THE SUBCONSCIOUS BALANCING ACT: UNDERSTANDING THE VARIOUS FUNCTIONS, DEMANDS, AND AGENCY USED BY PROGRAM STAFF IN ACADEMIC SUPPORT INITIATIVES

by

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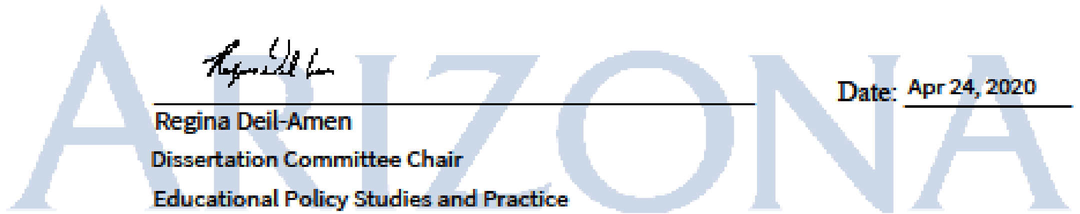
I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.



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DEDICATION

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ABSTRACT

The present study extends organizational labor models such as street-level bureaucrats, bureaucratization and specialization, and labor theory of poverty governance to explore the roles and identities of university staff in academic support programs (Lipsky, 1980; Weber, 1973; Seim, 2017). University staff members in academic support programs work in the margins of the organization to serve marginalized student populations. This study used the comparative case study approach (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) to study three separate academic support programs, and Seidman's (2006) phenomenological interview sequence to interview eight staff members. Past experiences inform how staff members perceive their work, and the structure of the organization drives how they seek to support student persistence by reforming individual students, rather than systemic, exclusionary barriers within the institution. University staff members respond to institutionalized barriers to student persistence based on their relative distance from the core of the institutional mission. In addition, three personae emerged from university staff members' interpretation of their work with students in academic support programs: *nurturing guide*, *administrative facilitator*, and *quiet disrupter*. These personae not only reflect the institutional structure that drives university staff members to reform students in order to help them persist and develop a sense of belonging, but they also reveal the gendered nature of this part of the workforce. This study contributes to existing literature and theory on academic labor and poverty governance by acknowledging the influence gender, race, and past experience has on emotional labor in academia, as well as applying labor models to academic support initiatives, which are designed to help students persist to graduation.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH PROBLEM

Students in underserved populations face numerous disparities in access to college and persistence to degree completion (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, & Yagan, 2019; Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997; Jury, Smeding, Stephens, Nelson, Aelenei, & Darnon, 2017; Mullen & Goyette, 2019; Ovink, Kalogrides, Nanney, & Delaney, 2018; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Posselt & Grodsky, 2017; Posselt, Jaquette, Bielby, & Bastedo, 2012; Toutkoushian, Stollberg, & Slatton, 2018; Walpole, 2003). Embedded in higher education in the United States is a history of exclusion and marginalization, starting with Harvard, Princeton, and Yale (Karabel, 2005), after which many colleges and universities model their policies and practices (Dimaggio & Powell, 1993; Hartley & Morphew, 2008) in order to gain prestige (Ehrenberg, 2003). Although the exclusionary practices of higher education have shifted away from overt discrimination and toward meritocratic stratification, meritocracy is still exclusive by nature. “The emphasis on test scores in college admissions notably benefits those with more resources and the power to influence how merit is defined, while disadvantaging others,” (Alon & Tienda, 2007, p. 507). Exclusionary systems and structures remain, making college success more challenging for students outside of the “traditional” college student paradigm.

Full time students pursuing a bachelor’s degree immediately following their high school graduation and living on a university campus, for whom the modern university was designed, is a dwindling minority of the post-secondary education population (Deil-Amen, 2015). The diversified higher education population incentivizes institutions to

support first-generation, minority, and low-income students in order to maintain enrollment numbers and tuition income (Garcia, 2019; Tolbert, 1985). Research on student success in college, particularly for marginalized and underserved populations, has resulted in the implementation of academic support programs that help students to integrate into their higher education context (Tinto, 1975). These initiatives include summer bridge programs, first-year seminars, and learning communities (Tinto, 2012). Academic success programs have only been developed since the expansion of post-secondary education in the 1960s and 70s, and serve as a way to simultaneously provide access to underserved students while upholding the original system built to marginalize. By retrofitting the university to allow for greater inclusivity and access, the core of the institution is allowed to remain untouched and unbothered by relative newcomers to higher education. Ultimately, it may be university staff members who have the greatest understanding of the ways that the core of the institution is protected from—and sometimes impedes the work of—peripheral programs that work to help marginalized students succeed.

The literature review for this dissertation will demonstrate a wide body of scholarship that emphasizes a focus on quantitative student outputs in evaluating academic support programs in higher education (grade point average, retention rates, and graduation rates). How professional staff members perceive their interactions with students and the institution— and whether those perceptions align with those of their students— is not typically included in practical program assessment. Understanding the impact of academic success programs without understanding the process of implementation and the interactions inherent in that process provides an incomplete view

of *what* is happening, *how* it works, and *why* an intervention is needed in the first place. This is insight that can be gained through qualitative inquiry focusing on university staff perspectives.

Although the process of how students and professionals interact with one another in academic support programs has not been qualitatively studied, institutional and external time and resources are invested in developing programs and enrolling students into them. The practice of creating student success initiatives and not studying the process by which students engage in them to inform practice is an example of virtual adoption. Virtual adoption is a top-down approach to applying an expedient solution to a problem without exploring the origins of the problem or the local ecology that contribute to its impact (Birnbaum, 2001). In this case, using a prototypical program model—often referred to as a "best practice" by university administrators—without an understanding of the ways that it will be implemented within a specific population is tantamount to repairing deep flaws within the infrastructure with a superficial, cosmetic solution.

The problem this study addresses is that, regardless of whether or not a quantifiable effect of participating in an academic success program is present, failing to examine the perceptions of students and professionals within these contexts leaves a significant gap in understanding what beliefs inform practices that are most effective. It also allows for change, adaptation, and inclusion of underserved populations to exist only at the margins of the institution, rather than at the core. A key characteristic of virtual adoption and the precipitation of the latest best practices in higher education is a surface understanding of how to implement an initiative and how it functions within its given context (Birnbaum, 2001).

Further, academic support programs involve multiple stakeholders with varying interests, including students, staff, administrators, and sometimes faculty. The university staff members who oversee the day-to-day operations of the program have the responsibility for serving diverse and potentially competing interests, and yet research on these student support initiatives does not examine the perspectives of university staff. To deny the importance of understanding the perspectives, motivations, and strategies of university staff members in academic support programs is to deny the idea that they may have agency. Examining the viewpoints and experiences of university staff allows the researcher to understand the potential tensions that exist in the professional role of a student-facing representative of the institution. Specifically, since academic support programs serve the purpose of retrofitting higher education to meet the needs of previously marginalized populations, it is especially important to understand the perspectives of staff members interested in working with these students. If tension exists between student values and institutional values, staff members' perspectives and behaviors can provide insight on whether and how virtual adoption strategies are positively impacting students, preventing systemic change in the institution, or potentially both. I discuss this idea further in my conceptual framework.

Colleges and universities use research-based strategies such as summer bridge programs, first-year seminars, and learning communities to strengthen the rate of first-to-second year student retention and graduation (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Tinto, 2012). Administrators identify a need, assign a university staff member to solve it, and then measure the effectiveness of the solution using an input-output algorithm. This method assesses the relationship between students' incoming characteristics such as high

school grade point average (GPA), college entrance exam scores, and writing and math placement scores and output measurements such as college GPA, percentage of students who persist to their second year of college, and percentage of students who earn a baccalaureate degree to measure the impact of any given academic intervention (Kuh, et. al, 2005; Tinto, 2012; Perna & Jones, 2013; Stevens & Kirst, 2015). Maxwell (2013) states that "understanding the context within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions" is an appropriate intellectual goal for a qualitative study (p. 30). To understand how students and professionals perceive their interactions within a specific context— and where their perceptions align or misalign— is as important as it is to understand the measurable outputs of that context (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017; Seidman, 2006). I'll more fully illustrate this point in the *Methods* section of this dissertation.

It is also difficult to see in the existing body of literature whether academic support programs are designed to benefit their respective institutions of higher education or the marginalized students they purport to serve. How does the university staff assigned to execute an academic support program navigate tensions that may exist between student needs and institutional values? University staff members who serve in academic support programs and their perceptions are systematically overlooked in higher education research, as I will highlight in my literature review. Understanding their perspectives is a missing piece of the puzzle in understanding how best to continue reform education to best serve historically excluded student populations. Making program improvements and interventions is an imprecise and potentially wasteful practice when staff perspective and the student experience are poorly understood.

Kilbourn (2006) writes that a dissertation in education should start with a problem, and that problem's context should be elaborated to reveal the practical and scholarly value of finding a solution. This dissertation is structured loosely around Kilbourn's formula of outlining the educational problem, its significance, the research that's been done so far and what is missing from current scholarship, and what my study contributes. In the following chapter, I will highlight the literature that shapes the need for academic support programs, the basic structure of four styles of academic support programs on which my sample is focused, findings about outcomes achieved by these academic support programs, and additional research that's highlighted the perspectives and experiences of students and staff in various post-secondary educational contexts. Through an analysis of existing literature, I will also develop the research questions that guide this study, as well as the conceptual frameworks that shape the research questions and protocol. Chapter two also includes a brief description of pilot research findings as they relate to the structure and findings of the present analysis.

Chapter Three of this dissertation provides a detailed rationalization for how I collected data and ensured its trustworthiness. This overview of the methods explains how I developed a response to the research questions from chapter two that respond to the problem outlined in this chapter. My methods are largely based on Seidman's (2006) phenomenological series of three interviews, which I conducted with eight professionals working in academic support programs at a single institution. I also reference Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) comparative case study heuristic, which views data as contextual and works to construct meaning by comparing multiple cases and understanding the historical and political roots of the subject of any social science research project.

Chapter Four develops the findings from the data collection and analysis and ties them back to the initial research problem. Findings from this project center on how experiences and perspectives of professionals in academic support programs influenced their values around higher education, and further influenced the ways that they interact with students and view the institution for which they work. Other findings include a comparative analysis of how different programs in various locations throughout the same organization operate and use relative power to leverage resources of exercise agency.

The fifth chapter of this dissertation compares the findings to the initial conceptual frameworks that shaped the study. It also contributes new ideas and provides a nuanced understanding of other theories not initially considered at the outset of this research. Finally, Chapter Five discusses possible implications for practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers to consider.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Literature Review

The problem of disparate access and completion of higher education between various groups in the United States shapes the need for academic support programs. There is a robust body of scholarship detailing the many ways that higher education in the United States is structurally and functionally exclusive in ways that disproportionately marginalize students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and first-generation college students.

Carnevale and Strohl's (2013) report on racial disparity in higher education revealed that white students overwhelmingly make up the majority of enrollments at the 462 most selective schools in the country, whereas black and Hispanic students largely enrolled at open-access institutions, such as community colleges. Bastedo and Jaquette (2011) concluded that although racial minority students continue to improve their performance on college entrance exams and high school completion, they continue to enroll in college and selective universities at similar rates over time. More recently, Ovink Kalogrides, Nanney, and Delaney (2018) argued that low-income students of color tend to electively "under match"—or select universities for which there are overqualified to attend—as a means to stay closer to home and save money at rates far more significant than their middle-to-high income and white peers.

Beyond racial disparities, scholars consistently find that higher education student access and success is stratified by socio-economic (SES) status as well. Astin and Oseguera (2004) concluded that higher-SES students are overrepresented in selective institutions compared to their lower-income peers, even when controlling for SAT/ACT

scores and high school grade point average. Fifiteen years later, Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, and Yagan (2019) found similar results in parental income disparities between open-access and selective universities, also when controlling for incoming statistics such as college admissions exam scores. Salazar (2019) found that even public, flagship institutions spent a disproportionate amount of time recruiting in-state students from low-income, racially diverse zip codes, further cementing the paradigm that higher education engages in intentional behaviors that results in stratification of access and success for students of color and low-income students.

Walpole (2003) used a national longitudinal dataset to study the relative differences in outcomes between high-SES and low-SES students in post-secondary education. Her analysis found that low-SES students reported lower involvement in extra-curricular activities, spent less time studying, earned lower grades, and enrolled in graduate and professional school and lower rates than their wealthier peers. A more contemporary analysis by Jury, Smeding, Stevens, Nelson, Aelenei, and Darnon (2017) came to similar conclusions, but elaborated that lower-SES students were not afforded the same opportunities to succeed in their college environment. Low-income and first-generation students face numerous psychological barriers that impede success. They report higher rates of depression and lower rates of overall wellbeing than their upper-income peers. Their self-perception is overall more negative, and experience “imposter syndrome” at increased rates than students from middle-to-upper income households or those that do not identify as first-generation college students. These barriers impact their performance in school and their outcomes such as graduate and professional school enrollments. Further, Jury et al (2017) argued that the institution reproduces these barriers

through systemic by endorsing through norms and common practices an individualistic mindset over a community-oriented, which tends to more strongly benefit low-income and first generation students.

These disparities impacting low-income students and students of color are not accidental or happenstance. Higher education in the United States was designed as exclusive. Karabel (2005) documented in painstaking detail the measures taken by the administrations of Harvard, Princeton, and Yale to narrow admissions and enrollments to white anglo-saxton protestant men from their inception until World War II. Practices such as requiring college admissions testing and privileging extra-curricular activities to showcase a student’s “well-roundedness” have deep roots in racism and exclusion, yet serve as an objective model for merit in college admissions and scholarship requirements across various higher education strata in the United States.

Normative barriers for low-income students and students of color create the environment where these students don’t thrive in higher education. Rather than examine these deep flaws in the design of higher education, academic support programs have become the means to serving students who struggle to persist in higher education. It will be important to define terminology featured in this dissertation’s design. The concept of Academic Support Programs is somewhat broad and appears to apply to any institutional attempt to retrofit higher education to populations deemed “underrepresented” or “underprepared.” For the purposes of this study, I will focus on systematized interventions which formally enroll students into a program of support for an academic term or longer. This includes summer bridge programs, learning communities, first-year seminars, and supplemental instruction.

Summer bridge programs bring students onto campus during a summer term between high school and the start of their first year of college to take classes, meet advisors, and generally develop a feeling of comfort and security with their environment and its resources before their first semester of study (Tinto, 2012). The concept dates to 1968, when it was first implemented in the California State University system (Garcia, 1991). The program featured in this study began in 1969 and is one of the earliest iterations of this type of academic support in the country. The term refers not just to the credits earned during that first summer, but also extra-curricular program components such as on-campus housing, peer advising, and out-of-class tutoring offered. Students in summer bridge programs often take multiple classes together as a group, which Tinto calls *learning communities*.

Tinto defines *learning communities* as not just the grouping together of students in multiple classes, but the interweaving of themes in shared coursework. An example of a learning community might be a cohort of students within a business college or engineering school that take multiple core courses together. Connections are made across related classes to help students contextualize knowledge together. Learning communities are designed to help students form stronger peer networks in college. By taking multiple, related classes together, students have a built-in system of support, as well as clear linkages across related curricula. Classes in learning communities often include required core coursework in a specific discipline— such as an introduction to engineering course in concert with a calculus or chemistry course—and sometimes include a *first-year seminar* as well.

First-year seminars are typically single-credit courses added onto students' core academic schedule of courses. Sometimes referred to as academic success courses, they function across a variety of different purposes. First-year seminars are sometimes framed as an extended orientation. These courses function to introduce students to institutional resources or to cultivate skills characteristic of academically successful students. First year seminars date back to epoch of *in loco parentis*, wherein faculty played a nurturing role in helping young adults mature and grow. During the 1960s, when many colleges ceased to assume a parental relationship with students, many such programs were cut. Following the accountability era of higher education of the 1980s, higher education in the United States saw a resurgence of first year seminars (Mamrick, 2005). The program featuring a first year seminar examined in this study was created in 2011. Whereas the extended orientation serves to support students across the curriculum, some first-year seminars are designed to provide additional support to students in a specific course. These courses are referred to as *supplemental instruction*.

Supplemental instruction provides additional, structured time to review concepts and practice new skills learned in academic courses such as math and science. The concept began in the late 1970s and has been adapted into both an optional academic resources or a mandatory components of first-year seminars as a way to require students to spend time learning and reviewing challenging new material (Blanc, DeBuhr, & Martin, 1983). Research indicates that students' overall understanding of a topic and performance in class is enhanced when supplemental instruction is mandatory rather than elective (Hodges, Dochen, & Joy, 2001). Since this study will focus on systematized interventions into which students enroll, I'll only be looking at supplemental instruction

that serves as a requirement to participate in an academic support program. The program that features supplemental instruction in this study has existed for three years.

In addition to the key terms with respect to the various types of academic support programs in this dissertation, I need to define the staff members that implement these programs. Higher education and organizational scholars have given university staff a variety of names. Rhoades and Sporn (2002) discuss staff as *managerial professionals*. Managerial professionals are administrative staff and student services personnel who manage interactions and relationships with students and prospective students outside of the formal curriculum. They serve as financial aid counselors, admissions representatives, donor and employer relations officers, and assessment specialists. Rhoades and Sporn argue that they function to expand the capitalist enterprise of the university through entrepreneurism, massification, and accountability. This framework centers specifically on how roles in a university are sub-specialized in order to increase research productivity as well as decrease administrative autonomy of faculty members.

Whitechurch (2009) introduced the concept of the *blended professional*, who serve both as educators as well as private-sector professionals. These individuals include adjunct faculty who work in the industry in which they also train students at the university, or professional mentors who guide students through the final phases of their own professionalization in the university context. Considering how university staff members who operate academic support programs are both educators as well as part of a separate growing sub-field of student affairs, it might be reasonable to classify them as blended professionals—as I had in my original proposal for this dissertation. But as I began recruiting professionals to interview for this study, the term seemed contrived.

Nobody identified as a “blended professional.” Nobody recognized the term as something that applied to their day-to-day work. Titles varied by the function of the perceived work, on which I will elaborate in the *Findings* chapter of this dissertation, but for the purpose of succinct clarity, I will refer to the professionals operating academic support programs simply as *university staff*.

Some studies have highlighted the positive impact academic support programs—particularly first year seminars and learning communities—have on first-to-second year retention (Keup, 2005; Clark & Cundiff, 2011). Summer bridge programs have been shown to positively impact the academic confidence, GPAs (Allen & Bir, 2011; Buck, 1985), math placement exams (Ami, 2001), and persistence to graduation (Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013; Evans, 1999) of their participants. Learning community models have been shown to positively impact GPA with non-traditional aged students (Reynolds & Hebert, 2011), as well as help commuter students integrate academically and socially through supportive peer groups (Tinto, 1997).

Some research infers that the mere existence of a program does not produce the impact or increased persistence or academic performance. One study used propensity score matching to show no difference between the GPAs of students who did and did not participate in a first-year seminar (Clark & Cundiff, 2011). Another study indicated that the overall impact of first-year seminars is only marginally effective, but that some program designs produce more desirable effects than others (Permzadian & Crede, 2016). The authors recommended several program design directives—such as having faculty or staff lead class sessions rather than peer mentors—to improve program outputs. Further research argues that the *types* of skills—such as self-advocacy and seeking out support—

taught in academic support programs academic support programs drive longer-term success in academic performance and persistence (Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Gowdy, Stark, Horn, Parnes, & Spencer, 2017). These lines of research suggest that the nuanced interactions between the students and the staff could play an important role in distinguishing an effective intervention from an ineffective one.

Tinto (1999) argued for the integration of several academic support strategies across the institution, rather than “tinkering at the margins” of the organization (p. 1). Indeed, a considerable body of scholarship shows a positive interaction between learning communities and either first-year seminars or summer bridge programs in the enhancement of first-to-second year persistence and retention outcomes (Keup, 2005; Friedman & Alexander, 2007; Kuh, et. al, 2005). The large volume of research on the quantifiable effectiveness of academic support programs, both individually and in tandem with one another, has justified the allocation of resources to such programs. However, these metrics are all determined through a positivistic paradigm and quantitative methods, which limits the understanding of the phenomenon to the effect, rather than the means to that effect.

Some scholars have examined process, but these examinations have been limited to classroom interactions (Cox, 2009) or do not specifically examine academic success programs (Deil-Amen, 2011). Deil-Amen (2011) found through interviews with commuter students in several two-year colleges that Tinto’s (1975) model could be applied to non-residential students in classroom contexts. Cox (2009) examined alignment and misalignment students had with English course instructors in the community college setting. These studies provide a good framework to understand how

students experience college environments, but neither specifically examines the environment of an academic support program, which often includes classroom and extra-curricular components, nor do they examine the interactions between university staff and students in academic support programs. These studies also focus on community colleges. Barnett (2007) studied students' interactions with institutional agents, but her analysis did not specifically focus on academic support programs, nor did it focus on the *perspectives* of students and staff about the nature, purpose, usefulness, quality, or effectiveness of a program and/or their perspectives on the relevant interactions between students and staff that necessarily occur as a result of a program's existence.

Tovar (2015) quantitatively studied the effect of the relationship between students and staff in academic support programs and student outputs. This study provided a closer look at the impact of individual relationships between students and university staff. Tovar found that discussing career goals with faculty and staff had a positive impact on GPA and persistence, and that strong relationships with family and friends were ultimately the strongest predictors of persistence in Latinx community college students. Instead of treating staff members like interchangeable cogs in a system, research about the impact of relationships implies that the individual experiences and agency of staff members matter in the effect of an academic support intervention on students. University staff members are the players that enact the policies and interventions that are evaluated as so effective, but there has not been a systematic development of data from the viewpoint of program staff. Without understanding how students and staff respectively interact with and within the program, and in what ways staff and student understandings and perceptions of program purpose, function, and outcome align, university administrators cannot

effectively assess the impact of resource allocation (or lack thereof), nor can they accurately replicate successful program designs or reform core institutional practices deemed problematic by those working with marginalized students. Perspectives and experiences of university staff matter, and without understanding of those experiences, the potential impact of such programs is unnecessarily isolated and limited.

Conceptual Framework

In order to understand how university staff members in academic support programs interact with students, one another, and the institutional culture, I bring together Weber's (1973) bureaucratization and specialization framework, Lipsky's (1980) concept of street-level bureaucrats, and Siem's (2017) labor theory of poverty governance. Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucrat is a concept that describes how policy can be interpreted and enacted through constituent-facing positions—such as university staff. Lipsky emphasized that the work of an organization is executed through individual staff members' interactions with constituents—such as students—and that many of those interactions rely on the discretion of the staff member.

In Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services, Lipsky (1980) made the case that the largest governmental organizations—such as law enforcement or the education sector—are operated by and function with the discretion of street-level bureaucrats. In fact, beyond discretion, Lipsky theorized that street-level bureaucrats were, themselves, policy-makers. Due to the large volume of interactions with constituents, street-level bureaucrats maintain order in their interactions with the public by codifying their responses to the extent that they create policy, and become the gatekeepers of that policy. In police work, this manifests as officers using discretion in

deciding who to pull over or whether to cite a driver exceeding the speed limit. In K-12 education, teachers "make subtle determinations of who is teachable" (Lipsky, 1980, p. 13). The common denominator is that street-level bureaucrats wield significant power over the lives of their constituents, although they have relatively little influence over formal policy-making and the social purpose of their agency.

Weber's (1973) bureaucratization and specialization framework posits that the structure of education has been so sub-specialized that individuals working within the system have little agency beyond the scope of their own work. An individual staff member may have limited knowledge and capability in their job training to critically solve a complex issue. Instead, they rely on well-defined protocol and a small scope of practice to serve students. An example would be a staff member whose responsibility is to review student applications but has no influence over how students are recruited to a university or what kinds of financial aid packages they receive. Lipsky's (1980) and Weber's (1973) concepts work with one another in this dissertation by showing how university staff members in academic support programs interpret and perceive their roles' limitations and exercise their own agency.

Through Weber's (1973) lens, university staff members have specific job duties and sub-specialized training that limits their knowledge of global university practices, rendering them unable to enact change over system-level issues impacting their constituents. They can serve as advisors who enforce academic policy by helping students to follow prescribed degree plans, or financial aid officers who can navigate computer systems designed to manage aid packages, without knowing enough about federal financial aid policies to tailor packages to student needs. Their training is such

that even when they understand the inequity that students face within large university processes, their work is so procedural that they often do not have the know-how to exercise agency to help students. In academic support programs, university staff members are given a specific task and responsibility and are isolated from other functional areas of the university with which students interact. Their role is to support students without having the agency to drive systemic change.

Through Lipsky's (1980) framework, we see university staff members who have quite a bit of influence over students' access to institutional policy and procedures, even though they have very little formal power to reform policies that they see as problematic. This can look like advisors practicing discretion with each student on advising which classes to take and how many credits to take on each semester. It can be advisors or university staff members deciding which cases to elevate to a higher-ranked administrator who can exercise greater discretion and agency in interpreting academic policy. Lipsky (1980) argues that although street-level personnel have prescribed limitations in their jobs, they exercise the control they have in interpreting policy judiciously as gatekeepers. In a similar way, academic support program staff exercise the greatest amount of their agency on students, manipulating their small sphere of influence in order to direct students through their respective programs.

Applied simultaneously, Weber's (1973) and Lipsky's (1980) frameworks together illuminate the conditions of agency and constraint within which university staff operate. They are bound by their prescribed role within an institution, yet they have flexibility to guide students and help interpret and find flexibility within university policy. University staff members in academic support programs find agency in their

direct interactions and relationships with students, whereas they experience limitations in their relationship with the institution itself due to their specialized role.

Seim (2017) revises Lipsky's (1980) theory and makes Weber (1973) contemporary by acknowledging the horizontality of lateral street-level units, as well as the restrictions imposed on agency from vertically higher influences. He argues that, "poverty governance, like all labor processes, includes both a practical and relational component" (p. 452). Practically, workers in education produce policy for students through their work. By performing the functions of their specializations, workers develop systems to guide their interactions with students. Relationally, workers interact with other specialized workers in lateral units on policy enactment. It is their specialized role that creates a relational dynamic with other parts of the bureaucracy. For example, a staff member in an academic support program may execute their work with students through interactions with academic advisers or financial aid officers, utilizing the focused training and access of actors and various functional areas of the university to achieve the desired outcomes of an academic support program.

By acknowledging the horizontality of labor within a poverty governance model, Seim (2017) contextualizes Weber's (1973) theory within the modern, neoliberal bureaucracy. Specialization limits agency, but specialization does not happen in a power vacuum and interactions between specializations is both a way that vertical constraints are purposefully maintained and a way that units exercise discretion/policy making. Through this lens, the academic support programs are nested within a network of units who both respond to influences from actors positioned vertically above them, as well as impose vertical influence on students through policy-making created by transactions

between specializations. University staff members utilize relationships with staff across the organization to execute their specialized labor. Like Seim’s study of ambulance crews, university staff in academic support programs may not personally have an agenda to govern the marginalized, but their service to students is ultimately influenced and constrained by a university administration which benefits from student governance as means to supporting students through to degree completion without altering the structure of the institution.

The labor theory of poverty governance helps frame two themes that emerged within the pilot study that preceded this dissertation: the academic integration/advancement paradox and responsive practice. In the pilot interviews, participants discussed their work with students in academic support programs, and students shared their experiences within these programs. The objective of this data collection was to begin to understand the relative alignment and misalignment between students and professional perceptions of academic support programs.

The academic integration/advancement paradox was the way I described the disparate ways that staff and students viewed support interventions. Staff seemed to idealize the internal change and growth they were promoting in students, and invested heavily in the idea that students connect to their campus in ways that aligned with Tinto’s (1975) Social and Academic Integration in his Theory of Student Departure. To them, the successful student assimilated to and found their place in the university community beyond formal academic spaces such as required courses. Students reported stronger investment in doing the work they needed to do to earn their desired grades in their classes. They appreciated interventions aimed at helping them achieve these goals and

persisting to graduation in the purest sense of completing courses satisfactorily, and that was the extent to which they appreciated academic support interventions. The staff members were invested in academic integration. The students valued academic advancement. The paradox is that professionals often see integration as a means to an end. To them, students are better equipped to succeed academically if they integrate with the organization. Using Seim's (2017) model, professionals are highly motivated to transform spaces in bodies—they seek to build students' cognitive and social skills through their programs' interventions. By contrast, students are motivated to transform bodies in spaces—they want to move through their academic programs without necessarily the burden of integrating and assimilating into their university, or they simply do not view the two as tied together. Similar to the ambulance crews of Seim's work, professionals in academic support programs viewed the "legitimate" work to be transforming spaces in bodies.

The other emergent theme from my pilot data—responsive practice—referred to the ways that professionals individualized their interventions to specific students or cohorts of students. University staff members that I interviewed for my pilot data rejected (though never outright) the notion of a standardized best practice in their work, and interventions are informed not on robust data samples, but observations in their day-to-day work. Similar to Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucrats, Seim (2017) emphasized discretion in bureaucratic labor. Decisions are constrained by vertical influences from above (institutional policy, restricted access to tools needed to exercise agency) but university staff *did* have the ability to manipulate aspects of their academic support programs and respond to student needs in ways that they deemed appropriate. This

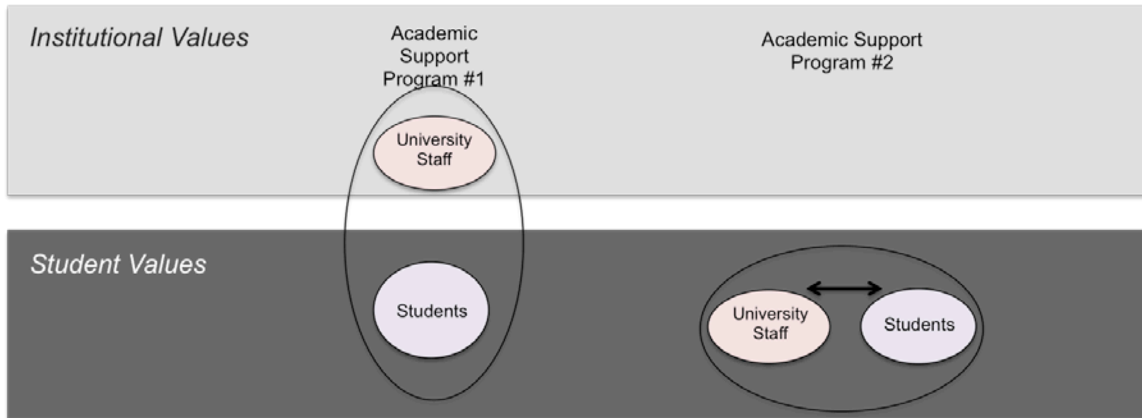
leeway demonstrates the agency that university staff members have in their work, and the source and driving motivation for that agency—as well as the recipients of resultant interventions—are the students they serve.

These themes from my pilot research are not foregone conclusions, but they informed my interview protocol, and I further develop them in the *Findings* chapter of this dissertation. My findings use the frameworks of Lipsky (1980), Weber (1973), and Seim (2017) to continue building knowledge around the function of and academic support programs and the roles of the university staff members who oversee and manage them. As Seim discussed with his labor theory of poverty governance, the analysis of the organization, the clients, and the workers must happen in relation to one another. There is no part of this system that operates in a vacuum or without regard to the other parts, so it is important to approach this research with a methodological framework that honors the interrelated nature of the parts of a whole.

This study uses the comparative case study heuristic presented by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) both as an approach to data collection and analysis, as well as an explanation as to how university staff members in academic support programs experience tension or alignment with institutional policy and the students enrolled in their programs. In this dissertation, each "case" in the case study refers not to the entire university system, but each individual academic support program that is being examined. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) approach analysis of cases by comparing them side-by-side (horizontally) as well as comparing how cases respond to institutional or external policy (vertically). The authors' approach to vertical comparison argues that two cases' differing positions within the same structure creates disparate interactions with policy, even though

the two cases may appear on the surface to have the same function within the organization. The diagram below describes how relationships with university staff members, students, and the institutional culture may differ across cases using a vertical comparison analysis.

Figure 1. Vertical comparison of academic support programs



This model suggests that when academic support programs reflect institutional values over student values—especially marginalized student values—university staff members either align their practice with student values, thus feeling tension with institutional values, or they align with the institution, thus experiencing tension with their student population. The placement and purpose of the program largely dictates the alignment with either the institution or the student. Institutional values and student values are not necessarily oppositional, but the model serves to demonstrate where tension can arise when there is a conflict. I will explore this model more in the *Methods* section of this paper.

University staff members' perspectives inform their relationships with students and their motivations for doing the work they do, which calls for an analysis of not only their work, but their personal experiences and perspectives that inform their work.

University staff members' and students' mutual and unique understanding of the needs imposed on students by higher education and how academic support programs address those needs should be studied (Maxwell, 2013).

Research Questions

Academic support programs and the university staff who implement them are more complex than a linear formula of input-to-output characteristics can capture. Many factors, including the purpose of each program, how it fits with institutional goals and culture, how university staff members understand problems addressed by academic support programs, and whether students and staff mutually understand the problem in the same way, influence academic support programs' functions and outputs. The interplay between policy, various administrative actors, university staff, and students calls for a nuanced examination of not just *if* academic support programs work, but more specifically, *how* they work, and whose values they fulfill. Considering the amount of agency and discretion a university staff member has in implementing a program also speaks to the purpose of academic support programs, and whether university staff members are using historical notions of normative university practices to serve marginalized student populations.

In order to address the role that university staff members in academic support programs play in interpreting institutional policies and values and students' needs, I will ask three core questions in this dissertation:

1. In what ways do university staff interpret and enact their roles with students in academic support programs?
2. How does this role enactment align with student and/or institutional values?

3. In what ways does higher education's roots of exclusion influence the ways that university staff members embody their roles and interactions with students?

The objective of these questions is to further explore the function of academic support programs from the perspective of the university staff members who are saturated in the culture of the programs investigated in this research.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Answering these questions requires a research design inclusive of university staff's experiences, students' experiences, as well as the context within which they operate and interact with one another. Data are rich and nuanced in the form of interviews and participant observations, calling for an interpretivist epistemological approach. The comparative case study heuristic calls for recognition of connection across cases horizontally, but also the vertical connection of policy formation and enactment within cases and the transversal connection of personal and institutional history (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).

This comparative case study involved data collection from multiple academic support programs within a single institution. The institution is a large, public, broad-access university in the southwestern United States. It is a Hispanic Serving Institution, with around 25 per cent of the undergraduate population identifying as Hispanic or Latino and around 46 per cent of the undergraduate population identifying as students of color. Academic support programs at the research site largely target students from underserved communities such as low-income, first-generation, or students of color. The comparative case study allows the study to follow "phenomena across a spatially dispersed social field, moving across multiple sites to explore relationships across different, but related, contexts…" (Bartlett, 2017, slide 19).

In this study, I established relationships with university staff and students in three academic support programs. Data collection from each site started with a series of three interviews for the participating university staff members, and was followed by participant observations of program activities, as well as a focus group of students enrolled in the

academic support program to crystalize emergent themes from qualitative interviews with staff. I will further describe the data collection and analysis in the *Selection & Sampling* and *Data* sections that follow this one.

I compared the sites horizontally, juxtaposing similarities and differences across the programs with respect to how university staff and students related to one another and the institution. As the comparative case study methodology refutes the assumption that case studies must be bounded, vertical comparison also evaluates the ways that actors in each program interact with institutional policy and university administration, recognizing the inequity of power distributed within a sociopolitical context. Transversal analysis compares cases across time, which takes into account how research participants' past experiences inform their perspectives, beliefs, and actions within their current contexts. I'll elaborate more on how I collected data to analyze the transversal dimension of this comparative case study in the *Data* section of this paper.

Maxwell (2013) outlines five possible goals for purposeful selection in qualitative research—two of which include seeking a representative sample, and selecting "groups or participants with whom you can establish the most productive relationships" (p. 99). Data collection from multiple programs within the same university achieves a degree of representativeness within the same socio-cultural context of the institution. This can ensure that "the conclusions adequately present the average members of the population..." (p. 98). This section of my proposal will detail how I selected the sites for this case study, how I collected data, and how I analyzed it.

Selection & Sampling

I employed purposive selection and theoretical sampling in order to find cases that fit the parameters of my research. Conversations with the professionals in the pilot study helped me learn more about and gain access to other programs within the institution—a process known as snowball sampling (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016; Glesne, 2016).

The preliminary interviews served a more salient purpose—they contributed to the concepts that frame the research questions for this study. Corbin and Strauss (2008) refer to this as "theoretical sampling," where "concepts are derived from data during analysis and questions about those concepts drive the next round of data collection" (p. 144). Gaining a deeper understanding of not just who could provide perspective on academic support programs, but also of what themes I could explore in my research, allowed me to "[let] the research guide the data collection" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 157). This led to an organic definition of the problem as it applies to the research site, and prevented me from adhering too rigidly to initial questions and assumptions.

Once I identified sites on the university campus, I systematically collected data to more thoroughly answer the research questions. Corbin and Strauss (2008) describe "saturation" as the ultimate goal of theoretical sampling, where the themes are sufficiently developed and connections clearly drawn between concepts. Glesne (2016) recommends deep understanding—or "thick description"— of research participants in order to draw theoretical conclusions about the case (p. 67). The next section will describe what data I collected in order to reach these objectives, and how I did it.

Data

I used Seidman's (2006) phenomenological interviewing strategy to begin collecting data that represented participants' contemporary understanding of an

experience—such as involvement as university staff in an academic support program—as well as lived experiences and histories that inform that perspective. Seidman instructs researchers to conduct three 90-minute semi-structured interviews in which participants discuss their life before their involvement in the context of interest, their current understanding of it, and the sense they make of their experience. This process allows researchers to engage in horizontal case comparison by forming connections and juxtapositions between participants' contemporary experiences in academic support programs, and it also allows for the transversal dimension in weaving both personal and institutional historical perspective into participants' narratives (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).

Interviews. The primary data in this study are interviews with university staff members. These data shaped the findings and responded directly to the research questions that frame the study. I interviewed eight university staff members who coordinate or oversee summer bridge programs, learning communities, or first-year seminars. (See Figure 3 for details on interview participants). I started with two interviews that lasted 60-90 minutes and that followed the protocol for Seidman's (2006) three in-depth interview sequence. These two interviews were scheduled approximately one week to one month apart. According to Seidman, the first interview should be a focused life history, encouraging the participant to "tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time," (2006, p. 17). This approach aligns with the comparative case study value of studying the transversal as well as the preliminary findings from my pilot research—individuals' past experiences inform their present understanding and perspective on phenomena, which in turn influences their behaviors (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).

Seidman (2006) describes the purpose of the second interview in the sequence as one that provides a description of the participant's current experience in the phenomenon under investigation. Questions in this interview explored the university staff member's work in their program, their day-to-day tasks, and goals within their work. This interview also included the participant's description of the history of their academic support program—how it came to be and how it has changed and evolved over time. Data from the second interview integrates the comparative case study heuristic by exploring participants' relationships and perspectives within their academic support program and across the institution—horizontal and vertical comparisons, respectively. It also includes the transversal in discussing the history of the program (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017).

The third, meaning-making interview was conducted as a follow up with the university staff members after I spent some time doing field observations in the academic support program, and in some cases, after I conducted the student-centered focus group for that site. In this interview, university staff members were asked to analyze their work and its purpose and impact on students and the university as a whole. Questions in this interview asked blended professionals to consider how they believed students were engaging in their academic support interventions and what or how students were learning as they participated in and moved through their respective programs. Questions also asked university staff members to reflect upon their own growth and development as people and as professionals, and asked about how they interacted with students as well as others in the institution.

Although I followed Seidman's (2006) recommendation to conduct three interviews, the timing of the final interview deviated from Seidman's structure. Rather

than conducting this third interview several days after the second, I opted to interview university staff members after I observed their respective programs through field observations. I also conducted focus groups with students in each program to gain a more holistic understanding of the program, as well as answer the fourth research question related to university staff and students' alignment of perspectives of each academic support program. This divergence served to provide richer data in which I was able to contextualize the university staff members' own descriptions. In the following section, I provide more specific detail about the secondary data collection.

Although field observations and focus groups with students were not the primary source of data that informed the findings of this research, it strengthened the validity and trustworthiness of the data derived from interviews of university staff. My observations of specific program elements and interactions between students and staff also gave the university staff members more confidence that I understood their work as they analyzed the impact they believed they had. Additionally, the amount of time that I engaged in additional data collection hopefully had the effect of building more trust between university staff members and myself, which in turn allowed for more truthful reflection in their final interview. Trust between the interviewer and the research participant is paramount in exploring and analyzing complex issues in a manner that is authentic (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glesne, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016).

The table below summarizes attributes of the university staff members who participated in interviews, including the programs for which they work, their ethnic identities, and their gender identities. I opted not to give each participant a pseudonym,

but will share important information that contextualizes quotes from each participant as they are used to summarize and construct the findings of this study.

Figure 2. University staff participants by program and demographic data

Total Participants Per Program	
Summer Bridge	2
STEM Intensive- (Multiple Unit)	6
Cultural Program- (Within One Unit)	1
Ethnic Identity Breakdown	
White	1
Latino/a/x	7
Two or more races	1
Gender Identity Breakdown	
Men	1
Women	7

Focus groups. In order to better understand the context of each academic support program, and to triangulate data collected in the interviews of university staff members, I conducted focus groups with students in academic support programs. Focus groups were homogeneous in that each group was tailored to a single site in the comparative case study. Focus groups can allow participants to make meaning of their experiences collectively (Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). Focus groups can be simply a facilitated discussion around a topic or topics, or it can include interactive activities such as "participatory mapping," (Glesne, 2016, p. 89). Participatory mapping involves "a group

of people [working] together to map or diagram some material aspect of their lives, usually with the assistance of a facilitator/researcher," (Glesne, 2016, p. 89). Participatory mapping in focus groups with students can provide an activity by which they can explain their perceptions and experiences in the context of academic support programs. By mapping out how they interact with one another and staff, and how that connects to their experiences as students, participants can clarify their meaning making for themselves as well as for the researcher. The table below summarizes the students who participated in the focus groups.

Figure 3. Student focus groups by program and demographic information

	Summer Bridge	**STEM Intensive**	**Cultural Program**
Total in Each Focus Group			
	2	12	4
Ethnicity			
White	0	2	
Black	0	3	2
Latinx	1	7	2
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	0	0
Gender			
Male	0	1	0
Female	2	10	4
Gender Non-Conforming	0	1	0

Focus groups occurred within the timeframe that I conducted participant observation for each site—with the exception of one, which occurred during the following academic semester due to time constraints within the timeline of a succinct

summer intensive program. The comparative case study aligns well with the rich data collected through focus group data and phenomenological interviewing. However, the trustworthiness of the research was enhanced through participant observation.

Participant observation. Because my study focuses on perceptions of university staff in academic support programs, interviews were the primary tool by which I collected and analyzed data. However, in order to construct, for my understanding, a more complete picture of the context, I engaged in field observations for each site of the case study. I observed class sessions and other group workshops at each site. My field notes provided the “thick description” that Glesne (2016) calls for in order to gain a “deep understanding” of the context (p. 67).

During the summer bridge program, I observed student staff meetings, large lecture classes, small-section classes, and one special event. I observed student staff training and several class sessions during the STEM Intensive program, and I observed two weekly meeting sessions for students during the Academic Unit Cultural Program. The observations were not the primary source of data collection, but simply a process to observe and understand each respective program outside of information collected from interviews. Participant observations could not be characterized as “intensive long-term involvement” the way Maxwell (2013, p. 126) describes it, but they did help me contextualize data derived from participant interviews.

Summary of data collection. In this study, both university staff members and students discussed their perspectives and experiences that led to the various decisions to either work in or enroll in an academic support program. Understandings of previous experiences inform their current perspective and the decisions they make in their current

environment. Interview and focus group participants also discussed details about their experiences in their current environment. Students discussed their academic progress and the ways in which they engaged in their academic success program, and staff shared details about their challenges and successes in program implementation. Here, common themes, as well as negative cases, emerged from the horizontal case comparison of various programs nested within the same institution. Negative cases provide a vertical axis from which an analysis of policy implementation can arise. The vertical component of comparative case study analysis is the complex set of networks that enact policy similarly *and* differently across similar horizontal components (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Exploring multiple programs at the same institution through both horizontal and vertical comparative case study lenses allowed my analysis to focus not only on the differences in student populations, as previous literature has emphasized, but also on how the positioning of university staff members within their institution creates differing experiences and perspectives in both students and professionals.

Individual interviews provided the framework for my in-depth understanding of the people involves in these contexts. Focus groups and field observations allowed me to cross-check my own assumptions about each narrative with a more holistic view of what was happening in each case. Although the student focus group data and field observations did not directly respond to the research questions, they helped bolster my understanding as a researcher of various programs with which I previously had a superficial understanding. These data reinforced the trustworthiness of the university staff interviews and the systematic findings constructed from those primary sources of data. The various sources of data in this study built a robust consciousness in my analysis of professional

and student perceptions, and also protected against validity threats that challenge qualitative inquiry.

Validity

As a researcher, I have to protect the findings of this study from biased assumptions. Maxwell (2013) outlines two validity threats: bias and reactivity. My researcher bias may lead to my seeking out data that fits my initial understanding of a phenomenon. My initial assumptions from my pilot data analysis could have biased my understanding of the data I collected, or even influenced research participants to identify with that bias in their responses.

I also brought with me into this research my bias as a professional. As Seidman (2006) describes, my perception of a phenomenon influences my behavior within it, including my behavior as a researcher. I work as a professional in an academic support program. I interact with students and professionals each day and my experiences with each population has shaped the way that I view this research problem. Some of my interactions with students are frustrating—I don't feel like they fully appreciate how much they need to learn about interacting with one another and with faculty and administrators. Some of my interactions with students feel more fulfilling—a student reaches out to their peer mentor for help on homework or tells me that they thought my class was really helpful. Likewise, I experience frustration with the institutional culture and assumed cultural norms that dictate some structural components of my work and my program. I am entering this research process knowing that I am very invested in academic support programs like first-year seminars, supplemental instruction, and a summer bridge program operating smoothly on my campus and being perceived positively by students. I

entered this project with an awareness that my observations were shaded with this perspective and I had to continually assess this as I collected and analyzed data.

Reactivity—or reflexivity—is the impact my presence might have had on a research setting. My presence could have influenced students or professionals to censor themselves or misrepresent their perceptions of academic support programs in interviews. To protect a study against validity threats, Maxwell (2013) recommends various tests, which include: rich data, numbers, respondent validation, triangulation, and comparison.

Rich data. Maxwell (2013) recommends the use of “rich data” (p. 126). Interviews transcribed verbatim and detailed descriptions in field notes prevent the analysis of what the researcher thought was significant at the time, and encourages the researcher to analyze exact language used by participants. Individual interviews were transcribed verbatim, while field observations were as descriptive as possible. In addition to in vivo field notes, I wrote memos after each field observation providing a deeper reflection of what I saw and the initial meanings I drew from my observations.

Numbers. The concept of using numbers to strengthen validity in qualitative research is similar to rich data. The use of numbers in qualitative research allows the researcher to “assess the amount of evidence” gathered from data collection. There is nothing inherently conclusive about the amount of data, but it simply lessens the likelihood of discrepant instances emerging as themes in the final analysis. I studied three programs on a single campus. I interviewed one to five professionals from each program, and included four to ten students in each focus group. In this respect, the amount of evidence that I compiled protected the validity of the study from discrepant cases.

Respondent validation. I used follow-up interviews and member checking to clarify my understanding of the participants'. This allowed professionals to correct the assumptions drawn from my analysis. Maxwell (2013) calls this the "single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on" (pp. 126-127). I sent manuscripts of my initial findings to professionals who I interviewed in order to verify that my interpretations of what they said, as well as the conclusions that I reached, were not inaccurate in any way. As a researcher, it was important for me to be open to this feedback and make adjustments to my analysis as necessary.

Triangulation. Validity–or trustworthiness—of qualitative data analysis relies upon data collection from several sources of information (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glesne, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Taylor, Bogdan, & DeVault, 2016). Data collection from diverse sources is known as triangulation. It allows the researcher to view the problem from multiple points of view, and also juxtapose the perspectives of one data source with the perspectives of another data source. My research question regarding the alignment and misalignment of how students and professionals understand the same experiences makes this validity test a central one. Data from individual interviews with professionals, as well as focus groups with students, and field observations in the academic support program settings themselves, allowed me to more holistically evaluate the cases involved in this study.

Comparison. Comparison is well integrated into this study's design. Similar to triangulation, this validity test is necessary in responding to the research question asking the varying ways in which students and professionals experience and perceive academic

support programs. Comparison, in this case, comes from the contrast between how students perceive and experience their context, and also how professionals experience their context (Maxwell, 2013).

This study also employs comparison in its use of the comparative case study model (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). In studying various academic support programs within the context of a single institution of higher education, this study employs comparison across professionals and across students, rather than just between students and professionals as aggregate groups.

Summary of validity. The design of this study was such that I, as a researcher, could derive answers to my research questions by viewing multiple academic support programs from multiple angles and through multiple lenses. Interviews with professionals were my primary source of information, and the number of professionals interviewed across multiple programs, as well as the in-depth nature of Seidman's (2006) three-part phenomenological interview series gave a deep understanding of how professionals understand and enact their work across the same institution. Interactions with students, both through field observations as well as focus groups, allowed for a more holistic understanding of academic support programs from the perspectives of the population served by each program. Observing multiple cases within the research site also allowed me to keep my perspective as a researcher fresh, and prevented me from becoming to enmeshed into one case, painting my perspective as that of an insider, rather than an outside observer. Overall, this research design provided the context needed for trustworthiness in the findings for these research questions.

Analysis

I used various coding and analysis styles outlined in Saldaña's (2016) and Corbin and Strauss (2008) methodologies. An external transcription company transcribed each interview. I began coding when I listened to audio files as I read the transcripts. This process served two purposes: I was able to catch and correct any inaccuracies in the third-party transcription, and I could develop and memo ideas around themes across the data. Once I listened to each round of interviews for each participant, I wrote an outline of some common themes, as well as some negative cases or outliers.

I used Saldaña's concept of "lumping." I uploaded the corrected transcripts into the NVivo software and coded the block themes I identified during my first read-through of each transcript. I kept track of each of my codes and sub-codes within an NVivo file, and continually cross-checked to assess my "data-to-codes ratio" to ensure that codes were being used repeatedly throughout the data (Saldaña, 2016, p. 79).

In the comparative case study method, as well as using Seidman's (2006) three-interview-sequence, it was important to also use attribute coding. Saldaña (2016) defines attribute coding as a "basic descriptive information such as: fieldwork setting… participant characteristics or demographics… time frame...and other variables of interest" (p. 83). In this case, I used attribute coding to distinguish between data from first, second, or third interviews, as well as to distinguish from which site the data came. I was able to do this using the case classification function in the NVivo software. This helped me make comparisons of similarities and differences across sites, which is central to my conceptual framework of aligning program components with perceived institutional values and perceived student values.

Attribute coding co-existed with structural coding. Saldaña (2916) defines structural coding as a way to capture answers to common questions across a structured or semi-structured interview protocol. For example, each participant was asked how their program addressed student needs. Answers to this question were coded under the label "needs addressed" and compared for "commonalities, differences, and relationships" (p. 98).

There were occasions within the data in which in vivo coding was an appropriate method. In vivo coding captures a participant's exact words and uses that phrase as a label for the sentiment it embodies. An example that is highlighted later in this dissertation's *Findings* chapter is the code "an evil you feel you can change." This code helped to embody a sentiment voiced specifically by one participant—but echoed in some way by others—of a feeling of helplessness in reforming a large, inequitable system. Saldaña (2016) advocates for verbatim language when it conveys and preserves the sense of meaning intended by the participant.

Process coding helped to convey *how* participants engaged in the embodiment of their roles. In this study, process coding allowed me to categorize and label participants' descriptions of how they achieved various outcomes within their work, drawing distinctions between the meaning that various participants made of their work and their relationships with students and the institution. "Process is ongoing action/interpretation/emotion taken in response to situations, or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal or handling a problem," (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 96-97). The use of process coding allowed for the discovery of basic differences in paradigms across the study's participants, and theoretical coding allowed for the application of a

more directed understanding of what these differences in paradigms mean in the context of this study's framework.

As themes began to emerge through first-cycle coding techniques, I used theoretical coding to develop a narrative that explained how the data from 24 interviews, three focus groups, and several field observations answered my research questions. Saldaña (2016) describes this step as "finding the primary theme of the research" (p. 250). Theoretical coding came both from my initial outlining when I conducted, then listen to, the interviews and focus groups, then further solidified as I worked through the first-cycle coding strategies listed above. I began to see patterns in how various university staff members discussed their perspectives on how their programs functioned, the needs addressed by their programs, how their respective academic support programs responded to those needs, and how their individual efforts within their professional roles impacted the students and program outcomes.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) compare theory building to an umbrella, which "has many spokes" which "give the umbrella shape and form" (p. 103). For the set of research questions and the way that the data unfolded during analysis, this metaphor translated well for me. Throughout the findings chapter of this dissertation, there are several distinct spokes that build to an overall theory around how university staff members understand the institution, students, and their overall impact in their small corner of post-secondary education.

In Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault's (2016) qualitative methods guidebook, the authors highlight Glaser and Strauss' (1967) method of switching back and forth between coding and analysis in order to build theory. I deployed this approach as well with the

help of NVivo software. When I found a code or theme that was interesting, I used the text query function to find other instances in which key words or phrases were used across the interviews. These text queries did not always lead to a consistent pattern, but it helped me get a preliminary glance at patterns that were repeated across the data.

Summary of Methods

In order to answer the research questions for this dissertation, this study deployed the comparative case study heuristic presented by Bartlett and Vavrus (2017). In this study, the *cases* were academic support programs within a single institution of higher education. Academic support programs were selected based on their use of a program in which students had to enroll or subscribe—a summer bridge program, a seminar, supplemental instruction, or a cohort-based learning-community joining two or more classes in a group of students' schedules. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) discuss the various ways to evaluate cases in the comparative case study approach. They are not simply compared to one another void of context, but rather, compared using a multidimensional lens. Academic support programs were compared based on their structural characteristics—horizontal comparison—but also their placement and relative power within the larger political system—vertical comparison. Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) also discussed the use of time—the transversal comparison—in analyzing data collected across multiple sites in a comparative case study. These dimensions represent the framework for approaching this type of study, and this section also highlighted the strategies I employed to do so.

I used Seidman's (2006) three-part phenomenological interview series as my primary point of data collection. Since the study focused on university staff, interviews

came from university staff members across the three cases. Participants sat for three interviews throughout the length of their program—whether it was a short, six-week summer term or a traditional, 16-week semester. Each interview lasted anywhere from about an hour to 90 minutes, and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. In order to ensure the trustworthiness of my data analysis, I used focus groups with students enrolled in each program as well as field observations from each case. Glesne (2016) describes *trustworthiness* as the researcher's ability to ensure data collection represents an authentic and genuine understanding of a phenomenon or subject, and this comes from viewing and understanding data from multiple viewpoints. Maxwell (2013) refers to this approach as *triangulation*, and affirms that it protects the research from threats to its validity.

The analytical methods outlined in this chapter guided my approach at using interview, focus group, and field observation data to answer my research questions. Through the use of multiple coding and re-coding strategies, I was able to build concepts that explain the perspectives of university staff in academic support programs. The Findings chapter of this dissertation provides a portrait of how university staff members in academic support programs understand their roles, and how they negotiate those roles with students, the institutional culture, and the policies they have to interpret and enact with students.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this research was to learn how university staff members understood their role in their respective academic support programs, how their policy enactment replicated or challenged historical patterns of exclusion in higher education, and how their perceptions of their interventions aligned or misaligned with those of students. To start, I will describe the various cases involved in this comparative case study in order to provide limited context. In an effort to both de-identify data, as well as speak to wider policy implications than the experiences of individual staff members of academic support programs, not every datum presented for analysis will be contextualized within its respective academic support program. However, a brief description of each case study presented in this dissertation will provide some understanding of the work of the university staff members and the work they do within the academic support programs.

Seidman's (2006) phenomenological interviewing method calls for an understanding of the experiences of the university staff and the life events and decisions that led them into their particular mode of work. I explore variations of common themes across the data in order to establish the background needed for that question. Some similarities manifest across the various participants, but negative cases, or discrepancies in the data, can be as informative as commonalities, so those are illuminated as well. The personal narratives of higher education experiences of university staff—especially as they related to feelings of connection and sense of belonging—create a background for how and why they pursued careers in academic support programs and how they understand the work they do and its purpose.

University staff members' understanding of the need their work addresses, the ways that they interpret and enact policy, and their approach to their work and relationships with students are central to these research findings. As understood through the perspective of university staff, the needs of students in academic support programs are complex, and sometimes the perceived interests of the students and those of the institution are in competition with one another, leaving university staff to interpret policy and advise students. University staff members' approaches to their work and the students within their academic support programs was not monolithic, either, and I include an analysis of the differing ways that staff members understood their roles and embodied personal or institutional values in their work with students.

Across the three programs surveyed, there was a mutual understanding that certain populations had historically been excluded from higher education, and their role as academic support programs was to somehow rectify that history with additional support for marginalized communities. The ways university staff members characterized contemporary practices in higher education as exclusionary varied across participants—some identified local issues in their own units, others identified issues with the institution at large, and still others identified state and federal policy when they talked about students' struggles. The position of each respective program within the institution influenced participants' perspectives. Additionally, prior experiences and worldviews of participants influenced the ways in which their practices mimicked or ran counter to higher education's historical roots in exclusion.

Summary of the Academic Support Programs

Throughout this section, I talk about the program staff in three academic support programs somewhat interchangeably. In an effort to maintain confidentiality of the research participants, I will avoid using program names whenever possible or participant names—even pseudonyms—for two important reasons. The first reason is that academic support units are relatively easy to identify based on their characteristics, so if a reader had any familiarity with a specific program on a specific campus, a research participant's confidentiality would be at risk for being compromised. Perhaps even more important, though, is that the significant findings in this research come from a collective of viewpoints and ideas across various sites within a single institution. The meaning that should be derived from this dissertation is not individual experiences or stories, but greater themes that emerge from hearing these stories as one narrative.

This is a comparative case study, so given the nature of that heuristic, I will make distinctions between some narratives in order to highlight the value of positioning within an institution. However, unless I'm intentionally making an argument about the contextual nature of a theme in these findings, much of what I write will be de-contextualized to protect the confidentiality of participants as well as draw attention to deeper patterns and themes within the context of academic support programs. In this section, I will briefly describe the function of each of the three programs in this study, which took place at a public university.

Summer Bridge. In this study there was one summer bridge program, which is centrally administered at the university—meaning it was not tied to a specific academic unit, but it was recognized and supported through a university office. In it, students take

classes for six weeks and earn six or seven university credits. One participant described the program as "a transition program."

> I think for any student transitioning from high school to college is hard and comes with like inevitable bumps in the road that every first-year student will face. And I think the need being addressed by [this program] is really being able to get through some of those transitions earlier.

Students in this program all graduated from high school during the spring semester and were enrolled in the fall to start at the university. The program welcomes all entering freshman as long as they are coming straight from high school with no time off, but they target in-state, low-income students.

College Cultural Program. Another program in the study was located within an academic unit and administered by staff members employed by that academic unit. It was designed to help black and Hispanic students, who are historically underrepresented—particularly in this unit—persist past critical milestones in their first two to three semesters at the university. The College Cultural program consisted of weekly meetings, peer mentoring, and a weekly study hall that targeted material in which students historically struggled in the college.

STEM Intensive Program. The third and final program that participated in this study was a program that focused on supporting underrepresented student populations in science, engineering, and math. One participant succinctly described the program below:

> I think our goal is to help students who really want to be in STEM, but maybe will encounter barriers that will make them feel like they don't belong, and they can't be there.

The STEM Intensive Program is neither centrally administered nor embedded in an academic unit—it was originally run by volunteers and slowly gained funding and metastasized throughout the institution, simultaneously living in various departments on

at the university. I will explore program structure and the significance of positioning in the institution later in this chapter. The program consists of one-unit seminars for freshman and transfer students over the course of two years, as well as ongoing support from peer mentors, tutors, and professional staff.

There are points in this analysis where I draw distinctions and similarities between cases based on characteristics such as their placement in the institutional structure, the students who participate, or the role of the staff who work in each respective program. At other points, disaggregating between the programs is not the focus—instead, the similarities between programs and their staff, or distinctions between staff that are unrelated to their respective programs, are the focus. Throughout the analysis, a focus on how staff, students, and the institution interact with and react to one another guides my interpretation of each narrative.

How University Staff's Past Experiences Inform their Contemporary Perspectives

The past experiences of university staff mattered in their pursuit of their current line of work, as well as their approach to how they view their current tasks in their academic success programs. Past experiences—especially as they related to personal experiences as college students—defined the type of work that interested these professionals, as well as their understanding of higher education. In particular, how they connected to their undergraduate institution, their relationships with peers, and their relationships with faculty and staff members emerged as a common theme across the university staff members interviewed.

Feelings of disconnect in college. For many participants, feelings of disconnect were prevalent in their narratives of their college experiences. Some felt disconnected

from their campus or their academic programs or their peers. The sense of disconnect manifested in diverse ways. For example, one participant shared her experience transferring from a community college in her hometown to a university elsewhere in the state:

> And when I got [to the university], I just felt very isolated and it was kind of hard to find community because you know, everyone who I would have met in my major already had friends. And then it was really interesting because it was really hard to find other native Spanish speaking Latino students. And I always felt like I looked different.
>
> And I remember this one day, I was in a class and we're talking about like rituals of like, you know, that happened as like a rite of passage. And the quinceañera was brought up as a thing and it was like, "oh, who here had a quinceañera?" And it was really weird and a class of 300 to be the only hand. Which was really interesting cause like growing up where I grew up in [my hometown], like that was the norm. I felt like every Saturday there was something going on for someone's birthday.

For this participant, the sense of isolation or disconnect was due to her status both as a transfer student as well as a Latina student. Another participant discussed a sense of disconnect coming from a low-income family and attending a wealthy, elite institution.

> I still felt like it wasn't really culturally a great fit for me. Mostly because people were so wealthy that like, I just had no concept of that kind of wealth. Like where I grew up, it was pretty small town and like the rich people in that town were like doctors right? And the rich people at [the private university I attended] like owned private jets and private islands and things like that. Just like a whole other level, and it wasn't like it was like everybody, but it was a significant enough like number of people that it was just like…very visible and like yeah like I remember my roommate buying like $300 pairs of jeans. It was like "what? That's what I make like a month at my work-study," so that kind of thing. So I feel like that, I just felt very like it really was shook my confidence in my first year, because I didn't feel like I could compete with all the kids who had been to private schools.

These participants' disconnect highlighted a difference in the dominant identity of their undergraduate institution—non-transfer students, white, or higher socio-economic

status—from their own. These narratives demonstrate a sense of belonging that was notably missing during these university staff members' college experiences.

Though some feelings of disconnect stemmed from the identities of the participant and those around them, some participants described feelings of disconnect related to a more overt sense of rejection as their attempted to find a community at their undergraduate institution. Here, one participant talks about her struggle to connect when she transferred to a new school her sophomore year:

> So like my graduating class in high school was 86 people. And then I would come [to my new institution] and I would be walking into lecture halls where there was [*sic*] more people in my lecture than in my entire high school. So like I would have a lecture with 500 people in my entire high school was only 400 people. So I definitely felt lost when I got [there]. I felt like I didn't fit in. I got cut from the volleyball team, I got dropped from sorority recruitment, like just have a lot of, kind of rejections if you will.

For this participant, feelings of outright rejection as she attempted to find community were compounded by a general sense of feeling out of place and adjusting to a new environment that was very different than from where she came.

Whether the disconnect described by participants was overt—getting cut from the volleyball team—or a more subtle dissonance with the university culture—feelings of disconnection to significant displays of wealth or not seeing one's own culture represented on campus—the theme of disconnection was woven through several stories. Disconnect marked many participants' in this study's stories about their own college going experiences. This common thread will be an important factor as participants later discuss their current roles in their respective academic support program.

How connection and integration enhanced college experiences. Perhaps equally as important as some participants' descriptions of disconnect during their

undergraduate experience were some participants' narratives about the value of connection. Actually, an emphasis on disconnect during college demonstrates an assumed value of connection, even when participants did not experience an overt sense of connection. Some participants framed their college experiences not through their sense of disconnect, but through powerful narratives of connection and a sense of community.

One participant discussed his transition to college in terms of how welcome he felt on a campus he visited during high school.

> The Honors College actually invited me to do an overnight program with them I think in October or November. And so I stayed in [the Honors Dorm], I was with two students and they just kind of showed me what the day in the life of a college student was like. So they took me to [get breakfast] and we played Capture the Flag and it was just a really cool moment, like seeing what the everyday life experience at the [college] was like.

In this participant's case, even his pre-college interactions with his undergraduate institution left a mark on how he perceived his sense of belonging in higher education. He felt welcomed and he could see himself fitting into his new environment.

Another participant described her work on a research team as she discussed her connection to her undergraduate experience.

> I guess I got so involved early on because in my ecology class, I had the sweetest professor who—spoiler alert—was my mentor later on. And she posted an opportunity in class that she was doing a summer research thing and she needed volunteers. And it was collecting data for a black cohosh and basically we would go out to the mountain and camp for five days and we had to work from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. But I don't know, it was weird because as I grew up in the mountains …but historically hated the outdoors. And then I was just like, I don't know, I was just like grooving on all of what I was learning. And I was like, heck yeah, this seems awesome.

This participant worked for her mentor for the remainder of college, and credits her early graduation and her love for learning to the fact that she got involved in research so early on in college. For the participant who attended an elite college and felt that her college

wasn't a strong fit for her culturally, she also emphasized some moments of connectivity and community.

> It's funny because I only really remember like three of my faculty that I had any kind of relationship with they all happen to be like Latinx, so I don't know if that's a part of it. I feel like because I was so self-conscious about who I was and where I was from I really didn't like connect with faculty at all, especially in my first couple years. I think by my junior and senior year I was better at that. And so like, I did have like a couple different faculty members that I felt like I could relate to because they were, you know Latina or Latino. And they were nice and didn't seem too intimidating or off-putting, and so them I still remember…So them I would see as mentors, and really I think just because I felt like we shared something maybe culturally and they seemed approachable, right, and not totally off-putting.

This participant described the few relationships she found with faculty mentors as "approachable" and "not totally off-putting," which was counter to the feelings she had about her wealthy peers. These two examples—the person who did research with a faculty mentor and the person who had a couple of Latinx faculty mentors with whom she felt comfortable—showcase the value students' relationships with university faculty can have on their sense of connection within their college experience. However a person characterizes their college experience, relationships with faculty either instilled a sense of connection or at least partially redeemed a sense of disconnect.

Another participant found community in college despite her rough beginnings being cut from the volleyball team and sorority recruitment.

> I did eventually, even though my first year transferring…was super rough, I did eventually establish community. So I mentioned that I had been cut from the volleyball team but tried out then for the competitive club team… So I ended up playing on the competitive club team which was a way that I found my way onto a team and found community then and then also had been dropped from recruitment but then ended up later on joining [a sorority]. So after those two kind of initial rejections, was able to plug in later on. Which helped me figure it out.

Again, although some memories of college were characterized by the overt rejection she felt in the beginning, she emphasized that she eventually found community and this helped her feel connected to her undergraduate experience. This participant emphasized a group of peers that constituted her network of support and community in college.

The participant who felt marginalized due to her status as a transfer student and her identity as a Latina also described a major connection she made on her campus.

> And when I was in higher education as an undergrad, I actually was in an ambassador program. So I would travel to different parts of [the state] and to different parts of the United States to basically talk to kids about higher education. And I tended to attract the students who looked like me and were the first in their family to go to college and they always ask me [about my] experiences.

Interestingly, this participant who struggled to feel like she fit in at her university developed a sense of belonging by encouraging students who were similar to her to attend the same university. I didn't recognize this paradox during the interview, so I didn't directly ask the her about it, but as she further described the passion she had in her role as a student ambassador, it became clear that she felt gratified in helping people find their way, perhaps especially because she felt so alone and isolated as part of her initial experience.

> And I just couldn't like stop feeling amazing when I would see that a student did apply and to get into the [my college]…One thing that we did is I'd love to give out my contact information, so I'd give out my personal cell in case they ever needed anything. And sometimes it was nice to like actually have them message me either email or phone and just be like, "hey, like I actually got here and I'm really excited" and that was really fun.

She found meaning in her struggle by serving as a connection to new and future students, hopefully preventing them from experiencing some of what she experienced as a new student.

A common thread across the participants of this study was a strong value of connection—because they felt a strong sense of community and belonging during college, because that feeling was distinctly absent, or some combination of disconnect tempered with a connection felt notable. A deep association of connection—present or absent—with the undergraduate experience underlies the values of the academic support programs for which each of these participants work. It is the *actant* in Actor Network Theory that creates the desire to build community and a sense of belonging for others. This becomes more clear as participants discuss the work that they currently do at the university later in this chapter.

Relationships between (dis)connection, dropping out, and returning to school. Many of the participants either attended just one undergraduate institution from start to finish without interruption, or transferred between two institutions but maintained continuous enrollment in higher education from the time they started until they graduated. There were two participants who had experiences with departing from one institution and not immediately starting again at another institution. Although some of their experiences mirrored the feelings around disconnect and the value of connection shared by participants whose enrollment was continuous, the way they came through college and into their profession had certain distinctions.

These two participants finished college with a distinct understanding of the work they wanted to do in educational equity. Both cited financial reasons for withdrawing from higher education, but they each had different outlooks on their pathways through education and the barriers they faced upon returning to school. One participant linked her struggles in higher education to a lack of preparation in certain subject areas and a lack of

understanding of how to *do* college, and credited her persistence to her participation in educational equity programs designed to help her learn important fundamentals required for her to progress to degree completion. The other participant focused on the policy—and interpretation of policy through academic advising—as the reason she struggled to get through school. She ultimately credited her success to having found “the right” environment in which she could learn and complete a bachelor’s degree.

The participant who credits her success and persistence on getting the appropriate academic support talked about her first attempt at college and the reason she departed:

> My family was like “go to college and that was it.” Right? So like many first gen, low-income students, underrepresented, I did well, in my first semester, I did well in my second semester, and the third semester, like a maelstrom of like stuff just hit. Family stuff, financial stuff, I had to in the middle of the semester-- and I was taking 15 units-- I had to start working full time. Right. So of course, I know this is something that we tell our students like don't take 15 units and work full time. I just did that blindly. And of course, it ended badly. I ended up dropping out.

As she reflected back on this experience, she notes that her decision to work full-time in order to address some financial difficulties was the reason that she dropped out. Her sense of disconnection that led to her departure the first time she tried to attend college was in part because of her external financial difficulties, but also because of a lack of cultural capital—she didn’t know *not* to work full-time and attend school full-time.

She went on to describe her next attempt at college, more than a decade later, and described herself as “not equipped to succeed” in foundational math courses:

> I had to accept it. And that's okay. Right. And the “why” wasn't important. It was— I don't need to look back, I need to look forward. Right? Like, why did I graduate from high school without really, fundamentally, strong math skills? Okay, I could whine about that until the cows come home, but that's not going to help me. So I need to accept that: Yes, this is where I am.

This participant identified a deficiency in her own educational background that she wanted to fix in order to complete a degree. She found an educational equity program and credits her participation in it as the reason she finished community college with a 4.0 GPA.

> Yeah, there was [*sic*] two educational equity programs— there was TRiO and there was EOP that I availed myself to. And it was wonderful. I mean it was like that was exactly what I needed. I needed the tutoring, I needed, the mentoring not so much, although it was great to have someone to sort of point me in the right direction if I had a challenge, but I think that those programs really helped develop my skill set in terms of like studying. Right. What does studying look like? It's not just reading, and it's not just highlighting, you know, that's old school. And that's what I knew. It's like you use a whiteboard, start talking to people about things, as opposed to just reading about it.

As she puts it, she was unprepared for post-secondary education, and credits her persistence to her sense of connection to an academic support program.

Beyond the services that she received from the academic support program, this participant also described a connection she made as a student staff member through academic support programs—both at community college and after she transferred.

> So I transferred successfully to a four-year university. And there again, I was also availed myself of all resources, went to Educational Equity Program that did a learning community in my first semester: thrived. And the coordinators/academic advisor said, “Okay, so you're coming with some unique skill sets. I've never had a student work with me directly. But I'd like you to help me with the next cohort of transfer students.” And I'm like, “yeah!” So I worked with him with the cohort of transfer students, which were 100 students as well as they did a pilot of an online cohort of 12 students.

This participant’s mindset of needing help led her to a desire to help others, and in doing so established a sense of belonging and community in her leadership role with an academic support program. The disconnect caused by her lack of college know-how led to her dropping out the first time she tried to attend. By attaching herself to an academic

support program, this participant felt that she closed this gap in her preparation for college, allowing her to finish.

Conversely, the other participant who finished college without continuous enrollment shared a different outlook on her experience. Similar to the participant who got very involved in academic support programs, this participant cited financial difficulties that made continuous enrollment untenable. Her parents couldn't contribute financially, and when she realized she wanted to change career paths after her first year of art school, she realized that she needed to take time away from school to figure out her next steps. After a two-year break, she decided to pursue a career in environmental science, but struggled to pass the remedial math classes that she needed to enroll in algebra.

> And I think at that point in time, I was just starting to get mad. I was angry about all these barriers that I've faced financially and not knowing how to get that support of what am I supposed to even be doing. I feel like every advisor I've ever had was terrible at any school I ever went to. One person misadvised me for the longest time who was telling me I had to get into these other classes that I didn't even need and so I just had this terrible idea of what college was at that point.

She eventually found a college that allowed students to design their own majors, and she created a major that combined her interest in environmental studies with her passion for urban gardening, food disparities, and social justice. For this participant, she felt disconnect throughout her college experience, and credits her persistence to graduation on her own determination and tenacity, *in spite of* the lack of support she felt in college—rather than *because* of any kind of institutional support.

These two participants tell a story about how feelings of disconnection or a strong value around connection shaped their college experience, particularly their stories of starting and stopping college. Their distinct and sometimes contradictory perspectives on

the institution's role in helping them persist to graduation are notable, and will play into their current roles as university staff in academic support programs.

University staff's influence on connection and disconnection. Many participants described university staff and faculty as having played a role in their sense of connection or disconnection in college. These roles were not always those of a mentor—some participants discussed the role of university staff as furthering their discord and lack of trust with the university in some way. One participant discussed the difficulty she faced because she drove to her family home in another city and crossed the U.S.-Mexico border frequently on weekends to see her father, who had recently moved back to the Mexico side of the border. After she struggled academically her first semester, a university staff member overseeing her scholarship reached out to her to meet.

> I met with her and we talked a little bit about time management and the stressors that I was going through. And she gave me her tips. Obviously, with like, "try to explain you can stay here more," but not really understanding culturally a lot of that. And I'm the oldest [sibling]. So I felt a lot of responsibility with like needing to go home to be there for my family and all this stuff.

For this participant, her need to go home was grounded in cultural values that she did not see reflected in her university environment. She had a difficult time relating to the university staff member from her scholarship, because the university staff member did not demonstrate an understanding of the participant's cultural values influencing her decision to leave campus frequently and spend time with her family. This misalignment in perspective further contributed to the participant's feeling of disconnect during college.

One of the participants who started and stopped college shared that she struggled to trust academic advisors. She felt as through she had been misadvised and not listened

to and they didn’t explain what she needed to know and what resources she needed to succeed, so she just stopped trusting them altogether.

> At some point, I just stopped seeing advisors as a resource. Like if you have a couple of negative experiences, so then the next school you go to, because I went to so many schools, so you're like, “oh, here's another advisor. I didn't get anything out of it before, so I'll just go to my meeting and then I have to talk about the classes I'm taking and then pretty much be done with it.”

She eventually found a faculty advisor who she described as “supportive,” but whom she felt did not offer any practical advice.

> So if I think about the one semi-good advisor that I had and then compare them to the others, and I would still say that, I mean, he as a person was great, but there was just this massive gap, I think, in understanding due to age. He was this really great philosophy professor at [the college where I graduated] and he was just such a nice guy and so supportive of me. But there's definitely this huge gap in understanding, I think, of problems that, I don't know, like a 20-something-year old Latina would be experiencing and he was this 75-year-old man.

For this participant, there she doesn’t attribute much of her success in college to relationships with college staff and faculty—quite the opposite. For the most part, these relationships were seen as burdensome and unhelpful.

The participant that reported a feeling of connection before entering college talked about having a rough transition into college, in spite of an initial feeling of belonging and community when he was recruited during high school. He went to the wrong classroom for the first class of his first day of college, and then he had his first-ever Italian class, in which he had a difficult time keeping up. He had gotten a work-study position, though, and he confided his struggles to his supervisor.

> I was like, “this is gonna be so hard. I don't know if I'm ready for this.” But by then, I was already settled into my job at admissions and kind of forming a really good, finding some really good mentors. [My supervisor] was a really good mentor for me and she told me, you know, “give it some time. You know, nobody's first day is amazing, you know. It's just something that you have to, you know, get used to and give it some time.”

As his first semester progressed, this participant hit another struggle.

> About ten days into my freshman year, I actually got cited for breaking the Code of Conduct. That was like terrifying for me because like I had always been the rule follower in school and never got in trouble in high school. But what happened was, you know, back in the day, LimeWire was a big thing. And so like I would download a lot of music and like TV shows and such. And I had no idea that that was something that like [the school] could trace. I didn't even really have a concept that it was wrong…And then I got an email from NBC like, "hey, we're aware that you're downloading our show and it's on your computer and like you need to stop that." And then I was like, okay, like I'll delete everything. Like I won't do this anymore. And I didn't know that they could find out about that. And then a couple days later, I got the email from the Dean of Students that was like, "what you're doing is wrong. Like it's considered stealing. Like you are being cited, you need to pay an $80 sanction, you're on probation for the rest of the semester and you need to write a paper about why what you were doing was wrong." And so that was like this terrifying thing for me… And then I went and told…my boss because I thought it was like when you're in high school and you get in trouble, like your coaches find out and like if you tell about your teachers so they can like keep an eye on you and stuff. And I thought that it was going to be the same [in college]. So I went and told my boss, I was like, "you need to hear this from me instead of from the Dean of Students. Like I'm in trouble right now for downloading music." And she was like, "[Participant name], who doesn't download music?"

For this participant, having a university staff member as a mentor helped him overcome some challenges that shook his sense of confidence (as a student) and identity (as a rule-follower).

It is important to note that throughout these narratives, participants described a particular value in a sense of connection (even or maybe especially if this value stemmed from their lack of connection) to their college. They also discussed the role that faculty and staff played in supporting connection or perpetuating a sense of disconnection. For some participants, the role that staff and faculty played was critical in creating a sense of belonging. For others, it further drove them away from a sense of belonging. And for some, it appeared that cultural elements of their undergraduate experience—without the

explicit mention of faculty and staff orchestrating that experience—created a sense of belonging in their memories of college. These interactions with people, policies, and campus organizations all represent the actants that influenced the belief systems of the participants of this study. Finally, as part of the selection criteria for this study, each of these participants works as a university staff member in academic support programs. The backgrounds and college-going experiences of staff members help to explain their motivation for doing the work that they do, and also help to explain how they enact that work and embody their roles as university staff members in academic support programs.

Framing the Problem of Student Success through Academic Integration/Advancement

Each participant in this study works for an academic support program at a large, public university. They each describe their support program as helping a specific population of students persist through varying points in college. Some programs purport to only influence students in their first year—one that's viewed as highly susceptible to drop-out, and is therefore the recipient of more institutional attention and intervention at many universities—and some identify ways that they support students through post-secondary education to graduation or other important milestones at the university. A central question to consider when thinking about academic support programs is: what is the problem and how does it need to be addressed? Each participant shared their perspectives on their programs and students, as well as the institution as a whole, and produced a complex narrative of how they are working within a university system to address a perceived problem.

Sense of belonging, with a side of academic advancement. Across all three sites, university staff described the need that they are addressing as creating a sense of belonging in the university, largely for historically marginalized students to persist through higher education. Several cited fostering a sense of belonging in students as a means to retention, which they knew was part of the institution's strategic plan. It was clear in their personal narratives about past experiences that a deep value of connection framed their understanding of their own college experience and persistence, and inspired their motivation for working in academic support. One participant shared that creating a physical space and grouping students so that they could support one another was a central piece of the way they addressed student needs in their population.

> I think some of the biggest needs are "sense of belonging." We time and time again have seen that there's this community that gets developed through the cohorts, through the lounges with other students who are currently going through that.

Another participant described the various ways that their academic support program sets up an infrastructure for students to develop a strong network and connection at the university:

> There's the social component of the program and then the community components. So integrating socially, we try to partner with different partners across campus and we give them the option to live in the dorms. We put them into peer mentoring groups where they're with about 15 to 20 people… But the idea is that by the end of the [program], they have this network of, you know, no more than 400 people where they've been able to, you know, meet people from, you know, their majors and from different interests that they have on campus. And…they have this support system ready. And so they have their friends from their classes, they have people that they've been able to meet when they go to campus partner events.

Sense of belonging acknowledges marginalization. Over and over, participants shared sentiments about how their program is designed to help students feel a sense of

belonging on their college campus—the same sense of belonging that many participants cited as having been missing or maybe found by accident during their experience in higher education. Sometimes this connection was reflected in the design of putting students in cohorts or first-year seminars together, or having them participate in extra-curricular activities in the residence halls. But other program components included an open acknowledgement that students in each program are underrepresented at the university somehow, and that finding a sense of belonging would be key to their individual and collective success.

I saw this intention present in my field observations as well. Class discussions did not shy away from the role that identity can play in a person's sense of belonging. I observed one class session where students discussed concepts such as power, privilege, and allyship openly and respectfully with one another. Students in this class talked about assumptions others have made about them based on identity—such as assuming that they or their family were undocumented immigrants based on their ethnicity. Other students shared ways in which they made assumptions about others. One African American student talked about how he used to think all white people were financially comfortable based on images he'd seen on television and in movies. Below is an excerpt from my field notebook in which I discussed my reaction to this particular class session:

> …the class was having an open discussion around power and privilege that I've never seen with [eighteen year olds]. Students are being reflective as they respond to one another respectfully, but sometimes challenging and pushing back on their peers' opinions… the other thing that was interesting about the interaction was the students' mutual respect for one another. Students did not feel uncomfortable disagreeing, but it also didn't devolve into a tense argument. I asked [the student leader] about this after class, and she commented that early on, her class started to develop a language or code around identity that they were able to use very comfortably with one another. This concept of "the mask" that they wear

> outwardly, that they construct or society constructs, is how the world views them, and behind the mask are more unique viewpoints and emotions.

To advance, you must belong. Even though it appeared to be an important priority in the design of each program, creating this “sense of belonging” wasn’t the only function of any of these academic support programs. In fact, even though each participant highlighted the importance of fostering a sense of belonging for their targeted, underserved population, it was not always their first description of their respective programs in their interviews. Many participants cited the academic interventions and credit-bearing purpose of their program when they first began to describe their work.

> It's a summer experience that is kind of a blend of, of course, academics. So they're going to finish this summer with six to seven units of academic credit, which was a half of a semester jumpstart. So there's a huge academic component to it. Then of course, there's also a residential component to it, not mandatory. We do have a lot of commuters, but you do have the option to live in the dorm. And then also of course, like the social component, I would argue is equally important as the academic component. You're going to end the summer with a super solid friend group and, you know, you know your way around campus. You just really start your fall semester leaps and bounds, I would say ahead of incoming freshmen that did not do [the summer bridge program].

In above quote, the staff member began their description with the credit-bearing component of the program, and then expanded into the social and residential components of the summer bridge program for which they worked. The participant did not discuss the *need* for this type of intervention with this specific population in their description, even as they acknowledged that need elsewhere in the interview.

I asked one participant about this discrepancy between the way he described the interventions of his program and the way he initially described the purpose of the program:

> I guess like I'm really used to the way that it's always been marketed and like even though it's a really essential component of the program, I guess it's not something

> that's always shown up in like the marketing. Like I'm always really used to talking about like yeah, you get your six credits and you get like your social integration and stuff. And I have never seen like the social justice aspect integrated into, you know, like the website or the brochures or like hearing the pitches from, you know, people who would recruit for [this program] before.

The emphasis on a sense of belonging was apparent throughout interviews across the sites—with staff members talking about community gatherings specific to their programs and events in which students mix and mingle with faculty and one another—but each program also somehow tied their interventions designed to create a sense of belonging to a credit-bearing requirement. University staff members in the summer bridge program noted that one of the required classes was designed to build a strong sense of community and academic confidence, as well as a tight peer network with which students would enter their fall semester at the university. This class was three units of elective credit, and missing more than two class sessions of any course during the summer would result in removal from the entire program. The program was promoted to prospective students as a way to earn credit, yet in order to do so, there was the expectation that they would develop a sense of belonging.

This element was present in other programs as well. Participants in the STEM Intensive Program emphasized a sense of belonging through their various events in which students could develop community with one another as well as with participating STEM faculty members. Students in the focus group for the STEM Intensive Program shared that they were grateful for these opportunities, but were mainly enticed to attend them because of the impact that *not* attending would have on their grade in the seminar tied to the program.

> Student 1: Considering that it is required for the class and I haven't done my required six, I don't think I would go if it weren't required.
>
> Student 2: Usually I have to call off work to go to an event. Yeah like for example yesterday… I got to work at 7:15, I worked until 9:15, went to class, came back to work, went to a different class, then went to a different place. So that's like an idea of what my schedule is like—I'm either in work or in class or it is past 10 o'clock at night. I've had to call off of work or push back appointments to make events.

Students in the focus groups were generally happy about the outcomes of the academic support program requirements, even sharing excitement about special opportunities they got as a part of their academic support programs, but acknowledged a certain level of fatigue at the expectation of participating and said they possibly wouldn't have the initiative to fully engage in these programs if it weren't tied to their grades.

This is the point in which the Academic Integration/Advancement Paradox comes together as Responsive Practice. When university staff members describe the sense of belonging that they strive to promote in their programs, they are referring to a principle that Tinto (1975) called integration. Tinto argued that in order for students to persist, it's important for them to form meaningful connections socially and academically in their university. The university staff in this study largely echoed those sentiments, amending them slightly to emphasize the specific need that marginalized communities have for connection. Through their narratives about their personal and professional experiences in higher education, they shared that higher education was historically designed to integrate a certain profile of students, and their academic support programs seeks to integrate marginalized populations through creating that sense of belonging. They use students' interest in academic advancement—such as earning additional

academic credit or earning a certain grade in a credit-bearing class—as means to develop that sense of belonging.

(Mis)alignment in perceptions of advancement. Participants working for other programs followed a similar pattern of pairing a sense of belonging for marginalized students with strategies to academically advance program participants.

> So a lot of our program interventions really fall under math. So we see that a lot of these high school students are coming in to [remedial math]…And with the high level of math that they … the faster that they move through their math courses in their understanding with that, the better, so we supplement them. So in the past, we've partnered with the [campus tutoring office] to try to what we used to send them to the exam reviews... But that was always a hit or miss depending on who was presenting or not. So this year, we actually got a math tutor who's going to come in. So in the fall, it will be [a foundational course] and math, and then in the spring, it will be math only. So it's that academic intervention that a lot of our students need, especially because [the foundational course] isn't really hard. Well, I never took the class, I can't really say. What we've heard is it's not really hard, but it's a lot of busy work. And that's what students aren't used to. It's a lot of tracking smaller projects in order to end the class. But because they're not used to doing stuff like that in high school, they need more of like that walk through. So it's intervention in our core classes to ensure that their foundation GPA doesn't get like, messed up their first semester here.

I asked this participant if the students served by her program—students of color—needed additional help in these subjects. She shared that often students of color enter the university deficient in several semesters of the math sequence required for her academic unit, so interventions focused on those components were designed specifically to help Hispanic and African American students persist. During the student focus group for this program, I asked students why they thought a program designed for minority students needed a tutoring component. Their responses were not completely in line with what the university staff member's response, but they agreed that Hispanic and African American students benefitted more from academic support than the predominant white population of the academic unit:

> There aren't a lot of minority students in [college name] and their aren't a lot of minorities in industry. And I feel like that's what [academic support program] is trying to do—their whole thing was to help with the retention of African American and Hispanic students in [college name] because people drop first semester in [one class] or they drop second semester in [another class], or they drop first semester of sophomore year in [another class]. And that's why we have those study halls so that we can stay there. Because this is why we came here and they want us to live out our dreams.

The students in the focus group reached consensus that the classes supported by their academic support program are universally challenging for *all* students regardless of ethnic background, but that there are so few African American and Hispanic students in their college and workforce that each individual minority student represents a larger proportion of the minority student population. Therefore, each minority student that departs the college and does not finish their degree represents a significant proportion of the college's minority students, and their absence is noticeable for the remaining students of color. This was how the students in the focus group for the College Cultural Program justified the existence of the program—not that they needed additional support because minority students were individually less prepared than their white peers, but that their small numbers in the college and in the workforce justified extra support to retain them.

Although the university staff member and the students in her program agreed on the use of study hall and tutoring as an academic intervention for students of color, as well as its outcome of fewer students of color departing their college before graduation, they differed in their perspectives of how to frame the problem. Whereas the university staff member saw the problem as students of color entering the university underprepared overall in math when compared to their white peers, the students involved in the academic support program highlighted that there were fewer minority students entering their College in the first place, so they believed their struggles in math only appeared to

be greater given the fact that each individual represented a greater proportion of minority students.

It’s easy to see the origin of this misalignment. The university staff member is not solely accountable to aligning with the perspectives of students; she also has to align with the perspectives of those who decide whether her job should exist. This means that she has to strike a delicate balance between holding her employer accountable for supporting marginalized populations through supportive academic interventions without highlighting institutional and societal inequities that create such large disparities in achievement in her unit. In doing so, the university staff member conforms to the habit of framing the problem as an issue of individual student achievement.

Reforming the student, not the system. Despite the fact that nearly all of the professionals interviewed discussed an inherent unfairness and marginalization of students at the university, their programs are largely designed with a focus on training students to exist in an inherently unfair system. This was a challenging theme to tease out, and several staff participants experienced some cognitive dissonance in our conversation when asked to talk about how their program addressed particular student needs.

The university staff member in the College Cultural Program acknowledged throughout her three interviews that she sees her role as deeper than helping underprepared minority students succeed academically. She talked about themes around a sense of belonging, which included planning and organizing cultural events for Hispanic and African American students, as well as serving as a sounding board and institutional intermediary for when students encountered instances of racism at the university. But she

also made clear that she was very familiar with quantitative data patterns in student performance outcomes related to persistence in her academic unit—particularly for students of color.

> Based on the data that I've collected our first two years, I started realizing that a lot of our African American students are actually dropping the program when they hit [a class]. And that is typically fall semester of their sophomore year. So we are actually extending our program to be a three-semester program as opposed to two semesters. And in that third semester, they won't have to attend Monday meetings anymore, because it would be the same thing that they did their freshman year. But they'll have to attend study hall and study hall is going to be [the sophomore class]. So we actually partnered with [that] department and they are going to have a TA for the class go in during those two hours to essentially re-teach the material if that's what the student needs.

This quote helps clarify the conflict university staff members experience between aligning with the values of the institution and those of students. The university staff member overseeing the College Cultural Program frames the problem as one of academic achievement for two reasons: it's what appeals to students and their needs, and it also allows the institution to turn away from the fact that systemic reforms could help improve the climate of the institution.

Another participant shared that their program helps students learn about a system that is often inaccessible or undecipherable to outsiders:

> STEM has this like secret culture to it that only faculty, career people know… But you know, knowing that if you're going to go into research, you need to get involved soon and you need to figure out what sector of research you're interested to have someone who can be a reference for you, to understand and develop skills.

This participant went on to explain that her program works to inject underrepresented and marginalized students into an opaque system by matching students to faculty mentors and research labs as a means to helping them meet their educational and career goals. The program introduces institutional know-how that's specific to STEM to students from

underrepresented communities as a means to helping them persist. Another university staff member expanded on the definition of the “secret culture of STEM” in the excerpt below:

> I think STEM is really complicated because there's [*sic*] so many things you have to do. And if you want to go to graduate school, and if you want to go to medical school, and even if you just want to go and work in the industry, so many boxes to check and things to know about that a lot of students don't know because it's not obvious. And I think even smaller things, if you want to get a research position, first of all, students don’t always know that they should get a research position if they want to go to grad school and then even if they do know that, sometimes they don't know the best way to approach a faculty member to ask about it.

Participants sometimes struggled to distinguish the support they provide students from the deficit framework that they were fighting against. The same university staff member who expanded on the definition of the “secret culture of STEM” wrestled with this concept of guiding marginalized student populations through the STEM curriculum and culture, and whether that automatically meant they were viewing them through a deficit lens. Below is an exchange in which the participant and I tried to work through this concept based on what they had said:

> Interviewer: So what you're saying is that you have this paradigm within which you were unwilling to work, which is viewing students as needing something to succeed. And you're saying with STEM it's more nuanced than that because you can't just say they don't need something to succeed, you have to figure out –tell me if I'm putting words in your mouth—but there is a balance between helping students get necessary information and framing students as missing necessary skills and information.
>
> Participant: Yeah, I think that's exactly it. I mean I feel like it's a very fine line, right, because ultimately it ends up looking the same. I think for me it was more like what you said, the paradigm. I didn't want to work with a bunch of people who just view students as missing all of these things but rather who view students as having a lot of strengths and also these are some things that we can share with them that will help them achieve what they want to achieve if that makes sense.

This nuance—that practitioners in academic support programs do not want to view students as deficient, but they recognize that the institution is nearly impossible to understand without additional information that is hidden from marginalized populations— is the essence of what it means to reform the student instead of the institution. For some university staff members, this sense of having to help students navigate a challenging environment manifested differently. They still saw an inequitable need to help some students overcome barriers, but the barriers they saw were embedded in federal policy rather than in the institutional culture. The excerpt below comes out of a discussion of a process called "federal verification," in which FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) applications are flagged and the federal government requests further documentation of income and family information.

> …essentially what that is, is you do a FASFA and the federal government can flag your FASFA for a process called verification. And it's for one of two reasons. A.), it's literally, it's random, but I recently learned that is not actually random, that they typically will flag students who are Pell eligible. Because when you're doing the FASFA, I mean that's, you're doing it to get access to federal money, which is the Pell Grant.

The participant went on to explain that nearly every student in her academic support program was Pell Eligible, and that she spent a significant portion of her time helping students through the verification process. One student in particular stood out to her for reasons that I will elaborate following this excerpt:

> And so [the student] came into my office and it was like so complicated. Because of like, you have to fill out this form of like who's in your family. And in her world, she has a stepmom because that's just in her world— it's stepmom. But then you have to get into these like, okay, "is she legally married to your dad?" "Well, no, they never got legally married, but they've been together for years. So she's my stepmom." Okay. According to the law, she's not, like she had reported her on her FASFA but wasn't on the tax form. So I had to figure that out. And then we had to talk through all the siblings. And are they in the house? Are they not in the house? I mean, and this was just a small taste of like we met for

> probably an hour and a half. And towards the end of the meeting, she was just in tears. Like I think she said something along the lines of like, "[Participant name], if I can't figure this out, there's no way I'm going to be able to figure school out so I should probably go." …I said, "[student], you didn't come to college to figure out your FASFA. Like you came to college to learn." I was like, "are you learning in [this program]?" She was like, "yes." I was like, "are you making friends?" She was like, "yes." I'm like, "are you figuring out your way around campus?" "Yes." I'm like, "okay, you can cut it and you should stay. But like your test of like can you be a college student is not your parents' taxes."

For this participant, the knowledge and support she was providing to a student in her program was very specialized and detailed execution of a complicated federal financial aid process that disproportionately impacts low-income students. As she pointed out to the student in the story that she shared, this is not a skill that anyone should be expected to possess in order to do well in college, but the system had set this student and many others up to need additional support.

In both instances—the "secret culture of STEM" and the process of federal financial aid verification—university staff members identified a need that students had but refused to see that as the students' deficit. They instead pointed to an unfair system that created the need in the first place. They saw themselves as the professionals who were positioned to help students overcome the barriers that were disrupting their educational attainment. On the whole, university staff members were not unaware that the students they were serving existed in a system that was stacked against them, but their work was framed primarily around reforming the student. The participant quoted below provided a concise summary of this concept.

> I do think there is a need and I do think we address a need. I think there is a bigger conversation around like why does that need exist. And I think the need exists because the system is unfriendly to the students in our populations and stuff like that. So I do think we are focused on helping the students rather than changing the system, but that's like a conversation for a whole other thing.

Systemic reforms: "Is that an evil you really feel you can change?" There was evidence throughout the interviews that helping students navigate an unjust system is simply easier—or easier to imagine—than disrupting the unjust system itself. Several participants mentioned a feeling of hopelessness to challenge a large institution or its culture, or even to challenge individual faculty or staff attitudes and behaviors. Their difficulty in imagining large-scale disruption is reminiscent of Weber's (1973) framework of bureaucratization and specialization. By creating staff roles that only influence the least powerful member of the community—the students—the institution maintains the integrity of its structure.

This is not to say that students are always the subjects of change, but that marginalized students are more likely to be the subjects of change when it comes to changing institutional culture than any other actor. One participant shared that although she feels that her department is committed to educating themselves about inclusion and systems of inequality, facilitating a cultural shift in the (majority white) student population is harder because "a lot of this stuff is just ingrained in them since they were little."

> in the past, [my supervisor] has told me she's like, "Is that an evil you really feel you can change? Like, how far can you go?"

The participant elaborated that she feels as though the institution is not willing to send a message that inclusion is a non-negotiable value—or more importantly, that racism cannot be tolerated anywhere in the institution. She described a couple of incidents of racism in the past couple of years that she felt were not dealt with in a way that sent such a message. One in particular was related to the use of derogatory language in a seminar for all students in that academic unit in their first semester.

> …every semester, we bring in a diverse speaker from [industry], again, to kind of discuss what they do within their company that correlates with a class…And last semester, we had an issue where the company that went into [one of our classes] did like an open word cloud… But students started responding like "beaners" and derogatory terms. And in my eyes, I'm like to shift the culture needs to be the head of our college going in and like reprimanding these students where, it was like [other administrators] got sent in there to be like, the bad parent, where I really felt like it needed to have been like our Dean, like, this is our college telling you we're so disappointed in you for choosing these actions.

This participant felt that her administration was telling her that changing students' problematic behavior is not feasible, but in this participant's eyes, there are clear actions that her unit could take to change a culture of prejudice and discrimination that ultimately negatively impacts marginalized people in that space.

In a subtler vein, one participant described some of the conflict he feels about whether the institutional culture reflects the inclusive values of his academic support program. He described the university's designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, yet he didn't see this reflected in external marketing materials for prospective students.

> We're a Hispanic-Serving Institution, and yet I never really see a lot of that in the marketing. Like it was something I remember asking about when I was over in admissions. Like we worked so hard to become this HSI as a big institution, but we don't work it into the PowerPoints, or that's not in any of our printed materials, and you know, what is that? And I never really got a straight answer. There was a lot of talk about how you don't want to make other groups feel like they're alienated, or they're not included in that HSI designation. And so, that was just something that made me scratch my head a little bit.

This description of the school's decision to not promote the institution's designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution in order to protect the perceptions of non-minoritized populations is another example of the institutional culture depending on academic support programs on the periphery to support marginalized students, rather than reimagining the overall culture of the university. This practice appears innocuous, but it subtly replicates historic patterns of exclusion.

These two examples show how university staff members in academic support programs perceive institutional leadership as favoring a focus on supporting marginalized students over a focus on reforming an overall institutional culture. However, even individual academic support programs sometimes distance themselves from students' academic units as a means to isolate their programs' efforts from the toxicity of the larger system, over which they feel very little ability to control.

Program isolation. Isolation from academic units may protect marginalized student populations from the historical exclusion and toxicity of higher education, but it does not come without consequences. One program enrolled students in credit-bearing classes as part of their model—following the framework of academic advancement to build students' sense of belonging—but did not understand various units' academic requirements. In this scenario, students in the summer bridge program were enrolled in a general education class of their choice. Neither the students nor the university staff members in the academic support program knew that certain general education classifications were not required for certain majors, rendering them far less effective as tools of academic advancement, since certain classes did not fulfill certain students' graduation requirements.

Two days into the program, students attended orientation in their respective academic units to register for their fall classes. It was at this point that the university staff member realized that several students had been enrolled into a general education class that was not required for their degree. In the excerpt below, the participant shares how this unfolded:

> so the day before I sent an email out to [the academic advising listserv]…a master list of what classes each [summer bridge] student is in…. And then

> obviously that helps guide them when they're doing their schedule review and orientation. If you're in English 101 over the summer, you don't need that for the fall.
>
> …So I sent [a list of who is in which class] that orientation was on a Wednesday. I sent that email out to [the advisors] Tuesday afternoon. When I get to work on Wednesday morning, my inbox is exploding. "Why is my nursing student in [this science class]? Why is my public health student in [this science class]? Why are my engineering students in [this science class]?" And I'm like, something's going on. I didn't even know what it meant, but I call…[the coordinator for that department], and I'm like, what is up with [this science class] and she apparently didn't know either. So long story short, we go over to meet with…the new student orientation team and they're like, "anybody who's in a science intensive major doesn't need it."… So then… I said I'm going to do some research and I pulled the rosters of [the science class in question] from [last] summer…. They were all science majors.

This participant was distraught about this mistake. She shared this story with me because she stated previously in the interview that she felt like she was constantly putting out proverbial fires and doing damage control for catastrophes. She clearly cared about the academic advancement of students in the program. But since she was new to the role and to the paradigm of academic advancement, she did not know the graduation requirements of students across the curriculum, and was not aware of curricular nuances that—clearly—previous directors also did not know about.

This story is not meant to reflect callousness about students' advancement towards their degree. In fact, the participant expressed deep anxiety about fixing this issue. She moved students into different classes two days into the program and worked to support them as they caught up with the lessons that they missed. Additionally, after the summer in which this data was collected, classes that could not be universally applied to students' general education requirements across degree programs were not offered as part of the program. But this academic support program, with a long legacy and history of helping students succeed at the university, also came with a history of at least two

summers of misunderstanding what students need to advance in their degrees. As the participant told the story, she added:

> I'm like okay, they still made friends, they still learned their way around campus. Like all those added benefits of like what [our program] does to get you ready, they still got that.

What stands out about this story is that the university staff member in this academic support program *does* care about students' academic advancement, but the program's isolation from academic units can be harmful, because it perpetuates a history of students not getting what they need to complete degree requirements. In fact, this is not an issue that is unique to the academic support program, but can be more broadly applied across academic and non-academic units throughout the institution. The Summer Bridge Program staff did not know what the different categories of the general education program were at this institution, but neither did the department offering the general education classes. This speaks to isolation beyond academic support programs, but in departments throughout the institution. College advisors knew immediately when this participant sent a list of which of their students were enrolled in which summer class, because they have an interest in assuring academic advancement for the students within their department. The department offering the general education classes has a major interest in enrolling students across the institution, and does not have a stake in whether any of the students outside of their own department progresses to graduation. The Summer Bridge Program is interested in student success and values academic advancement, but the true measure of the program is whether students feel they *belong* at their university, and a sense of belonging does not have strict parameters on degree requirements.

The staff member felt badly and ultimately rectified the situation to get current students classes that would advance them academically. It was her first year in her role, she put considerable effort into rectifying the situation and learning about the curricular needs of students, and the oversight was noted and changes were made to the program to prevent students from earning non-essential general education credits. But the fact that she did not know about this graduation requirement, and that based on her research, knowledge about curricular requirements was not a priority in at least one previous year, speaks to the impact isolation from academic units can have on students' academic advancement and progress towards degree completion. It also indicates a distance between academic support programs with an emphasis on helping marginalized students succeed and the values of the institution as a whole.

Institutional values. The interview protocol asked participants to reflect on whether they believed their program values and practices aligned with the institutional values and practices. Most of the participants did not hesitate to share that their program aligned with the institution's strategic plan—they were able to cite data that demonstrated that students were retained at the institution and in their respective fields at a higher rate than similar students not enrolled in their programs. However, when pushed, many participants often revised their responses to indicate that they thought their program was doing what the institution as a whole *should* be doing, and that the values of the institution were not necessarily aligned with those of their respective academic support programs.

This tension came at varying points typically within the third interview for most participants. One participant responded to the initial question by sharing how his program contributes to a mission of access to higher education.

> [This program] really contributes to access, I would say. It really contributes to inclusion and just making sure that every student finds their place at the university. That's kind of one of the things that I see as being one of the big goals for both [this program] and the university as a whole. And so, we focus really heavily on making sure that this program is accessible to low-income, first-generation, marginalized groups.

Much later in the interview, this same participant described a scenario in which instructors working closely with the program were asked to participate in the same training as the student staff, and there was a feeling of defiance and resistance among instructional staff during the training.

> Participant: … we had a seating chart, and we were like there's going to be one instructor at every table. You're sitting with a peer mentor, and a tutor, and an RA. We're trying to establish a bigger [program] community, but a lot of them weren't getting behind that. Some of them were vocally resistant.
>
> Interviewer: Tell me more about that.
>
> Participant: Well, there was one instructor who walked in on the second day, and then he looked on the screen and saw the seating chart and saw that he was going to be sitting with students. And then he sighed, and he said, "This shit again." And so, that just kind of set the tone for the rest of the day. I did kind of an ice breaker activity where I had them answer some questions, or I had them for 20 minutes I had them draw their version of the meme where they say, "Here's what students think I do. Here's what other instructors think I do. Here's what I actually do." And there were instructors who were like this isn't worth my time, and so they got on their laptop and were just doing other things and not participating. And then when I had them start sharing in their groups [to] like, learn something from each other. What do you want -- teachers, what do you want students to know about you? And students, what do you want teachers to know about you? And the teachers were just like not having it.
>
> So, when I had them get up and like rotate, there was one who slammed her laptop and like got up and stormed over to the next table. And it just was not a good time. We had the…instructors' supervisors talk to them at the beginning of the next morning and say, "Look, you're here. We're paying you for this. You

> signed up to be part of this program. Please be actively participating in training." And I wasn't there for that meeting. I wanted it to, you know, really come from their direct supervisors. But I heard word that that didn't go well either. There was one who piped up, and he was like, "Well, if you don't want me on my laptop, then make this worth my time." And so, that was tough for me. Just like, I didn't really expect that adults that were in positions of leadership within the program were going to be kind of resistant to the culture.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah. I want to go back to the very first question I asked.
>
> Participant: Yeah.
>
> Interviewer: Do you think your program aligns or fits with the culture or practice at the university?
>
> Participant: You know, I think it does, but now that I start talking about the instructors and kind of the challenges that came there. I don't know that all the departments are working together for that. Like I don't know if there's a shared culture at the university. There's the culture we're presenting. Like we get these emails from [the president] about what we want to be. But I don't know that I see that standardized among all the departments.

This evolution in the participant's understanding of where his academic support program fits into the university culture is a powerful demonstration of how historical patterns of exclusion are institutionalized and internalized even by university staff members who work to support marginalized student populations. To this end, it was challenging for a fairly optimistic university staff member to identify problematic *practices* at the university because he understood the university culture to be more of an idealistic vision than a day-to-day culture.

Other participants were able to more quickly identify where their program was not entirely in line with the culture and practices of the institution.

> I think we're probably ahead of the curve in terms of the pillars that the [university] has established and is currently having different types of initiatives. If the pillars include, which they do, things like diversity and inclusivity furthering student streams then yes, we are completely aligned with university goals and visions. However, I think we're ahead of them. I think we're ahead of them. I think

> that many of the equity programs are ahead of the curve. Maybe they need to take a page out of the work that we do.

This participant—similar to the one quoted earlier in this section—acknowledged that the institution has paid some lip-service to the values upheld by their program, but more quickly concluded that what the university says and what individual units do are disparate and do not demonstrate a unified understanding of its values. She shared an example of a student coming to her and making the decision to withdraw from the university:

> …the student said "I don't want to be here anymore." Explored that and just, "no, it's a financial burden. This is really hurting my family. I need to go home, I need to work, and I need to go to a community college, so this isn't a financial burden for my family." And I'm like, "more power to you that you were able to figure this out early, identify it, now let's make it happen." That same student went to another professional colleague who shall remain nameless, who went on the path of "well, you haven't engaged with this and have you tried that and" …didn't listen. Wasn't present with the student. I understand that the student is revenue; I understand that. But they're not to me, they're people.

This story shows a clear lack of alignment of values between the university staff member and another professional on campus. The university staff member perceived a lack of institutional support—through the actions of staff member outside of her academic support program—in helping care for students.

Similar to the one above, a few participants discussed that conflict between serving individual students and their needs and meeting larger institutional goals—particularly around retention or graduation. For example, one participant pointed out that staying at the university might not be the best pathway for a particular student, but it serves the interests of the academic support program and the university as a whole, so that conflict of interest can cause stress on the university staff member in the academic support program.

> I think one thing that is stressful is like a focus on retention tends to be like a numerical focus and not take into account students' lives and experiences. And so working for a program that is all about retention it doesn't feel like that's always—doesn't feel always like I don't know, like I know students drop out because that was the best choice for them, but it makes our numbers look bad, right. So things like that, I feel like that's really stressful. Where of course like I have no qualms about working with a student to do a medical withdrawal or transfer to a different university or whatever they need to do… like I absolutely will support them in that. But I also know like in the back of my head like that affects our retention data, which might affect our funding. Like all of those kinds of things are tied together.

University staff members, especially those whose programs had tenuous funding sources—more on that to come—were not ignorant of the need to keep students to "prove" that their academic support program was a necessary piece of the institution. But they felt uneasy with the conflict between keeping students for the health of the program and helping students make decisions that were healthy for them as individuals. Questions around whether their programs aligned or fit with university values made participants consider why their programs were necessary for student success in the sub-population of students that they served.

Inequitable Distances Between the Programs and the Institution Influence Staff Perceptions of Agency

"The study of policy encourages us to consider how actors respond similarly and differently to a mandate from… authorities even though the actors are putatively 'of' the same culture" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 75) In the comparative case study heuristic, Bartlett and Vavrus discuss the concept of vertical comparison as not just a comparison between formal layers within an organization, but as how seemingly similarly positioned actors respond differently to institutional policy. Although all three sites within this comparative case study serve similar functions to retain underrepresented or marginalized

students at the same institution, their relative positions in the institution are reflected in the ways that professional staff frame policy interpretations and enactments.

All three sites are embedded differently in the organization. The summer bridge is not tied to any academic unit and is centrally administered. The College Cultural Program is tied directly to an academic unit, and the STEM Intensive Program is loosely associated with several academic units, but does not have a single "home" in the institution, and the program is focused on specific types of students rather than students within a specific program of study. These differing placements are a reflection of Bartlett and Vavrus' vertical comparison, and there are ways in which university staff members in each program related to students as well as other institutional actors—both personnel and policies—distinctly.

Responding to resource scarcity. One commonality between each site was the sense of resource scarcity. Although each site was tied to a different part of the institution, all university staff participants expressed a concern around funding in some way or another. Funding came from grants, corporate sponsors, donors, program fees, and even crowd-funding campaigns across the different programs. The difference between each site arose from the varying levels of desperation in terms of funding. For one site, funding might have been expressed as scarce, but the program's long legacy at the institution all but guaranteed its existence. It had robust donor support and a financial model that collected tuition dollars and program fees from participating students. For another site, the money for the program came from corporate sponsors who wanted to support the institution in promoting this particular type of academic support program. The third site had money coming from several federal education grants, all tied to

different positions and slightly different populations within the same program. For the two sites without the benefit of a lengthy legacy at the institution, university staff members felt that absence of outside money would certainly extinguish their programs and their jobs.

The scarcity of funding manifested a feeling of anxiety in several participants' interviews, as they described their process of having to renew grants and sponsorships:

> …the only reason I can do as many events as I do is because of corporate partners who fund it, so none of my funding comes from the college. All of it comes from corporate sponsors. So for me, every year when those renewals are coming up, it's a little bit of a panic because I'm like, if they don't give me that money, how am I going to fund my programs.

This participant shared that she did not believe her programs would be able to exist without the support of actors outside of the institution who believed in her initiatives. Since an academic unit employed her and her program was only one piece of her job description, her anxiety was about the existence of her program, not her employment itself. But another participant talked about a continual anxiety about whether she would have a job.

> …the way it is right now it's like my funding for my position is up in the air every single year. And so at some point I'll be, like, do I want to be stressed out for six months wondering if I even am going to have a job in six months or do I want to find something at the university that's not entirely funded by grants. Or where I'm not getting paid from six different places percentage-wise and then I can just be like this seems like that's more of a stable position.

Not being tied to any specific unit, and instead being employed by a program that was loosely affiliated with academic units, created a constant state of fear for this participant.

The feelings experienced around the scarcity of funding and their relative positioning in the institution influenced the way that various university staff members approached their work with students and their relationships with colleagues and other

units across the institution. Since each program was beholden to similar student outcomes like persistence to graduation and overall academic performance, university staff members worked hard to ensure those deliverables were met. The differences between the two programs highlighted above are twofold. Each program has a different stakeholder with varying ties to their institution, and the university staff members in each program embodied varying approaches to achieving those outcomes.

The university staff member who perceived that their program's future was in the hands of a corporate sponsor was still very much beholden to their administrative unit. The funding was provided to the administrative unit, not necessarily to the academic support program, and the staff member was employed to do more than oversee the academic support program—it was one part of a multi-faceted job. This staff member's fear was of losing the program, not necessarily a job.

Alternatively, the university staff member who was anxious about grant renewals was fearful because her position was tied to several funding sources across and outside of the institution, and without those renewals, she did not feel secure that she would still have a job. Other professionals in her program echoed similar sentiments about their positions being tied to external funding sources. But perhaps more significant than the anxiety around scarcity of resources was the ways that their perceptions of funding influenced their actions within their programs and their interactions with the students and the institution—it may be the same anxiety around instability of funding sources that provides a framework which allows for university staff members to operate with slightly more agency.

Enactment of agency in student support. In the conceptual framework, I introduced the concept that Weber's (1973) specialization and bureaucratization framework can work with Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucrat framework to explain the ways that university staff members interpret and enact policy and relate to students. The vertical comparison of academic support programs and their inequitable distances from the core of the institution can illustrate this dichotomy.

The STEM Intensive program was unique among the three because it wasn't explicitly tied to any one institutional department or unit. As such, the university staff members who worked for that program shared some strategies that they had for working with students that were not explicitly aligned with the mission or culture of an institutional department. By contrast, the College Cultural Program was deeply defined by and embedded in the mission of an academic unit, and that relationship influenced the structure of the program and the interactions between students and staff. Some of the examples below will demonstrate the ways in which the program's positioning can influence university staff enactment of agency.

University staff members sometimes used their understanding of the university system to help students navigate it and disrupt the negative impact that some academic policies could have on their students. A staff member in the STEM Intensive program discussed the ways that they help students navigate policy to get what they need, even if policy seems to explicitly rule out what that student needs:

> Participant: So I think it comes up a lot with advising related things, so a lot of times a student needs to, I don't know, drop a class or do a medical withdrawal or something like that where their GPA is going to be impacted or something's going on where they need to make . . . they need to change something but it's not always easy to do that. And so I know I've had students go to an adviser and say, "Well I need to drop o-chem because I'm failing" and the instructor or the advisor will

> say, “well, it's after the drop date and failing isn’t a good enough reason to drop it.” And so in that situation I would work with the students to figure out what else they could say that would be the good enough reason essentially.
>
> Interviewer: What are some examples of what they could say?
>
> Participant: Well, so it has to be like a legitimate extenuating circumstance. So a lot of times I’ll say to a student, like, “well is the fact that you're failing making you feel anxious?” Because mental health is a legitimate extenuating circumstance like it is, right? And so I think the thing that I—when I encounter situations like that, I feel like the student should have agency in what they do with their academic plan in their life. Like if they really feel like they need to drop a class, that's a tough decision to make especially late in the semester. I think they should be able to do it if they want to do it. And if they thought about it and talk to people and it's the best thing for them. And so if other people are sort of blocking that path, we'll help them figure out a way to work around it, I guess.

In this case, the university staff member described how they use their understanding of how policy works to help students use agency in the way they manage their pursuit of their bachelor’s degree. Using individual knowledge of policy to help students—especially those who have previously been marginalized by existing policy—fits the street-level bureaucrat framework of policy enactment and university staff agency. The staff member quoted above does not perceive a strong tie to a departmental value of course withdrawal policy in the same way they described other advisors and instructional staff do. They perceive the policy as fluid and open to more broad interpretation, but more importantly, they do not see themselves as aligned with a department that has a strict interpretation of that policy. It is their academic support program’s relative distance from a central unit that helps them align more closely to individual students’ needs and see policy as malleable.

The way the university staff member in the College Cultural program discussed policy was in terms of interpreting and helping students understand the current system and behave in a way that was acceptable to the existing institutional culture. In the

interview excerpt below, the university staff member describes the way she works with students who are struggling academically.

> Or if a student is like, “I think I need to drop [calculus], I think I'm going to mess up my GPA,” then I have those honest conversations with them. A lot of what I've done in the past two years is I mean, and all advisors do this, but I'm a little bit more sensitive to students of color. So I think that's why they feel a little bit more comfortable. But I’ll sit down with them. And I'll say, “Okay, realistically, what do you think you'll get? Do you think you can pass this class? And then we create more of a personalized plan…

In this part of the interview, the participant emphasized that her objective is to help a student accept and move past poor academic performance. It may not have even occurred to her to help a student find a different way to withdraw from a class; she works within the paradigm in which she exists to help students make future plans.

The specialization and bureaucratization framework— in which Weber (1973) argues that professionals are so sub-specialized that they do not know how to question or manipulate policy application—helps to explain how this example differs from the university staff member that helped students to understand how to circumvent policy, rather than accept it. The university staff member in the College Cultural program was employed by a specific academic unit and viewed her role as helping students fit into that unit. The STEM Intensive program university staff member did not work for a specific academic unit, and therefore had more intellectual leeway to help students get what they need out of the institution, rather than thinking about the helping the institution get what it needs out of the student. As she put it:

> if it's like well, the academic catalog says the rules are ABC and you want to do D, let's help to figure out how to do that without breaking the rules and getting kicked out or whatever.

It’s important, here, to note a couple of nuances. First, in both of these examples, university professionals are working to guide students through a system that is challenging to navigate, and both believe they are doing what is best for their students. It is also unclear if there is a right answer as to how to help a student navigate policies—in this case, dropping or withdrawing from classes to save their GPA. It is simply notable that one university staff member whose employment is more closely tied to an academic unit is more invested in helping students reform the way they behave within a system, and the other is not closely tied to an academic unit and sees their role as helping students know enough about how to manipulate policy to get what they need out of it.

The distance from the core of the institution seems to influence university staff members’ perceptions and interactions with both the institution and the students. Distance from the core creates greater alignment with student interests (when those interests conflict with those of the institution), whereas closer ties to the institution creates greater alignment with the institution. This alignment with institutional values need not necessarily manifest in misalignment with student values, but simply a paradigmatic shift in how the university staff member guided students.

Although the interview protocol never specifically mentioned course withdrawal, the policy came up in some way in at least one interview across the three sites. If these two programs operate counter to one another in terms of student and institutional alignment around the matter of course withdrawal, how might a centrally administered unit operate? One participant in the Summer Bridge Program described their approach to course withdrawal:

> And so we offer students at the end if they're at risk of failing that course, we offer them a W. Which is not something we're able to do during the academic

> year. Cause I'm sure, you know, there's like really strict W dates, right? We don't have that. So I can drop people. And I did drop people on literally the last day.

The university staff in the Summer Bridge Program did not have to worry about advising students on how they could improve their GPA, or on how to work around a system that did not allow them to drop a class. The "normal" institutional policies just did not apply to them in this scenario. The program staff member later explained that the accelerated nature of the summer program was the reason the exception was made for them. It makes sense—students are taking six or seven credits of college coursework in about six weeks, having never taken college classes before. It's a program that's designed to help students ramp up to a level of comfort, proficiency, and confidence in college coursework, and based on those parameters, making an exception to the institutional policy on course withdrawal seems rational. But there are seemingly rationale explanations to making exceptions for students outside the circumstances of this program. In those cases, the policy is unyielding, and university staff members find themselves either justifying the policy and helping students assimilate to its constraints, or they help students work their way around the policy.

This might further illustrate the theme of inequitable distances from the core of the institution. A university staff member in an academic support program very loosely affiliated with various academic units uses their individual understanding of policy to help students gain what they need without technically breaking any rules. A university staff member in an academic support program very tightly coupled with an academic unit works with students to help indoctrinate them into how their college operates, hoping to reproduce behavior that the institution sees as acceptable in students. And a university staff member whose program is located in the core of the institution is not concerned with

policy interpretation, because there exists a rational explanation as to why the policy does not apply to their program.

How university staff members uniquely enact policy and feed student relationships within the context of their academic support programs speaks to how they embody their roles as university staff members in academic support programs. Policy enactment and role embodiment are intertwined, and although they are influenced by the university staff member's academic support program, role embodiment is also unique to each university staff member and informed my their past experiences.

Responsive Practice: How University Staff Embody their Support Roles with Students

Institutional values are often in line with reforming the student, rather than reflecting on institutional culture and policy that inequitably impacts marginalized and historically excluded student populations. University staff members embody various roles and identities to help students navigate institutional culture and policy. Through the functions of the three academic support programs and the ways in which university staff interpret and enact policy within their roles, three different types of actors emerge in the ways that they embody support of students in their respective programs. I have dubbed these forms of embodiment: the nurturing guide, the administrative facilitator, and the quiet disrupter. These personae are evident not just in participants' views of students, but also their views of their own past experiences, their respective programs, and their relationships within the institution. Embodiment of support is defined as how a participant's worldview informs and translates to their interpretation of their role and how they respond to students.

The ways that university staff members selected which academic support programs they wanted to work for, as well as the ways that they wanted to support students, are not arbitrary. Past experiences informed their motivations and intentions for working in academic support programs and the ways that they believed they could and should support students. Every university staff member interviewed expressed either a sense of disconnect or an innate value of connection—sometimes stemming from that disconnect—from their own college experience. The theme of connection unites the participants in this study, but their responses to that disconnect, and the ways that they made sense of it, is what differentiates them and creates different modes in which they embody their respective roles.

Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted two participants' experiences in stopping and starting their post-secondary education several times before completing their bachelors' degrees. One participant understood her setbacks and barriers to completion as internal shortcomings. She needed to fix her "academic deficits" in order to grind through the unfamiliar system of higher education. Below, she talks about her experience returning to school after having dropped out over a decade prior:

> I realized that this was this one area that I really did need to accept help. So when I would run into things like, okay, I need to take three semesters of preparatory math at the community college in order to take college level math, I knew that if I didn't get through those three, I wasn't even going to think about transferring to a four year university. So tutoring was like my best friend. So here was this kid, younger than my own son. Tutoring me in math and it was humbling. And once I got past that part, it was like, "Okay, I can do this. Rock on, like, teach me, right." So going to tutoring and then having a peer mentor, although the peer mentor their experience wasn't quite like mine, still, they could point me in the right direction. So I think that they, they developed a sense of self-confidence in my abilities, right to succeed. I think that's first and foremost. Then they helped me with the academic deficits that I had.

In this excerpt, the participant identifies something internal that she needed help fixing, and talked about the steps that she took to move through challenging coursework in order to persist to degree completion. Her story is not unusual—much has been written on the use of remedial math courses to support persistence through higher education (Perna & Jones, 2013). The other participant in this project who started and stopped college before completing a bachelor's degree reflected a similar struggle.

> I kept hitting wall after wall after wall when I was at community college. All I needed to do is get into a college algebra class, but I had to take these remedial math classes in order to take college algebra because of my placement score. Because at that point, I was like, I hadn't been in a math class for, I don't know, 10 years or something. And I'm trying to take this math placement score. So yeah, I had to take the same remedial class three times in a row that I'm paying for. And I'm like, "I just need to get this--just to get into this one class." And I think that that was my first barrier where I felt like, "okay, I don't think I'm going to be able to get into any hard science if I can't even get myself into this college algebra class." And at that point, I definitely had no, sort of, idea of where to look for help or support because I was working full time, so I was like, this is still this thing I have to put on the back burner, like I have to work, like I can't really focus on worry about this.

In this participant's narrative, the policy of having to take (and retake) remedial math courses before getting into college algebra was so arduous and frustrating that it eventually led her to stop-out of college (again). This participant did not see a problem with herself, but with a system that would not allow her to advance towards a degree. The distinction between these two narratives demonstrates the ways that university staff members embody distinct personae in their work with students in academic support programs. How a university staff member sees themselves and their experiences informs how they see students. In the above example, one person saw an internal issue—where they lacked a certain skillset and needed to depend on others to gain this skillset—and the other person saw an external system disrupting their educational goals.

These lenses can explain the ways that staff members see educational systems and students within them, and in turn the ways that they respond to students within those systems, particularly within academic support programs. I used the narratives of the two participants who started, stopped, and transferred multiple times because they are bound by similar experiences, yet they are unique in their interpretation of those experiences. However, all of the participants embody their supportive roles in some way, and that embodiment grows out of past experiences. In the sections that follow, I will outline and explain the types of embodiment that emerged from the data. These roles are not discreet—university staff members can drift from one to another in their interactions with their work, the institution, their colleagues, and students. This section serves to explore the different ways that university staff can understand their purpose in their roles with students.

Nurturing guide. One style of role embodiment that emerged was *nurturing guidance*. The university staff members that talk about lessons that they have learned and ways that they have helped students learn those lessons aligned with the role of the nurturing guide. Referring back to the participant who talked about needing to have a tutor and a peer mentor in an academic support program in college, the nurturing guide works to gently validate students' experiences while working to support them through whatever challenge they are facing.

> I normalize the experience. Even if your classmates are not sharing this with you, they're going through the same thing. Trust me they are. And if you go into the lounges and ask your classmates here, because I understand, you know, this is a big school that you can become anonymous fairly quickly, the challenges are there. The bumps on the road are there. The Ds and the Fs are there, but, you know, it just is. What you do with it is what defines you, but I hope that my students get compassion, a little humor, a little goofiness, that's okay. I think they need levity. I think they need levity in their days sometimes.

In this excerpt, the participant talked about normalizing the concept of earning Ds and Fs, and specified that it's "what you do with it that defines you." She went on to talk about what she believes students need to succeed in the context of her program and persist to graduation.

> …openness in knowing that we're in their corner and of course we have to gain their trust for that. But open to the process, like if you participate with the minimal touch points, there's going to be opportunities that will just land at your feet. The question is, will you take them?

One of the hallmarks of this embodiment persona is a belief that the relationship between the university staff member and the student is the key to a student's success in the program and persistence in their degree program. This paradigm grows out of the university staff member's own relationship with various mentors, as well as their belief in their understanding of what students need to integrate academically and socially into higher education. Below is an excerpt from another interview in which the participant takes on the nurturing guide persona.

> I just think they need to be open to wanting feedback. I think that's a critical part of being successful in [this program]. We do a lot interpersonal thinking and work with students. And if you're not open to hearing different strategies and trying to be open to that and actually implementing some of the feedback, then it's not going to really do much for you because [this program] is a very collaborative environment for success. We can help strategize and co-create ideas together, but then it's on the student to implement. And if they don't want that, then it's not going to be valuable for them.

In each of these examples, the participants discuss ways that students need to engage with university staff in the context of their program in order to succeed. The university staff members demonstrate a genuine interest in helping students, and believe they have the tools to help individual students succeed. They also frame students as needing to engage with them in order to advance.

> I feel like students seem to be okay asking for help. I've felt like the ones who have been open to asking me for help, whether it'd be academically, socially, honestly, just the amount of questions I asked about-- I answered about advising this weekend to them, was a ton. But those students who just tend to seek the help and information…have been the most successful that I have seen. It's those that don't try to bridge that connection or really ask for help that I've seen kind of dwindle off...

Nurturing guides provide a great deal of emotional support for students, and take pride in forming meaningful relationships. Their relationships with students are described as mutual, too. Participants who described a nurturing guidance style of support seemed to also benefit from their relationships with students.

> Honestly, like, the relationship that I have with my students oftentimes, especially those mornings where I don't want to come in to work is what gets me to come in to work. Honestly, like, they add as much value to my life as I probably add to theirs.

In fact, some participants' perspectives were so embedded in the persona of the nurturing guide that they couldn't imagine approaching their work any differently. When asked what advice they would give to another person in their role, one participant responded, "if you don't wake up in the morning feeling like this is the place you want to be, then this isn't the place for you." This intense commitment to the role they play in students' lives is another signature of the nurturing guide. Since they see relationships with students as very closely tied to their roles, they express a sense of fulfillment in and loyalty to those relationships.

In addition to their role being central to their identity and relationships with students driving a sense of purpose, nurturing guides took great pride in recognition of their importance in students' lives. Several participants from different programs discussed ways that they felt seen by the students for the work they did on behalf of

students. One participant described how students in her program made her feel special on her birthday.

> so it was my birthday recently and they decorated my office and I had cakes at every single meeting, it was a lot, but I asked them like why they didn't do the same thing for someone else that they work closely with and they just said “I don't know who that person is. Like I know them enough to talk to them and say ‘hi, but I don't know that person like I know you.”

Another participant discussed how students gave recognition to her and her colleagues on National First Gen Day.

> National First-Gen Day happened weeks ago, I don't even know how long ago. Anyways, and our student staff felt the need to get all of the professional staff members a present to thank them for us being on their journey with them. So that was a really cool kind of impactful way again seeing like that. Students do see the value in being in the program and they are thankful and they took the time out of their day to give us a card and say something.

This participant went on to say that this is not why she does the work that she does, but that it reaffirms to her that students value the program, and more specifically that they value the staff.

In another example, a participant talked about receiving an unexpected thank-you note from three of her students—one of whom struggled and didn’t appear to connect with her or the program. She described the surprise she felt at being thanked and reflected on her sense of relief that a student with whom she struggled to form a relationship seemed to be grateful for her.

> one of the [offices] at [this university], sends out an email to students at the end of the school year and tells them that you can send a thank you note to a, you know, a faculty member, a staff member, or whatever, graduate student. And I received three…And I opened them and I was, like, I need to go to my office because I think I'm going to cry, and I did. And it was, like—and two were from students that have engaged, are thriving and one is from a student that's super struggling and fails to connect with me in the way that the program requires them to, so that one was probably the one that was the most poignant of the three because no matter– and I'm probably going to get choked up.

> …And that proved to me that no matter if we think we don't have impact on the students, we do… But, yeah, that was probably—it was like that didn't need to be on, what is it, an employee performance review, that didn't need to be an award, those were three students that took a few minutes out of their day to say thank you and that was huge. That was huge.

It was clear in this participant's interview that being thanked by the student who did not seem to engage in the way that the program was designed for him to engage had the most profound impact on her. This is directly related to how this staff member embodies their role of support—serving as a nurturing guide drives her sense of purpose. The moment she gets the appropriate feedback from a student with whom she felt she lacked a connection is a moment that stands out to her.

The staff members who seemed to resonate strongly with the nurturing guide persona often reported that they, too, had a nurturing guide or mentor of some sort who they relied upon in college for encouragement, support, and advice. They felt that their own nurturing guide built in them the sense of self-efficacy that helped them find their way through college and into their current profession.

> Again, because I had such an influential mentor without his support, I don't know if I would have graduated and let alone gone on to graduate school and served in this role for a long time.

Oftentimes, participants connected this sense of gratitude for past mentors to their current work with students.

The first section of this chapter explored ways that university staff members' past experiences influenced their perspectives on higher education and led them to their current work. Some university staff members discussed ways that faculty and staff within their own educational context helped them develop a strong value around connection, but there was also a theme of disconnect among many of the participants in this study. That

disconnect drove some participants to find mentors and embody the nurturing guide style of support. The same sense of disconnect manifested differently for some of the other university staff members.

Administrative facilitator. Contrary to the nurturing guide, another persona is the *administrative facilitator*. This university staff member sees their role as making sure the mechanics of their program produce the results that help students get what they need to succeed. Almost in complete contrast to the nurturing guide, they take themselves out of the equation and do not claim to have meaningful relationships with students. Some observers—or even possibly the participants themselves—might say that this is built into their job function, but across the data, there are indicators that the participants' values are driving this role, not solely their function within their program.

One participant who embodied the role of administrative facilitator described her position as tracking data, managing infrastructure, and generally maintaining the behind-the-scenes aspects of their academic support program. Through administrative facilitation, she kept the parts of their program running even though she admitted she had very little contact with students.

> So when I first started, I was hired as basically just an office assistant for [this program]… And that was kind of at the beginning starting to manage our systems and the way that we were tracking students and to try to make sure that all of that was being done fairly efficiently and ongoing.

In her first interview, this participant shared that organizing processes and maximizing efficiency was one of her strengths, and that she had worked in this capacity for other organizations in her career.

> I guess just because I have always been able to be good at keeping things organized and seeing things that need to be fixed. I've worked for a lot of different places where people have these really great ideas, but they're not good at all at

> managing themselves and keeping things tight and controlled and actually functioning well. So I feel like all of those positions were really hard, working with people like that. But it showed me like, well, I'm really good at doing this, I'm able to turn something that seemed really amorphous and all over the place into something that's like, oh, okay, now we figured out a way to consistently get this done every single time. Because I feel like you can have all these ideas, but if you can't actually get them done well, then it's not going to be effective.

Another participant discussed her role in program leadership as behind-the-scenes as well. In her interview, she strongly shied away from claiming relationships with students as central to her job, explaining that students were meant to have relationships with other students to succeed.

> And the majority of the students, I would say don't, wouldn't even know I'm "the program director", wouldn't know who. If you said who's [participant name], they wouldn't know. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that. Because you should have a connection with your peer mentor. Like [your peer mentor] is teaching your class four days a week. You should have a connection with your RA. You should have a connection with your tutor. You should have a connection with your instructor.

To both of these participants, they framed their role as one that didn't create a space for relationships with students, but there were also strong values attached to the reasons why they sought out roles organizing academic support programs and positioned themselves to work behind the scenes. Neither of these participants had strong connections with faculty or staff in their undergraduate experience to which they credited their growth and learning. One participant talked about the community they formed with other students. The other participant quoted above discussed the ways that she felt faculty and staff created and enforced barriers that kept her from connecting and succeeding in higher education. In both cases, despite a shared value of connection in college, they understood the role of university staff as *facilitating* community and connection, rather than actually *being* the connection for students.

Each persona is not discreet, and it's important to be clear that it is possible for one university staff member to embody more than one style of support. Although many of the participants seemed to have a more dominant persona, each style is not fixed and university staff could be seen drifting from one to another. One participant appeared to embody the nurturing guide persona throughout her interviews, but also discussed ways that students interact with various other components of her academic support program in a way that suggested that she possessed some of the same characteristics as the administrative facilitators.

> Because to support students I think you have to approach it from all aspects like when faculty say something, it resonates differently with students than it does staff or peers and vice versa. That's why we have peer mentors. That's why we have faculty fellows.

For this participant, although she understood her work as one in which she embodied the role of nurturing guide; she also understood the role that other actors played in students' success and persistence.

To contrast, another participant who seemed to lean more strongly into the nurturing guide role had a different perspective on students learning and developing connections outside of the program:

> I feel sometimes [this program] is like the parent, a nurturing parent. Somebody like, we're supporting you, like this is a safe space, we're going to lay these foundational tools, blah, blah, blah. So we do all this stuff, checking in constantly, like are you putting this into practice, like checking in, checking in. And then I'll hear from a student like somebody told them something and then they're like, "yeah, and it's worked." And I'm like, great, I'm so happy that you're using metacognition as a tool to do this thing or like look at this problem in this way.
>
> And they're like . . . for example, I had a student telling me, like, looking at things from this bigger picture, reflecting on their learning, blah, blah, blah, all things that we taught them in [this program] in their first semester freshman year, they told me that they've picked up on this in their econ class. In their—what are they now—third semester, so they're a sophomore now. And…the student was like, "I

> don't want to sound like a douche, but I've, like, learned this through my econ class and it's really been working great and I feel like I'm, you know, crushing it now." And I was like, "that's great. Like I don't want to sound like a douche, but we taught you this."

For a university staff member who embodies the *administrative facilitator* style of support, the student who is learning and accessing resources outside of their relationship with the university staff member or outside of the context of their academic support program is a successful one. For the participant who embodies the *nurturing guide* style of support, this same student is ignoring the work of the staff member and their academic support program. For a university staff member who embodies both roles, they might strongly center the work that they do with students as valuable, but they also see the value in how students interact with other students, faculty, and university staff members.

Some university staff members seem to embody traits as both the nurturing guide as well as the administrative facilitator, and others may lean more strongly into one style or the other. Still another category emerged in which the participant was neither a nurturing guide, nor administrative facilitator, nor a combination of the two. The third persona that emerged is the *quiet disrupter*.

Quiet disrupter. The quiet disrupter emerged as its own distinct persona because the participant who embodied this role reflected more in her interview on the systems that create these roles than the roles themselves. In turn, she saw herself in her work as more than someone who facilitates a program or mentors students, but someone who works hard to understand institutional culture and policy in a way that helps individual students work around restrictive practices and shifts the job functions of others in academic support roles.

> I think I see a lot of times people who don’t necessarily assume the best intentions for students, so—and to some extent I get it, like, there probably are a lot of students here who are not taking school seriously and are just here to party or whatever. And what I sometimes see happening is people treating the students that I work with like that that they aren’t taking things seriously and that they don’t really care, like, that's kind of blowing them off, I guess. So I think just like may be a different attitude to our students is a part of it. I don't know, I feel like it's bigger than that, but I just feel like that's what students complain about a lot when they talk about professors not being friendly or advisors not being friendly is just like assumption that, I don't know.

The quiet disrupter persona assumes the role of the street-level bureaucrat discussed earlier in this chapter, where they work to help students individually move around policy in order to help them persist in higher education. Role embodiment is tied to how university staff members execute their work and enact policy, but it is defined by how staff members see and conceptualize their roles within their programs. For the quiet disrupter, a common *behavior* is helping students maneuver around policy to persist, but the defining *belief* is that they work in an unjust system that merits disruption—both through individual interactions as well as systemic reform.

The quiet disrupter can appear to align with the other two personae in their behavior and even in their beliefs, but what sets them apart is how they see the bigger picture of the work being done in academic support and where they see themselves fitting into that work. They don’t have the same intensity of interest in relationships as nurturing guides, and they don’t share a strong interest in managing a programmatic intervention in with administrative facilitators. There is a deeper desire to embody a role that changes a system using the skills that they adopt from the two more common personae.

> I think for me I am interested in individual student kind of work. I've been doing one-on-one sort of stuff with students, but I also ultimately think like I am interested in more bigger-picture kind of work as well. And so I feel like where I would like to go in the future if anything ever opens up is moving away from direct one-on-one work to more like institutional level, I don't know, kind of stuff.

It's possible that this personae is more rare among university staff members in academic support programs, because the other two personae better align with how the institution positions academic support programs. The core of the institution is not looking to be disrupted. The history of academic support programs traces back to retrofitting an exclusionary system to include previously marginalized populations without having to make changes. The quiet disrupter has to be *quiet*, because otherwise they wouldn't fit into the purpose of academic support programs.

Additional considerations. In addition to the three personae that I outlined above, other themes related to role embodiment emerged during the coding process. Across the three sites, participants integrated their own identities into their discussion of how they understand and approach their work. I labeled this code *identity vector of embodiment* and saw a link to how university staff members saw themselves and how they understood the work they did with students.

I also noticed across each persona of role embodiment an expression of burnout that also appeared to systematically pop up as participants discussed how they understand their work. A discussion of burnout is relevant to the discussion of role embodiment, as I've distinguished role embodiment as a system of beliefs about the meaning of the work, rather than a set of behaviors embedded in the definition of policy enactment. I will discuss in this section the relationships between how participants embodied institutional values and the ways that they felt emotionally worn down from their work.

Identity vector of role embodiment. Although it was not explicitly asked in the interview protocol, it's important to point out that almost every participant talked about their own identity and how that intersected with the ways that they embodied their roles

with students within their academic support programs. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the role that staff and faculty played in participants' own feelings of disconnect during their undergraduate experiences. One participant was encouraged to tell her family that she could not return home as much as she did, because it was impacting her academic performance. As a result, that participant felt an even deeper sense of disconnect, and felt misunderstood by the university staff member who gave her the advice to stay closer to campus. During one interview, a different participant talked about a similar situation she was in professionally, in which she was the person advocating for the student to put some distance between herself and her family responsibilities for the sake of her academic performance and persistence. Below is an excerpt from that interview.

> Participant: I had a student who, she was pretty much taking care of her three, so two nieces and one nephew because her brother, just something in life happened. I think he got a divorce and he kind of was just going through things. So she was after work and after class going up and picking up these girls and feeding them and taking care of them and all those things, right… You know, she fought through it and everything, but she's still working through that because when family happens, I feel like that's really tricky. You want to be there for your family, but also you have to set those boundaries, and we talked about that.

The participant went on to share that she called Child Protective Services based on what the student had told her about her family. I followed up and asked the participant how the student felt about calling CPS, and whether she thought their shared Latinx identity played a role in whether the student felt understood and supported in this scenario.

> Yeah, I think so. You know, I could relate with her. I was telling her, you know, I come from a similar family where there certain family expectations despite what's going on with you. And that's not necessarily negative. It just is what it is culture wise. And so we addressed that together and I was like, you shouldn't feel like you're—again, normalizing that behavior. You shouldn't feel like you're letting your family down cause you're not. You're stepping up to support your nieces and you're already doing that.

Of course, identity was likely not the only factor that played into this interaction. The participant pointed out that she had dedicated a considerable amount of time building a relationship with this student, which eventually led to her opening up about her family's situation. This is an important distinction between the participant's past experience with university staff described earlier in this chapter and the one detailed above. The former described a single interaction in which there had not been a previously existing trusting relationship. The latter came from a participant who was clearly invested not just in student success, but also in the relationships she built with students. The participant who advised her student to set boundaries with her family demonstrated the positive impact nurturing guides can have on student outcomes. This scenario also reinforces the importance of diverse representation in university staff members, especially in programs designed to serve previously marginalized students.

In another interview, a participant discussed her identity as a white woman working in a program designed to serve students of color.

> I'm a white-identified professional working with students of color that has a huge impact on my work and how I do it. … I think it's just something that I try to really be cognizant of and I think it's like for me, the way I like to contextualize it is just really trying to do a good job balancing. Like when is it time for me to listen and not take up a lot of space versus when is it time for me to speak up and take up space, if that makes sense. So like I think there are times where as white professionals, we're able to maybe say things or push the envelope in ways that won't make us fear retaliation or being like questioned about our motives and stuff. And I'm not talking about a student level here. I'm actually talking about more of like policy advocacy.

This participant's observation of how identity impacted they way they embodied their role as a university staff member exemplifies not just the importance of representation, but of awareness of privilege. Particularly when working with marginalized student

populations, having an understanding of power in identity can impact the way a university staff member embodies roles that challenge institutional values.

Role burnout. During the coding process, the themes of role embodiment and role burnout appeared to be intertwined. As university staff members discussed their understanding of their work, they also discussed their frustration with their work and the ways that they coped with that frustration. Some of the descriptions of role burnout aligned with the personae that emerged from coding about role embodiment—nurturing guides tended to cope in ways that were similar to other nurturing guides, whereas administrative facilitators tended to view their burnout similarly to one another, but differently from nurturing guides.

The timing of the interviews is worth noting—this was unintentional on my part, but each series of interviews wrapped up towards the end of a program cycle. For one program, it was the end of the summer, and for the other two it was towards the end of the fall semester. This could explain why themes of frustration, fatigue, and role burnout emerged across the data, but it is important that the timing is not used to dismiss these sentiments. As Seidman (2006) discusses, the way that a person understands their experience influences their actions and behaviors. In this case study, the ways that university staff systematically understand their roles influences the ways that they interact with students, colleagues, and other professionals on the university campus. When a university staff member feels burned out on their work, it changes the way they interact with their environment and the ways they view their work. Whether this happens towards the end of a program cycle or throughout is less important than the fact that it happens at all.

Many university staff members described their role burnout in similar terms, regardless of the person they embodied in their work. Here’s an excerpt from a nurturing guide’s interview:

> Often, there's not enough hours in the day, one. Two, I really am in a lot of different projects and whether that'd be like under the umbrella of like, you know, all of the student organizations that I need to help or diversity, but I'm over-committed and I often find myself drowning this semester if I'm the–I'm like I'm not catching any balls. It's like I'm chasing the ones that are worst on fire and like pulling those first and trying to handle that.

An excerpt from an administrative facilitator’s interview revealed a similar sense of exhaustion with the work:

> Because even though I am like really happy with the work I'm doing and the difference I feel [this program] makes, I've kind of had to do a lot of soul searching, especially this [year], of is that result worth the level of personal sacrifice that I've had to endure to make it happen? And I've been telling myself that this [year] is an anomaly because it was my first time ever. And I'm very committed to doing another [year] because I know that there are things I can improve and things I can make better... But like I couldn't sustain the work, this level of work life balance for much longer before I break.

In spite of feelings of satisfaction with a job well done and the belief in a strong impact their program makes, the administrative facilitator’s sentiment was distinct from the nurturing guide’s in that they expressed personal boundaries for what they’d be willing to emotionally invest in their role in the future. Both university staff members showed a tendency towards giving a great deal of emotional labor, and that causing a sense of burnout. The difference was that because the administrative facilitator doesn’t center their relationships with students in their work, their commitment to their work was more rational and less tied up in their relationships with students. The administrative facilitator expressed the intention of leaving her role if she was not able to find ways to temper her work-life balance. More than one nurturing guide expressed a stronger desire to find

balance within their own role rather than change jobs altogether. Here is the same nurturing guide as was quote previously in this section:

> I love my job, okay, I really, really love my job. I had a job opportunity last year that paid a lot more that I probably should have taken and I didn't because I love my job and my students. I really-- I do feel like I'm making a difference in at least getting them to realize that diversity needs a bigger seat at the table than what we're giving it for metaphorically. And the impact they do with my students I see through small stuff like the awards and things like that. I am striving towards leaving this place a little better than what I like left or how I got here.

Another university staff member shared her insight into her frustration around how the commitment of support staff to students compares to the commitment of the institution to support staff.

> I would say if I could change anything about the university culture, I would change how they invest in their staff. I think that people burn out here because if you don't have a director who believes in yearly merit check-ins or cost-of-living increase or maybe even like comp time, depending on what your division does, if you host a lot of weekend events…Maybe I'm projecting more on other support staff… I mean I've been here for a year and a half now and I see a lot of people doing a lot of work and I don't feel…they're not compensated for the work that they do. And I think if the university did a better job at investing in people as a whole, people that do a lot of retention work that are actually working, boots on the ground with the students every day, then those people would have—I would hope that those people would have more time to support themselves outside of work.

This is an important observation for two reasons. This person exemplified a lot of the traits of the nurturing guide, so their response is not to think about finding a role that better supports their work-life balance, but to question *why* their position lacks the support they needs. The nurturing guide centers the wellness of students, so a natural evolution of that belief is to care about the wellness of staff who care for students.

The second reason this observation is important is that it continues to question institutional values. I've argued throughout this dissertation that the placement of resources and staff and academic support programs reflect the institutional investment in

inclusion and student success. By understanding the lens through which many university staff members understand and embody their work, it's possible to see whether and how the institution cares for the personnel who care for the students. It's only by understanding the way that university staff members see and understand their work that we can assess whether that work is valued and supported by institutional policy, practice, and culture.

Summary of Findings

Academic support programs may be diverse in size, institutional placement, and student audience, but they are bound by the experiences and motivations of the staff members who manage and implement them. University staff members interviewed for this study demonstrated the common tie of appreciating connection and community from their own experience in college, and the various personae that emerged in how staff embodied their support of students also reflected some commonality across the programs, although their was sometimes diversity *within* each program.

The value around connection seeped into program values and design, particularly as staff implemented academic advancement through responsive practice. University staff members worked to instill a sense of belonging by responding to students' interests in advancing through their curriculum. Staff members believe that engagement in their respective academic support programs—including curricular components, community with other students, and interpersonal relationships with program staff—leads to better outcomes for students, and ultimately, the program.

University staff members' responsiveness was not limited to meeting students' needs, but also meeting institutional values. Although programs were situated inequitable

distances from the core of the institution, university staff in each program demonstrated responsiveness to institutional values and practices by working to reform students to meet institutional retention goals. Whether those goals were set by centrally administered units, academic units, or grant-funders, university staff from each program demonstrated an understanding that their work with students was dependent on responsiveness to institutional expectations of increased retention outcomes. Rather than challenging institutional norms that marginalize students and create a need for specialized support programs, university staff members respond to the institution by reforming students in a similar way that they respond to students by tying their values of sense of belonging—academic integration—to students' values of academic advancement. This idea of responsive practice has evolved through this study from the initial concept developed in my pilot research. University staff members are using information learned in day-to-day interactions with students to adjust the ways that they respond not just to students' needs, but also to guide student behavior to respond to institutional needs. It's a mode of adjusting program components to meet the contemporary needs of students, and also to guide contemporary students to behave in ways that benefit the institution.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Academic support programs are designed to help students persist through higher education in spite of the institutional shortcomings that create so many barriers, specifically for historically marginalized and underserved groups. The staff members who run them bring with them experiences, values, and insights that shape the structure of the programs, and these perspectives merit examination and understanding. University staff and their understanding of students are also influenced—and sometimes constrained—by institutional norms and policy. The operation of academic programs is based largely on how university staff members respond both to students and to institutional mandates and practices in their day-to-day work. The findings of this study reflect a need to evaluate phenomena using the comparative case study heuristic, as academic support programs differed even with the same institution, and influences from administrative units, program legacies, and individual staff past experiences shaped the delivery and implementation of each program.

Conceptual frameworks such as Weber's (1973) work on specialization and bureaucratization, Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucrats, and Seim's (2017) labor theory of poverty governance guided this research and analysis. They help to explain some of the phenomena seen in the interviews with and observations of university staff members in academic support programs. Using Seidman's (2006) phenomenological interviewing method, the findings of this study illuminate not just how professionals behave in a large bureaucratic organization with limited agency, but how they view and understand that behavior, thus adding to Weber's, Lipsky's, and Seim's respective frameworks. How an individual understands their circumstances and their experiences

impacts how they behave (Seidman, 2006), lending a more in-depth understanding to how and why university staff members in academic support programs chose their particular field of work and exercise agency in their work.

Findings from this study also highlighted some new perspectives on frameworks not previously considered at the start of this analysis. Specifically, perspectives from university staff members challenged Hackman's (1985) concept of centrality. Each program was disparately distanced from the core of the institution, and yet no program saw themselves as having considerable power compared to other programs. Hackman's theory neatly divides large organizations—such as universities—into core and peripheral departments. Core departments serve the central mission of the organization and more easily gain resources than peripheral units, which serve auxiliary functions in the organization. This chapter includes analysis that highlights an emerging framework that counters centrality—namely that the periphery of large organizations is more of a complex network in which individual units leverage power in varying ways.

The Function of the Managing Unit Matters

Looking at this study through a horizontal comparative lens, seeing each program as a distinct case within a broader context, one important finding is that the perceptions and actions and even the organization of the university staff depend largely on the function of the unit that oversees the program. This study examined three programs—each of which had a shared vision of supporting marginalized populations of students, and each of which was managed by a different part of the same university. A key finding was that staff behavior, perceptions, and agency varied across the sites and those variances could be tied to the managing unit of their program.

Two of the programs surveyed focused on a student population based on an academic discipline—the College Cultural Program focused on majors within a specific college, and the STEM Intensive Program had a broader focus of students studying STEM disciplines without focusing on a specific college. These two programs, though similar in focus, had different approaches to addressing problems of access and persistence within minority populations in their respective disciplines. The College Cultural Program created study halls that specifically focused on helping students succeed in challenging, high-attrition courses within the curriculum. The STEM Intensive Program focused on developing a sense of belonging and community for students, sometimes tying academic advancement to these sense of belonging interventions to encourage students to attend. Whereas the College Cultural Program was managed and financially supported within a college unit, the STEM Intensive Program had various funding sources mostly from outside of the institution altogether, and had no central academic unit that claimed them.

The tie to an academic college and the subsequent focus on building academic skills to battle high attrition rates shows how the positioning of a program within the organization can alter the perceived need of the students in that program. It was clear from interviews with staff members from both programs that the university staff wanted to view the students through a strength-based lens, as they all acknowledged how the culture of the university could marginalize minority students, but their approaches to how to reform students to fit into the established university system varied depending on the interests and values of their respective managing units.

The varying interests of the managing units and their influence on academic support program structure and their university staff members' approach to the work can be tied to Hackman's (1985) work on centrality. Hackman wrote that units positioned closer to the core of the institution get more resources, and that peripheral units further from the core need to use different negotiating strategies to obtain resources. Within this comparative case study, each site serves in a peripheral function according to Hackman's framework, even though they are positioned at varying distances from the core of the institution.

Competing peripheral units in higher education. Hackman's framework is used to discuss the strategies of core and peripheral units to gain resources within the university. In this study it appears that despite varying functions and placements within the institution, no professional sees their program as part of a core unit, even though they see other programs as core because of their managing unit. This perspective speaks to the power of the organization to unintentionally (or intentionally) position peripheral units in opposition to one another, diminishing their collective power. Regardless of the function or position of managing unit, each of these programs serves a group of students that are not a central focus of the institution. Their respective struggles for resources and power to influence policy and practice vertically within the institution are reflected differently based their positioning in the institution, but their common focus is serving as additional supports for students who are generally neglected in some way by the university's central mission. In a sense, they are there to clean up any messes or tie up loose ends left by the central mission's deficits without presenting a radical challenge to the norms and

behaviors of how the university operates. In this way, their agency is limited to a supplemental rather than a transformational impact.

In this sample, the Summer Bridge Program is not associated with a single academic college or department. It is administered from a central student support unit, and enrolls students in academic courses such as math, English, education, and social science. Those departments earn tuition revenue from enrollments in the Summer Bridge Program, so even though the Summer Bridge isn't tied to a college or department, it wields some power over academic departments as a revenue-generating partner. Its legacy at the institution also gives it power with academic departments. As one of the oldest and longest-lasting academic support programs at the institution, the Summer Bridge Program is able to make rules to which tuition-dependent academic units have to conform. The Summer Bridge Program created a summer term that conforms to the features of the summer program rather than conforming to any other summer term established by the university's Office of the Registrar. This means that while other summer classes run on the same five week schedule during either the first or the second half of the summer break, the Summer Bridge Program creates start and end dates that serve the students and the program best, and even exclude special dates within the program—such as orientation and an academic conference—from the schedule of classes, ensuring that no student is overloaded on any particular day. Although the Summer Bridge Program is not tied to a college and does not confer degrees, it still exercises power over the academic departments that participate in Summer Bridge courses.

The STEM Intensive program is also peripheral with Hackman's (1985) framework, but the university staff in that program demonstrated a different type of

power than the Summer Bridge or College Cultural programs. The STEM Intensive Program was not tied to a specific college, academic department, or support unit—they operated across several units. They also operated with very little institutional financial support; most of their budget came from federal grant funding and donor support. This meant that the university staff running the program did not have the values and norms of a managing unit dictating the program components, the success metrics, or scope of practice with the university staff. Oversight of the program was not institutional, but dependent on the expectations and standards of external funders such as the U.S. Department of Education TRiO Grant. The staff members in the STEM Intensive Program demonstrated a higher perception of freedom to empower students in their program to persist in spite of restrictive policies or barriers. The agency they enact in their interactions with students reflects a looser tie to institutional values than that of other academic support programs.

By contrast, student-staff interactions within the College Cultural Program, with a close tie to an academic unit, felt more tightly bound to the values of institution. Even when the university staff member in that unit expressed discontent with the values of that unit's administration, they understood the scope of their role as prescribed to align with departmental values, norms, and protocols. But the College Cultural Program practiced another form of power. Ultimately, its position within an academic college and oversight by college administrators allowed its staff member the ability to design a program that was uniquely positioned to help students advance academically in their desired field of study, as she crafted program practices and components specifically around future success in the college. The program's direct tie to the college that would ultimately

determine students' ability to advance to degree completion gave the university staff member in this program more autonomy in both policy creation and her influence over student behavior than either of the other two programs involved in this study.

Hackman (1985) argues that, "core units are those whose functions are essential to the central mission of the institution. Without the core, the organization would have another overall purpose" (p. 62). The findings of this study demonstrate that programs that serve marginalized students are peripheral by the nature of their existence, but they find ways to influence other horizontal units (such as academic programs and departments) as well as vertically downward (students in their programs).

University staff members of each program cited the university's strategic plan when asked how their program aligned with institutional values, suggesting that each program somehow fit into the core. However, university staff members from each program also lamented that they struggle for resources despite the fact that they are responding to a central mission declared by the university's strategic plan. From the STEM Intensive Program:

> Participant: We're serving a population of STEM scholars that contribute, I think, back to the university. Many of our scholars are not just scholars, but they are peer mentors. They are ambassadors in their respective colleges. They mentor young students in the community. They contribute. I think there's a sense for many of our students, a sense of purpose beyond their education…
>
> Interviewer: So if you could change anything about university culture in order to improve [this program], what would that be?
>
> Participant: More money, more resource allocation. Yeah, absolutely, more money. Money in infrastructure and actually having a space where it's cohesive and where we have interactive study halls and things like that.

.

Even the College Cultural Program, which is directly tied to a degree-conferring college, demonstrated a lack of institutional investment. Institutional funding paid for the

staff member's time, but a corporate sponsor covered all other program costs, and the staff member was only spending part of her time administering the College Cultural Program:

> with diversity and [the College Cultural Program], the only reason I can do as many events as I do is because of corporate partners who fund it, so none of my funding comes from the college. All of it comes from corporate sponsors. So for me, every year when those renewals are coming up, it's a little bit of a panic because I'm like, if they don't give me that money, how am I going to fund my programs.

The similarities in perspectives around resource acquisition despite the differences in organizational position for each program support the argument that the institutional core Hackman once theorized about has transformed into a network of competition for power and resources. That network, however, continues to exist on the margins of the institution, and the competition for resources only further serves the core by distracting actors in the periphery. Connected to Hackman's (1985) theory of centrality, as well as the role of the managing unit in the enactment of policy, are also Lipsky's (1980) and Weber's (1973) frameworks of individual agency and policy-making in bureaucracies.

Bureaucratization and specialization. The university staff interviewed in this study demonstrated the relative constraints introduced by Weber (1973) not only in their perceptions of agency limitations, but also in their perceptions the higher education system's flexibility to change. Across each interview, I observed university staff members' recognition that marginalized populations existed in higher education at large and at their particular institution. Staff members acknowledged that students served by their program faced unique barriers, and worked to address those barriers through the mechanics of their academic support programs. Each program, however, was designed to

somehow reform the student first, while accepting the flaws of the institution that disadvantaged the very populations they were tasked to serve.

We see this in the Summer Bridge Program, which focused energy on helping students adapt to the larger campus as a strategy to help them persist beyond the first year of college. The professional staff positions are designed entirely to support the students in the program, with little recognition of the larger issues that impact the success of first generation, low-income, and minority students (for whom the program was designed). This was made clear in the stories about instructional staff being rude and disrespectful to student staff during program preparation and training, as well as towards program participants throughout the summer. Summer Bridge Program staff acknowledged problematic university norms and practices in their narratives of their experience in their academic support program, but neither attributed those norms and practices to overarching university values, or conceived of their own position as one that's responsible for reforming those practices.

This lack of agency to dismantle institutional barriers was not unique to the university staff in the Summer Bridge Program. The staff interviewed in the College Cultural Program and the STEM Intensive Program also primarily described measures in their jobs designed to advance marginalized students through the existing system, even when they acknowledged that problematic institutional barriers seemed to disproportionately impact their program's population. Weber's (1973) bureaucratization and specialization framework discusses ways in which the modern, "rational," workforce is educated in ways that specialize their expertise and subvert their understanding of policy reform. To this end, the findings of this study support the idea that Weber's

specialized workforce lacks the agency and system-level understanding of the larger higher education institution to reform policy. Interactions with problematic individual actors throughout the system were not seen as normative because university staff experienced them as isolated and not part of a larger systemic issue of institutional values.

Street-level bureaucrats. Findings from this study reflected many of the paradigms put forth by Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucrats framework. Primary among them is the concept of the "social engineering goal" public-serving agencies. Lipsky argues that one of the goals of street-level bureaucracies is to socially engineer the clientele they serve. "…it is characteristic of a liberal society to show deference to the norm of respect for the individual. Institutions are given license to organize and manipulate individuals only if they properly defer to this norm" (Lipsky, 1980, p. 44). This is similar to the concept of framing the problem of student persistence in terms of the student deficits and student-centered outcomes, rather than viewing an organization as needing to change for ever-evolving student needs. By creating institutional goals centered on student performance, and supporting the creation of academic support programs on the premise that they will help underrepresented students persist at the university and graduate, universities are operating academic support programs in the way that Lipsky theorized street-level bureaucracies operate.

University staff members exercised agency in the ways that they responded to students and embodied their roles in academic support programs, but sometimes found themselves situated in a system that created tension between the needs of the student and the needs of the institution. Lipsky (1980) also discussed the intentional ambiguity of

agency goals in the street-level bureaucracy framework, either because policy-makers saw the expedience of passing conflicts in program development along to administrators, or because the status quo allows agency goals to accumulate and contradict one another without any resolution. Themes of goal ambiguity emerged in university staff interviews when staff discussed normative institutional behavior that ran counter to the values and goals of their academic support program, but often did not see these behaviors and practices as reflective of institutional values. During their interviews, university staff members shared stories of common teaching and advising practices as well as normative policies and practices that cause barriers to student success. However, when asked if their program aligns with institutional values, most staff members cited the university's strategic plan, the institution's status as a Hispanic Serving Institution, or other formal statements by university administration declaring a commitment to student access, success, and achievement. These examples fit Lipsky's (1980) analysis of goal ambiguity in public-serving organizations.

Lipsky (1980) failed to capture the past experiences and perspectives that inform street-level bureaucrats' work in their organizations in his analysis. In this study, it was apparent throughout the interviews and observations of university staff members that their perspectives motivate their work with students, even prompting some of them to create new initiatives in support of helping marginalized students succeed academically. By studying university staff members' perspectives through Seidman's (2006) phenomenological interviewing method, I was able to distinguish these professionals from Lipsky's (1980) bloc of bureaucrats who he argued resisted the demands of clients—in the case of the university staff in this study, students—in their role

expectations. The university staff enacting policy through academic support programs in this study demonstrated strong connections to their student constituents, and their responsive practice with students was one example of their view of students as the primary actors who defined their roles, making the organization, individual departments, and the profession at-large secondary influences in their perception of their work.

Given the parallels and difference between Lipsky's (1980) work and this study of university staff in academic support programs, further research from the perspective of university employees could enrich Lipsky's framework and help better understand the complexities and contradictions of working in a university bureaucracy, particularly in emergent programs with the purpose of retrofitting higher education. Phenomenological interviews with student-facing staff across the institution—rather than solely in academic support programs—could illuminate the degree to which various organizational roles in higher education conform to or diverge from Lipsky's framework.

A Sense of Belonging and the Academic Integration/Advancement Paradox

Another theme that arose in the findings of this study was the intersection of academic advancement and an overall sense of belonging as goals of each academic support program. The overlap between academic integration and advancement was apparent in the pilot data that informed my approach to this study, but the idea of a sense of belonging emerged specifically from data collected for this dissertation. Literature on the concept of *sense of belonging* is connected to Tinto's (1975) concept of integration, but specifically focuses on marginalized identities in higher education, for whom *belonging* has not always been an inherent feeling on university campuses.

Strayhorn defines *sense of belonging* as

> …students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers (2018, p. 4).

The focus on how the institution and its actors treat students in this definition stands apart from Tinto's definition of social and academic integration, which emphasizes the behavior of the individual students in connecting to peers and faculty in a kind of assimilation process. Hurtado and Carter's (1997) review of *sense of belonging* literature concluded that:

> A sense of belonging contains both cognitive and affective elements in that the individual's cognitive evaluation of his or her role in relation to the group results in an affective response. Thus, studying a sense of belonging allows researchers to assess which forms of social interaction (academic and social) further enhance students' affiliation and identity with their colleges (p. 328).

The university staff in this study discussed *sense of belonging* in these terms when they talked about their job functions and their roles with students. It was clear from their narratives that they believed their roles was to help students feel as though they belonged in the university community through various classes, events, and through the use of peer mentors and tutors.

Findings from this study support the idea that although instilling a sense of belonging as characterized by Strayhorn (2018) and Hurtado and Carter (1997) is ultimately valued by students and academic support program staff, a shared value between students and the institution is academic advancement. It is for this reason that pairing the two within the context of academic support programming is so effective at both attracting students to participate in otherwise voluntary academic support programs, as well as giving students the protective emotional buffer needed to persist when they come into contact with barriers in their college careers. The relationships that students

develop with staff, peers, and student mentors within the context of an academic support program are important for long-term persistence, but the prospect of academic advancement through summer courses, supplemental instruction, or enhanced opportunities to interact with faculty hold higher levels of perceived value and thus, create a greater incentive for involvement for students.

This study contributes a practical consideration for university staff interested in building academic support initiatives focused on developing students' sense of belonging. A robust body of literature has shown that developing students' sense of belonging has a positive impact on persistence to degree completion, but this study demonstrates that developing vehicles for academic advancement responds both to student *and* institutional values, and can contribute to the overall health of an academic support program whose mission reflects a commitment to building a strong sense of belonging on campus for marginalized students.

How the Transversal Axis Influences this Analysis

The comparative case study paradigm also helps interpret and understand how the component of time—what Bartlett and Vavrus (2017) refer to as the *trasversal layer*—impacts policy enactment within and across university staff and academic support programs. "The study of history allows us to assess evidence and conflicting interpretations of a phenomenon, heightening our ability to question assumptions about the shape and form it has taken in the contemporary era," (p. 94). Findings of this study indicate that the length of time that each program has existed at the university impacts the ways that policies have taken shape within each program.

Program legacies. The centrally administered Summer Bridge Program had a far longer legacy within the institution than did either of the more discipline specific programs. As a result, rather than going around policy or reforming students to adapt to policy, the program had policy adaptations that fit their student population's needs. This policy grew from the combination of a growing understanding of what students need, as well as a long legacy of success in helping students persist to their second year at a higher rate than their peers through the use of this program. This is an example of how time can impact the differences between two cases (academic support programs) within the same context (a single university). It can also be seen as an example of a program's responsiveness to the organization's values (first-to-second year student retention in this case) bought this program flexibility to reform policy, rather than simply reforming students and forcing students and program components to adapt to institutional policy.

On the other end of the time spectrum, the newest program—the College Cultural Program—is continuously bound by college and university policy and philosophy on student success. The university staff member overseeing that program acknowledged tensions between her perception of institutional marginalization of minority students and the college's focus on reforming students to fit the existing system of academic integration. As a result, the program's formal components largely consisted of academic interventions such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, and professional development workshops, even as the university staff member revealed in her interviews that she served as a sounding board and advocate informally for students when they encountered systemic instances of injustice or marginalization. These differences in program legacies

matter as we analyze the varying degrees that academic support programs can use their relative power to influence university policy, practices and norms.

Responsive practice through role embodiment. In additional to the legacies of each program, the transversal axis of the comparative case study helps to make sense of how the varying experiences of individual university staff members understand their work and how they embody student support and enacts policy. “These methods of interviewing…appeal to those who distrust cultural analyses that have oversimplified different ways that lives among a putatively similar group of people are lived” (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017, p. 95). Current literature on academic support programs is full of analyses that boil these initiatives down to monoliths, rather than understanding the unique experiences that inform the perspectives of the staff and students who participate. A staff member whose college experience was defined by how they felt supported by university personnel approaches their role in student support very differently from a staff member who felt marginalized and disconnected from their institution during college. The former may center themselves in their students’ experiences as that *nurturing guide*, working to replicate the salvation they found in their connection with professional staff during college. The latter may perform the role of *quiet disrupter*, using their platform to reform an organization they saw as having been systematically unfair to them and to the students with whom they work. In both cases, it is important to remember that Seidman’s (2006) method of phenomenological interviewing—particularly focusing on the first, life history interview—is not simply a practice in thoroughness, but in understanding how past experiences have an impact on contemporary behavior and individual perspectives.

Gender, Ethnicity, and Work

Programs for this comparative case study were selected based on their function to support academic success for marginalized student populations. Each program enrolled students into a curriculum designed to help them persist to some milestone in their undergraduate career at a four-year university. This research design unintentionally uncovered a characteristic of this employment category that is not purely coincidental—the majority of the university staff member interview participants were women of color.

The university staff members of color involved in this study often foregrounded their ethnic identity in their interviews, discussing the ways that being a person of color influenced them to work with marginalized student populations. Particularly among staff participants of color, experiences of disconnect in college frequently stemmed from being a minority student during their undergraduate or graduate studies, and not seeing themselves reflected in their surroundings of other students and faculty. Especially for those staff who emerged with characteristics of the *nurturing guide*, they often embodied roles in their work of the staff or faculty who served as caretakers in their own college experiences. The one participant who identified as white also acknowledged the role that her ethnicity played in her approach to her work in that she acknowledged when she needed to use her own privilege to amplify voices of color in her work, and when she needed to step back and listen to the experiences and perspectives of minority students and staff. Higher education scholars have studied the impacts of minoritized identity in academia within faculty ranks (Baez, 2000; Martinez, Chang, & Welton, 2017; O'Meara, Kuvaeva, Nyunt, Waugaman, & Jackson, 2017), but this dissertation contributes the perspectives of the university staff members who work in academic support initiatives.

Although the notion of gender identity was not as apparent in the content of each participant's narrative, all but one of these student support staff members identified as a woman. Even within the three personae of role enactment—*nurturing guide, administrative facilitator,* and *quiet disrupter—*gendered language emerged. It became clear both in data collection and analysis that this sector of work in higher education—academic support programs to bolster the success of minority/marginalized students—is gendered work. The ways that these roles are not just embodied by the employee, but structured by the organization, speak to the nature of the work. These positions within the institution are designed to care for students, either directly as the *nurturing guide*, or through the deployment of professional staff, student mentors, or faculty volunteers as the *administrative facilitator*. Cardozo (2017) argued that non-tenure track faculty members take on the unpaid labor of care work in higher education, and that women and people of color disproportionately fill this role. This dissertation extends Cardozo's analysis to the higher education workforce outside of traditional faculty and instructional staff. The academic support programs in this study represented the uncoupled roles of faculty described by Rhoades and Sporn (2002), wherein administrative, advising, and service responsibilities are moved to staff positions in order to increase research productivity among tenure stream faculty. It is not just non-tenure faculty who carry the burden of care in their work, but also the staff positions that support students' academic advancement and sense of belonging on the periphery of the institution in order to shelter tenure stream faculty from advancing those same ideals in their work.

The drive to care about individual students can overwhelm professionals' bandwidth. By staying busy with micro-level student support, professionals do not have

time to drive macro-level change in the form of policy advocacy, collaboration and collective action across units, or even meaningful program evaluation and research. In their paper on community college faculty, Gonzales and Ayers (2018) argued, "the logic of the family asks for congruence and expects community college faculty to serve not on employee-employer grounds, but on relational, obligatory grounds" (p. 471). The same can be stated for university staff in this study of academic support programs. The measure of their efficacy as a professional is to support students, and to do so provides little additional time, resources, and cognitive space to evaluate systemic reproduction of inequities for the students they serve.

Even the term *quiet disrupter* reveals the type of professional who might break away from the micro-level caretaking mold (i.e. not a *loud* disrupter). In order to combat organizational inequities faced by marginalized students in their program, a disruptive professional must do so quietly. Rather than loudly advocating for change vertically upward in the organization (administrators/executive leadership), the *quiet disrupter* influences actors vertically downward (students) with the knowledge they have as an actor of the organization. The covert nature of quiet disruption is also gendered, as the quiet disrupter has to drive change without appearing to drive change and while simultaneously behaving within the context of their work as a *nurturing guide* or *administrative facilitator*.

Although this work was not initially framed as a study about gender, ethnicity, and work—these themes emerged and hold significance in the ways that these programs are marginalized in the institution. As peripheral units, academic support programs are structured by the organization to exploit the emotional labor and historical feelings of

disconnect embodied by marginalized identities—namely women of color—to support students who are not seen as central to the mission of the organization. Professionals who are overextended in their efforts to help marginalized students succeed in a system that was not designed for them do not have time to advocate for policy changes or collaborate across programs. This, combined with academic support programs aligning themselves with core units even when their program is peripheral, may be why professionals across various parts of the institution see other programs as better resourced or more advantaged than their own.

Tending to the ethnic and gender identities of those assuming the staff positions in academic support programs also extends the works of Weber, Lipsky, and Seim (who are notably all white men) by addressing how the gender and racial/ethnic identity inform how agency gets enacted and interpreted by these support professionals tasked with direct contact with students on the periphery of the university. The past and contemporary experiences of university staff members are informed by their identities, and the identities of academic support program personnel play into what motivates their work, how they relate to students, and how the university uses or exploits their emotional labor. The discussion of agency, constraints, and relationships—both vertical and horizontal—in street-level labor is incomplete without a discussion of how individual identity informs the perspectives of workers. University staff members' responses to students, the organization, and one another are gendered and colored. This is an important dimension in any model of street-level labor.

Summary of Implications

Findings and analyses from this study brought forth numerous implications, for practitioners working in the field of student support, for policymakers interested in driving substantive change in higher education, as well as for researchers interested in further exploring themes of personnel perspectives in large organizations. Emergent themes from data in this study suggest that practitioners should pay close attention to their focus on academic advancement—or Seim's (2017) concept of bodies in spaces—as well as their interest in fostering a sense of belonging—or spaces in bodies. Policymakers should learn from the behaviors of the *quiet disrupter* persona and Lipsky's (1980) conceptualization of organizational goals to more clearly define the goals of higher education and the policies that help shape those goals. And scholars can model their own data collection methods off those executed in this study to build more robust concepts and theories about the operations of university initiatives beyond academic support programs. The comparative case study, which honors horizontal, vertical, and transversal dimensions of a phenomenon, can help the researcher more broadly understand the connections across complex units (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Phenomenological interviews can allow space and time for interview participants to deeply explore their feelings around topics in which a single interview may only elicit superficial and clinical explanations (Seidman, 2006).

For university staff members working in student support, perhaps one of the most practical implications is the connection between academic advancement and creating a sense of belonging for students. Program design should embrace both ideals, that students should complete academic requirements that help them advance towards successful degree completion, and also that students should receive the support, respect, and

community from the university staff for which Strayhorn (2018) advocates. Program features such as tutoring and supplemental instruction, first-year seminars that require attendance at a certain number of community events, and summer programs that combine an extended campus orientation with degree-specific course enrollments would meet this standard of academic advancement.

Policymakers should consider the numerous ways that normative behaviors on university campuses create barriers for marginalized students, thus creating the need for academic support programs to provide supplemental support to marginalized students and address problems created by the central mission's deficits. Rather than understanding academic support programs' function as reforming deficient students, forward thinking administrators and policy makers would do well to consider ways that the university could reform the institution. Specifically, policy-makers could turn to the section in chapter four in which I discussed the behaviors and perspectives of the *quiet disrupter* persona. The *quiet disrupter* identified policies that seemed to disproportionately impact marginalized identities in higher education and worked with students to find ways around those policies. By understanding ways that students have to work around problematic policies, policy-makers can begin to create more accessible and inclusive policies that better align with the institutional mission and further develop unambiguous goals for the organization.

Organizational leadership as well as academic support practitioners can also consider the ways that peripheral programs can work together to address student inequities. Through collaboration, academic support programs can maximize their impact and collectively generate staff time, energy, and bandwidth to address institutional

shortfalls vertically upward towards policy, rather than solely vertical downward towards individual students. In this way, street-level staff members' work can have a transformational impact on policy reform and on student experience beyond their individualized interactions within their academic support initiatives.

Scholars can learn a considerable amount about how the organization functions and where tensions lie between institutional values, institutional norms, and students' interests by collecting data from the perspective of the university staff, particularly those working in student-facing roles. This study contributed the idea that university staff members in academic support programs may be better aligned with student values in their ideals, but may be coerced into thinking and operating in the interest of the institution through their specialized roles. Staff in more central, institutionalized roles, such as academic advisors, admissions counselors, and student affairs professionals in other functional areas of the university may bring varying perspectives that help to understand the levels of specialization and decision-making power university staff members wield across the organization. Additionally, the multi-angular approach to data collection in this study—including field observations and focus groups with program participants—created a more trustworthy dataset and gave me the ability as a scholar to better understand the problem of role and policy enactment within a complicated landscape like a large university. Employing richer methods of discovery can help higher education scholars in particular gain a stronger grasp on the complexities of the organization and the people within it.

Conclusion

This research was designed to understand the process of role and policy enactment from the perspective of university staff members in academic support programs. Academic support programs were chosen as a subject of observation because their existence demonstrates higher education's commitment to reform at the most peripheral levels in order to yield gains to the institution (increased retention and graduation rates) without disrupting the core traditions and values of the institution. The goal was to understand how university staff members negotiate tensions between their perceptions of student values and their perceptions of institutional norms and values.

By approaching this study through a phenomenological lens and using Seidman's (2006) three-interview sequence, it was possible to understand the perspective of these professionals not as a singular bloc of bureaucrats, as previous organizational theory implies, but as complex individuals with previous experiences as students in higher education that informed their professional approach to building and sustaining academic support programs. The eight university staff members who participated in this study brought some similar themes, some disparate experiences, and a vast array of interpretations of these experiences to their current work. These perspectives shape the ways that they make meaning in their work with students and how they view their employer. Though some reported a strong sense of connection within their own undergraduate experience, either with the institution or with university staff, many reported feelings of disconnect in college. These unambiguous and polar feelings around connectivity led to a consensus that developing a sense of belonging in college was important in student success.

As university staff members reflected on their contemporary work, they talked about fostering a sense of belonging with students in their academic support programs. Many professionals ultimately believed that creating a sense of belonging among students in their programs was the ultimate benefit of their respective academic support program. To incentivize participation in this community-building component, the prospect of academic advancement—creating opportunities for students to progress towards their academic and professional goals in a meaningful way—was also integrated into program design. More than integrated, academic advancement was often centered in the program description as a way to gain interest from prospective participants. Themes of academic advancement also aligned with institutional values of increased retention and graduation rates, which was simultaneously a way that university staff blended the need to create a sense of belonging with the institution's interest in retaining marginalized students without reforming the institutional core.

One objective of this research was to explore the ways university staff members' strategies to enact policy and negotiate tension between perceived student and institutional values align with organizational theorists discussions of personnel and agency. Throughout the analysis, it became evident that although university staff saw themselves as advocates for marginalized student populations, they also had difficulty imagining large-scale disruption of unjust institutional systems and values. Instead, staff members typically worked to reform student beliefs and behaviors. This is in line with Weber's (1973) specialization and bureaucratization framework —staff members' roles were so subspecialized that they couldn't imagine creating change outside of their defined scope of work. It is also in line with Lipsky's (1980) street-level bureaucrats

framework, in that the only agency university staff had was over the least powerful people in the organization: the students (or in Lipsky's terminology, the clientele).

University staff members demonstrated responsive practice in non-uniform ways—in particular, they approached their roles and their relationships with students by either centering themselves in the relationship with their students as a nurturing guide, centering the academic support program as an administrative facilitator, or centering policy reform as a quiet disrupter. These personae highlighted ways that university staff members saw their programs' roles in the university, the students enrolled in these academic support programs, as well as how they saw themselves. These perceptions further contribute to organizational theory about the function of personnel in large, bureaucratic organizations, creating a fuller picture of the complexities of institution-staff-student relationships.

This study's unique design in studying three academic support programs nested in various parts of the organization also helped to challenge Hackman's (1985) concept of centrality. Rather than seeing departments and units within the institution as *core* or *peripheral*, program placement appeared to be more ambiguous. Although all three programs existed in the periphery of the organization, there proximity to power varied, and the strategies they used to lasso resources was dependent on that proximity to and the function of their managing units. This contribution adds to our understanding of resource allocation and acquisition in the modern university.

By further understanding the perspectives and experiences of university staff, especially those working in academic support programs, we can better understand how universities continue to exclude marginalized populations. By defining programs that

work to include students, but limiting the agency and scope of influence of the professionals in these programs to mainly reforming students without influencing core policy, practice, and values of the institution, universities can benefit from the enrollment and relative success of marginalized student populations without having to reform institutional barriers that were originally designed to exclude them—such as admissions testing requirements, remedial coursework, and restrictive advising practices. This study, which compared relatively isolated sites across the same campus, was able to aggregate common experiences and perspectives from a wide-angle lens that individual staff perspectives might not otherwise perceive. Findings from this research can hopefully help to inform vast change in the landscape of student support across the curriculum, and not just in the margins of higher education.

APPENDIX A: UNIVERSITY STAFF INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

First Interview

1. You're working [academic support program name] to help students persist through higher education. How did you get to this place? What were the relevant events and relationships and milestones in your life that led you into this career path? This can include your family and background and what influenced you to go to college.
2. Tell me about your college experience. Specifically tell me about what you studied and whether you found it challenging or struggled, what support you needed (from the college or outside the college) to succeed academically and persist to graduation. What did you feel you were good at in class or outside of class in college?
3. How did you decide you want to work in college administration? Tell me about your journey from the end of your undergraduate experience to your current place in life as it relates to your career.
4. Tell me about the academic success program that you manage. What is its history? What were you hired to do?

Second Interview

1. Tell me about how you came to work in [academic support program name]. What was your understanding of the work and what you were there to do? How has that understanding shifted since you began working here? What were some factors that contributed to the shift in your understanding of your work?
2. Tell me about the program components of [academic support program name]. How are students selected/admitted? What is required of them?
3. Tell me about the need that is being addressed in this academic support program. How do students benefit from the interventions that you manage?
4. Do you use "evidence-based approaches" in developing your program's curriculum? Why or why not? What have you found to be effective?
5. What are the expectations you/your program have for students? How is success measured?
6. What are some of the tasks associated with your role in this academic support program? Tell me about the time/focus involved in your job responsibilities as they relate to this program.
    a. Are there meetings you attend regularly? Tell me about those.
    b. Do you have regular contact with students (classes, club meetings)? Tell me about that.
    c. Do you have irregular contact with students (counseling sessions, meetings, conferences)? Tell me about those.
    d. In what ways do you have to work with colleagues in your program? Outside of your program?

7. What are key pieces of your program that you think I should observe in the next [period of time] in order to better understand your work?
8. What are your direct supervisor's expectations for you?
9. Are there institutional goals that your program fits into? How is the success of your program/work evaluated?
10. Is there anything else you want to add about [your academic support program]?

Third Interview

1. Describe how your program aligns or fits in with the culture/practices of the university as a whole. If you feel like it doesn't fit or like your work is counter to university norms, tell me more about that.
2. If you could change anything about the university culture in order to improve your program, what would that be?
3. What long-term goals do you have for this career path?
4. What do you like about your role with students in this program? What do you dislike?
5. What do you like about your relationships with colleagues and other staff and faculty in your department and across the institution?
6. What kinds of patterns do you notice in students' behavior/learning over the course of the year? Do you have any theories about how students develop and change in the time that they are in your program?
7. What skills do students need to do well in this program, persist to graduation, and meet their post-graduation goals?
8. In what ways do you think you have an impact on students? What advice do you give to students who seem to be struggling early on in college?
9. What excites you or gives you joy in your job? What stresses you out about work?
10. What advice would you give to a new advisor or staff member in your position?
11. This is the end of our third and final interview. In this series of interviews, we've discussed your relevant personal history that led you to this career path, what your current work looks like and how you interact with students, other staff, and the institutional culture, and what impact you feel like you're having with students. Please tell me anything else you feel is important to share that would help me understand your experience as a professional or the work you're doing.

APPENDIX B: STUDENT FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Interviewer script: This is a focus group for the [name of academic support program]. My name is Noel and I know I've met some of you in your class or other group activities. I'm working on my doctoral dissertation in the College of Education's Department of Educational Policy Studies and Practice, and as part of my dissertation I'm studying the perceptions of students in programs like this one.

I'm recording this conversation so that I can accurately analyze what was said, not just my own memory of what was said. I will keep everything that is said in this focus group confidential and private, and I expect the same of everyone else. This needs to be a space where everyone can speak freely about their experiences without fear their thoughts being repeated outside of this space. Can everyone agree to that?

Let's get started.

1. Please introduce yourself with your name you normally go by, your year, major, and anything else you would like me to know about you.
2. Think about what it takes to be successful in college. What are some things students need to *do* to be successful and what are some things students *need* from their college to be successful?
3. What, if anything, do you think this academic support program is doing for you to help meet those needs?
4. Tell me about [this academic support program]. What are the program components? How do you interact with one another in the context of this program? How do you interact with your instructors or program staff?
5. [There should be additional follow-up questions to ask about program components that the blended professional described in their interview, but that the students left out of their description]
6. Why do you think [academic support program name] exists? What do you think [program leaders] are trying to accomplish?
7. As a researcher, I'm trying to clearly understand how students like you in academic support programs get the skills, support, resources you need. Observing situations and scenarios that paint that clear picture is important. What do you think I should pay attention to when I observe your program? (i.e. classes, study groups, what the instructor assigns, how students interact with the instructor, etc.)

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