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**Creating a Culture of Completion in Two-Year Institutions:  
Examining the Influence of Participation in the Community  
College Completion Corps on Institutional Stakeholders**

Jennifer Blalock

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Creating a Culture of Completion in Two-Year Institutions:  
Examining the Influence of Participation in the Community College Completion Corps  
on Institutional Stakeholders

by  
Jennifer L. Blalock

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the  
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education  
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## Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Jennifer L. Blalock under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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## Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

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March 28, 2016  
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## **Abstract**

Creating a Culture of Completion in Two-Year Institutions: Examining the Influence of Participation in the Community College Completion Corps on Institutional Stakeholders. Jennifer L. Blalock, 2016: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. ERIC Descriptors: Completion, Completion Agenda, Commitment Makers, Community Colleges, Student Success and Completion

This applied dissertation assessed the effect of participation in Community College Completion Corps and associated activities on campus stakeholders' perceptions of a culture of completion. The national initiative to increase completion rates at community colleges has resulted in a heightened awareness of this performance measurement. A number of community colleges have participated by hosting a C4 signing event, the hallmark activity associated with the movement. This inaugural event served as a public declaration of the two-year institution's intention to provide an environment in which policy and practice, as well as theory and application, focus on supporting and increasing student completion. Post-event, the expectation is that community colleges will enact measurable activities, projects, and changes in key areas to influence completion.

The researcher analyzed the perceptions and evidence of a culture of completion at two-year institutions that hosted a C4 signing event between 2010 and 2015. As most signing events include representation from campus stakeholders that include administrators, faculty, staff, and student leaders, this study included a representative of each of the identified groups, interviewed with the same questionnaire to determine their perceptions of any shifts in the campus' culture and to identify changes in policy, programs, and initiatives that influenced student completion.

An analysis of the data revealed a variety of institutional themes related to campus completion barriers and facilitators. Community college completion ceremonies served to highlight the importance of completion on campus and promote college-wide engagement and support of the initiatives. The interviews supported that these events provided an introductory and public showcase for institutional commitment to promoting community college completion and improved graduation rates. However, the study identified additional institutional focus on completion and alignment of administrative and academic policies and procedures to instill a culture of completion necessary for making substantive improvements in institutional completion rates.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2012) reported community college enrollment had increased nearly 20% in the last decade. Despite the increase in enrollment, the most recent national completion rate of community college students was 21%, a decrease of 2% from the previous decade (Nodine, Venezia, & Bracco, 2011). President Barack Obama elevated increasing community college completion to a national strategic priority, establishing a goal of attaining an additional 5 million community college graduates in the United States by 2020 (Obama, 2009a). The Lumina Foundation for Education raised the bar beyond that, setting a goal of a 60% increase in two-year credential completion by the year 2025 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). Labor projections regularly cite the nation's job market will be composed primarily of jobs requiring, at a minimum, a two-year degree credential. As a result of both the national leadership interest in and global workforce reliance on college completion, a subsequent focus on programs supporting and strengthening completion at the two-year institution is evident in emerging literature, trends, and organizational restructuring on national, state, and local levels.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Increased interest in making such significant improvements in community college graduation rates across the country has led to an examination of best organizational practices to support student success. Nationally, many community college students enroll at two-year institutions with stated intentions of earning a certificate or degree but drop out prior to attaining the formal certificate or degree. According to Complete College America (2011), the graduation rate for community college students pursuing two-year

degrees instead of a four-year degree, attending full-time, is 18.8%, with their part-time peers achieving a 7.8% graduation rate. Obama (2009b) acknowledged that nearly half of community college degree-seeking students have not met their goals when tracked as much as six years later.

The general problem this researcher explored was the challenge community colleges face in establishing and sustaining a culture of completion that promotes student success as measured by degree attainment, while also maintaining their open access mission and its associated philosophical implications. Community college enrollments and admissions policies have historically promoted a less formalized approach to degree attainment and long-term personal and professional planning. The primary problem considered was why so many students enroll at community colleges, declare that obtaining a degree is their ultimate educational goal, but do not complete their identified degree program or certificate. The researcher also aimed to identify what, if any, cultural perceptions exist in the composition of the community college operational structure that might incite student drop-out and withdrawals prior to graduation.

Various factors contribute to the difficulties community colleges encounter as they adapt a culture of open access to one that focuses on student retention and completion of degree programs. Community colleges must address this dilemma as they prepare to achieve the graduation increases proposed by 2020. Campus culture and the investment of various levels of institutional stakeholders in actualizing and institutionalizing these goals is an integral component of the process. In an effort to provide insight regarding this larger problem, this researcher studied stakeholders' perceptions of cultural campus change after participating in a campus-wide or system-

wide completion activity affiliated with Phi Theta Kappa's Community College Completion Corps.

Traditionally, community colleges have not incorporated completion into their institutional strategic or organizational objectives. Prioritizing completion by the institution's associate degree-seeking students can often appear to elevate recruitment over retention, seemingly at odds with a focus on access of entry and enrollment-based funding formulas. Such a structural omission makes complying with and achieving national completion mandates challenging, if not impossible, and requires a dramatic cultural shift in institutional focus. Bragg and Durham (2012) acknowledged the conundrum faced by community colleges with what may appear to be conflicting measures of competency based on completion. The heightened emphasis on the ability of the community college to make significant contributions to revitalizing the nation's workforce and economic stability demands attention and response. Degree completion rates have profound and wide-reaching effects on not just a national level, but also on global economic and social scales.

Reasons for enrollment at community colleges are as diverse as the students who attend them. Some students may enroll to attain workforce skills for career advancement or professional development, while others register for personal enrichment. Specifically, applying as a degree-seeking student is an eligibility requirement to receive federal financial aid. Those students who identify as degree seeking often encounter a loosely based organizational structure that does not offer a cohesive, collective organizational voice supporting their enrollment and progress toward a final goal of graduation. Because admission requirements are so inclusive, the scope of services and range of academic

preparedness of incoming community college students can be extreme and daunting to assess, advise, and support. Subsequently, community colleges continue to explore the partnerships and collaborations necessary to create a community of supportive resources with the primary objective of significantly increasing student graduation rates.

Two-year institutions have started to show interest in developing a culture of completion, viewing campus-wide, multilevel investment and participation as well as relevant programming and procedures as opportunities to create stronger pathways to degree acquisition. Many community colleges are conducting internal self-assessments to explore where and how the completion agenda should be integrated into the culture of their organization. Such programming often includes a formal, public acknowledgment of the institution's strategic prioritization and investment by a dynamic and diverse group of stakeholders, including administration, faculty, student services, and support staff. The public acknowledgement challenges individual campus leaders to identify and promote a common, collective vision of completion, while expanding the role of each individual position to contribute to the cumulative campus completion agenda.

In response to the growing national call to action, two-year colleges developed various initiatives focused on supporting completion through a formal partnership involving five national organizations. In 2010, the Association for Community College Trustees, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE), Phi Theta Kappa, the League for Innovation in the Community College, and the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development collectively committed to meeting the national challenge of increasing the number of community college graduates by 2020. Together, they issued a challenge to community colleges across the nation to similarly take the

pledge and support the college completion agenda on the institutional campus level (McPhail, 2011). The AACC (2010) published the results in the *Democracy's Colleges Call to Action*, which detailed the commitment to and executive-level leadership support for the nation-wide completion agenda.

The campus-level commitment thus began as the opportunity to create and cultivate a culture of completion in daily practice, connecting every faction of the community college through a shared completion mission, vision, and agenda. Institutions could formally take the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development Community College Completion Challenge, signing up online, at events, or at hosting ceremonies on their campus where a diverse representation of campus stakeholders participate. Nodine et al. (2011) identified large-scale, cross-campus relationship building, redesign, and restructuring as primary tenets of the completion platform.

**The topic.** Community college completion has been a topic of varying interest and research during the last several decades. From student success to retention and persistence, completion has undergone several iterations, considered via different measurements. Because of the unique, dynamic nature of community college enrollment, a concern exists that adequately measuring completion is nearly impossible, at least by traditional standards. In a venue where some students may enroll in one to two classes for professional development and attain their desired outcome while others may be pursuing a certificate or two-year credential, a fair and equitable tool to measure completion will not likely be a singular formula. Community college completion remains a complicated topic with vast institutional and national implications.

**The research problem.** The general question the researcher addressed was the

influence of organizational investment on various levels of the two-year institution on college-wide completion rates. Understanding and exploring the traditional community college structure, mission, organization, and strategic focus provided a foundation for analyzing institutions that have taken a ceremonial approach to acknowledging their commitment to improving completion rates. The problem this researcher sought to investigate was how community colleges can achieve the dramatic increases in graduate rates proposed nationally by 2020. This major challenge faced by community colleges speaks to the institution's core values and requires a shift in cultural perceptions and practices. Achieving such a cultural shift demands related changes in institutional dynamics.

Mitigating the cultural and operational challenges impeding student graduation will help establish and sustain a culture of completion on community college campuses nationally. Traditionally, the two-year institutional culture has neither emphasized nor promoted student success as measured by degree attainment levels. Instead, continuously growing enrollment has been a central goal, rooted in the long-standing philosophical implications of the colleges' open access mission. Traditional student enrollment statistics have been the primary institutional effectiveness focus area, with resources allocated to increasing student enrollment because of its relationship to funding appropriations.

As the field's priorities continue to emerge and adjust, community colleges have concentrated institutional resources and strategic planning on student graduation rates, introducing many initiatives to embark on new paths to refocus the culture. One such initiative is the Phi Theta Kappa's Community College Completion Corps (C4). This

program invites community colleges, either individually or as a statewide system, to host a formal signing event in which various campus stakeholders publicly commit to supporting (faculty, staff, and administrators) and pursuing (student) completion.

Hosting a public Community College Completion Corps event on campus requires administrative support as well as a designation of college-wide resources and participation. In considering whether to support participation in this program, one must consider whether a community college's ceremonial commitment will result in enhanced completion. How does such an activity translate into the creation of a culture of completion, in both theory and application? What influence does hosting a signing event have on the participants and the associated campus cultural shift in prioritizing student completion?

**Background and justification.** Since their inception, community colleges have struggled with the significance and placement of completion in their overall mission. Initially, community colleges were intended to equalize access to higher education with open-door admissions policies and a community-based curriculum of continuing and workforce education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Community colleges in the 21st century have a much more extensive mission, balancing a number of roles and responsibilities critical to their community's economic, professional, and sociocultural development. In 2009, President Obama introduced the American Graduation Initiative, the first national program firmly rooting completion at the heart of the community college mission (Obama, 2009a). Achieving this newly heightened goal will require innovation, best practices, and shared ownership and participation in the realization of the completion agenda.

Researchers in the field have explored the barriers that impede student success and completion for both traditional and nontraditional community college students. However, little has been done or documented to create a shared, open, and accessible repository of common benchmarks and viable models of organizational changes to promote an attainable and sustainable culture of completion. Community colleges must serve an increasingly complex, demanding, and dynamic student population, yet they lack the same level of funding, resources, and legislative support provided to their university-level counterparts because of differences in mission and focus. In this study, the researcher explored the perceptions of actions and accountability on each level of the two-year college organizational hierarchy, pursuing solutions invested in cross-campus collaboration and change leadership.

**Deficiencies in the evidence.** A culture of completion requires various stakeholders of the community college to support completion in both institutional theory and action. The qualitative research approach affords the opportunity to compile and analyze feedback and individual perceptions, through interviews with a multitude of campus representatives at various levels of leadership. This methodology also allowed the researcher to create a holistic, comprehensive understanding of what the perception of a culture of completion is and how others in the field may replicate and promote such a culture at their respective campuses.

The governance of two-year institutions is unique and varied at the national level, creating a palpable void of cohesiveness regarding how to prioritize community college student completion, how to define and measure achieving that milestone, and how to share proven best practices amongst two-year institutions in the field. Ranging from

seamless and incentivized completion programming to pathways that promote transfer prior to completion, no standard approach exists to cultivate a culture of completion on the community college campus. According to Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth (2004), among nonacademic factors that influence student success and completion, students identified institutional commitment as having a high-moderate likelihood of affecting their completion. Lotkowski et al.'s (2004) survey findings and recommendations included the marriage of nonacademic and academic people, programming, and policies in support of college completion, providing additional merit to the importance of official commitment to promotion of a community of engaged stakeholders, campus wide.

**Relevance to the discipline.** The field of higher education continues to evolve as a performance, outcomes-based system. Beyond open access, the discipline has begun to measure, assess, and evaluate effectiveness based on metrics such as community college completion rates. This shift requires that community colleges maintain a level of accountability related to specific, measurable achievement and momentum points. Completion continues to emerge as a key component of institutional performance and success. Researchers often discuss competitive funding formulas as a means to encourage increased institutional accountability and compliance with completion goals on federal, state, and local levels. Based on this emphasis, community colleges must be able to support and sustain a culture of completion in both theory and application as a core strategic priority.

**Audience.** The audience for this research and associated findings included a diverse group of stakeholders in the field of higher education, and the research has specific relevance and applicability to two-year community college leaders. Community

college presidents, their governing boards, faculty, and staff collectively benefit from the findings and related information provided from this study. Such findings may include the potential effect of participation in Community College Completion Corps activities, such as a public completion commitment ceremony and associated post-event programs, as well as changes to policies and procedures.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of staff or personnel employed at a two-year institution where a Community College Completion Corps (C4) signing ceremony took place. The researcher sought to find out, from the interviewee's view, what influence, if any, the event had on creating and sustaining a culture of completion in campus structure, policy, and behavior. The researcher investigated whether a publicly held organizational ceremony—the C4 signing and institutional declaration of commitment to completion—resulted in transformative, changed leadership promoting a culture of completion. Specifically, the researcher invited five two-year institution sites to serve as approved study locations and asked individuals in specific campus leadership roles at each institution to serve as study participants. Approved sites included a community college in New Jersey, where the state system held community college completion events statewide, branded as NJC4. Community college sites identified in Alabama, Kansas, Texas, and Oklahoma also participated.

Community college faculty, staff, and administrators at the approved sites consented to participate by engaging in the study and interviews. The interview questions addressed the individual respondent's perception regarding the effect of the college's participation in the Community College Completion Challenge on policy, planning, and

organizational procedures. Further, their responses provided an opportunity to identify the presence of the change leadership model components employed to support the initiatives. Participants' views of best practices, future action plans, and shared experiences formed a list of recommendations to assist community colleges in adopting a culture of completion that had a measurable institutional effect of improving student completion rates.

### **Definition of Terms**

**American Graduation Initiative.** Introduced by President Obama in 2009 and further expanded upon in the White House Summit on Community Colleges in 2010, this initiative calls for an increase in community college graduates by 2020 to restore the nation's place in the top 10 degree producers globally (Obama, 2009b).

**Attrition.** As defined by Berger and Lyon (2005), attrition is the failure of students to reenroll at an institution in consecutive semesters.

**Change leadership.** Drew (2010) defined change leadership as that which "fosters innovation, collaboration and ability to influence and align people around a strategic vision" (pp. 67–68).

**Commitment makers.** The Community College Completion Corps recognizes two-year institutions that publicly communicate their organizational dedication to supporting a culture of completion on their campuses as commitment makers. The C4 website identified these colleges as publicly affiliated with its national completion agenda.

**Completion agenda.** The completion agenda is the nationally recognized commitment to increasing the nation's college completion rates, inclusive of those at the

two-year institutions, by formally communicating a shared, campus-wide vision of policies, practices, and resources dedicated to the promotion of completion rates.

**Completion commitment ceremony.** A completion commitment ceremony, also known as a C4 signing event, can be hosted at any of several types of public locations, such as the state's capitol, the statewide higher education offices, the community college campus, or a Phi Theta Kappa chapter, regional, or national event. Students, faculty, staff, administrators, and other stakeholders make presentations emphasizing the importance of completion and the institution's commitment to that goal, and a banner is available for all stakeholders to pledge to support completion.

**Community college completion.** Community college completion is defined as the completion of all degree requirements and subsequent award of the associated two-year degree or credential.

**Community College Completion Corps.** The Community College Completion Corps (C4) is housed at Phi Theta Kappa, the International Honor Society of community colleges. The Corps offers materials, resources, best practices, and a toolkit of completion research and information intended for use in support of a campus-wide culture of completion.

**Community college completion pledge.** Taken online or in person, the completion pledge offers two unique commitment opportunities for completion support. One option is for currently enrolled community college students and the other is for community college faculty and staff. The faculty community college completion pledge reads as follows:

As a community college administrator, faculty or staff member, I commit and pledge to promote practices and strategies that will produce 50% more students

with high-quality degrees and certificates by 2020. I call upon every sector and constituency of my college and community to join me in this work. (Phi Theta Kappa, 2014)

The student community college completion pledge reads as follows:

I accept the responsibility for my commitment to complete a college credential; I understand its importance to my future success; and I pledge to help one other student make and honor the same commitment. (Phi Theta Kappa, 2014)

The pledge asks students to provide an expected graduation date, their student identification number, and the community college they are currently attending as a method for collecting data to track and measure the influence of the program.

**Completion Challenge.** In 2010, five nationally recognized organizations in the field of community college leadership and innovation issued the Completion Challenge. Inspired by the various federal mandates proposing dramatic increases in college completion at the two-year level, the challenge pushed leaders to take the pledge institution-wide, creating a repository of best practice initiatives that engage every level of input and participation at the community college. Participants can respond to this challenge through a formal completion challenge signing ceremony as well as other innovative events involving the entire campus community. The National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) and the Community College Completion Corps both offer resources and support for the challenge.

**Completion champion.** A completion champion is any stakeholder who is not a currently enrolled community college student who completes the completion pledge and commits to support a culture of completion on campus or within a specific program. Completion champions commit to employing strategies that will assist in achieving the 2020 graduation-rate goal.

**Culture of completion.** A culture of completion is the experience of creating and sustaining a campus-wide shared leadership approach to promoting and supporting degree completion by students at the institution. The culture requires that completion serve as a central, guiding aspect of decision-making, policy, and procedures. All members of the campus community engage in the completion agenda and work to connect their professional responsibilities to contribute positively to the organization's completion rates.

**Institutional commitment.** Institutional commitment refers to the level of human and operational capital designated to support specific initiatives by the institution. For the purposes of this study, the institutional commitment measure related to community college completion initiatives.

**Persistence.** Persistence means the rate of continuous progress toward degree completion a student makes through community college enrollment. Tinto (2012a) suggested that persistence refers to the student's experience of achieving and accomplishing his or her academic goals.

**NJC4.** The New Jersey community college system branded the Community College Completion Corps as NJC4.

**New Jersey Council of County Colleges.** Consisting of 19 two-year degree-granting institutions located within the state of New Jersey, the mission of New Jersey's community colleges is to provide high quality transfer programs, occupational programs, continuing education courses, business support services, and community service programs at a reasonably low cost that lead to student success and respond to local and statewide needs. The New Jersey Council of County Colleges provides statewide

leadership for the advancement of the 19 community colleges of New Jersey, performs sector coordinating responsibilities as required by state law, and coordinates statewide efforts to improve student success.

**Retention.** Retention is defined as the continuous enrollment of a student from one primary academic term to another. Typically, an institution's retention rate does not include the summer academic term. Tinto (2012a) stated that retention refers specifically to the institutional measurement of completion and achievement of academic goals.

**Student dropout.** According to Tinto (2012a), student dropout refers to the failure of an individual student to attain a designated educational goal by discontinuing academic participation within the higher education institution. Further, Tinto (2012a) ascribed a level of responsibility on the institution for dropout, regarding the institution's ability to provide services or support in the areas that created barriers toward completing the identified academic goal.

**Transformational leadership theory.** Bass (1990) defined transformational leadership as that which elevates the consciousness and investment of the work teams to focus on the greater good of the group, the mission, and the outcomes of the organization.

## **Summary**

Community college completion has become an area of increased national interest, with particular emphasis on the importance of creating substantive gains in student graduation rates as a means of strengthening the nation's economic growth and stability. Because of this, two-year colleges and their graduation rates continue to fall under the microscope of public and political opinion. The colleges are lauded for their transformative powers in equalizing access to socioeconomic mobility by offering

affordable, convenient, open access educational opportunities. Conversely, two-year colleges are criticized for their low student graduation rates and are under pressure to achieve ambitious gains in these performance metrics within the coming decades.

In Chapter 1, the researcher addressed (a) the national community college completion call to action and several national completion initiatives, (b) the anticipated significance of and barriers in place that prevent improving student graduation rates, and (c) definitions related to the theoretical practice of student enrollment persistence, retention, and completion. The chapter presented Phi Theta Kappa's C4 as well as its student, faculty, and staff components. Chapter 2 will outline the theoretical and research-based foundation of community college completion initiatives and includes a review of the current research literature.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Friedel, D'Amico, Katsinas, and Grant (2013) and Boroch et al. (2010) identified planning for dramatic change in community colleges, including changes in student success and graduation benchmarks, as a key competency of emerging leadership. Tinto (1975) provided a framework for establishing a completion emphasis at the community college in his seminal retention model. Goal commitment and institutional commitment form the two primary tenets of the theory. Institutional commitments have focused increasingly on the importance of establishing a culture of completion, with service to student success as a driving force in policy development and decision making. According to Tinto (2012a), "The higher the degree of integration of the individual into the college systems, the greater will be his commitment to the specific institution and to the goal of college completion" (p. 96). Tinto's interactive theory of retention correlated non-completion as a direct consequence of the student's experience with the college as an institution (Longden, 2004). Tinto's research indicated a strong relationship between campus engagement inside and outside of the classroom, persistence, and degree completion.

In further study, Tinto (2011) suggested the collaborative nature of creating a culture of completion begins in the classroom. To significantly influence institutional student success rates, the researcher recommended attaining interdisciplinary relationships and networks across the college campus, connecting faculty, institutional leadership, state leadership, and other vested stakeholders with the common goals of persistence, retention, and completion (Tinto, 2011). The foundation of this retention theory rested on institutional commitment and action. From Tinto's work (2012a, 2012b),

a collective call to action developed within the higher education field, introducing the need for change leadership to establish a new collective campus cultural shift with student completion at its center.

Seidman (2005) acknowledged the issue of student retention and completion in higher education has remained pervasive and prevalent throughout the existence of a formal higher education system. Bundy (2013) emphasized student graduation as the primary challenge community colleges face today. Still, despite targeted, formalized efforts by educational systems and institutions to implement a variety of programs that seek to redress identified completion barriers, little, if any, increase has occurred in completion rates. Thus, objectively exploring the relationship between student completion rates and state and institutional changes through new programs and initiatives was necessary to validate the student retention problem. Increased support has failed to yield a marked increase in student completion rates, indicating a need for further development, evaluation, and assessment of additional methodologies and frameworks for change.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Because making significant gains in graduation rates at the nation's two-year colleges requires a system-wide shift in culture, community college leaders need to consider what organizational and leadership conditions are most conducive to achieving such sweeping change. Further, based on inherent limitations associated with the mission and structure of the nation's community colleges, the theoretical framework to support a transformation in processes must also align with the system in which the culture exists. Meier (2013) explained that the mission and focus of community colleges has often been

a source of debate and confusion. Adding student graduation and completion to the already clouded and exhaustive expanse of the mission is an adjustment for many leaders nationally. Toma (2010) recognized that while community college systems and the two-year institutions that include them may have operated on an extended mission supporting completion initiatives, researchers needed to explore many other considerations of the campus culture. Some of the contributing organizational components include an exploration of processes, identified as inputs, and policies identified as outputs. Critical analysis of a campus' inputs and outputs, clearly delineating between processes and policies, can create the best opportunity to redress and subsequently implement major changes and shift organizational focus.

In order to enact change and transform a culture, leaders must frame their actions according to a theoretical foundation from which they can create and realize the driving vision of the organizational progress. The most effective types of change are vested in identifiable stages, providing the leaders initiating the change with a roadmap to building and introducing the new pathway of operation. Wallin (2010) examined the growing necessity of change leaders in community colleges based on the extensive future demands and expectations being placed on these localized institutions. Kelly (2011) projected that institutional leadership at the two-year level must assign student completion as a top priority.

To further realize the completion agenda, change leaders must consider adopting and integrating cultural supports that reflect the best environmental conditions for student success. Kelly and Schneider (2012) examined the start-to-finish approach two-year institutions must enact to promote completion in cultural behaviors and outputs.

Kolenovic, Linderman, and Karp (2013) researched the impact of change leadership programming on helping community college students in reaching graduation through a case study of community colleges offering wrap-around services to students upon entry.

For the purposes of this study and its analysis of the perceptions of the effect that C4 completion activities have on creating a culture of completion on the campuses that held the activities, the researcher employed the theoretical framework provided by the 4-CAP model of leadership capabilities. These capabilities are sensemaking, relating, visioning, and inventing (Ancona, Malone, Orlikowski, & Senge, 2007). Using interviewees' observations, the researcher explored the influence of C4 events on completion, considering the plans leading up to the public signing, the actual completion celebration event, and the post-campus environment through the four leadership dimensions to determine what potential the related programming and processes have for establishing and sustaining a culture of completion.

Further, the researcher introduced and discussed specific elements of Kotter's (2012) model of stages of leading change to frame the effect of C4 and subsequent completion programming in establishing a new culture of completion. Kotter (2012) defined culture as "the norms of behavior and shared values" within an organization (p. 148). Because national leaders have already established a sense of urgency and related metrics to elevate the completion agenda to a high-level collective imperative, the foundational and first step identified in Kotter's model of change, the researcher focused on additional norms of behavior within the context of the community college. Acceptable practices and expected standards of operation exist within the system that innovations and change leadership will challenge. To explore stakeholder perceptions of the process of

change, the researcher of this study considered three elements of Kotter's eight stages of the change process: (a) creating the guiding coalition, (b) empowering employees for broad-based action, and (c) anchoring new approaches in the culture (Kotter, 2012). The researcher investigated stakeholders' observations regarding how the campus community received invitations to participate in the completion initiatives; what opportunities the community received to for training on, learning about, or exposure to employing new completion-focused behaviors; and how colleges have integrated any changes and innovative behaviors to establish a culture of completion.

### **Historical Context**

Berger and Lyon (2005) identified the earliest experience of student success and completion as a reflection of the college's purpose during the period of 1600 to approximately 1850, when college prepared young men for the ministry and religious work. Higher education continued to evolve and expanded its course offerings and programs to include more purely academic pursuits with the emergence of the intellectual as an expected and embraced member of American society. The idea that higher education focused on the development of the mind as well as the divine spirit was a reflection of economic prosperity and opportunity. Social evolution and cultural sophistication demanded a well-educated, inquisitive, and reflective thinker who could dedicate time and energy to inquiry, innovation, and ideas. Thus, the full-time scholar was born and the concept of learning for the sake of knowledge acquisition and critical analysis of man's existence resulted in an increased emphasis on academic achievement and accomplishment.

From early on, the public established a relationship between economic stability

and prioritization of higher education. In times of increased opportunity, families were able to allow their sons, and later daughters, to focus exclusively on academic development. Learning as a cultural priority has been impacted by a variety of social conditions, including war, recessions, economic depressions, and natural disasters (Berger & Lyon, 2005). These mitigating factors continued to have a powerful influence on student enrollment, achievement, and completion in colleges and universities throughout the next two hundred years into the 21st century, when they have been compounded by an array of growing contextual dynamics that also complicate the completion puzzle.

While the current completion agenda brings renewed focus on increasing community college graduation rates, it is not the first national initiative to suggest such a systemic concentration. Parnell (1985) introduced the concept of promoting the acquisition of an associate's degree. Parnell (1985) advocated for employers to solicit more two-year degreed job seekers and for senior colleges and universities to increase pathways for transfer and admission to baccalaureate programs. Cohen and Brawer (2008) detailed the movement in the 1980s to require entrance assessment and degree pursuit for incoming community college students, further compounded by the later requirement of degree-seeking status for federal financial aid eligibility.

### **Current Issues**

In the current operational governance of most two-year institutions, executive leaders continue to yield a tremendous amount of influence in creating the culture on campus through resource allocation and strategic prioritization. Based on this model, enforcing the community college completion mandate must start at the top to maximize

progress toward increasing institutional completion rates. McClenney (2013) advocated the importance of institutions embracing change to further the completion agenda. On both the state and federal levels, ambitious metrics and associated timetables for achievement mandate institutions aggressively pursue advances in college completion rates. The U.S. Department of Education (2011) published the *College Completion Tool Kit* as a resource directory to enhance the federal government's goals of increasing the number of college graduates and degreed citizens.

Based on President Obama's mandate, which required colleges to significantly increase the number of individuals with at least two-year credentials, the tool kit suggested that states and their respective community college systems begin to set goals and develop action plans. Castleman, Schwartz, and Baum (2015) advocated for organizational leaders in higher education to reframe decision-making. Hirt and Frank (2013) further substantiated the importance of analyzing the structure of support within each institution as a strong indication of whether or not community colleges are willing to implement cultural change on their campuses. Such shifts in institutional focus included extending the responsibility for retention, persistence, and completion to every stakeholder on campus.

As the discussion continues to evolve, a variety of national stakeholders have emerged as leading voices in the call to action. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002) created a national panel of higher education experts. This panel critically analyzed deficiencies in the current higher education academy. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002) sought to identify and address what was missing in the collegiate experience that led to minimal changes in completion rates,

despite substantial increase in enrollment and access. While the subsequent report acknowledged that increased access to higher education also resulted in a larger proportion of underprepared students entering campus, the researchers also made several recommendations to increase expectations in order to increase student success.

The recommendations included references to institutional alignment and collaboration, akin to the mandate for comprehensive community college commitment to the completion agenda. A decade later, many colleges have not yet enacted many of these suggestions. Higher education thought leaders introduced the completion challenge as a viable tool to facilitate the realization of higher graduation rates by publicly shifting the culture on campus to one of completion. The idea of increased rigor and institutional investment resulting in increased completion seems not only logical, but also inevitable.

In 2012, the AACC published additional findings and updated recommendations because of conducting a steering committee known as the 21st Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, several sub-committees, and a 50-state listening tour at community colleges across the nation. The publication centered on the three Rs it suggested were critical to the future sustainability of the community college system: redesign, reinvent, and reset (AACC, 2012). Each recommendation connected to specific implementation strategies designed to provide community college leaders with the basis to promote institutional effectiveness.

One of the most significant recommendations of the AACC's (2012) work is the Voluntary Framework of Accountability. Recognizing that no framework presently exists that speaks to the unique nature of the diverse and far-reaching scope of community colleges, the commission has undertaken the task of proactively creating an assessment

rubric that speaks to the dynamic nature of the two-year institution. The AACC's work resulted in several important milestones, including a technical manual, defined outcomes for assessment, a blueprint for data collection, pilot testing, and a strategic plan for implementation. Moltz (2011) identified this collaborative mandate as a methodology for establishing a national metric of evaluation and assessment, affording two-year institutions the guidelines that have been lacking in the field to direct the institutions' efforts.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation identified college access and completion as one of its primary areas of philanthropy and funded initiatives. From investing in K-12 initiatives that focus on extensive college preparation and readiness activities to college scholarship programs, the Foundation also extends its scope of influence to conducting and endowing research on issues of higher education equity and completion. Because of the Foundation's dual focus on economic mobility and higher education acquisition, it continues to fund a substantial number of programs targeting two-year institutions and the community college system holistically and long-term.

The Lumina Foundation (2009) set an ambitious goal to improve the percentage of degreed Americans by 60% by the year 2025. In their strategic plan, the Lumina Foundation (2009) listed the creation of higher education outreach networks as a primary outcome. As a long-term goal, the Lumina Foundation recommended the creation of a culture of completion that stretches beyond the community college campus to involve local and state communities in the shared mission. The foundation focused on shared accountability and recognizing the importance of both the access that community colleges provide and the responsibility these institutions have to support student success

and completion (Lumina Foundation, 2009). Annually, the Lumina Foundation awards grants, publishes findings, conducts studies, and offers resources to further advance the repository of shared knowledge in the rapidly evolving field of community college completion.

A by-product of the Lumina Foundation's work is the Achieving the Dream Foundation and Network, which began in 2004. The network of engaged community college researchers, administrators, and innovators consists of legislative policy groups, 200 higher education institutions, and corporate and business leaders and investors. Their work, focused on best practices and increasing access and completion of two-year community college students, emphasizes the necessity of institutional change to align practices with an emerging vision and evolving mission. The Achieving the Dream initiative's programming and partnerships affect nearly 4 million students.

Complete College America was founded in 2009. Composed of a consortium of state leaders, this national completion resource requires a commitment from the governor to cement participation. The program has four key focus areas designed to target substantive improvement in college completion. Driven by an analysis of data showing that students who take 15 or more credit hours per term have a higher completion rate, the first strategy the national organization recommends is to mandate full-time enrollment of students. The second strategy suggests that co-requisite remediation, achieved through integration of remedial and developmental coursework into the college-level course experience helps to decrease time to completion and college readiness. Structured schedules and guided pathways are two additional measures the organization suggests employing for improving student success, as providing students with specific, easily

accessible completion scheduling facilitates accurate and efficient course progress and program completion. Finally, Complete College America strongly advocates tying completion rates to performance-based funding to incentivize organizational commitment to completion.

Beyond achievement and acknowledgment of various federal mandates, some initiatives offer incentives for completion. Wood, Nevarez, and Hilton (2011) examined the “community college achievement gap,” (p. 54) exploring the disparities in success rates, inclusive of graduation, as it related to future transfer success. Based on their research, Wood et al. (2011) similarly emphasized the importance of creating and continuously developing a shared responsibility of student success relating to completion and transfer preparation. Wood et al. (2011) considered the need to incentivize completion as a facilitative step in the process of transfer preparedness and subsequent completion. The Lumina Foundation (2012) recommended student incentives, such as tuition discounts, scholarships, and financial aid award alignment, based on student progress toward completion to encourage significant completion gains.

Providing a shared, collaborative, and nationally recognized point of measure has resulted in the introduction of a completion arch. The College Board, a national thought leader and researcher regarding community college achievement, issued a completion arch as a proposed methodology for measuring success and completion in the community college system. The arch, or benchmark, consists of five segments, each representing additional opportunities for measurement and assessment of effectiveness. These benchmarks are (a) enrollment, (b) developmental education placement, (c) progress, (d) transfer and completion, and (e) workforce preparation and employment outcomes (Horn

and Radwin, 2012). Horn and Radwin (2012) further explored the importance of establishing milestones and consistently monitoring progress to measure community college completion accurately, while preparing to implement interventions to prevent students from stopping their studies prior to completion.

The College Board (Horn, 2012) defined community college enrollment as a quantitative representation of students registered in classes. The College Board calculated this figure based on two segments of the community college experience. The first component used the fall, or first academic term, enrollment, while the second segment considered the entire academic year. This measure allowed the community college to evaluate its success by comparing and monitoring increases, decreases, and sustainment of enrollment from term to term and year to year, while tracking major and part-time or full-time status (Horn, 2012). Leu, Radwin, and Horn (2015) explored the measurement and tracking of two-year institutional completion progress by correlating initiatives and outcomes.

Further incentives for encouraging impressive gains in institutional completion and graduation rates have a legislative component, as some elected officials have initiated performance-based funding formulas. As federal, state, and local funding sources experience increased budgetary shortfalls, governments require more accountability on the part of those funded. Tandberg, Hillman, and Barakat (2014) researched the unintended consequences of connecting state institutional funding to community college performance on student completion. Community colleges in many states now compete with one another for performance-based funding, of which completion and graduation rates are a large component. Albright (2009) examined a number of specific state

initiatives targeting completion rates and institutional performance. Based on some of the states with the highest increases, best practices included collaborative practices, shared mission and vision, and flexibility in adapting policies to ensure institutional sustainability. Commitment to completion stood as a key component of the majority of the state programs.

Doyle (2010) conducted research on national graduation rates among higher education institutions, state by state, and findings indicated a correlation between funding levels and graduation and completion rates. Beyond receiving the appropriations, Doyle's (2010) examination reiterated the importance of focusing fiscal resources directly on supplementing student federal aid as a way to ensure completion to graduation. For performance-based funding to funnel the completion cycle, colleges must reinvest its earned dollars in student financial need.

Much debate persists within the field of higher education regarding how to measure college completion fairly and accurately. Individual versus institutional completion success rates present another dimension to this complex puzzle of accountability. Mullin (2012a) acknowledged the complexity of truly assessing and responding to criticisms of completion rates at the community college level. Based on institutional measures, how community colleges compare is relative to the specific metrics used. Mullin (2012a) noted international discrepancies in calculating success and graduation rates, making it difficult to hold equivalent standards. The researcher also cited the differing types of degrees or completion milestones available at community colleges as barriers to accurate completion rates (Mullin, 2012b).

Further, individual cohort cumulative counts may help the institution establish a

point of reference to illustrate its current completion rates. Enacting creative and comprehensive metrics to capture institutional completion and retention advances requires institutional leaders to take a proactive role in identifying and defining the measures (Dowd, 2014). Braxton et al. (2013) indicated that the definition and baselines for measurement are evolving to meet the new national expectations for community colleges. These new and innovative measures can also establish goals for an institution based on the achievements of comparably sized, funded, and administered two-year institutions in the field. The community college completion agenda, then, creates a sense of contextual comparison and relativity for improving and highlighting best practices by opening up a shared systemic dialogue of data driven decision making.

With no shortage of external stakeholders offering advice and solution-based accountability benchmarks, a need exists for surveying campus stakeholders. The Center for Community College Student Engagement ([CCCSE], 2012) administered four separate instruments to glean a representative sampling of perspectives regarding what works in promoting student success and completion. The Survey of Entering Student Engagement, the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, the Community College Faculty Survey of Student Engagement, and the Community College Institutional Survey each allow a unique segment of the campus population to provide feedback regarding each group's perspective on student success and completion (CCCSE, 2012). Upon compilation, these data showed the dire need for a cultural campus shift engaging increased participation and contribution to student completion, ranging from faculty to financial aid to supplemental instruction (CCCSE, 2014).

Compared to global competitors, the nation does not even rank in the top 10 of

industrialized countries in terms of graduation performance. This presents an opportunity to look internationally for additional best practices and comparative analyses. Longden (2004) conducted a dataset analysis study of higher education completion rates in the United Kingdom, analyzing student achievement, funding, organizational structure, and other key contributing factors. Longden's (2004) findings focused on the importance of instituting a new lens to observe and study retention and completion, solving the "departure puzzle" (p. 134). The researcher also emphasized the importance of remaining sensitive to cultural capital on student and institutional levels, marrying a sense of the student and the institution's past with a balance of the skills, knowledge, and understanding necessary for current and future success (Longden, 2004).

### **Institutional Policies and Procedures**

Considered its core mission, the community college is widely recognized as the great equalizer of higher education, due in large part to its policy of open access. This creates a complicated and often conflicting dynamic when pursuing the question of how to improve completion rates under the conditions of open enrollment. Astin's (2005) longitudinal analysis of a large group of identified completion and success predictors revealed a primary institutional factor prohibitive to community college student success. In the data analysis, Astin (2005) noted that selective institutions consistently achieve substantially higher retention and completion rates because of the academic, economic, and social characteristics of their selectively admitted students and, in turn, that student body creates an environment where positive peer pressure creates its own culture of completion.

Because community colleges, by virtue of their most rudimentary mission, have

open door access, they have limited ability to ensure that their incoming students have the internal and external resources to achieve success. Perna and Jones (2013) as well as Scherer and Anson (2014) identified an inverse relationship between the access component of the community college mission and student graduation rates. The policy of open-door enrollment impedes the ability to cultivate a peer group that exemplifies academic, economic, and social characteristics associated with student success. Still, Collett (2013) conducted personnel interviews with several community colleges reporting increases in student completion and acknowledged that promising best practices continue to emerge. These practices emerge from a foundation of empowering institutions to proactively coach and model positive student behaviors as the standard for incoming enrollees, starting with orientation (Collett, 2013).

Doyle (2010) compared selective versus nonselective, or open admissions, higher education institutions during the last 10-year period, finding the highest gains in completion rates during the last decade actually occurred in nonselective institutions. According to Doyle (2010), from the data collected, 9 of the top 10 institutions identified as having the largest gains or increases in completion rates were nonselective institutions. Doyle (2010) further proposed that researchers should consider factors beyond admission standards to assess an institution's likelihood to support student completion and graduation.

McClenney and Mathis (2011) recognized the dichotomy of heightened accountability for student success and completion in light of the open access mission of the community college. The researchers proposed creating and sustaining a model to provide options two-year institutions could utilize to create the ideal environment to

support completion in an open access culture (McClenney & Mathis, 2011). Balancing the inherent limitations faced by substantially limited college resources with a more ambitious expectation of student success measured by graduation rates is not only a challenge, but in many instances, will require a systemic transition in the culture of the campus. Specifically, two-year institutions continue to face challenges in creating and adjusting flexible college-wide practices, policies, and procedures. McClenney and Mathis (2011) suggested a measured approach in which both external and internal stakeholders collaborate to spearhead the change, anchored in the ongoing development of a national repository of a shared knowledge base.

Institutional leadership and prioritization of completion continues to evolve as it encompasses and institutionalizes the completion agenda and its associated challenges. O'Banion (2011) explained that one of the most critical initial steps in working toward completion is identifying a leadership team to take ownership of the commitment to the goal. Such an investment by top-tiered stakeholders will provide a foundation for the institution to begin developing the early stages of a cultural shift. O'Banion (2011) also discussed the merit of making a long-term commitment to the sustainability of this new culture of completion, assuring a diverse level of buy-in and participation that represents the diversity of the organization. With completion formalized as a priority for leadership, top-down decision making and strategic planning connect this institutional area of focus to a culture of completion so learning outcomes across campus become connected to the shared end result of graduation.

Further identifying who comprise this vital leadership component of the national completion initiative is a challenging task because the governance structure of

community college administration varies across the nation. Most commonly, community colleges have a governing board. Often referred to as the Board of Trustees, the colleges assign board members in several different ways. In some states, the board consists of elected officials. In others, the governor appoints local business and educational leaders, as well as community members, to serve in an executive administrative capacity. Regardless of appointment, the mission of a board is traditionally consistent with executive-level decision making, such as setting organizational strategic priorities, appointing the president or CEO, and evaluating his or her performance.

Welsh (2011) conducted a case study examination of the effect of engaging the board of trustees in executing a two-year college completion mandate. The training and orientation process for the board of the trustees must cultivate an understanding of the complexities of community colleges' internal and external completion facilitators and barriers. These key institutional leaders need to be engaged in the national data and mandated benchmark achievement in several ways, including attendance at national conferences and conventions as well as exposure to emerging trends and institutional, local, and state regulations and priorities. Exposure to and immersion in the national completion conversation will afford the board members' leadership and buy-in for appropriating resources, lobbying for funding, and approving programming and policies that are conducive to establishing and maintaining a culture of completion.

System-wide, centralized management is one structure of administration for two-year institutions. Some states provide a state-level administrative leadership model, headed by a chancellor or chief executive officer. The state office often includes several vice chancellors or executives who focus on specific areas of leadership within the

community college system. This group of leaders may lead the legislative initiatives and state board of education programming that localized administrators—campus presidents and their boards—must interpret and institutionalize. As increased completion has taken on national importance, this objective has come to the forefront of strategic prioritization at the state level, with several states introducing new offices and departments with associated resource allocations.

Community colleges have long relied on the cross-campus collaborative nature of their structure. Perhaps no initiative will require or benefit more from the cross-campus collaboration potential to implement systemic change than creating a culture of completion and a shared sense of responsibility in sustaining this charge. *Learning Reconsidered* (Keeling, 2004) is one of many cross-campus, multi-organization publications that promotes the importance of campus-wide collaboration as a way to support and promote student success and completion. The publication recommended weaving the principles of student development and achievement into every aspect of the college experience. In a follow-up publication, *Learning Reconsidered 2* (Keeling, 2006) further discussed the campus-wide approach to investing in student success and completion, calling for innovative partnerships to transfer the campus culture of supporting students from inside the classroom to outside of the classroom.

Despite the efforts of external stakeholders to define institutional practices that they believe will promote completion, an evolving canon of campus best practices is beginning to emerge. While much debate exists regarding external organizations defining community college completion standards and mandating associated achievement, at the grassroots level, many campus communities are beginning and refining a campus-wide

dialogue regarding what completion means at their institution. The national voice of community colleges, the AACC (2012), has continued to encourage institutions to employ mechanisms of organizational accountability and change to engage the entire campus in the completion initiative.

Arredondo and Knight (2005) highlighted the best practices of Chapman University that resulted in significant retention and completion rate boosts during a 4-year and 6-year period. The heart of the program was a detailed, published, and supported document, the Chapman Plan, which clarified the institution's retention and completion plan on multiple levels (Arredondo & Knight, 2005). According to Arredondo and Knight (2005), the Plan implemented the tagline, "personalized education of distinction," to convey that "the institution does all that is possible to support students toward their goal of attaining a degree" (p. 92). Publicly shared information, distributed campus wide, established a culture rich with evidence of the institution's commitment to completion and student success and cemented the process of data-driven decision making.

With increased levels of attention comes a sense of urgency to achieve the ambitious goals for completion and economic recovery that the various national stakeholders have laid before the community college system, creating additional challenges beyond the complexities of increasing student completion rates (Boggs, 2011). As leaders attempt to employ a multitude of programs and policies to achieve the national completion measure, they pull institutional operations on every level in a variety of directions. This pull has created a sense of initiative overload on campuses across the nation, where responsibilities have increased while funding and staffing have remained flat or, in some cases, decreased.

Baker (2012) stressed the importance of placing all programs in context according to scalability and sustainability. As community colleges continue to open their doors to a wide variety of students and an ever-expanding scope of duty and responsibility, their teams must adapt to a burgeoning workload added to their institutional missions. Some experts have cautioned that initiative overload may create a culture of apathy, rather than completion, at the nation's community colleges. Russell (2011) surveyed some of the country's premier completion initiatives for common characteristics and best practices, while cautioning that administrators must be sensitive to "institutional fatigue" (p. 3). Based on expanding student enrollments, Russell (2011) also warned against losing focus on equal access as a primary component of the community college mission, suggesting this long-standing aim of two-year institutions not be sacrificed in light of enhanced completion mandates.

Enrollment status of community college students is primarily part-time, due to work and family commitments. Complete College America and other national and state completion champions are examining the relationship between enrollment status and college completion. Various researchers have suggested the implementation of a full-time enrollment requirement, ranging from 12 credit hours to as many as 15 per semester or term, to cultivate a campus culture of completion as a proven method of practice to increase graduation success. Complete College America specifically advises implementing policies and procedures that support full-time enrollment of students. The data indicates that students who enroll in at least 15 credit hours of course work per term achieve higher levels of persistence and, ultimately, college completion (Complete College America, 2012).

Because of this correlation between full-time course enrollment and completion success, many community colleges are exploring what options they have at the institutional local level. Reed (2012) cautioned that two-year leaders have to employ institutional measures some campus stakeholders may consider detrimental in order to best support completion. Despite acknowledging that a high percentage of students are working adults with family responsibilities and would experience difficulty committing to full-time enrollment, many decision makers within two-year institutions are open to exploring the issue of enrollment status further. A small community college in a highly affluent community in Virginia is striving to overcome one of the state's lowest graduation rates. It has begun executive-level discussions regarding potential policy implementation that mandates full-time enrollment for all students. Those who are unable to accommodate this type of schedule could prove hardship exclusions and file a waiver with the dean of students. Executive-level administrators acknowledged that this measure may appear extreme and contrary to the accessibility and flexibility of the community college experience, but the urgency of the completion agenda has led them to result in serious consideration of this controversial measure (Dowd, 2014).

Still others point to data that suggest community college students, primarily those managing complex personal, family, and work responsibilities outside of the classroom, are more likely to experience academic challenges and completion barriers by enrolling full-time (Phillips & Horowitz, 2013). Many students elect to register for full-time course schedules to maximize their federal grant and financial aid award, in an attempt to provide additional financial supplements for their on- and off-campus living expenses. While this practice may not be conducive to ideal time management and study

opportunities, many two-year campuses with open advising models allow students complete autonomy in determining full-time or part-time enrollment status.

A number of on-campus personnel, particularly academic advisors, can enrich the campus experience of community college students. Tinto (2012b) recommended academic advisors could and should play a critical role in student development. In particular, he suggested they focus on (a) developing college competency, both inside and outside of the classroom; (b) encouraging student autonomy; and (c) creating an environment promoting the student's individual ownership and accountability for the direction of his or her personal and professional life. Martinez and Fugate (2013) explained the role of advising as critical to supporting student completion. Professional advising services exist on most community-college campuses, in models ranging from centralized to decentralized (Drake, Jordan & Miller, 2013). Typically requiring a minimum of a bachelor's degree, most advisors start this often entry-level position with little or no higher education or student development experience or theoretical academic background. Advisor training programs also vary, with some community colleges relying on a tiered system that provides generalized advisors for initial student advisement followed by faculty advisement in the major field of study.

Beyond two-year advisement program structure and training, the selected model and format of advisement also affects student persistence and success. Advising models vary and size of enrollment and organizational resource allocation often influence the models. Prescriptive advisement refers to the most elementary advisor-advisee interaction. The advisor provides dictatorial information as well as some minimal interpretation of course degree requirements and campus policies and procedures. Little

discovery and engagement takes place between the advisor and advisee to reveal deeper meaning behind student goals and aspirations, so little action planning takes place.

The developmental advisement model aspires to cultivate a closer, more comprehensive advisor-advisee relationship, built on depth of knowledge, inquiry and probing, and interpersonal communication. Developmental academic advising explores multiple dimensions of the student's life experience, ranging from personal, social, and professional, to set academic goals and create a plan of action that identifies the on-campus resources and external agencies from which the student may benefit (Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, 1984). This model acknowledges that for the student to experience the highest level of success inside the classroom, college advising support services must address the whole student. The National Academic Advisement Association defined developmental advising as the approach of integrating the pedagogy of teaching and learning into advising practices (Thurmond & Nutt, 2009).

Intrusive advisement and case-management advisement models merge a social services approach to client management with academic advising principles. Based on the work of Glennan in the 1970's, the practice requires advisors to take a leadership role in coaching, mentoring, and supporting the student throughout the semester (Smart, 2011). An intrusive advising model incorporates awareness, access, and instruction regarding how to use college support services, such as tutoring, financial aid, and academic support labs. Because this model requires a large amount of advisee management and engagement, some community colleges have also applied small-group advising sessions to create meta-community and cohort peer support.

One of the primary completion concerns related to advisement beyond the

theoretical and structural components considers the purpose and intent of the student's participation and use of advising services. Based on previous exposure to advising, students are often ill-prepared to transition to the new model of self-advocacy and student-initiated engagement with advisors (Goldrick-Rab, 2007). Variances exist between compulsory and voluntary advising programs. Several rationales support the mandatory advisement models used at some two-year institutions, which include policies that require any incoming first-time college student to utilize advising for at least the first term. Often, students from high-risk populations, such as student athletes, academic probationary or provisional students, non-native English speakers, veterans, and students testing into one or more remedial courses, must meet with an assigned advisor for a set number of sessions throughout the term (Samuel & Scott, 2014). Being assigned a particular advisor encourages the student to build and cultivate a relationship of trust and collaboration based on a common goal of success guided by identified goal setting and educational planning.

While community colleges offer a wide array of support services, from learning labs to free tutoring, challenges exist in communicating these offerings to students and in connecting students to the resources at critical points in their performance (Troy, 2013). Many two-year institutions have introduced mandatory orientation programs for new students and students attending college for the first time. Other programs include early alert and academic intervention systems implemented campus wide to create accountability and opportunities to connect with academically vulnerable students as early as possible in the process (Ellis-O'Quinn, 2012). Shared responsibility in reporting and responding to problems and connecting students with accessible intervention options

provides an environment with more safeguards to prevent student drop out and withdrawals.

Funding and administrative policies often result in the use of adjunct or part-time faculty to assist in classroom coverage on campuses throughout the country (Zarkesh & Beas, 2004). As two-year institutions seek to reduce operational costs, institutional leaders often view part-time employees as a cost-saving measure. In light of faculty unions and restrictions on full-time faculty course workloads, some institutions supplement the instructional schedule with part-time, adjunct faculty. These part-time employees receive low remuneration and require less training and professional development outside of the classroom, making it difficult to cultivate a high level of institutional commitment to academic excellence, organizational mission and strategic priorities, and student success. Umbach (2007) explained that while adjuncts focus more directly on their teaching priorities, this often comes in conjunction with a decreased accessibility to students, no office hours, and a notable disconnect with the college's environment.

Jaeger and Eagan (2009) conducted a study to evaluate the relationship between two-year degree completion and participation in courses taught by a part-time faculty member. The researchers monitored enrollment, course completion, and graduation for a sample of 1.5 million students during a 5-year period (Jaeger & Eagan, 2009). Based on the average number of courses taught by adjunct faculty that each student in the sample took, the results indicated a 5% decrease in likelihood of associate degree acquisition (Jaeger & Eagan, 2009). The researchers suggested cultivating a culture of inclusion, shared values, and dedicating time to training and professional development as initiatives

to buffer this negative effect on completion. Mesa (2012) further explored the role of instructor expectations of student performance, acknowledging part-time faculty as less prepared to accurately assess and improve student achievement.

Classroom attendance and participation also merit discussion as important issues in the analysis of community college completion barriers and facilitators. Community college faculty have historically expressed the critical need for students to prioritize classroom attendance and actively engage in the academic discourse created during instructional delivery. The faculty note that every class meeting is vital to community college student success and, ultimately, completion. Hale and Bray (2011) conducted a study at three regional, rural community colleges in Mississippi to address a deficiency in the literature regarding implicit relationships between time of registration and college retention, success, and completion. The researchers quantitatively studied four years of data related to student demographic characteristics and time of registration, categorized as early registration, registration, or late registration (Hale & Bray, 2011). The traditional assumption has been that community college students who register late are less prepared for academic success because of their last minute decision making and preparations.

Hale and Bray (2011) identified a significant disparity in grade and academic achievement between students who registered during the early and regular registration periods versus those who registered late. Because academic achievement is a critical component of community college completion and these students garnered lower grades and success rates, the researchers recommended that campuses focused on completion should eliminate late registration (Hale & Bray, 2011). Initial resistance to such institutional policy measures may be rooted in concerns about lowering enrollment rates

during critical budgetary times, but the researchers believed, in agreement with the community college completion agenda, quality of experience and student success are simply more critical than numbers (Hale & Bray, 2011).

The open access admission policy of community colleges is especially welcoming to the first-generation college student population. College readiness goes beyond just academic preparedness to include a student's awareness of college expectations (Duncheon & Tierney, 2015). A first-generation college student is a student whose parents did not enroll in any type of higher education. Minority students account for a large percentage of first-generation enrollees (Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2008). These students often do not have parental or external support, nor experience or awareness of how to navigate the college culture, environment, or policies and procedures. Webb (2011) studied the effects of institutional interaction and engagement on students attending rural community colleges in Alabama. Based on an academic advising program piloted by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, recent college graduates were partnered with current students to mentor and coach them through the completion and transfer process (Webb, 2011). In interviews, the mentors identified a lack of contextual knowledge and background about navigating the community college as a major barrier to completion and subsequent transfer for their assigned advisees. Without parental and environmental support or an understanding of the importance of community college success, the students had to independently align themselves with campus resources and personnel and establish their own unique pathways to completion (Webb, 2011).

Student economic and ethnic demographics also contribute to graduation rates at

two-year institutions. Since community colleges serve students who are often from disadvantaged geographic regions, these institutions enroll a high proportion of lower income and minority students. Bettinger (2012) conducted a comparative examination of graduation rates between the poorest 40% of students enrolled and the highest 20% in terms of socioeconomic standing. This assessment revealed a 30 percentage point variance in success rates (Bettinger, 2012). Students receive most financial aid awards in full at the beginning of the term, rather than in a staggered method, with little or no accountability measures beyond initial attendance reporting (Dowd & Coury, 2006). Additional discussion regarding the availability of financial assistance, access to and timing of awards, and accountability among financial aid recipients may offer other ways to create more pathways toward completion.

The financial literacy level of community college enrollees also impedes their ability to successfully navigate their personal and academic financial responsibilities. Though community colleges provide a comparatively more affordable pathway to higher education, financial barriers still affect success, progression, and completion for its students. Jaeger and Egan (2012) acknowledged that recipients of need-based financial assistance had a 3% decrease in graduation and completion as opposed to their peers who did not. Eitel and Martin (2009) conducted a review of the behaviors of first-generation female college students, evaluating their mastery of “financial decisions and resource management; borrowing and debt; and the need for financial literacy” (p. 617). The researchers surveyed more than 200 students to assess their perceptions of the influence of financial awareness and management on the successful completion of their college credential.

The results of this study indicated a high level of reliance on anticipated financial support for continuing their education and for supplementing their personal and family expenses. Respondents also revealed a high level of anxiety about financial concerns, decisions, and obligations and expressed that their completion was contingent upon continued subsidies for tuition, fees, and books as well as costs associated with housing and transportation. Bettinger (2012) further emphasized the necessity of explaining the financial package to the recipient, as many had little to no experience with grants or loans and were often overwhelmed at the complexities of pre- and post-financial aid counseling. Additionally, when students entered college it was often the first time they encountered the intricacies of federal, state, and college loan paperwork and processes.

The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation has devoted a significant amount of its research and resources to understanding the issues related to completion and transfer for low-income students. The Foundation sponsors some of the largest undergraduate scholarships in the nation, including an \$80,000 community college transfer scholarship, and it has also published several white papers regarding studies related to college completion and the success of low-income, high-achieving college students. Wyner, Bridgeland, and DiIulio (2009) published findings related to the barriers toward completion faced by low-income families at community colleges throughout the country. Compared to their higher income peers, low-income students have a decrease of approximately 18% completion at a two-year community college (Wyner et al., 2009). Community colleges have a large task to address the various gaps and deficiencies these learners have been struggling with throughout their educational journeys, which are often amplified at the higher education level.

To further incentivize completion by under-resourced community college students, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation offers the largest community college undergraduate transfer scholarship in the nation, to encourage community college achievement and completion as well as attainment of the baccalaureate degree. The scholarship program implemented a community college transfer initiative. That initiative built relationships with identified selective-admissions colleges and universities and addressed deficiencies in the areas of dedicated resources at the four-year colleges to support two-year community college graduates as they transitioned to their baccalaureate degree studies. The initiative also incorporates community building and a deep and involved mentoring program to provide a surrogate support network to nurture and champion the student to completion outside of the classroom.

Because of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation's substantial investment in developing partnerships to encourage community college completion, Burack and Lansperry (2014) assessed the success of the program for the two-year institution, the student, and the four-year college. The results of this study suggested that implementing additional resources focused on student success benefited the community college student as well as the four-year institution (Burack & Lansperry, 2014). The additional summary conclusions of their study, including nearly 1,000 community college students, revealed that collaborative support and access to resources inspired students to expand their goals and aspirations, pushing them further than they ever would have anticipated (Burack & Lansperry, 2014).

Becker, Krodel, and Tucker (2009) conducted research on the various socioeconomic factors impeding college success and recommended organizational

policies and procedures that can help students overcome those barriers. Becker et al. (2009) defined seven risk factors that create significant barriers to student persistence and completion: (a) part-time attendance, (b) working full-time, (c) having children, (d) being a single parent, (e) being financially independent, (f) delaying enrollment into college, and (g) having a general education diploma. Often, first-generation students have little external, off-campus support within their home and work environments to rely on for guiding their academic pathway. This can cause basic college operational procedures, such as financial aid verification, payment policies, and repayment for failure to make adequate progress in coursework, to derail students' ability to succeed before they even get to the classroom.

In light of the need to maintain full-time employment while enrolled in part-time or often full-time course schedules, Berkner, He, Mason, and Wheelless (2007) recognized the majority of working students were more likely to identify themselves as employees first and students second. Full-time employment, defined as a minimum of 40 hours per week, decreases the amount of time a student can dedicate to study and academic preparation. The demands of the academic class schedule further intensify this situation as students must spend many hours on schoolwork, for even just part-time enrollment. To combat these and other mitigating factors related to economic status and, in many instances, poverty, Becker et al. (2009) recommended that institutions present the college classroom experience in ways that are reflective of adult learning styles, sensitive to knowledge gaps, and rooted in student engagement on campus. The researchers also considered the importance of building strong relationships between the academic experience and campus support resources available for enrolled students in

ways that increased access and ease of use (Berkner et al., 2007).

Through examination of various case studies involving under-resourced learners and those student populations categorized as generational poverty, researchers have proposed several new strategies for supporting these students in succeeding at community colleges. Payne (2014) began by first identifying the factors that create poverty conditions and generational economic cycles that impair upward socioeconomic mobility, including success in college. Payne (2014) suggested the primary causes of systemic poverty relate to the creation of a culture of poverty that perpetuates the behaviors and conditions from which it stems. Payne (2014) proposed to focus on eight key conditions of success: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships, role models, and knowledge of hidden rules (Payne, 2014). From the results, Payne (2014) advised educators at the two-year college level to empower students in poverty and other lower socioeconomic levels by focusing on four of the previously listed barriers to their success, specifically mental health, support systems, relationships, and role models.

However, many of the other listed conditions associated with poverty that Payne (2014) identified, such as ignorance of hidden rules regarding the navigation of community college procedures and policies, present major barriers to student completion and merit further exploration, study, and change. For example, many two-year institutions, in an attempt to save paper and efficiencies, communicate important college deadlines and messages via email. The delivery of these often time-sensitive, action-required missives can be delayed, if not altogether undelivered, based on a variety of issues students in poverty face. Such issues include housing trouble, homelessness,

limited access to computers and the Internet, difficulty paying utility bills which impairs telecommunication opportunities, and excessive post-classroom work hours to simply sustain their personal or family's cost of living. Krodel, Ingle, and Jakes (2011) emphasized the importance of the two-year institution assuming a leadership role in creating pathways for under-resourced students to overcome barriers.

Affordability of tuition and open access for enrollment often attract students in lower socioeconomic statuses battling various financial barriers, resulting in a student population often eligible for financial aid. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that nationally, as of 2011–2012, nearly 80% of all students attending two-year institutions received financial aid in both grants and repayable aid formats (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Students must utilize the assistance received to supplement tuition, textbooks, study materials, lab fees, practicums, parking, and many other college-related costs. In some instances where refunds are available, if the student's financial aid award is in excess of their institutional financial obligations, the student can utilize the additional funds to assist with living expenses to facilitate his or her ability to focus on classwork.

Stark deficiencies in community college students' academic readiness also pose a serious impediment to institutional completion rates. Pruett and Absher (2015) examined the wide array of factors developmental education students faced as barriers toward completion of their degrees. Community colleges assess incoming students through placement exams. The tests determine their college readiness and readiness to begin the course degree requirements at the college level. Long (2012) categorized those students placed in remedial coursework into two unique groups, including underprepared high

school graduates entering higher education at a traditional age and adult students electing to begin or return to a higher education pathway after a period of time has elapsed from their high school graduation or GED attainment. Those whose test scores categorize them as not college ready must complete a sequence of remedial courses designed to prepare students for college-level academic engagement and success. This assessment process can result in community college students taking as many as five to eight developmental courses in the areas of mathematics, reading, and writing, creating a longer pathway to completion.

Beyond the quantitative barrier of increasing the number of required courses for completion, academic remediation has additional impact on student success. Complete College America (2012) addressed potential barriers to completion created by remediation and developmental coursework. The organization proposed a four-tiered correlation between remedial course placement and non-completion by community college students (Complete College America, 2012, pp. 2–3):

1. Too many students start in remediation.
2. Remediation doesn't work.
3. Too few complete gateway courses.
4. Too few graduate.

Various studies of community college remedial students focused on how many students actually complete the required developmental course sequence, advance, successfully complete the general education course requirements, and graduate. The rates decrease continually and dramatically for students who face multiple courses of required remediation. Statistics have revealed that the more required developmental coursework a

student must complete, the less likely he or she is to graduate (Long, 2012). Spurred by this statistical relationship and the continuous increase in the number of underprepared incoming community college students, other researchers have proposed further research to evaluate the effectiveness of what society often perceives as a failing system (Higbee, Arendale, & Lundell, 2005). Higbee et al. (2005) also suggested integrating change and innovation into the curricular models of developmental education. Crisp and Delgado (2014) identified the impact of developmental education on student community college graduation and later attainment of the baccalaureate degree.

Bennett and Wilezol (2013) suggested the issue goes further, often dating back to K–12 academic programming failures and curricular deficiencies that advance students who are not preparing adequately for college-level work. The task of addressing years of academic deficiencies in the period of a term, typically 15 weeks, is daunting for even the most seasoned professor, particularly in the area of math, where community colleges see the highest rate of remediation required (Bennett & Wilezol, 2013). In their exploration of the value and return on investment in higher education, Bennett and Wilezol (2013) identified low successful completion and graduation rates of students enrolled in developmental education courses, with less than 10% of those students actually graduating from a two-year institution in three years or less.

Change and review of state-mandated remediation, further initiated by the cost of course instruction and financial aid restrictions, continues in this area, with particular emphasis on the positive and negative effects on completion and student success (Hu et al., 2014). Because state and local governments primarily fund public two-year institutions, scrutiny of the programs' success has increased as availability has decreased.

Increased accountability and competitiveness for fewer support resources have encouraged many community college systems to rely on innovation and collaboration to improve student success and graduation. Texas, Florida, Tennessee, and Utah have already limited funding for these programs as well as state subsidies for the associated tuition and instructional costs (Long, 2012).

Florida estimated its annual costs of remedial programming at nearly 120 million dollars, with more than half of the costs absorbed by the state (Office for Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability, 2006). Per the state's review of its community college students enrolled in developmental coursework, the Office for Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability (2007) released the following summary:

Over half of all students entering Florida's public postsecondary institutions require remediation in mathematics, reading, and/or writing. Ninety-four percent of students who need remediation attend community colleges. These students are required to complete college preparatory programs before enrolling in college-level classes. However, only 52% of these students subsequently complete their college preparatory programs, taking an average of two years to do so. Those students who fail to complete college preparation within two years are very likely to discontinue their education rather than pursue other alternatives such as career/workforce training. Students who receive low scores on college readiness tests or who require remediation in multiple areas are particularly at risk of dropping out. (p.100)

The state's findings created a sense of urgency, propelling legislative and governing bodies at the local and state levels to explore measures that would result in dramatic, sweeping, and swift change in an attempt to improve the completion rates quickly.

Prompted by additional study, including a report by the Community College Research Center estimating nearly a quarter of all students placed in developmental coursework could succeed in a college-level course, Florida enacted state legislation affording students more autonomy and alternatives to the previously required

developmental course sequence (Bailey & Cho, 2010). Because of Senate Bill 1720, enacted into law in 2013, students testing into remedial courses in the state received additional options to accelerate and satisfy remediation requirements. These options focused on dramatically decreasing both the time and the cost of remedial education, allowing the student to exercise his or her own academic ambition to overcome the completion barrier. Some researchers, including an exploratory study funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to investigate methodology for implementing the unfunded mandate, identified a wide range of changes to developmental programming statewide (Hu et al., 2014). Such changes included co-requisite integration, compression of course content delivery, modulation, contextualization, enhanced advisor training and accessibility, and connectivity of the courses to related student support resources, including learning labs, tutoring, and libraries (Hu et al., 2014). Hodara and Jaggars (2014) examined the impact of accelerating developmental education for community college students, determining the potential for increasing the number of students who go on to complete their program of study.

Additional study of student success rates suggests a strong relationship between the level of student engagement and the likelihood of student completion at the two-year institution. Martin, Galentino, and Townsend (2014) promoted engagement as a method for increasing student motivation and self-empowerment, furthering students' likelihood to complete. Since many students attending community colleges are commuters and must balance a number of external responsibilities, it is challenging for two-year institutions to provide engagement opportunities and activities. Student clubs typically require meeting times, which result in nontraditional students spending more time on campus and less

time at home or at work, decreasing their already limited study time.

While students serve as the central area of focus, study, and research in completion queries, researchers must not only treat them as subjects for discussion but also invite them to participate as leaders and agents of change with stakeholder vision and insights. McClenney and Arnsperger (2012) suggested cultivating a culture of completion on campus required an invitation for students to become engaged and active participants in their academic experience. The researchers personally conducted listening tours, recommending that institutional stakeholders mirror the opportunity on their respective campuses to connect the student experience with administrative policy and organizational procedure (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012). By validating and documenting the student experience, community colleges can create a culture that provides the most effective completion environment. Their focus groups, interviews, and interactions with community college students across the country indicate a direct relationship between student observations of on campus support and student success (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012). This relationship provides strong validation for the role of students as completion stakeholders who take an active role in changing and affecting the culture at the two-year institutions they attend.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher of this study addressed the problem of how the absence of a campus-wide culture of completion at the nation's two-year degree-granting institutions affects institutional completion rates. Based on Tinto's continued work beginning in the 1970's to the present in the area of retention, institutional commitment is widely recognized as an essential foundation for supporting student persistence and completion.

This study's research questions addressed the level of perceived influence the campus culture and programs, policies, and procedures have on community colleges that are commitment makers. The central research question of this study was:

How do community college stakeholders perceive, identify, and measure the effect of institutional participation by their community college after formally participating in a community college completion pledge ceremony?

The following were the subquestions for this study:

1. What perceptual evidence of a culture of completion, specifically in the areas of instruction, institutional priorities and policies, and individual student support and behaviors, are identifiable by the interviewees on the campus in various levels of the organization?

2. How did initiatives employed at the institution, post-C4 commitment ceremony, contribute to the creation of a culture of completion, from the stakeholder's perspective? The respondents are encouraged to cite personal anecdotes, new programs and initiatives, and the perceived effect on student persistence and completion.

3. What changes in the campus culture were observed from the respondents' perspective that reflect the introduction of a culture of completion?

4. Were any elements of the 4-Cap Change model and/or Kotter's model of leading change evident on the campus or within the system before, during, or after the C4 event?

## **Summary**

Chapter 2 included a thorough examination of historical and current research and study related to community college completion barriers, initiatives, and best practices.

The literature revealed several areas of opportunity for further exploration and discussion. Community college completion has historically been a challenge for two-year institutions, as community college students face a variety of socioeconomic barriers to completion. Further, institutional policies and procedures rooted in the traditional community college mission engender confusion regarding how to appropriately document and assess student completion rates in an accurate and equitable manner. The researcher introduced a theoretical framework using models of institutional change as a basis for placing the challenge of adapting campus culture to increase community college completion at all levels of the institution's leadership. Chapter 3 details the methodology for further exploring the research questions related to community college completion.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

As community colleges struggle to shift institutional focus and create a cultural shift in organizational priorities to significantly increase community college graduation rates, the need to provide a repository of best practices and shared narrative on the process has emerged. Identifying the challenges community colleges face and the progress they make in overcoming those challenges to establish and sustain a culture of completion on the campuses provides a framework for community college systems to evolve and adapt. Such growth and discovery will empower community college leaders to address the conceptual gaps between a theoretical focus on supporting student completion and the application of the change leadership theory to work practices and policies that can promote student success.

This qualitative phenomenological study was composed of 18 interviews with key stakeholders who participated in a Community College Completion Corps commitment event that took place at their institution between the years of 2010 and 2015. The researcher compiled and reviewed the interviews to promote shared inquiry and dialogue regarding the issues and initiatives supporting community college student completion. The primary investigator conducted each interview with the campus stakeholders and created transcripts. After the interviews were completed, the primary investigator reviewed the transcriptions for spelling and typos. The researcher then sent the transcriptions to each participant for review, edits and revisions, and approval.

The researcher collected each interviewee's thoughts, observations, and personal reflections regarding organizational events, programs, and policies to identify student success facilitators and completion barriers. By using language, critical inquiry, and

shared verbal exchange through the in-depth interview format, the researcher developed new generative understandings regarding the concepts and contributed explanatory evidence to the field (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The format of the qualitative interviews helped solicit the lived experience and personal reflections, which contributed richly to the field of barriers and facilitators to community college completion. Thus, a qualitative research methodology was the most appropriate design to address the study's research questions.

The researcher conducted an analysis of the responses to provide current and future stakeholders and agents of educational achievement and change with a platform to formally institutionalize and sustain a culture of completion. The community college mission encompasses a broad range of services. As a result, researchers need to provide a wide array of options for supporting organizational and cultural changes that promote student success and completion.

### **Site Selection and Sampling of Participants**

The target population for this research consisted of identified stakeholders in specific roles at two-year institutions who registered as hosting a C4 event on their campus between 2010 and 2015. Five unique sites, each an accredited two-year institution within a different state, were utilized for the purpose of this study. The researcher obtained permission to conduct the study at each site by following the established institutional or system protocol to conduct research on employees of the selected institutions. This included sending permission to conduct study letters, obtaining signed approval from approved campus supervisors, and maintaining copies of this correspondence for three years from the conclusion of the study.

One institution selected is a member of the New Jersey Council of County Colleges and a participant in the NJC4 program, New Jersey's system-wide adaptation of the Community College Completion Corps. The researcher selected this site for several reasons. First, the New Jersey Community College system was the nation's first statewide community college system to participate in a system-wide completion event. The first year the colleges participated was 2013. Following the success of this event, the council created an advisory board and enhanced the programming to include additional completion support resources. Second, the system has established a centralized office for student success, whose primary mission is to pursue the state's goals for increasing community college graduation rates. This structure and supporting allocation of dedicated resources provides a framework to facilitate the achievement of substantive gains in student success measures such as persistence and completion.

An additional justification for selecting the proposed sites and inviting associated participants related to the nature of the interviewer-interviewee relationship. In qualitative research, access to research subjects is critical for study completion and validity. The researcher of this study had designated points of access to stakeholders to conduct meaningful interviews. This established rapport allowed the researcher to form and maintain a relationship of trust with interviewees, creating an environment more conducive to the disclosure of significant insights.

Based on these conditions, a study of C4 participation at community colleges in New Jersey, Texas, Oklahoma, Alabama, and Kansas provided the potential to illuminate best practices. The researcher also conducted an interview with the key executive who heralded the C4 program as the executive director of Phi Theta Kappa, headquartered in

Mississippi. In addition to highlighting systemic challenges and barriers to student success, this study examined the practices these institutions implemented, providing a framework for understanding the strategic changes and organizational transitions necessary to institutionalize a culture of completion. This qualitative study on the perceptions of key stakeholders within these two-year institutions that participated in a Community College Completion Corps event created a forum for vested parties to articulate their observations and interpret the influence of these collective efforts in realizing a culture of completion.

The researcher selected interview groups from public two-year institutions and system-wide offices that conducted Commit to Complete signing events on their campuses between 2010 and 2015. Many of the selected two-year sites exist within statewide systems where completion is a stated priority. New Jersey's Council of County Colleges, the statewide governing agency that provides the policy and executive management of the state's 19 two-year institutions, has prioritized completion. Likewise, the Texas, Alabama, Kansas, and Oklahoma governance offices have also elected to study and improve community college graduation rates. The national leadership of Phi Theta Kappa in Mississippi provided insight into an external support agency's engagement, promotion, and prioritization of completion programming. Inquiry and engagement with individuals across this spectrum of colleges created a diverse and summative portrait of the perceived effects of the completion ceremony.

The sample group consisted of representatives from two primary stakeholder categories. A stratified sampling technique helped to create the list of prospective interviewees. Category 1 respondents, identified as change leaders, consisted of state-

level administrators and college institutional administrators. Category 2 interview respondents, identified as change agents, included faculty- and student-services personnel. These two categories of respondents each offered unique perspectives on the campus experience of the initial completion initiative and associated post-ceremony programs and plans. Each stakeholder represented a critical component of the community college environment and its corresponding culture, who are all essential to promoting community college completion and helping colleges attain, as well as sustain, a culture of completion. The study included an equal number of interviews with each participant group, with nine change agents and nine change leaders. The study concluded with 18 interviews.

The researcher extended invitations to participate in the study to community college faculty, staff, and administrators employed at eligible sites. The selected colleges had registered their completion events on the official C4 site within the identified time span of 2010 to 2015 and their governing administrators provided approval for participation. The researcher distributed a letter via mail and electronic correspondence inviting qualified site participants to participate in the study. Once an individual who met the specified qualifications communicated his or her willingness to serve as an interviewee, that individual received a consent form to participate in the study. These forms are located in a secured filing cabinet. The researcher will hold and secure these documents for a period of three years.

This sampling process provided legitimacy to the research and assured the participants had attended an event that met the qualifications of being associated with the C4 movement. The sampling criteria thus created a pool of respondents identified as

knowledgeable informants. By interviewing knowledgeable informants, the researcher was able to create an environment where the questions were responsive, flexible, and contextually relevant to the interviewees' professional experience. The primary investigator conducted all of the interviews and employed active listening techniques, resulting in generative discussions and new, deeper reflections and responses. The researcher used the online web meeting method, Adobe Connect, to audiotape and record all interviews.

Each completion ceremony requires prior planning on numerous levels of the campus, from the president to the student-services personnel, so representation in the C4 event reflects the institution's multiple constituencies. For this reason, interviews included individuals from each identified stakeholder group on campus or in the system that participated in the events and related planning. This form of stratified sampling afforded a holistic understanding by including a range of viewpoints and experiences. Through language and inquiry, supported by a range of probing questions, participants collectively created an extensive body of narrative from which other stakeholders and change agents can find relevance for future application, institutional adaptation, and cultural integration.

### **Procedures**

Qualitative studies provide researchers and scholars the opportunity to explore perceptions, motivations, and actions. The interview as a research tool is most successful when categorized into a dynamic approach, with opportunities for the interviewee to share stories, experiences, and viewpoints (Chenail, 2011). For the purposes of this study, the researcher incorporated several procedures to accurately capture and analyze

respondent feedback regarding their lived experience as comprehensively as possible. The subsequent analysis identified the strengths and gaps in addressing community college completion success regarding the C4 commitment ceremony. Identifying these deficiencies and strengths allows for further advancements of an organizational culture that promotes student success. Qualitative methodology served as the guiding format for this study.

The researcher submitted the study protocol and its accompanying research instrument to the IRB for review and approval. Upon approval, interviews ensued in several face-to-face formats, based on participant availability and scheduling. Some interviews occurred via Internet conferencing, while others took place in person. All interview participants were provided with a confidentiality statement regarding their answers, a summary of the purpose of this dissertation study, and instructions about the interview process and questions. The researcher recorded and transcribed all interviews. Interview session duration ranged from 45 minutes to an hour, based on the length and depth of the interviewee's responses. Once the researcher transcribed the taped interviews, the interviewees had the opportunity to validate or modify what had been recorded in the interview through member checking. The researcher completed all interviews during the period of July 2015 through August 2015.

### **Instruments**

Because this study involved qualitative collection of information and thorough interviews of identified stakeholders on each participating campus, the primary instrument used for shared inquiry and discussion was the verbal interview and its associated questions. The interview questions were open-ended and provided specific

connectivity to three key areas. Each question contained subquestions to allow for further development and disclosure pertaining to specific topics. The researcher designed the questions to maximize interviewee insights and observations and to assess what level of change leadership, if any, respondents identified relating to the institution's C4 process.

After pretesting the interview questions with a three-member panel of experts, the researcher incorporated subsequent revisions and suggestions. The panel of experts represented a student services staff member, a faculty member, and a community college administrator. This panel of experts assisted in validating the instrument, as no current instrument existed for this study's area of focus. The study followed a modified Delphi approach. Each expert reviewed the questions in writing and provided feedback to the researcher, who adjusted the questions accordingly. After integrating their comments, the researcher sent out a revised instrument for additional review and feedback.

Upon receipt of additional feedback, the researcher conducted two sample interviews with randomly selected participants. This practice exercise elicited feedback relating to how the interviewees interpreted the questions and determined the level of response the questions elicited. After piloting the instrument, the panel of experts reviewed the recorded and transcribed responses to assess the effectiveness of the questions and results. The researcher adjusted the questions according to this feedback to enhance the study's efficacy in soliciting meaningful responses from the respondents.

Finally, to effectively communicating the inquiry of each question included in the instrument, the researcher employed a high level of attentiveness, active listening, detailed transcription, and dynamic responsiveness. The interviewer had engaged with most of the respondents professionally and had an established rapport, which created a

high level of trust and professionalism and invited increased candor in interviewee responses.

The study included a topic guide outlining key concepts and anticipated themes to help the interviewer establish a responsive interaction with the interviewee and elicit the most productive responses. Questions related to the study's specific focus areas. The first set of questions investigated the respondents' perceptions of C4 events and the current culture of completion on campus. Second, the questions addressed organizational practices and strategies to support student success and completion. The final cluster of questions focused on the application of key concepts within the theory of change leadership and associated institutional or system-wide change.

Appendix A presents the approved and final interview questions. Each interview maintained a level of flexibility to allow the interviewer to be engaged and the interviewee to be interactive. As a result, the researcher had the opportunity to probe more deeply for explanatory evidence (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003).

### **Data Collection and Analysis Techniques**

The researcher recorded and transcribed verbatim each individual interview. Prior to analysis, the answers to each question were organized by respondent, reviewed by a co-rater, and sent to the interviewee for review, revision, and approval. Creswell (2009) detailed an interview protocol to ensure study consistency and allow for development of structure and flow. The researcher identified and organized all interviews by date, time, and site selection. Questions and subquestions allowed additional probes to provide deeper insights and respondent observations.

The validity of data analysis for this study relied heavily on the accuracy and

cohesiveness of the interview transcription, and the use of a co-rater and member check further strengthened it. The researcher analyzed the interviews to identify key words and themes drawn from theory, previous empirical literature, and contextual factors.

Contextual factors included the extent to which a culture of completion was understood and/or already existed at an institution; interpretations of the completion pledge; and completion barriers and facilitators. The researcher analyzed the transcripts in full using multiple passes, each oriented to detect a specific set of themes associated with a sensitizing concept. A separate pass through the transcripts helped to identify unanticipated emergent themes from the list of sensitizing concepts. Therefore, the analysis of the transcripts involved a combination of deductive and inductive approaches.

Because this investigation followed a stratified sampling technique, the interviewer delineated points of divergence and convergence among sampling strata. The researcher sought to identify themes exhibited throughout the full sample of respondents. The researcher categorized themes as primary, recurring, and secondary. Simultaneously, the nature and sources of variances in perceptions can result in divergent themes to explore. The reported findings used respondent quotes to illustrate and support patterns in barriers and facilitators to community college completion.

### **Data Validity**

The primary investigator transcribed each interview within a period of five working days. A co-rater reviewed the interview transcriptions. The respondents then received the interview transcriptions for review, revision, additional clarification, and approval. This member check step and the co-rater review provided the study data collection with a high level of proven and tested validity. Thus, the data analysis began

with data primed for accuracy and integrity.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To uphold the principles of ethics in conducting these research interviews, the researcher maintained and protected the anonymity of the respondents while also creating and identifying themes and topical codes in analyzing the answers provided. The researcher compared and reviewed all responses to achieve holistic data that would not individualize, but rather generalize, to provide viable completion strategies and techniques for the field in a more extensive capacity. Organizing the data collected and conducting a comprehensive, holistic review for coding and thematic trends fostered a spirit of community and collaboration, rather than emphasizing individualized and limited observations.

### **Limitations**

The primary limitation of this study was the size and nonrandom nature of the sample of respondents. These constraints significantly impeded the researcher's efforts to generalize beyond the patterns observed in the data. Despite this limitation, qualitative interview samples generally have a high degree of internal validity and provide a forum for respondents to share rich insights, genuine observations, and meaningful experiences. Additionally, the use of four to five participating sites in different states allowed for broader comparisons, which could prove more beneficial in creating national benchmarks. The researcher considered implementing a comparative design for its related benefits. The researcher made an intentional decision in the inclusivity of this study's breadth of site selection, with community colleges in various states and of varying sizes, in hopes of eliciting an increased depth and enhanced understanding afforded by more a

detailed, limited scope.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study used an interview questionnaire as the instrument to engage several key campus stakeholders who had participated in a Community College Completion Corps event. The qualitative interviews provided opportunities to share, record, and analyze lived experiences in a way that contributes to the advancement of community college completion and the associated campus-wide cultural change. By adhering to the established standards of qualitative research, various checks and balances allowed the researcher to objectively record and explore the narrative, authentic personal perceptions regarding community college culture and its implications for the successful promotion of student completion.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of college staff or personnel employed at a two-year institution where a Community College Completion Corps (C4) signing ceremony took place. The study sought to determine what effect the event had on creating and sustaining a culture of completion in campus structure, policy, and behavior. The researcher investigated whether a public organizational declaration of commitment to completion results in transformative, change leadership that yields the attainment of a culture of completion.

The study participants included system or campus administrators, student services staff members, and faculty members. The responses to interview questions addressed the individual respondent's perception regarding the effect of the college's participation in the Community College Completion Challenge on policy, planning, and organizational procedures. The researcher also sought to identify any of the change leadership model components associated with the initiatives. Participants' best practices, future action plans, and shared experiences formed a list of recommendations to assist community colleges in adopting a culture of completion that has a measurable effect on improving institutional student completion rates. This qualitative phenomenological study consisted of 18 interviews with key stakeholders who participated in a Community College Completion Corps commitment event that took place at their institution between the years of 2010 and 2015.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching research question associated with this community college issue focused on the level of perceived influence the campus culture and programs, policies,

and procedures have on community colleges that are commitment makers. The central research question of this study was:

How do community college stakeholders perceive, identify, and measure the effect of institutional participation by their community college after formally participating in a community college completion pledge ceremony?

The following were the subquestions for this study:

1. What perceptual evidence of a culture of completion, specifically in the areas of instruction, institutional priorities and policies, and individual student support and behaviors, are identifiable by the interviewees on the campus in various levels of the organization?

2. How did initiatives employed at the institution, post-C4 commitment ceremony, contribute to the creation of a culture of completion, from the stakeholder's perspective? The respondents are encouraged to cite personal anecdotes, new programs and initiatives, and the perceived effect on student persistence and completion.

3. What changes in the campus culture were observed from the respondents' perspective that reflect the introduction of a culture of completion?

4. Were any elements of the 4-Cap Change model and/or Kotter's model of leading change evident on the campus or within the system before, during, or after the C4 event?

### **Participant Selection and Demographics**

The target population for this research consisted of identified stakeholders in specific roles at two-year institutions that registered as hosting a C4 event on their campus between 2010 and 2015. This study used five unique sites, each an accredited

two-year institution within a different state. Recruiting individuals across this diverse spectrum of colleges created a diverse and summative portrait of the perceived effect and change processes that occurred after the completion ceremony.

The sample group consisted of representatives from two primary stakeholder categories. Category 1 respondents, identified as change leaders, were state-level administrators and college institutional administrators. Category 2 respondents, identified as change agents, included faculty and student services personnel. These two categories of respondents each offered unique perspectives on the campus experience related to the initial completion initiative and associated post-ceremony programs and plans. Each stakeholder represented a critical component of the community college environment and its corresponding culture. The participants were essential to promoting community college completion and attaining, as well as sustaining a culture of completion. The study included an equal number of interviews with each participant group: nine change agents and nine change leaders.

Table 1 displays the participants' demographic data. Generally, the researcher made every effort to ensure the sample was distributed evenly across all categories. However, it is important to note the sample was primarily Caucasian, which is an accurate representation of the national distribution of race for college administrators, faculty, and staff.

Table 1

*Frequencies and Percentages of Demographics for Participants (n = 18)*

Demographic	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	8	44
Female	10	56
Ethnicity		
White	15	83
Black	3	17
Title		
College Presidents	6	33
State Administrators	2	11
National Administrator	1	5
Faculty	5	28
Staff	4	22
States		
Alabama	3	17
Kansas	3	17
Mississippi	1	5
New Jersey	3	17
Oklahoma	4	22
Texas	4	22

*Note.* Due to rounding error, not all percentages may sum to 100.

**Data Collection**

Interviews ensued in several face-to-face formats based on participant availability. Some interviews occurred via Internet conferencing, while others took place in person. All interview participants received a confidentiality statement regarding their answers, a summary of the purpose of this dissertation study, and instructions about the interview process and questions. By interviewing knowledgeable informants, the interviewer created an environment where the questions were responsive, flexible, and contextually relevant to the interviewees' professional experience. The primary investigator conducted

all of the interviews and employed active listening techniques, resulting in generative discussions and new, deeper reflections and responses. The researcher conducted five of the interviews in person and conducted the remaining 13 using an online web meeting method, Adobe Connect, to audiotape and record all interviews. Interview session duration ranged from 30 minutes to an hour and a half, based on the length and depth of the interviewee responses. While the researcher intended all interviews to last no longer than 45 minutes, some interviewees provided greater detail and lengthier responses during the scheduled interview. The researcher completed all interviews during the period of July 2015 through August 2015.

The researcher recorded and transcribed verbatim each individual interview. The researcher then sent the transcription to the interviewee for review, revision, and approval, prior to analysis for a member check. Once validated, the audiotapes were securely stored.

### **Data Analysis**

The process of data analysis for this study relied heavily on accuracy and cohesiveness of the interview transcription, further strengthened by the member check and use of a co-rater. The researcher analyzed the interviews to identify key words and themes drawn from theory, previous empirical literature, and contextual factors. Contextual factors included the extent to which a culture of completion was understood and/or already existed at an institution; interpretations of the completion pledge; and completion barriers and facilitators.

The researcher employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to analyze the study data. Following this format, the researcher analyzed the data qualitatively in

search of patterns, themes, and concepts. The inductive approach condenses thick and rich raw data to identify clear links between the data and the research questions, provides findings that can easily be understood and explained, and often generates a figurative or graphical representation of the ideas that have arisen from the data.

Initially, the researcher read and reread the responses several times to become familiar with the data. Reading through the data enabled the researcher to take the time necessary to begin to identify patterns, repeated words, and ideas that occurred in the participant transcripts. Once the researcher was familiar with the data and had some initial codes completed, all transcripts were uploaded into Nvivo 11 to aid in organizing the data. The data were then broken down into separate units of meaning. Each unit of meaning was a portion of the data that represented some type of meaning. Units of data could consist of words, phrases, or several sentences. Each unit was assigned a code.

The researcher gathered similar codes into categories and discarded any that did not apply to the research questions. The researcher then combined the categories into themes and ran several data analyses using Nvivo 11 including word frequency and textual searches. After identifying all themes, the researcher reviewed them to ensure quality and depth. Reviewing the data also ensured that important information was not overlooked and that coding errors did not occur. The researcher gave each theme a name that captured the essence of the theme, then gathered the results and reported the findings.

After completing the coding stage of data, the researcher had identified 407 codes relevant to the research question. Each code could contain many data units with similar meanings. The next stage involved combining related codes. The researcher identified 18 categories within the data. Table 2 shows the breakdown of codes to categories.

Table 2

*Categories*

Category name	Number of codes	Percentage
Support	33	8
Measurements	49	12
Changes	21	5
Change Leaders	21	5
Culture	56	14
Money	23	6
Finances	18	4
Phi Theta Kappa	18	4
Events	22	6
Students	19	5
College	22	6
Courses	14	3
Program	10	2
Support	27	7
Access	14	4
Pledge	13	3
Buy-in	11	3
Leadership	16	4

*Note.* Due to rounding error, not all percentages may sum to 100.

These categories were further analyzed and then combined into four themes and two subthemes. Table 3 displays the breakdown of categories to themes and subthemes.

Table 3

*Themes and Subthemes*

Theme and subtheme	Categories	Percentage
Measurement	Measurements	17
	Changes	
Providing support for students	Support	11
	Students	
Initiatives create change	Pledge	22
	College	
	Phi Theta Kappa	
Financial preparedness	Money	10
	Finances	
Developmental education and college readiness	Courses	6
	Program	
Creating a culture of completion	Buy-in	25
	Access	
	Events	
	Culture	
Change leadership	Leadership	9
	Change Leaders	

*Note.* Due to rounding error, not all percentages may sum to 100.

**Data Validity**

The primary investigator transcribed each interview within a period of five working days. The respondents received the interview transcriptions for review, revision, additional clarification, and approval. This member check step provided the data collection with a high level of proven and tested validity. Thus, the data analysis used data primed for accuracy and integrity. A co-rater analyzed the data as well. Both raters individually coded the interviews, and an analysis revealed a 98.1% agreement between raters, with a Cohen's Kappa of .92 and a Krippendorff's Alpha of .92. This indicated a high level of internal consistency, which increased the validity of the results.

**Results**

This section reports the themes and subthemes identified during data analysis. Excerpts from the data support each theme and subtheme. The following results are

organized by research question and subquestion.

**Central research question.** How do community college stakeholders perceive, identify, and measure the effect of institutional participation by their community college after formally participating in a community college completion pledge ceremony?

The researcher found one foundational theme that applied to the central question and across all research subquestions. The theme was named *measurement*, and it described the myriad methods used to gauge institutional participation following college completion pledge ceremonies. Interestingly, interviewees mentioned little empirical evaluation occurring on the campuses. Generally, the measurement reported was anecdotal, or simple counts of program participants. Although a majority of the study participants, 16 of 18, were very enthusiastic about the focus on completion, two of the respondents had concerns about measuring success and whether focusing on that area would be detrimental to the concepts of access and getting students what they need (i.e., a single class). In addition, discussions regarding what the numbers could possibly signify also occurred. STAFF 3 spoke about initial forms of measurement and stated, “We evaluated the program at first by counting signatures. We were shocked by how many we had, it was so cool. Today, I measure it by the level of student engagement. Peer to peer.”

STAFF 9 also spoke about how his institution was measuring the effect of the C4 ceremony. He stated, “We did get a lot of comments from faculty who participated and we got a lot of feedback from the students we met at the workshops. All positive.”

ADMIN 3 spoke at length about the measurement of results. He believed that while the gross numbers were wonderful, he was more interested in drilling down to see how those numbers translated into completion. He said:

Well, we had 15,000+ students sign the pledge to complete. That's great! How many of those 15,000+ retained from fall to spring? How many graduated in two years? That is one thing that we have to put in place...It's nice that we are raising awareness. It's nice that we have more signatures this year than we did last year. It's nice that we are able to do more events this year than last year. The bottom line is that is not what makes it successful. What makes it successful is have the number of students who walked across the stage and got a degree increased from last year to this year and what we can tell you since we undertook this renewed focus on student success, we have increased the number of graduates at our community colleges statewide by 40%...we have increased the actual number of students graduating with a certificate or an Associate's degree by 40%. Our enrollment has gone down but our completions have gone up.

Thus, ADMIN 3 was able to measure the success of the culture and programmatic shift by assessing long-term results. The ultimate measure of success for this program was to see an increase in the number of students completing their programs and graduating.

In contrast to other respondents ADMIN 6 questioned if traditional completion, graduating with a degree, is what should be measured. He stated:

The larger point that colleges have to make is about access and success... that one goal of completion tends to make you rethink everything. It sounds so simple, I mean, why would we not be about people getting degrees? But when you put out there about completion...But that focus on completion sort of defines what we are doing and what we are called to do...It comes down to what values we hold and...we are abandoning the notion that students can come to us and take one course and be successful. We still think that is going to happen and we hope it does happen for those individuals who really do only want only one course. Maybe they needed a Spanish class to help them in their job. We want to provide that, it is just so hard to measure all the different types of successes... We value all these things in the spectrum of what community college defines as success... we want to be more strategic about it.

His attention was on meeting a variety of needs for students. He believed the focus on completion of a degree, increasing technology, and other initiatives moved the college further from its roots of being a place where people could go to get what they needed educationally, be it a degree or simply one course.

ADMIN 10 had a list of metrics employed to measure the effectiveness and

success of the events used to promote student completion. He listed:

1. Number of students signing the C4 Commitment to Complete Banner/Board.
2. Number of faculty/staff signing pledge/banner as Completion Champions.
3. Campus-wide promotion of C4 and its message of the need to complete and credential or degree.
4. Involvement and presence of the college administration, faculty, staff, trustees, public leaders in the C4 event.
5. Integration of C4 into student success courses.
6. Integration of C4 into CollegeFish, a web-based platform to guide students toward college completion and preparation for transfer.
7. Press Coverage.
8. Discussions on how C4 was the initiator of conversations between staff, faculty, and administrators on how they all could improve student success by adopting promising practices as outlined by the Center for Community College Student Engagement and recommendations of the 21st Commission on the Future of Community Colleges.

By combining a variety of metrics and measures, ADMIN 10 believed a clear picture of the effect of these events was identifiable.

Overall, most of the participants made similar comments. They believed the focus had shifted, and they were seeing more commitment from staff and students every year. They cited increases in the numbers of individuals who signed the pledge and attendance at C4 events as evidence that a culture of completion was becoming the norm on their campuses.

**Subquestion 1.** What perceptual evidence of a culture of completion, specifically in the areas of instruction, institutional priorities and policies, and individual student support and behaviors, are identifiable by the interviewees on the campus in various levels of the organization?

One central theme answered this question: *providing support for students*. This theme encompassed a variety of methods, initiatives, and supports created or modified to aid students as they attended the college. The institutions created these initiatives to increase student support and, thus, increase student success in completing a course of study and graduation.

STAFF 1 spoke at length about the myriad offerings put in place on her campus to help students succeed. She said:

Our campus revamped the tutoring center – more student friendly and inclusive. Grown the size of our writing center so it has more student tutors and also more hours of availability. They’ve also added more student activities to get students more active on campus. Increased the size and scope of Phi Theta Kappa chapter on campus. They had more programming for students to feel like they were part of the campus. So yes in conjunction with C4 there were a lot of activities focused on getting student[s] involved.

She also described many programs and interventions the college adopted to increase support for students who might be new or struggling. Interventions she listed included:

(a) “Support in the remedial skills,” (b) “Streamlined some of our developmental courses,” (c) “Developmental math, reading, [and] English boot camps,” (d) “Have faculty involved...sent out a list of five to six students that...faculty were specifically asked to contact,” (e) “Started a mentoring program opportunity,” and (f) “Early alert system to encourage faculty to share when they know students are having struggles.”

These programs targeted students who needed extra support to be successful to ensure

that students did not fall through the cracks and that they had the requisite skills to be academically successful.

ADMIN 1 spoke on a more generalized level about institutional changes. He addressed overarching changes made on his campus, saying:

In October each year we focus on that [completion] with the students. We do that year round. We have a graduation clock in our student center that kicks off and runs all the way until graduation day and starts over again. Includes pictures of graduation class from that particular year. Everything we do is centered on making sure we get students to the finish line. Right as you walk in the student center – it's like huge big screened television. It's a countdown clock, constantly counting down days, minutes, and seconds.

He spoke about how helping students succeed and complete was a campus wide-effort:

Everyone on our campus is involved from my office all the way to our janitorial staff. As I said before, all of our focus for our professional development days in fall and spring for all of the faculty, staff, and student leadership is focused on the completion agenda. So, everybody knows on our campus that we are all responsible.

He felt training the staff was an essential component of creating an atmosphere of support. For him, the two focuses were on access and completion. He felt that as budget cuts occurred, they needed to do more with less and rally support from the local community to aid in the efforts to improve student outcomes. He said:

[We need to] figure out ways to help us retain and help students get to their degree completion. That may not be with additional funding because we all understand that funding is probably not going to increase but it may be with volunteers from the community helping to mentor and then the community becoming a resource to us that will help us support students.

He then turned his focus to some specific modifications executed to facilitate student success:

Our Student Affairs area, where students had to go for all student services, it was scattered on three different floors, in different areas of one huge building. The VP of Student Affairs worked with us to establish a one stop shop, first floor, outside the student center so that students have easy access to everything all in one place.

[I was} working with deans on programs, to mentor the students within their programs. Student Affairs and Academic Affairs make phone calls to students who haven't reenrolled to remind them to get back in class. Send out letters to students letting them know how many credit hours they have to graduation. When they've reached it we send letters saying you've earned the credit to graduate.

ADMIN 3 spoke about the importance of buy-in and collaboration. He said, "Yes, it was and has to be a collaborative event. It's amazing how students tell one person made a difference in their lives – custodian outside of the classroom. All of us combined make it a success." He felt that everyone involved in the community needed to be willing to provide support and share in the responsibility for student success and degree completion. He indicated the best way to ensure that students were at the center of everything was to remember:

No matter what project I am working on, I ask myself, how is this going to better enable at least one student to get his/her degree in a timely fashion? I ask myself that on every project, whether it is a new story I put up on the website or send a reporter, or if I have to go meet with a potential funder and try to get another \$500,000 for our student success.

He explained the mission of the college had evolved:

[At the] bottom line [and at the] end of the day, that is what it's about now. Our mission is not only about making sure the doors are open for students to come to our college. It's also about making sure the doors are open and students come and get through the pipeline because the bigger picture is we need a skilled workforce.

STAFF 6 spoke about initiatives around completion. An area of weakness she remarked upon was faculty inclusion. She stated, "As far as planning, faculty haven't really been involved, outside of the representation of the Faculty Association on Executive Council. That's really the only faculty member who has had the formal conversation." Thus, in her perception a plan was created with little to no faculty input.

STAFF 7 had a differing perspective and said, "College president, SGA, advisors, faculty, all clubs and organizations. It became a team event. Different representatives

from different areas on campus. Everything is relevant, everyone is important.” However, she felt a disconnect lay at the board level and stated, “The Board of Trustees needed to be engaged. Getting their buy-in would be helpful.”

Overall, the participants seemed invested in the focus on a culture of completion. They identified many initiatives, perceptions, and ideas about providing support for students. Initiatives took place on many levels, from institutional to individual involvement. It was clear the respondents believed involvement from all stakeholders, from their boards to all staff, was an essential component in creating this change. A few participants felt changes needed to occur. Further, several respondents observed that certain groups were not invested or included in this change.

**Subquestion 2.** How did initiatives employed at the institution, post-C4 commitment ceremony, contribute to the creation of a culture of completion, from the stakeholder’s perspective? The respondents are encouraged to cite personal anecdotes, new programs and initiatives, and the perceived effect on student persistence and completion.

The theme that provided an answer to this question was called *initiatives create change*. The participants indicated that many initiatives were set into place leading up to, as a part of, or after the C4 commitment ceremony. These changes intended to aid students and provide support to enable students to be successful and attain a degree. Participants saw some areas as problematic and still in need of assessment and alteration, including the subthemes *financial preparedness* and *developmental education and college readiness*.

STAFF 2 spoke about initiatives undertaken after C4 events had taken place. He

stated:

I think the three workshops that our PTK students scheduled for the at-risk populations last semester probably showed the most promise because they geared them specifically to groups of students. And they worked well because they were not a diverse group of students with different needs. They were groups -- they did one for Latino students and invited their parents because in the Latino community, family, the parent is very important in the college process. We had some professional development last year where we talked about what was important to Hispanic families, regardless of income. Then there was one scheduled for nontraditional students and veterans who have their own set of challenges. I think in watching what happened with those there were really good models in building a safety net and introducing them in the Latino families the whole family to the resource network on campus and how they can get involved and connected to it.

The college C4 committee, led by the administration, found that being selective and targeting workshops to specific populations allowed them to customize the interventions to a specific population. By doing so, the campus could directly address different strengths, cultures, and needs.

ADMIN 6 spoke about the power of gathering groups of stakeholders together and giving them a forum in which to work. He said that by doing so, "it was very public, very open, very engaging. Advising, counseling, careers, the students. Everyone was involved. And the events occurred consistently throughout the year, not just a one-time thing." The group was able to work together to provide programming and events that focused on completion all over their campus throughout the year. No one department was overburdened, and students received increased support and services.

ADMIN 6 also spoke about the importance of passion and a desire to support students. He mentioned an incident with a staff member:

We have a staff member who is a recruiter and he is on our Achieving the Dream team and he got very passionate one day in our meeting, and he is very spiritual so he got in the preaching mode about how every student at the college is MY student when they walk in the door and I'm going to do everything I can to take

care of them and he went on for 30 or 40 minutes. What I loved most about that, I am just going to give you some context...he was so into this that he really has that commitment to the students and he has it in a way that is focused on helping the students to get to their goals in a very structured way and wants to try to impact change on campus.

ADMIN 6 believed if every person on campus could be that engaged and involved, students would receive the encouragement and support they needed to be successful and graduate.

ADMIN 1 spoke about the importance of the completion pledges. As a part of C4 events every member of campus—students, staff, and administrators—are asked to sign a pledge stating they will support completion and work towards graduation. ADMIN 1 said:

I think the pledges are extremely important. Before Phi Theta Kappa came out with their pledge for faculty and administrators, we did one the first year when we launched them here. It was kind of funny because the faculty got irate, they didn't want to do a pledge because the culture here was we should not be concerned about completion, just access. The second year when PTK came out with the faculty and staff pledge, ours had already been asked to sign one already. It was very simple and it said they supported the work that our chapter and students were doing. I think it's important, it's nonthreatening and that's what it has to be for culture change.

The pledge carried weight. All of the participants spoke about the pledge and its importance. All of the participants noted growth in the numbers of people signing the pledge from year to year.

ADMIN 4 mentioned specific interventions tried on his campus. He involved students and faculty in the outreach and support. He described:

[We work] with our PTK student leaders and they are addressing it [issues] through their programs so you might see a program on study skills, workshops on study skills, and workshops on putting your academic career goals in focus. Another thing that we do connected to the data about barriers and completion, we know that a lot of students come to us as research suggests from [CCSSE] and in the first six weeks they might not feel connected to their community college and

they might not feel engaged and so what they do is drop through the cracks. They come to us with goals in August and by October/November, they might have failed their first test in their entire life and they just throw their hands up and say, 'You know, maybe college isn't for me. Maybe I'm not college material.' So, a very intentional goal of our program is to have it in the first six to eight weeks of the semester so that we can catch those students and engage them in conversations about why they are there and remind them about what they started and of their goals and so those two areas, academic and non-cognitive are central to our program and our priority.

Engaging students on a variety of levels allowed them to form connections with the college. These connections enabled students to feel support and helped them to continue onwards.

STAFF 1 spoke about events that were held on her campus and said:

Our President had posters made around the campus. We had events every day for two weeks. Our focus was on supporting the student from start to finish and highlighting the resources on campus to empower them every step of the way. Every department was included in some way.

Her campus used a targeted, time limited period to provide intensive support. Students were able to easily connect with and learn about resources.

Each campus found different ways to actively engage and provide support for students while emphasizing a culture of completion. The entire focus of the events was to enable student success, increase knowledge about services, and create relationships with students in order to make them feel a connection to their institutions.

One of the issues identified by the participants that affected completion was in the area of financial preparedness. Many students were not aware of the details associated with receiving financial aid. They did not understand the processes involved and how to navigate systems. Eleven of the interviewees spoke about financial aid and its importance in increasing a student's ability to complete a program of study.

STAFF 9 spoke about an initiative at his school that took information to students,

in the classroom, to ensure they would be able to access information and services. He stated:

Then we did C4 workshops where we went in to classrooms who allowed us to and we showed students what to do to be successful – priority advising, making appointments, People Soft, degree plans, where to get messages from Financial Aid. People did not know how to sign their promissory notes. Financial aid paperwork. We do it annually.

The program coordinators ambitiously included a wide variety of services during this workshop experience. It is important to note that many students were not aware of how to sign promissory notes, which are essential in order to receive financial aid. The financial aid representative also spoke about recent changes in financial aid that directly affected students. STAFF 9 voiced his opinion about how essential it was to reach out to students, saying, “We have to teach students what they need to do to succeed immediately. We have to! People used to take a lot longer figuring out what to do. They don’t have the money to do that anymore. Financial aid won’t allow for it.”

With new rules in place that limited access to financial aid, students did not have the time to take any class they wished. Pell grants are regulated and have specific cut offs, and students who pass that marker can no longer receive those grants. Because many students rely on those monies to complete their programs, they must be aware of the classes they take and the amount of time they spend getting a degree. ADMIN 6 spoke about this at some length:

One of the things that really caught our attention was the re-design of financial aid and the number of semesters that students can be eligible for Pell Grant and/or for loans. You can see students losing their financial aid and their financial reimbursement from the state for their institution for not being on track and on time and I think there are some real challenges with that.

Thus, financial aid can be a barrier to completion for students who are struggling or

undecided. It is essential for these students to receive education on a variety of levels in order to be successful. ADMIN 10 spoke about the risks attached to financial aid changes. He stated:

Some suggest that emphasis on metrics and funding that emphasize completion will reduce financial resources to maintain the 'open door' access that has been a part of the community college fabric for years. Emphasis on time to degree could impact student engagement outside the classroom.

These limits could create a barrier to the culture of completion that these institutions emphasize.

STAFF 6 also spoke about finances. She addressed issues with financial aid and also with money in general. She said:

I think it's financial. I think that's what happens, because you know we, our HIA project was establishing a food pantry because we discovered what a tremendous need there was for that. When you talk about people on campus that need the basic necessity of food it's very easy to see what there are stop outs. When people are faced with a choice of feeding their kids or going to college, you can obviously see why they'd stop out. It's going to become increasingly more difficult, especially with the financial aid restrictions. Students change degree plans all the time and so, that is going to create more hardship on completion. And then students not being college ready. They spend a year working on remedial courses and then it comes back to financial aid. They run out of aid. I think everything comes back to money.

She saw that many students were struggling with having money to meet their daily living expenses and indicated this factor affected their ability to go to or stay in classes. In addition, many students faced issues with financial aid.

ADMIN 1 spoke about similar concerns. He said:

I talk to students all the time and um, their biggest hurdles are that they don't have money. They don't have support systems. Many of them come from families who they are really the first generation in their family to go to college so they don't have a network at home to help them navigate going to college, not even the admissions application or FAFSA. They also tell them, because they don't have a lot of money, or no money at all, homeless or hungry.

Overall, interviewees identified financial literacy as one of the most problematic areas for students, because many students had limited resources and knowledge.

Financial aid had become tightly restricted with stringent limits on the amount and time allowed for students to receive funding. This underscored the importance of educating students about financial aid and also the necessity of having strong programs and interventions to help students be successful from the beginning of their programs.

Fourteen of the participants spoke about the subtheme of developmental education and college readiness. They indicated that many students who attended community college had issues with their basic academics. Their level of basic academic knowledge was low and they needed remediation before they could take college-level courses. The institutions were creating courses or modifying their developmental education courses to help students achieve success and move on to their programs of study. ADMIN 1 shared an example of this on his campus. He reported changes that occurred at his institution:

We are in the process right now of developing assessments for all of our new programs that we are putting in place because we are going to follow them to see if they work. We did that with the Student Success course, we followed the metrics on it success in the class and classes they took afterward. It was remarkable, the difference in students who scored in developmental, took the student success class with their developmental education class. There's a huge difference in the success rate.

By creating a course to support and match the developmental course, they were able to increase success rates of struggling students. These students were generally at the highest risk for dropping out and needed extra support.

ADMIN 3 mentioned a similar program and stated:

We needed to redesign our developmental education program. At the time, in our state, only 1 in 6 students who went through developmental education would actually earn one college level credit. Most of the kids who went through Developmental Education just got stuck there where they just dropped out

because they were frustrated.

His institution identified the issue and began to work on a redesign of the course to ensure these students received the support necessary for their success.

ADMIN 4 also spoke about the students who needed to take developmental courses and what was required to help them be successful. When he examined the data he saw:

The data is telling us is that if students come to our colleges ready and academically prepared, for English, math and the like, they tend to do better, they make their success milestone at much a higher rate than any of our other students, most notably, our developmental education students.

He continued, acknowledging the fact that community colleges needed to “find ways that we can transform those programs.”

ADMIN 6 spoke about a movement to help students in developmental education.

He recalled:

I have just recently met with a student group and they were talking about onboarding students that had trouble with developmental reading, writing and math and literally left that meeting and went to a meeting with the director of our adult basic education and she is brand new and she said, “I want to do something where we do transition between adult basic education and developmental...” so I put those two together and now students are talking. When you can get students to be excited about it, we can talk about things all we want, but if it’s students who are carrying that message, it really helps to have that resonate with the other students.

By tying students and staff together he was able to get different groups of stakeholders to work together and make changes.

ADMIN 9 had specific people provide support to developmental students. He said, “Navigators work with students who are placed in developmental courses.” This was put into place to ensure student success by providing them with a specific support person to go to so they could receive help. STAFF 1 listed a series of supports for

students in developmental classes. Her institution “streamlined some of our developmental courses, [offered] developmental math, reading, [and] English boot camps, and [offered] support in the remedial skills that they will need.”

Attendance was another concern related to developmental classes. If students were not in class, they could not be successful. ADMIN 6 spoke about this issue and remarked:

Student attendance is... if you don't show up, how can you learn? We saw in our developmental math classes, students missing ten classes and then not doing very well in the class, well yeah, that is the equivalent of depending on how many times the course meets, either three weeks or five weeks, if it's a two day a week class, and you don't make it one third or one fourth of the course, yeah, I can see why you aren't going to be successful in that. Are there ways we can encourage that engagement and support and let students know that they are able to get here, we can work with them. Faculty members would want nothing more than students who show up ready to learn. Attendance is something we struggle with and it sounds crazy, but we are actually requiring attendance to be taken, we aren't quite there in terms of hardwire requiring that, we are in a pilot stage to see if it makes a difference.

STAFF 3 spoke about the developmental courses and said:

One thing we did was create a bridge course to help support students who are in developmental courses. There was a gap in readiness from the basic communications course and the fundamentals of English. And some were at a score that was right between, or on the verge. We wanted to help them succeed and manage that developmental sequence to college level coursework.

Different institutions used slightly different methods to address the attendance issue.

However, this was an area of focus for most of the programs. Administrators and staff identified this as an area that needed attention in order to support students and help them complete their education.

**Subquestion 3.** What changes in the campus culture were observed from the respondents' perspective that reflect the introduction of a culture of completion?

The theme that addressed this research subquestion was *creating a culture of completion*. All of the participants spoke about a culture of completion. Most indicated they had seen changes that indicated a culture of completion was emerging in their institutions. ADMIN 10 defined a culture of completion:

Culture of completion – culture is a sets of norms and beliefs manifested in behaviors - of faculty/staff, administrators and trustees who intentionally allocate resources, make data-informed decisions, redefine roles and responsibilities, and work collaboratively and collectively to ensure that access to education is provided with support to succeed. Access without support is not an opportunity.

He continued and spoke about the growth of this culture:

According to Jim Collins, noted author “Good to Great” – culture takes seven years to be institutionalized. The college completion initiative is relatively young, however, due to the financial pressures placed by state legislatures with performance-based funding, colleges are moving quicker to refine and design practices and programs that are the underpinnings for developing a culture of completion. The continuing work of AACCC, ACCT, CCCSE, League for Innovation, Kresge, Gates, and Lumina Foundations in the field of college completion will continue to fuel the development of the culture that supports completion.

Thus, creating this culture is a process that will occur over time. Each campus will have a different growth rate.

STAFF 4 provided his definition of a culture of completion:

The most important is fostering a culture of acceptance on campus. While perfection would mean 100% completion and everyone worked hard enough to get A’s, that simply does not work. In order to get people to complete their degrees, I believe we have to establish goals up front (such as if they intend to go on to a 4 year or simply just need to get their associates) and when a student starts to fall, we need to help that student get back up. A culture of completion would entail students or professors helping those who are not doing as well by setting up study groups, online collaborative learning through shared Google Docs of study guides and being more helpful and empathetic towards student who are behind. Institutionally and administratively, culture of competition would mean putting in place programs that steer students towards competition and success.

His definition was both theoretical, in that he described the construct, and operational, in

that he named specific interventions as part of the culture.

ADMIN 2 remarked, “I believe we are steadily shifting the culture. It takes time, it takes people, it takes continuous effort. We have all the pieces and all of the commitment.” Creating a culture of completion was identified as a process. It did not occur overnight.

ADMIN 1 spoke in more detail about the change in culture, saying:

I think the very first thing for a culture of completion is there has to be a mind-shift in the culture in many of our institutions including the institutions here because the traditional culture for community colleges is all about access and is an open door policy that says anybody can come, but students are responsible for whether or not they are successful. There has to be this complete shift and understanding that we are also responsible for providing them with the support services and the things they need in order to help them into thru and beyond our institution...So it's a refocus, a development of really a new kind of culture that says access is great, but access is not enough. Access and completion are the two agendas we have to think about now.

This shift in focus presented a noticeable difference, as opposed to the traditional practice of simply inviting students to apply and offering them open admissions. Instead, the emphasis and campus culture extended to consider the importance of providing the support services for students to focus on completion beginning with the first semester. Rather than only being an easily accessible college, provisions for student success were also necessary.

STAFF 1 found the shift taxing and somewhat daunting based on the level of engagement required for a successful cultural redesign. She stated getting all stakeholders involved and engaged was a challenge:

Getting multi-level engagement has been challenging. We have a graduation director, a new position created about a year ago. He already quit. The position's purpose is to help encourage students to keep climbing, keep trying to finish. That emphasis facilitates our engagement. We brought C4 to our annual spirit events and Freshmen Orientation. We set up a banner. He directed them to come and

sign. We also spoke with students at lunch about completion. We gave them wristbands, walked around campus a little bit.

Though she saw evidence of the shift, she found that it still had a long way to go before it became the underlying focus of everything. Getting consistent staffing, buy-in at all levels, and consistent emphasis on completion were areas of opportunity for improvements.

STAFF 4 spoke about how a culture of completion was working on his campus.

He described what occurred at his institution:

To me, a culture of completion is a campus where students are followed and supported from beginning to end. At our campus, faculty do report students who have disappeared or are struggling. We try and catch excessive absences, especially in the beginning of the term. Full-time faculty don't always understand that there are segments, different types of students who are coming from different learning levels and such. There are a lot of adjunct or part-time faculty as well. And then, there's not a lot of administrative support to help the faculty with reporting and various college procedures. It adds to the workload.

STAFF 4 identified learning how to educate and weave in all stakeholders as an area in need of more work. Thus, even a campus with an established culture of completion had areas for improvement. An evolution continued to occur even as the shift toward a culture of completion was in progress.

STAFF 2 spoke about this as well and named some of the changes she has observed on her campus. She said:

We collaborated and integrated it in to several other campus-wide events, including Welcome Back fairs, Transfer Fairs, and the District's designated completion week. Speakers, events. We also have a team of Orientation Leaders that have special training on completion support. There are always completion themed events and activities on our campus. Public events where classes and clubs are encouraged to participate as well as integrating it into orientation have been most successful.

She was able to mark changes and describe them in detail. She saw the focus on

completion woven into everyday events with an invitation to all stakeholders to participate.

ADMIN 5 emphasized the importance of staff training. He believed an important component of creating a culture of completion was for staff to understand and participate actively in the cultural shift. He noted:

We actually had an entire day of training where we focused on completion. We had some Student Keys to Success or Keys to Student Success. That was a really important professional development day. Got everybody onboard. I believe people have a better understanding of why it's important students are successful and how they can ensure success as faculty and staff.

This training increased cross-campus collaboration and investment among stakeholders.

ADMIN 6 pointed out that individuals and departments involved in creating change need the ability to shift to a new focus and understanding. He said:

It is a priority here. In fact this last year we spent quite a bit of time focusing on completion and persistence for graduation and the reason we did that is because that is the culture we want this institution to have. Start, Stay, Succeed. Since then, we've really put efforts in to supporting Start, Stay, Succeed. Really focusing all of our resources to merge if you will in terms of completion being the end product. To achieve a culture of completion, you have to support it from the top down. You've got to engage students and you've got to do things in a way where you are tracking results and data. Moving forward, you can't do it without buy-in, feedback, collaboration, and support.

He saw that a culture of completion required buy-in at all levels. The only way for the cultural shift to occur was for all the stakeholders to understand the shift and support it in their respective areas on campus.

ADMIN 4 expressed excitement about the opportunities offered by this cultural change. He had watched this program emerge and saw the impact it had on student outcomes. He also spoke about a culture of completion:

The idea that colleges are recognizing this program by giving students graduation cords, C4 graduation cords, when they complete, or as we saw at ABC County

College in, putting the C4 logo next to students' names in the printed commencement program if they had signed the pledge. So, when you look through that and put the picture to it, oh my god, this was just an idea three years ago and here it is today at one of our commencements and I think the idea is going to flourish across the state. It's cool and great to be a part of. It is really professionally enriching and rewarding. I think it's a highlight of my young, professional career. I don't see how many things can take off like this, it's like a once in a lifetime thing.

Seeing students graduating and the culture start to take hold made a huge impact on him.

He could see the changes moving rapidly and was excited to be a part of it. He believed it was a unique opportunity to be on the ground floor of institutional change.

In contrast, STAFF 9 stated that he had seen no evidence of integration of the C4 pledge into the daily practices on his campus. His institution had just begun to explore the C4 pledge and still needed to provide a great deal of education about the program. He offered some ideas of how to integrate the practice:

There isn't any [integration of the C4 pledge]. But I would have completion added to everyone's job description. We have to teach students what they need to do to succeed immediately. We have to! People used to take a lot longer figuring out what to do. They don't have the money to do that anymore. Financial aid won't allow for it. You need to make a decision earlier. We need to focus on the programs and opportunities available. Degrees, career goals, how to be a successful student. Study tools, email, advising, responsible for degree plan, all that stuff.

He continued to speak about completion and explained why it was essential to work closely with students throughout the time they attended the institution. He identified many barriers that were in place for students and areas that required particular attention. He was inspired by the opportunities for real institutional change and felt that everyone on campus should be involved in the process. His focus on the importance of educating the students about options, responsibilities, and planning inside and outside of the classroom further cemented the importance of completion focused cross-campus

collaboration and integration.

**Subquestion 4.** Were any elements of the 4-Cap Change model and/or Kotter’s model of leading change evident on the campus or within the system before, during, or after the C4 event?

All of the interview responses and reactions to the various events examined the importance of institutional leadership as interviewees reflected on how their campuses developed and executed a C4 program. The primary theme addressing this sub question is *change leadership*. Executive leaders yield great influence in implementing organizational change and establishing a culture of support to embrace the change.

Several theories of change leadership exist and offer insight into assessing the efficacy of institutionalizing change. The CAP-4 Model defined four key stages or characteristics necessary of a leader or leadership team aspiring to implement change within an organization. These stages are sensemaking, relating, visioning, and inventing. Weick (1995) explained the first stage, sensemaking, as follows: “Organizational sensemaking offers a sensible reality of an organization and of the organizing processes that individuals engage, within that organization. Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, which is a reflection of one’s actions, or the enacted cues” (p. 10).

From this theory, full engagement and support of a culture of completion required that colleges and their leadership convincingly build the case for increasing student success through increased graduation rates. ADMIN 7 experienced this firsthand on campus:

We had an all-college day with a guest speaker from a national organization, who shared compelling information and data about the graduation initiatives and emerging focus. Everyone was nodding their heads and when we later discussed the C4 program, there was a contextual space they could draw from to place how

important it would be for our institution.

Ancona (2012) further developed the CAP-4 change leadership model as employed by several higher education institutions nationally. Ancona introduced the next steps—relating, visioning, and inventing—as equally important to achieving a culture of change on campus. The relating stage focused on the relationships and engagement college wide in a change initiative. STAFF 2 noted the initial C4 events were primarily housed in one singular campus area, with subsequent events incorporating a larger group of campus constituents: “By bringing more people to the table to discuss our plans, we had more perspectives represented and more voices willing to share the common message of completion. It definitely made our completion events more successful.”

The third and fourth levels of leadership included in the CAP-4 model are visioning and inventing. A majority of those interviewed acknowledged various examples of the process of visioning in their C4 plans, which often led to inventing. ADMIN 3 explained:

While it might have taken more time to pull everyone together, it really was fruitful to just spend a few of our planning meetings discussing who we are as a college and who we want to be. Even though we haven’t always talked about completion, we all agreed it has always been a goal for us when working with students. Now, it was just a higher priority and more palpable.

Kotter (2012) introduced a model of change leadership including an alternative outline of how to implement change within a diverse and complex organization. One critical element was “creating the guiding coalition. (Kotter, 10).” STAFF 3 explained some of the challenges in creating the leadership team to support the C4 events on campus:

The first year, it was just a small group of us, pulling something together quickly. The second year, the group grew, because people were appointed. Once we got

familiar with why we were called together and what impact our events could have, things were way more successful and our participation grew.

Because change is rooted in engagement, the effectiveness of completion initiatives can be greatly impacted by the ability and authority invested in those change agents leading the movement. Kotter (2012) suggested empowering employees for broad-based action as a foundational element of his change leadership model. While the researcher interviewed several presidents for this study, most admitted they did not have a great deal of hands-on involvement in the planning and preparation of the completion events. ADMIN 8 shared, “I have great confidence in my leadership team, the staff, and the students. I knew they could create a successful program.” ADMIN 7 took it further, appropriating funding to support the events:

If I wanted these events to truly have an impact, I knew the planning team needed not only my verbal support, but also access to resources and funding. That investment went a long way in our events being recognized as a campus priority.

Finally, several interviewees addressed the third component of Kotter’s change leadership model considered for this research, anchoring new approaches in the culture. Respondents consistently described this component of change leadership as a challenging one. STAFF 9 conceded:

Just because we host an event and identify a day each year to talk about completion doesn’t mean we are a culture of completion. That is going to take time because we not only have to change the way we speak as an institution, but also the way we operate.

Several participants made significant changes after their first C4 event, broadening their scope of impact beyond a one-day event to a college-wide initiative with reinforcements in other events and institutional adjustments. ADMIN 1 explained:

Our institution isn’t radically different, but it is changing slowly and we appreciate that to significantly impact our graduation rates means we have to

examine lots of pieces of the puzzle. And we are willing to do that. Not just because we have to, but more importantly, because we want to.

### **Summary**

The researcher conducted a comprehensive analysis of the 18 interviews with varying levels of community college stakeholders using NVivo 11 software to assist with identification of themes. These common themes, recognizing the barriers students experience while pursuing a community college credential, and recommendations for strategies to support success provide an essential foundation from which to develop a comprehensive national plan for completion. These findings are significant to the advancement of completion programming within the field of community colleges and merit continuous study, research, and discussion in pursuit of collective increases in graduation and retention rates. Chapter 5 offers a contextual summary of this qualitative study and its results, describes opportunities for future research, and addresses the implications for best practices in the field.

## **Chapter 5: Summary, Implications, and Recommendations**

National leaders in the field of higher education have established a new wave of accountability measures to which community college administrators, staff, and faculty have now dedicated significant planning and resources. Tinto (1975, 2012a) has conducted studies and research regarding student persistence, retention, and completion for several decades, calling for greater institutional accountability in higher education. This increasing national prioritization of community college completion recognizes graduation rates of currently enrolled students as a component of measuring institutional effectiveness. College administrators and campus-wide stakeholders are collectively searching for systems and strategies to transform the current campus culture and associated policies to mirror the national trend toward completion. As this strategic planning takes place, campuses across the nation assess their internal culture and institutional practices.

These two-year colleges are attempting to adjust institutional operations, isolate completion barriers, and introduce completion facilitators. Kotter's change leadership model provided a methodology for organizational change for this study. It identified several key phases of leadership to create conditions conducive to cultural change (Kotter, 2012). The CAP-4 Model also offered an outline from which institutions can effectively transform culture, inviting stakeholders within the community to better understand the need for change (Ancona, 2012). One way for community colleges to achieve substantive change is to introduce, implement, and evaluate new completion initiatives, such as the Community College Completion Corps and its signature-signing ceremony. Further, Tinto's continuum of research regarding student retention and

success, beginning in 1975 and spanning the current decade, provided further insight into college completion, validating the relationship between on-campus engagement and student success (Tinto, 2012b).

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of campus stakeholders affiliated with a community college where a Community Completion Corps ceremony was held. The small group of interviewees represented campus administrators and campus change agents. The researcher interviewed participants and recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and coded their responses to nine interview questions to identify topical themes for further research and study. The researcher analyzed the data qualitatively to find patterns, themes, and concepts, and used the data to make interpretations (Groenewald, 2004).

Each code provided a short and clear label to capture the key idea expressed in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes ranged from descriptive to interpretive and conveyed the meaning in such a way that seeing the data was not necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A code could apply to more than one data unit. All transcripts were completely coded. This final chapter addresses the implications of the study for improvement in community college completion and opportunities for further research and study in the field.

### **Implications of the Study**

Understanding how to cultivate a culture of completion at two-year community colleges is central to achieving significant gains in completion, locally and nationally. The results of this study confirmed that hosting a Community College Completion Corps signing event at a two-year institution has an influence on the campus stakeholders who participated in the planning and execution of the event, with potential to influence others who attended and participated in the event. As change agents at varying levels on their

respective campuses, the interviewees' perspectives on changing campus culture are important measures of potential advancement. The findings of this study further substantiated that this event, while influential, cannot stand alone as a singular component of institutional cultural change. It can contribute to strategic planning that seeks to expand the culture of the community college from open access to equally prioritize the importance of students earning their identified credential. The respondents identified several internal and external issues that create barriers for students to complete their community college degree program. To institutionalize completion strategies and interventions, it is crucial that the college-wide culture reflect, adopt, and integrate necessary changes to support student success.

### **Factors Influencing a Culture of Completion**

**Measurement.** Accurately measuring community college completion rates presents difficulties in institutions that serve a dynamic and varied student population. As the emphasis on college completion rates escalates, community colleges find themselves in a uniquely challenging position to quantify their impact. Leu et al. (2015) researched several of the emerging measurement resources in the community college field, comparing and contrasting key metrics such as what is measured, how it is measured, timeframe of measurement, and what types of students are included in the completion counts.

In addition to employing institutional change initiatives, when considering the impact and success of hosting and participating in the Community College Completion Corps program, institutions must determine how they will evaluate and measure the success and efficacy of the event as a first step of planning. This requires identifying

program objectives, outcomes, and goals. As evidenced in the interviews, most respondents were able to identify the cumulative total of pledges signed, but additional tracking is necessary to determine any significant impact on completion rates, as well as college-wide culture. STAFF 4 explained:

In some ways, when we first held our inaugural C4 signing event, we weren't as prepared as we might have been for really making an impact, college-wide. We set it up, as a small group on campus, quickly and with little formal planning, rather than really inviting everyone to get involved. That was a lesson learned for future planning, if we really want to measure our impact.

One opportunity for additional measure is to track the subsequent retention and graduation rates of students who have attended a C4 signing ceremony. Beyond attendance, institutional study could also differentiate between those who attended a ceremony or event but did not take the pledge and those who attended and did take the pledge. *What relationship exists, if any, between these levels of participation?* Further, to examine the influence on culture, faculty, staff, and administrators could participate in a baseline survey prior to a C4 event, assessing their understanding of the institutional prioritization of completion, and a similar survey after the event to determine any changes or improvements.

**Providing support for students.** Hirt and Frank (2013) identified a direct connection between support services and community college student success and completion. While some of the C4 signing events included internal and external student resources, stakeholder interviews reinforced the need to provide clear connections between students and related support services. The C4 signing event, while in some instances inclusive of resource awareness and promotion activities, requires additional programming and institutional engagement to increase awareness, access, and utilization

of support resources. An intervention is only as strong as its follow through, and while showcasing the advising, financial aid, tutoring, and career services is a recommended component of the event, additional exposure to the wrap-around services must help connect the students to completion facilitators on a more regular basis than a once a term or annual activity.

Several interviewees stated that in follow-up to a first-year C4 event, they either planned to or had already developed C4 signing events that incorporated exposure to multiple support resources. Hirt and Frank (2013) identified several emerging frameworks related to wrap-around services to support student completion, reflecting the unique and individual nature of the two-year institution population. ADMIN 5 described a system-wide focus on supporting the whole student by including an advising day event in the second year of their C4 programming. During the event, students received an academic degree audit and graduation plan to further solidify remaining academic requirements and promote graduation. ADMIN 5 shared, “We felt that by inviting our college advising team to become an integral component of the C4 week, we were creating a value added experience that promoted positive student planning and resource utilization.” ADMIN 3 recognized specific student populations to target with comprehensive C4 programming in the future and detailed their planning technique: “Our team created workshops designed for students with no identified major, students on academic probation, and students in financial aid jeopardy due to not meeting satisfactory standards of progress.” Other administrators further substantiated the opportunities for future impact beyond the initial implementation. ADMIN 9 noted, “We feel confident that C4’s potential for college-wide impact is open for expansion. There is so much more

we can do, so much more we are doing, that students simply aren't taking advantage of.”

**Initiatives create change.** The historical context of the community college mission centered on open access, with little to no focus on the importance of measuring completion and using that value to assess institutional effectiveness (Meier, 2013). Thus, the campus culture valued opening the admission doors to students from all walks of life, wiping away the admission barriers of test scores, high school rankings, and high tuition costs at selective admissions institutions. This resulted in campuses that served students of varied socio-economic and academic levels. In some respects, it created a culture of attempting to be all things to all people, despite having limited resources. ADMIN 4 reported that creating change through initiatives can happen in several ways, advocating for a grass-roots approach and substantiating that the C4 program affords colleges such an opportunity. ADMIN 4 explained:

First, students on our campuses are really incredible leaders. We have really incredible leaders on our campuses who are highly capable and are very thirsty for opportunities to lead initiatives on their campuses to engage in partnerships with the various offices such as the president, student affairs, academic affairs, faculty, and so we need to give those students the opportunities to be leaders.

McKlenney and Arnsperger (2012) conducted interviews with student groups and recommended driving institutions to make change according to student feedback.

**Financial preparedness.** The low-cost, affordable tuition offered at publicly funded community colleges is a direct result of the core mission of the two-year institution – open access. Forty-four percent of low-income students attend community college first, compared to only 15% of high-income students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). This means community college classrooms often consist of students who come from lower socio-economic families and demographics. Malcolm

(2013) confirmed that community colleges account for the largest representation of low-income, Pell-eligible, minority, and first-generation college students in higher education. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) reported 48% of all independent community college students earn less than \$20,000.

Because this population of low-income students is so prevalent in community colleges, students face issues not only paying for tuition and books, but also managing their own personal finances and lifestyle. Challenges such as covering rent, working multiple jobs, providing childcare expenses, and meeting health care and medical costs can have a significant impact on class attendance and class performance.

**Developmental education and college readiness.** Bailey and Cho (2010) examined the progression and success of students placed in developmental education courses. They noted the success rate decreased with every requirement and found a divide between the continued success and eventual completion of community college developmental students. The academic preparedness of students attending community colleges extended to both extremes of the spectrum, based on the community college's open access mission. Students who enrolled in a community college without a high school diploma, and, contingent upon institutional rules and regulations, even without a GED, had dramatic gaps in the academic skills necessary to succeed in the foundational core class requirements.

Addressing these deficiencies requires intensive remediation and an extensive investment of time and additional academic support. Powell (2013) suggested the most effective way to promote student retention, completion, and graduation was to address developmental education in new and innovative ways. To further the completion agenda,

institutions should approach each student testing below college level at the community college with a more comprehensive advising and support model. Such a focus on not only completing the required developmental coursework, but also achieving the identified community college credential may have implications on completion rates. STAFF 2 explained:

I often find students in my class who tested in to the lowest levels of remedial and developmental courses. The students share they never anticipated they would be able to attend college. While it is inspiring to see their sense of excitement, they are often overwhelmed both inside and outside of the classroom.

**Creating a culture of completion.** Meier (2013) explained the mission of the community college was heavily influenced by the social and economic needs of the community it serves. Changes in organizational focus, mission, and institutional priorities reflect the changing and competitive economic landscape within which each community college exists and competes. As the demand for a more educated, well trained workforce increases, the emphasis on college completion and graduation rates at community colleges must be reinforced in the cultural norms and behaviors of the two-year institution. Establishing community college student completion as the top institutional priority requires a high level of engagement, support, and investment of campus staff, faculty, students, and administrators, as well as external stakeholders whom the institution serves.

Kotter (2012) acknowledged that companies fail to initiate change by not having a clear vision. He recommended that for firms to implement change successfully, top leadership should begin by communicating the change initiative concisely and invitingly and encourage others to join in the collective effort. STAFF 7 observed:

The first year we had the event, only a handful of individuals participated. Mostly

students and the Phi Theta Kappa advisors participated. But by the second year, because our president became aware of the program at a statewide meeting, he got more engaged and through his leadership, the entire campus, at the very least, was aware of what was going on. It does require top level buy-in to set the culture and tone of the campus.

ADMIN 3 further solidified the importance of executive level leadership in initiating and supporting the change:

I started talking about C4 at the Cabinet level first. I knew my right-hand team needed to understand not only what this program was about, but also why our institution was participating and what we hoped to gain from it.

**Change leadership.** Because community colleges have primarily focused on student access rather than achievement, emphasizing completion requires a shift in the culture. Wallin (2010) predicted community colleges, like the local economies they support, could expect a dramatic amount of change in the coming decades. STAFF 3 explained, “Our campus is changing to prioritize completion. The process may be slow, but I think everyone is coming on board now that they better understand why we are hosting C4 events, why it matters.”

Kotter (2012) created a process for leaders to implement changes in organizational focus, and three of the phases are highly relevant to challenges community college leadership face. The first related phase is creating the guiding coalition.

According to ADMIN 1:

Everyone on our campus is involved from my office all the way to our janitorial staff. As I said before, all of our focus for our professional development days in fall and spring for all of the faculty, staff, and student leadership is focused on the completion agenda. So, everybody knows on our campus that we are all responsible.

Others interviewed during this study expressed the same importance of encouraging college wide participation at all stages of the completion event process, including before

and after efforts. STAFF 2 reiterated:

There was a full discussion of all stakeholders and they asked for feedback. Everyone knew there is a lot to supporting community college completion, it's complicated. The President's Team agreed and offered to provide whatever support was necessary. The president wanted to add things and take the concept even further. At the district level, the chancellor was involved in compression planning and wanted to move the needle on completion system-wide. Follow through was critical. The College President was actively engaged in every step of the process. She would even come and help person the orientation tables and get students to sign the pledge.

When the guiding coalition was far-reaching and included multiple levels of leadership, respondents saw an impact on the success of the completion event.

The next two phases of Kotter's leading change—developing a vision and strategy and communicating the change vision—exposed a potential weakness and area for improvement shared in many of the C4 events and activities. Because the level of pre- and post-planning efforts varied greatly, most people interviewed for the study did not share a clear vision or strategy for long-term impact. ADMIN 4 cautioned:

For us, it was the idea that it is very easy to set policy, or to think about things that should be done on our campuses, but without having the people that are on the ground to contribute to the conversations, to be a part of it, to lead it... Faculty, staff, students, administrators, even business people from the local communities. Without having them at the table, and being a stakeholder in which this is going to be organized, I think you won't have as solid of a product of the program without those collective voices at the table. So, having an advisory board is paramount.

Ancona (2012) introduced the 4-CAP change leadership model, identifying four primary characteristics of change leadership. Using the 4-CAP model to impart the importance of completion, campus stakeholders must employ sensemaking, relating, visioning, and inventing as an effective approach to achieving organizational cultural change. Sensemaking is rooted in organizational identity and the employee's ability to communicate the priorities of the institution. STAFF 8 explained, "Having a public event

C4, hanging banners, advertising the message across campus sent a strong message to everyone that completion matters and our institution is here to support it at every level.” Visual recognition and awareness of the cultural campus shift contributed to the college-wide engagement.

The relating, visioning, and inventing processes varied greatly among the respective stakeholders. STAFF 7 recounted, “We tried to make the process open, so people would help us create engaging events. But it was tough, based on our timeline and schedules, to get everyone involved. Time was against us.” Ancona (2012) explained that in the relating process, building relationships and trust required time, discussion, and campus wide engagement. Further, inventing—creating new structures to support change and new initiatives—must also afford appropriate resources and visible support to enact the change from theory to application. STAFF 3 shared, “Having a budget from our president showed his investment in making completion a priority and allowing us to make viable changes to impact student success.”

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study has several limitations associated with the generalizability and comprehensive impact of its findings. The sample population consisted of individuals associated with five community colleges in five states and one national organization. The national community college landscape boasts nearly 10.1 million students enrolled in public two-year colleges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Community colleges have an extensive footprint in communities nationally, responding to the dynamic needs of the communities they serve. The states encompassed in this study do not represent a huge breadth of geographical diversity but rather a small sample of the

two-year institution.

Bias is another limitation with the potential to have influenced the results of this study. The respondents interviewed all represented institutions. As employees of the selected community colleges, the respondents have a connection to the institution's culture, reputation, and effectiveness. Further, because the interviews involved a face-to-face engagement, either through internet web conference or in person, those interviewed may have felt an obligation to emphasize positive observations about program's potential for impact, rather than express any comments that might have been perceived as critical. Chenail (2011) offered two options to decrease bias, including interviewing the interviewer and pilot testing. This study used pilot testing to limit bias, but interviewing the interviewer may have provided an additional opportunity to explore potential bias in the questions and interview structure.

The scope of the questions related to completion was not exhaustive or representative of the many issues community college students face when attempting to complete their college degrees. Mental health, family issues, personal relationships, and many other factors beyond the sphere of influence of the two-year institution can contribute significant barriers to persistence and progress. This limits the results and recommendations to the ideas and topics identified through the interviews. As such, readers are encouraged not to view these findings as a comprehensive listing of all college completion barriers and potential interventions.

### **Recommendations**

Community college completion is a complicated issue that requires high level and cross-campus collaboration to achieve the greatest improvement. On-campus leaders

must consider the cultural components facilitating and impeding college completion. To realize change, the institution's leaders must implement a change leadership model, such as Kotter's leading change or the 4-CAP change leadership program, to meet the specific needs of their respective campuses. Adjusting institutional priorities requires multi-level buy-in and engagement to transition the culture to focus on completion. Programs such as the Community College Completion Corps offer institutions a low-cost opportunity to begin transforming the campus culture to focus on a measure of student success that relies on completion and graduation rates.

This research focused on one central research question, examining the perception of community college faculty, staff, and administrators who participated in a C4 signing event on their campuses regarding the event's ability to promote a culture of completion. Based on the interviews conducted and the subsequent analysis, the researcher found most interview subjects did perceive an impact of the events on the institution's awareness of the strategic prioritization of college completion. However, based on the responses collected and experiences shared during this study, the researcher acknowledged that fully realizing a college-wide culture of completion required a much richer, deeper, and substantive change from institutional leadership. Kotter (2012) advocated for leaders initiating change to form a guiding coalition in which members are empowered to act and led by a sense of urgency. Based on the study, the researcher further acknowledged the importance of leading change effectively and recommended college administrators and stakeholders define specific, targeted measurements that accurately assess effectiveness through collaborative discussion among campus stakeholders and thorough study of institutional demographics.

Focusing on achieving high levels of degree completion at the community college required a significant change at the two-year institution, both in theory and in institutional action. As the literature suggested, for leaders to effectively generate multi-level campus involvement in initiatives to improve college completion, the researcher recognized college administrators must employ certain elements of change leadership. Interview participants representing both staff and administrators regularly referenced the importance of creating college-wide involvement that aligns policies to reflect completion as a priority, reflecting the study's first subquestion. Tinto (1975) has long emphasized the importance of institutional commitment to student success as a pillar for achieving significant improvement in student completion.

Upon review and analysis of the interview transcripts, as well as the literature review, the researcher acknowledged the importance of college-wide engagement and accountability for the highest impact of C4 signing events. The researcher also observed in interviews affirmations that practice and policy must mirror the institution's goals and objectives to cultivate a culture of completion. In the most successful events and campus transitions, the researcher identified a spirit of collaboration and visible administrative support and allocated resources. Ultimately, the researcher determined that two-year colleges with both theoretical and operational alignment of completion priorities were best poised to establish a culture of completion, reinforcing Tinto's institutional commitment measure (1975).

Specifically, in the interviews recounting the most successful C4 events, the researcher identified components of both the 4-Cap Change model and Kotter's model for leading change. Several participants validated the researcher's interest in C4 planning and

events for the presence of change leadership qualities because the shared-governance model of the community college required multi-level engagement and an invitation to participate in completion activities. Ancona (2012) defined relating, visioning, inventing, and sensemaking as the 4-Cap Change model. The interviews convinced the researcher that C4 events were most impactful when various levels of the institution's leadership came together to plan, promote, and participate. By having a voice and role in the initiative, they could relate, envision, and invent a culture of completion for their respective campuses.

The researcher believed sensemaking—connecting the dots of why college completion is important to the various stakeholders—was not always included but is equally important to the process of establishing a culture of completion. Weick (1995) defined sensemaking as commitment to generating visible changes in organizational behavior. The findings convinced the researcher that community colleges can fully achieve and sustain a culture of completion by encouraging changes not just in student behavior, but, more importantly, in behavior at every level of the organization.

The importance of community college completion rates as a measure associated with institutional effectiveness and funding will continue to emerge as a performance expectation standard, rather than a suggested metric, across the field of higher education in the coming decades. Economic and job market indicators will all contribute greatly to the need for a larger pipeline of college graduates who boast a minimum of a two-year credential or degree. Beyond the data, change leaders and other invested stakeholders in two-year institutions have a great responsibility to realize the full extent of the transformational benefits of supporting students to completion. According to ADMIN 9:

Many Board members stated it would take courageous leadership of presidents to reveal to their Boards and the press unfavorable data. I felt it wasn't so much courageous as it was a moral responsibility to do what they were elected to do.

The path toward achieving higher community college accountability in student completion will require leaders who are not only prepared to enact substantive change, but who also have the courage to face the challenges and the rewards of revamping a culture in its entirety.

### **Conclusion**

A qualitative study and its findings confirmed that while hosting a Community College Completion Corps event on a campus provided an opportunity to begin an intentional shift of the culture toward one of completion rather than just open access, campus leaders must support and reinforce its ideals through institutionalization of the completion agenda. Data analysis and coding illuminated several key themes and areas in which two-year college campuses should devote resources and planning to promote completion. Seeking out college-wide engagement and participation in C4 events and other college completion initiatives strengthens the institution's ability to establish and maintain a culture of completion. Community colleges leaders who prioritize the achievement of full and rich institutional change have the greatest potential for impact on student success and completion.

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Appendix A

Community College Completion Corps Participant Interview Questionnaire

### **Community College Completion Corps Participant Interview Questionnaire**

Hello and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview designed to explore your perceptions surrounding the C4/community college completion events your community college held. My name is Jennifer Blalock and I am a doctoral student in the Fischler School of Education at Nova Southeastern. I will ask you a series of questions and record your answers, verbatim, for the purposes of the research associated with my dissertation. Please feel free to request that I reread a question, provide further clarification, or to conclude the interview at any time. This interview should take no more than 45 minutes and consists of 9 questions. Your responses will be kept confidential and you will be given an opportunity to review the transcription of the interview to provide revisions, ask questions, or approve any responses. You will be given a copy of the questions and a copy of the C4 student and champion pledge. Do you have any questions at this time? If not, we will now begin the interview.

Hello and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview designed to explore your perceptions surrounding the C4/community college completion events your community college participated in. My name is Jennifer Blalock and I am a doctoral student in the Fischler School of Education at Nova Southeastern. I will ask you a series of questions and record your answers, verbatim, for the purposes of the research associated with my dissertation. Please feel free to request that I reread a question, provide further clarification, or to conclude the interview at any time. This interview should take no more than 45 minutes and consists of 9 questions. Your responses will be kept confidential and you will be given an opportunity to review the transcription of the interview to provide revisions, ask questions, or approve any responses. You will be given a copy of the questions and a copy of the C4 student and champion pledge. Do you have any questions at this time? If not, we will now begin the interview.

1. (a) Has student completion been identified as a priority on your campus, institution, or system, or all of these? (b) How do you perceive the importance of improving college completion and graduation as it relates to institutional prioritization? (c) If you characterize college completion and graduation as a top institutional priority, what evidence have you seen to support this institutional effort? If you do not, what other priorities do you feel are elevated above it?
2. How were informed of the C4 program? From your knowledge, how did your campus become involved with C4 and what do you believe to be the rationale for engagement with C4?
3. (a) Please describe the circumstances that led to your engagement in student completion programming and initiatives, including C4, on your campus and/or within your community college system? (b) What other campus/system stakeholders were invited to participate in the C4 events and planning? (c) In your opinion, was the C4 planning, preparation, and event collaborative? If not, who are the other groups or stakeholders you believe should be included in the planning or encouraged to become more actively engaged in the focus and related initiatives?
4. Based on the national focus on graduation rates, the concept of establishing a

“culture of completion” has been introduced to the field and consequently, is often identified as a strategic priority of two-year institutions. (a) Have you ever heard this phrase used? (b) What does this phrase “culture of completion” mean to you? (c) To what degree do you think a culture of completion has been established on your campus/in your college system?

5. What activities took place during the C4 events you participated in? [Prompt, if needed: Did the signings occur as expected? What about any other activities?]
6. What, in your view, are the most significant barriers to completion on your campus? Did the C4 event attempt to connect students with resources to overcome the various barriers to completion and if so, how? What facilitators exist on campus toward achieving a culture of completion here? Were any a direct result of or related to the C4 event, in your opinion?
7. (a) In general, what actions has your department/institution taken to support student completion, post-C4 completion ceremony? (b) In your opinion, what has worked most effectively and which efforts, if any, have failed to meet your expectations?
8. How do/did you evaluate the impact and success C4 event(s) in which you participated? What, in your opinion, worked well at these events and what areas could be enhanced or integrated for future ceremonies?
9. Please take a moment to review the C4 commitment pledges for both students and for faculty/staff/administrators provided to you. (a). Which pledge did you take (if any) or which pledge would be applicable to you?  
(b). What is/was your initial reaction to the student pledge?  
(c). What is/was your initial reaction to the faculty/staff/administrator pledge?  
(d). In your view, what is one strength of each of the pledges and what is one weakness?

Appendix B

Community College Student Completion Pledge

### **Community College Student Completion Pledge**

I pledge the following:

I accept the responsibility for my commitment to complete a college credential; I understand its importance to my future success; and I pledge to help one other student make and honor the same commitment.

Appendix C

Community College Transfer Champion Pledge

### **Community College Transfer Champion Pledge**

I pledge the following:

As a community college administrator, faculty, or staff member, I commit and pledge to promote practices and strategies that will produce 50% more students with high-quality degrees and certificates by 2020. I call upon every sector and constituency of my college and community to join me in this work.