

DEFINING STUDENT SUCCESS: AN EXAMINATION OF HOW FACULTY, STAFF, AND  
ADMINISTRATORS INTERPRET AND ACT UPON INSTITUTIONAL “COLLEGE  
COMPLETION” POLICIES AND PRACTICES

A Thesis

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by

Imran Majid

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Abstract  
of  
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Higher education institutions in the United States face a national imperative to boost student persistence and overall educational attainment amidst vacillating fiscal resources and growth in the non-traditional student body. According to Cominole, Radford, and Skomsvold (2015), 25% of all undergraduates in the United States worked full-time in 2011, and 34% of students also delayed postsecondary enrollment for at least one year after high school. However, existing literature suggests that faculty, staff, and administrators should develop an understanding of the variations and commonalities within a student’s educational journey, and develop specific policies, practices, and programs to ensure his/her success (Chaplot, Jenkins, Johnstone, & Rassen, 2013). Therefore, postsecondary institutions—including the California State University (CSU) system—are striving to develop a better understanding on how students learn, engage, and involve themselves with their college or university.

Because students come from a variety of academic and economic backgrounds, they may enter the college or university with different levels of knowledge and expertise in navigating personal (e.g., a lack of financial resources) and institutional (e.g., inaccurate placement programs) barriers. Higher education institutions also often contain separate colleges or departments that do not have a history of interacting with each other (Weick, 1976). Therefore,

students may have different and inconsistent interactions with various campus departments, divisions, and staff. These exchanges may either assist or impede the student's ability to make timely progression or completion of his/her degree or certificate (Chaplot et al., 2013). Given these factors, higher education institutions may face difficulty in preventing barriers and aligning their culture, processes, and structures with the needs and expectations of every student.

This exploratory research project utilized an organizational perspective, along with qualitative data, to explore these institutional barriers within the College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies (SSIS) at Sacramento State. Given the national focus on college completion, changes in California's demographics and economic trends, and the university's non-traditional student body and historically low four-year graduation rate, Sacramento State represents a unique opportunity to investigate potentially longstanding institutional barriers that may impede student completion of a degree. I conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with faculty, staff, and administrators and six student focus groups across four academic departments within SSIS to develop an insight on the potential factors driving the College's student success metrics relative to the rest of Sacramento State. While the role of SSIS in promoting student success was unclear, I found that there is "misalignment," or a lack of consensus between different role-alike groups (such as between students and faculty), about how to best determine, implement, and oversee student success practices and initiatives.

While I explored policies about academic preparation, student supports, and course standards, each stakeholder group in my study possessed different views on how to best improve student success at Sacramento State. In general, I found that: a) administrators wanted greater collaboration and communication between academic departments and the university's central coordinating divisions (i.e., Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and the President's Office); b)

faculty desired access to resources, such as student progression and post-college data, and greater institutional support to more effectively track, advise, and mentor students; and c) students wished for more consistent, reliable information about transfer and graduation requirements and timely communication about the availability of campus support systems, such as the Women's Resource Center.

Because of the small sample and the specialized nature of my research, this study does not have any definitive, generalizable, findings for the university overall, but there are critically important implications for Sacramento State and SSIS. For example, Sacramento State may want to first consider defining student success, including how the effects of specific initiatives will be measured over time. This systematic conceptualization is important in order for key academic personnel (i.e., faculty, staff, advisers, etc.) to understand the university's goals and how they will be operationalized. Furthermore, Sacramento State may also want to examine the following five factors as part of its student success initiatives: mission and culture, the role of SSIS, faculty support, advising systems, and data collection. Improvement in these areas may lead to better centralization and coordination of student success programs and services, fewer bureaucratic barriers, and a smoother path to completion for students.

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## DEDICATION

To my cousins Laylah and Kasim: wherever you are, wherever you go, may you always find success, love, and happiness.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Seven years ago, I failed an English class in my first semester of college after receiving all A's and B's in high school. The people I have met since that difficult time have given me more strength, inspiration, and hope than I can possibly describe here.

To my former staff members at *The Connection*, thank you for allowing me to explore my passion for writing and telling stories. For the very first time in my life, I actually felt that I belonged, and the work that I did mattered. Cory and Rubina, I am forever grateful for your mentorship and intelligent advice. I was resistant at first, but becoming news editor that semester was an incredibly rewarding experience. I was given the opportunity to cover the community college budget shortfall, and it was my first foray in trying to understand higher education and state policy. Who knew it would eventually motivate me to attend graduate school?

To my former co-workers at Bel Air 525, thank you for your genuine words of kindness and encouragement to persevere. Thank you for the flexible schedule, humor and jokes (including "Easy Mac"), and friendships and validation. To Michelle, you are my second mom. Thank you for your heartfelt laughter, your incessant compassion, and your everlasting love and support.

To my former reporters and editors at *The State Hornet*, I am lucky to have worked with such a talented and dedicated team. Thank you for your trust and friendliness, optimism and enthusiasm, and hard work and unselfishness. Joe and Ryan, I learned an incredible amount about management and leadership from you both. Thank you for your guidance and inspiration, and for cultivating my self-determination into success.

To the faculty, staff, administrators, and students who supported and participated in this study, thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedules to share your invaluable thoughts and perceptions about student success. I developed a better understanding on why improving

student success is such a difficult and complex endeavor, and it was a truly enlightening professional experience.

To the Public Policy and Administration (PPA) department, your wisdom and dedication to this program cannot be understated. I discovered at least one new tool in every class, and I applied so much of what I learned to this thesis. Thank you for instilling me with perspectives on how to understand and frame policy problems and solutions, for helping me become a better analytical and intelligent writer, and for showing me the beauty and greatness of Munger's Triangle. I also want to give a special thank you to Andrea Venezia and Charles Gossett for their expertise and relentless support. Andrea, I was actually quite terrified that I would never finish this project, but your positivity and reassurance to persist served as the calmly motivating voice that I desperately needed. Thank you.

To my student colleagues within PPA, thank you for making this program even more fun and interesting. I genuinely feel that I bonded with all of you in some way, although mostly through class projects and assignments. Brian, thank you for not only assisting me with my research, but for being a true friend and a brilliant leader.

Last but not least, to my family, you have always been the one constant of my life that I could always count on for encouragement. Mom, Dad, Sahar, and Omair, you have so much faith in me to succeed and do well. Please know that I love you all very much, and I hope to always make you proud.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

The United States needs more college-educated workers to obtain a series of societal, economic, and global benefits; consequently, postsecondary institutions are facing an increasing amount of scrutiny from state and federal decision-makers to accelerate completion for a growing number of students. However, given the dynamic and complex social, academic, financial, and institutional factors that can affect a student's likelihood to persist and graduate, colleges and universities must work to align their policies and structures with what students need for success. Students may not only encounter institutional barriers, such as a lack of available courses, a misunderstanding of transfer or graduation requirements, and a low level of institutional support and outreach, but also encounter serious personal and external barriers, such as a lack of financial aid, family and life hardships, and a low level of academic preparedness. Therefore, to increase the chances of student success, colleges and universities should develop strategies to meet the highly individualized needs of attendees—and understand the incentives and consequences related to those strategies.

Higher education institutions may pursue various tools and reforms to support successful and timely degree completion. These strategies include developing innovative programs that assist students in understanding and reaching their respective academic goals, eliminating institutional barriers that prevent timely progress and degree completion (such as ineffective assessment and placement policies), and fostering an organizational culture oriented towards an understanding of the student experience. This

challenge is exceedingly difficult in large colleges and universities, which may contain highly decentralized academic departments, programs and entities, and colleges and divisions. Given this autonomy, students may experience inconsistent and disconnected educational expectations throughout their path to completion, including misunderstandings about the intended purpose of their chosen major. Moreover, students' interactions with these various departments and divisions can determine their sense of comfort and belonging within the institution, which may influence their decision to persist. To increase the odds of timely completion, the student's actions and decisions should be tracked and measured, allowing institutional actors to intervene if the student displays obvious signs of non-persistence, such as switching from full- to part-time enrollment.

While students have a responsibility for their own educational success, higher education institutions can share that responsibility through the support they provide within the student "life cycle"—their time at the institution (Hinkle, Jobe, Kaplan, & Spencer, 2016). By keeping students at the center of cross-departmental collaboration and other campus-wide coordinative efforts, colleges and universities can reduce complexity and develop consistent policies and practices to ensure students believe that they are supported and connected to the institution, obtain a clear understanding of course requirements, and are tracked, advised, and mentored throughout their educational journey. Alignment between what the faculty, administrators, and other staff intend to provide students, and what students actually experience in their courses, academic and campus engagements, and post-college life may lead to greater uniformity of interactions

that the institution can then use to drive decision-making and as evidence for improvements.

To better understand the presence and implications of this alignment, this thesis studies the perceptions about student success policies and practices within a large four-year public university. Specifically, I explore faculty, staff, administrator, and student views about institutional barriers that prevent sufficient student progression and degree completion within the College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies (SSIS) at Sacramento State. Through 23 interviews with SSIS faculty, staff, and administrators and six student focus groups, my research not only provides insight into the potential factors driving student success metrics in SSIS, but also discusses areas for improvement for SSIS and Sacramento State.

As a publicly funded institution, Sacramento State possesses a responsibility to educate and graduate students, but the university has one of the lowest four-year graduation rates in the California State University (CSU) system. Fewer than one in 10 first-time freshmen graduate from Sacramento State in four years, a number that has been held relatively constant for the past 30 years (Nelsen, 2016). By underserving its student body, Sacramento State risks several unintended consequences for students, such as decreased lifetime earnings, increased debt, and limited space for new students to enroll. While all colleges and universities vary based on such factors as their leadership, student demographics, and institutional resources, Sacramento State represents an interesting opportunity to investigate the presence of potentially longstanding institutional barriers that may impede timely completion, specifically from the perspectives of faculty, staff,

administrators, and students within the university's largest college. It also has a new Administration—one that entered with a clear focus on student learning and success. This thesis is intended to help the new Administration.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, I describe in more detail the implications of moving toward a completion model instead of a traditional access model; the latter is the historical approach within higher education in California and nationally. Then, I describe how the CSU system is confronting this challenge to boost student progression and degree completion in the midst of shifting demographic and budgetary realities. Next, I provide a brief overview of the contextual factors shaping the current four-year graduation rate within Sacramento State and SSIS. Finally, I describe my study and provide a roadmap for the rest of my thesis.

### **From Access to Completion: The Changing Priorities of Higher Education**

For the past half-century, most state and federal educational policies have focused on improving access to higher education through the provision of sufficient institutional funding and student financial aid. Yet there has been a recent realization by state and federal decision-makers that simply focusing on the access side of the equation, without a simultaneous commitment to the completion of a program of study, will not guarantee future educational and economic success (Swail, 2002).

While an unrelenting focus on boosting enrollment figures has successfully expanded access to higher education since 1965, it has also incentivized higher education institutions to bring students in, but not necessarily help students move towards completion (Hearn, 2015). Moreover, national gains in enrollment levels have not been

accompanied by similar gains in students' academic progress, program persistence, or overall educational attainment (Hearn, 2015). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2016), the United States ranked 10<sup>th</sup> among the top 35 developed countries in the number of individuals aged 25-34 with a postsecondary degree in 2015. This ranking has steadily declined over time, indicating that the United States needs better college completion outcomes in order to remain globally competitive. While estimations vary and the effects are disputed, some workforce experts project that the United States will now face a five million postsecondary degree shortfall by 2020 (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013). As a result of these concerns and trends, policy debates surrounding higher education have shifted from access to success issues, and holding colleges and universities accountable for achieving measurable outputs such as higher graduation rates. Publicly funded higher education institutions—including Sacramento State—have an obligation to help avoid lost economic opportunity and prevent millions of citizens from becoming locked out of the middle and upper classes.

As a result of new technologies, economic conditions, and globalization, higher education institutions are in a strategic position to serve as the link between a growing demand by employers for college-educated workers, and a growing demand by students for a postsecondary degree. Between 2004 and 2014, enrollment in all degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 17%, from 17.3 million to 20.2 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Moreover, students are entering higher education with varying experiences, knowledge, and expectations. While traditional students are usually

between the ages of 18 and 22, receive parental financial support, and live on campus, there has been a substantial growth in the number of students who do not fall into this category (Cominole, Radford, & Skomsvold, 2015). While descriptions vary, researchers generally consider non-traditional students to have at least one of the following characteristics: being independent for financial aid purposes; having one or more dependents; being a single caregiver; not having a traditional high school diploma; delaying postsecondary enrollment; attending school part-time; and being employed full-time (Cominole, Radford, & Skomsvold, 2015). Using this definition, 76% of all college undergraduates within the United States met at least one criterion in 2011 (Cominole, Radford, & Skomsvold, 2015). Therefore, in developing policies and programs to support students, higher education institutions should also ensure the services provided are responsive and sensitive to the wide-ranging needs of non-traditional students, such as on-campus child care programs.

To prevent students from becoming lost and disconnected from their educational aspirations, colleges and universities are beginning to unravel the “black box” of students’ experiences within their respective organization. This includes understanding why certain groups of students are more likely to not complete their degree or certificate. For example, 9% of students born in the lowest income quartile completed bachelor’s degrees between 2000 and 2007, compared to 54% of students from the highest-income quartile (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Moreover, in 2009, 37% of white adults between the ages 25 and 29 possessed a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 19% of African-Americans and 12% of Hispanic adults (Root Cause, 2010). Given the potential shortage

of college-educated workers, colleges and universities will need to close these opportunity and achievement gaps to ensure economic vitality. However, in order for this to occur, there must first be a change in the way colleges and universities approach student success efforts and adopt institution-wide policies and procedures.

### **The Need for Change Within Higher Education**

Given higher education's shifting priorities—combined with changing demographics with regards to who enrolls in higher education, mounting pressure to demonstrate value (in the form of increased rates of certificate and degree completion), and growth in hybrid and online education—colleges and universities are being asked to reconsider their infrastructures and processes, and deliver a clearer value proposition that will lead to a sustainable financial future (Swanger, 2016). However, the traditional models of higher education management have come under scrutiny for being too slow, inefficient, and unresponsive in responding to these changes.

Colleges and universities tend to be loosely coupled systems, with separate colleges or academic departments that may not have a history of interacting with each other. Not only do these isolations create various pockets of autonomy, but may cause higher education institutions to become compartmentalized, less coordinated, and decentralized (Weick, 1976). Therefore, faculty and staff may have a stronger affiliation with their discipline and department than with the college or university, which could keep them from working collaboratively, participating in college-wide improvements, and implementing large-scale changes that could benefit students (Weick, 1976; Callan, 2013). Because new approaches—such as concurrent remediation and changes in unit

requirements—lack clear, immediate evidence of effectiveness, there are few incentives to undertake disruptive transformative change within higher education (Morris & Setser, 2015). The impact of specific teaching methods or curricular changes may be clear only after a number of years, and the measures most likely will be indirect, such as graduate test scores or successes in the job market (Eckel, Green, Hill, & Mallon, 1999).

Since students may encounter a variety of personal and institutional barriers to completion—including incomplete access to college resources, inadequate college and career guidance, and academic misalignment throughout the K-14 system—changes within programs and the institution can ensure students complete college in a timely fashion (Bansal, 2015). However, it may sometimes be unclear what specific policies should be changed. For example, determining course scheduling is a product of many different factors, such as faculty availability; student demand; classroom or lab availability; accessibility of resources for certain course materials; and costs (Chaplot, Jenkins, Johnstone, & Rassen, 2013). However, the student engages with all of those components in a singular experience through enrollment; if the course is not available, it could be for many different reasons (Chaplot et al., 2013). If the academic leaders and administrators are not able to identify the root cause of the issue, then the problem may not be fully addressed for future students. Therefore, higher education stakeholders may need to collaborate to understand what students experience on their way to completion, and recognize the institutional processes that leads to that experience. By bringing together groups of people with different ideas, approaches, experiences, areas of expertise, people can create a receptive environment for generating concepts and

methods, including determining a clear sense of purpose, identifying new solutions, scaling proven innovations, and reducing overlap between different programs and services (Becker, Burns, & Crow, 2015).

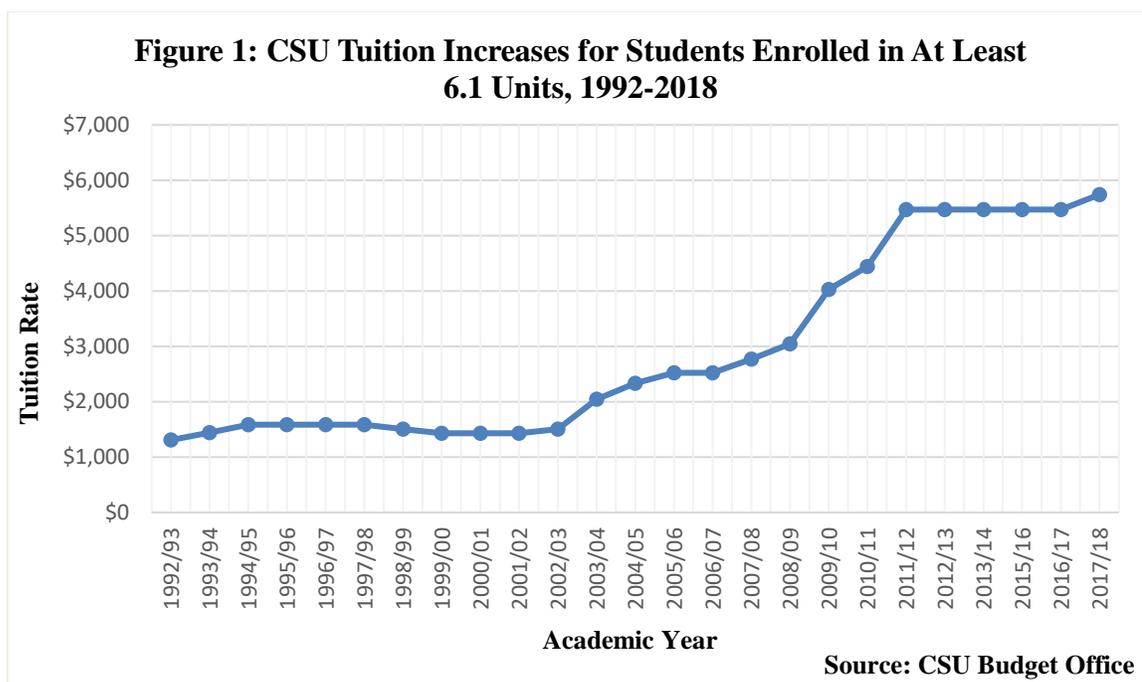
In Chapter 2, I review the literature and describe efforts to understand the various factors that influence student success, persistence, and completion. Moreover, I describe in greater detail the institutional barriers—such as culture and structure—that can prevent sufficient change and collaboration, as well as the strategies and tools available to colleges and universities to assist students in reaching their academic goals. However, there remains an inherent tension on whether higher education can expand access and affordability during a time when it must provide more high-quality degrees and certificates. This challenge is further made complicated within California, which continues to face additional demographic and economic challenges.

### **Budget Cuts and Diversity: The Story of Higher Education in California**

After decades of serving as a national and international leader in providing businesses and workplaces with qualified and well-trained degree-holders, California is struggling to achieve better completion results from its higher education systems (Callan, 2013). According to the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) Higher Education Center (2011), California will need 1.1 million additional college graduates by 2030 in order to meet economic demands. Similar to national trends, the PPIC acknowledged expanding access to higher education may help shrink this gap, but recommended state and education leaders pursue policies that will increase the likelihood students stay in

college and earn degrees. However, this challenge must be addressed with fewer fiscal resources, despite a growing population of minorities and working-age adults.

Between 2007 and 2012, state appropriations for the University of California (UC) and CSU declined 30%, or \$2 billion, even as enrollment increased (Cook, Johnson, Murphy, & Weston, 2014). As the state's universities transitioned the burden of cost from the state to its students, the UC and CSU were left to find additional funding by increasing tuition rates and cutting expenses. While the Great Recession resulted in fewer courses, fewer staff, and declining student services across California's colleges and universities, the state's disinvestment from higher education is the product of a long-term trend since the establishment of the Master Plan in 1960. The Master Plan guaranteed inexpensive access for high school students into the state's community colleges and universities, but California's General Fund support for its postsecondary systems has declined from 17% to 12% between 1967 and 2012 (Johnson, 2012). In response to these reductions in state subsidies, the UC and CSU tripled tuition rates between 1987 and 2017 to cover the institutional costs of educating a growing number of students amidst reductions in state subsidies (Cook, 2017). While per-student tuition revenue within the UC and CSU more than doubled between 2002 and 2012, General Fund support per student has fallen by approximately 50% (Cook, Johnson, Murphy, & Weston, 2014; Johnson, 2012). Moreover, between 1980 and 2014, the CSU enrolled 53% more full-time students, while the UC raised its full-time enrollment by 93% (California Budget Project, 2014).



While there is an increasing national demand for a more skilled and knowledgeable workforce, California ranks 49<sup>th</sup> among states in the percentage of undergraduate students enrolled in a four-year university (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). Moreover, an estimated 4.5 million working-age adults in California have participated in postsecondary education at some point in time, but never received a credential or degree (Callan, 2013). Consequently, California ranks 45<sup>th</sup> in its bachelor's degree completion rate among its college-age population (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). Without a degree or certificate, individuals may experience several undesirable consequences, such as decreased lifetime earnings. According to Carnevale, Gulish, & Jayasundera (2015), 97% of jobs that paid \$53,000 or more annually went to college graduates in the aftermath of the Great Recession, while workers with a high-school diploma or less have lost 39,000 good jobs since 2010. Moreover, by subsidizing

higher education, federal and state governments also receive a direct financial return, as degree-holders are more likely rely less on income support programs. Only 2% of college-educated households relied on Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) in 2011, compared to 12% of high school graduate households (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013).

California is also becoming increasingly younger and more diverse than the rest of the United States, creating additional demographic and economic challenges in boosting postsecondary attainment. Between 1980 and 2060, the proportion of all minorities is expected to increase from 29% to 70%; the proportion of working-age Hispanics alone is expected to grow from 16% to 48% (Callan, 2013; Bansal, 2015). Hispanics also represent more than 45% of all 15-24 year olds in California (Bansal, 2015). Therefore, with the present and predicted future demographics, low-income, first-generation, and minority college students may face significant and disproportionate barriers to postsecondary access and success. Currently, only 16% of Hispanics possess some post-secondary degree compared to 51% of Whites, not only suggesting a significant opportunity gap but also raising concern that the state's future degree holders will not accurately reflect California's shifting population groups (Bansal, 2015).

In summary, California is facing a significant loss of potential college graduates, and is in danger of not meeting workforce demands and losing out on the societal benefits that come from a highly educated citizenry. However, the state's higher education institutions—including the CSU—continue to pursue policies, procedures, and practices designed to boost current student completion rates.

### *California State University*

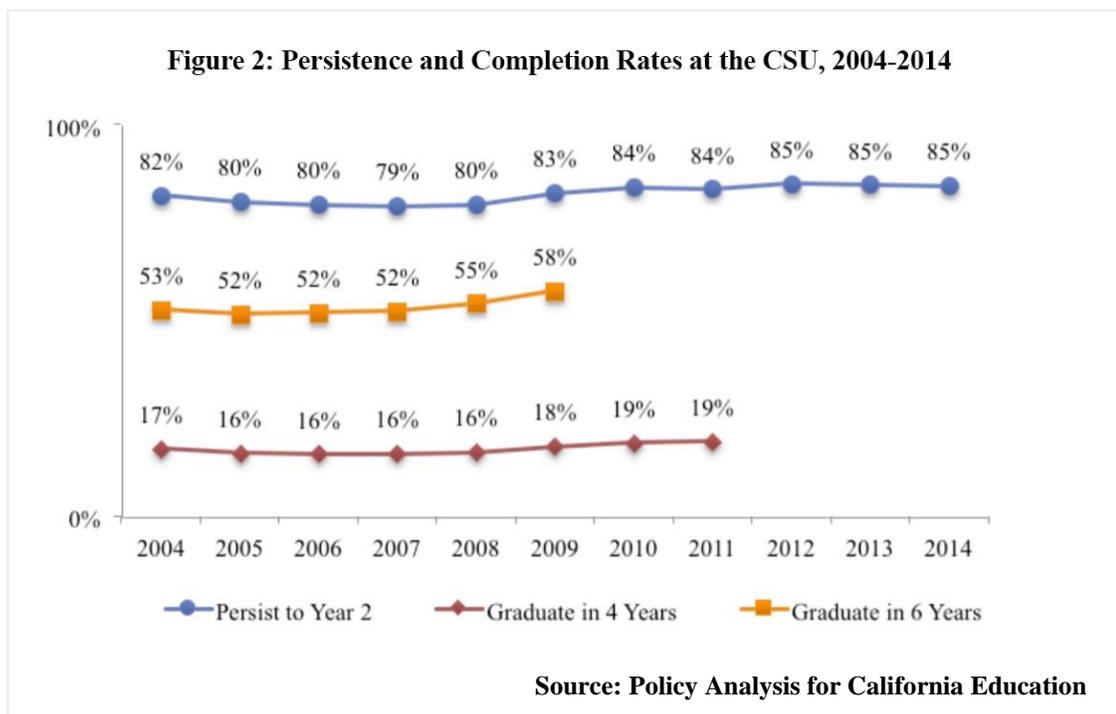
With its mission to “encourage and provide access to an excellent education to all who are prepared for and wish to participate in collegiate study,” the CSU initially expressed a commitment to the “knowledge and competencies that students derive from the baccalaureate experience,” rather than years-to- or units-to-degree (CSU Public Affairs, 2017; CSU Academic Senate, 1997). However, the CSU adopted several policies beginning in the late 1980s to guide its students on the path to a degree, and ensure successful academic careers.

To ensure that high school and transfer students entered the university academically ready for the rigor of college work, the CSU aligned its eligibility requirements with those of the UC beginning in 1988. Applicants need four years of college preparatory English, three years of college preparatory math, and one year of a laboratory science in order to be considered for admission (CSU Academic Senate, 1997). Known as the A-G subject requirements, the CSU intended to lower the number of first-time freshmen needing remediation. However, the percentage of freshmen that required English remediation rose from 38% in 1989 to 43% in 1996. Moreover, 53% of first-time freshmen needed math remediation in 1996, up from 23% in 1989 (Murray, 2008). In response to these growing trends, the CSU Board of Trustees set a goal in 1996 to lower its remediation rate to 10% by 2007 (Naqvi, 2014). Moreover, the CSU adopted Executive Order 665 in 1998, which required all new first-time freshmen to complete remediation within their first year (Naqvi, 2014). Finally, the CSU implemented the Early Assessment Program (EAP) in 2004 to help students improve their skills during their last

two years of high school so they are prepared to perform college-level work once they graduate (Murray, 2008). If junior-year students demonstrated proficiency in both English and math based on a placement test, they are deemed college-ready. Students who receive a score of “conditional” or “conditionally ready” on the EAP can demonstrate proficiency by enrolling in an approved course during their senior year and earning a C grade or better (Naqvi, 2014).

While the CSU attempted to increase college persistence and completion by raising the number of college-ready students, the collective university system continues to experience high remediation and low graduation rates. For example, approximately 50% of first-time freshmen in 2006 graduated within six years, but nearly 56% needed remediation (Case, Kurlaender, & Lusher, 2017). Moreover, there remains substantial differences in college readiness among underrepresented students. According to the CSU Division of Analytic Studies (2006), 26% of White first-time freshmen needed remediation in 2006, compared to African-Americans (63%), Asians (58%), and Latinos (58%).

In response to these trends and calls for increased performance and accountability, the CSU launched its first Graduation Initiative (GI) in 2009 to increase six-year graduation rates for first-time full-time freshmen, raise its overall six-year graduation rate, and halve achievement gaps by 2015 (CSU Office of the Chancellor, 2016). While the CSU raised its six-year graduation rate to 54% by improving college readiness, increasing access to student support services, and increasing course availability across



individual campuses, graduation rates were already on the rise prior to the GI's adoption (CSU Office of the Chancellor, 2016; Cook & Jackson, 2016). Despite raising the graduation rates of underrepresented minorities to 50%, the CSU did not close the achievement gap between racial and ethnic groups (Cook & Jackson, 2016). Moreover, as part of the GI, the CSU launched its Early Start program in 2012, which required incoming first-time freshmen to begin remedial coursework prior to their first semester. However, in a study conducted by Case et al. (2017), the researchers did not find a consistent positive effect between enrollment in Early Start and student persistence or achievement. The CSU also experienced larger increases in graduation rates towards the end of the initiative—when new programs and policies began to make an impact on freshmen students—but several campuses did not reach their specific graduation rate

increase targets, including Sacramento State (Cook & Jackson, 2016). Completion rates also varied widely across the CSU. In 2015, six-year campus graduation rates ranged from 35% to 76% (Cook & Jackson, 2016).

Recognizing continuing and severe attainment gaps among first-time freshmen and transfer students, the CSU updated its GI in 2016 to reflect new ambitious goals for 2025. Specifically, the CSU placed a greater focus on removing obstacles to receiving a bachelor's degree by ensuring students were academically prepared through pre-matriculation efforts, improved advising, and supplemental academic support (CSU Office of the Chancellor, 2016). In an April 2016 report to the Legislature, the CSU pledged to provide its students a greater sense of belonging and connectedness while strengthening academic and social integration—factors known to influence student retention and timely graduation (CSU Office of the Chancellor, 2016; Tinto, 1975). Therefore, by removing barriers to student success, the CSU expects to increase its first-time freshmen four-year graduation rate from 19% to 40%, and the two-year graduation rate of transfer students from 31% to 45% by 2025 (Cook & Jackson, 2016).

To reach its collective goal, the CSU required each individual campus to adopt a strategic plan with specific actions and policies to improve its respective graduation rates. While many of these plans included proposals to strengthen advising, enhance digital degree planners, expand early alert systems, and expand orientations, there is uncertainty on the overall effects of such policies (CSU Office of the Chancellor, 2016). The outcomes of many actions are known only after a significant lapse of time and only after other events have occurred that “explain” the actual outcomes (Eckel et al., 1999). In

other words, there is not an immediate feedback loop to the institution on the full effects of current student success policies. However, institutional practices may have at least some effect on increasing completion rates. According to Cook & Jackson (2016), changes in student characteristics between 2008 and 2014 at Sacramento State should have lowered graduation rates by 2%. Instead, graduation rates increased by 2% during this time frame. However, Sacramento State still has one of the lowest four-year graduation rates within the CSU.

### *Sacramento State*

Founded in 1947, Sacramento State includes 58 undergraduate majors across seven different colleges. With over 30,000 students in 2016, the campus not only has one of the highest enrollment rates within the CSU, but is also one of the most diverse. In 2016, Latinos made up 29% of the student population, Whites made up 28%, and Asian Americans made up 20% (Koscho, 2016). The university holds both a(n) Hispanic- and Asian-Pacific Islander-Serving designation with the U.S. Department of Education (Koscho, 2016). Moreover, Sacramento State serves a non-traditional student body, with an average undergraduate age of 23 (Office of Institutional Research, 2016). Many students also attend nearby community colleges before transferring to Sacramento State. Out of the 7,638 new undergraduate students entering Sacramento State in Fall 2016, 49% were first-time freshmen and 51% were transfer students (Office of Institutional Research, 2016).

At California's capital university, 9% of first-time freshmen graduate in four-years—well-below the current system-wide rate of 19% (Office of Institutional Research,

<b>Table 1: Comparison of CSU Four-Year Graduation Rates, 2010-2014</b>	
San Luis Obispo	47%
Martime Academy	45%
San Diego	34%
Sonoma	28%
Chico	26%
Channel Islands	24%
Monterey Bay	21%
Pomona	18%
San Francisco	18%
Fullerton	18%
Fresno	16%
Stanislaus	16%
Long Beach	15%
Humboldt	15%
Bakersfield	15%
San Bernardino	14%
Easy Bay	14%
San Marcos	14%
San Jose	11%
Northridge	10%
<b>Sacramento</b>	<b>9%</b>
Los Angeles	6%
Dominguez Hills	5%

**Source: CSU Division of Analytic Studies**

2016). While Sacramento State's four-year graduation rate has drifted between 4% and 10% for the past 30 years, the university has undertaken several projects and strategies to reach the goals of the CSU's GI, including enhancing its First-Year Experience Program, providing mandatory first-year and transfer student orientation, and requiring second-year probation advising (Nelsen, 2016). Citing a moral imperative to provide students with a high-quality education in the shortest time possible, President Robert Nelsen (2016) outlined a multi-pronged approach in his Fall 2016 Address to reduce students' time-to-degree: implementing a degree-planning software known as SmartPlanner, assessing

student course-specific needs through Platinum Analytics, and strengthening integration with local area high schools to reduce the number of first-year students in remediation. Moreover, in 2016, Sacramento State launched an outreach effort known as Finish in Four to encourage first-time freshmen to sign up for 15 credits in their first semester. Consequently, 62% of new freshmen signed the pledge, up from 17% in 2014, allowing these students to remain on-track to graduate in four years (Nelsen, 2016). These efforts, known as the Sac State Graduation Ecosystem, are part of a new campus-wide commitment to put students at the center of the university's educational and organizational initiatives (Office of Academic Affairs, 2016).

Based on other national education institutions with similar size and demographics, the CSU expects Sacramento State to raise its four-year native student graduation rate from 9% to 30%, and its six-year native student graduation rate from 49% to 60% by 2025 (Gold & Minor, 2016). Moreover, Sacramento State is also expected to raise the two-year transfer graduation rate from 27% to 38%, and its four-year transfer graduation rate from 70% to 81% by 2025 (Gold & Minor, 2016). While there are many potential reasons for the school's low graduation rate, several factors immediately stand out. For example, 55% of first-time freshmen students needed remediation in 2016, requiring these students to enroll in additional courses and learn skills that could have been obtained in high school (Office of Institutional Research, 2016; Venezia, Kirst, & Antonio, 2003). Approximately 97% of students also live off-campus (Office of Institutional Research, 2016). The further away a student lives from campus, the less likely he/she will take advantage of the educational resources the institution provides

(Gonyea, Kuh, & Palmer, 2001). Therefore, students may not have sufficient and timely access to institutional resources and services, such as tutoring and advising.

Sacramento State has also historically struggled to develop a data ecosystem that tracks student progression and identifies common behaviors of at-risk students (Office of Academic Affairs, 2016). For example, in computing the four-year graduation rate, students who begin at one college but finish in another are counted in their college of origin, not in their college of completion. Moreover, while Sacramento State has 33 separate initiatives that address graduation and retention rates, the effects of specific programs and services on student outcomes are unclear due to the lack of data (Reid, 2016). Without this understanding, the university may face trouble in organizing, coordinating, and prioritizing its student success efforts.

In the university's 2016 Western Association of Colleges (WASC) report and application for reaccreditation, Sacramento State pledged a more student-centric mission that includes greater collaboration, transparency, shared responsibility, and accountability across the campus's divisions and colleges (Office of Academic Affairs, 2016). This movement will require greater access to, and sharing of, institutional data to "infuse the campus with a culture of assessment and continual improvement" (Office of Academic Affairs, 2016). Given this commitment, the national focus on college completion, changes in state demographics and economic trends, and the university's non-traditional student body and historically low four-year graduation rate, Sacramento State represents a unique opportunity to better understand the specific factors driving its completion rate, specifically from the perspectives of those who work most closely with students.

### **About the College of Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Studies**

With 13 different undergraduate departments and majors, the College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies (SSIS) contains the largest number of enrolled undergraduate students, and has one of the highest four-year native student graduation rates (14%) out of the seven individual colleges at Sacramento State (Office of Institutional Research, 2016). SSIS is often perceived as the fallback or second choice college for students who are unable to get their first major in another college, such as the College of Business Administration. For example, out of the 664 students who began at Sacramento State in Fall 2012 as first-time freshmen and changed their original major to an area of study at a different college, 34% switched to a major within SSIS, the largest percentage in the university (Office of Institutional Research, 2016). Moreover, SSIS also contains a larger number of transfer students relative to the rest of Sacramento State. Out of the 3,579 transfer students who began at Sacramento State in Fall 2010, 21% were enrolled in a major within SSIS; 72% of these students graduated within four years (Office of Institutional Research, 2016).

Recognizing the high priority for Sacramento State to improve specific student success areas, including graduation rates, retention rates, college readiness, and outcomes, the former Dean of SSIS convened a Task Force in Fall 2016 to investigate the policies, practices, and procedures driving student outcomes. Moreover, the former Dean strived to align student success efforts with those of the other university Divisions, including Student Affairs and the President's Office, as well as the CSU system offices. To the extent possible, SSIS plans to use the Task Force to gain a better understanding of

these factors and make programmatic and system changes to ensure its students graduate in a timely fashion. Research shows that in order to improve undergraduate retention and success, higher education institutions should offer easily accessible academic, personal, and social support services. Students' interactions with these systems can influence their sense of connectedness as well as their ability to navigate campus culture, meet expectations, and graduate (Tinto, 1975).

### **Purpose of This Thesis**

This thesis research project seeks to inform Sacramento State's Administration and SSIS of promising practices and policies that may support shorter time-to-degree, and of faculty, administrator, staff, and student perceptions about institutional barriers that prevent sufficient student progression. As a master's student of Public Policy and Administration (PPA), I served as the graduate student representative on SSIS's Task Force in Spring 2017, allowing me valuable access into the thoughts, perspectives, and perceptions of the stakeholders most directly involved with student success. Therefore, to further understand the context of graduation rates, retention rates, and other metrics, this thesis examines the perceived factors driving student success in SSIS, the institutional and system barriers hampering success (including barriers such as impaction, space constraints, etc.) and recommends ways in which SSIS can improve in supporting the academic success of its students. Within SSIS, there might be disconnects between what different groups perceive to be a) policies/supports that help students progress and complete; and b) potential barriers to student success. My research is designed to inform SSIS about faculty, administrator, staff, and student perceptions about key issues and

whether there appears to be differences between those perceptions. I do not directly identify the names, positions, or majors of the participants within my study.

According to Chaplot et al. (2013), examining the set of interactions between students and the institution can provide insight into the numerous systems, protocols, departments, and personnel that lead to completion outcomes. By understanding the institutional policies, practices, programs, and processes from a student-centered perspective, the university may develop a series of loss and momentum points, and build a better understanding of the factors that induce students to delay or drop out or foster completion and graduation (Chaplot et al., 2013). Therefore, using this framework, this thesis analyzes the perceived factors to student progression and completion based on the perspectives of faculty, administrators, staff, and students. Specifically, in Phase One of my research, I interviewed faculty, staff, and administrators from four different SSIS departments regarding their perceptions and perspectives on the following set of institutional policies:

- i. Academic preparation, assessment, and placement (within SSIS and Sacramento State)
- ii. Support services (within SSIS and Sacramento State)
- iii. Course standards and curriculum (within SSIS and Sacramento State)
- iv. Other factors (within SSIS and Sacramento State)

In Phase Two of my research, I conducted focus groups with undergraduate students from the same majors regarding the same issues investigated in Phase One. Finally, I compared the results between Phase One and Phase Two and determined if

there is collective agreement or alignment between what faculty, staff, and administrators are intending to do or provide and what students are experiencing.

My thesis is organized as follows. In Chapter 2, I review the literature regarding student success and how it is measured. Moreover, I explore the various factors that can affect the timely completion of a college degree, including student characteristics and experiences, and institutional conditions and policies. In Chapter 3, I describe my methodology, which includes the two distinct phases of research outlined earlier. Chapter 4 summarizes the findings from Phase One and Phase Two of my research, and discusses the points of convergence and divergence between each stakeholder group. Finally, Chapter 5 analyzes the results and discusses the implications of my research, both for Sacramento State and SSIS.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Student success in higher education is predicated on a number of conditions specific to the student and to the institution. For students, learning to navigate and overcome the various social, cultural, and economic barriers—created through repeated interactions with peers, faculty, and institutional policies—can determine their degree of campus integration, which may influence the student's academic performance, progression, and degree completion. In determining whether there is a successful match between student expectations and the campus environment, an increasing body of literature suggests that the context—in terms of prior student experiences and demographics, and the potential barriers created by educational institutions through certain policies and practices—play a role in timely completion of a degree. This literature review first provides an overview of the major theoretical perspectives of student success, persistence, and retention. Next, I review the different student characteristics and experiences that may influence future interactions with the institution. Finally, I examine the major institutional factors and policies that can support students in navigating the college process.

#### **Major Theoretical Perspectives on Student Success and Retention**

Within the literature, explanations regarding how student success is defined, measured, and achieved differ depending on the sociological, organizational, psychological, and economic perspectives employed. Because students begin college after many years of complex interactions within their cultural, social, political, and

educational environments, some students may be more academically prepared than others, yet their activities and exchanges while attending college may also influence whether they persist and reach their educational goals (Bridges, Buckley, Hayek, Kinzie & Kuh, 2006). However, while degree attainment is often emphasized as the definitive measure of student success, other authors suggest that more complex measures of academic achievement, personal development, and real-world skills should also be embedded within the goals of colleges and universities (Schreiner, 2010). Therefore, based on the type of institution, its nature and mission, its student population, and the needs of its students, student success can be defined in many different ways, but this conceptualization can be used to guide the institution's strategic planning, policies, and interventions (Tillman, 2002).

As I will discuss later in this chapter, postsecondary institutions may contain highly decentralized and autonomous academic departments, divisions, and programs. Because students interact with these individual components throughout their educational journey, colleges and universities may need to standardize its definition of student success so the structures and services provided within the institution align with the goals of the campus and students' needs. However, the literature demonstrates many different components of student success, further exacerbating the challenge of creating a singular definition.

### *Defining Student Success*

Definitions of student success may vary depending on students, their goals, and the type of institutions they attend. For example, traditional students between the ages of

18 and 22 who enter postsecondary education soon after high school graduation may view a bachelor's degree as a stepping stone to a particular career. However, older, part-time students may define college success as acquiring a specific set of enhanced skills and knowledge, regardless of completion (McPherson & Schapiro, 2008; Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2006). Moreover, for some small liberal arts colleges and other private universities, success comes from maintaining a high graduation rate, while other higher education institutions, such as community colleges, may define student success as completing certification, preparation for specific jobs, or transfer to other academic institutions (McPherson & Schapiro, 2008; Bailey, Jenkins, & Leinbach, 2006). However, as described in Chapter 1, colleges and universities face external political pressures to increase the number of students with a degree or certificate. This expectation is currently driving many higher education institutions to realign their policies, processes, and procedures, but the literature suggests that there are certain implications behind timely completion that go beyond economic vitality.

Depending on the level of analysis and the data utilized, student success definitions may emphasize certain longitudinal outcomes over others. Several authors suggest that student success is determined by an individual's internal context and multiple external layers of context, including the individual, family, institution, and the broader social, economic, and policy environment. (Perna & Thomas, 2008; Mullin, 2012; Perna & Thomas, 2006). For the student, success may arise from obtaining academic achievement, learning skills, moving beyond their current social class position, and completing other post-graduation goals (Drake, Langhout, & Rosselli, 2009; Mullin,

2012; Perna & Thomas, 2006). Therefore, college success is important to students because it demonstrates that they are meeting the expectation to achieve desired learning goals, which may improve their chances of meeting long-term personal and career goals (Benton, Downey, Kim, & Newton, 2010). For the institution, successful policies and practices ensure students enroll in college, persist to program or degree completion, enroll in and complete advanced degree programs, and earn high incomes (Perna & Thomas, 2008). The academic success of students is important to the institution because it demonstrates evidence of educating and preparing students for life beyond college (Benton et al., 2010).

While *persistence* generally refers to the enrollment of individuals over time that may or may not be continuous and may or may not result in degree completion, *success* is a broader concept that places a value on different forms of persistence, although most research defines success as completion of a college degree (Pusser & Tinto, 2006; Jenkins & Rodriguez, 2013). Moreover, while *retention* is a measure of institutional persistence, the variability in student enrollment patterns and educational goals may make it difficult for institutions to label one student a persister and another non-persister (Hagedorn, 2005). While a dropout could be viewed as anyone who leaves college prior to graduation, the student may eventually return (either to the same or a different institution), and transform into a non-dropout (Hagedorn, 2005). Therefore, much of the literatures discusses how a college dropout should only be defined in comparison to student outcome versus original intent. Following that logic, it is only when students leave college before achieving their respective goals that they should be labeled a dropout

(Hagedorn, 2005). A significant number of student dropouts will lead to *attrition*, or a lower number of students resulting from lower student retention (Hagedorn, 2005). Given the complex factors behind each of these definitions, higher education institutions may need to develop specific strategies, such as early intervention and intrusive advising, to address each of these challenges.

Policymakers and practitioners must also acknowledge the limitations that are imposed by a student's situated context. The institution's policies and programs may interact with other policies and programs, such as K-12, and with the characteristics of other schools, families, and students. This further complicates the ability of the institution to define student success and isolate specific policies that enhance this effort. For example, while high schools serve as a link to higher education, some students may enter the college or university not ready for college-rigor work and thus have different understandings on what it means to be a successful college student (Venezia et al., 2003). Policies and programs that recognize variations in the different layers of context are likely to be more effective than policies and programs that emphasize a one-size-fits-all approach (Perna & Thomas, 2006).

While some student success definitions may be abstract (e.g., critical thinking), the literature suggests higher education institutions should also consider how to measure student outcomes. This understanding can ensure accountability for the institution's goals, and can guide the development of new policies and practices.

### ***Measuring Student Success***

Student success metrics may include quantifiable degree attainment and academic achievement indicators, such as enrollment in postsecondary education, assessment and placement data, completion of general education (GE) courses in a timely fashion, grades, exam scores, persistence to the sophomore year, time-to-degree, and graduation (Bridges et al., 2006). Other authors suggest student success indicators may include measures of academic preparation, college choice, academic performance, and future income (Mullin, 2012). Beyond academic measures and persistence to graduation, some researchers emphasize the importance of qualitative traits, such as engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2010; Bridges et al., 2006). While these aspects are difficult to measure, they provide insight into whether students are satisfied with their experience and feel comfortable and affirmed in the learning environment (Astin, 1984; Bridges et al., 2006). These “soft” outcomes—compared to the “hard” outcomes of retention, completion, and future employment—measure success according to the students’ level of engagement with the institution, and their perceptions of progress towards their own and programmatic goals (Leach & Zepke, 2010).

### ***Predicting Student Success and Persistence***

Within the institution, there is uncertainty about how students are supported over time into either successful or unsuccessful students in terms of degree attainment. To explain whether students progress and complete a degree, researchers suggest several conditions, such as the level of student involvement, engagement, and integration with

the college or university can determine whether students graduate or dropout (Kinzie, Ward, & Wolf-Wendel, 2009; Bridges et al., 2006; Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975). The time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development (Kinzie et al., 2009). Similarly, institutions that are committed to the goal of increasing student success, especially among low-income and underrepresented students, seem to find a way to achieve that end by investing resources, incentives, and rewards (Pusser & Tinto, 2006). However, while these conditions are believed to enhance college completion, there does not appear to be a consistent theory of action that provides guidelines to institutions on the development of policies, programs, and practices to enhance student persistence (Pusser & Tinto, 2006). Therefore, the institution may face uncertainty on what areas—including the allocation of resources, communication, structures, culture, and decision-making—should be improved to enhance student success. However, several researchers have provided models to explain the interactions between students and the institution, and their effect on persistence and completion.

To predict retention, Tinto (1975) argued high levels of student social and academic integration within the institutional environment will lead to a greater probability of persistence. Social integration represents the extent to which a student finds the institution's social environment to be congenial with his or her preferences, which are shaped by the student's background, values, and aspirations, while academic integration represents both satisfactory compliance with explicit norms, such as earning passing grades (Tinto, 1975; Bridges et al., 2006). Similar to Tinto (1975), Astin (1984)

suggested that the student's level of involvement, or how motivated the student is and how much time and energy he/she devotes to the learning process, leads to desired learning and development outcomes. Therefore, all institutional policies and practices—those relating to non-academic as well as academic matters—can be evaluated in terms of the degree to which they increase or reduce student involvement (Astin, 1984). Students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that involve them as valued members of the institution (Tinto, 2003). However, Bean & Eaton (2001) argued it is the student's self-assessment of their academic and social integration that motivates them to engage in adaptive strategies, and feel comfortable and integrated into the environment. Therefore, as academic and social self-efficacy increases, academic and social integration also increases (Bean & Eaton, 2001). This suggests institutional actors, such as faculty and advisers, can affect a student's sense of belonging within the institution by providing positive feedback and encouragement.

The student's level of engagement—or the frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff, and other students—is also an important predictor of student persistence (Swail, 2004; Bridges et al., 2006). Student engagement represents two main components: 1) the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other activities that lead to the experiences and outcomes that constitute student success; and 2) how institutions of higher education allocate their human and other resources and organize learning opportunities and services to encourage students to participate in and benefit from such activities (Kinzie et al., 2009). In order to increase the likelihood of student success, the interaction between the student's cognitive, social, and institutional

factors must combine to provide a solid foundation for student growth, development, and persistence (Swail, 2004). Therefore, how the institution allocates its resources and arranges its curricula, learning opportunities, and support services to encourage student participation can lead to greater persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation (Kuh, 2009). Support from student groups, faculty, and other campus resources are signs that students are integrated into the college community and are thereby less likely to leave college (Baker & Robnett, 2012). However, according to a study conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini (1979), student involvement may only play a mediating effect on lower levels of college commitment. The greater the student commitment to attaining educational goals, the less important engagement in campus life was to persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979).

In examining this connection between student background and experiences once enrolled, Padilla (1999) studied the behaviors and actions of successful minority students at a large public university in the Southwest United States. Through this research, Padilla (1999) found that successful students take effective actions to overcome each specific barrier they face, and that such actions are based on specific theoretical and heuristic knowledge. Padilla (1999) also found transitioning from a rural to urban location, a lack of minority role models, and racial isolation were among the barriers faced by minority students. While Padilla (1999) created a local model of college success based on the examination of successful students, other researchers emphasized the importance of developing a more comprehensive understanding of the student experience. For example, Offenstein and Shulock (2009) developed a framework of milestone and success

indicators to specifically identify evidence of student progression, allowing colleges and universities to draw connections between campus or system policies and student behavior patterns. These studies suggest that institutions should use a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to better understand potential institutional barriers.

Similar to the previous models, the Loss and Momentum Framework, proposed by Chaplot et al. for a largescale national community college redesign initiative funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2013), suggests that institutional barriers cause many of the problems students encounter on their path to college completion. The framework prompts colleges to investigate the numerous systems, protocols, departments and personnel that each student encounters on the way to completion outcomes. To discover whether students achieve their educational goals or leave the institution, the framework suggests identifying how the college engages with the student at critical points, including Connection (initial college interest), Entry (enrollment and completion of gatekeeper courses), Progress (completion of 75% of educational requirements), and Completion (earning a credential). However, as discussed previously, students initially enter the institution with a set of predisposing characteristics, including educational preparation, socioeconomic and demographic status, and motivational and perseverance attributes (Conway, Powell, & Ross, 1990). These features exert a relatively constant influence on the students' chances of success.

### **Student Characteristics and College Experiences**

At the time of higher education entry, individuals possess a variety of attributes (e.g., sex and race); pre-college experiences (e.g., GPA, academic and social

attainments); and family backgrounds (e.g., social status attributes, value climates, expectational climates). These factors have direct and indirect impacts upon performance in college (Tinto, 1975). Consequently, student qualities might be a factor of equal if not greater importance when deciding to stay or discontinue college, more than the actual experience once enrolled (Kovacic, 2010; Duby, Iverson, & Pascarella, 1983). However, other researchers argue background characteristics are only a starting point in predicting final outcomes due to the variety of institutional interactions that may contribute to difficulty in degree completion (Kember, 1995). Student demographic characteristics have, in general, less consistent findings related to their direct effects on student persistence (Durant, 2015). Therefore, who students are and what they do prior to starting their postsecondary education play at least an intermediary role dependent on the context of the institution, although the direct influence of the following specific factors on persistence and academic achievement are difficult to differentiate.

### ***Race & Ethnicity***

Race has been found to be a significant factor in the persistence of undergraduate students (Burns, Murtaugh, & Schuster, 1999; Reason, 2003; Durant, 2015; Bailey, Cho, & Jeong, 2010). While underrepresented populations have lower odds of completing high school and enrolling in college, the inclusion of other background variables, such as socioeconomic status (SES), high school GPA, and participation in a freshman orientation course, causes the difference between racial groups to disappear (Reason, 2009; Bridges et al., 2006). Therefore, different racial groups may have different variables that affect persistence, and some literature provides evidence that historical

inequalities are reinforced through the structures of the nation's higher education institutions (Reason, 2009; Edley, 2017).

### ***Family's Socioeconomic Status & Expectations***

Numerous studies have found that the student's family SES and level of support exerts both a direct and an indirect effect on student persistence, but not necessarily academic achievement (Stull, 2013; Cruce, Gonyea, Kinzie, Kuh, & Shoup, 2008). While planning for college and postsecondary activities as early as the eighth grade increases the prospects for completing college, the family's SES sets the stage for students' academic performance by directly providing resources at home and indirectly providing the social capital necessary to succeed in school (Gutierrez, 2000; Bridges et al., 2006; Stull, 2013). The parent's levels of social capital may include their own college-going behaviors. Students whose parents have attained no more than a high school diploma are less likely to aspire to a bachelor's degree and less likely to be college qualified (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004).

SES has a direct effect on college planning, attendance, and graduation, and considerable indirect effects on the level of overall educational attainment (Sewell & Shah, 1967). According to a study conducted by Drake, Langhaut, and Rosselli (2009), lower social class status among college students were associated with classism, or lower levels of school belonging, negative psychosocial outcomes, and greater intentions of leaving school. Therefore, the student's finances have a contributing factor to persistence, as wealthier families can provide support whereas poorer students often struggle to obtain financial aid (Drake et al., 2009; Durant, 2010). However, the receipt of financial aid

seems to have a positive effect on student persistence, even after controlling for race and ethnicity (Fike & Fike, 2008; Hu & John, 2001).

### ***Pre-College Experiences***

Variables that indicate the level of achievement in high school, such as GPA and SAT/ACT scores, are significant predictors of student persistence (Harper, Kneidinger, Osher, & Tross, 2000; Bremer, Castellano, Hirschy, 2011; & Reason, 2009). However, once college experiences are taken into account—including living on campus, enrollment status, and working off campus—the effects of pre-college characteristics and experiences diminish considerably on first-year grades and persistence into the second year (Cruce et al., 2008). Therefore, institutional experiences, academic achievement, and other environmental factors appear to contribute the most to persistence decisions, as opposed to educational aspirations, prior academic achievement, attitudes toward learning, and college support and encouragement (Cabrera, Hagedorn, Nora, & Pascarella, 1996; Baker & Robnett, 2012). Yet high schools serve a significant role in promoting future college enrollment and sufficient academic preparation (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010).

Overall, the literature suggests that a students' college experiences highly depends on his/her academic, social, and economic background, but these factors might be mitigated depending on what the institution provides. Once enrolled in higher education, the student's academic and social experiences can become the strongest predictors of their persistence (Cruce et al., 2008; Durant, 2015). However, higher education institutions operate under a large amount of ambiguity and uncertainty. A policy may

assist one student in reaching his/her college completion goals, but may not have an effect on a different student. Moreover, the full effects of a policy will only be known after a certain amount of time, and may interact with similar policies at different times throughout the student's educational career. Finally, the institution itself faces certain conditions that can limit its ability to implement campus-wide improvements for students, and understand the full effects of student success policies.

### **Institutional Conditions & Barriers**

While the quality and frequency of academic and social interactions between students, faculty, and staff can shape the students' experiences and determine how well students fit at a particular institution, other theorists emphasize the relationship between institutional structures and organizational processes, and student success (Tinto, 1975; Brock, 2010; Kinnick & Ricks, 1993). By reframing the issue of student retention as a strategic issue, higher education institutions can develop a better understanding of the need for more effective policies and practices that stretch beyond simply improving numbers (Brozovsky, McLaughlin, & McLaughlin, 1998). However, as discussed in Chapter 1, colleges and universities have faced criticism for not adopting to shifting circumstances quickly enough. Because higher education institutions have long-standing missions, they are less likely to change, and if change occurs, it is likely the result of extensive debate among many different stakeholders (Kezar, 2001). While much can be done to improve the student experience, the institution itself may face a variety of barriers, such as ineffective communication processes, that may prevent sufficient change (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Yet to successfully encourage student engagement, it is

important to examine the decision-making processes behind the institution's academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings.

### ***Structure & Power***

As discussed in Chapter 1, higher education institutions often operate with ambiguous purposes in vertically oriented structures that are only loosely connected (Keeling, Underhile, & Wall, 2007). While this structure may allow for creative thinking and encourage the autonomy of different disciplines, it does not support collaborative approaches to learning, research, and organizational functioning (Kezar, 2001; Keeling et al., 2007). Departmental silos, hierarchical administrative units, unions, and other rigid structures may act as barriers to cross-divisional work and partnerships (McCann & Smith, 2001). With a loosely coupled structure, competing authority systems may emerge among the faculty and administrators, the state, and trustees (Komives & Woodard Jr., 2003). Consequently, due to the level of independence within the system, change is likely to occur in continuous pockets, but independent of any opportunistic adaptation to local circumstances, such as the need for more college-educated workers (Kezar, 2001). Some theorists have characterized higher education institutions as an organized anarchy, due to their ambiguous goals, unclear technology, and fluid participation (McCann & Smith, 2001).

Normative organizations, such as colleges and universities, may rely on referent and expert power, rather than coercive, reward, or legitimate power, to enact changes (Kezar, 2001). Consequently, power is often masked or secret because it is socially unacceptable to exert it within a collegial setting (Birnbaum & Edelson, 1989). New

employees may struggle to determine who possesses power on campus (Kezar, 2001). As a result, administrators may be forced to rely on the bureaucratic and reporting hierarchy to establish themselves as legitimate leaders (Eddy & VanDerLinden, 2006). While shared governance between faculty and administrators has been the overriding principle that guides decision-making across American universities, tense relationships may arise out of high faculty workload, a high number of part-time faculty, and external political demands (Leach, 2008).

Due to the potential decentralization of departments and divisions within higher education institutions, it may be difficult to develop campus-wide improvements that could assist students through their interactions with various policies, practices, and procedures. However, the literature suggests that this concern might be alleviated if the stakeholders within the institution are committed to collaboration and developing a holistic understanding on what students experience on their way to completion, and the institutional processes that lead to that experience. Therefore, the way institutional actors think, act, and communicate is also an important component of student success efforts.

### ***Culture***

An organization's culture can be conceptualized as those automatic assumptions upon which members of an organization act, and a pattern for behavioral expectations (Kaufman, 2013). Tierney (1988) was among the first researchers to create a framework for analyzing the role of organizational culture in improving management and institutional performance within colleges and universities. In a case study of an anonymous public institution, Tierney (1988) examined several variables, including the

institution's mission, environment, and leadership, and found that the institutional culture nurtured excellence and effectiveness, despite an unstable economic and political environment. Strong belief and consensus in the institution's purpose and mission emerged as a significant factor, allowing for greater program flexibility and change (Tierney, 1988). Conversely, another study conducted by Berger (2002) found that the more colleges are oriented towards external connections and influences in decision-making, the more likely there is to be a negative effect on student learning.

In another study conducted by Eckel and Kezar (2002), the authors analyzed the organizational cultures of six colleges and universities, and found senior administrative support, collaborative leadership, visible actions, and staff development were among the factors that affected change. Therefore, to enact institutional change—especially within higher education institutions—there should be an organizational culture that includes buy-in and support from all relevant stakeholders. The University of Michigan–Flint fostered campus engagement and changed communication patterns in 2005 to create a culture of openness, inclusiveness, and collaboration, allowing for greater consideration of policies and practices that would enhance the student experience and learning (Barnett et al., 2011). To move from a culture that supports individual work to a culture that facilitates collaborative work, Kezar (2005) suggested a three-stage process that includes building, demonstrating, and sustaining commitment.

To summarize, the literature suggests that the institutional structures of colleges and universities may serve as barriers that prevent the adoption of effective policies and practices that enhance the student experience. This may also decrease the likelihood of

student persistence. However, as described earlier, student success and retention efforts should also recognize that there is variation among the needs of different students. Policies and programs that are developed in isolation with little coordination are unlikely to improve student success for all students or reduce gaps in success across students (Perna & Thomas, 2006). Therefore, to develop student-friendly campus cultures, institutions should also understand the purpose and implications of the following student success and retention policies.

### **Institutional Policies & Practices**

#### ***Academic Preparation, Assessment, and Placement***

The literature suggests that there is a misalignment between the requirements of a graduating senior and a college freshman student, resulting in confusing messages about how and what students should do to enter and succeed in college (Long, 2014; Venezia et al., 2003). Consequently, a large number of incoming college students are not prepared for college-level coursework, requiring these students to enter remedial education for skills that could have been obtained in high school (Venezia et al., 2003). While many studies focus on the impact of remedial courses on student persistence, remedial students may be underprepared in many other areas outside of academics. Students in remedial courses may lack college-ready skills in areas such as financial literacy and study habits, and are frequently unfamiliar with the general practices of college life, such as the importance of reading a syllabus and meeting due dates (Sherwin, 2011). Therefore, educating underprepared students is often viewed as one of the most challenging and complex issues facing higher education today.

A lack of sufficient academic preparation may lead to several adverse consequences for both the student and the institution. According to Strong American Schools (2008), students enrolled in remedial courses lose academic momentum because they are being re-taught lessons they should have learned in high school, and are more likely to drop out of embarrassment and increased costs. Because most remedial courses do not count for college credit, enrollment within these courses may prolong the amount of time it takes the students to be successful in their college career, although there does not appear to be a significant relationship with college completion (Lewis, 2015; Attewell, Domina, Lavin, & Levey, 2006; Long, 2014). In evaluating the overall effectiveness of remedial courses, Asera et al. (2010). argued that the success of these programs depends on the institution's choices concerning program structure, organization, and management, as faculty must be prepared to make a significant contribution to both student academic and social development. Moreover, to assist students in college academic preparedness, other researchers recommend local partnerships with high schools to communicate outreach requirements and expectations, and detect early warning signs related to college-readiness in math and English (Parker, 2007; Chait & Venezia, 2009).

An increase in the diversity of student backgrounds, learning styles, and levels of preparation can also affect the development of accurate placement programs that predict success. While many institutions rely on aptitude tests for student course placement, the correlation between test scores and later academic achievement has been found to be anywhere between +0.5 and +0.7 (Callas, 1981). Therefore, the effectiveness of

placement programs depends on three main factors: (1) the assessment data utilized; (2) the academic system in which the student is placed; and, (3) the institution's commitment to evaluate the placement process and make adjustments suggested by the evaluation's findings (Callas, 1981). Long (2014) argued that improving how students' academic preparation levels are assessed is the first step in better tailoring supports for their needs. Better assessment practices can reduce the number of students who are incorrectly placed into remediation due to an opaque process or bad testing day (Long, 2014).

### *Student Support Services*

By offering students additional help to succeed in courses, colleges and universities can ensure students persist and graduate, yet short-term interventions generally lead to short-term impacts while intensive and intrusive interventions have a greater impact on student outcomes (Bracco, Dadgar, Nodine, & Venezia, 2013; Karp, 2011). Even with support services available to all students, only the students with pre-existing college know-how tend to take advantage of them (Karp, 2011). Moreover, the way most colleges and universities are organized— with student services housed in one division and academic functions in another, each functioning in parallel but with little coordination—can also create barriers in obtaining academic and personal advising, counseling, tutoring, and financial aid (Cerna et al., 2009). According to Tinto (2004), successful retention efforts must include student support services, such as supplemental instruction or study groups, that are designed and integrated to meet student learning needs for particular courses, departments, or majors.

Students are much more likely to utilize support services that are easily accessible or readily available. A study conducted by Hossler, Kuh, and Olsen (2001) at Indiana University Bloomington showed that students in high-risk courses were almost twice as likely to seek tutoring when it was available in their own residence hall than when the same service was provided in other campus locations. These students were also much more likely to persist to the second year and get higher grades than peers who did not utilize tutoring (Hossler et al., 2001; Bridges et al., 2006). By integrating support services and instruction, colleges and universities can expand student access by making these services an extension of the classroom, and make their delivery more seamless for students (Bracco et al., 2013).

### ***Course Standards and Curriculum***

The way college curriculum is organized and delivered can also facilitate or present obstacles to student persistence (Bridges et al., 2006). A quality curriculum is easily accessible to educators, supported by professional development, and connected to student work (Helms, 2015). Several studies have found that creating high aspirations for learning outcomes, establishing clear expectations for student performance, and holding students accountable for their behavior are effective strategies that may lead to higher student engagement and graduation rates (Hassel & Lourey, 2005; Kinzie, Kuh, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011). However, how to properly assess and provide evidence of student learning, standards, and high-quality instruction remains uncertain (Jenkins & Rodriguez, 2013; Crawford, Puls-Elvidge, Schindler, & Welzant, 2015). While accreditation may serve as a basis for quality in higher education institutions, several authors suggest that meeting

accreditation standards may be insufficient for demonstrating overall institutional and programmatic quality (Crawford et al., 2015; Helms, 2015). Therefore, without clear evidence of effectiveness, institutions must also consider how to best structure and design several academic policies, such as course pre-requisites and number of units required for graduation, in order to facilitate student retention and completion.

Course prerequisites are considered an essential tool in the construction of curriculum for courses in which student success is highly dependent on previously acquired knowledge or skills (Academic Senate for Community Colleges, 2010). While prerequisites may increase the likelihood of success in the subsequent, target course, several studies report no substantial relationship between prerequisites and student performance, and may also lead to lower enrollment (Abou-Sayf, 2008; Hadden, 2000). Moreover, scheduling techniques and course formats may also impact academic success. While institutions can improve their capacity and resources to offer the right courses at the right time to meet student demand, especially for students approaching graduation, this process may operate under conditions of high ambiguity and uncertainty (Cortest & Kalsbeek, 2012). Therefore, the strategic management of academic affairs within the college or university can increase the institution's integration, efficiency, and effectiveness of key operations, and enhance the retention of new students (Huddleston, 2000).

### **Conclusion**

While student success may emphasize certain longitudinal outcomes over others and is highly dependent on the context of the college or university, the literature suggests

institutional policies and practices should focus on four main areas: learning, engagement, progression, and completion (CSU Student Success Network, n.d.). Within each of these areas, there are potential structures, systems, policies, and programs that will either facilitate or impede student success (Chaplot et al., 2013).

The institution can ensure students are prepared for learning and future academic success by fostering high school partnerships, ensuring accurate placement tests, and designing effective remedial courses that encourage, not demoralize, students. By designing effective and easily accessible support services that integrates academics into student everyday life, colleges and universities can also ensure students are engaged with their environment and motivated to succeed. To ensure students continue to make progress towards a degree or certificate, certain academic processes, requirements, and standards should also have clear reasons and evidence of effectiveness. Finally, these policies and practices will either ensure student completion of a degree or certificate, or create barriers that prevent students from achieving their respective academic goals. Moreover, there are social and economic benefits (e.g., post-college employment) associated with completion, which the institution can track and use to make further refinements within the curriculum.

Colleges and universities may face challenges in adopting these policies. First, students may enter the institution with varying levels of academic preparedness and knowledge on how to navigate institutional barriers. While some students may persist and complete their degree in a timely manner without intrusive support or advising, other students may struggle and express a desire for more information and campus

involvement. Second, academic departments, colleges, divisions, and programs often operate autonomously and independently, potentially preventing different stakeholders from communicating and working together to ensure a holistic, consistent student experience. As described in Chapter 1, students may have different and disjointed experiences when interacting with different campus systems, such as course scheduling. While course scheduling is the product of many different processes, it may be difficult to pinpoint what factors may lead to a course being available or unavailable (Chaplot et al., 2013). In large higher education institutions, students also receive information from a variety of places, including online webpages, faculty, peers, and advisers. If the student receives misinformation or is unclear what courses are needed for graduation, the institution should recognize where this misalignment occurs, and strive to correct it. To summarize, while a student's situational context may lead to different levels of knowledge and expertise in navigating institutional barriers, separate silos within the college or university may prevent the institution from identifying the needs of individual students, and the processes that should be changed to ensure those needs are fulfilled.

In the next chapter, I discuss how I integrated this literature to design my study, which seeks to better understand institutional barriers within the College of SSIS and Sacramento State. I present these findings in Chapter 4.

## **Chapter 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

With a greater need to better understand the wide-ranging factors that may affect sufficient student degree progression, my thesis is intended to inform the College of SSIS at Sacramento State of the various institutional and personal barriers affecting the student experience. This chapter describes the research approach of my study and proceeds as follows. First, I explain how I initially chose my topic and collaborated with the College of SSIS to design a study specifically tailored to its goals and needs. Then, I describe my research methodology and the process of obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Finally, I summarize the two phases of my research, as well as the study's limitations.

#### **Origins of Research**

I first became aware of the College of SSIS's Task Force on Student Success (Task Force) when my first reader, Dr. Andrea Venezia, suggested that I could potentially conduct research for the Task Force for the thesis project; that could help the college and fulfill the thesis requirement. Given my extensive history with Sacramento State as an undergraduate and student editor for the campus newspaper, I was aware of the institution's context and challenges, including its relatively low four- and six-year graduation rate compared to other CSU institutions. With my background and interest in higher education issues, Dr. Venezia recommended pursuing a thesis topic aligned with the goals of the Task Force, and working with SSIS to develop an understanding of

promising practices and institutional barriers related to student degree progression and completion.

In November 2016, I was officially appointed by the SSIS Joint Council, a subcommittee of the Associated Students, Inc., to serve as the graduate student representative of the Task Force. Moreover, I also met with the former Dean of SSIS, who outlined and discussed the following three process goals of the Task Force:

- To manage the implementation of policies that can enhance SSIS student success;
- To spearhead research that helps SSIS stakeholders understand what is driving the college's student success metrics relative to the rest of the university and the system (to ascertain which strengths the college can leverage and which areas need improvement); and
- To organize the college's student success work in a way that assures alignment with work going on at the campus level, e.g. that SSIS's work complements the work going on in Student Affairs, the President's Office, and other parts of the university.

As a student researcher, I saw an opportunity to investigate and collaborate with SSIS to develop an awareness of the numerous systems, protocols, departments, and personnel that every student encounters on the way to drop-out or completion. By specifically outlining the policies and practices benefitting or preventing student degree progression and completion, SSIS could ascertain strengths and areas for improvement. However, as discussed in Chapter 1, there is a lack of clean, longitudinal, and accessible

student-level data within Sacramento State, making historical and recent initiatives aimed at improving student success difficult, if not impossible, to assess for effectiveness.

Based on this limitation, and the need to better understand how all stakeholders, including students, define and perceive student success, I decided to conduct a research study that was exploratory, and not evaluative.

### **Research Design**

Based on my literature review and the specific issues of interest expressed by the former Dean of SSIS and the Task Force, I decided to investigate the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What do faculty and administrators in SSIS believe are the major contributing factors regarding students' progression and timely completion (four-year completion, for example) of a degree? What evidence do they use to make that determination? Given what faculty/administrators believe and the evidence they use, how do these individuals perceive the relationship between the following institutional strategies, and student success?

- i. Academic preparation, assessment, and placement (within SSIS and Sacramento State)
- ii. Support services (within SSIS and Sacramento State)
- iii. Course standards and curriculum (within SSIS and Sacramento State)
- iv. Other factors (within SSIS and Sacramento State)

**RQ2:** What do students in SSIS believe are the major contributing factors regarding their progression and timely completion (four-year completion) of a degree within the following institutional strategies?

- i. Academic preparation, assessment, and placement (within SSIS and Sacramento State)
- ii. Support services (within SSIS and Sacramento State)
- iii. Course standards and curriculum (within SSIS and Sacramento State)
- iv. Other factors (within SSIS and Sacramento State)

**RQ3:** To what extent is there agreement from SSIS faculty, administrators, and students on the specific set of interactions and underlying factors that leads to students' progression and timely completion (four-year completion, for example) of a degree?

Given my research questions, limited time frame, and resources, I utilized strictly qualitative methods in the form of semi-structured interviews with faculty and administrators, and focus groups with students. According to Rubin & Rubin (2012), qualitative interviews allow researchers to “explore in detail the experiences, motives, and opinions of others and learn to see the world from perspectives other than their own” (p. 3). Moreover, by putting together descriptions and ideas from separate interviewees, researchers can create portraits of complicated processes, challenge long-held assumptions, and explore complex, contradictory, or counterintuitive matters (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). With Sacramento State’s historically low graduation rate, high time-to-

degree, and external pressure to improve student outcomes, the goals and strengths of qualitative interviewing may lead to thoughtful and nuanced responses to these issues, providing informative insight into potential changes and improvements.

Given the complexity of certain Sacramento State policies, including advising and general education requirements, I hypothesized that there would be some differing perspectives between faculty/administrators, and students on the issue of student progression and attainment of a degree. Based on preliminary research that included an examination of Sacramento State's Strategic Plan, I was unclear as to what end current policies and procedures are structured. While my study does not determine causality, existing research suggests that students are less likely to persist if they become lost in bureaucratic hurdles, confusing choices, and conflicting demands (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). Based on the literature and Sacramento State's historically low four-year graduation rate, I believed that the institutional barriers within the university may have some effect on student time-to-degree.

### ***Sampling***

SSIS contains over 154 full-time equivalent (FTE) faculty and 4,500 students across 14 different departments (Office of Institutional Research, 2016). Given this large size and intended purpose of my research, the former Dean of SSIS offered the names of four different majors to study, which I do not identify within this thesis. Within each department, I conducted four faculty interviews, one administrator interview, and two student focus groups. However, for one department, I did not have the means or time to

conduct student focus groups.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I conducted interviews with three staff directly involved with the day-to-day operations and functions of SSIS. Although not necessarily representative of SSIS, the departments in this study varied in their student enrollment, number of faculty, advising models, and services offered. As part of this research, I do not identify the names, departments, or titles of any of my participants, and I did not disclose this information to SSIS.

To better organize my research efforts and time, I broke down my research into two distinct phases. In Phase One, I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with SSIS faculty, four semi-structured interviews with departmental administrators, and three semi-structured interviews with SSIS staff. In Phase Two, I conducted six student groups, or two focus groups each in three different majors. I describe these research phases in greater detail later in this chapter.

### **Human Subjects Review**

As a researcher, I possess an obligation to do no harm and minimize risk for my interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Given the potential personal and professional risks for the participants within my study, I considered several ethical requirements and guidelines, including IRB approval. While the PPA department may approve any student research that is considered exempt, some faculty expressed concern over the sensitivity of some of my research questions. For example, students might have felt stigmatized if they

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<sup>1</sup> As discussed later in this chapter, I conducted my departmental administrator interviews prior to recruiting any faculty, and also relied on the assistance of faculty within my study to conduct student focus groups. However, due to academic, personal, and other life constraints, my administrator interview within this major took place in late March 2017, leaving me little time to recruit faculty, and thus students, before the end of the semester.

participated in, and answered questions about, remedial courses, and faculty may be uncomfortable answering questions about student success issues since those are not explicitly included in faculty job descriptions. Based on those potential risks, the PPA department required that I submit my research proposal to Sacramento State's IRB for exempt approval.

In my university IRB application, I included the informed consent forms for faculty, staff, administrators (Appendix A), and students (Appendix B). These consent forms state that participation within my study was strictly voluntary. Moreover, I emphasized that any identifiable information obtained in connection with my study would remain confidential and would be disclosed only with permission. As part of my script and interview questions, I restated this information, and offered participants the opportunity to leave without penalty or loss of benefits. Finally, as part of my application, I presented the potential minimal risks for my interviewees, and my plans to mitigate or eliminate them. For example, by answering questions related to student success—an institutional subject not part of their job description—faculty may believe that their future tenure-related processes or employability would be affected if they could not sufficiently answer questions related to this topic. To mitigate this risk, I assured faculty in the consent form that any information that is shared or not shared with me would not be traced back to them. Moreover, because students may be answering specific questions related to remediation, impaction, and previous academic experiences, they may inadvertently compare themselves to their peers, and feel stigmatized by these experiences and interactions. However, as part of my protocol and consent form, I

reminded the student participants that my study was strictly exploratory, and it was useful to have a variety of opinions and viewpoints. Moreover, in my protocol, I reminded the student focus groups on the importance of being polite and respectful.

In March 2017, I received approval from the university IRB to begin my research. Per IRB guidelines, I secured all data collection materials—including audio recordings, consent forms, and interview notes—in a locked office cabinet. I will destroy these materials no earlier than December 31, 2020.

### **Phase One**

The first phase of research included a total of 23 semi-structured interviews with SSIS faculty, staff, and administrators across four different departments. To recruit participants for my study, I drafted an email that included my educational background, the purpose of my study, and the rights of the participants. As a matter of respect and congeniality, and to inform the subsequent faculty interviews, I finished my departmental administrator interviews prior to recruiting any faculty. Because some faculty were more directly involved and knowledgeable about student success efforts and policies, I interviewed the departmental administrators first, then requested they identify the names of 10 faculty members I should interview within his/her department. From this sample, I selected four faculty using an online random selector tool. Therefore, while I did not have a simple random sample, my study was more likely to contain faculty who had thoughts, experiences, and expertise related to institutional barriers and practices. Moreover, because of the random selection, I ensured faculty confidentiality and anonymity. However, some faculty did not wish to participate. When this occurred, I removed the

name of the member from my list, and randomly selected another name. Finally, I selected three additional SSIS staff to interview. While these participants are not affiliated with a specific major, they are more directly involved and familiar with the intimate processes and overall management of SSIS policies.

Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The questions (Appendix C) were broken down into four main parts for faculty, and five parts for administrators. In the first part, I obtained a general sense of the participant's experiences, thoughts, and ideas regarding student success, degree progression, and degree completion at Sacramento State. I then moved on to the three main themes of institutional policies and practices found in my literature review: academic preparation, assessment, and placement; support services; and course standards and curriculum. Within each area, I asked the participant to describe the relevant policies, programs, and practices within SSIS and Sacramento State, and its effectiveness in facilitating student success.<sup>2</sup> Finally, I asked the administrators only how they measured student success efforts.

Overall, the interviews provided thoughtful responses to a variety of institutional policies and practices. Participants often reflected on what, and how much, they knew regarding student success within SSIS and Sacramento State. Some participants indicated they had been at Sacramento State for less than a year, while others had been employed by the institution for more than 30 years. Therefore, I was able to gather a wide variety of perspectives and views based on the many different experiences and involvements of

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<sup>2</sup> In this part of the interview, I often reminded participants that my research was not a "quiz." It was completely acceptable if they were not familiar with certain university practices, such as placement testing.

faculty and administrators. Moreover, some participants touched upon other topics when answering the given question. For example, the responses to student progression and completion barriers often included some attribution to institutional policies, such as support services. I utilized follow-up and clarifying questions to immediately capture these connections and beliefs.

### **Phase Two**

As demonstrated by my research questions, I am interested in determining to what extent faculty, administrators, and students agree (and disagree) about the institutional barriers that impede progress and completion of a degree. However, any analysis of the student experience is incomplete without direct student feedback. The second phase of my research offered students within SSIS a voice through focus groups.

As a graduate student, I lacked any financial incentives, and instead relied on the assistance of the faculty I interviewed in Phase One. Per the advice of my first reader, I strived to conduct the student focus groups during actual class time. This served two main purposes: a) students may see the focus group as a voluntary activity taking place during an already existing time commitment; and b) if the student decided to participate, he/she would not dedicate any extra time that could be used for work, study, or any other personal obligations. Therefore, while student participants were not offered any financial incentives, extra credit, or any other external benefit, I strived to provide a convenience factor that would make student participation more likely and facilitate honest answers and responses.

Within each major, I collaborated with a faculty interviewee to arrange a suitable class date and time. Given this precious academic and learning time for faculty and students, I undertook every measure to minimize disruption and ensure research efficiency. Similar to my faculty and administrator recruitment email, I drafted a student recruitment letter that included my educational background, the purpose of my research, and the rights of the potential participants. I requested that the faculty member distribute this letter in print or electronically. Moreover, on the day of the scheduled focus group and immediately prior to me gauging interest, I introduced myself, my topic, and the importance of providing a student voice in order to drive improvements for future students. My initial goal was to conduct at least two student focus groups, preferably from the same course, within each of the four majors.

The actual conduct of the focus group was highly dependent on the needs and requests of the faculty member. The following are brief descriptions on the specific arrangements I made:

***Focus Groups S1 & S2:*** This course offered me a relatively large sample of students to draw from. However, due to competing academic priorities, the faculty member could only allocate a single day and 30 minutes of class time for my activity. To ensure I could successfully conduct two focus groups within this time frame, I enlisted the assistance of another PPA student.<sup>3</sup> I made arrangements to reserve another

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<sup>3</sup> The student possessed previous professional experience conducting interviews and focus groups for political campaigns. The student was trained through written materials and graduate research courses, and was fully briefed on the expected norms of the focus group.

classroom, and with another facilitator, we were able to conduct two focus groups simultaneously.

*Focus Groups S3 & S4:* The faculty member offered two separate courses to draw student focus groups from. In each case, the faculty member ended class early and allowed me to recruit any remaining and interested students.

*Focus Groups S5 & S6:* Within this course, I conducted one student focus group, while the faculty member supervised an in-class activity with the non-participating students. At the conclusion of my first focus group, I recruited another set from the non-participating students, and conducted a second focus group.

*Focus Groups S7 & S8:* Due to limited class time and other end-of-semester deadlines, I was unable to find a faculty member within this department who possessed the flexibility to assist me.

Overall, I conducted six student focus groups across three majors. Each focus group lasted anywhere between 25 and 35 minutes, and each group contained anywhere between four and 11 students. A total of 41 students participated in the focus groups. The questions asked (Appendix D) touched upon the same themes in my faculty and administrator interviews. Many students were forthcoming and honest about the hardships they faced, and expressed satisfaction at the conclusion of the activity. Several students were surprised to hear about some of the experiences of their peers, while others seemed to relate and understand.

### **Study Limitations**

The findings and conclusions drawn from this study cannot be used to draw causality between different institutional policies and practices, and student success. My thesis is exploratory and provides insight into how SSIS faculty, administrators, and students define and perceive the problems surrounding student success. I explore the potential areas for improvement according to the perceptions and beliefs of key SSIS stakeholders. In addition, the findings contained within this study should not be mistaken as the only relevant concerns. Even if a policy, practice, or program is not mentioned by faculty, administrators, or students, there is a possibility that the undescribed issues are still important to student success. Therefore, because of my research design, my study is not necessarily representative of the student success issues facing SSIS, other university colleges, or Sacramento State. Yet the findings and conclusions drawn from this thesis can be used to begin exploring areas for improvement for student success efforts.

The data collected from my student focus groups also contain two other limitations. First, I am missing student data from one major, further limiting the representativeness of my sample. Moreover, all of my focus groups contained students from upper division courses. Therefore, the student participants within my study were juniors and seniors. Compared to freshmen and sophomores, the juniors and seniors were less likely to be exposed to newer student success initiatives, such as Finish in Four.

In the next chapter, I describe the findings from my interviews and focus groups, and explore the common and different perceptions of faculty, administrators, and students.

## Chapter 4

### FINDINGS

Sacramento State is a large, diverse, commuter university with a four-year graduation rate well below the CSU average. In addition, the university lacks clean, student-level, longitudinal data on its student success efforts. Therefore, my thesis utilizes an organizational perspective, along with qualitative data, to better understand the potential barriers to timely progression and completion of a degree. Through 23 semi-structured interviews with faculty and administrators and six student focus groups across four departments within SSIS, I find there is “misalignment,” or a lack of consensus between different role-alike groups (such as between students and faculty), about how to best determine, implement, and oversee student success policies and initiatives. In general, I find that: a) administrators wanted greater collaboration and communication between academic departments and the university’s central coordinating divisions (i.e., Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and the President’s Office); b) faculty desired access to resources, such as student progression and post-college data, and greater institutional support to more effectively track, advise, and mentor students; and c) students wished for more consistent, reliable information about transfer and graduation requirements and timely communication about the availability of campus support systems, such as the Women’s Resource Center.

This chapter describes the major findings and themes from the field research regarding student success within SSIS from the perspectives of administrators and staff, faculty, and students. I begin each section with a general overview and set of common

themes that framed my exploration of institutional policies. To protect confidentiality of departments and individuals, I do not describe the highly-specialized programs and practices of each major. I utilize the concepts described in Chapter 2 (such as academic and social integration) to determine to what extent administrators, faculty, and students agree on the specific set of interactions and underlying factors that leads to students' progression and timely completion of a degree. I also reference several campus resources when describing student support services. A summary of these programs and entities, including their intended purpose, can be found in Appendix E.

As described in Chapters 1 and 2, academic departments within universities are likely to be compartmentalized, siloed, and rigid (Weick, 1976). Consequently, faculty and staff within each division may not interact or collaborate with each other, potentially leading to competing authority systems and an overall lack of coordination (Kezar, 2001; Keeling et al., 2007). Indeed, when asked to describe overall SSIS policies and practices, most faculty and administrators referred only to their experiences within their specific major, and included some aspect of “I can’t speak about other departments” or “in my department.” While I find some similarity with regard to the issues, practices, and programs within each academic department in SSIS, it also appears that there is a stronger sense of connection from the department to the university (i.e., Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and the President’s Office), as opposed to from the department to SSIS. For example, administrators, faculty, and students described localized services within their department, and identified several campus-wide student success initiatives and support systems, such as SmartPlanner and the Writing Center. While my thesis

aimed to explore specific SSIS policies and practices that promote student success at the college level, there was uncertainty about the role of SSIS in supporting this effort throughout the interviews.

### **Administrators**

I interviewed one administrator each from four academic departments within SSIS, and three staff involved in the day-to-day operations of SSIS (n=7). Collectively, the administrators had been at Sacramento State from anywhere between three to 20 years, with an average tenure of approximately 12 years. All respondents were involved with various student success efforts, such as coordination and planning, early interventions, academic advising, teaching, and other types of student engagement such as career advising and mentoring. Below, I describe the main findings clustered into the following themes: general findings; defining student success; measuring student success; academic preparation, assessment, and placement; student support services; and course standards and curriculum.

### ***General Findings***

*Student success efforts have been aggressive, but disorganized.* When asked to reflect on Sacramento State's past efforts related to student success, most administrators agreed that the campus's initiatives seemed decentralized, inconsistent, and sporadic. While the administrators recognized President Nelsen's urgent priority to lower time-to-degree through greater collaboration between the university's Academic and Student Affairs, online tools including SmartPlanner, and programs such as Finish in Four, there was concern that these efforts remained without clearly articulated goals and a long-term

vision. Moreover, while these initiatives included a strong focus on enhancing students' responsibility for their own educational paths, it is unclear if the university has done enough on the academic side to increase its number of full-time faculty. That could be connected to resource constraints, but the university is hiring larger numbers of faculty since 2012.<sup>4</sup> Given the university's scarce financial resources, some administrators believed that Sacramento State has already reached its capacity to graduate students faster. This is how one administrator summed up the influence of state and federal policies on higher education:

*“We are an underfunded and overcrowded public institution. To expect us to produce the same kind of result as a private school is an unreasonable and unfair mandate.”*

Finally, while the administrators agreed that the university has always had the intent of helping students succeed, there was also consensus that Sacramento State has historically been unable to leverage its programs and resources together to foster a holistic environment for student success. According to Kinzie et al. (2011), institutional efforts aimed at promoting student success are more effective when Academic and Student Affairs professionals collaborate in the delivery of educational and support programs, and develop a “holistic perspective on student development and the institution’s responsibilities with regard to student success.” However, throughout their educational journey, administrators believed that Sacramento State students encountered different policies and disjointed systems at the department and university level. For

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<sup>4</sup> While the total number of Sacramento State faculty has risen 25% between 2012 and 2016, there has been an uneven distribution in hiring between full-time and part-time faculty. In the same time frame, the number of full-time faculty increased 3%, and there has been a 45% increase in part-time faculty.

example, one administrator described how the Office of Admissions and Outreach, along with the Academic Advising Center, determine to what extent students are academically prepared. Once students complete their initial placement tests and/or remedial courses, they are ready to start their SSIS major. While the administrators emphasized advising as a valuable tool to understand and familiarize themselves with the student population, the students' expectations of the college experiences are already taking shape prior to interacting with their field of study. The activities and interactions students engage in throughout their educational journey determines their sense of connectedness to the institution, which can also influence whether they persist and reach their educational goals (Tinto, 1975; Bridges et al., 2006).

*Bureaucratic isolation prevents effective coordination of support services.* The administrators agreed on the importance of offering students a sense of connection to and community with the campus, their area of study, and university support services. The administrators stated that faculty and staff should be available to help students solve academic problems, develop future career plans, and navigate life crises such as mental health. The administrators also provided mostly positive feedback on the numerous support systems available at Sacramento State, including the Student Health and Counseling Services (SHCS). While these social experiences and interactions empower students, the administrators suggested that the lack of communication and coordination with the university often leads to isolation and frustration for the college, department, and student. Although the university allocates resources, there appears to be a missing bridge

between the information, tools, and policies developed at the university level, and each academic department. This is how an administrator described the relationship:

*“In some ways, the core thing that we do is fairly constant. We offer our classes, we support the curriculum, and we innovate...when there's a lot of stuff going on in Student Affairs, I may or may not really be clued in to what it's about or how I'm supposed to think about it, or what difference it's going to make, or how much do we spend on that or anything like that.”*

While some of the administrators received training on advising and SmartPlanner, none of them indicated that they had received mandatory training or information about how to consider or envision student success at Sacramento State. Consequently, most of their perspectives derived from past experiences, and voluntary workshops and conferences. Given the many factors of student success and busy workload of administrators, many interviewees indicated that there was a fairly high opportunity cost to discover and influence campus-wide policies and procedures. One administrator put it succinctly:

*“I have more control over what I can do in my department. I have very little control over what I can do beyond the department.”*

*Students face personal barriers that may impede their progress.* All of the administrators recognized that Sacramento State students possess complex lives, including economic hardships and family demands, that may prevent them from finishing their degree. Other student barriers may include lack of family support, part-time or full-time employment, and legal and medical needs. Yet there was also an emphasis on continuing to provide support and outreach to ensure student empowerment and belonging. While the administrators agreed that certain students may never return after dropping out, several administrators identified early intervention advising and counseling

as tools that could be used to track students at risk of no longer persisting. However, it is unclear where these systems should be housed within Sacramento State.

### ***Defining Student Success***

*New student success initiatives must help ensure timely progression and completion.* Recognizing the severe personal and institutional barriers that can sometimes impede a student's path to graduation, the administrators concurred that the university cannot necessarily expect every first-time freshman student to graduate in four years. However, timely graduation is still one element of student success, especially for the students who want to graduate in four or five years, although it is unclear from my study if the university has the infrastructure to systematically determine a student's targeted graduation date. Yet interviewees consistently stated that the university must not adopt a "robotic one-size-fits-all" approach, and continue to recognize the complexity of students' lives, and their previous interactions with the K-12 system.

*Consistent belief that defining student success includes mostly subjective elements.* There was broad agreement that student success includes individualized attention and responsiveness, but aside from those elements, there was variation in responses. One administrator defined success as "transforming the way the student looks at the world," while another administrator described the importance of providing different types of academic, professional, and personal support to different student populations based on their unique experiences. Many administrators argued that success includes empowering students to understand the relevance of their major in their everyday lives, while also obtaining the life skills necessary to succeed in a diverse world. While many

of these definitions were abstract, the administrators provided some indication on how such elements can be measured.

### ***Measuring Student Success***

*Student success outcomes must be equitable and measured using multiple metrics.*

When asked to describe valid and reliable student success metrics, the administrators mentioned a variety of measures, including program and completion rates, years-to-degree, GPA, and student satisfaction. Every administrator also recognized student success metrics should be used in a collective and holistic manner to fully understand the effects of student success policies and initiatives. For example, one administrator described how course completion rates are not only a measure of student success, but also curriculum success. If many students consistently receive a D, F, or W (DFW) in any given class, the course may not be taught in a way that enhances student learning, or the department is not providing students enough support for success. Several administrators also agreed on the importance of eliminating the achievement gap in all student success metrics, especially within course completion and graduation rates. According to one administrator, SSIS is “successful on the whole if we have all students graduate equally...we should not see one group graduate at a different rate than another.”

While data can help predict student success and make improvements, the end users of the data must also be convinced the problems revealed by the data are “real” to motivate changes in college teaching, curriculum, and administration (Baldwin, Bensimon, Dowd, & Kleiman, 2011). However, some administrators believed that the data provided to them does not always match their field experiences or needs.

*Departments lack data that faculty and staff can use effectively to support student success.* While there was an emphasis on preparing students for future careers as part of student success, it is unclear from my study if the university collects data on whether students are obtaining employment in their area of interest after graduation. Several administrators working within specific majors expressed a desire to obtain job placement data. Although these metrics are longitudinal and fluctuate with labor market demands, most administrators believed the measure would be an effective way to evaluate whether there is alignment between the student's skills, preferences, and career path.

Several administrators also expressed disappointment that departments do not have access to student major retention and persistence data. In other words, it is unclear to what extent the students in any given major persist in the same major over time. While the Office of Institutional Research (OIR) collects university-level retention and persistence data, there appears to be a gap between what the office does and the needs of the academic department, and the information presented is often in a "foreign language," according to an administrator. Because OIR offers summary statistics calculated from relatively large samples of students, one administrator believed that greater micro-level data and tracking students from entry to exit is needed to fully understand the role of the institution in fostering success.

### ***Academic Preparation, Assessment, and Placement***

*Vague familiarity regarding initial student academic preparation.* Six out of the seven administrators interviewed could not provide a complete description on how students are first assessed and placed into courses. Most administrators indicated some

awareness of Early Start, but said they do not work directly with this program. One administrator described the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) Summer Bridge Academy, which provides specialized support to low-income freshmen students to ensure college readiness. Another administrator described how programs such as First-Year Advising, First-Year Seminar, and lower division courses create a smooth transition for first-time freshmen students. None of these services are available for transfer students, and none of the administrators provided insight into how transfer students are academically prepared for Sacramento State.

*Shared belief that students do not necessarily enter SSIS fully prepared for academic rigor.* While the administrators stated that SSIS complies with campus remediation policies and practices, there was a common belief that students entering courses and majors are underprepared. Moreover, one administrator argued that Sacramento State should only accept those students who are fully ready for college, and redirect existing academic preparation funding to enhance course offerings for current students.

Several administrators described the other psychological and institutional impacts of remediation. For students, taking remediation courses means they are paying tuition toward units that will not count for graduation. Moreover, if they signed up for Finish in Four, these students will need to sign up for more than 15 units in one or more semesters to reach their goal. Finally, because students spend extra time in remediation to ensure academic preparedness, SSIS receives a higher years-to-degree metric, although a couple of administrators noted that the placement tests contain “questionable” validity.

*SSIS has several outreach services, but the lack of clear goals and data make it difficult to assess effectiveness.* Within SSIS, there is a part-time Student Services Professional (SSP) that coordinates and provides outreach to local high schools and community colleges. While some departments participate in these events to garner student interest in Sacramento State and promote low enrollment majors, none of the administrators clearly articulated the intended outcomes or effectiveness of the service. While some administrators have noticed a lower need for remediation from local community college students and an increased interest in specific majors, several administrators stated that the SSP has not led a formal assessment process.

#### ***Student Support Services***

*SSIS lacks resources to provide greater student support, but there is disagreement on which services it should provide.* When asked to describe student support services provided by SSIS, most administrators described the role of the SSP in providing advising and counseling, but did not know of any other services provided by the College. While SSIS coordinates with the Student Case Manager located within Student Affairs to resolve specific student issues such as homelessness, the Student Case Manager is not specific to SSIS and must also assist over 30,000 Sacramento State students.

While the administrators seemed fairly satisfied with the quality of the student support services offered at the university level, some administrators questioned whether those services should be provided on a more decentralized level. For example, some majors within SSIS require highly specialized math and writing skills, yet several administrators believed that the Math and Writing Centers are not necessarily equipped to

offer sufficient tutoring and mentoring in those specific areas. Moreover, although I found some interest in expanding career and advising services at the college level, one administrator believed SSIS was too abstract of a unit for students to understand and obtain information. Because each student arrives at Sacramento State with different sets of skills, deficiencies, and mentalities, there was concern SSIS would treat these students all the same instead of providing individualized support.

When reflecting on how the university can reduce bureaucratic barriers to provide greater student support, one administrator described the issue as a dilemma between supporting creativity and retaining a connection to the individual discipline:

*“There's a lot of gray, messy, ambiguity that is an apparent part of what we're doing and that has to be tolerated...this is a developmental process. It's not making cans of soup. It's not about uniformity, but it shouldn't be about forming people either. It's like how do you partner for everybody's best outcome but allow the best outcome to proceed in different ways.”*

According to Massen (1996), higher education culture can provide stability and a sense of continuity within “an ongoing social system.” However, because the culture within higher education institutions may be characterized by a world of unclear goals and irresolvable time-conflicts and tensions, various subcultures may form with different levels of commitment (Smerek, 2010). Yet a strong belief and consensus in the institution’s purpose and mission can also allow for greater program flexibility and change (Tierney, 1988). While I was unable to fully ascertain what specific changes the administrators desired, there was some agreement that there needed to be greater coordination between the academic department, SSIS, and the university’s central coordinating offices (i.e., Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and the President’s Office).

*There is a strong desire for a better link between major and GE advising.* While students receive major advising from their respective departments, many administrators mentioned that students are referred to the university's Academic Advising Center for GE advising. While there were mixed beliefs about whether GE requirements were confusing, there was agreement that sending students elsewhere for assistance often results in misinformation. Students are told "five different things by five different people" to quote an administrator, and this miscommunication can leave students feeling confused, hopeless, or frustrated. Students can meet and "double dip" certain GE requirements through required major courses, but interviewees stated that this is not communicated effectively to students. Consequently, students may enroll in excessive units above and beyond what is required for graduation. However, one administrator believed that the Academic Advising Center only wants to graduate students faster, and provides an inappropriately large number of course waivers and substitutions. The interviewee believed that such workarounds may undermine an individual department's goal to ensure students obtain the skills necessary for future careers. Many of the administrators stated that it is important to provide students with unified academic and career advising at an individualized level; they also acknowledged, however, that the faculty are not equipped to offer GE advising due to its various nuances.

### ***Course Standards and Curriculum***

*SSIS has increased its course offerings, but this may have led to under-enrollment.* When asked to describe student barriers to progression and completion, the administrators mentioned course availability as a factor that has grown relatively

insignificant. To ensure students obtain the classes they need to graduate, President Nelsen provided substantial funding in the previous academic year for SSIS to dramatically expand and open course sections, especially for classes that contained wait lists. Yet one administrator mentioned how she still encountered students who were unable to get the courses they needed. Another administrator described how several classes are suffering from under-enrollment, and that there has only been a marginal increase in the average unit load for students.<sup>5</sup> However, there was optimism that SmartPlanner will allow the university to more accurately predict future course demand and scheduling.

*Determining course standards may lead to campus turf wars.* While the faculty drive curriculum developments and changes, official approval requires college and university review (Tagg, 2012). Several administrators criticized this process for being unstructured, political, and lengthy. Those interviewees stated that some faculty in particular majors believed they had a “monopoly” over certain course standards and topics; in addition, faculty in academic departments across the university often disagreed on the appropriateness of curricular changes. Interviewees stated that the feedback received at the university level often focuses on the existence of conflict and overlap, and has little to do with actual course content. Because approvals or denials are decided based on the level of departmental conflict instead of course rigor and material, most interviewees believed that deciding on curricular changes at the university level is a fairly

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Office of Institutional Research (2016), the average unit load for all students between Fall 2012 and Fall 2016 has increased by 0.3 units.

piecemeal process. However, several administrators described a new streamlined software system that will allow departments to track the curriculum request, which they hope will alleviate delays.

### **Faculty**

Overall, I found my interviews with faculty members to be more difficult to code into broad themes. While this may be due to the variance in faculty experiences and knowledge, and the overall compartmentalization of academic departments within the university, I also received many abstract and theoretical responses about student success, and not a lot of information about institutional barriers. However, this was an expected complication when interviewing faculty members, as their involvement, role, and career in academia provides them with a different perspective in understanding the student experience. Their direct conversations and interactions with students provided a deeper, more nuanced, understanding on the unintended consequences of pushing for timely completion than did the conversations with administrators.

For this part of my study, I interviewed four faculty in four different academic departments within SSIS (n=16). Although my sample size included a small number of part-time faculty (2), the rest were full-time. Most faculty had been at Sacramento State anywhere between one and 20 years (with an average of 14 and a median of 15 years). The general perspective was that the campus's student success efforts are committed, but varied depending on leadership. While I did not ask the faculty about concrete and available measures of student success, the majority agreed that students should not have to graduate in four years, and also expressed concern that current policies do not account

for students' situational contexts. For example, several faculty stated that first-time freshmen feel pressured to take 15 units, which is more than they can reasonably handle given their employment situation, academic skills, and family demands.

### ***General Findings***

*Students' personal barriers are most likely to affect timely progression and completion.* The faculty were almost in unanimous agreement that the students' living circumstances and life demands are the biggest factors that leads to disconnection and educational apathy. A faculty member described how students have many different roles (e.g., a parent or employee), and being dedicated students is not necessarily their most important priority. Many faculty believed that students, such as those who remain in the institution, are more likely to receive a poorer quality of education because they seek to complete the bare minimum amount of work to complete their degree. Other personal barriers for students that faculty cited included financial circumstances, commuting, or illnesses and other health-related concerns. Several faculty also described how Sacramento State contains a large number of first-generation college students. The faculty believed that these students may not fully understand the university experience, and do not have family support or expectations. Combining these complications with Sacramento State's priority to graduate students faster left some faculty concerned:

*"I think I'd rather see a student take five or six years and get A's and B's then do it in four years and get A's, B's, C's, and D's. I just feel like they're not going to absorb as much, they're not getting through the material as much, and they're probably really not going to be as prepared when they hit the job market."*

Three out of the 16 faculty interviewed emphasized how Sacramento State needs to adjust its policies and practices to better accommodate the non-traditional student.

Among this group, there was a shared belief that students often become lost within inefficient university systems and must seek help from the institution. However, faculty and staff do not always provide a sense of optimism and clear structure. As a result, the student becomes “extremely discouraged because the people are not encouraging (and) they come from a place of discouragement.”

One faculty member described the changes in perspective she experienced with regard to how she views her role in supporting student success:

*“Now I realize, ‘Well wait a minute, we have to continue to see academic success as a holistic approach.’ If a student doesn't turn an assignment, it's not just about saying, ‘Well, you're irresponsible’ it's about saying, ‘Let me put a pause on whatever institutionally I've been told about what those represents, and let me ask the student, are you okay? What's happening?’ And know that that is a data point to keep you accountable to say, ‘Maybe there's a better explanation for the assignment that I could've given.’”*

*The faculty perceived themselves to be an important support for students.*

Numerous faculty expressed a passion for promoting student learning, involvement, and engagement. For example, some faculty described how they learned the names of every student, and made an effort to converse with students who had struggled on a previous exam or assignment. Because a stronger connection to the program means students are less likely to drop out or “fall within the cracks” to quote one professor, some faculty explained how they involved students in research opportunities and other applied practices. However, the faculty also acknowledged that some students may feel uncomfortable or intimidated by their professors. Moreover, these efforts are considered voluntary, and there does not appear to be an “institutional infrastructure” that rewards such undertakings.

As a whole, the faculty admitted they would like to spend more time with students outside of the classroom, but stated that there are institutional disincentives to do so. The faculty believed they must continue to pursue research opportunities and preparing for other classes because “that’s what we (faculty) are going to be evaluated on.” Moreover, some faculty indicated that they feel pressured to give students higher grades to obtain positive course evaluations. However, such concerns may differ depending on the individual faculty member, and there is a “varying range of what faculty can do and there’s a range of what faculty are willing to do,” to quote one interviewee. While the faculty stated they were at least partially responsible for student success based on their voluntary efforts, most of the training they received involved non-mandatory workshops and seminars on teaching pedagogy, advising tools, and campus support services. Moreover, I obtained mixed responses on whether part-time and newer faculty received an initial orientation that explained current student success efforts, programs, and initiatives. Some indicated they learned about the resources during orientation, while others discovered services based on student comments.

*Students lack institutional support in deciding their major.* According to the faculty, numerous students change their major over their academic career for a variety of reasons, such as entering college without a specific end goal in mind, a lack of understanding about their original chosen field, and an inability to enroll in their desired major because of impactation.<sup>6</sup> While some faculty stated they provided career advising

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<sup>6</sup> As noted in Chapter 1, out of the 664 students who began at Sacramento State in Fall 2012 as first-time freshmen and changed their original major to an area of study at a different college, 34% switched to a major within SSIS, the largest percentage in the university (Office of Institutional Research, 2016).

and mentoring, there was also widespread agreement that students struggle to decide on the right major for them when initially entering Sacramento State either as a freshman or a transfer student. While a couple of faculty members mentioned that the Career Center includes a personal interest inventory to assess a person's strengths and weaknesses, it is unclear to what extent academic departments are involved in this process or whether such information is systematically reported or utilized.

### *Defining Student Success*

*Student success includes access to resources, attainment of knowledge, and critical thinking skills.* While the faculty provided many different ideas in their definition of student success, access, knowledge, and critical thinking skills were the three most consistent elements. Because students have difficult and busy lives, several faculty stated these students need to feel connected and have access to campus and departmental support systems throughout their educational journey to ensure completion. Other faculty emphasized providing students civic and global engagement, exposing students to different paths of thinking, and encouraging the processing of information in new and different ways. Similar to the administrators, the faculty seemed to believe student success varies depending on the student's academic ability, needs, goals, and prior experiences. Four out of the 16 faculty interviewed included timely completion as part of their definition.

*Post-college employment is an important component of student success.* A majority of the faculty believed that Sacramento State must provide career tools and skills, such as resume building and internships, to ensure students obtain gainful

employment after graduation. They stated that the university must provide mentoring and advising to help students build a professional connection in the real world. Through internships, research studies, and other applied practices, students can become prepared to deal with situations in the workplace.

***Academic Preparation, Assessment, and Placement***

*Faculty are not directly involved in academic preparation efforts, but lack of student academic preparation can be felt.* A number of faculty were somewhat familiar with initial university academic preparation programs, student assessment and placement, and remediation policies and practices. Several faculty described how the Office of College Readiness works with local high schools to ensure students are academically ready prior to Sacramento State enrollment, and various faculty also described how course placement depends on a student's English Placement Test (EPT) and Entry Math Level (EML) scores. However, there was also a general consensus that many students do not possess basic college skills, such as analytical writing.

Although the faculty mentioned they teach mostly juniors and seniors, they stated that students sometimes have deficits in their academic ability. This is how one faculty member described her experiences:

*"I always ask my students when I am giving them an exam to let me know if they have any questions including if they don't know what a word means. When I started doing that I started realizing that there's a lot of words that I take for granted that a lot of students don't know...they just come in with different skill sets, different vocabulary, different reading. So sometimes they don't necessarily have the writing skills that I would like to see on the third-year student."*

While many faculty stated that remediation causes delays in students' degree completion, there was also some agreement remediation protects underprepared students

from enrolling in a course beyond their skill levels. In this sense, remediation was viewed by many as another institutional support system that can ensure long-term success.

However, several faculty also noted these courses do not count for credit, which may lead to adverse psychological impacts; some were concerned that a well-qualified student might have had a “bad test day.” As discussed in Chapter 2, assessment and placement tests are considered neither valid nor reliable, and students are often uninformed about the assessments and unprepared for the content and format (Long, 2014; Venezia et al., 2010).

### ***Student Support Services***

*Faculty refer students to a variety of university student support services.* As a whole, the faculty were mostly familiar with the student support services available at Sacramento State, but consistent with the administrator interviews, the faculty did not reference many specific SSIS services, other than the role of the SSP. Common entities mentioned included the university’s gym, Peer and Academic Resources Center (PARC), Student Services with Disabilities (SSWD), Academic Advising Center, Women’s Center, Multicultural Center, Writing Center, and Career Center. Most of the faculty praised the services provided by these entities for giving different students different types of attention and engagement, although some faculty indicated they referred students but never heard feedback on the quality of the service offered. Faculty also mentioned and discussed the support systems available within their departments.

*There are not enough faculty to advise every student.* While individual academic departments may have different advising models, part-time faculty within some SSIS

departments are not formally required to provide advising services to students. The part-time faculty within my study indicated they may still informally advise students which courses to enroll in based on the student's skills, remaining coursework, and career trajectory. Given the limited number of full-time faculty and the large student enrollment in some majors, at least some departments do not require mandatory advising prior to course registration, except for freshmen and students on academic probation. Therefore, there may not be enough capacity within individual majors to actively monitor and track every student. However, three out of the 16 faculty also agreed that not all students require advising, and there was some uncertainty about whether advising can fully account for the complexity of student's lives. With the assistance of an academic adviser, a student may develop an academic plan, but a life crisis can prevent the execution of those recommendations. Moreover, similar to administrators, several faculty also described the difficulty for students to navigate the distinct major and GE advising systems.

### ***Course Standards and Curriculum***

*Major prerequisites, sequencing, and requirements are mostly well-developed.*

The faculty spoke mostly positively about the structure of their major's curriculum. Faculty from the same department seemed to share common beliefs and an awareness of the various issues, nuances, and applicability of their major to the student. However, the organization of the curriculum varied dramatically across each department, but there was strong agreement that students could easily understand the requirements, especially if they received advising.

Some faculty also described how Sacramento State's course enrollment software has not consistently enforced lower division requirements and other prerequisites, sometimes allowing underprepared students to enter more advanced classes. In addition, while the faculty emphasized a curriculum that is relevant and sequenced for students, some faculty also recognized the influence of high-demand courses in preventing sufficient student progression and completion. Based on this concern, individual departments have removed (or are in the process of removing) some course prerequisites, and/or shifted some major requirements to lower division. Course availability does not appear to be a major concern given the university's efforts to open up classes, yet several faculty also mentioned this has led to under-enrollment.

### **Students**

In the second phase of my research, I conducted two focus groups each in three of the four SSIS majors identified in Phase One (n=41). The six focus groups contained mostly senior transfer students, although many of these students indicated they had been at Sacramento State longer than the recommended two years. The discussion within each group centered heavily on specific institutional barriers, including advising, course availability, and support systems.

### ***General Findings***

*Students encounter numerous barriers when transferring to Sacramento State.*

Across every focus group, students were largely unhappy about their transfer experiences. Students described how they simply received list of classes required for graduation, and had to figure everything else out on their own. One student said she was

told to sign up for “whatever” classes at her transfer orientation, and no one checked to see whether certain community college courses could count for university credit. Another student had a similar experience at her transfer orientation:

*“This is my first semester here. The first day of orientation was this huge long block of information to the point where I was exhausted. I was actually not in a good position to drive just because how much information you had to retain. And after that it was just kind of like suddenly you were thrown into the system and not really given any explanation as to what classes should I be prioritizing first.”*

Such examples exemplify the longitudinal nature of current student success initiatives and developments, as Sacramento State is currently working on simplifying transfer pathways (Office of Academic Affairs, 2016). Yet the transfer student participants within my study indicated they did not receive information about campus support services, career and research opportunities, and major and GE requirements until much later in their Sacramento State life.

*Students do not feel supported at Sacramento State.* Students strongly believed that Sacramento State has not been helpful in ensuring their success. One student discussed how the university “puts things in your path that you have to overcome especially if you already have a plan.” Students also expressed concern about the university’s rising enrollment count when it already cannot provide them enough resources and attention. One student characterized Sacramento State as a “total mess with regard to its bureaucracy:”

*“I felt like there wasn’t great communication between the (community colleges) and Sacramento State even though it’s in the same area. At the same time I felt like ‘How can I have taken all of these units but you can’t count all of these?’ And then I get here and I’m taking the same [name removed] class as I did at my (community college) with the exact same [expletive] book...I’m not made out of money. It makes me want to stop going to school.”*

Students also expressed displeasure with the all of the student services available at Lassen Hall, and being “thrown around when it comes to figuring out certain classes or financial aid.” Another student said she felt like an “idiot” because of the conflicting information she received from her department and the Academic Advising Center. Finally, a student who was unable to get into the impacted nursing program said she was told to take a semester off and “go sell flowers on a corner somewhere” before returning and deciding on a new major. While these examples are fairly egregious, three to five students within every focus group had at least one experience relating to Sacramento State’s lack of institutional support.

*Students want support from faculty.* Across focus groups, students discussed the faculty’s ability to relate, teach, and engage both inside and outside of the classroom. Several students said their most enjoyable classes included professors who were “very passionate about what they’re teaching,” but not necessarily “coddling you or giving you an easy route.” A student described how a faculty member assisted with an unanticipated setback:

*“I started the semester and I had the flu for two weeks. Two weeks later, I went to my professor and I was like ‘I’m so sorry I need to drop the class’ and she was like ‘Actually if you’re 100% committed, I’m willing to help you as long as you come to my office hours.’ She actually helped me. I know some professors are very caring like that.”*

Some students said they did feel “shy” or “intimidated” by faculty, especially if they had a specific request such as a letter of recommendation. These students believed they were using faculty as a means to an end, and it felt rude and improper. Moreover, students also encountered some faculty with limited office hours, and felt they had

nowhere else to go if they could not attend those times. Combined with large class sizes, those students stated that they did not know how to obtain the feedback and attention they thought they needed. Without communication and mentoring, students stated they could not obtain a better understanding of the class material or pursue job and research opportunities.

### ***Defining Student Success***

*Completion is more important than timely completion.* In one student focus group, six out of the eight participants agreed it is impossible to graduate in four years unless the student dedicates all of his/her time and energy into achieving that goal. Moreover, several other students in other focus groups defined their success simply by graduating, regardless of time spent. One student also described how the university does not bestow a special sense of achievement even for those students who graduate on-time:

*“I would like to see more emphasis on the celebratory side of graduation. There’s no appreciation for the students who are on that track, that 9% that you get. So if you really wanted to support the four-year graduation (outcome), you have to celebrate the people who are doing it for you because they don’t get nothing.”*

*A successful student is accountable and goal-driven.* Similar to the administrators and faculty, students provided a wide range of answers on how to best define a successful college student, but the student focus groups emphasized certain personal qualities, such as “knowing what you want to do when you come to college.” Students discussed the importance of reaching their own personal goals, and being exposed to different campus resources and fields of study. Students also believed they needed to be well-rounded in academic and real-world experiences to ensure post-college success, regardless of current life circumstances. This is how one student defined the concept:

*“For a successful college student, you’re getting more out of it than just passing. C’s get degrees and that’s something we preach and live by that. But at the same time if you’re being successful then maybe you’re getting involved in different areas. You’re just not getting your degree.”*

Some students said they were overwhelmed with assignments and exams, and could only focus on actually passing their courses. Therefore, while students expressed an interest for research opportunities and other internships as part of being a successful student, the classes often took precedent. A student described his dilemma:

*“Right now we basically are just preparing for every test that comes. You put off one thing because you have something else that’s due sooner so you’re blasting through stuff quickly. And I’m getting A’s but I’m not sure how much of it I’m retaining.”*

### ***Academic Preparation, Assessment, and Placement***

*Students had mixed feelings about placement tests and remediation.* Some students indicated they required remediation at Sacramento State based on a placement test score. While some students believed remedial courses were helpful in becoming better academically prepared, others described it as a “ridiculous process.” Several students said they did not belong in those “easy” courses, but were forced to complete the requirement based on “arbitrary” test score. One student explained his experiences taking a chemistry placement test:

*“They don’t give you enough time. I think an hour is not enough. I had taken chemistry before coming to Sac State so a lot of it was coming back to me. So I had to do formulas and stuff like that and I was getting the answer but I was running out of time and because of that I had to bubble in guesses. I hated that. I took it twice and failed it.”*

In a qualitative study conducted by Venezia, Bracco, and Nodine (2010) on community college assessment and placement policies, most incoming community

college students were uninformed about the tests and unprepared for the content and format. Moreover, many students indicated that the assessment they took was not connected to what they studied in high school, and were unaware of that their performance would affect whether they would be able to get college credit for their classes right away. Other authors suggest that improving how students' academic preparation levels are assessed is the first step in better tailoring supports for their needs (Long, 2014). However, it is unclear from my study whether such improvements are currently taking place.

### ***Student Support Services***

*Students had mixed experiences with campus support services.* Students had many positive and negative experiences using university and department support services, but had little familiarity with specific SSIS services, including the SSP. One student described the Children's Center as immensely useful in providing quality care for her child, but other students questioned the helpfulness of services such as SSWD. A student explained she could not receive approval for a disability after transferring despite obtaining authorization at her local community college, and several students agreed SSWD "pick(s) and choose what they see as a disability." Students also provided conflicting information about the effectiveness of the Writing Center. One student said she had to read her paper out loud to the mentor and did not receive direct written feedback, while another student said he received specific writing advice and information about external resources. Students that worked during the day also noted certain offices, such as Financial Aid, close before they can get to campus in the evening.

Students were also dissatisfied that the university does not provide a clearly articulated list of campus resources.<sup>7</sup> Some students said they discovered entities, such as the PRIDE Center and Multicultural Center, a semester or two before they graduate. Through the interactions within my focus group, some students also discovered that the Academic Information Resources Center (AIRC), a large university study area, is open 24 hours during the semester. A student described her frustration:

*“They don’t tell you about it. You have to know about it.”*

### ***Course Standards and Curriculum***

*Students discussed receiving misinformation about required courses.* Many students described an inability to fully understand graduation requirements due to misinformation from various advising services. According to numerous transfer students, advisers at community college provided wrong course recommendations, often resulting in students enrolling in classes unnecessary for graduation. Students also expressed a general desire for greater collaboration between Sacramento State and local community colleges, so they “don’t have to call 500 people to figure out what class I (the student) need to take.” Based on these experiences, several students said they learned to not only ask questions, but to also question the answers. One student described the consequences of enrolling in the wrong courses:

*“I didn’t plan on taking that so I didn’t plan on having that extra class on top of all ones I’m taking...it’s just very frustrating to put in your schedule when you already have other classes you want to take.”*

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<sup>7</sup> The list of services in Appendix E was created preliminarily from Sacramento State’s Faculty Resource Guide, but I also included programs, services, and entities listed elsewhere on the university’s website, such as the Writing Center.

While some transfer students received information from peer advisers, one student was disappointed that the peer mentors assigned to her department were not actually students within the major. Moreover, every peer mentor offered different information, also resulting in greater frustration and confusion for the student. Overall, students described the course requirements as “blurry.” Major and GE requirements did not seem intuitive to students, as lower division community college courses would sometimes not count for Sacramento State credit despite similarity in course objectives, readings, and material.

### **Points of Convergence and Divergence Between Interviewees**

In this next section, I determine to what extent administrators, faculty, and students agree or disagree on the specific set of interactions and underlying factors that leads to students' progression and timely completion. As shown by Table 2, there were various points of convergence and divergence between the different stakeholder groups. For example, administrators, faculty, and students agreed that every student arrives at Sacramento State with a different set of personal goals, expectations, and prior experiences. However, once enrolled in the institution, the student's academic and social experiences become strong predictors of their persistence (Durant, 2015).

While I received much more data about potential institutional barriers, the findings presented in this chapter received the most consensus across each stakeholder group. Overall, I was fairly surprised about the level of awareness regarding some topics, such as student course under-enrollment, complexity of advising systems, and the lack of major and career exploration. However, similar to the literature on higher education

institutional barriers, I find that Sacramento States faces difficulties in the structure and delivery of programs and services. For example, the administrators agreed on the importance of offering students the resources and tools to succeed regardless of their academic and professional goals. However, there was also wide agreement that the university's decentralization and lack of effective communication often left them powerless to fully oversee and implement student success services, such as GE advising. Moreover, the implications of these problems can be seen in what some students experienced.

*There is a gap between what administrators and faculty intend to provide, and what students actually encounter and receive.* Collectively, the administrators and faculty believed that students must receive support, a sense of belonging and community, and a learning experience that will lead to a fulfilling career. While the administrators and faculty indicated that students need to feel that they are “surrounded by allies that are committed to supporting them,” the students within my study provided examples of becoming lost and alone. For example, while the faculty stated campus support services provided assistance, engagement, and individualized attention, students in my study explained how these systems were unhelpful and inaccessible due to the lack of articulation about their availability. Moreover, in examining course standards and curriculum, the administrators and faculty did not raise many issues about prerequisites and sequencing, yet students discussed examples of course overlap and confusion over requirements. While the administrators and faculty realized that certain improvements could be made in course delivery at Sacramento State and within community colleges,

this process might be slowed down by the review procedures at the department, college, and university levels.

*There is misalignment in how student success should be defined and measured.*

Throughout my research, administrators, faculty, and students recognized that the university measured student success by its four-year graduation rate. Participants had a different view of student success, which was more nuanced and included factors such as community and civic engagement, learning and development, and critical thinking. Moreover, there appears to be a lack of data about these outcomes, rendering the university unable to fully evaluate whether these objectives are actually achieved. Interviewees believed that the articulation of the university's mission, goals, and intended outcomes are not communicated clearly. Once again, this can be seen in the examples provided by students. Based on her experiences, one student discerned the offices within Lassen Hall do not "communicate effectively." Another student described how the ELM and EPT were supposed to indicate college readiness, but the university still required additional placement tests for chemistry and statistics. I discuss the consequences of not having a clear way of thinking about how students should be supported much more in Chapter 5.

*The role of personal factors is unclear.* Among the administrators and faculty, there was agreement that students face substantial economic and family barriers, potentially leading to adverse effects such as course failure and drop-out. However, although many students in my study talked about how they worked and/or had children,

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Administrators</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Students</b>
<b>General Findings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student success efforts have been aggressive but disorganized</li> <li>• Bureaucratic isolation prevents effective coordination of support services</li> <li>• Students face personal barriers that may impede their progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' personal barriers are most likely to affect timely progression and completion</li> <li>• The faculty perceived themselves to be an important support for students</li> <li>• Students lack institutional support in deciding their major</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students encounter numerous barriers when transferring to Sacramento State</li> <li>• Students do not feel supported at Sacramento State</li> <li>• Students want support from faculty</li> </ul>
<b>Defining Student Success</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New student success initiatives must help ensure timely progression and completion</li> <li>• Consistent belief that defining student success includes mostly subjective elements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student success includes access to resources, attainment of knowledge, and critical thinking skills</li> <li>• Post-college employment is an important component of student success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completion is more important than timely completion</li> <li>• A successful student is accountable and goal-driven</li> </ul>

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Administrators</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Students</b>
<b>Measuring Student Success</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student success outcomes must be equitable and measured using multiple metrics</li> <li>• Departments lack data that faculty and staff can use effectively to support student success</li> </ul>		
<b>Academic Preparation, Assessment, and Placement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vague familiarity regarding initial student academic preparation</li> <li>• Shared belief that students do not necessarily enter SSIS fully prepared for academic rigor</li> <li>• SSIS has several outreach services, but lack of clear goals and data make it difficult to assess effectiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty are not directly involved in placement and assessment, but the lack of student academic preparation can be felt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students had mixed feelings about placement tests and remediation</li> </ul>

<b>Table 2: Summary of Findings (continued)</b>			
<b>Stakeholder</b>	<b>Administrators</b>	<b>Faculty</b>	<b>Students</b>
<b>Student Support Services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SSIS lacks resources to provide greater student support, but there is disagreement on what services it should provide</li> <li>• There is a strong desire for a better link between major and GE advising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty refer students to a variety of university student support services</li> <li>• There are not enough faculty to advise every student</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students had mixed experiences with campus support services</li> </ul>
<b>Course Standards and Curriculum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SSIS has increased its course offerings, but this may have led to under-enrollment</li> <li>• Determining course standards may lead to campus turf wars</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Major prerequisites, sequencing, and requirements are mostly well-developed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students discussed receiving misinformation about required courses</li> </ul>

they did not seem to perceive these factors as necessarily limiting their potential success. Rather, these students focused more on their beliefs about Sacramento State being uncooperative and insensitive to their needs. Moreover, while students recognized the difficulty of their classes and the importance of proper time management, they also realized they needed to remain motivated, resilient, and connect with faculty in order to become successful.<sup>8</sup> While the administrators and faculty discussed the specific outcomes of successful students, the students emphasized the personal and current qualities they must embody in order to reach their own goals.

*Isolation hinders coordination.* In looking at academic preparation, assessment, and placement, many of the administrators and faculty within SSIS were not familiar, or work directly with, programs that prepare students for academic rigor. However, there was also agreement between administration and faculty that some students, including transfers, entered SSIS majors unprepared for college-level work. As described previously, these students interact with academic preparation, placement, assessment policies prior to entering SSIS, shaping their sense of connectedness and expectations of the institution. These experiences help influence whether students decide to persist (Pusser & Tinto, 2006). Yet administrators mentioned a high opportunity cost to assist or influence campus-wide student success improvements. Moreover, the effects of such initiatives may not be known for a certain amount of time.

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<sup>8</sup> The Dunning-Kruger Effect is a phenomenon that described how individuals are sometimes “ignorant of one’s own ignorance” (Dunning, 2011). Applied to my research, this suggests students may not recognize their own intellectual and social limitations, and their academic deficiencies. The faculty did not mention this concept by name, but provided examples of its occurrences.

*The faculty are viewed as a student support service by administrators, faculty, and students.* The role of faculty in providing students feedback and support, career advice, and knowledge is the most consistent finding within my study. Administrators and faculty discussed the importance of reaching out to students, providing them the tools of becoming an “independent lifelong learner,” and ensuring a sense of belonging and attainable success. Students overwhelmingly agreed, wishing they had access to more faculty who were relatable, engaging, and accessible. However, many faculty also teach part-time, conduct research outside of the classroom, and do not believe they have all of the support, knowledge, and familiarity with campus resources to ensure student success. In Chapter 5, I discuss this finding as an area for improvement for Sacramento State.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented my findings about institutional barriers at Sacramento State and within SSIS that prevent sufficient student progression and completion of a degree. Both the administrators and faculty emphasized certain student longitudinal skills and outcomes, such as life-long learning and post-college employment. Moreover, the administrators and faculty also believed that Sacramento State must be responsive to the needs of individual students, and provide specialized support and attention. The students within my focus groups also praised faculty who were able to relate and create an engaging educational experience.

While my research focused on exploring specific SSIS programs and practices, I found a lack of general awareness and knowledge about the role of SSIS in promoting student success. As a result, there was a stronger sense of connection between individual

academic departments and the university. The administrators discussed their intent to ease various technical and bureaucratic issues that prevented them from fully overseeing and implementing initiatives. The faculty provided many abstract responses, but generally agreed students face many personal barriers that may impede their success. However, the students seemed to largely disagree, and discussed the various barriers they encountered when navigating campus-wide policies and systems.

In the next chapter, I provide a more detailed analysis on where students struggle to achieve degree progression. I also discuss several potential areas for improvement for Sacramento State and SSIS to ensure a more streamlined student experience.

## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION

Utilizing an organizational approach, this thesis explores how administrators, faculty, and students within a large four-year public university understand the contributing factors regarding students' progression and timely completion of a degree. Specifically, I interviewed administrators and faculty within the College of SSIS, Sacramento State's largest college, about their perceptions of student success and potential institutional barriers. I also conducted focus groups to determine what policies and supports students believed helped ensure their success. Based on the data collected, I found that there is a "misalignment" between what administrators and faculty intended to do and provide, and what students experienced.

Similar to the literature, administrators and faculty recognized that a student's level of involvement, engagement, and integration can influence his/her academic and long-term success, and stressed the need to provide students intrusive support through mentoring and advising. However, the student focus groups provided several examples of institutional barriers, such as miscommunication about transfer and graduation requirements, overlap between community college and Sacramento State lower division courses, and a lack of articulation and information about campus support systems. While I cannot determine the causal relationship between this misalignment and Sacramento State's student success metrics (e.g., the four-year graduation rate), research suggests higher education institutions should provide strategies to students on how to navigate institutional, academic, and social problems, while also reducing complexity (Bean &

Eaton, 2001). Students within my study mentioned that there was a lack of institutional support and familiarity with the complex requirements of GE, often resulting in enrollment within courses that did not count for graduation. This suggests, but does not prove, that complex course requirements (as perceived by students) without sufficient and accessible programmatic support may lead to longer time-to-degree.

My research contains several other limitations. First, not every interviewee was asked every question. Given the complexity of student success and the varying experiences of administrators, faculty, and students, I did not have enough time within the interviews and focus groups to deeply explore every issue. However, based on my initial interview with the departmental administrator, I strived to tailor my faculty interviews with the relevant questions and issues that seemed significant to that specific major. Moreover, when analyzing the transcripts for similarities, I looked for broad themes, and provided a list of common findings that interviewees tended to agree on. Second, the focus groups may have contained self-selection bias. While I recruited participants from class sizes anywhere between 25 and 80 students, hoping for 10 to 12 per focus group, the average size of my focus group was seven students. Because students were asked to volunteer their time, individuals with particularly egregious or negative experiences may have opted in to share their disappointment. With this limited sample, my study should not be considered representative of the Sacramento State student body, or of SSIS. Finally, student success initiatives are longitudinal, and the immediate effects of new policies are difficult, if not impossible, to fully understand in a cross sectional snapshot; this was not an evaluation. Initiatives operating at each level—such as the

initial transition to college, experience of remedial education, and persistence through coursework—can affect the rates of success at different times throughout a student’s educational path (Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

With this summary of my research and limitations in mind, this chapter is intended to provide leaders at Sacramento State with a broader understanding of issues they can explore in order to support and improve upon current student success efforts, although I do not provide any definitive recommendations or solutions. In this chapter, I first return to my discussion from Chapter 1 regarding the importance of supporting non-traditional, low-income, and underrepresented students. Then, I provide some suggestions on how higher education institutions can align their policies and structures with the specific needs of students. Next, using the Loss and Momentum Framework, I provide a list of loss and momentum points within Sacramento State that came out of this study, and suggest ideas for campus leaders to consider when working on improvement efforts. Finally, I provide recommendations for further study.

### **Supporting Non-Traditional, Low-Income, and Underrepresented Students**

Based on my findings, there was agreement that student support is an integral element of Sacramento State’s success efforts, but the access and quality of services could be improved. Given Sacramento State’s diverse and older student body, one potential reason for this finding is that some students do not possess the social and cultural capital to understand and navigate these programs. Even though many colleges and universities offer open-access support services, students without pre-existing social and cultural understandings of those programs are likely not able to make use of those

services, and may believe their inability to succeed is personal rather than a result of institutional structures (Hughes, Karp, & O'Gara, 2008). While I did not collect data about demographics, academic achievement, or years-in-school within the student focus groups, many of the student participants indicated they were older, had a job, and/or raising a family. Moreover, 50% of all undergraduate Sacramento State students were considered low-income in 2016, 34% were first-generation, and 24% were over the age of 25 (Office of Institutional Research, 2016). Based on the literature and this data on Sacramento State's student body, it is possible, although not certain, that the programs and services offered by the university are not aligned with the wide-ranging needs of non-traditional, low-income, and underrepresented students.

The literature suggests achievement and opportunity gaps are reinforced through the structures of higher education institutions (Edley, 2017). In a study of community colleges conducted by Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003), the authors found that success required certain social know-how skills—such as how to handle enrollment, class registration, and financial aid—that are less available to underserved students. Because these students did not have access to knowledge about college, they were more likely than middle-class students to become lost in navigating bureaucratic hurdles, confusing choices, and conflicting demands (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003). A disaggregation of Sacramento State's four-year graduation rates provides some evidence of this disparity. According to the Office of Institutional Research (2016), 13% of White first-time freshmen starting in 2011 graduated in four years, while 8% of underrepresented minorities graduated in the same time frame. This is also consistent with transfer

students—31% of White transfer students entering Sacramento State in 2011 graduated in two years, compared to 25% of underrepresented minorities (Office of Institutional Research, 2016). If a student believes that he/she does not fit in college, or that his/her social and cultural practices are inappropriate and their knowledge is undervalued, they may be more inclined to withdraw early (Thomas, 2002).

Psychological barriers and performance gaps experienced by low-SES students are also maintained and reproduced because the institution promotes attitudes, speech, behaviors, and knowledge that are more congruent with the practices of high-SES families (Aelenei et al., 2017). Low-income students tend to “fall through the cracks” when retention services and programs lack centralization, coordination, or resources (Engle & O’Brien, 2007). Although these barriers can be reinforced systematically, postsecondary institutions that develop an awareness of the relationship between their student demographics and involvement practices can potentially increase access to, and the quality of, student support services.

Higher education institutions seek to increase “the amount of physical and psychological time and energy that students invest in both out-of-class and in-class activities,” but this paradigm favors traditional-aged, middle-class students (Fairchild, 2003). Because non-traditional students often work and/or care for their family, faculty office and program hours may not meet their specific availability. Moreover, non-traditional students may feel overwhelmed with financial demands, and prioritize their job over an education. To better support non-traditional students, Fairchild (2003) suggests several practices, such as extended office hours, adequate and close parking, and

family-oriented events. Moreover, Fairchild (2003) also suggests that non-traditional students should not pay student fees for activities they rarely participate in, and grades and standardized tests may not necessarily reflect their academic aptitude. At Sacramento State, this could mean expanding online tutoring and advising services, providing convenient parking for common student services such as financial aid, increasing the hours of entities including PARC, hosting community events, and not charging fees for activities students rarely access such as the university's gym.

Finally, certain institutional actions and policies can reduce opportunity gaps caused by high school academic experiences, race, and income. Lee and Muraskin (2004) examined differences in retention and graduation rates among colleges and universities that served high concentrations of low-income students. The authors found that intentional academic planning, small classes, shared values, and a dedicated faculty were among the factors that explained higher-than-expected graduation rates within these institutions. Moreover, Lewis (2014) conducted a quantitative analysis of Sacramento State's First-Year Experience (FYE) program, and found that a student's SES loses statistical significance once college experiences (i.e., freshman GPA, freshman units, and enrollment in the FYE program) are incorporated. While the study only applies to a highly-specialized freshman program, it suggests that Sacramento State has an opportunity to "help divert pathways that might have been predetermined by SES" (Lewis, 2014).

In conclusion, if the delivery of services and support systems are not accessible or contain misinformation, non-traditional, low-income, and underrepresented students can

become frustrated, leading to extended time-to-degree or even non-persistence. For Sacramento State, the implications of this are to align intended outcomes, access and utilization of services, and the specific needs of all students, especially older and working adults. However, in order to fulfill this role, all of the stakeholders within the institution must envision and agree on ideal student pathways, then dedicate resources, align structures, and minimize barriers—although this an exceptionally difficult challenge within large and complex colleges and universities.

### **Aligning Institutional Policies and Structures with Student Needs**

The findings from this study indicate that Sacramento State’s vision for student success is unclear and inconsistent—with regard to how key stakeholders understand student success and they act to support it, and with regard to students’ experiences. While some of the vagueness and inconsistencies are to be expected, given myriad programs available to students, the lack of clarity about different roles and responsibilities related to supporting student success, and the variability involved in implementing programs and policies, there are important implications to consider. While the administrators and faculty believed that the university makes clear and intentional efforts to make classes available for students, provide services, and offer support, students described the various difficulties of navigating disjointed and inconsistent policies and systems. Finally, while my study intended to examine SSIS student success policies and practices, I found that most administrators, faculty, and students encountered barriers either within their department, or within Academic and Student Affairs. Therefore, the role of SSIS in promoting student success was unclear.

While state and federal policies play a role in funding and implementing student success initiatives, research also shows that the organizational policies and structures of higher education institutions—defined as the patterns, processes, and behaviors exhibited by campus administrators—has some influence on student learning (Bridges, Buckley, Hayek, Kinzie & Kuh, 2011). According to Pusser and Tinto (2006), colleges and universities can promote student success by maintaining institutional commitment, high expectations, academic and social support, student feedback, and student involvement. Given the pervasive and rapidly changing demands of higher education institutions, the culture, structure, and policies contained within colleges and universities should strive to become more responsive to their external context and the internal context of student needs. However, this requires institutional stakeholders to obtain a consensus on what the actual mission of the university should be.

According to Kezar and Kinzie (2006), higher education institutions that align their stated mission with their living mission—measured by faculty, administrator, and staff actions—are more effective and efficient than institutions that lack alignment. For example, a university’s mission statement might refer to a commitment to teaching and mentoring undergraduates, but its lived mission strongly emphasizes graduate students and doctoral education (Kezar and Kinzie, 2006). To test this hypothesis, Kezar and Kinzie (2006) conducted a national study of 20 higher education institutions, and found that institutions that closely aligned their stated and living mission received greater positive feedback from students about the college’s policies and practices. With this alignment, faculty, staff, and administrators have a consistent purpose and frame of

reference; they can describe in detail how their work and policies, practices, and programs support the mission of the institution.

While I discuss a stronger sense of mission as an area of improvement for Sacramento State later in this chapter, there were disagreements about the university's mission within my study. While the administrators believed timely progression and completion was one element of student success, relatively few faculty included this as part of their definition. This finding is consistent with the literature; it is difficult to establish a shared mission between faculty and administrators. Academic staff and administrators possess distinctive opinions on how to respond to technological and economic challenges, decision-making processes, teaching and research commitments, and institutional effectiveness (Kuo, 2009). Faculty and administrators may also maintain different priorities and interests. Faculty have a responsibility for research advancement and student teaching, whereas most administrators are responsible for resource allocation, operational effectiveness, and the reputation of the unit and the university (Kuo, 2009). Therefore, developing an agreement on the mission of the institution, the needs of students, and the relevance of policies and programs can be hard to achieve. However, fostering greater unity between institutional culture and decision-making processes can improve the organizational responsiveness of higher education institutions, and allow them to align institutional policies and structures with student needs.

In a case study of Utah State University (USU), the researchers found that most students had access to a plethora of services and support structures to aid them through their college experience, but many students either did not take advantage of these services

or did not even know they were available (Flanagan, 2012). This “engagement gap” existed for several reasons, including a general misunderstanding of the different services offered and their respective functions, a lack of general knowledge of what the students were expected to utilize, and a lack of connectivity between resources (Flanagan, 2012). While I also found a similar “engagement gap” at Sacramento State, this case study suggests that colleges and universities should consider several factors, such as the delivery of services, leadership, and level of coordination between different departments, divisions, and other institutions, when evaluating their student retention and success policies. Given Sacramento State’s perceived decentralization and autonomy between different entities, the university may want to consider developing a better understanding of the processes that may lead to a disjointed student experience. This information can then be used as evidence for improvements. However, this would require the university to overcome silos, collaborate, and change.

In a study of 21 research universities within the United States, Holley (2009) found that implementing interdisciplinary initiatives was accomplished through changes in how institutional work was organized, while maintaining concurrent shifts in language and behavior. Holley (2009) outlined five strategies higher education institutions can utilize to enact change on multiple organizational levels. Through senior administrative support, leaders not only provide the necessary resources but also shape institutional priorities and focus attention on important issues. Collaborative leadership empowers multiple groups with decision-making authority, allowing multiple individuals to help shape new mental models of change. A flexible vision provides clear direction for the

institution, but is also responsive to external and internal opportunities. By providing faculty and staff development, the stakeholders learn the needed skills related to change initiatives. In other words, the organization invests in individual learning. Finally, through visible action, institutions make the long-term effort visible by highlighting progress. Leaders set achievable short-term goals and ways to evidence progress to build and enhance commitment. A similar process can be used by Sacramento State to enhance, consolidate, and centralize its student engagement and involvement practices.

According to Bartell (2003), adaptation within higher education, “requires articulation by leadership, while simultaneously institutionalizing a strategic planning process that is representative and participative and recognizes the power of the culture within which it occurs.” While Sacramento State is focused on raising its four- and six-year graduation rates, an implication of my findings is that the university may want to conduct a deeper investigation on the connection between student success initiatives, and their actual effects. However, to conduct this examination, there must be an understanding of the student experience, and an understanding of the institutional processes that lead to that experience. Unpacking and separating these two aspects of the institution is difficult, but may provide clues on how to best resolve institutional barriers that lead to longer time-to-degree.

Under this process, Sacramento State should first recognize why students decide to attend the university. This includes understanding their academic goals and career plans, K-12 and/or community college experiences, social and economic circumstances, and expectations for themselves and the institution. Then, the university can develop an

understanding on how these factors impact the major selected, the courses chosen, and the programs and services utilized, from entry to completion. Finally, Sacramento State can become aware where students begin to struggle and why (e.g., misinformation about course requirements), and at what organizational level (e.g., the academic department or university program).

With this understanding, Sacramento State can attempt to identify the institutional processes that may lead students off-track. This includes understanding the student success policies occurring at every organizational level; who is leading them; how they are being operationalized; how they are being understood; how they are being communicated about; and to whom they are being communicated. Given the vagueness and different interpretations of student success, in addition to role ambiguity among key stakeholders such as faculty and administrators, this exploration would seek to develop greater consistency of student engagements with the university, and ensure alignment between the intended and actual effects of student success initiatives. An alignment—between what the faculty, administrators, and other staff intend to provide students, and what students actually experience in their courses, academic and campus engagements, and post-college life—may lead to greater uniformity of interactions that the institution can then use to drive decision-making and as evidence for improvements.

To summarize, higher education institutions face a difficult challenge to facilitate greater student completion despite fewer fiscal resources. However, colleges and universities can undertake various reforms and procedures to ensure an institutional mission aligned with student expectations and fulfill external demands and the internal

demands of students. Because students may face complex social, academic, and financial problems that can affect their likelihood to persist and graduate, the literature suggests that the institution should develop an awareness of these factors, and restructure policies and practices accordingly while also preventing barriers. Using data from my study, I explore some of these factors below.

### **Understanding the Loss and Momentum Points within Sacramento State**

As described in Chapters 1 and 2, the Loss and Momentum Framework proposes that there are certain events and encounters with the institution that all students experience during their path to completion (Chaplot et al., 2013). Throughout this complex journey, students interact with college personnel (e.g., instructors and advisers), college structures and systems (e.g., placement/assessment processes and class scheduling) and college policies (e.g., rules around retaking placement tests), and each of these interactions makes an impact on whether students will continue on in their studies toward successful completion or whether they will drop out along the way (Chaplot et al., 2013). In this framework, “loss points” are junctures at which students often delay or decide not to continue with postsecondary education. In contrast, “momentum points” are interactions with the institution that facilitate and encourage the completion of programs, achievement of credentials and transfer to four-year institutions (Chaplot et al., 2013). The framework suggests that colleges and universities can adjust their policies, practices, and programs, in addition to their structure and culture, to facilitate better student outcomes.

While higher education institutions have historically set up their operational infrastructures based on the services delivered, this creates a series of discrete interactions for the student to navigate, which can create an experience that feels inconsistent and disconnected (Chaplot et al., 2013). Within my study, the administrators agreed that sending students to their department for major advising, then sending students to the Academic Advising Center for GE advising, was problematic. By recognizing this confusion, the Loss and Momentum Framework allows institutions to become better equipped to align programs with stronger structures that can help expedite the path to completion (Chaplot et al., 2013). Student experiences and interactions with the various university processes and systems should help drive institutional policies, such as curricular changes.

Within my study, I explored three policy areas within Sacramento State that every student encountered on their way to completion: 1) academic preparation, assessment and placement; 2) student support services; and 3) course standards and curriculum. Given my small sample size and lack of quantitative data, I cannot fully describe the student experience within each of these areas, but I can offer a starting point for this analysis. Below, I provide a brief list of the loss and momentum points within each of the three areas.

### ***Academic Preparation, Assessment, and Placement***

*Momentum Point: Students believe that they are better prepared after remediation.* While the literature shows several adverse effects associated with remediation including student embarrassment and increased costs, three students in my

study who underwent remediation said the courses provided valuable feedback, and gave them confidence to succeed (Strong American Schools, 2008). One returning college student mentioned she had not taken a math class in a long time, and the remedial course served as a good review. Therefore, remediation can be helpful, depending on the needs of the student. Students in remediation are more likely to persist in college in comparison to students with similar test scores and backgrounds who were not required to take the courses (Bettinger & Long, 2009). Faculty also mentioned remedial courses prevent underprepared students from enrolling in courses beyond their academic ability, and can thus ensure long-term success.

*Loss Point: Students believe they were improperly placed in remediation.* The literature suggests assessment and placement tests are neither valid nor reliable, and students are uninformed about the assessments and unprepared for the content and format (Long, 2014; Venezia et al., 2010). Within my study, several students agreed that the courses were easy, but were forced to take the class because of their placement test score. However, students also believed the placement tests were unfair in several ways. One student mentioned how she missed the test cut-off score by two points, while another student stated he knew the test material but ran out of time. While none of the students indicated the effect of remediation on their ability to persist, research shows that students enrolled in remedial courses lose academic momentum, and are more likely to drop out of increased costs and embarrassment (Hoyt, 1999; Strong American Schools, 2008).

### ***Student Support Services***

*Momentum Point: Students had a positive experience with campus support services.* Several students stated that they appreciated the assistance they received from the Writing Center, PARC, and SHCS. One student indicated she depended on PARC to pass her math class. The student stated that her professor presented the material in a confusing matter, and she was able to receive more specialized assistance from PARC. According to Engstrom and Tinto (2008), student success requires institutional investment in structured and carefully aligned activities that enable students to translate access into success. Therefore, students should understand and realize that there are other places for help if they are struggling within the classroom.

*Loss Point: Students do not receive support from faculty.* While the literature shows that student-faculty interactions remain a powerful tool in a students' personal and professional development, some students within my study indicated they were frustrated by large class sizes and an inability to attend faculty office hours (Baker & Griffin, 2013). Students emphasized the need for consistent faculty communication, including clarifications and feedback on assignments, to create an engaging, exciting environment for learning. Within one focus group, four students were asked if there was anywhere else they could go to for support if their professor was unavailable. The students did not provide a response. Again, while I did not specifically examine the relationship between a lack of faculty support and the student's ability to persist, the literature suggests faculty involvement can enhance a student's academic and social integration, and are a key element of institutional efforts to improve student retention (Tinto, 2006).

### ***Course Standards and Curriculum***

*Momentum Point: Students are able to enroll in the classes they need.* Several students indicated that course availability has improved over time, but also stated this may have been due to priority registration. Students also agreed that the university has provided a fair mix of day and evening courses, allowing them to work these classes into their work and family schedule.

*Loss Point: Students take the wrong courses necessary for graduation.* Academic advising provides an opportunity for students to develop a personal, consistent relationship with someone in the institution who cares about them (Drake, 2011). However, students in my study indicated that there was inconsistent and incomplete information about transfer and graduation requirements among different advisers, leading to confusion and enrollment in unnecessary courses. This is concerning for several reasons. Academic advising plays a critical role in connecting students with learning opportunities to foster and support their engagement, success, and the attainment of key learning outcomes (Campbell & Nut, 2008). Yet several students were frustrated by the conflicting advising they received from their major and the Academic Advising Center, and indicated they were forced to figure out requirements by themselves. One student believed that there was not enough continuity between different advising programs, including Peer Advising and the Academic Advising Center.

Overall, these loss and momentum points provide several ideas where the campus can improve student success. However, in order to drive these changes, there must also be a deeper examination of the processes behind the current status quo. In this next

section, I discuss the five broad areas where Sacramento State could consider improving its institutional practices. These areas are: mission and culture, the role of SSIS, faculty support, advising systems, and data collection. While I do not provide specific recommendations, I believe that improving the institutional procedures within these areas is necessary to more closely align Sacramento State with the needs of its students.

### **Areas for Improvement**

#### ***Mission & Culture***

Several authors have emphasized the role of culture in organizational performance. Higher education institutions are influenced by powerful, external factors such as demographic, economic, and political conditions, yet they are also shaped by strong forces that emanate from within (Tierney, 1988). An organization's culture can imbue its constituents with a strong feeling that the institution has a distinctive purpose and that the programs reflect its missions (Tierney, 1988). While culture can provide an organization a sense of identity and shared values, there are many features that can cause fragmentation and subcultures within colleges and universities. These factors include ambivalent goals, problematic standards for goal attainment, and faculty autonomy and freedom (Sporn, 1996). Moreover, within higher education institutions, administrators, faculty, and staff derive their identities from their occupational roles (e.g., an economist), leading to less socialization and integration among departments (Smerek, 2010).

Given this fragmentation and ambiguity, higher education institutions should also consider how cultures should be formed. Efforts to impose a new culture, especially ones oriented towards the external environment, may lead to perpetual, erratic, and damaging

tensions (Silver, 2003). However, a couple of studies have shown that adopting an external, achievement-oriented culture is effective in terms of student academic development, student educational satisfaction, and system openness and community interaction (Smart & St. John, 1996; Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). To build a culture within higher education institutions, Tierney (1988) recommends several practices for administrators, including considering real or potential conflicts not in isolation but on the broad canvas of the organization, recognizing structural or operational contradictions that suggest tensions in the organization, and implementing and evaluating everyday decisions with a keen awareness of their role in and influence upon organizational stakeholders. By aligning the culture with the mission of the institution, colleges and universities can ensure not only constituent buy-in and support, but create all-encompassing structures and policies that meet the individualized needs of all students.

In examining the culture at Sacramento State, it appears that there is a misalignment on the intended outcomes of student success. When asked to define student success, several administrators and faculty requested clarification on whether I wanted to know the university's definition, or their personal definition. Given the wide range of answers regarding this question, it appears that there is not a systematic, consistent belief on how student success initiatives should be implemented, coordinated, and measured. It is unclear from my study why this is, although I can speculate at least one reason.

While an organization's strategic plan contains its mission statement, core values, specific goals, and performance measures, it is unclear to what extent Sacramento State currently utilizes its strategic plan (Rainey, 2009). The strategic plan, which was a result

of campus-wide collaboration and lasts between 2014 and 2020, was adopted one year before President Nelsen arrived at Sacramento State. Because new leaders often signal new priorities, ways of thinking, and objectives, the current strategic plan may no longer be relevant to the current administration. However, strategic plans not only ensure accountability but also allow the institution to clarify its goals and measure progress against them, although they may not be as effective in highly political and fragmented agencies (Rainey, 2009). Therefore, strategic plans may allow a form of consistent, goal-oriented thinking, but the current plan might not match what the current administration believes is significant for student success.

Without a strong understanding of the purpose of student success policies, it is unclear to what end Sacramento State leverages its resources and programs. While increasing graduation rates is at the forefront of the university's initiatives, the faculty within my study raised several concerns about the unintended consequences of this goal, including lack of student career preparation. Given the role of faculty and other staff in ensuring student integration and support, it is critical for Sacramento State to more clearly define the outcomes of its student success efforts, and ensure it aligns with the beliefs and expectations of the academic personnel students will encounter on their way to completion. This includes the faculty, advisers, and other staff located within local high schools and community colleges.<sup>9</sup> By providing a more systematic and universal student success conceptualization, Sacramento State can begin to resolve the disjointed

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<sup>9</sup> According to the Office of Institutional Research (2016), 48% of all first-time freshmen were from the Sacramento region in 2016, and 55% of all transfer students were also from Sacramento. While I do not discuss this as a specific area for improvement, Sacramento State may want to consider enhancing pathways through greater collaboration with local high school and community college advisers.

and decentralized systems and policies students currently face. Programs, entities, and academic departments can shift their structures to not only reach this end goal, but align their services more closely with what students need.

In conclusion, an implication of my findings is that Sacramento State could develop a more unified culture that is oriented towards a shared mission of student success and the student experience. However, these efforts require stakeholder buy-in and support. SSIS may be able to assist in reaching this goal.

### ***The Role of SSIS***

As described in Chapter 2, higher education institutions are often characterized as organized anarchies because of their ambiguous environment and shifting alliances (McCann and Smith, 2001). In a study supporting the fragmentation perspective, Silver (2003) interviewed 221 people at five universities about their perceptions of innovations in teaching and learning. While culture was not the main focus of his research, Silver (2003) found that there was an absence of shared norms, assumptions, and values that were clearly associated with the institution itself. Given the decentralized nature of authority and decision-making within higher education institutions, it follows that leadership for reform needs to be cultivated not just among college presidents and other top administrators, but also among deans and faculty leaders (Jenkins, 2011). This is a role SSIS can try to fulfill.

Within my study, faculty and administrators indicated that they were not familiar with specific SSIS policies and practices that promoted student success. Moreover, many of the administrators and faculty indicated a stronger sense of connection from their

department to the university (i.e., Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and the President's Office), as opposed to from the department to SSIS. While I cannot offer suggestions for other university colleges, these findings and the literature suggest that SSIS can serve as a centralizing force for the diverse range of student success initiatives occurring at the university and departmental levels. The dean and other college leaders could serve as an intermediary between the university and their individual academic departments, and build shared agreement on the appropriateness of change and reform efforts. Because it is difficult to motivate faculty and staff to participate in organizational reforms and change norms of practice, SSIS can offer a compelling vision and educate key stakeholders on the goals of reform and the strategies by which they will be met (Jenkins, 2011). If successful, SSIS can empower its constituents to consider and participate in university-wide improvements.

### ***Faculty Support***

The faculty serve as a direct influence on the student's involvement, integration, and success. A faculty member helps "a student think through what he or she wants to do, and identifies and creates opportunities for the student to build the necessary skills to succeed" (Baker & Griffin, 2010). Both substantive and social out-of-class contacts with faculty members appear to positively influence (though indirectly) what students get from their college experience, their views of the college environment (especially the quality of personal relations), and their satisfaction (Bridges et al., 2006). These interactions may reinforce a student's initial goals and deepen the commitment to graduate (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The faculty who participated in the study seemed to understand and appreciate their role in helping students succeed. The faculty discussed the importance of having an “open door policy,” learning the names of students, and offering students the tools and skills necessary for future careers. However, the faculty also noted that there was not an “institutional infrastructure” in the form of trainings and incentives to assist or reward them for helping students. In fact, the faculty believed that there are institutional disincentives to spend more time with students because they are being evaluated based on their research—a common finding within the literature (Tinto, 2006).

This finding suggests that Sacramento State may want to consider investing resources and adopting reward systems that promote and reinforce faculty behaviors (e.g., advising) consistent with student success goals. Given the university’s high number of commuter students, the faculty play a critical role in shaping the student’s expectations, sense of belonging, and academic success. Sacramento State may also want to consider the role of part-time faculty in these efforts. One part-time faculty member indicated she was not aware of what Sacramento State considered important for student success, but still informally advised students about certain courses. These interactions are part of the student experience.

### *Advising Systems*

Academic advising is sometimes viewed as one of the most “underestimated characteristics of a successful college experience” (Light, 2004). For students, advising is associated with increased self-efficacy, improved study skills, and greater perceived support (Heisserer & Paratte, 2002). Moreover, advising can also positively influence

completion of remedial courses, persistence rates, and transfer rates after controlling for preexisting characteristics (Karp, 2011). While advising can be used as a success and retention tool, there may be several barriers that prevent students from accessing this service. As cited previously, underrepresented and low-income students may not possess certain social skills and knowledge to understand the availability, ease, and value of advising (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Hughes et al., 2008; Lee & Muraskin, 2004). Finally, while students need access to good information, current counseling structures and college budgets cannot support frequent individual advising sessions (Karp, 2011).

In the research I conducted, administrators and students indicated that there was overlap and confusion regarding advising systems. Students often stated that they received conflicting and wrong information about major and GE requirements from their community college adviser, peer adviser, and the Academic Advising Center. An implication is that Sacramento State could seek to streamline and consolidate its advising systems to minimize the possibility of students receiving misinformation, and ensure that all students have equal access to a knowledgeable adviser. Moreover, as articulated by students and faculty, students sometimes entered Sacramento State without a clear understanding of their specific area of study, and switch majors frequently. While this may be also due to impaction and course availability, this suggests that Sacramento State may want to provide students greater information about specific majors through advising, ideally when the student first expresses an interest in attending the institution.

### ***Data Collection***

Academic analytics and educational data mining are presenting new possibilities for analyzing and predicting student progression. In some higher education institutions, faculty have access to new data sources that can be used as guides for course redesign, and as evidence for implementing new assessments and lines of communication between instructors and students (Baepler & Murdoch, 2010). Data can also be used to monitor individual student performance, identify outliers for early intervention, and prevent attrition from a course or program (Picciano, 2012). This information can be used to track students from entry to exit. Moreover, faculty and advisers can provide students feedback about their progress, and intervene if a student is falling behind in their classes. These actions can ensure individualized support and attention for the student.

While Sacramento State is already working to improve its data collection efforts, the university also may also want to consider which specific measures are collected as part of student success. For example, administrators and faculty indicated a strong desire for job placement data, and major persistence and retention data. Moreover, Sacramento State may also want to contemplate how to use data more effectively, such as when making resource decisions. Several administrators and faculty within my study stated that some courses are under-enrolled. While the administrators and faculty believed that the decision to open up more sections was made to help students enroll in required courses, it is unclear to what extent student demand was taken into account, or whether the courses were scheduled according to a student's availability. If greater micro-level data is more

accessible to faculty, administrators, and campus leaders, it can become an integral element of decision-making, from early interventions to resource allocations.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

While this thesis intended to provide leaders with SSIS and Sacramento State information about how administrators, faculty, and students perceive student success policies, there were several limitations that limits its general applicability. Therefore, future research regarding institutional barriers at Sacramento State should first focus on including the experiences of students not contained within my study: freshmen and sophomore students, and students from majors outside of SSIS. These studies can reveal whether students experience similar barriers to the ones found in my specialized study. Future research should also include quantitative data to explore causal links between institutional barriers and completion, such as the relationship between student engagement with campus support systems and time-to-degree. Finally, other CSU's may want to conduct similar studies utilizing the Loss and Momentum Framework. By determining similarities in the student experience, CSU's can develop a shared understanding of the potential pitfalls preventing sufficient student progression.

### **Conclusion**

As the mission of colleges and universities transitions from access to include a large focus on supporting success, the context, structure, and constraints within which higher education institutions operate can determine how student success efforts and initiatives are decided upon, implemented, and coordinated. As institutions such as Sacramento State continue to educate a larger number of diverse and older students, there

may be hidden obstacles contained within the decentralized university's structure that prevent sufficient progression and timely completion.

This thesis intended to explore the perceived factors driving student success in SSIS relative to the rest of Sacramento State, and the institutional and system barriers hampering success (including barriers such as impaction, space constraints, etc.) from the perspectives of SSIS administrators, staff, faculty, and students. While I strived to discover specific SSIS policies and supports that helped student succeed, I found that most administrators, faculty, and students believed that the university's central coordinating offices (i.e., Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, and the President's Office) played a much more significant role in deciding, implementing, and overseeing student success initiatives. However, because administrators, students, and faculty provided several different definitions of student success, I am unsure about the purpose of these policies. Finally, students also provided several examples of disjointed systems and policies, including advising.

Because of the small sample and the specialized nature of my research, this study does not have any definitive, generalizable, findings, but there are critically important implications for Sacramento State and SSIS. Because of the misalignment between administrators, faculty, and students on the actual and intended effects of student success policies, Sacramento State could conduct a deeper investigation regarding the institutional processes that lead to this inconsistency. By understanding both the student experience and the institutional processes, Sacramento State can determine the degree of alignment and use this information to guide decision-making and further refinements.

Given the high amount of passion and energy regarding the university's student success efforts, Sacramento State could use this dedication as an impetus to better organize and coordinate its student success efforts across multiple organizational levels and stakeholders. This will not only involve developing a central mission oriented towards an understanding of the student experience, but the formation of a student success culture among many different stakeholders, including faculty, administrators, and staff, across academic departments, colleges, and divisions. This challenge is not without difficulty. It will require institutional actors to collaborate, commit, communicate, and operationalize student success efforts not just throughout the decentralized silos within the university, but potentially within local high schools and community colleges. However, these efforts may lead to better centralization and coordination of student success programs, fewer bureaucratic barriers, and a smoother path to completion for students. Therefore, Sacramento State should continue working to align the intended effects of its student success policies with what students actually encounter and perceive.

### Appendix A: Faculty, Staff, and Administrator Consent to Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study which will involve sharing your thoughts, perceptions, and opinions towards student success within the College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies (SSIS), and Sacramento State. My name is Imran Majid, and I am a graduate student at California State University, Sacramento, studying Public Policy & Administration. The purpose of this research is two-fold. Within SSIS, there might be disconnects between what different groups perceive to be a) policies/supports that help students progress and complete and b) potential barriers to student success. My research is designed to inform SSIS about administrator, staff, faculty, and student perceptions about key issues and whether there appear to be differences between those perceptions.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview with myself. Your participation in this study will last between 45 minutes and 1 hour. Risks associated with this study are not anticipated to be greater than those risks encountered in daily life.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Data collection tools, including audio tapes and notebooks, will be stored in a secure office cabinet that contains a lock. The data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked location for a period of three years after the study is completed.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please contact me at [REDACTED], or email my first reader, Andrea Venezia, at [venezia@csus.edu](mailto:venezia@csus.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Office of Research Affairs, California State University, Sacramento, (916) 278-5674, or email [irb@csus.edu](mailto:irb@csus.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above.

Signature

Date

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### Appendix B: Student Consent to Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study which will involve sharing your thoughts, perceptions, and feelings towards student success within the College of Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary Studies (SSIS), and Sacramento State. My name is Imran Majid, and I am a graduate student at California State University, Sacramento, studying Public Policy & Administration. The purpose of this research is two-fold. Within SSIS, there might be disconnects between what different groups perceive to be a) policies/supports that help students progress and complete and b) potential barriers to student success. My research is designed to inform SSIS about administrator, staff, faculty, and student perceptions about key issues and whether there appear to be differences between those perceptions.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a focus group with your peers. Your participation in this study will last between 45 minutes and 1 hour. Risks associated with this study are not anticipated to be greater than those risks encountered in daily life.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Data collection tools, including audio tapes and notebooks, will be stored in a secure office cabinet that contains a lock. The data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked location for a period of three years after the study is completed.

If you have any questions about the research at any time, please contact me at [REDACTED], or email my first reader, Andrea Venezia, at [venezia@csus.edu](mailto:venezia@csus.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Office of Research Affairs, California State University, Sacramento, (916) 278-5674, or email [irb@csus.edu](mailto:irb@csus.edu).

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above.

Signature

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### **Appendix C: Faculty, Staff, and Administrator Interview Questions**

Hello. My name is Imran Majid and I am a Public Policy & Administration graduate student at Sacramento State. For my master's thesis project, I am conducting research about people's perceptions regarding student success at Sac State. I am interviewing administrators, staff, faculty, and students.

Your participation in my study is strictly voluntary. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. I am not using any identifiable information, such as faculty names or titles or departmental names in my thesis. You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. Do you consent to being interviewed for this project?

("No" answer): Thank you for your time and honesty.

("Yes" answer): Thank you. I will move on to asking my first question.

#### ***Background***

First, it would help me to know how long you have been at Sac State.

How would you characterize Sac State's efforts related to student success [probe: what kind of efforts have you seen? Have you been involved in any? Were there any that you thought were particularly effective?]

To help ground our conversation, I would like to know how you define student success.

Have you received any training from Sac State about any issue or activity related to student success? If so, what did you receive? If not, is there anything you wish you had received?

Are there particular aspects related to student success that particularly interest you? Within your classroom? Outside of your classroom?

From your experience, what do you think are the main factors that can affect students' progression from year to year? [probe: students' personal lives? Grades? Advising? Course availability? Degree impaction? Placement practices? Clarity of gen ed requirements? Social interactions? Other student characteristics?] Could you give some examples about the factors that you think are most important – why you think they are most important?

Similarly, what do you think are the main factors that can affect students' completion of a degree? [same probes] Could you give some examples about the factors that you think are most important – why you think they are most important?

For my literature review, I am focusing on questions related to:

- Academic preparation, assessment, and placement
- Course Standards & Curriculum
- Course Prerequisites & Number of Courses
- Support Services
- Measurement of Student Success

Do you have any questions about any of those categories?

I'll start with questions about academic preparation, assessment, and placement.

***Academic Preparation, Assessment, & Placement***

1. What specific academic preparation programs at Sacramento State that help prepare all students for college-level courses? Are you familiar with Early Start? Other programs? Could you provide some examples about why you think they are useful or not useful for students? What about within SSIS – are there specific programs within SSIS that help students get ready for college-level courses?
2. How are students first assessed and placed into courses in SSIS? What kinds of placement tests do students take? Who administers them? Could you please describe remedial education policies and how remediation works in SSIS? Do you think these efforts are effective? Why or why not?
3. Do Sacramento State and/or SSIS have pre-college outreach programs with local high schools or community colleges? If so, have you been involved in them? Do you have a perspective about the goals of the programs and whether they are successful?

***Support Services***

Great, thank you. This wraps up the questions I have regarding academic preparation, assessment, and placement. Next, I would like to ask questions related to student support policies and practices, both within SSIS and the university.

4. Could you describe specific services at Sacramento State that help support for students [probe: academic advising, tutoring, mental health, crisis counseling, financial aid, career exploration...]? Have you ever referred a student to any of those services? If so, did you think they were helpful? Could you provide any examples?
  
5. Could you describe specific services within SSIS that help support for students [probe: academic advising, tutoring, mental health, crisis counseling, financial aid, career exploration...]? Have you ever referred a student to any of those services? If so, did you think they were helpful? Could you provide any examples?

### *Course Standards & Curriculum*

Great, thank you. This wraps up the questions I have regarding student support services. Next, I would like to ask questions related to course standards and curriculum, both within SSIS and the university.

6. How are course standards and curriculum determined within Sacramento State? Would you characterize those processes and effective or ineffective? Why?
  
7. How are course standards and curriculum determined within SSIS? Would you characterize those processes as effective or ineffective? Why?
  
8. With regard to lower division courses, do you think they are well-sequenced? Do you think students can easily understand the requirements?
  
9. With regard to upper-division courses, do you think they are well-sequenced? Do you think students can easily understand the requirements?
  
10. With regard to major and general education (GE) requirements, do you think they are well-sequenced? Do you think students can easily understand the requirements?
  
11. What about the number of units required in a major? Do you believe the number of units required for majors, both within Sacramento State and SSIS courses, are successful?

12. How are course prerequisites determined within Sacramento State? Do you think those processes are effective or not effective? Can you provide an example?
13. How are course prerequisites determined within SSIS? Do you think those processes are effective or not effective? Can you provide an example?
14. How is course scheduling determined at Sac State? Within SSIS? Do you think course scheduling processes at Sac State are effective? Example?
15. Do you think course scheduling processes within SSIS are effective? Example?
16. How does SSIS decide about impacted courses? What do you think about the practice of impacting courses? How does SSIS decide about impacted majors? What do you think the effect is on students – for impacted courses and majors? Do you think the policies should change?
17. Do space constraints play a role in any barriers for students within SSIS?

IF FACULTY MEMBER SKIP TO CONCLUSION.

### *Student Success*

Great, thank you. This wraps up the questions I have regarding course standards. My final set of questions circles back to our initial discussion of student success, and how to measure it.

18. How do you measure student success?
19. What about course completion rates? Are course completion rates a valid and reliable measure of student success? Why or why not?
20. What about retention and persistence rates? Are retention and persistence rates valid and reliable measures of student success? Why or why not?

21. What about program and completion rates? Are program and completion rates a valid and reliable measures of student success? Why or why not?
22. What about job placement rates? Are job placement rates a valid and reliable measures of student success? Why or why not?
23. Overall, do you believe efforts to support student success are successful at Sacramento State? Why or why not?
24. Overall, do you believe efforts to support student success are successful within SSIS? Why or why not?

### ***Conclusion***

Is there anything important that I should have asked you about student success – did I forget anything?

Thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it and am grateful that you took this time to share your thoughts with me. This wraps up our interview today.

### **Appendix D: Student Focus Group Protocol**

Hello. My name is Imran Majid and I am a Public Policy & Administration graduate student at Sacramento State. For my master's thesis project, I am researching people's perceptions about student success at Sac State. I am interviewing administrators, staff, and faculty members and conducting focus groups with students. Does everyone know what a focus group is? [wait to see if anyone tells you. If not, describe how a focus group is a way to get people together to do basically a group interview, but one of the benefits is that people can riff off of each other, so encourage them to brainstorm together. If someone mentions something that makes someone else think of an issue, that's great!]

Your participation in my study is strictly voluntary. As I noted in the consent form, I will be tape recording this interview; that allows me to be present with all of you during the focus group, so I can pay attention to your discussion. If I had to write notes, it would be hard for me to follow the conversation. But please know that I will not use any information about you, personally, in my thesis. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential. You have the right not to participate at all or to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. Do you consent to being interviewed for this project?

Sometimes, I will ask you to raise your hands about a particular issue. I will count your hands off out loud so that my tape recorder will catch it. Finally, I want to talk about the norms for this discussion. Does anyone know what a norm is? [wait to see. If not, describe that it's the way you want everyone to interact with each other in a respectful and polite manner.] We will be talking about what it's like to navigate through Sac State and everyone has a different experience. We all need to be respectful and listen carefully to what everyone says. This is your time to have your voices heard in a research project, so please do your part to make this a safe environment for everyone to share.

Thank you. I will move on to asking my first question.

#### *Questions*

1. First, I would like to know a little about you. Do you all identify as freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, or by your number of years at Sac State? [If they identify as those...]  
     Please raise your hand if you are currently a freshman. [count]  
     Please raise your hand if you are currently a sophomore. [count]  
     Please raise your hand if you are currently a junior. [count]  
     Please raise your hand if you are currently a senior. [count]
  
2. How do you define a successful college student? What kinds of things make someone a successful college student? [probe about student factors, such as

preparation, class attendance, study habits, motivation, family support, social interactions; and factors related to the institution, such as available courses, tutoring, advising, [impaction].

3. What are the things that have helped you the most at Sac State – in terms of helping you succeed with your classes? Can you give me some examples? (If unique example arises) Please raise your hand if you experienced (the unique example). [count]
4. What are the things that have been the most challenging – that have gotten in the way of you succeeding with your classes? (If unique example arises) Please raise your hand if you experienced (the unique example). [count]

Excellent. Thank you for your answers so far. Next, I would like to ask questions about some specific activities on campus.

5. Have any of you taken part in a program that helped you prepare for taking college-level classes – that helped you get ready for the academic rigor of college? Show of hands/count. What did you think about that program? Did it help you? Do you know if it was a university-wide program or an SSIS-specific program (show of hands/count)?
6. Please tell me about your experiences with taking a placement test at Sac State. How many of you took a placement test? English? Math? Both? (show of hands/count) What did you think of the test(s)? Were you able to prepare for the tests? Did you know about them ahead of time? If so, when and how did you learn about them?
7. Did anyone have to take a remedial class? [If anyone laughs or makes fun of someone, gently remind the person of the norms.] (show of hands/tally). What did you think of the class? Did it help you? Could you provide an example of how it helped/didn't help?
8. Is there anything else that you want to tell me about how you prepared for academic rigor at Sac State? (wait to see if they say anything) Do you find the courses to be challenging? (raise hands re: yes/no and count) Any examples you could share?
9. Have any particular services offered by Sac State, like tutoring or advising, been helpful for you [probe about financial aid and career center]? Do you know if those were offered by Sac State or SSIS? Could you give examples of what was helpful (or not helpful)?

10. In terms of the courses you took, did you understand what you were supposed to take for Gen Ed? Does the course sequence make sense to you? What about the difference between lower division and upper division? Does that make sense to you?
11. How many of you have been able to get all the classes you want at Sac State? Which classes were you not able to get? How many of you could not get 1 class (raise hands and count)? 2 classes (raise hands and count)? 3 classes (raise hands and count)? More than 3 classes (raise hands and count)? For those of you who have had trouble getting classes, how long do you think you have to stay at Sac State beyond what you planned to spend in order to graduate (1 semester, 2 semesters, 3 semesters)...?
12. What about impacted majors? How many of you could not get into the major you wanted? Which majors were those?
13. How about the course schedule? Are courses offered when you need them? Do you have a preference about days/nights, week days/weekends?

### ***Conclusion***

Is there anything else you want to add that you want your administrators, advisors, or faculty to know? Did I miss anything important? Thank you very much for your time. I really appreciate it and I learned a lot from you today. This wraps up our interview.

### Appendix E: Partial List of Sacramento State Resources for Students

<b>Program/Department</b>	<b>How They Can Help</b>
<b>Academic Advising</b>	The Academic Advising Center offers new student orientation, mandatory first-year advising, and advising on General Education and graduation requirements for all students. Through individual appointments and group advising sessions and presentations, the professional staff, faculty advisors, and student interns work to help students understand the University's academic requirements as well as its policies and procedures.
<b>Academic Probation, Disqualification, Dismissal</b>	The Academic Probation, Disqualification, Dismissal Program notifies students of their academic status at the end of each semester. Students can come to the Academic Advising and Career Center in Lassen Hall, Room 1013, where they will be provided information on the University reinstatement process.
<b>Business Educational Equity Programs (BEEP)</b>	The Business Educational Equity Programs (BEEP) is designed to provide academic support to Business and Pre-Business Administration majors. Support is provided in a wide range of courses through tutoring services. The goal is connect students to tutoring where they historically struggle. In addition, the Program works to promote student success through the Business Student Ambassador Program, which offers individual and personal outreach to new business students. In general, the program helps students navigate campus resources, as well as resources in the College of Business Administration during their first semester as a business student at Sac State.
<b>Center for College and Career Readiness (CCR)</b>	The Center for College & Career Readiness (CCR), a division of Academic Affairs, is the principle campus resource for everything "College and Career Ready." Using a collective impact infrastructure, CCR focuses on establishing a continuous pipeline from preschool to bachelor's degree; ensures that high school graduates enter Sacramento State better academically prepared to succeed at the university level; and, provides readily available resources and timely interventions for current and future students.

<b>College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP)</b>	<p>The College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP) is a unique educational program that works to help students from migrant and seasonal farm worker backgrounds succeed at Sacramento State. CAMP works to facilitate the transition from high school to college and offers first-year support services to help students develop the skills necessary to graduate from college.</p>
<b>College of Education Educational Equity Program (COE)</b>	<p>The College of Education Educational Equity Program (COE) works to support students in many ways including: career decisions and selecting a major, academic and personal advising, faculty and peer mentoring, information about and assistance with the credential application process, financial aid and scholarship information, tutoring referrals, and transfer student advising.</p>
<b>Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)</b>	<p>Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) works to help students cope with stress and/or troubling personal problems that may interfere with their academic life.</p>
<b>DEGREES</b>	<p>The DEGREES Project is armed to provide students with comprehensive program support through the connection of students to campus resources and services. Components of the program include mentoring, tutoring, disability testing, advising, enrichment activities, and academic and social support. Students participating in the program are paired with a DEGREES Project coach that partners with students for success. The goal of the program is to work to close the achievement gap and to bolster campus graduation rates through the increased utilization of high impact practices.</p>

<b>Dreamer Resource Center</b>	The mission of the Dreamer Resource Center is to make the dream of a college degree a reality for undocumented students and students with mixed-status family members at Sacramento State.
<b>Educational Equity Programs (EEP)</b>	Arts and Letters, Supplemental Instruction Program (SI) College of Business, Business Educational Equity Programs (BEEP) College of Education, Education Equity Program (COE) College of Engineering and Computer Science, MESA/Engineering Program (MEP) College of Health and Human Services, Health and Human Services Educational Equity Program College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Science Educational Equity Program (SEE) College of Social Sciences & Interdisciplinary Studies, Cooper-Woodson College Enhancement Program.
<b>Faculty Student Mentor Program (FSMP)</b>	The Faculty Student Mentor Program (FSMP) is one of several educational equity programs designed to help provide students with the academic support and encouragement needed to meet their educational goals. Students from low-income and first-generation backgrounds are eligible to participate. FSMP works to provide key elements of support to promote goal attainment and degree completion. Teams of faculty and peer mentors from the respective Colleges assist students with their integration into campus life. The program also works to provide its participants with the skills needed to develop as scholars in their academic major.

<p><b>Full Circle Project (FCP)</b></p>	<p>The Full Circle Project (FCP) is a comprehensive approach by California State University, Sacramento (Sacramento State), the Department of Ethnic Studies, and the Asian American Studies Program to implement a strategically focused, campus-wide effort to improve the retention and graduation rates of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students. The Full Circle Project aims to assist AAPI students throughout their college careers and works to provide them with ample opportunities to engage in service both on- and off-campus.</p>
<p><b>Multi-Cultural Center (MCC)</b></p>	<p>The Multi-Cultural Center (MCC) at Sacramento State supports the needs of diverse communities by working to provide educational programs and a welcoming space that helps students learn about themselves and others. By partnering with multiple campus and community entities to co-create diversity and social justice initiatives, the MCC is committed to responding to student needs, building bridges for fostering social awareness and cultural understanding, and taking action on the important issues and concerns of campus communities.</p>
<p><b>Peer and Academic Resource Center (PARC)</b></p>	<p>The Peer and Academic Resource Center (PARC) includes supplemental instruction offerings, a university peer advising program, individual and group tutoring, specialized workshops, and services to support students at all academic levels. Services of the Center are accomplished through peer-led and student-driven components that build on academic support services and work to increase course passage, student retention, and rates to graduation.</p>
<p><b>PRIDE Center</b></p>	<p>The PRIDE Center works to provide a Safe Zone where LGBTQQIAA students can spend their in-betweenclass time accessing resources, building a sense of community, volunteering their time, and helping others. All of these things help students who may otherwise feel isolated and marginalized get the community engagement and connections to campus that they need in order to be successful students. The Center also educates students, staff, and faculty on how to create Safe Zones outside of the PRIDE Center. These trainings are facilitated in a variety of ways (classroom panel presentations, events, etc.).</p>

<b>Project Pass</b>	Project PASS is a comprehensive, five-year, NSF-funded program designed to increase the retention and graduation of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) students graduating from Sacramento State. Project PASS targets student success in “gateway” math and science courses, and the program implements a variety of research-based strategies for improving student learning and retention.
<b>Science Educational Equity Program (SEE)</b>	The Science Educational Equity Program (SEE), which was established in 1986, is a comprehensive academic support program for students who face social, economic, and educational barriers to careers in the health professions, science research, and science teaching. The SEE Program works to improve access to quality of health care in underserved communities and also works to foster inclusion of diverse perspectives in science research and science education.
<b>Services to Students with Disabilities (SSWD)</b>	Services to Students with Disabilities (SSWD) is designed to support the academic success of students with disabilities and works to provide leadership to the University community to ensure equal access to programs and resources. SSWD offers a comprehensive range of academic support services and works to foster an accessible physical and technological environment to facilitate retention and graduation.
<b>Sexual Assault Response</b>	If you are a member of Sac State, you can contact our victim’s advocate for information, referrals and support. Confidentiality is respected. The University’s Sexual Assault Response offers assistance in multiple ways.
<b>Student Academic Success/ Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)</b>	The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) serves California residents from low-income households who demonstrate the motivation and potential to earn a baccalaureate degree. EOP students are individuals who have the potential to succeed at Sacramento State, but who have not been able to realize their goal for a higher education because of their economic and/ or educational background. EOP accepts California residents and AB540 students who meet the Income Eligibility Index, and who are first-generation college students. Academic advising, counseling services, and peer mentoring are available to EOP students.

<b>Student-Athlete Resource Center (SARC)</b>	The Student-Athletic Resource Center (SARC) helps student-athletes navigate through many of the campus' academic procedures and policies as well as understand NCAA rules, compliance, and eligibility requirements. SARC provides services that place student welfare and development as a top priority.
<b>Student Conduct</b>	Student Conduct provides outreach and education related to student rights and responsibilities and CSU student conduct policies and procedures.
<b>Women's Resource Center</b>	The Women's Resource Center's mission is to eliminate gendered discrimination and oppression by cultivating women's individual and social development. The Center works to provide the environment, resources, education, advocacy, outreach, and support necessary to maintain a community alliance of and for women.
<b>Writing Center</b>	The primary goal of the University Reading and Writing Center (URWC) is to provide encouraging, focused, and non-judgmental one-to-one tutorials in reading and writing for any undergraduate or graduate student at CSUS. In a collaborative and supportive environment, our peer tutors offer help with reading and writing at all points in the process, from initial planning and organizing through developing and revising a paper or understanding difficult texts. The URWC is supported by Academic Affairs and partners with Associated Students, Inc.
<b>Veterans Success Center (VSC)</b>	The Veteran's Success Center (VSC) at Sacramento State works to provide multi-faceted assistance to prospective and enrolled student veterans and dependents. Most notably, the Center assists students in accessing their GI benefits, completing the admission and application process, and registering for courses. The Center also helps students access campus resources, get involved in leadership activities, and transition into the civilian work world.

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