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**A GROUNDED THEORY OF INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PRACTICES IN
NEW JERSEY HIGHER EDUCATION**

by

Dennis W. Devery

A Dissertation

Submitted to the
Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
For the degree of
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at
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Dissertation Chair: JoAnn B. Manning, Ed.D.

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Abstract

Dennis W. Devery
A GROUNDED THEORY OF INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING PRACTICES IN
NEW JERSEY HIGHER EDUCATION
2015-2016
JoAnn B. Manning, Ed.D.
Doctor of Education

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to develop a theory, grounded in data provided by faculty, administrators, and institutional document analysis, concerning why and how faculty and administrators at three New Jersey higher education institutions use individualized learning practices. Individualized learning practices, as defined in this study, are the actions, activities, and procedures performed by faculty and administrators at the course, program, and institutional levels that assist students as they progress through a higher education institution. The study found a variety of individualized learning practices are utilized by faculty and administrators at the course, program and institutional levels as strategies to meet students where they are in order to enable students to achieve their higher education goals. The study found that “meeting students where they are” was the core phenomenon of the theory and that meeting students where they are requires understanding the students current academic, financial and developmental status as well as their higher education goals. The study follows the Strauss and Corbin (1990) grounded theory methodology and discusses the core phenomenon; the causal, contextual and intervening factors; as well as the strategies and consequences of the theory developed in this study.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
List of Figures	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Problem Statement	6
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions	8
Conceptual Framework	9
Limitations	15
Definition of Terms	17
Significance	18
Summary	20
Chapter 2: Literature Review	22
Grounded Theory	23
Multilevel Individualized Learning Practices	26
Course Level	29
Program Level	35
Institutional Level	39
Factors Influencing Faculty and Administrators	44
Self-Determination Theory	45
Behaviors and Attitudes	46
Institutional Transformation	47
Productive Learning Environments	47
Organizing for Learning	52
Learning Paradigm Theory	54
Summary	57
Chapter 3: Methods	58
Sample	61
Data Collection	67
Data Analysis	69
Validity	72

Table of Contents (Continued)

Ethical Considerations	75
Summary	76
Chapter 4: Findings	78
Grounded Theory Introduction	79
The Theory Overview	81
Causal Conditions	83
Societal Pressure	84
Evolving Student Characteristics.....	90
Faculty and Administrators' Desire for Student Success.....	95
Core Phenomenon.....	99
Individualized Learning Practices	115
Contextual Conditions.....	128
Institutional Focus	128
Faculty and Administrator Comportment	133
Resources	138
Intervening Conditions.....	143
Societal Pressure.....	143
Regulatory Paradigms	147
Consequences	150
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications	159
Implications	163
References.....	168
Appendix A: Informed Consent Form.....	180
Appendix B: Interview Protocol	181

List of Figures

Figure	Page
Figure 1. Axial coding process.....	26
Figure 2. A visual depiction of the theoretical paradigm	83

Chapter 1

Introduction

Two thirds of Americans say higher education is important to getting a good job and improving earning potential, and 7 of every 10 Americans say higher education is important to financial security (Lumina Foundation, 2013). Higher education is perceived as the key to economic survival, social mobility, and prosperity in America, yet millions of Americans cannot access higher education or do not graduate from higher education institutions after they have gained access (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). The costs of postsecondary education are high (Martin & Gillen, 2011; U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2012); however, the cost of not having higher education credentials is even higher for individuals and American society (Greenstone, Looney, Patashnik, & Yu, 2013). The Pew Research Center (2011, 2014) found that higher education is relevant, desired by employers, and offers a good return on investment.

Research clearly indicates that postsecondary education enables individuals to become more economically successful and upwardly mobile than those without postsecondary education (Baum, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014). Social mobility and the possibility of economic opportunity are fundamental tenets of American society (Greenstone et al., 2013). A Pew Research Center study (2011) found “higher education does seem to enhance a person’s work life—making it more satisfying, more interesting, and much more lucrative” (p. 51). As reported in the 2011 U.S. Department of Education *College Completion Toolkit*,

The earnings gap and employment gap between those who have completed postsecondary training and those who have not are substantially wider. The

growing earnings gap and employment gap strongly indicate that the job market's demand for higher skill attainment continues to rise. (USDOE, 2011, p. 25)

The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) provided specific data to reinforce the concept that higher education matters and has an impact on employment. In 2010, individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher had a 76.9% labor-force participation rate and a 4.4% unemployment rate; those with some college or an associate's degree had a 70.2% labor-force participation rate and an 8.3% unemployment rate; those with only a high school diploma had a 60.6% labor-force participation rate and a 10.3% unemployment rate; those with less than a high school diploma had a labor-force participation rate of only 37.1% and their unemployment rate was 17.7% (Census Bureau, 2012, Table 589, p.379). In addition, researchers at the Pew Charitable Trusts (2012) found that higher education can not only promote upward social mobility, but also prevent downward mobility. Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) provided further evidence of the importance of postsecondary education in their projections for jobs and education requirements through 2018, stating,

The future of employment in the United States boils down to this: success will require higher education, in one form or another. By 2018, the economy will create 46.8 million openings, 13.8 million brand-new jobs and 33 million "replacement jobs," positions vacated by workers who have retired or permanently left their occupations. Nearly two-thirds of these 46.8 million jobs, some 63 percent, will require workers with at least some college education. About 33 percent will require a Bachelor's degree or better, while 30 percent will

require some college or a two-year Associate's degree. Only 36 percent will require workers with just a high school diploma or less. (p. 13)

These research findings and data make it increasingly evident that postsecondary education has become critical for economic success and social mobility. Carnevale et al. (2010) claimed, "Essentially, postsecondary education or training has become the threshold requirement for access to middle-class status and earnings in good times and in bad. It is no longer the preferred pathway to middle-class jobs; it is increasingly the only pathway" (p. 13).

The perception and reality that a postsecondary education has become a requirement to attain a reasonable standard of living in the United States has increased demand on higher education institutions. This demand has strained the capacity of traditional higher education institutions. Members of the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (2012) wrote, "The existing capacity of nonprofit and public higher education is insufficient to satisfy the growing demand for higher education" (p. 2). Eighteen million undergraduate students were enrolled at U.S. degree-granting institutions in 2011 (College Board, 2013). That is 6 million more undergraduate students than were enrolled in 1990 (USDOE, 2013e).

Concerns about higher education have surfaced in the State of New Jersey. The total 2011 headcount of college enrollments of undergraduate and graduate students in New Jersey reached 442,878, which represented 110,000 more students than were enrolled in 1990 (New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education, 2015). New Jersey higher education institutions have historically been unable to meet college-bound students' demand for higher education; consequently, the lack of capacity at public and

private nonprofit institutions has left many students with little choice but to leave the State or turn to for-profit higher education institutions. The fact is “it is unrealistic to expect New Jersey to build sufficient space for every college-bound student graduating from a New Jersey high school” (New Jersey Higher Education Task Force Report, 2010, p. 71). Thus, in 2010, New Jersey had the highest outmigration of students (29,544 students) of any state in the nation (USDOE, 2012a).

Proprietary for-profit institutions offer additional options for New Jersey’s students. Jacobs (2012) claimed, “When students can’t get the courses they need at a low-cost community college, they often turn to a costlier for-profit college. The for-profits expand to meet demand, so there are no wait lists” (p. 1). The U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (2012) indicated that from 1998 to 2008, for-profit higher education institutions saw a 225% increase in enrollment. Unfortunately, that same report showed that, “more than half a million students who enrolled in 2008-9 left without a degree or certificate by mid-2010” (p. 2).

Increased demand and institutional capacity issues are troublesome challenges for higher education institutions, but an even greater issue is low completion rates. The National Student Clearinghouse (2014) reported that the national undergraduate six-year college completion rate average was 63% for public four-year degree-granting institutions. In New Jersey, the undergraduate six-year college completion rate average was 74% for public four-year degree-granting institutions (National Student Clearinghouse, 2014). Completion rates vary by the selectivity level of the institution, with the most selective colleges averaging 88% and open-enrollment institutions averaging only 31% nationally (USDOE, 2013d). The U.S. Senate Committee on Health,

Education, Labor and Pensions (2012) noted that more than half the students who entered for-profit colleges in 2008–2009 left without a degree or certificate. These statistics indicate that fixing access and capacity is not enough to increase postsecondary attainment. College completion rates must also be addressed.

The issue of how to address the college completion problem is becoming increasingly complicated by the diverse student body entering the higher education market. According to David Spence, President of the Southern Regional Education Board,

Increasing the numbers of persons with degrees and certificates in the coming years will require increasing the rates at which students who typically enroll in college actually graduate. However, to raise the numbers substantially, we will need to see that many more students, younger and older alike, enter college and succeed. (as cited in Bradley & Blanco, 2010, p. 2)

A growing demographic in the higher education student body is the adult student. The 18- to 21-year-old students who leave college without credentials add to the growing population of older adults who will eventually seek higher education. Van Der Werf and Sabatier (2009) stated, “The adult student market will be the fastest growing [market] in higher education for the foreseeable future” (p. 48). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2011), “Nearly 50 percent of adults aged 25–64 (over 97 million) have a high school degree or equivalent, but no postsecondary degree. There are over 7 million adults aged 25–34 with some college, but no degree” (USDOE, 2011, p. 22). The population of older adults with some college but no degree is an important potential source of students who could attain postsecondary credentials at an accelerated rate and

satisfy the American workforce requirements articulated by the Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce report (Carnevale et al., 2010).

The increasing diversity of the higher education student body is expanding the spectrum of issues facing higher education institutions. According to a Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education report (2010), many students increasingly need and desire flexible course scheduling, alternate delivery modes, and alternate methods of college credit attainment. Many students desiring to participate in higher education find access, cost, their own college readiness, and inflexible institutional bureaucracies to be formidable barriers to entry or reasons for not completing college after enrolling (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012). Meeting the demand for college-educated workers requires improvements across all traditional and nontraditional college student segments (Lingenfelter, as cited in Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012).

Problem Statement

The continued movement toward a knowledge economy has increased demand for higher education beyond the methodological and infrastructural capacities of public and private nonprofit higher education institutions. Even with the addition of for-profit colleges, the United States will be short 3 million postsecondary graduates in the workforce by 2018 unless higher education increases current output by 10% a year (Carnevale et al., 2010). Therefore, there is a need to research methods to accelerate the traditional higher education process and to increase the production of college-educated individuals while maintaining the high quality of U.S. higher education.

This study proceeded on the premise that increasing the number of students who have access to college, complete college, and acquire higher education knowledge and credentials is a worthwhile goal for faculty, administrators, higher education institutions, and American society. Another key premise was that faculty, administrators, and institutions can affect student access and college completion rates by their policies, practices, and procedures at the course, program, and institutional levels. Cress et al. (2010) provided numerous examples of these linkages in their research for the Campus Compact coalition. Perna (2010) described how faculty and administrators can enhance student success with adjustments to their policies and practices in support of working college students. Perna (2010) stated, “Through one-on-one interactions, professors and administrators can promote adult working students’ sense of belonging and validate their presence on campus, thus encouraging their academic success” (p. 32). Perna also advised, “Another strategy is to recognize formally the contribution of workplace experiences to student learning by awarding course credit for relevant employment experiences” (p. 31). Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that “faculty members may play the single most important role in student learning” (p. 176). Finally, researchers have indicated that the utilization of individualized learning practices could improve learning and yield progress in accelerating the production of students’ attainment of college degrees (CAEL, 2010; Cress et al., 2010; Diamond et al., 1975; Perna, 2010; Twigg, 2003).

I defined *individualized learning practices* as actions, activities, and procedures performed by faculty and administrators at the course, program, and institutional levels that assist students as they progress through a higher education institution. The term

learning as applied to individualized learning practices is meant to convey the concept of knowledge acquisition in its broadest sense and within the framework of how higher education institutions assist students at multiple levels with knowledge acquisition, as well as with credentialing of knowledge learned at their institution and in previous collegiate and non-collegiate environments. The needs of each student consist of both academic and nonacademic matters. Individualized learning practices take place when faculty and administrators account for individual differences among students and adjust instruction; curriculum, and institutional policies to enable each student to achieve his or her goals.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to develop a theory, grounded in data provided by faculty, administrators, and institutional document analysis, concerning why and how faculty and administrators use individualized learning practices. To narrow the study, I focused exclusively on faculty and administrators involved with individualized learning practices and policies at three New Jersey higher education institutions: Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University. The faculty and administrators interviewed were advised of this study's definition of individualized learning practices. The participants were selected with the assistance of each institution's Provost based on the Provost's understanding of the definition. Each Provost recommended individuals who were familiar with the individualized learning practices and institutional policies that directly and indirectly affected individualized learning practices at his or her institution. All participants had some knowledge of and interaction with individualized learning practices, but the degree of familiarity varied among the

participants. With this investigation, I sought to develop a theory based on faculty and administrator experiences and document analysis that can help to explain the use of individualized learning practices and provide a framework for future researchers to determine if similar circumstances exist at other institutions.

My overarching research question was, “Why do faculty and administrators at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University use individualized learning practices?” The research subquestions were as follows:

1. How are individualized learning practices currently utilized at the course, program, and institution level at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University?
2. What factors affect the degree of implementation of individualized learning practices at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this grounded theory study emerged after the data were collected and analyzed. Reviewing existing theories helped sensitize me to the concepts I was investigating; however, as Strauss and Corbin (1998) advised, “It is impossible to know prior to the investigation what the salient problems will be or what theoretical concepts will emerge” (p. 49). The founders of the grounded theory methodology, Glaser and Strauss (1967), recommended researchers limit the review of literature prior to collecting data to avoid forcing data into preconceived categories. Glaser and Strauss suggested that only after conducting considerable data collection and analysis should the researcher review literature and compare emergent theory with

previous ideas. Thus, some theories, models, and ideas discussed in the literature were studied during my research process, however, following the grounded theory methodology, I revised my conceptual framework and literature review extensively at the conclusion of my data collection and analysis.

My personal experience with individualized learning practices at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University served as the foundation for this study; however, the conceptual framework that emerged went well beyond the narrow focus of my experience. The conceptual framework that emerged reflects theories concerning the linkages between several variables, including the changing nature of higher education, multilevel academic and nonacademic practices, factors influencing faculty and administrator implementation of individualized learning practices, and institutional transformation.

My personal experience with individualized learning practices provided me access to higher education, reduced the cost of my education, reduced my time to degree completion, and assisted me in attaining my goals in both my undergraduate and graduate programs. The use of my own experience as part of the foundation of this research study is supported by literature presented by some of the most notable researchers in the qualitative and grounded theory research fields. For example, Corbin and Strauss (2008) noted that the source of research problems is often personal or professional experience. “The touchstone of a potential researcher’s experience may be a more valuable indicator of a potentially successful research endeavor than another more abstract one” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 23). In addition, Glaser and Strauss (1967) advised that enhancing

research credibility could require the researcher to “offer accounts of personal experience to show how events impinged upon himself [or herself]” (p. 9).

Guba and Lincoln (1998) acknowledged that researchers bring their perspectives, training, knowledge, and biases to the research process. This background and experience can sensitize the researcher to the nuances of the phenomenon being studied and the data being provided by the participants. My experience with individualized learning practices at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University helped to sensitize me to data collected at all three of these institutions. Corbin and Strauss (2008) advised that “our backgrounds and past experiences provide the mental capacity to respond to and receive the messages contained in data” and that “professional experience can enhance sensitivity” (p. 33). Corbin and Strauss (2008) further stated, “It makes sense, then, to draw upon those experiences to obtain insight into what our participants are describing” (p. 80).

Incorporating my experience into the conceptual framework did not mean that I wanted to impose my experience on the data but that my experience provided a framework for understanding the possible meanings and situations provided in the data. Corbin and Strauss (2008) advised that a researcher’s experiences may even “offer a negative case or something new to think about that will make us confront our assumptions about specific data” (p. 80). Using my personal experience as a component of the conceptual framework was critical to guiding this study and was supported by the aforementioned literature and scholars.

Although my experience provided a foundation concerning some of the individualized learning practices used at the three institutions in this study, understanding

what practices were currently in use and why required collecting faculty and administrator perspectives. Studying self-reported student data is an important step in measuring higher education quality (Wingspread Group, 1993); however, equally important is studying faculty practices. Bensimon (2007) stated, “If, as scholars of higher education, we wish to produce knowledge to improve student success, we cannot ignore that practitioners play a significant role.... We have to expand the scholarship on student success and take into account the influence of practitioners positively and negatively” (p. 445).

During my analysis of participant interview data, it became apparent that the individualized learning practices being implemented by faculty and administrators were not the core phenomenon of the research study. The core phenomenon was faculty and administrators at the three institutions feeling compelled to “meet students where they are” academically, financially, and developmentally. The “meeting students where they are” phenomenon involves two key subcategories: (a) understanding where students are academically, financially, and developmentally, and (b) understanding their individual higher education goals. Understanding “where students are” involves determining student academic, financial, and developmental status in relation to their individual higher education goals. The core phenomenon influenced faculty and administrators to develop and implement individualized learning practices. These revelations led me to an examination of existing literature to determine if literature concerning institutional transformation supported the emerging theory I was developing to explain conditions at the three institutions in this study.

The overall theory that emerged from interview and document analysis was that societal pressure, evolving student characteristics, and faculty and administrators' desire for student success are influencing faculty and administrators to adjust institutional practices to meet students where they are academically, financially, and developmentally. Meeting students where they are is an *in vivo* phrase captured from participants' statements. This phenomenon is influencing the faculty and administrators to develop and implement individualized learning practices to assist students in progressing from their current status to attaining their individual higher education goals. The implementation of these individualized learning practices is subject to conditions that enhance or restrict implementation and success. Finally, these practices result in consequences to students, faculty, administrators, and the higher education institutions.

The changing nature of higher education over the past decades is reflected in changes colleges and universities have experienced in terms of place, time, scholarly communities, and student communities (Eckel & King, 2007; Bridges, 2000). Researchers have outlined a context for the environment faculty and administrators operate in today and pointed out a new mindset focused on educating the growing and diverse student population (Eckel & King, 2007; Bridges, 2000). In addition, research concerning the socioeconomic impacts of higher education has provided a context for understanding some of the societal pressures higher education professionals (including participants in this study) feel as part of the U.S. higher education community (Carnevale et al., 2010; Greenstone et al., 2013; Pew Research Center, 2011, 2014).

Other researchers studying the evolving characteristics of higher education students which include age, enrollment status, gender, race and ethnicity, academic

preparedness, work status and technological connectedness have examined how these factors have influenced the changing practices of higher education professionals (Eckel & King, 2007; Hirudayaraj, 2011; Perna, 2010; Prensky, 2001). These student characteristic-focused research studies, coupled with student motivational and learning research (Astin, 1993, 1999; Knowles, 1970; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Tinto, 1993), have documented the association between student characteristics, learning practices, and student success in higher education and thus provide additional context for understanding faculty and administrators' multilevel implementation of individualized learning practices. Astin (1993) in particular offered further insight concerning the impacts of institutional practices and environmental experiences on student outcomes in relation to faculty and administrator practices.

This study also drew on the theoretical perspectives of Twigg (1999, 2003), Ewell (1997a, 1997b), and Barr and Tagg (1995) as frameworks for reviewing the theory that emerged from the participant data in this study. Twigg's research (1999, 2003) concerned designing more productive higher education learning environments, thus providing an understanding of practical solutions for institutions to adapt to rising costs, increased enrollment demands, restricted tuition revenue, the desire for increased access, and the promise of technology. Ewell (1997a, 1997b) synthesized three elements—what is known about learning, how to instruct to accomplish that learning, and how to build organizational environments that support learning—to produce an appropriate framework for examining the participant perspectives, action, and the theory that emerged from the interviews and documents analyzed in this study. Finally, Barr and Tagg (1995) suggested that institutional transformation in U.S. higher education was happening

because of a paradigm shift in the belief of the purpose of college. Barr and Tagg (1995) noted that the instructional paradigm that governed colleges for years was subtly but profoundly shifting to a new paradigm based on learning outcomes. Barr and Tagg's (1995) research provided an exceptional framework for comparing my study's emergent theory to the idea of this paradigm shift.

Much literature has been written on the factors influencing institutional change in higher education, on multilevel academic and nonacademic practices, and on the theoretical perspectives concerning institutional transformation examined by Twigg (1999, 2003), Ewell (1997a, 1997b), and Barr and Tagg (1995). These studies have enhanced understanding of why faculty and administrators at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University implement individualized learning practices and thus provide a framework for understanding the theory generated from this study.

Limitations

The initial limitation of this study was that the sample included only three public higher education institutions in New Jersey. The reason for this limitation, aside from the practical issues of time, distance, resources, and access, was that I personally attended each of these colleges. Thus, this study was a journey of self-discovery. I wanted to understand if my individualized experience at each of these institutions was an anomaly or a replicable process from which others could benefit.

Another limitation was that this study was conducted exclusively at public institutions with limited research focus. Faculty and administrators at research-focused private or public institutions may have different perspectives on the priority of

developing strategies to make students successful. Additionally, to the extent there are special considerations in the policy and practice decision-making processes at public institutions versus private institutions, such as obligations created by state funding, collective bargaining or state regulations the results may be biased in that regard.

Additionally, there was the possibility of a limitation related to the selective deposit and selective survival of documentation (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966). Thus, documentation records used in this study reflected what someone decided to keep and store and may not have provided complete situational awareness.

There was a possibility of sample selection bias; the participants were selected based on the recommendations of the Provosts at each of the institutions. This type of nonrandom sample selection, assisted by a senior leader familiar with the personnel at each institution, was essential to help me identify participants who met the theoretical sample requirements of this grounded theory study. If there were other personnel at each institution who could have provided different insights into individualized learning practices at any of the three institutions but were not interviewed, then that omission constitutes a limitation. The sampling and responses of the participants might also have provoked social desirability bias, which involves participants answering questions based on what they believe will make them or their institutions look socially desirable (Nederhof, 1985).

This study focused on faculty and administrator perceptions, actions, and policies and did not involve student perceptions or actions regarding individualized learning practices. This strategy was chosen to support the goal of developing a theory focused on

decision making by higher education faculty and administrators to implement individualized learning practices.

Further, because this investigation employed a qualitative design, the results are not statistically generalizable to the larger spectrum of higher education institutions across the country. I endeavored to generate a theory that other researchers at other institutions could use as a model to determine if similar institutional policies and faculty and administrator individualized learning practices are occurring and influencing student college completion timelines and goal attainment.

Finally, there was a possibility that my advocacy for individualized learning practices could skew the data regardless of the scholarly checks I put in place to prevent such an issue. To minimize bias, I conducted a thorough reflexivity exercise. As Corbin & Strauss (2008) advised, I endeavored to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of data by examining my “influence on the research process” (p. 31) and by acknowledging in the text of the study the “biases, values, and experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 43) I brought to this research.

Definition of Terms

This study had one critical specialized concept—individualized learning practices—and I have operationally defined this concept as follows. *Individualized learning practices* are the actions, activities, and procedures performed by faculty and administrators at the course, program, and institutional levels that assist students as they progress through a higher education institution. These practices affect both academic and nonacademic matters. Individualized learning practices take place when faculty and administrators adjust instruction, curriculum, and institutional policies to assist individual

students achieve their higher education goals. Numerous researchers have mentioned individualization and individual learning (Diamond et al., 1975), individualistic learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), individualized instruction (Mills & Ragan, 1994), or variations on this verbiage in published articles concerning practices to individualize higher education. These articles focused almost exclusively on the instructional and curriculum development area of higher education institutions. My definition of individualized learning practices encompasses instruction and curriculum development but goes beyond this scope to include institutional academic and nonacademic practices and policies that assist students as they progress through the higher education system.

Significance

Studying faculty and administrator ideas about the utilization of individualized learning practice in higher education was worthwhile because faculty and administrators are the professional practitioners and gatekeepers of higher education attainment, in New Jersey and across the country. Further, studying these two groups was significant because faculty and administrators' opinions and practices are often missing from the scholarship on student success in higher education. Bensimon (2007) stated, "The absence of practitioners in the scholarship on postsecondary student success is particularly noticeable in comparison to the scholarship on K-12 student achievement" (p. 444). Additionally, Tinto and Pusser (2006) advised, "Too much of our [higher education] research focuses on theoretically appealing concepts that do not translate easily into definable courses of action" (p. 4). Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007) noted a need for researchers to "verify effective approaches that foster success of different groups of students at different types of institutions" (p. xi). Understanding the

knowledge level, concerns, and innovative ideas that faculty and administrators have about individualized learning practices will inform the debate concerning how to accelerate the production of college-educated citizens while maintaining quality and addressing societal demands for increased access, affordability, and success in higher education. Additionally, understanding the ideas and concerns of faculty and administrators will help higher education leaders design educational processes that support underserved students (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001).

In 2014, I as the Vice President for Planning and Research at Thomas Edison State College, responsible for strategic planning and higher education market research, and many other higher education administrators found ourselves in turmoil concerning how to deliver instruction and remain economically viable, maintain quality, and meet requirements for academic freedom while delivering student outcomes that met the challenges of a global economy and domestic calls for accountability. The internal and external environments of higher education institutions appeared to be changing at an unprecedented rate, spurred by innovations in technology, learning science, and greater understanding of human cognition. At the time of this study, it seemed that higher education was on the verge of a paradigm shift, moving from traditional limited-access collective education to individualized instruction for the masses. Harden (2012) stated, “The changes ahead will ultimately bring about the most beneficial, most efficient and most equitable access to education that the world has ever seen....Technology will also bring future students an array of new choices about how to build and customize their educations” (p. 56).

Through my research, I sought to build a theory to explain the use of individualized learning practices at the course, program, and institutional levels in higher education institutions, with a holistic view of the interaction and effect, focused on the individualized learning practices at three New Jersey higher education institutions. The grounded theory method provided context concerning the causal factors, contextual factors, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences surrounding a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007) involving individualized learning practices. The resulting theory provides a level of understanding concerning current practices that will inform debate about the evolution of higher education in America.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the economic and societal issues that were changing the higher education environment in the United States and New Jersey. The demand for higher education has surpassed the methodological and infrastructure capacities of public and private nonprofit higher education institutions, thus prompting the need for research into methods to accelerate the traditional higher education process and to increase the production of college-educated individuals while maintaining the high quality of U.S. higher education. I discussed research indicating that the utilization of individualized learning practices could improve learning and accelerate the production of students' attaining college degrees. The purpose of this study was to develop a theory, grounded in data provided by faculty, administrators, and institutional document analysis, concerning why faculty and administrators use individualized learning practices. The research questions assisted in narrowing the focus of the study to three higher education institutions in New Jersey. The conceptual framework provided a summary of the

theories, models, and ideas that have been used to explain the phenomenon discovered in this study. Finally, in the chapter, I noted the limitations of the study, defined the key concept of individualized learning practices, and explained the significance of this study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Due to the methodological nuances of grounded theory research, this literature review is different from reviews found in most dissertations. This literature review established the context for my study and supported the rationale for my research questions; however, Chapter 2 does not present existing theories to be supported or improved upon. Rather, a review of the literature initially sensitized me to the phenomenon I was researching and after data collection and analysis provided a basis for comparison between the emergent theory and previous scholarly works.

The originators of the grounded theory approach, Glaser and Strauss (1967), noted that research that allowed theory to emerge from the data provided by participants was lacking in the research field and that such research could provide new insights that were not linked to previous research. In fact, Glaser and Strauss recommended that researchers limit the review of literature prior to collecting data to avoid forcing data into preconceived categories. Glaser and Strauss suggested that only after considerable data collection and analysis should the researcher review literature and compare emergent theory with previous works. For this reason, I offer some of the typical dissertation literature review material as part of Chapter 4 (Findings) and Chapter 5 (Conclusions and Implications).

This chapter begins with a review of the principles of grounded theory research strategy. I then examine literature concerning multilevel individualized learning practices, including information concerning individualized learning practices in specific segments of higher education and across the course, program, and institutional levels

within higher education institutions. Next, I review studies on factors that influence faculty and administrator practices and implementation of individualized learning practices in higher education institutions. Finally, I close the chapter with a review of research about institutional transformation in the changing higher education environment. The studies on institutional transformation appear to support the theory that emerged from participant data.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory was the methodological approach selected for my research study. I chose the grounded theory approach because it relies on the emergence of theory from participant data rather than on prior theory or research. When applying grounded theory procedures, the researcher specifically attempts to develop theory from the participants' data. Accordingly, I endeavored to develop a theory based on a holistic view of individualized learning practices across course, program, and institutional levels as described by faculty and administrators who participated in the study.

In 1967, Glaser and Strauss, the originators of the ground theory methodology, shared congruent views of how researchers should methodologically develop theory, codes, and themes as part of grounded theory research. Kelle (2005) noted that Glaser and Strauss later developed divergent views on the issues of structure and standardized approaches to grounded theory development. Glaser remained committed to the free-flowing approach that let categories and theory emerge from the data, while Strauss moved to a more structured categorization of data discovered during research (Kelle, 2005). Creswell (2007) noted that Glaser "criticized Strauss's approach to grounded theory as too prescribed and structured" (p. 63). In 1990, Strauss and Corbin co-authored

the original version of *Basics of Qualitative Research* in an attempt to explain Strauss's enhanced concept of how to develop theory using a grounded theory methodology. Since 1990, Strauss and Corbin have produced three subsequent editions of their original work, affirming their position that some structured categorization is appropriate. In fact, Strauss and Corbin (1990) advise that reviewing literature prior to and during the data collection process can provide a more informed categorization process and therefore a better grounded theory.

The Strauss and Corbin (1990) method was a better fit for my research study than Glaser's method, and therefore I adopted it as my specific methodological approach. The more prescribed approach outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) begins with coding the data into major categories. This analytical process is known as *open coding* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and also identifies concepts and the concepts' properties and dimensions. Strauss and Corbin (1998) advised, "During open coding many different categories are identified. Some of these will pertain to phenomena. Other categories will refer to conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences" (p. 129).

Axial coding was the next methodological step. Axial coding builds on the open coding categories but is aimed at discovering connections between categories and identifying one category that appears to be the focal category, also known as the core phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Once the core phenomenon is identified, the axial coding process requires the researcher to go back to the data and build categories around this core phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin (1990) identified the types of categories surrounding the core phenomenon as causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and consequences. Creswell (2007) briefly explained each of these categories by noting

that causal conditions are the factors that caused the core phenomenon, strategies are actions taken in response to the core phenomenon, contextual and intervening conditions are the broad and specific situational factors that influence the strategies, and consequences are the outcomes from using the strategies (p.64-65). The core phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions and consequences, form a model sometimes called a *paradigm* by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

The final methodological step is selective coding, which Straus and Corbin (1998) described as “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (p. 161). The model or paradigm developed during axial coding is refined by filling in poorly developed categories or eliminating excess categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The selective coding process requires that a narrative be developed to describe the interrelationship of the categories in the model/paradigm (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This narrative can then be validated by comparing it to the raw data or by presenting it to the participants to see if it represents their realities (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although the narrative might not fit every aspect of the participants’ realities, the major concepts should apply if the model/paradigm is grounded in participant data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory scholars have highlighted the use of diagrams and visual models to assist with identifying connections or gaps in the logic of axial coding models or paradigms (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Creswell, 2007). This research project integrated a variation of the axial coding process using Morrow and Smith’s (1995) visual model (see Figure 1).

In sum, Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) methodology provided a structured approach to grounded theory research that fit my research project exceptionally well. My literature

review assisted in sensitizing me to the data, allowing me to understand the data in context and to identify relevant issues (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Dey (2007) commented on the appropriateness of a literature review during grounded theory research, stating, “The point is not to avoid preconceptions, but to ensure that they are well-grounded in arguments and evidence, and always subject to further investigation, revision, and refutation” (p. 176). Grounded theory was the perfect approach for conducting my research, leading to an understanding of the ideas generated by the participating faculty and administrators, who are charged with making higher education work on a daily basis.

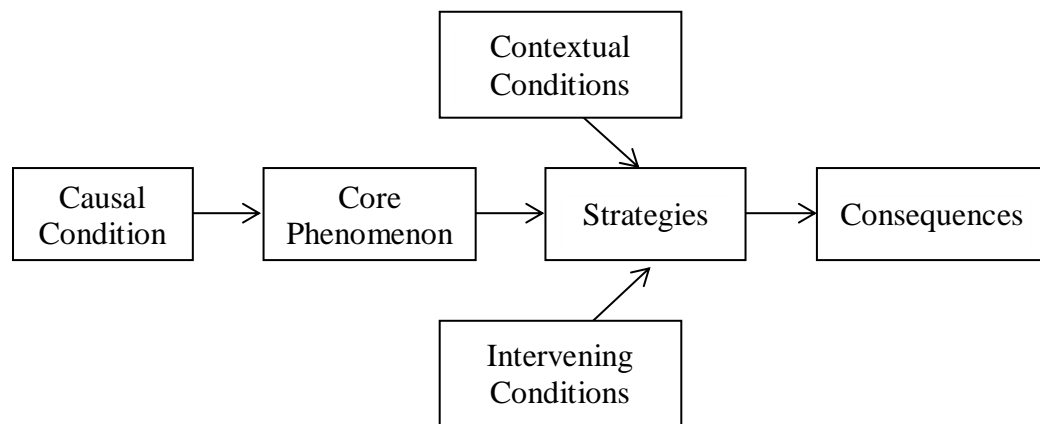


Figure 1. Axial coding process.

Multilevel Individualized Learning Practices

Much of the foundational research associated with learning practices in higher education is segmented by level: course, program, or institutional. Foundational research at the course level has often involved student learning-style research, student motivation research, and technology enhancements such as cognitive tutor research. At the program level, much of the research has focused on curriculum standards and curriculum

development. At the institutional level, considerable research has been conducted concerning student connectedness, transfer student versus native student performance, institutional mission and funding.

Individualized learning practices, as I defined them for this study, are the actions, activities, and procedures performed by faculty and administrators at the course, program, and institutional levels that address the individual needs of each student and assist students as they progress toward their higher education goals. Researchers have suggested that many students in higher education institutions could benefit from individualized learning practices (Cress et al., 2010; Diamond et al., 1975; Perna, 2010; Twigg, 2003), yet the acceptance of these practices in higher education often meets resistance. Bok (2006) stated, “faculties are more likely to resist any determined effort to examine their work and question familiar ways of teaching and learning” (p. 334). For example, Twigg (2003) noted in her study on course redesign,

In higher education, both on campus and online, we individualize faculty practice (that is, we allow individual faculty members great latitude in course development and delivery) and standardize the student learning experience (that is, we treat all students in a course as if their learning needs, interests and abilities are the same).

Instead we need to do just the opposite: individualize student learning and standardize faculty practice. (Twigg, 2003, p. 38)

However, the authors of a 2011 U.S. Department of Education report, in reference to a University of Maryland course redesign initiative, stated, “Initially the faculty was resistant to course redesign driven by cost-reduction goals...But once they saw

improvements in student achievement associated with redesign, they became enthusiastic adopters” (USDOE, 2011, p. 16).

Numerous theories assist in understanding resistance to change by faculty and administrator, including prospect theory (Kashneman & Tversky, 1984), endowment effect (Thaler, 1980), and status quo bias (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). These theories provided some insight into the issue explored in this research study. Researchers have explicitly expressed a need for greater understanding of faculty and administrator roles in college student experiences and success (Bensimon, 2007; Martinez Aleman, 2007; Stage & Hubbard, 2007). My research question concerning perceptions of faculty and administrators at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University was prompted by a desire to understand what was actually taking place at these three institutions and to discern the reasons faculty and administrators had and had not utilized individualized learning practices.

The practice of awarding credit based on assessments of prior learning and knowledge obtained outside the classroom provides an example of an individualized learning practice which appears to meet resistance even though research indicates improved student success when implemented. Awarding credit based on learning obtained outside the classroom has not been adopted by many institutions because of faculty and administrator resistance. Faculty and administrator resistance originates from multiple issues but often centers around “tension within the institution between quality and efficiency concerns” (CAEL, 2010, p. 70). According to a 2010 Center for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) study, adult undergraduates who received “prior learning credit” were more than twice as likely to graduate compared to their peers who received

no prior learning credit. In addition, undergraduates who received prior learning credit completed a bachelor's degree 2.5 to 10 months faster and an associate's degree up to 4.5 months faster than did their peers who received no prior learning credit (Center for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2010). Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) supports the idea that individualized learning practices enhance individuals' intrinsic motivation because students can accumulate college-level credit for knowledge they already have and enjoy some level of self-determination of their educational pathway. These students "experience their behavior to be self-determined...producing a feeling of competence" (p. 58). These researchers have demonstrated some of the successful outcomes possible when implementing individualized learning practices, as well as illuminating the apparent inherent reluctance of faculty and institutions to adopt these new practices. My research question concerns the factors affecting institutions' implementation of individualized learning practices and represents an attempt to understand the implementation of these seemingly successful options.

Course Level

At the course level, the most effective individualized learning practice appears to be personalized instruction. Bloom (1984) introduced research by two University of Chicago doctoral students who sought to assess differences in achievement scores between average students given one-on-one tutoring versus students exposed to a standard one-to-30 teacher-student ratio typically found in conventional classroom instruction. The researchers found a significant difference of two standard deviations (Bloom, 1984). Bloom (1984) stated that the research "demonstrates that most of the students do have the potential to reach this high level of learning" (p. 4). Bloom

acknowledged that the issue for higher education institutions—in fact, for any instructional organization—is that it has not been economically feasible to provide every student with an individual personal tutor.

Bloom (1984) described multiple research projects conducted to determine which alterable variables could improve student achievement in group instruction to the extent achieved by one-on-one tutoring. The research projects found varying levels of achievement improvement based on teacher and administrator intervention but clearly indicated that teacher performance and pedagogy affected student performance at the course level. Numerous researchers have provided compelling research concerning course level practices (Bloom, 1984; Cress et al. 2010; Diamond et al., 1975; Perna, 2010; Twigg, 2003). In addition, these studies provided justification for faculty and administrators to implement individualized learning practices based on student learning style, student motivation, and technological advances that could elevate student learning toward the achievement level described by Bloom (1984).

At their core, individualized learning practices focus policy and instruction on student needs rather than on faculty, administrator, or institutional needs. This approach is supported by Kaplan and Kies (1993), who found that by assessing learning styles, instructors can develop more personalized instruction; this assessment, matched to the appropriate teaching style, improves student learning outcomes. Additional research indicated that, if educational conditions are altered to meet learning style preferences, statistically significant improvements in behaviors, grades, and attitudes are observed (Dunn, Beaudry, & Klavas, 1989).

Johnston (1998) added to this work, developing the idea of differential learning patterns and an instrument known as the Learning Combination Inventory (LCI). This instrument provided faculty with a perspective concerning understanding how students learn. Further, faculty members have used this knowledge to teach each student according to how he or she individually learns. More importantly, the LCI provided students with an understanding of their individual learning styles so that they could develop learning strategies to deal with teaching styles that differed from their preferred learning patterns.

Research concerning adult learner theory (Knowles, 1970) has indicated that adults, who are an increasing segment of the higher education student body, have different learning patterns than 18 to 21 year old students. In addition, adult learners are self-directed and want to control and individualize their learning (Knowles, 1970). These studies sensitized me to the issues affecting differential instruction at the course level and enabled me to prepare questions and categorize data concerning the perspectives of higher education professionals more effectively with regard to individualized learning.

Faculty, administrators, and higher education institution leaders continually study the issue of student motivation in an attempt to understand more clearly how to make students successful. Just as understanding student learning styles provides faculty and administrators insight to help students succeed, so does understanding students' motivation styles. Ryan and Stiller (1991) described intrinsic motivation as an important phenomenon in education that can be catalyzed or undermined by instructor practices. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the rate of success and graduation for students is linked to students' intrinsic motivation, which is linked to the

amount of control students have over their learning and path to a degree. Understanding students' feelings of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation is important because this understanding provides faculty and administrators with an idea of the motivational styles to which students will respond.

When students are controlled, their regulatory process is compliance-based; however, when students feel self-determined, their regulatory process is choice-based (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Student involvement theory (Astin, 1999) further supports the concept that the more the student feels individually connected to and involved in the learning process, the better the results. According to student involvement theory,

The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (Astin, 1999, p. 519)

Thus, the degree to which faculty and administrators understand these motivational factors provides a level of insight into their ability to understand the need for individualized learning practices.

Bloom (1984) indicated that one-on-one tutoring by expert human tutors was much more effective than typical one-to-many classroom instruction, but historically that model has not been economically feasible. Advances in computer technology, however, have changed the economics and the instructional possibilities with regard to personalized instruction. Bridges (2000) articulated how technology has transformed

instruction from a focus on the transmission of knowledge to a focus on the manipulation and analysis of knowledge. One form of this transformation of instruction is manifested in the “flipped classroom” initiatives described by Brame (2012):

Flipping the classroom means that students gain first exposure to new material outside the class, usually via reading or lecture videos, and then use class time to do the harder work of assimilating that knowledge, perhaps through problem-solving, discussion or debates... in class where they have the support of their peers and instructor. This model contrasts from the traditional model in which first exposure occurs via lecture in class, with students assimilating knowledge through homework; thus the term flipped classroom. (p. 1)

Bridges (2000) pointed to the changing nature of instruction, which places individual learners “at the center of a multi-layer, multimedia, multi-dimensional learning environment through which they have the power to construct their own learning” (p. 49). The advent of computer-based “cognitive tutors” (Anderson, Corbett, Koedinger & Pelletier, 1996) has further transformed the instructional environment and made it possible to institute individualized learning practices at the course level.

Computerized cognitive tutors are based on the adaptive character of thought theory (Anderson, 1976). Carnegie Mellon University has been conducting extensive research in the area of cognitive tutoring and established the Open Learning Initiative to integrate expertise with cognitive tutoring into online courses (Thille, 2012, p.5). Lovett, Meyer, and Thille (2008) reported,

Students in the [Carnegie Mellon] accelerated Open Learning Initiative [OLI] Statistics course were able to learn better and in half the time as compared to

students with traditional instruction. Usually, that kind of effectiveness or efficiency effect would be the result of individualized, human tutored instruction.

(p. 16)

Similarly, Koedinger and Corbett (2006) reported, “Students in cognitive tutor Algebra I classes have been shown to score twice as high on end-of-course open-ended problem solving tests and 15 percent higher on objective tests when compared to students enrolled in traditional algebra courses” (p. 62). Lovett et al. (2008) related how instructor behavior at the course level was enhanced using the Carnegie Mellon Online Learning Initiative, stating,

The experienced instructor came to class better prepared to teach. Thanks to OLI’s automatically generated instructor reports, the instructor was able to see reports on student progress, review summaries of students’ quiz performance, and read students’ reflections and questions about the previous week’s material. With this information in hand, he was able to select discussion topics and example problems that targeted the topics with which the students were struggling. Then, class time was spent with students actively engaged on the material that was most likely to need more supported practice or a novel explanation from the instructor.

(p. 17)

Thus, computerized cognitive tutors, based on the adaptive character of thought theory (Anderson, 1976), provide higher education institutions with the ability to individualize learning practices at the course level.

My research concerning the experiences and perceptions of faculty and administrators relative to individualized learning practices represented my attempt to

determine their level of knowledge of and experience with the previous research on the topic. The research and literature seemed to support the idea that individualized learning practices can enhance course content delivery and student learning and can accelerate the production of quality postsecondary graduates. My research questions and data collection efforts were designed to determine the practices higher education professionals were implementing or not implementing at the three institutions and why.

Program Level

At the program level, research has indicated that the changing demographics of higher education influence curriculum development. Bridges (2000), discussing the British higher education system, observed that the nature of universities changed radically in the last 20 years of the 20th century. Bridges explained that colleges and universities have experienced changes in place, time, scholarly communities, and student communities. Bridges observed that these changes have propelled higher education into a new mindset for educating a growing and diverse student population. Eckel and King (2007) noted that the U.S. system of higher education has experienced similar changes that have required adjustments in standard higher education practices. Eckel and King explained that institutions are updating and expanding facilities and services to meet demand for state of the art technology and academic facilities. Further, institutions are attempting to diversify revenue streams through online education and niche degree programs as they adjust to student demographic changes (Eckel & King, 2007). These demographic changes include 80% of students holding jobs, 75% being considered nontraditional students, and fewer than 20% living on campus (Eckel & King, 2007).

These changes not only affect course-level instruction and institutional policies, but also affect the curriculum being developed and implemented at the program level.

The substantial and growing number of students who transfer between higher education institutions has caused considerable adjustment to standard curriculum development practices and requires coordination of curriculum outside the individual institution. Smith (2012) reported, “A third of those who were first-time college students in 2006 had attended at least one other institution by summer 2011” and “43 percent of transfers were to public two year institutions” (p. 1). The New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (2013) reported that 12,989 students transferred into New Jersey senior public institutions in 2012 (p. 2). The challenges associated with the volume of student transfers, institutional coordination requirements, and the disruption of standard curriculum development practices have manifested over the past few years in frequent public disputes between faculty and administrators. For example, Fein (2012) documented multiple arguments and even lawsuits between faculty and administrators in the City University of New York system concerning general education curriculum and the need for alignment with the internal credit transfer process. In 2008, New Jersey implemented a comprehensive statewide transfer agreement, known as the Lampitt Law (named after the sponsor of the legislation, Assemblywoman Pamela Lampitt), to ensure an associate of arts or associate of science degree from a New Jersey Community College will be fully transferable as the first two years of a baccalaureate degree program a New Jersey’s public four year institutions (NJSA 18A:62-46).

The growing segment of adult learners in higher education is pressuring curriculum developers to review Knowles’s (1970) adult learner theory about andragogy

versus pedagogy. Adult learner theory has provided a view of how adult learners in higher education, sometimes referred to as *nontraditional* students, require instruction delivery and content with which they can connect (Knowles, 1970). Knowles (1970) theory had six basic tenets: (a) adults are internally motivated and self-directed, (b) adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences, (c) adults are goal-oriented, (d) adults are relevancy-oriented, (e) adults are practical, and (f) adult learners like to be respected. These tenets often drive the modification of curricula toward a more relevant and practical view than that of the classic theoretical approach (Kenner & Weirnerman, 2011, p. 90). Based on the growing number of college students that Knowles would have classified as adults, the adult learner theory appears to have broader implications for higher education curriculum development and program implementation.

Adults bring life experiences and knowledge to the learning environment. They are practical, and they like to be respected. These factors have an impact at the program level because they prompt curriculum developers to consider alternate delivery methods and make determinations of how prior learning evaluation fits into the curriculum scheme of the institution. Bridges (2000) highlighted the conflict between student desires for acknowledgment of knowledge learned outside the classroom and institutional desires to control the factors and quality of knowledge production. Society has pressured higher education institutions to provide and accept workplace related and experiential learning and “insofar as universities recognize and acknowledge (accredit) knowledge derived from outside the academy they threaten their own privileged position of authority in its construction” (Bridges, 2000, p. 47). The research conducted as part of this study on faculty and administrator utilization of program-level individual learning practices

encompassed the use of experiential and workplace learning and was sensitized by Bridges' concepts, which may allow for a fuller understanding of how learning practices integrate across higher education.

Pressure to individualize instruction has influenced some higher education institutions to move toward a modularization of student-centered curricula. Bridges (2000) described the modularization of curricula in terms of institutions allowing students to blend courses from various degree programs into unique degree plans that meet their individual desires. The authors of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT; 2013) preliminary report on the future of MIT education expanded on the idea, stating,

Modularity could be achieved in the MIT undergraduate curriculum in a number of ways. A top-down approach would decompose existing courses into modules; a bottom-up approach would re-engineer a curriculum by identifying the core concepts and associated modules that underlie them or build on them. (p. 29)

The authors of the MIT report noted, "In addition to providing increased flexibility for students to customize their degree programs, increased modularity also presents other opportunities to improve MIT education and even may address some existing faculty resource limitations" (p. 12). Modularization also allows for employer-centered curricula that link programs of study to specific employer needs. Bridges (2000) described how his university

was approached recently by a major computing and information systems company. They wanted a degree program which would prepare students for a management role in their European based organization. Our modularization program enabled us to assemble a tailored degree which included elements of our

existing programs in information systems, management and European languages which crossed the boundaries of not only three subject departments but also three nascent faculty structures. (p. 43)

Bridges (2000) also highlighted three challenges to modularization: professional and accreditation requirements, progressive learning requirements in an area of study, and the desire of the head of the college department to protect income streams. These issues have resulted in barriers to individualization and student choice. The modularization concept provides an interesting context for understanding the further expansion of individual learning practices and the programmatic barriers.

Institutional Level

At the institutional level, researchers have suggested that policies have an impact on the individual student's feeling of connectedness to the institution and that individual connection has an impact on student success. For example, Tinto (1993) studied student persistence in higher education and found that although student backgrounds have an effect on student persistence, the interaction between the student and the institutional systems has the most telling effect on persistence. Astin's (1999) research and subsequent development of student involvement theory showed that students' institutional involvement was critical to success, retention, and graduation. Astin's (1999) research further indicated that student involvement was directly correlated to the policies and practices of the institutions.

Ryan and Deci (2000) found that relatedness, or a sense of belonging to an organization disseminating a goal, such as attaining a degree, allowed people to perform well even when the goal was not intrinsically motivating. Thus, the policies of the

institution can cause the student to feel part of the institution or alienated from it, and these policies can have a profound effect (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Research clearly indicates a connection between institutional policy and student success. Monaghan and Attewell (2015) found that the credit transfer policies of four-year institutions had a significant negative impact on bachelor's degree attainment of community college transfer students. This negative impact was directly attributable to credits lost in the transfer process because of institutional policies. In fact, Monaghan and Attewell found "the BA attainment rate among community college transfers (students) would be even higher than [for] 4-year entrants if this credit loss did not occur" (p. 16). This research provided context for my interview questions, some of which were posed to facilitate understanding of administrator practices involving transfer credit and collaborations between two-year and four-year institutions.

Knowles's (1970) adult learner theory supported the idea that students want relevant systems for completing higher education requirements, not a bureaucratic one-size-fits-all model. Students want credit for what they know and want institutions to implement policies and systems to make degree achievement possible. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) supported the idea that institutional policies should allow students to accumulate college-level credit for knowledge they already had and allow students some level of self-determination of their educational pathway. The CAEL (2010) report indicated that policies that account for knowledge acquired outside the classroom and allowed for a level of self-determination enhanced individual students' intrinsic motivation and resulted in greater student success.

Individualized learning practices can be seen as commoditizing academic programs; these practices challenge traditional notions of how college credit can be earned. This understanding helped sensitize me to issues of transfer credit, experiential learning, and disruptions of traditional higher education business models by individualized learning practices. I was thus aware of how such disruptions could cause institutions to resist such measures.

During my research, two additional factors influencing learning practices at the institutional level became apparent. First, professionals at higher education institutions often viewed their educational responsibilities differently, depending on their institution's level of selectivity in student admissions and their institutional mission. Second, federal and state funding models for higher education in the United States have fundamentally changed since the 1990s.

Higher education institutions with highly selective student-acceptance criteria often have faculty and administrators who believe their institutions were established to educate the best and brightest as an investment in the intellectual capital of the country and that these institutions therefore should not focus on educating the masses. Hoxby (2014) argued that students at highly selective institutions pay far less than the actual cost of the education; the institutions are therefore subsidizing the students' education, much like a venture capitalist subsidizes a new business, expecting repayment in the form of significant donations from future alumni. This funding model, Hoxby argued, requires that these institutions accept only the best and brightest. On the other hand, the faculty and administrators at nonselective higher education institutions appear to share the belief that higher education institutions have a responsibility to provide educational

opportunities to the masses so as to increase the overall intellectual capital of the entire citizenry, enabling economic opportunity and social mobility. Kun and Whitt (1988) found that, “Different sectors of higher education have developed different missions to meet the needs of different segments of the post-secondary market....Differences in mission and commitment in turn affect the recruitment, socialization, tasks and performance standards of faculty” (p.79). The divergent views and visions of higher education in the United States seem to have an effect on institutional implementation of individualized learning practices and provide an excellent area for future research.

The institutional missions of higher education institutions appear to have an influence on the use of faculty and administrator implementation of individualized learning practices insofar as the institutional mission drives the demographic characteristics of students attending the institution and the type of faculty and administrators drawn to work at the institutions. Pike, Kuh, and Gonyea (2003) noted,

Even institutional differences as fundamental as Carnegie type are not directly related to differences in students’ college experiences and gains in learning.

Differences in reported college experiences and gains in learning across Carnegie classifications are the result of differences in the characteristics of students attending the various types of institutions. (pp. 258–259)

Pike, Kuh and Gonyea’s (2003) findings seem to reveal a need for faculty and administrators to create academic and nonacademic institutional policies and practices that particularly support individual students who lack knowledge and experience with college life. The researchers acknowledged that some institutions had a higher preponderance of these student segments based on institutional mission and resultant

admissions policies. Toutkoushian and Smart (2001) stated, “The majority of studies that have considered the topic [institutional characteristics] concluded that institutional effects contribute little, if anything, to student growth after controlling for student background and acquired characteristics” (p. 55).

A fundamental shift in federal and state funding policy for higher education is another factor affecting individualized learning practice implementation. The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (2013) released a report that showed the degree of this shift. Per-student support for public higher education institutions in FY2012 fell to the lowest level in 25 years (State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2013). Lingenfelter (as cited in Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012) wrote, “Students are paying more, while public institutions are receiving substantially less money to educate them” (p. 2). Christensen, Horn, Soares, and Caldera (2011) pointed out, “Changing circumstances mandate that we [the United States] shift the focus of higher education policy away from how to enable more students to afford higher education to how we can make a quality postsecondary education affordable” (p. 1). Changing ideas about whom higher education institutions should educate and how to increase access underscore the need for research aimed at understanding the factors affecting implementation of individualized learning practices at higher education institutions.

Individualized learning practices appear to meet the needs of many students, and researchers have suggested that these practices present the possibility of significant improvement in multiple higher education goals. Even so, acceptance of individualized learning practices may be hindered by a structural inertia barrier (Hannan & Freeman,

1984). My grounded theory research used the existing literature concerning individualized learning practices at the course, program, and institutional level to facilitate the categorization and development of my theory.

Factors Influencing Faculty and Administrators

Understanding the factors influencing faculty and administrator utilization and implementation of individualized learning practices is critical to understanding why higher education professionals implement the practices they do, as well as how individualized learning practices could be used in the future to influence student success. Bensimon (2007) stated,

If, as scholars of higher education, we wish to produce knowledge to improve student success, we cannot ignore that practitioners play a significant role. . . . We have to expand the scholarship on student success and take into account the influence of practitioners – positively and negatively. (p. 445)

However, little discourse or research has been conducted concerning the perceptions of faculty and administrators relative to individualized learning practices. The people who actually make the higher education system work in an ever-changing environment should be the source of knowledge and experience in this area. In fact, Bensimon (2007) noted that in stark contrast to the plethora of K-12 research concerning faculty and staff influence on student success, there is a distinct lack of scholarship concerning faculty and staff influence on college student success.

Throughout my research, faculty and administrators repeatedly stated that student success was their primary objective. Researchers have found that faculty–student interaction has an effect on student success (Brophy & Good, 1970; Cole, 2010; Stipek,

2002). Ryan and Stiller (1991) found that faculty practices can support or undermine intrinsic motivation in students. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) further supported this connection and provided a framework for understanding the interrelationship between faculty–student interactions and the motivation of students in higher education.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory relates the interconnection between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and the degree to which a person is motivated by his or her feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness regarding a specific issue (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory is informative in relation to this study because it provides a context for understanding the impact of faculty, administrator, and institutional policies, practices, and procedures on a student’s motivation to learn in a particular higher education environment. Proponents of the theory have demonstrated that intrinsic motivation fosters the best desire for learning and that feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are critical elements of building intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The degree to which faculty–student and staff–student interactions foster students’ feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness affects the degree of intrinsic motivation students experience (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Self-determination theorists have acknowledged that educational experiences are not always intrinsically motivating and that extrinsic motivation is a factor (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Again, the theory supports the use of individualized learning practices by indicating that for a person to convert an extrinsic motivator (e.g., a reward, such as an academic degree) to an intrinsic motivator (e.g., a personal goal), the person must feel a

relatedness to the group or institution disseminating the goal, in addition to feelings of autonomy and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory provides an exceptional theoretical framework within which to examine how faculty, administrator, and institutional use of individualized learning practices can accelerate degree completion and motivate students to graduate.

Behaviors and Attitudes

Researchers have suggested that recruiting and training faculty committed to enhancing student engagement and student learning has an effect on the learning centeredness of institutions and produces gains in student learning (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) further suggested that the degree to which faculty and administrators create an open and welcoming environment and encourage the success of every student has a direct effect on students' ability to, as Fay (1987) described, transcend the constraints placed upon them by societal classifications such as race, gender, class, or age. Cole (2010) found that "minority students' academic performance was negatively affected by their interactions with faculty regarding the adequacy or quality of their academic work" (p. 155). Research on student learning has shown that faculty feedback—and dialogue that occurs as a result of that feedback—can have a significant impact on students' skill development and learning (Stipek, 2002).

My research on factors influencing higher education professionals toward individualized learning was intended to increase understanding of the causal factors and contextual and intervening conditions (Creswell, 2007) in higher education that inhibit the success of students, as well as to illuminate trends that help students transcend barriers and empower them to succeed in postsecondary education. This drove my

decision to ask questions of higher education professionals to obtain varied perspectives of how individualized learning practices might empower students to succeed in postsecondary education.

Institutional Transformation

After analyzing participant interviews and document analysis, the emergence of a theory from the data led me to conclude that a review of studies about institutional transformation would be an appropriate addition to the literature review. The literature review of articles about institutional transformation facilitated a comparison between existing research and the theory that emerged in this research study. This process aligned with the recommendations of Glaser and Strauss (1967), who suggested that only after considerable data collection and analysis should the researcher review literature and compare emergent theory with previous works. This section of the literature review covers the work of researchers who provided exceptional findings for comparing this study's emergent theory with previous works (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Ewell, 1997; Twigg, 1999, 2003).

Productive Learning Environments

Twigg's research (1999, 2003) on designing more productive learning environments in higher education provided a framework for understanding the practical solutions for institutions to address rising costs, increased enrollment demands, restricted tuition revenue, the desire for increased access, and the promise of technology. In the foundational premise, Twigg (1999) noted, "Rather than focusing on how to provide more efficient and effective teaching, colleges and universities need to focus on how to produce more effective and efficient student learning" (p. 4). Twigg (1999) suggested

that higher education institutions can meet the challenges of today's higher education environment with technology-enabled course redesign; however, they must be ready for the change. One of the key readiness factors is a commitment to a learner-centered educational environment. Twigg (1999) suggested colleges should recognize that students are different and should be provided "a variety of modalities that support their academic, personal and career development" (p. 8).

Twigg's work at the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) provided an example of the successful student outcomes that are achievable by implementing course redesign. The NCAT organization was formed in 1999 with the mission of teaching colleges and universities how to use technology to improve student learning outcomes and reduce instructional costs (National Center for Academic Transformation, 2015d, para. 2). The NCAT conducted two national-level redesign programs, the Program in Course Redesign (PCR) from 1999 to 2003 and the Roadmap to Redesign from 2003 to 2006, to improve learning and reduce costs (NCAT, 2015c, para 1). Thirty higher education institutions participated in The Program in Course Redesign, which was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts (NCAT, 2015b, para 1). Twenty-five of the 30 completed PCR projects demonstrated improved learning; the remaining five showed equivalent learning (NCAT, 2015d, para. 3). Twenty-four of the projects measured course completion rates and 18 of the 24 showed improvement (NCAT, 2015d, para. 3). All 30 of the projects reduced costs by 37% on average, with a range of between 20% to 77% in cost reductions (NCAT, 2015d, para. 3).

In 2006, the University of Maryland system contracted with Twigg and the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) to assist the University with the

high incidence of student failure and drop out, both of which increased the time and cost of attaining a college degree. The initial University of Maryland system course redesign program was administered between June 2006 and June 2009 (NCAT, 2015a, para. 3). Five projects were completed during this program, affecting 5,300 students (NCAT, 2015a, para. 3). All five projects demonstrated improved learning, and three of the five improved course completion rates with a grade of C or better (NCAT, 2015a, para. 3). One project showed a course completion rate equivalent to a traditional class, and one project showed a course completion rate decline (NCAT, 2015a, para. 3). All five projects reduced instructional costs 50% on average, three projects saved more than originally projected, and the annual savings from the five projects was \$397,636 (NCAT, 2015a, para. 3).

The Abell Foundation (2011) provided details concerning three of the University of Maryland projects. The first project at the University of Maryland Eastern Shore campus involved a Chemistry 111 course in the Department of Natural Sciences (Abell Foundation, 2011). The faculty and staff wanted to improve the Department's inconsistent knowledge of the background of incoming students, improve students' mastery of material, coordinate among professors teaching course sections to provide consistent learning outcomes, and develop an instructional format that engaged students better than the lecture-based format (Abell Foundation, 2011). The results of the course redesign for Chemistry 111 were significant (Hearne, as cited in Abell Foundation, 2011, p. 2). The lecture meeting frequency was reduced to twice a week, and a one hour mandatory computer lab session was added (Abell Foundation, 2011). The staffing for courses and the lab sessions were adjusted, and students were provided individual on-

demand assistance in the lab sessions (Abell Foundation, 2011). The class size increased from 50 to 110, the number of sections taught per year went from seven to three, and the institution had more students taking Chemistry 111 than ever before (Abell Foundation, 2011). Hearne further reported, “The pass rate of the students increased 15 percent, and we were able to decrease the cost of offering the course by 70 percent to the institution” (as cited in Abell Foundation, 2011, p. 2). The textbook cost to students for this course decreased from \$250 to \$90 because of the redesign format (Abell Foundation, 2011).

The Chancellor of the University of Maryland system, Dr. William Brit Kirwan, brought course redesign to the University of Maryland system, remarking, “In every one of our pilots, the students in the redesigned sections did better and the cost of instruction was lower” (as cited in Abell Foundation, 2011, p. 5). Kirwan made course redesign a strategic initiative for the University of Maryland system and increased the internal capacity of faculty and staff to continue course redesign efforts across the University of Maryland system (Abell Foundation, 2011). Kirwan (as cited in Abell Foundation, 2011) advised,

The genius of the course redesign approach is that it makes the classroom an active learning environment, compatible with the students’ need for direct engagement. In redesigned sections, we have learned that student retention and learning are greater and remarkably instructional costs are lower. (p. 6)

The University of Maryland course redesign projects along with the work of the National Center for Academic Transformation provided compelling empirical data to support the value of individualized learning practices in the higher education environment. Thus, the

need for research to understand why faculty and administrators utilize individualized learning practices was strongly supported.

Data from the Carnegie Mellon Open Learning Initiative (OLI) provided further support for the uses of individualized learning practices. Carnegie Mellon's Open Learning Initiative began in 2002 with a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (Carnegie Mellon University, 2015, para 2). The idea behind the OLI was to integrate the expertise of Carnegie Mellon cognitive science professors into courses and focus on student learning (Carnegie Mellon, 2015, para 2). OLI changed the way courses are developed, the way courses are taught, and the way students and faculty interact. "OLI develops courses using a team approach involving faculty, course developers, assessment designers and technology experts. OLI courses have high-quality text, practice activities, self-assessments and graded assessments all linked to course learning outcomes" (N. Bier, personal communication, November 19, 2014). Feedback is provided to students and faculty indicating content areas that have or have not been mastered. Students are expected to use this information to do additional work in the content area. Faculty are expected to use feedback to inform their instruction content during classroom time to concentrate on areas that have not been mastered by students. OLI also uses feedback from statistics generated in the OLI system as well as feedback from faculty and students to improve OLI courses. This community based approach to course improvement is consistent with Simon's idea that "improvement in post-secondary education will require converting teaching from a solo sport to a community based research activity" (Carnegie Mellon, 2015, para 4). OLI courses are conducted

completely online, in a hybrid format and in face to face courses as textbook replacement (N. Bier, personal communication, November 19, 2014).

In 2007, Carnegie Mellon administrators conducted a study in which students in a statistics class were separated into two groups. One group had a traditional 15-week class experience, and the other group had an eight-week class experience that included completing an OLI online module before each class with the instructor receiving feedback on course concepts with which students were having difficulties (Lovett, Meyer, & Thille, 2008, p. 17). The OLI students “demonstrated learning outcomes equal to or better than the traditional class, in half the time. Six months later OLI students had retained the material just as well as the traditional class” (Cohon, 2012, Make it Faster section, para. 3). Lovett, Meyer, and Thille (2008), reporting on this same class, wrote, “Usually, that kind of effectiveness or efficiency effect would be the result of individualized, human tutored instruction” (p. 16).

In sum, Twigg (1999, 2003) research, coupled with the course redesign work at the University of Maryland and Carnegie Mellon University’s Open Learning Initiative provided a powerful framework for reviewing my research concerning why faculty and administrators utilize individualized learning practices.

Organizing for Learning

Ewell (1997a, 1997b) provided additional context about institutional transformation in a changing higher education environment. Ewell (1997a) as well as Arum and Roksa (2011) found numerous initiatives to improve undergraduate education have been launched over the years in response to external pressures for improvement, as employers, politicians and citizens expressed concern over what was learned in college.

Ewell (1997a) acknowledged that some initiatives were the result of a sincere desire among faculty and administrators to do a better job. Ewell (1997b) further suggested that the reason the initiatives had limited success over the years was linked to the piecemeal implementation of the initiatives and the “absence of a broadly discussed and well-articulated understanding of what collegiate learning really means in a particular collegiate community and of the specific circumstances and strategies that are likely to promote it” (para. 4). Arum and Roksa (2011) found similar issues stating, “at most colleges and universities course syllabi are collected from instructors and administratively filed (typically at the department level) , there is often little evidence that faculty have come together to ensure that course work is appropriately demanding and requires significant reading, writing and critical thinking” (p. 129).

Ewell (1997b) used a unique multitrade inquiry approach, including educational psychology, teaching improvement, instructional design, organizational change, and cognitive science, to examine “what we know about how deep and lasting learning actually occurs, and about the organizational and educational factors that research suggests are needed most to foster it” (p. 1). Ewell’s (1997b) synthesis of what is known about how deep and lasting learning actually occurs and the organizational and educational factors that foster that type of learning provided an exceptional framework for evaluating factors influencing faculty and administrator practices concerning individualized learning practices. Ewell’s (1997b) insights about promoting learning at the curriculum and instructional levels sensitized my research of practices at the course and program levels. In addition, Ewell’s (1997b) insights into promoting learning at the organizational structure and culture level sensitized my understanding of institutional

level practices. Ewells insights are supported by the later research of Arum and Roksa (2011) who found that “Institutions need to develop a culture of learning if undergraduate education is to be improved” (p. 127) and Kun et al., (2005) who found that “Student success becomes an institutional priority when leaders make it so” (p. 270). Ewell (1997b) suggested that improvements in student success in higher education required a shift from a faculty and administrator institutional focus to a student-centered focus and a systematic institution-wide “systems thinking” approach to change initiatives. Pope (2006) had a similar finding stating that forty colleges she studied that focused on the student rather than the faculty had “outperformed most of the Ivies and their clones” (p.3). Ewell’s research and the more recent research of Arum and Roksa (2011), Pope (2006) and Kun et al (2005) provided a second exceptional framework for evaluating faculty and administrator perceptions and the theory developed in this study.

Learning Paradigm Theory

Barr and Tagg (1995) suggested that institutional transformation in U.S. higher education would happen because of a paradigm shift in the belief of the purpose of college. Barr and Tagg (1995) stated, “The paradigm that has governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists to provide instruction. Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that exists to produce learning” (p. 13). Arum and Roksa (2011) noted this movement in their research stating, “This shift toward more student centered approaches has been grounded in a broader movement aiming to transform undergraduate education from a focus on faculty teaching to an emphasis on student learning” (p. 101). Barr and Tagg (1995) argued that the traditional instructional paradigm takes the “means or method called instruction or

teaching and makes it the college's end purpose" (p. 13). Further, "Under the logic of the Instructional Paradigm, colleges suffer a design flaw; it is not possible to increase outputs without a corresponding increase in costs, because any attempt to increase outputs without increasing resources is a threat to quality" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 13).

Additionally, under this instructional paradigm, college administrators felt students were responsible for learning; the college was responsible for instruction (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Barr and Tagg (1995) pointed to the quality criteria used to compare colleges: "Selectivity in student admissions, number of PhDs on faculty, and research reputation" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 16) as evidence of a focus on institutional factors rather than on student learning. Barr and Tagg (1995) suggested, "Instructional Paradigm teaching and learning structures present immense barriers to improving student learning and success. They provide no space for redesigned learning environments or for experimentation with alternate learning technologies" (p. 20). Because most higher education reform initiatives have been conducted within the instructional paradigm framework, they could not succeed (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

Barr and Tagg (1995) suggested the traditional instructional paradigm was giving way to a new learning paradigm in which the purpose of college is not instruction but "rather that of producing learning with every student by whatever means work best" (p. 13). Barr and Tagg (1995) noted that this new learning paradigm supported the notion that colleges should enable "whatever approaches serve best to promote learning of a particular knowledge by particular students" (p. 14). This new learning paradigm separates the means (instruction) from the product (student learning), thus allowing student learning to govern the means. Barr and Tagg (1995) suggested that the new

learning paradigm “shifts what the institution takes responsibility for; from quality instruction (lecturing, talking) to student learning” (p. 15). Barr and Tagg (1995) further suggested the joint responsibility for learning between the student and the institution resulted in a synergy that “produces powerful results” (p. 15).

The new learning paradigm required a focus on the individual student and an assessment of student learning outcomes. In this learning environment, “faculty and everyone else at the institution are unambiguously committed to each student’s success” (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 23). Barr and Tagg (1995) realized that the transition from an instructional paradigm to a learning paradigm would not be instantaneous, would change the roles of college employees, and would happen in an incremental process. They suggested that initially higher education professionals would attempt to use new tools and ideas in the old instructional paradigm until ultimately practices shifted as funding and resources were linked to student learning outcomes. Interestingly Arum and Roksa (2011) sixteen years later had similar findings stating,

“Transformational change will remain elusive as long as the principle tenets of the academy remain in place: as long as teaching remains a solitary activity as opposed to one that is shared and valued in a scholarly community; as long as faculty members spend little time reflecting on teaching or engaging in the scholarship of teaching and have little incentive to do so”. (p. 134)

Barr and Tagg’s (1995) research coupled with Arum and Roska’s (2011) research sixteen years later provided an interesting context for examining the theory developed in this study and why faculty and administrators are implementing individualized learning practices and the factors influencing their practices. It also provides an interesting

framework for evaluating how much the three higher education institutions have adopted the learning paradigm model and for assessing how long institutional transformation takes: Barr and Tagg (1995) introduced the learning paradigm concept nearly twenty years ago.

Summary

This literature review established the context for my study and supported the rationale for my research questions. Reviewing the literature initially sensitized me to the issues surrounding the phenomenon I was researching and then, after data collection and analysis, provided a basis for comparison between the emergent theory and previous scholarly works. In the literature review, I highlighted the methodological nuances of grounded theory, supported the conceptual framework of the study, described the segmented research concerning multilevel individualized learning practices, reviewed research concerning factors influencing faculty and administrators, and introduced learning theories about higher education institutional transformation. The theories and concepts presented in this literature review sensitized me to the issues surrounding individualized learning practices in higher education and enabled the development and evaluation of a theory that was grounded in the data collected from the faculty and administrator participants.

Chapter 3

Methods

My research design was influenced by my philosophical worldview, which is that of social constructivism (Creswell, 2009). I sought meaning in the complex participant views of situations. I was comfortable asking open-ended questions and deriving meaning from participant answers, with the full understanding that their answers were framed by historical, cultural, and organizational backgrounds. I also acknowledged that my own background framed my interpretation of participants' answers. My research was intended to help me understand why faculty use individualized learning practices in their teaching and learning practices and why administrators use individualized learning practices in their institutional governance policies and procedures. This understanding, grounded in the views of higher education professionals, allowed for the development of a theory of why these faculty and administrators utilized these practices.

My research design was qualitative. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) advised, "Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). This thought accurately reflects what I was attempting to understand with this research and clarifies why a qualitative design was the ideal design for my study. Data collection consisted of interviewing higher education professionals involved with individualized learning practices and analyzing documents concerning individualized learning practices at three higher education institutions. The qualitative methodology allowed me to study these practices in their natural settings, thereby enhancing the development of grounded theory based on the meaning higher education professionals bring to this phenomenon.

My primary strategy of inquiry was that of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This study involved an in-depth exploration of the individualized learning practices used at three New Jersey higher education institutions, including how these practices were used and why higher education professionals did or did not utilize these practices. Charmaz (2008) stated, “The grounded theory method has a long history of engaging both *why* questions and *what* and *how* questions” (p. 397). Creswell (2007) advised that grounded theory relies on “data from the field, especially in the actions, interactions and processes of people” (p. 63). I identified a need for research about higher education faculty and administrator views and practice in relation to student learning and success. Thus, this research study focused on the views and actions of faculty and administrators familiar with individualized learning practices.

Bensimon (2007) stated, “If, as scholars of higher education, we wish to produce knowledge to improve student success, we cannot ignore that practitioners play a significant role.... We have to expand scholarship on student success and take into account the influence of practitioners – positively and negatively” (p. 445). Creswell (2007) stated, “Grounded theory is a good design to use when a theory is not available to explain a process” or when the theories “are incomplete because they do not address potential variables of interest to the researcher” (p. 66). This reflects the situation I discovered with theories about individualized learning practices. Current theories of individualization and individual learning (Diamond et al., 1975), individualistic learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999), individualized instruction (Mills & Ragan, 1994) were narrowly focused on segments of student learning and did not address the individualized learning practices across the course, program, and institutional levels. Additionally,

current research appeared limited in their review of faculty and administrator perceptions and utilization of individualized learning practices. Umbach & Wawrzynski (2005), found that “little new knowledge has been generated about.... the approaches faculty take to effective educational practices” (p. 4) and that it is important to understand what faculty practices influence student learning. Therefore, my intent was to develop a theory of the use of individualized learning practices at three higher education institutions based on data provided by faculty and administrator participants.

The similarities and differences discovered between and among the participants with different positions within higher education and at different institutions was expected to provide a wealth of comparative information. Qualitative strategies, including grounded theory, allowed for inductive reasoning to develop general categories and linkages from participant data (Suter, 2012, p. 346), furthering the understanding of individualized learning practice usage at these three institutions and allowing for development of a theory in this area. The theory will not be generalizable but will provide a model that other researchers can use to determine if the theory holds true at other institutions, which could lead to a more generalizable theory in the future. Creswell (2007) indicated that the result of the grounded theory “process of data collection and analysis is a theory, a substantive-level theory, written by a researcher close to a specific problem or population of people....The substantive-level theory may be tested later for its empirical verification with quantitative data to determine if it can be generalized to a sample” (p. 67). Finally, I chose grounded theory as an appropriate design because Rowan University’s doctoral program endeavors to provide research that enhances

practitioner solutions. Neff (1998) advised, “Because grounded theory explains and predicts, it is useful for practitioners as well as researchers” (p. 140).

Sample

In this study, I chose a purposeful sample of institutions and, from those institutions, participants who were familiar with individualized learning practices and issues surrounding the implementation of such practices in higher education. The three provosts and I identified participants at each institution, based on each provost’s understanding of the research, my desire to sample faculty and administrators with similar positions across all three institutions, and the provost’s knowledge and expertise concerning who at each of these three institutions worked on learning practice issues at the course, program, and institutional levels. Creswell (2007) noted that a purposeful sample limits the participants and sites to those with “an understanding of the research problem and central phenomena in the study” (p. 125). Faculty and administrator participants were contacted directly by the Provost in most cases and invited to participate in the research project; I followed up by phone or e-mail and made an appointment for the interview. In a few cases, I contacted the faculty or administrator and advised that the Provost had suggested that they would be an excellent person to interview concerning my dissertation research. Each participant signed an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix A), seemed eager to assist with my research, and appeared honored to have been singled out by the Provost as a person to be interviewed from their institution. None of the participants seemed compelled to participate. In fact, they all seemed eager to provide their professional and uninhibited opinions, even reminding me a few times during their interviews that their comments were to remain non-attributable.

Pseudonyms are used whenever a participant is quoted to assure no attribution. This research study was limited to three New Jersey institutions and 27 faculty and administrator participants because I wanted to understand at a deep level the nature of individualized learning practices at these specific institutions. Creswell (2007) recommended “including 20 to 30 individuals in order to develop a well saturated theory” (p. 127).

At the site level, the recommended selection criterion was that of a maximum variation sample to obtain information-rich institutions and allowed for diverse variations (Creswell, 2007). This study involved research at New Jersey institutions within three different sectors of higher education: Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University. The variations between these institutions included student admission selectivity, student enrollment status, instructional delivery methodology, and Carnegie classification. At the time of this project, Burlington County College and Thomas Edison State College had open enrollment, while Rowan University had a selective admission policy that became more selective each year. Additionally, in 2013, the majority (88%) of students at Thomas Edison State College were aged 25 years of age or older (USDOE, 2013); in contrast, the majority (86%) of Rowan University students were 24 or younger; and 67% of students enrolled at Burlington County College in 2013 were 24 years of age or younger (USDOE, 2013).

Student enrollment status was also different at each institution. Almost all (99%) of students at Thomas Edison State College attended part-time in 2013 (USDOE, 2013). In contrast, 85% attended Rowan University full-time in 2013 (USDOE, 2013). Students

attending Burlington County College were a mix, with 51% attending full-time and 49% attending part-time in 2013 (USDOE, 2013).

The instructional delivery methods at each institution were different. The majority of undergraduate students, (99%) at Thomas Edison State College enrolled exclusively in distance education, while only 3% of students at Rowan University enrolled in any distance education (USDOE, 2013). Ten percent were enrolled exclusively in distance education at Burlington County College, while 20% were enrolled in some distance education (USDOE, 2013).

Finally, each institution had a different Carnegie classification. Burlington County College was classified as a large, two-year, mixed part-time/full-time associate-level institution (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2014). Thomas Edison State College was classified as a medium, four-year, primarily nonresidential “master’s S” institution (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2014). Rowan University was classified as a medium, four-year, primarily residential selective “master’s L” institution (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2014). The “S” and the “L” classifications indicate the size of the graduate level programs as either small or large (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2014).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) advised that a maximum-variation selection criteria strategy captures and describes the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participant and program variation. Patton (1990) stated, “Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program” (p. 172). In addition, these institutions were purposefully selected because I attended all three

institutions and had personal experience using individual learning practices. Corbin and Strauss (2008) advised that a researcher's personal experience is at times similar to participants and that researchers should "draw upon those experiences to obtain insight into what the participants are describing" (p. 80). Additionally, the colleges were selected based on my ability to gain access to personnel at the institutions and the proximity of these institutions to my work location. All of the institutions were within reasonable commuting distance of my work site, and I had professional relationships with gatekeepers at each of the institutions. Finally, I chose three public institutions because, according to the College Board (2013), public colleges and universities educate more than three quarters of undergraduates attending degree-granting institutions in the United States.

At the participant level, the study used theoretical sampling. The theoretical sampling model espoused by Strauss and Corbin (1990) is designed to select participants who are knowledgeable concerning the research problem and can assist with building a theory. The participants chosen for this study exclusively comprised faculty and administrators because, rather than pursue a student orientation, I wanted to understand and focus on practitioner decisions about policy and practice and the impacts of these decisions on institutions and student success. Bensimon (2007) articulated the essence of the reason why I chose faculty and administrators:

In higher education, the dominant paradigm of student success is based exclusively on personal characteristics of students that have been found to correlate with persistence and graduation. Essentially, practitioners are missing from the most familiar way of conceptualizing empirical studies of student

success; when scholars attempt to translate their findings into recommendations for action, practitioners are rarely ever the target of change or intervention.

(p. 444)

The dominant paradigm of correlating student success to individual student motivation and engagement rather than to other factors like faculty, administrator, and institutional policies and practices is linked to theory and research that perpetuate this focus (Astin, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). It is possible that “the lack of variability in the conceptualization of student success results from a small scholarly community’s close social ties, with the entry of new ideas blocked by the high incidence of inter-citation” (Weick, 1983, as cited in Bensimon, 2007, p. 449). In this research study, I intended to look outside the dominant paradigm to explore the role of faculty, administrator, and institutional policies and practices in the utilization of individualized learning practices, which researchers have indicated have a positive impact on student success (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Diamond et al., 1975; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Twigg, 2003).

The Provost at each institution and I identified the potential faculty and administrator participants, based on each Provost’s understanding of the research. Using the professional judgment of each Provost for participant selection provided the best opportunity to find participants knowledgeable in the research problem; however, this recruitment method could have introduced a sample bias or a social desirability bias, which is a bias involving participants answering questions based on what they believe will make themselves or their institution look socially desirable (Nederhof, 1985). Participants in this study were from various offices at each institution, including the

Provosts' offices, the student support offices, the Deans' offices, as well as from faculty and faculty leadership. The sample included 27 participants of which 26 percent were faculty ($n = 7$), 30 percent were deans ($n = 8$), 19 percent were executive level administrators ($n = 5$) and 26 percent were student services administrators ($n = 7$). While there were only seven specific faculty members in the sample, 21 of the 27 participants indicated that they currently teach as adjunct faculty or have in the past. Participants included minority voices with minority race participants making up 30 percent ($n = 8$) of participants and female participants making up 26 percent ($n = 7$) of participants. The participants had an average 22 years of experience in higher education with the least experienced participant having 7 years and the most experienced having 43 years' experience.

At the time of the study, each participant had knowledge of or worked with issues related to individualized learning practices. Interviews were conducted individually with faculty members and administrators at each institution. Twenty-seven participants were interviewed for this study. This sample size is consistent with the average sample sizes for similar grounded theory studies (Mason, 2010; Thomson, 2011) and with Creswell's (2007) advice to include "20 to 30 individuals in order to develop a well saturated theory" (p. 127).

The purpose of this study was to collect extensive details about specific participants' views and actions concerning individual learning practices at the course, program, and institutional levels. Marshall and Rossman (1999) advised, "One cannot understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants attribute to those actions—their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds; the

researcher, therefore, needs to understand the deeper perspectives captured through face-to-face interaction” (p. 57). Accordingly, I attempted to reach a saturation point with responses to questions, which enabled me to identify categories and analyze differences and similarities between the institutions, the subgroups of faculty and administrators, and between individual participants. There is no specific number of interviews or specific volume of data collection required to attain saturation. Corbin and Strauss (2008) advised that saturation is “the point in the research when all the concepts are well defined and explained” (p. 145).

Data Collection

I collected data from 27 faculty and administrator participants. The primary data collection effort focused on semi-structured face-to-face participant interviews using open-ended questions. The study used a standard interview protocol (see Appendix B) with all participants. Interview notes were maintained and audio recordings were made of the interviews as well as verbatim transcripts for analysis.

In addition, public documents were collected from each institution concerning their policies and uses of individual learning practices. Specifically, catalogs and faculty handbooks were collected from each institution, and each institution’s Web site was reviewed for policies pertaining to or having an impact on individualized learning practices. Notes were taken of key information and significant issues concerning individualized learning practices in the catalogs, faculty handbooks, and Web sites.

The aforementioned sampling plans and data collection protocols supported the validity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the data collected and prevented sampling distortions caused by insufficient breadth in sampling, changes occurring over time, or

lack of depth in data collection (Patton, 1990). Corbin and Strauss (2008) provided two additional strategies—reflexivity and sensitivity—which I used to support the credibility and trustworthiness of the data collected. Reflexivity, as a strategy for ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of data, required that I examine my “influence on the research process” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 31). Therefore, using reflexivity techniques, I examined the emotions I conveyed to participants during interviews to minimize the effect I had on participant responses. As an alumnus of the three institutions where I was conducting my research, I held a level of shared experience with the participants in this study. This fact had the potential to cause bias; researchers need to “recognize when either our own or the respondent’s biases, assumptions or beliefs are intruding into the analysis” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 80). I was cognizant of the potential bias; however, I was also aware of the benefit of having a shared experience with the participants. Balancing the benefits and possible bias was well articulated by Corbin and Strauss (2008) when they advised,

We, as researchers, often have life experiences that are similar to those of our participants. It makes sense, then, to draw upon those experiences to obtain insight into what our participants are describing....keeping enough distance to be able to think clearly and analytically about what is said. (p.80)

Thus, sensitivity as a strategy for ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of the data required “having insight, being tuned into, being able to pick up on relevant issues, events and happenings in data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 32). I used sensitivity to place myself in the research process so that I could understand what the participants were

trying to tell me, rather than categorizing the data based on my biased, preconceived interpretation of what the data meant.

Data Analysis

My data analysis model followed Strauss and Corbin's (1990) model for grounded theory analysis. Strauss and Corbin (1990) provided researchers with a coding paradigm to assist in structuring data and clarifying relationships between data elements. The coding paradigm allows categories and codes to emerge from the data but also helps the researcher "to think systematically about data and to relate [to] them in very complex ways" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 99). The specific categories prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) consisted of five elements that involve the central or core phenomenon: causal conditions, strategies, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, and consequences. The core phenomenon and categories were organized into a coding paradigm, or theoretical model, which I presented visually using an axial paradigm model, (Morrow & Smith, 1995) depicted previously in Figure 1.

The mechanics of data analysis in this research project consisted of producing audio recordings and verbatim transcripts of interviews, listening and reading through them line by line using microanalysis to identify concepts and novel relationships, and then systematically developing categories from these concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The documents and Web sites of each institution, as they pertained to or had an impact on individualized learning practices, were analyzed in the same manner.

Data were subjected to open coding to determine appropriate categories and to identify the core phenomenon. Determining the emerging categories was accomplished

through line-by-line microanalysis and comparison of different data. Comparison involved both incident-to-incident comparison and theoretical comparisons. Strauss and Corbin (1998) wrote, “Theoretical comparisons are tools for looking at something somewhat objectively rather than naming or classifying without a thorough examination of the object at the property or dimensional levels” (p. 80). The theoretical comparisons used in this study involved comparing concepts rather than individual cases. The research also used systematic comparison to analyze data comparing incidents in the data to incidents from my experience or taken from research literature. Categories and relationships were further identified by questioning the data with greater specificity, asking who, when, why, where, what, how, how much, and with what result questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This analysis uncovered variations in the data and also provided ideas to enhance the study’s theoretical sampling and identify “what further questions one should make of participants” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 91). Throughout data collection and analysis, a process called *memoing* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was employed, consisting of notes about coding, analysis, and potential new concepts.

The data were then subjected to axial coding, which is a process by which linkages between categories are outlined and placed in specific categories that link to and surround the core phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During axial coding, categories were related to each other according to their properties and dimensions, allowing me to determine relationships of both structure and process. Strauss and Corbin (1998) advised, “Process and structure are inextricably linked, and unless one understands the nature of the relationship (both to each other and to the phenomena in question) it is difficult to truly grasp what is going on” (p. 127). Data analysis during

axial coding allowed for the systematic development and identification of relationships between categories; thus, using the Strauss & Corbin (1990) methodology resulted in an axial paradigm model (Creswell, 2007).

In the grounded theory methodology, the next step in data analysis was selective coding, involved integrating and refining the categories outlined during the axial coding and analysis process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.143) and then writing the story line that connects all the categories (Creswell, 2007, p. 67). Throughout the process, a constant comparison approach was followed, in which I looked for negative cases and compared new data with emerging categories until the new data did not add anything to the categories or overall theoretical model (Creswell, 2007). Next, I reviewed the research to ensure that “all the concepts were well defined and explained” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 145); thus, at that point, the categories were theoretically saturated.

Once the categories were reviewed to ensure they were saturated, explanatory statements were developed to highlight relationships. Finally, a narrative was constructed using concepts and linkages to build the storyline of the core phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 67). Strauss and Corbin (1998) advised, “The relationships are not written in a cause-and-effect fashion. The paths of association are more convoluted than direct, with all sorts of intervening variables entering into the analytic picture to influence the path of action” (p. 150).

Although the storyline, concepts, and theoretical model do not need to fit every situation, if the results were grounded in the data, then the storyline, concepts, and theoretical model should be recognizable to the participants (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The theory and theoretical model of this research project were presented to the faculty

and administrator participants to determine if the theory and model were recognizable. The responses of the participants indicated that theory and theoretical model are recognizable. Sara advised,

I enjoyed reading your theory. I think it says a lot about the current state of higher education and it validates my current reality. I think as you stated there is a shift in higher education to meet students where they are and there is more focus on customer service, the students being the customer. As far as alternate language goes I did not have any problem with the terminology or understanding the essence of what you wrote. You stressed that the institutions have a student focus now rather than a faculty and administrative focus and I agree with that especially here at my institution. I think your observations were correct. There is a changing demographic of diverse students and the goal of higher education is now to meet their needs, find their goals, and provide an education that will enable them to be successful in what they wish to obtain. I am sorry I cannot provide any alternate interpretations. I think higher education continues to evolve and that the theory you have developed is contemporary for today.

Validity

The validity, credibility, and trustworthiness of the data analysis depended on the strategies of prolonged engagement, triangulation, clarification of researcher bias, negative case analysis, and member checking (Creswell, 2007). Prolonged engagement in this grounded theory study involved a sample size of 27 participants, which allowed for concepts, categories, and themes to emerge from the data, thus providing rich in-depth explanations and definitions of the concepts. This study's engagement lasted over 18

months, involved over 30 hours of interviews, and resulted in over 1,000 pages of transcribed text. The concepts and categories discovered during initial interviews led me toward concepts and categories I had not originally considered, resulting in a greater depth and variation in the concepts and categories.

I triangulated the data and findings among and between the interview participants and the policy documents acquired from each college. The constant comparison analysis approach assisted with development of triangulation using “corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 2007, p. 208). I have both a personal and professional bias toward the use of individualized learning practices in higher education. I ensured that this bias was clarified in this study and identified how this bias shaped my interpretation and approach (Creswell, 2007, p. 208).

In addition, I conducted negative case analysis as the study progressed to refine concepts and categories. Patton (1990) advised qualitative researchers to search for negative cases when they started to see patterns emerging in the data. Accordingly, I provide negative case examples in Chapter 4. I found variation in numerous categories throughout the study and highlight these variations in the findings as well. Corbin and Strauss (2008) advised that the quality of grounded theory research should be judged in part on variation. Corbin and Strauss stated, “By including variation, the researcher is demonstrating the complexity of human life” (p. 306).

Finally, member checking was performed as a critical validation function. Member checking was essential because of the study’s reliance on interviews. I followed Stake’s (1995) guidance and asked the participants “to examine rough drafts of the research work and provide alternative language and critical observations and

interpretations” (p. 115). Member checking resulted in participant confirmation of interview transcript accuracy and confirmation that the major concepts of the theory aligned with participant realities in higher education today. In addition to Sara’s comments above, two other participants provided comments that were reflective of the group and provided direct evidence concerning the validity of the theory. Note that pseudonyms are used to prevent attribution to participants in this study. Peter stated,

I found it [the transcript] to be an accurate representation of our interview and felt that the conclusions which you drew from the wide array of interviews conducted were reasonable and appropriate. While I believe based on the excerpts of the interviews provided and my four plus decades [of] higher education experience, that the core phenomenon “meeting students where they are” is an ideal type theory, it is something most higher education aspires toward – aspiring being the key. We have a long way to go before obtaining this ideal; hopefully, we will continue to focus on it.

Edward advised,

I believe your theory is grounded [in participant data] and reflects reality in today’s higher education environment. You identified trends in higher education as it relates to today’s student and financial, environmental, academic, technological, etc, challenges set before them. You clearly recognize how institutions are identifying ways of “meeting students where they are” as well as how institutions have drastically changed their methods in meeting these needs.

In sum, the aforementioned validation strategies added to the validity of the research and helped confirm that “all the concepts are well defined and explained,” which Corbin and Strauss (2008) advised is “the point of saturation” (p. 145).

Ethical Considerations

My study required awareness of ethical considerations in two significant areas: interview participants and research at my home institution. The primary source of my data was participant interviews. This fact required that I follow appropriate ethical standards to protect the identity of participants related to their specific comments. I achieved this objective by assigning aliases to participants selected for my study and did not identify specific institution programs or departments in the study. I also made some interview quotes more generic to ensure participants could not be identified by statements reported in the findings. I also ensured that the participants knew they were part of a research study and were informed about the issue I was researching. All participants signed informed consent forms prior to any interviews (see Appendix A).

Conducting research at the college where I was working at the time of the study required additional ethical safeguards. I ensured that the participants voluntarily consented to the project, felt no pressure to participate, and fully understood the nature of my research. Further, I limited my interviews to senior college administrators and faculty who had no connection to my division, the Division of Planning and Research, of the college and with whom I, as the Vice President for Planning and Research, had no supervisory connection.

Summary

The literature review and research questions led directly to my choice of methodology: It was clear that to understand individualized learning practices in higher education, I would have to do more than act as a theoretical outside researcher examining cases and statistical results. My central research question required understanding how individual learning practices are implemented by the people who are charged with delivering these practices in higher education institutions today. The *how* and *why* questions of this study were intended to collect information that could provide an in-depth yet practical level of understanding. These objectives required firsthand knowledge from the participants. Obtaining this type of firsthand knowledge required conducting interviews with participants who were directly involved with the phenomenon. On the other hand, it was equally necessary that knowledge emerge from the data and not from preconceived notions of what I thought was happening or what I wanted to be happening.

These research requirements directed me toward a qualitative study and away from quantitative research. Understanding the individualized learning practices being implemented in the three higher education institutions required intense dialog with participants who were charged with the responsibility for developing and implementing policies and practices at these higher education institutions. Ironically, my literature review led me to realize that there was very little information concerning the use of individualized learning practices in higher education beyond the question of individual learning versus group learning at the course level. Knowledge about a theory of how these practices are used and the factors that influence them was lacking; thus, this study

could add to the body of knowledge in this area. Additionally, beyond faculty resistance theories, there appeared to be little discourse or scholarship (Bensimon, 2007) concerning the perceptions of faculty and administrators who have to actually make the higher education system work in an ever-changing environment.

Reviewing the literature and developing the research question led logically to the selection of a qualitative methodology with a grounded theory approach. The nature of grounded theory research is such that the researcher never knows at the beginning of the study what core phenomenon or theory will emerge from participant data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This study confirmed that opinion. I initially thought individualized learning practices would be the core phenomenon; however, they emerged as strategies related to the core phenomenon of faculty and administrators “meeting students where they are,” as described in the next chapter.

Chapter 4

Findings

In this chapter, I present the grounded theory of individualized learning practices in New Jersey higher education that emerged from the participant data. Embedded in this theory are my findings concerning the overarching research question, “Why do faculty and administrators at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University use individualized learning practices?” The research sub questions were as follows:

1. How are individualized learning practices currently utilized at the course, program, and institution level at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University?
2. What factors affect the degree of implementation of individualized learning practices at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University?

Throughout this chapter, I quote directly from participants to illustrate ideas, concepts, and relationships. My objective was to assist the reader in making connections between the participants’ words and my analysis. Mills, Bonner, and Francis (2006) advised that in a grounded theory study, “it is a delicate balancing act, enabling participants’ accounts to retain a degree of visibility in the text so that the reader can make the connections between analytical findings and the data from which they were derived” (p. 7). Accordingly, throughout this chapter, I attempted to strike an appropriate balance by inserting participant comments where appropriate. The comments shared in the interviews were not always easily quotable because they were often fragmented;

therefore, I used a summarizing approach in some cases to present the essence of the participants' experience (Kennedy, 2009). Additionally, pseudonyms are used whenever a participant is quoted and some of the quotes were made generic to ensure comments could not be attributable to a specific participant.

Grounded Theory Introduction

This research study follows the Strauss and Corbin (1990) methodology for grounded theory development. Grounded theory generally has three coding steps—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—which organize data into a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Strauss and Corbin's (1990) prescribed approach begins with coding data, in this case, interview and document data, into major categories. During initial coding, known as open coding, many different categories are typically identified. Some of these categories may pertain to a phenomenon, while other categories refer to conditions, actions, interactions, or consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 129).

In the next methodological step, axial coding is used to build onto the open-coding categories and identify connections between categories; however, during axial coding, one open-coding category usually emerges as the focal category, known as the *core phenomenon* (Creswell, 2007). Once the core phenomenon is identified, the researcher returns to the data and builds categories around this core phenomenon. Strauss and Corbin (1990) identified five types of categories surrounding the core phenomenon: causal conditions, strategies, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, and consequences. Creswell (2007) defined each of these categories in simple form, stating that causal conditions are the factors that caused the core phenomenon, strategies are actions taken in response to the core phenomenon, contextual and intervening conditions are the broad and

specific situational factors that influence the implementation of the strategies, and consequences are the outcomes from using the strategies (p. 64). The core phenomenon, causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions, and consequences form a model called a *theoretical paradigm* (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The final methodological step involves selective coding, which Strauss and Corbin (1998) called “the process of integrating and refining the theory” (p. 161). The model or paradigm developed during axial coding is refined by filling in poorly developed categories or eliminating excess subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The selective coding process culminates in the development of a narrative that describes the interrelationship of the categories in the model/paradigm. This narrative can then be validated by comparing it to raw data or by presenting it to the participants to determine if the narrative represents their realities (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.161). In this case, the theory was compared to the raw data, and the theory was sent to the participants to determine if it reflected their realities. Although the theory might not fit every aspect of the participants’ reality, the major concepts should apply if the theory is grounded in participant data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.161).

This research project resulted in the development of a theory that can be used to explain the use of individualized learning practices at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University. The theoretical view was constructed from data collected from participants at those three institutions. Thus, the research provided “perspectival knowledge based on the lived experience of participants” (O’Connor, Netting, & Thomas, 2008, p. 30). Creswell (2007) indicated that the result of the grounded theory process is “a theory that might be viewed as a substantive, low-level

theory rather than an abstract, grand theory” (p. 65). This theory is not a formal theory, nor will it be generalizable or statistically significant. Instead, this theory represents one element of research concerning why faculty and administrators at these three institutions do what they do. Additional research and testing in this area will provide additional insights and might result in a generalizable theory in the future.

The Theory Overview

The theory that emerged from the data is that faculty and administrators at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University use Individualized Learning Practices at the course, program and institutional level to meet students where they are academically, financially and developmentally in order to assist the students in attaining their individual higher education goals. Further, societal pressure, evolving student characteristics and faculty and administrator desire for student success are the causal conditions compelling faculty and administrators to meet students where they are. Additionally, institutional focus, faculty and administrator comportment and resources as well as societal pressure and regulatory paradigms influence the implementation of individual learning practices. Finally the utilization of individualized learning practices has consequences for students, faculty and administrators and institutions.

Meeting students where they are, was an in vivo phrase which repeatedly emerged from participant statements. Thus, “meeting students where they are” represents the core phenomenon of the study that linked all the categories (causal conditions, strategies, contextual and intervening conditions and consequences) together. The core phenomenon of meeting students where they are involves understanding where students

are academically, financially and developmentally in relation to their individual higher education goals.

Three categories—societal pressure, evolving student characteristics, and faculty and administrator desire for student success—emerged as the causal conditions leading to the core phenomenon. The development and implementation of strategies, what I referred to as *individual learning practices*, that occur in response to the core phenomenon appear to be based on participant knowledge of students' academic, financial, and developmental status, in addition to each students' higher education goals. Creswell (2007) suggested these strategies represent “actions taken in response to the core phenomenon” (p. 64).

Individualized learning practice development and implementation was influenced by sources internal and external to the institutions. These contextual and intervening conditions either enhanced or restricted individualized learning practice implementation. Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined contextual and intervening conditions as particular (contextual) and broad (intervening) conditions within which the strategies occur. Participants mentioned that they implement individualized learning practices at the course, program, and institutional levels within the confines of contextual and intervening conditions and are increasing their use year over year. The implementation of individualized learning practices, has consequences for students, faculty, and administrators as well as the three institutions. The balance of the chapter provides the theory in narrative form and indicates the connections between the component parts. Figure 2 below shows the relationships between the elements in the theoretical paradigm using the Morrow and Smith (1995) visual model.

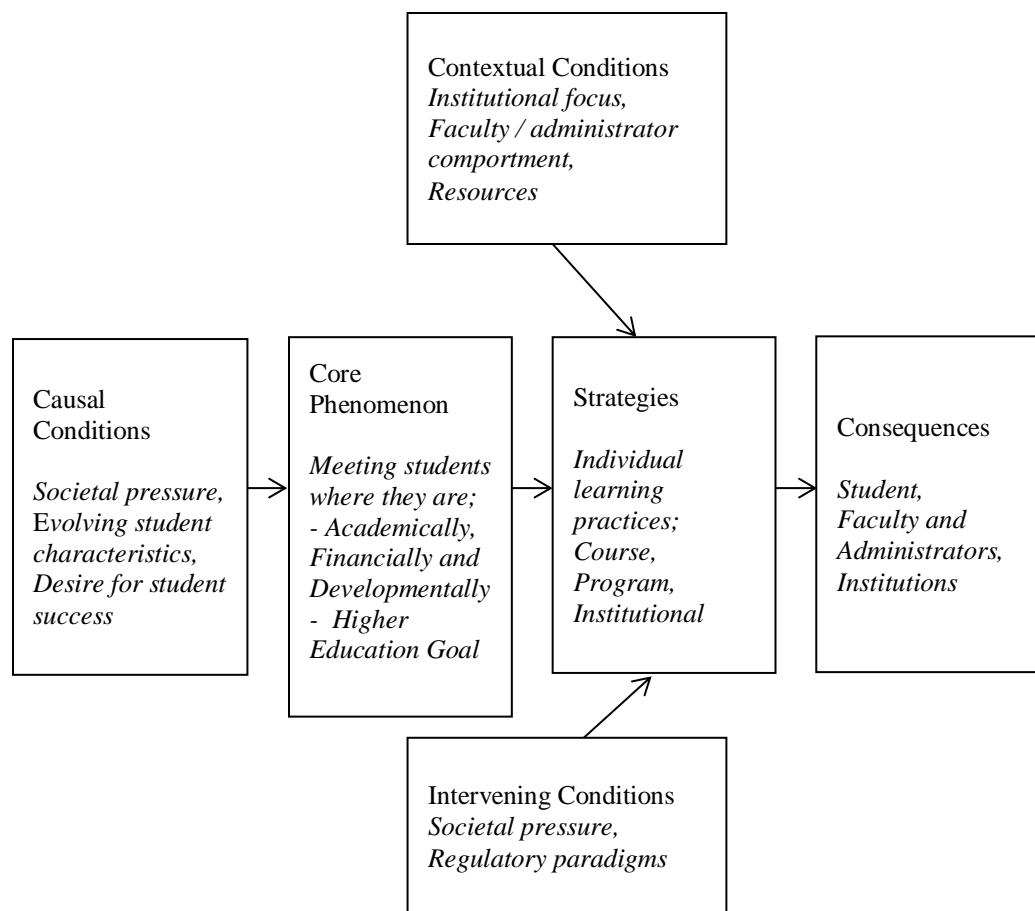


Figure 2. A visual depiction of the theoretical paradigm.

Causal Conditions

In grounded theory, researchers begin with general research questions and then discover the more relevant questions based on the data (Charmaz, 1990). That process is precisely what happened during my analysis. During the course of my interviews and constant comparative analysis, the core phenomenon emerged from the data.

Subsequently, I began asking questions about that core phenomenon to make sense of the data. Following Strauss and Corbin's (1998) model, I began looking for the causal conditions linked to the core phenomenon of "meeting students where they are." I asked

participants to identify the major challenges in higher education to get an understanding of why faculty and administrators felt the need to meet students where they are. This question got to the heart of the casual conditions.

Three main subcategories—societal pressure, evolving student characteristics, and faculty and administrators desire for student success—emerged from the data as causal conditions. These three subcategories appear to represent the fundamental causal conditions driving the core phenomenon of meeting students where they are. Interview analysis led me to believe that participants felt compelled by American societal pressures to maximize access for all students and to provide them every opportunity to be successful. This finding appears to align with research conducted by Eckel and King (2007), who advised,

Since World War II, U.S higher education has been involved in a process of “massification” that is expanding to serve all walks of life. Motivating this effort is a widespread belief in the power of education to create social and economic mobility and the morality and social value of making higher education accessible to everyone. (p. 1050)

These factors and the movement of society toward a growing knowledge-based economy have increased the number of jobs that require higher education credentials. Carnevale et al. (2010) supported this idea: “The future of employment in the United States boils down to this: success will require higher education” (p. 13).

Societal Pressure

Today’s societal beliefs and workforce realities appear to drive an increasingly diverse array of students to higher education institutions. Minority student enrollment in

higher education increased 56% between 1998 and 2008 (Kim, 2011). The U.S. Treasury (2012) reported, “Students across the entire income distribution are now more likely to go to college than a generation ago” (p. 16). These societal beliefs and workforce realities influenced the faculty and administrators in the study to increase access to the myriad of students who now need higher educational credentials. Participants indicated that the increased volume and diversity of students across the academic, financial, and developmental continuums, coupled with the desires of faculty and administrators for students to attain their higher education goals, have prompted these educators to adjust from one-size-fits-all institutional practices toward meeting students where they are, thus serving students’ diverse needs and goals. One of the participants, Henry, provided insight concerning this issue:

So, we take anyone that wants to come through our doors and that often means meeting students where they are and providing developmental remedial education and providing relevant programming....I think, historically, a lot of the best faculty understood that they’re teaching the students where they are. So, for instance, if they need some background or they need some review or they can’t afford the current textbook kind of thing, they adjust to that as well, so the best way that the instruction happens is the instructor’s teaching the students where they are, understanding where they are, and tailoring things.

Providing the diversity of services adds to the cost of operating higher education institutions. Unfortunately, while the student population has grown and become more diverse, thus requiring more services at greater costs, federal and state governments have begun to reduce funding for higher education institutions. The State Higher Education

Executive Officers association (2013) released a report showing the degree of this shift, indicating that per-student support for public higher education institutions in FY2012 fell to the lowest level in 25 years.

From my analysis of participant interviews, I surmise that this defunding of public higher education institutions has sent faculty and administrators looking for innovative ways of providing a quality education to the diversifying student population while increasing revenue to cover the cost of providing that education. Mary said,

I think that there is an increased sensibility to keep costs down as much as possible for our students through things we were doing at the college. I think there is this sense of constriction both on the student body that we can pull from and the amount that we generate from that student body and the amount we can expend on that student body.

Barr and Tagg (1995) predicted that declining budgets and increasingly diverse students would make it virtually impossible for institutions to meet student needs for postsecondary education and would inevitably shift institutions to a learning paradigm that supports innovation and individualized learning practices. Even in today's higher education climate, this shift is taking place because the current instructional paradigm still has "a serious design flaw: it is not possible to increase outputs without a corresponding increase in costs, because any attempt to increase outputs without increasing resources is a threat to quality" (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 13).

Participants further indicated that the search for innovative practices to reduce costs leads to the implementation of individualized learning practices. Reducing business-related overhead and instituting efficient administrative systems are important

for higher education institutions but will not bend the cost curve (Mulhern, Spies, Staiger, & Wu, 2015). In order to bend the cost curve, “there needs to be a significant rethinking of the basic processes of teaching and learning” (Mulhern, Spies, Staiger, & Wu, 2015, p. 66). The findings indicated that how and what innovation is introduced into the higher education institutions is often an area of conflict between faculty and administrators.

Andrew said,

It’s a fine line between faculty rights and what administrators can do. The curriculum of a university belongs to the faculty. The administration controls everything about the university but curriculum....The administration can approve or disapprove it. They can’t write it, so we’re still debating on whether or not the delivery is a curricular issue or not. So, we’re having that debate over the past year.

This comment reflects an interesting variation I found in the data. All participants appeared interested in exploring ways to improve student learning; however, some expressed reluctance to alter traditional structures.

The search for innovative practices described by participants serves not just as an institutional cost-saving strategy but also is intended to serve as a cost-saving strategy for students. This is particularly important in light of the fact that “students are paying more, while public institutions are receiving substantially less money to educate them” (Lingenfelter, as cited in Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2012, p. 2). Increasing student tuition appears to have had the effect of requiring students to work more. This trend is problematic for higher education professionals; researchers have suggested that student persistence and completion rates are lower for students who

work more (Perna, 2010). Eckel and King (2007) noted that 80% of students worked during the academic year. Additionally, because of the societal and workforce issues referenced earlier, many students are older or are returning students; in fact, more than 40% of the undergraduate students were 25 years of age or older (Eckel & King, 2007). Participants noted that these older students and returning students require institutions to implement additional individualized learning practices to meet these students where they are, academically and developmentally. Mark provided an excellent example of the academic and developmental differences in returning students and described how his institution has adapted to this societal reality:

One of the things that we're looking at and doing is with returning students. So the idea is we have a number of students, and so does every other institution by the way, who left the institution without a degree. And the idea is, it may be impractical to come back if you were a chemical engineering student and you left with 40 credits remaining for your degree. It may be impractical for you to come back and complete a chemical engineering degree. But it may be entirely practical for you to complete a general studies degree, largely online...If we can do a better job of reaching out to that group and moving them to completion, we are helping them directly and that's the service that we are in. We're helping the economy by building more educated workforce but we're also reshaping the perception in the voting populace of the role of higher education.

In addition to attempting to find cost savings, these faculty and administrators were attempting to find alternate revenue sources to support educational programs for the growing and diverse student population. These efforts have taken two paths. One path

has aimed at raising revenue by increasing enrollment in high-revenue low-cost programs, online programs, and graduate programs. Some participants suggested that this path increases the use of individualized learning practices as the institutions further diversify their student populations. The second path has aimed at increasing revenue through partnering with corporations in a myriad of enterprises. The findings are supported by research. Eckel and King (2007) suggested this strategy creates less individualized learning practices but can have the effect of changing the organization structure and priorities by favoring more market-related programs, such as business, nursing, and engineering, rather than favoring humanities programs. Pamela explained that she and her team are spending an increasing amount of time and resources explaining the value of liberal arts education to students, community leaders, and corporate executives. These two initiatives seem to indicate a preference for new ways of supporting the institutions and student success while at the same time maintaining the current institutional structure. These initiatives could signal the beginning of a shift toward the learning paradigm mentioned by Barr and Tagg (1995), who wrote, “One early sign of a paradigm shift is an attempt to use the tools and ideas of a new paradigm within the framework provided by the old” (p. 25). However, these initiatives could also be the type of piecemeal approach that Ewell (1997b) cautioned against because the approach wastes resources and has proven unsuccessful in the past.

Researchers have suggested that societal beliefs and workforce realities are driving an increasingly diverse population into higher education institutions (Kim, 2011; Mulhern et al., 2015; U.S. Treasury, 2012). This claim was supported by the findings of this study. These factors, along with higher education funding issues, appear to be

influencing faculty and administrators at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University to meet students where they are academically, financially, and developmentally. In addition, these factors appear to be motivating faculty and administrators to implement individualized learning practices to help the students attain their individual higher education goals.

Evolving Student Characteristics

According to the findings, the second prominent factor influencing faculty and administrators to implement individualized learning practices was evolving student characteristics. Participants repeatedly attributed their need to adjust institutional policies and practices and to implement individualized learning practices to changes in student characteristics. The findings indicated that a significant number of students attending the institutions in this study were first-generation students. First-generation students traditionally lack familiarity with higher education practices and have a limited network of peers familiar with higher education (Saenz et al, 2007). These findings are supported by research (Hirudayaraj, 2011). Thus, a student's status as a first-generation student influenced participants' interaction with them, as well as the level and depth of interaction required.

The findings from the interview analysis also indicated that the financial continuum of students has diversified. An increasing number of students of lower socioeconomic status attended these institutions. The authors of a U.S. Treasury (2012) report seemed to support these findings, stating, "The majority (over 70 percent) of low-income students still attend a public two-year or four-year school" (p. 23). This reality has caused participants to adjust practices in recognition of the financial constraints of

these students. Kelly explained that often decisions concerning whether to use e-textbooks with adaptive technology software or a regular paper textbook were decided based on costs to students. Mary said her institution was reconfiguring developmental courses to prevent students from wasting financial aid dollars on credits that would not transfer or advance the student toward a degree. Findings from the interview analysis supported the work of Perna (2010), who suggested that more students were working—and working more hours—while enrolled. These evolving student characteristics appeared to have a significant impact on faculty and administrator practices.

Participants indicated that considerations of time, place, and delivery for academic courses and student services that used to focus on institutional issues of faculty and staff availability, physical infrastructure, and scheduling were shifting to a more student-focused approach. Similar types of changes were noted by Bridges (2000), who explained that colleges and universities experienced a change in the identity of place, time, scholarly communities, and student communities. The findings from the interview analysis confirmed Bridges's findings and show that this shift has caused these three institutions to change semester start dates and durations, and to shift courses and programs between online, hybrid, and face-to-face formats. Andrew explained that his institution had day classes, night classes, weekend classes, and online classes to meet student needs:

We have plenty of students who are either student teaching during the day or in practicums, they are in [elementary school or high school] classes during the day where they have to observe because two thirds of our students are in teaching, so they have responsibilities in the schools until three to four pm most days, so they

have a 4:30pm [college] class or sometimes they have a 6:30pm [college] class during the week.

In addition, the findings of the study seemed to confirm the trend identified by Eckel and King (2007), who advised,

Although most institutions continue to rely on a traditional nine-month (two semester) academic calendar, many colleges and universities are innovating with their academic calendars, and additionally offer short month-long courses, overlapping semesters, and courses in a condensed weekend format, as they try to create programs that meet student needs and schedules. (p. 44)

My interview analysis also indicated that student characteristics concerning expectations of higher education institutions were changing. Paul explained, “Students are different now. Their expectations are different now from what they were just even 20 years ago. But also, we’re training people for a world that didn’t exist 20 years ago.”

Edward said,

I think the expectations have changed as well, but these kids coming out now, the expectation is on the instructor more than the student where the student will question, which they have every right to, but they’ll question curriculum, rigor, outcomes, everything about the course and the professor teaching it. Whereas a student 30 or 40 years ago would have never pushed on the professor and the student would have worked with the professor to identify their own shortcomings and how they can meet them. So, I think it’s almost a change of approach, whereas, the student was looking to meet the rigor of the college course, now the

student is expecting the professor to meet their needs and insure that the student meet the rigors of the college course.

According to the findings, today's students seemed to expect full connectedness in their lives, including from their higher education institutions. This echoes the research of Prensky (2001), who wrote, "Computer games, e-mail, the Internet, cell phones and instant messaging are integral parts of [student] lives" (p. 1). This connectedness appears to necessitate 24-hour connection, responsive feedback, the ability to find information independently, the ability to perform administrative tasks independently, and the ability for students to attend meetings or classes when, where, and with whatever device they choose. This expectation of connectedness may influence implementation of individualized learning practices related to the delivery, assessment, and support of academic and nonacademic programs across the institutions. Andrew's comments touched on this connectedness issues. Andrew said,

The thing that's changed is the way students approach you now. No one comes into your office and sits down and talks to you anymore. They all approach you via e-mail.... I get e-mails like nonstop all day about questions for help.

Kelly also felt this constant connectedness issue from students, stating, "I can barely answer all my e-mail." Erik advised that students expect to manage their interaction with the institution through whatever method works for them. He explained,

We are never going to be able to rely on a face-to-face encounter with our students so everything that they have to do with the college, to move themselves through an academic program to include the instruction, has got to be able to take

place at a distance whether that's online, on the telephone, by snail mail or currently now we're experimenting with face-to-face telecommunications.

The findings concerning student connectedness and the effect connectedness had on the interactions between students and institutions appear to align with Prensky's (2001) research. Prensky (2001) advised,

So if Digital Immigrant educators really want to reach Digital Natives – i.e., all their students – they will have to change. It's high time for them to stop their grouching, and as the Nike motto of the Digital Native generation says, "Just do it!" They will succeed in the long run – and their successes will come that much sooner if their administrators support them. (p. 6)

Participants also believed that the academic readiness of the growing and diversifying student higher education population has expanded the academic readiness level continuum and unfortunately, primarily toward the lower end of the spectrum. This position confirms the findings reported by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002):

At the same time that colleges admit many more students, the professors who teach them report greater numbers underprepared for college work. The evidence supports these impressions. Less than one-half of high school graduates complete even a minimally defined college preparatory curriculum in high school, leaving colleges to remedy the educational gaps. (p. 3)

Bill noted, "Students are coming into higher education with vastly different levels of skills and knowledge as a result of the preparation that they've had prior to setting foot through the door." Bill further explained that many higher education students are

returning students. “They’ve been out of college for a good period of time, in many instances, and now they’re coming back and the college they’re confronting now doesn’t look like what they thought college would be like.” Thus, the evolving student characteristic of academic readiness appeared to be another significant element compelling faculty and administrators to adjust programs, policies and practices to meet students where they are.

The multitude of evolving student characteristics included race, age, socio-economic status, part-time enrollment status, first-generation college student status, as well as student expectations, and academic readiness appeared to be compelling interview participants to implement individualized learning practices in an effort to bridge the gap between students’ current success level and the higher education goals they were trying to achieve.

Faculty and Administrators’ Desire for Student Success

Interview analysis showed that the third prominent factor influencing faculty and administrators to meet students where they are by implementing individualized learning practices was faculty and administrators’ desire for student success. Ewell (1997a) supported this finding. According to Ewell, improvement initiatives and activity “is attributable to a sincere desire on the part of many faculty to do a better job” (p. 1). Barr and Tagg (1995) also supported this idea: “As teachers, we want above all else for our students to learn and succeed” (p. 14). The interview analysis revealed multiple instances in which faculty and administrators exceeded standard practices or changed policies, practices, and procedures to ensure student success. The question was, what drove these participants to do everything possible, including implementing individualized learning

practices, to help students succeed? Interview analysis indicated two factors: first, the participants felt a joint responsibility for student success, and second, the missions of the institutions were student-centric, which influenced participant behavior.

Larry was very clear about this joint responsibility, stating, “When I’m teaching a course, I want to make sure that part of the onus and responsibility becomes on me, too.” This joint responsibility aligned with the learning paradigm shift Barr and Tagg (1995) identified, in which institutions move beyond responsibility for quality instruction to responsibility for being co-producing student learning with the student. Erik added to this idea, stating,

The standard measure of how many students I helped complete a degree is not really my measure. The measure is how many students did I treat professionally and as an adult and allowed them to attain their educational goals whether it was one course or multiple degrees.

This idea aligned with Barr and Tagg’s (1995) concept of success under the learning paradigm, about which they stated,

By success we mean the achievement of overall student educational objectives such as earning a degree, persisting in school, and learning the right things the skills and knowledge that will help the student achieve their goals in work and life. (p. 15)

The findings from the participant interviews echoed the research of Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005), which indicated “that faculty attitudes and beliefs about the student experience can play a role in creating an environment that fosters student learning” (p. 20). Both faculty and administrators participants said they believed the students had a

degree of responsibility for their own success, but the faculty and administrators also had responsibility to foster this success. These participant beliefs aligned with the research of Kuh, Laird, and Umbach (2004), who advised, “In an era when many observers question the motivation of substantial numbers of undergraduates, it is reassuring to know that faculty can and do shape student performance by what they themselves value and do” (p. 30).

The mission of each of the institutions also appeared to influence participants’ implementation of individualized learning practices. Foley (1995) advised,

Every institution of higher education in America is different in some way: religiously affiliated, land-grant based, public, private. However, all of these institutions are similar in that they each have educational goals. A major difference from one institution to another is the philosophy guiding the educational experience. One institution could place an emphasis on research, while another is more focused on teaching. No matter what the emphasis, it is important for a college or university to clearly communicate its goals. This communication is typically conveyed through an institutional mission statement.

(p. 1)

Reviewing the missions of the three institutions in this study through participant interviews and document analysis provided insight concerning the organizational culture and types of faculty and administrators that are employed at these institutions.

Burlington County College’s mission at the time of this study was “Burlington County College, a comprehensive community college, provides all individuals access to affordable and quality education” (BCC Catalog, 2015, p. 11). Thomas Edison State

College's mission was "To provide flexible, high quality, collegiate learning opportunities for self-directed adults" (TESC Catalog, 2014, p. 6). Rowan University's mission was "A leading public institution and State designated Comprehensive Public Research Institution; Rowan University combines liberal education with professional preparation from the baccalaureate through the doctorate. Rowan provides a collaborative, learning-centered environment in which highly qualified and diverse faculty, staff, and students integrate teaching, research, scholarship, creative activity, and community service. Through intellectual, social and cultural contributions, the University enriches the lives of those in the campus community and surrounding region" (Rowan Board of Trustee's Bylaws, 2013). Each of these mission statements focuses on student-centric issues.

The findings of this study affirmed Twigg (2003), Ewell (1997a, 1997b), and Barr & Tagg (1995), all of whom supported the premise that a student or learner centric focus enhances student learning and results in variation in practice and innovation, thus supporting what I refer to as individualized learning practices. Most of the participants in this study internalized the institutional mission to include access, affordability, and quality. This manifested in their desire to effect student success. Fostering student success meant providing access to the maximum number of students possible, understanding the students' needs, and establishing policies and practices that helped each student attain his or her higher education goals.

Societal pressures, evolving student characteristics, and faculty and administrator desire for student success compelled the participants to meet students where they are academically, financially, and developmentally. This phenomenon clearly demonstrates

that faculty and administrators understand the social justice implications of higher education and desire to ensure that all students have access to higher education and are supported in their endeavor to acquire knowledge and earn the higher education credentials critical to success in American society. Additionally the phenomenon appeared to align with Barr and Tagg (1995), who suggested that U.S. higher education institutions were shifting from an instructional paradigm, focused on faculty and the institutions, to a learning paradigm focused on student learning and toward “whatever approaches serve best to prompt learning of a particular knowledge by particular students” (p. 14).

Core Phenomenon

Strauss and Corbin (1998) advised that the core phenomenon of a grounded theory research project should represent the main theme of the research and “consist of all the products of analysis condensed into a few words that seem to explain what this research is all about” (p. 146). The core phenomenon discovered during this research was faculty and administrators “meeting students where they are” to assist students in attaining their higher education goals. The core phenomenon term, *meeting students where they are*, is an in vivo phrase which repeatedly arose during the interviews. It was mentioned so often that I thought perhaps there was some significant recent literature I had missed that contained this phrase. I found a limited number of references (De Sousa, 2005; Karp & Bork, 2012; Laird, Chen & Kuh, 2008; Sunderland, 2014; Zlotkowski, Longo & Williams, 2006) to this phrase in higher education literature. Each of these references provided a some degree of support of the concept of meeting students where they are but De Sousa’s (2005) research, which I read after discovering the core

phenomena, appeared to substantially align with the faculty and administrator perspectives found during this research study. De Sousa (2005) stated,

“High-performing institutions are well informed about their students. They know where their students are from, their preferred learning styles, their talents, and when and where they need help.... Advisors, faculty members and others subscribe to the belief that any student can learn anything we teach here, provided the right conditions are established for their learning and they enact this belief by meeting students where they are academically, socially and psychologically” (p.2).

It became apparent that all categories discovered during the research were connected to the core phenomenon of meeting student where they are. Twenty of the 27 participants mentioned the concept of meeting students where they are in one form or another. Meeting students where they are had different meanings to different participants but generally the phrase meant meeting students where they are academically, financially, and developmentally. Although a few participants provided negative cases expressing reluctance to meeting students where they are in certain circumstances, the majority described their efforts to meet students where they are and explained the strategies—the individualized learning practices—they used to assist students in attaining their higher education goals. Mark, Henry, and Sam, each from a different institution in the study, provided fairly representative comments concerning how the core phenomenon, meeting students where they are, influenced the individualized learning practices they and their institutions were using. Mark spoke specifically about how the core phenomenon influenced his institution:

So I think we are sort of coalescing around the model. Moving from here's what we offer if there's anything here that works for you and you have the qualifications great, to recognizing the student as a more three dimensional image and recognizing that in some ways, we're going to have to be able to repackage to meet their needs. As opposed to just saying, here's what we have. Come and take it or not.

Henry provided a more direct link to the relationship between the core phenomenon and the individual learning practices that faculty and administrators sometimes needed to implement, stating,

I think, historically, a lot of the best faculty understood that they're teaching the students where they are. So, for instance, if they need some background or they need some review or they can't afford the current textbook kind of thing, they adjust to that, so the best way that the instruction happens is the instructor's teaching the students where they are, understanding where they are, and tailoring things.

Sam provided further illumination of the relationship between the core phenomenon and individual learning practices, describing the linkage between meeting students where they are in terms of pedagogy and the practice of course design. Sam explained,

I think the issues of pedagogy are extremely important particularly when you're talking about students who are at different developmental stages. Students who haven't been in a formal education setting for decades, literally, and what that means in terms of having pedagogical styles that meet students where they are. I think that acknowledges the multiple intelligences that are out there as part of

how we design courses with the understanding that people are going to have, you know again, these multiple ways of learning and I think you have to find ways to meet that individually for each student.

Participants clearly articulated that the core phenomenon of meeting students where they are formed the basis for development of individual learning practices that provided pathways for students to achieve their higher education goals. Henry and Sam's comments illustrated the relationships between understanding where students are and the development of instructional, pedagogical, course design, and student service strategies used by faculty and administrators. Mark's comment provided an overview of how institutions were looking to adapt policies and practices to meet students where they are. This shift toward a more student-oriented focus seemed to align with Twigg's (2003), who stated,

In higher education, both on campus and online, we individualize faculty practice (that is, we allow individual faculty members great latitude in course development and delivery) and standardize the student learning experience (that is, we treat all students in a course as if their learning needs, interests and abilities are the same). Instead we need to do just the opposite: individualize student learning and standardize faculty practice. (p. 38)

The shift also appeared to align with the research of Barr and Tagg (1995), who argued that U.S. higher education institutions were moving toward a learning paradigm that "ends the lecturer's privileged position, honoring in its place whatever approaches serve best to prompt learning of particular knowledge by particular students" (p. 14). The "meeting students where they are" phenomenon involved two key subcategories: (a)

understanding where students are academically, financially, and developmentally, and (b) understanding their individual higher education goals. This phenomenon appeared to align with Barr and Tagg's (1995) concept of the learning paradigm, which involved institutions moving beyond simply providing access and quality instruction toward a focus on student success.

Understanding "where students are" involves determining student academic, financial, and developmental status in relation to their individual higher education goals. The findings from the interview analysis indicated that this process was active and evolving at all three institutions but accomplished in various ways. Understanding where students are academically has become increasingly complex as the higher education student population has grown and diversified. Participants described teaching new 18-year-old students fresh from high school along with 40-year-old returning students. Academic readiness levels were spread across the entire spectrum. Kelly described the academic diversity, stating,

I have students in my class that have master's degrees. I've students in my class that can't read beyond the fifth grade reading level. So, how do you wind up meeting all of those needs within a classroom or as an institution? It's complex, it's really complex.

Participants said determining student academic status at two of the institutions in this study generally involved the use of standardized test scores from national testing services—SAT results were mentioned most often—and institutional placement tests administered when a student initially enrolled at an institution. One institution in the study relied solely on students' transcripts of previous academic performance and prior

learning assessments to determine where the student was academically when enrolling. Participants mentioned that a few special programs at each institution had additional initial academic evaluations, and one special academic program used student learning styles evaluation tools to collect additional academic information. Ellen was aware of systems that could capture this type information and had used them at a previous College but advised that her current institution uses standardized placement tests and transcripts to determine individual academic information but even with that information, “there's no formalized way” to share that information across the institution. Participants further advised that during the course of a student’s enrollment, faculty and administrators appeared to rely on faculty comments, course grades, and progress toward a stated goal as indicators of where students were academically.

A few participants provided negative cases concerning the need or desire to determine students’ academic status. These participants advised that, based on the number of students in their classes and the time they had to dedicate to developing instruction, conducting classes, and providing feedback on assignments, they would not be able to do anything with student academic status data if it were provided routinely. Edward specifically said that even if he did know student academic status information, it would not matter because he had limited ability to adjust, based on the number of students in his class, time constraints, and the diversity of student academic readiness. These negative cases would be excellent areas for future research because of the importance of faculty and student interaction, as evidenced by other research (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

Understanding the financial status of students appeared equally challenging, according to participant reports. Participants acknowledged that the financial status of students was initially determined using the FAFSA form and financial aid documents; however, interview data indicated that understanding a student's financial status extended far beyond this rudimentary review. Participants suggested that student debt, other family financial obligations, and a student's housing situations often had to be considered when attempting to understand a student's financial status. Additionally, the fact that many students needed to work full-time or part-time to pay for college and other bills was a significant consideration when trying to determine where they were financially. Perna (2010) advised, "Contrary to the common belief that community college students are more likely to be employed than students at four-year institutions, the distribution of undergraduates by the number of hours worked is similar at public two-year, public four-year, and private four-year institutions" (p. 30).

Participants suggested that financial status was hard to determine because of the numerous variables affecting this status; however, financial status appeared to affect students to a greater degree than did either academic or developmental status. Numerous participants mentioned students who were well prepared academically and developmentally to succeed in college but had to "stop out" because of financial issues. Henry provided a perfect example, describing a student who was getting an "A" in his class and then stopped showing up for class for a few weeks. When Henry spoke to the student, the student said he and his family were homeless, and he missed class because he had to handle that situation. Henry went out of his way to ensure the student got the assignments he needed, and the student finished the class earning an "A". Perna (2010)

advised, “Although students who work have an obligation to fulfill their academic responsibilities, colleges and universities also have a responsibility to ensure that all students—including those who work—can be successful” (p. 31).

Participants further suggested that understanding where students were financially was even more critical at their institutions because many students chose to attend the institutions because of their financial status and the affordability of state public institutions. The U.S. Treasury (2012) supported this notion: “The majority (over 70 percent) of low-income students still attend a public two-year or four-year school” (p. 23).

Participants advised that understanding where students were developmentally required an understanding of both the student and his or her environment outside of the institution. Participants also said that the growing and diversifying student population made this increasingly difficult. Participants suggested that adult students did not have the typical maturity issues of the 18- to 21-year-old students, but did have their own unique work and family issues. Participants further suggested that military and veteran students had unique issues, as did first-generation college students and minority students. Each of these student populations and various other segments had some degree of life challenge outside of academics that participants suggested needed to be understood in order to meet students where they were. Mark provided an excellent example, explaining that returning students who had been out of engineering classes for years were typically not developmentally ready to rejoin the engineering classes, but could rejoin the institution to earn a general studies degree. Ewell (1997b) identified the need for understanding the developmental status of students, stating, “Direct individual

experiences decisively shape individual understanding” (“What we know about learning”, para. 7) and “learning occurs when the learner is ready to learn” (“What we know about learning”, para. 8).

Student motivation and connectedness emerged from interview data as key indicators of where students are developmentally. Two theories seemed to support this idea: Deci & Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory linked students success to intrinsic motivation, and Astin’s (1999) student involvement theory showed that the more students feel individually connected to and involved in the learning process, the better the results. Participants suggested that student motivation was just as critical as ability for students to attain their higher education goals. Pamela advised, “I don't think it's [students dropping out] because they lack the ability to do [the course work] it. I think that it's because it just gets -- the going just gets too tough”. Carl advised, “So why do they drop out, there's a million different reasons. Why do they succeed? It is personal determination.” Joseph explained,

We have students who have been very successful in high school; [their] biggest issue may be just motivation. Why are they here? Their parents made them go here. They don't want to work. They have all the situations why they don't want to be here.

Joseph feels they have the ability to succeed but their success or failure is a result of their motivation. Participants further suggested that student motivation often varied based on student goals; however, by attempting to determine where students are and what their goals are, the participants involved the students, which the participants believed led to more involvement and motivation on the part of the students. Bill advised,

I find that it's really important, right at the beginning of the semester to master some type of rapport with the students. To find out why they're here and what are their goals, what they are hoping to accomplish.

Mary explained that her institution worked with students to understand their motivations and goals and then adjusted curriculum if appropriate. Mary stated,

We have a five-week class. There's no issue with us doing that because, for that group [of students], we know we have a motivated group and we know that in many cases, they're already working [in the discipline]....we know that they're kind of a tried and true student and they're motivated to get through the program as quickly as possible. Some of the feedback we get from that program is, it takes so long. They want to get done and so I think [adjusting curriculum to the group, in that case, that would work well.

Participants also described how student connectedness to the institution often resulted from connections with faculty and enabled student success. Andrew stated that students at his institution are successful because they feel a, "personal interaction with [fellow students and faculty] a feeling like in a community. That this is the community where I go to school, these are my classmates and these are my professors and they're mine. It's my institution." Steve stated that one of his students was asked by a prospective employer what she enjoyed most about her education at her institution and she stated, "she has much more access and much more direct interaction with the faculty here." This finding aligned with Tinto (1993), who suggested that retention and student success depended on academic and social integration within the college.

Participant interview data across the institutions showed varying degrees of participant effort toward determining students' developmental status. Only one institution was mentioned as using an institution-wide evaluation tool to examine where students were developmentally when they initially enrolled. The purpose of the evaluation tool was primarily to assist students with peer-to-peer interaction at that institution. All institutions appeared to use various student satisfaction surveys to determine where student were developmentally during the course of their enrollment.

Participants said faculty, advisors, and student services staff also informally captured additional information about where students were developmentally during their enrollment. One institution aligned student services under the Provost's office because administrators felt the student services domain required the same level of emphasis that the academic domain received at the institution. Mark summed up the issue: "The idea is recognizing that while there may be two aspects of their life, it's the same student and if one of them goes off the rails, the other is going with it." Two institutions had alert systems to notify administrators when a member of the faculty or staff was concerned about a student's emotional status. All institutions were noted as having advisors to assist student and to evaluate students' developmental status, but participants consistently suggested there were not enough advisors. Steve explained how his department handled the advisor shortage stating,

when I realized we don't have dedicated academic advisers? I turned to the faculty and so the faculty do a lot. Well, the faculty can tell [students] what courses to take and this and that but the faculty can't see them through financial issues, you know, or personal issues, they help them [the students] find resources

on campus....What we did is we converted one of our admins, she's been very engaged in the program work with the Associate Dean on the scheduling, advising and things. She's become our [department] de-facto adviser.

Mary provided some additional context stating,

Our student support program which is where our counselor, one, one part-time counselor and one part-time psychiatrist who is classified to translate all of those IPs from high school into accommodation forms here so one part-time person for that position and one full-time person to lead the department with an MSW. They're wonderful people. I love working with them. They're a great bunch. But, still, we have 10,000 students and two part-time people to support them, all of them with their needs. That's overwhelming.”

Advisors emerged as a significant determining element indicating where students were across the academic, emotional, and financial domains. Most participants suggested that there were not enough advisors and that students often did not seek guidance from advisors. Marvin explained that his institution was increasing the number of advisors but “A lot of times our students will not graduate because of lack of academic advising or self-advising.” Additionally, participants suggested that advisor responsibilities had risen to a level such that quality advising required dedicated professionals. Erik advised that at his institution, “The advising is done by a group of prepared professional advisors who substitute for what most colleges would have faculty do.” Pamela advised that her institution was moving to a centralized advising model with dedicated fulltime advisors in the Colleges because, “we've always had faculty advising and that creates difficulties

because faculty are not here during the summer and during the busy times of the semester they are less available. They [faculty] don't know the institution wide system as well.”

Participant interview data further indicated that determining where students were required not only more advisors but also innovative advising programs, which were being implemented at all three institutions in this study. For example, participants mentioned the development of automated systems to assist faculty members in moving academic and nonacademic student issues to appropriate institutional advising, tutoring, or other resources. Mary explained that her institution's system is called Retention Alert and personnel, “can submit a retention alert for a variety of issues and then it's routed to the right person.... and when they submit a retention alert for academic issues, it automatically goes to tutoring and to an academic advisor. Tutoring reaches out to that student.... and then they [the student] also get a phone call from an academic adviser.”

Marvin advised that his institution, “created and implemented some early alert initiatives between Student Life and Strategic Enrollment Management that helps us identify At Risk Students, called the Success Network.” Participants also mentioned innovative advising techniques and delivery methods, including automated transcript evaluation, automated program development, and course selection, as well as video-conference advising. Erik explained that, “currently we're experimenting with face-to-face telecommunications advising, there are many methods of doing it, but they almost always start from the basis that I can't say “come to my office” to do anything.” Whether advisors should be managed centrally or at the department level differed among participants, but opinions about the need for dedicated advisors appeared unanimous.

Pamela provided an interesting context. She related the fact that her institution's

President was concerned about graduation rates but Advising was not on his “radar” as a significant influencer until “various people were able to get it on his radar and we are now hiring advisers.” Mary provided additional context stating, “As much as I love to have more faculty, I know that my faculty can't do their job well if the students aren't supported with all those externals [issues] that they [students] have that they bring into the classroom.”

Understanding individual student higher education goals was the second subcategory of the core phenomenon. This subcategory constituted a definition of success for each student; just as understanding “where students are” provides the starting point for individualized learning practices, understanding each student’s higher education goal provides the end point for the individualized learning practices. Participant interview findings showed that faculty and student-support personnel, including those responsible for admissions, advising, transfer evaluations, and student affairs, typically had critical insight into individual students’ higher education goals. Mindy explained that her advisors and support staff get to know the students profoundly and, “students get to know the adviser.... advisers talk to them about a plan, talk to them about courses, talk to them about what else can we help you with, and give them other resources.” Participant data indicated that just as the student population has grown and diversified, so have the higher education goals of the students. Paul articulated this point well stating,

Our students are not these undifferentiated 18-year-olds who are all like, yeah, show me what to do next; I don't know. These are people who have specific goals. And many of them have goals that are very different, and backgrounds and experience that are very different from one another.

Ellen stated that, “our students change and their goals change as they change and so, the successes kind of change. So not everybody comes in necessarily deciding that they want to get a degree, but many end up doing that.” Participants believed students were primarily attending their institutions to acquire some type of credential. The institutions in this study offered students a diverse plethora of possible credentials, from nonacademic technical certificates to doctoral degrees. Sam explained that,

the multiple methods the students have for attaining a degree [at his institution] is a novel concept that the rest of higher education is probably just beginning to prick the surface of, so I think the testing by examination method is something that is now beginning to extend to more traditional institutions, our Prior Learning Assessment model, our independent study model again are all features and facets that we have that are better than other institutions at allowing students to really come in and complete a degree.

Participants also advised that some students attended school because of a work requirement, some attended because their parents made them, and some attended just for the love of learning. Participants acknowledged that determining each student’s goal could be a challenge. Joseph stated that he and his team,

work with each student individually and find out what it is that they will determine is their success. Because I don’t believe that success has a cookie cutter approach. I believe that what you are looking for, we’re going to get you that. Whether it is a graduate degree or you just want to figure out this is the part of your life that you’re not sure what you want to do. And if that’s your meaning of success, then I want to support that part and I understand that.

This philosophy aligned with Barr and Tagg's (1995) concept of the learning paradigm in which

by success we mean the achievement of overall student educational objectives such as earning a degree, persisting in school, and learning the right things, the skills and knowledge that will help the student achieve their goals in work and life. (p. 15)

This philosophy was espoused by most participants in this study. The challenge acknowledged by participants was that to truly help students achieve their individual higher education goals, institutional administrators needed to understand the motivation behind student attendance to discern students' work and life goals. Ellen provided insight stating, "you've got to get students to tell you about like, what do you want to do with your life? Where do you see yourself? Like, let them tell their story and then help them figure out how are you going to get there." Joseph acknowledged that,

Everyone who comes to college wants to be what sounds fancy, accountant, nurse, engineer. Most of them can identify that because it does have a direct correlation to a job.... But what we try to work with them on is trying to link them to what their ultimate goal is. What do they enjoy doing? Because they're going to do this for the rest of their life.

Participants further acknowledged that, unfortunately, current resources and infrastructure limited their abilities to capture and disseminate that level of individual student information; thus, some students received this level of support, and others did not.

Participant data clearly indicated that faculty and administrators felt compelled to meet students where they are academically, financially, and developmentally to assist

them in achieving their individual higher education goals. Participant data also showed that while there were numerous venues for collecting data about where students are academically, financially, and developmentally, there did not appear to be a systematic process for collection or dissemination of this data. Further, participant data indicated that while faculty and administrators espoused the desire to help students identify their individual higher education goals and map them to institutional programs, current resources and infrastructure limited their ability to meet this espoused goal. In every instance where faculty and administrators acknowledged attempts to capture student information concerning student goals the process was manual, not systematic and not scalable to the size of the institutions' student population. Thus, it appeared that the individualized learning practices established in response to the core phenomenon of meeting students where they are may not be fully informed regarding where students are academically, financially, or developmentally and was probably not fully informed concerning individual student higher education goals.

Individualized Learning Practices

Participant descriptions of individualized learning practices at the course, program, and institutional levels, in both academic and nonacademic programs, varied widely across the three institutions and in some cases within institutions. Peter advised that at his institution,

I would say that the courses we offer do not allow for individualized instruction. Where I think we allow students to address that issue is we have open ended and completely flexible transfer policy so that if you don't want to take the kind of online courses that we have we don't require you too. You can

go to another institution and do an independent study. You can go out study on your own. Take one of our exams. You can go out do independent research, come back and do a Prior Learning Assessment, so here it's not so much built into our courses it's built in to the model.

Mary stated that at her institution, "As soon as the student tells me they're in distress, I make sure I'm either connecting them with counseling or with disability services or with a foundation depending on what their need is....I think a lot of it is high-touch. You got to know what the issue is before you can address it but there are some programmatic things that we're doing". This finding seemed to align with Ewell's (1997b) research concerning organizing for learning that required "determining student goals and needs in far greater detail than we do now, and attempting to shape programs that respond to what are quite often different kinds of student requirements and rhythms of participation" (Ewell, 1997b, "Organizational Structure and Culture", para 1). Interview analysis led to the conclusion that at the course level, time, locations, method of delivery, types of instructors, method of assessment, and length of the courses were all being adjusted to meet the needs of students academically, financially, and developmentally. For example, Mary said her institution had day and evening classes, and face-to-face, hybrid, and online classes. Her institution offered 5-week, 7-week, and 15-week courses; Mary explained that the course types and lengths were linked to the needs of the students. Time and location, and to some degree method of delivery and method of assessment, appeared to be related to the increasing student need for flexibility. According to participants, these adaptations had occurred because of the nature of the diversifying

student population and students' competing family and work responsibilities outside the academic environment. Sam advised,

we design courses with the understanding that people are going to have multiple ways of learning and I think you have to find ways to meet that individually for each student, it makes it difficult on the course design process but our style of self-paced learning also gives students the ability to adapt as they need to as they move through our course of study and that directly [affects] development of syllabi.

Thomas stated, "students come to us with a variety of credits and experiences through a variety of channels....but we go to where they are [academically and developmentally] and that shift of paradigm is very unusual".

The method of delivery, assessment, and type of instructors also appeared to be related to the academic and developmental status of students. Bill advised,

I think that not only does our institution attract a certain kind of student, a mature student, more motivated, more driven. I also think that it also attracts a certain kind of instructor in terms of someone whose going to be staying here....Who actually gets a lot of pleasure out of working with the population that we have here.

Steve advised that in his program at his institution, "our program is unique in that we have a hands on, designed base approach, project based approach to learning that cuts through all four years. There may be only two or three schools that offer the same approach that runs through all eight of their semesters on campus". This finding supported research that indicated if educational conditions are altered to meet learning

style preferences, statistically significant improvements in behaviors, grades, and attitudes may result (Dunn, Beaudry, & Klavas, 1989). For example, one institution focused on self-directed adults; admissions personnel assumed a certain level of prior learning and experience, helped students with learning, and provided assessments at a distance with subject matter experts serving as learning mentors rather than as typical instructors. This institution's academic environment was directed to a more advanced level of individual academic readiness and development but still provided some individualized learning practices to meet the needs of individual students.

Other institutions' course delivery method, course assessment, and type of instructors were related to student academic and developmental statuses that ranged from advanced to developmental. Participants reported that one institution had begun delivering courses at the high school level to increase the academic readiness of students who will likely attend the institution in the future. Mary explained;

we have a bridge program that we're starting with four different high schools in our district or in our county and those four high schools are going to offer Math 075 to their seniors. We know that with the way the K-12 is set up in New Jersey that students typically stop taking math their freshman or sophomore year [in high school]. They've met their requirement for their math classes by their sophomore year or junior, depending on what track they're in. I hate to say that T word; but it's true, we still have tracks. Their senior year, they're not taking a math class and so we targeted this developmental math class to those students who were done with their math in their sophomore or junior year but really need to have a brush-up on algebra and a review of those courses and are hoping that by offering this

class to them with the textbook that we would use here, that they'd be able to test out of development math class when they get here.

Interview analysis also indicated that course-level individualized learning practices were at times related to student financial issues, specifically to considerations concerning the type of textbook selected for a course. Kelly explained that even though students could benefit from textbooks with integrated support material sometimes faculty select less beneficial textbooks because of the cost to the students. Kelly stated,

the faculty member that's responsible for choosing text and supporting materials decide whether to choose those text [with integrated support material]. Most of the intro-type courses today and many other 200 and 300-level courses today have [textbooks with] those integrated materials. The issue then, is money. So, they cost more money than sometimes the regular old textbook, especially used textbooks.

Henry further explained that if, “they [students] can't afford the current textbook... there's a lot of leeway in terms of the faculty and how they deliver their content”.

The myriad of course-level individualized learning practices including course delivery methods, course lengths, course pedagogy and even textbook selection described by participants provided ample evidence of faculty's and administrators' desires at all three institutions in this study to meet students where they are academically, financially, and developmentally. The aforementioned practices aligned with Barr and Tagg's (1995) learning paradigm in which “the structure of courses and lectures become dispensable and negotiable. Semesters and quarters, lectures, labs, syllabi, indeed classes themselves become options rather than perceived structures and mandatory activities” (p. 20).

At the program level, interview analysis indicated that individualized learning practices focused primarily around degree programs designed for students from unique populations and those requiring transfer credits. The participants revealed that their institutions were building degree programs for individuals in niche student populations, such as returning students, students seeking multidisciplinary degrees, and students with particular employment experience. Mark articulated how his institution was developing program-level individualized learning practices that met returning students where they were, stating,

So, the idea is, we have a number of students, and so does every other institution by the way, who left the institution without a degree and it may be impractical for you to come back and complete a chemical engineering degree. But it may be entirely practical for you to complete a general studies degree. So we are partnering with multiple institutions to develop a program to provide the students with flexibility and in some cases credit through experiential learning evaluation. We're helping returning students directly.

Steve explained that his institution was trying to implement cross-discipline degree programs in an effort to meet an increasing student demand for cross-discipline learning:

One of the programs that we tried to get online this year was a general Bachelor of Science in Engineering degree for students who want the rigor of Engineering, but also might want to go to Business school or Law School and might want to go to work as an engineer for a year or two before they do that, you know. That's what a BS in Engineering would have...it would give students flexibility in their curriculum. They take a small track in Chemical, small track in Civil, small track

in Electrical, one third of their courses might be in business, might be in education, might be in law and justice. They design their curriculum and that gives them flexibility.

The practice Steve described aligned with Bridges's (2000) findings concerning trends to implement cross-discipline degrees that allow students to blend courses from various degree programs into a unique degree plan that met their needs.

This cross-discipline strategy also seemed to meet industry needs. For example, L. McAdam, chief executive officer at Verizon, noted that training in engineering and business was a huge career advantage (Lohr, 2014). Further, Bridges (2000) pointed to a modularization of program content as a means of developing these degree programs. Bridges's position seemed to align with the stance of the authors of a report on the future of education at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2013): "In addition to providing increased flexibility for students to customize their degree programs, increased modularity also presents other opportunities to improve MIT education and even may address some existing faculty resource limitations" (p. 12).

Mary noted another program-level individualized learning practice that her institution was exploring involved adjusting programs and course lengths based on the professional and academic experience of students in order to speed time to degree completion. She advised that in certain niche programs,

We know we have a motivated group and we know that in many cases, they're already working [in the field]; they already have their bachelor's degree and so we know that they're kind of a tried and true student and they're motivated to get through the program as quickly as possible.

These practices aligned with self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) that has linked student success with the degree of control students have over their learning and degree paths. Interview analysis indicated that program-level individualized learning practices such as programs for returning students, multi-disciplinary academic programs and academic program adjustments based on professional work experience which meet students where they are academically and developmentally, were happening at all three institutions in this study. These practices also seemed to align with the research of Kaplan and Kies (1993), who found that by assessing learning styles, instructors can develop more personalized instruction; this assessment, matched to the appropriate teaching style, improves student learning.

Some participants advised that their institutions take into account credits already earned and learning that occurred outside the classroom and allow a reduction of duplicate learning and course credits. These types of practices, which focus on the learning needs of students rather than on institutional calendars, credit hours, and seat time, are illustrative of a shift toward the learning paradigm that Barr and Tagg (1995) foretold twenty years ago.

Interview data analysis revealed numerous academic and nonacademic individualized learning practices at the institutional level at all three institutions. In the academic domain, these practices included academic content modularization, credit for learning outside the classroom (prior learning assessment), flexible credit transfer policies, credit by examination, credit banking, elimination of nonpedagogically-based barriers, and cross-institutional academic program collaborations, all focused on meeting students where they are academically, financially, and developmentally. Peter provided

vivid examples explaining that his institution had almost no individualized learning practices at the course level but offered a plethora of individualized learning practices at the institutional and program levels. Peter said,

The courses we offer do not allow for individualized instruction. I think we address that issue as we have an open ended and completely flexible transfer policy so that if you don't want to take the kind of courses that we have we don't require you to. You can go to another institution or do an independent study and transfer the credit back to our institution. You can go out and study on your own and take one of our exams. You can go out do independent research, come back and do Prior Learning Assessment, so it is not so much built into our courses it's built in to the model.

This approach aligned with the research of Bridges (2000), who described the changing nature of instruction and advised that learners were increasingly placed at the center of multidimensional learning environment and given the "power to construct their own learning" (p. 49). Peter's institution had standard course lengths of 12 weeks, but a new semester started every month, for every course, so students could start their individual programs any time during the year. Erik mentioned that his institution's academic and nonacademic programs were built to support individualized learning practices and often included allowing students to manage their interaction with the institution in whatever method worked for them. Erik explained,

We are never going to be able to rely on a face-to-face encounter with our students so everything that they have to do with the college, to move themselves through an academic program to include the instruction, has got to be able to take

place at a distance whether that's online, on the telephone, by snail mail or currently now we're experimenting with face-to-face telecommunications there are many methods of doing it but they almost always start from the basis that I can't say "come to my office" to do anything.

These practices aligned with Barr and Tagg's (1995) research showing that institutions shifting to a learning paradigm typically had a change in purpose from a simple transfer of knowledge to "create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems" (p. 15).

Interview data analysis revealed many nonacademic individualized learning practices, including administrative, advising, and tutoring services provided in every possible mode and variation from individual to group support, from face-to-face to virtual interaction, and from mentored to self-directed assistance. Marvin advised that his institution,

provides a variety of support services in order to help students navigate those [college] systems. For example we have a comprehensive health and wellness center that addresses counselling issues, student health and we also do passive and integral programming through educational initiatives. We have it all under one roof so that we de-stigmatize the whole idea of getting help. We embed those issues in orientation and we expose them [students] to those topics early....about two years ago our institution created a new division called Strategic Enrollment Management that handles financial aid, academic advising, admissions in order to

help students get into the institution and provide access but also help them manage the process.

Participants from all three institutions described ongoing initiatives to meet students where they are across the various nonacademic services provided by the institutions. Mary described connecting students with foundation resources to assist students with financial issues, “we do have our foundation which does a lot of scholarship work for our students and so we are constantly trying to network and connect students to the scholarships that are available to them”. Marvin provided another example explaining an initiative for transfer students, “we try to provide vehicles and opportunities for those transfer students to find their cohort, to meet these students that are already here but also identify with other transfer students who may be going through similar issues that they’re going through with the transition”. Joseph described his institution’s initiative to get assist students by providing career opportunities stating, “we’re also now trying to get businesses to offer more career opportunities as far part of our success model”.

The expansion of individualized learning practices was apparent from interviews at each of the institutions and also across both academic and nonacademic areas. Peter explained that he was trying to expand individualized learning practices to include modularization of content to reduce the degree of duplicated student learning:

One of the things that I’m trying to, at least position the college to be able to do more effectively, and it’s one of the things I’m excited about, is that a student comes into a course whatever the course might be and thinks they know part of the course but not all of the course. The student ought to be able to test out or

PLA out of that part of the course and just say I only need to study this part of the course and take the tests and do the assignments and then get credit for the whole course. And to me that would really be bringing the student's prior knowledge into our structure and help them.

Mark explained that at his institution, educators were expanding individualized learning practices not just to assist current students but also as a means of attracting and serving additional students. He stated,

Relatively few of our courses are offered in both traditional and nontraditional methods to our on-campus population. So, we don't have a lot of courses where you could choose to take an online version or a hybrid version or an all-in person version. We have individual courses that can be taken online, certainly and we have some graduate majors that can be taken online. And our nursing program is a predominantly, well it's, I guess technically a hybrid but most of it is online. We are in the process of developing our first purely online pathways to a handful of specific majors so law and justice and psychology should have one within a year. Not because we're trying to drive students off of the campus into that group but that we recognize that there's a market that we're not serving people who simply cannot come here. I think we do a disservice when we ignore that segment of the population. We are a state institution and we're designed to help with that.

Both faculty and administrator participants from each of the institutions acknowledged that individualized learning practices were expanding across academic and nonacademic programs at the course, program, and institutional levels. These practices were developed to meet students where they are, to provide students with pathways that

meet their needs, and to help students attain their individual higher education goals.

Dennis advised that his division was created to assist his institution with implementation and expansion of practices designed to meet students where they are and to help students attain their individual higher education goals. He advised,

We are intermediaries between the student that wants certain things out there and the schools that owned the programs. The thing was that many students, they don't want to come to the campus anymore. They were very busy and after the, you know, after the day at work, they wanted to go back home. So, our job was identifying the best programs that we knew there was a market for on one hand, and second transforming these programs or changing their mode of delivery or making them more convenient. You have to give options. Right now, it's all about options. I think that is what the students want. And, uh -- And if you don't present that to them, certainly your chances of attracting the student are going to be quite limited.

Interview findings indicated that these practices increased over the past years as the student population has grown and diversified. Paul advised, "Students are different now and their expectations are different". Peter explained,

I think that there is a growing conversation around [instruction] that you know students go to the lecture hall and listen to the faculty member with his PowerPoint deliver a lecture for an hour or two hours or however long it is, is probably not an efficient way and higher education is beginning to look at that and see if you get MOOCs and you get things like online learning, service learning projects trying to get new pedagogy to engage students because students

are just finding it not engaging. They're finding it boring and therefore their attention is often wandering.

Susan stated that in her division of her institution,

We also like the students to come up with creative things like what they thought would be helpful in the course and we always ask for that feedback and so, we always have a planning meeting for our course and a wrap-up for our course.... And then, changes really come from the voice of what I call the customer, the voice of the student.

The continued expansion of individualized learning practices seems likely as technology increases the possibilities, and the student population continues to grow and diversify.

Contextual Conditions

Creswell (2007) advised that contextual conditions are the “particular set of conditions within which the strategies occur. These are specific in nature and close to the actions and interactions” (p. 238). Three contextual conditions emerged from the interview data as significantly influencing strategies: institutional focus, faculty and administrator comportment, and resources.

Institutional Focus

Interview data analysis showed that institutional focus, specifically the degree to which the particular institution's faculty and administrators had a student-centric focus versus an institutional-requirements focus, was a key factor affecting the implementation of individualized learning practices. Participants at all three institutions appeared to have a student-centric focus and were pushing to become even more student-centric. Mark and

David provided comments that were fairly representative of the student-centered focus of the institutions. Mark stated,

We've made a commitment that no student will ever be denied a seat in a class that they need for their normal progress towards graduation.... We're controlling the prices, we are increasing the chances of you progressing through in time and we are removing artificial barriers that we impose, often accidentally, to completion.

Similarly, David said, "I think it's incumbent upon the institution to monitor students and to make sure that they have all the tools that they need in order to be successful at the institution." Interview data further indicated that student centeredness encompassed both academic and nonacademic areas, and both areas required implementation of individualized learning practices to meet students where they are. Interview analysis indicated that these institutions had traditionally focused on the academic and cognitive side of students; however, as the student population diversified, more individualized learning practices were needed on the nonacademic side of student life. Susan explained the diversity of student issues that require support stating,

We've had to support students in our program through a lot. They're working full time, they're going to school, and now, their parent has a terminal diagnosis, isn't living with them, and they're supporting them through that. That's what I think makes institutions successful. It's not a building. It's the people who live inside and what they embrace and what they do in that student centeredness that really does make a difference.

Another component of institutional focus that appeared to influence implementation of individual learning practices was the degree to which institutional administrators were interested in collaborating with other institution administrators to vertically and horizontally integrate academic programs beyond their institutional boundaries. Ewell (1997b) noted the benefits of vertical and horizontal curriculum integration within institutions; however, there appeared to be an equally beneficial synergy across institutional boundaries. Interview data analysis showed that all three institutions in this study were coordinating curricula beyond their borders. This type of institutional collaboration enabled development of numerous individualized learning practice possibilities. Participants mentioned that their institutions were working with high schools to better prepare students who will enroll at their institutions. Joseph advised,

One of our initiatives that I'm really proud of, we work with two high schools here where the remediation course is actually taught at a high school. And we help the high school develop the curriculum, but it's not our course. It's a high school course. We accept that high school course, which will accelerate them into the college level when they get here.

Collaborations also involved coordinating and adjusting curricula based on requirements from institutional transfer destinations and entering into partnerships with other higher education institutions to enable students to transition more easily between institutions. Mary acknowledged that one of the main drivers of her institution's curriculum is what will transfer to other institutions. Mark explained that his institution is significantly increasing peer institution collaboration stating,

Part of what we're talking about with another peer institution is actually developing the opportunity to offer connected certificates. So if they were going to offer a four-course sequence in environmental studies -- environmental science and we were going to offer a four-course sequence in entrepreneurship, with a reciprocity of tuition agreement, that institution's students could enroll for that four-course sequence at our institution and receive a degree from their institution but with a certificate from our institution. While our students could enroll in their institution's four-course sequence and graduate with a degree from our institution but with a certificate from the other institution which stops us from having to replicate infrastructure.

These practices revealed a collaborative institutional focus, but more importantly, enabled implementation of individualized learning practices that meet the academic, financial, and developmental needs of students beyond institutional borders. Interview analysis showed that the trend toward institutional partnerships resulted from an understanding that institutions did not have the resources to be experts in all fields or to offer every program to all students. Paul said that educators at his institution believed institutions should "figure out what you do well and partner with people when you don't." Peter further articulated how the idea of collaboration was influencing individual learning practices across higher education in New Jersey:

I think New Jersey is beginning, from my understanding, to begin to address this, the presidents are having some conversations about does every institution need to offer everything. Should maybe certain institutions specialize in certain areas and

then the student chooses to go to that institution if they want to study that rather than all institutions offering everything.

Interview data further indicated that institutional focus also concerned the degree to which an institution was open to innovative pedagogical approaches. Openness to innovative pedagogical approaches had a direct effect on the individual learning practices that were implemented. Peter noted his institution was looking at curricula and pedagogy to better engage students:

I think there has to be something in terms of curricular discussion that gets us beyond what we're doing. Because a lot of places the curriculum, I mean we've tinkered around the edges but the core curriculum hasn't changed in 50 to 100 years. It's still the same old stuff and you know, I think it's a least worthy of a conversation.... A big challenge is the pedagogy and how do you deliver it.

Similarly, Mary described a definite shift in the delivery of instruction at her institution and said that the new delivery formats were having an impact on instructors and students. This idea corresponded with Ewell's (1997b) and Twigg's (1999, 2003) assertion that new initiatives centered on instructional technology and distant delivery could fundamentally transform the way higher education happens. Mary suggested that these impacts, both positive and negative, were influencing development and implementation of individual learning practices. She stated,

I think online has definitely increased. Having taught online, having taken a graduate program online, I think the challenge is that sometimes people feel that online is easier and it's not. You have to be more self-motivated. You have to be willing to log in every day. You have to be willing to do the reading on your own

and figure out how to participate in the discussion boards. You can be in a face-to-face class and participate by listening but you can't be in an online class and participate just by reading the discussion boards. There is a difference there. Some students excel online and some students don't.... The instructor has different strengths as an instructor just like students have different strengths as learners. The challenge is learning how to make student strengths as a learner match the instructor's strengths as a teacher.

Interview analysis indicated that institutional focus directly affected the type and scope of individual learning practices and that change in any particular area of institutional focus could influence the degree of implementation of individualized learning practices.

Faculty and Administrator Comportment

From the interview data, I identified faculty and administrator comportment as a factor affecting the degree to which individualized learning practices were implemented at the three institutions. This comportment factor included the actions of staff, but also their attitudes and knowledge. Interview analysis showed that the degree to which faculty and staff believed that student success was a shared responsibility affected implementation of individualized learning practices. David, Susan, and Joseph, who are each from different institutions in this study, spoke of their joint responsibility for a student's success and described numerous practices to make students successful. This contrasted significantly with a few negative cases in which participants accused some colleagues as being happy to fail 50% of their students. Participants claimed that faculty in some programs "like to beat their chest, you know, Ah! I weeded out half my class." This kind of thinking, according to Barr and Tagg (1995), stems from the old

instructional paradigm of U.S. higher education, which holds that the instructor and instruction are the measure of institutional quality rather than student learning.

Interview data also showed a link between the individualized learning practices implemented and the degree to which faculty and administrators believed that the institution should balance flexibility with program integrity and quality. Numerous participants described the need for balance between being flexible toward student needs and providing students with a quality education. Participants suggested that all three institutions attempted to provide students with an affordable flexible program while ensuring the students received a quality education. Mark noted the importance of meeting students where they are and helping them attain their individual goals as quickly as possible, but “without compromising the academic quality of the degree.” These remarks could be an indication of faculty resistance to change which could limit the implementation of individualized learning practices. Barr and Tagg (1995) suggested that if institutions continued to follow the instructional paradigm, affordability and quality would always be diametrically opposed to each other. Twigg (2003) suggested that an affordable and quality education was possible by integrating technology and focusing on student learning.

Interview data further indicated that implementation of individual learning practices were also influenced by the knowledge faculty and administrators had about innovation in higher education instruction, support services, and the internal and external resources available to the institution to address academic and nonacademic student issues. A surprising finding from this research was that only two of the 27 faculty and administrators interviewed had ever heard of the Carnegie Mellon Open Learning

Initiative and only one appeared to be familiar with the University of Maryland course redesign initiatives. Paul provided one possible explanation for this lack of knowledge among his colleagues. Paul advised that he attended many conferences to stay current in his academic field, but also stated,

I think at any institution, of any type, that's not an easy thing for people to do.

People are like, yeah, this is how we do it. We've always done it this way. And it's hard to really pay attention to what else is going on out there.

A myriad of other possible reasons may explain the lack of knowledge about these two and other higher education reform initiatives. For example, the lack of knowledge might reflect a lack of emphasis on professional development, a lack desire for change, or a lack of process for reviewing innovative developments in the higher education field.

Whatever the reason for educators' lack of knowledge about these two initiatives, the concern was beyond the scope of this study and represents an area for future research.

Interview analysis indicated that a majority of participants were aware of adaptive learning technology and some had implemented adaptive learning technology as part of electronic textbooks and programs available through textbook publishers. Carl advised,

There are quite a few faculty members at the institution who have adopted published or provided [adaptive learning technology] materials for their classes.

Some of the publishers you know, Pearson, McGraw Hill, the larger publishers produce tools and the faculty members have adopted, you know, say McGraw Hill Connect or Pearson Mastering, Pearson MyLab, Wiley Plus and are using those in their classes.

Bill advised that he and his colleagues were aware of adaptive learning technologies and he had brought McGraw Hill representatives to institutions numerous times because,

The [McGraw Hill] ebook will open up this magnificent program called Connect and Pearson has something similar to it and Cengage has something similar to it. So I'm familiar with the alternatives.... and students end up doing better on exams as a result of using it.

Interview data further showed that participants were concerned about the level of familiarity they and their colleagues possessed regarding the latest technologies. Sara stated, "You have a wide array of students with different backgrounds, and the faculty are older than the students, so the students sometimes are teaching the faculty about the technology." Participant data showed a lack of a systematic process for discovering and introducing innovative techniques and practices in both the academic and nonacademic areas at all three institutions. Carl, who has been a faculty and administrator, provided an example of the non-systematic process at his institution,

I think for most different faculty, they don't see that there's a whole lot of different ways of approaching that [instruction]. Necessarily, not right off the bat because again, unlike K-12 educators, college faculties are trained in a specific discipline, they are not necessarily trained in education. So, one of the things that we've launched very recently is universal designed for learning training. We stood up in front of a division meeting and advised that they [faculty] could learn alternative instruction and assessment options using universal design for learning techniques with the caveat that we're not requiring you, we're not forcing you, we can't contractually force you to do this.

Arum and Roksa (2011) echoed these findings stating, “ During graduate training, future faculty members receive little if any formal instruction on teaching. Doctoral training focuses primarily, and at times exclusively, on research” (p. 133). Thomas at a different institution stated bluntly, “we don’t conduct faculty development”. Pamela, at the third institution provided further context for the lack of a systematic process explaining,

We don't really have, for most courses, a syllabus of record. So, the faculty are sort of mentored by other faculty, even adjunct faculty are mentored within the department. The faculty are advised by other faculty, you know, this is the way we teach our course, this is what we normally do, I'll be glad to give you a sample syllabus but their samples, they're not really any foundation upon which you must build.

Pamela further explained, “There are some colleges that have a formal mentoring system. We don't in our college, but every one of my departments when there is new faculty member, I know that there are senior faculty and chairs looking out for them”. Arum and Roksa (2011) advised that in order to have transformational change, innovation and improve instruction institution’s needed to “engage in the scholarship of teaching” and spend more “time reflecting on teaching” (p. 134).

Finally, participant data indicated that the degree to which faculty and administrators felt valued by the institution appeared to influence the individualized learning practices employed. Most of the faculty and administrators interviewed for this study felt valued and empowered to develop individualized learning practices to help students succeed. Joseph repeatedly mentioned initiatives he was trying, and I could sense from the interview that he felt valued and empowered by his institution. He stated,

I try to strive to work with each individual student. And I try to sell them an honest picture. That they can be what they want to be if they can dream it.... I get my staff to work with the individual students to give them encouragement, to give them support. And then just try to work with them where they are.

Edward provided a critique of what he believed happened when his colleagues did not feel valued or empowered: “Some professors just push people through. Because they don’t, they don’t have the want and the care because they probably feel the institution doesn’t have the want and the care for them.”

Thus, from the findings, it is clear that faculty and administrator comportment influenced the degree to which individualized learning practices were implemented at the three institutions. This comportment included the actions, attitudes, and knowledge of these staff members.

Resources

The resources available at each institution were mentioned throughout participant interviews as affecting the implementation of individual learning practices. The resources typically mentioned included physical infrastructure, financial resources, and technological resources. Participants suggested that physical infrastructure, such as classrooms, labs, and general meeting space, affected the ability of institutions to implement various individual learning practices. For example, the size of classrooms limited the number of students that could physically fit in a class and therefore affected some individualized learning practices involving class size and methods of delivering instruction. Pamela articulated this point, stating,

We're building new buildings and there are no large classrooms built into those buildings. So, we're not planning for large classrooms. Our labs are only 24 seats each. It makes it a real challenge but we're, you know, we're definitely keeping everything small.

This type of physical infrastructure limitation clearly prevented the type of course redesign, which involves expanding to large class sizes, articulated by J. Hearne in the Abell Report (Abell Foundation, 2011) and thus limited possible individualized learning practices.

Participants suggested that the financial resources available to hire staff had a direct effect on faculty and administrators' ability to implement individualized learning practices that required staff-student interaction. Participants implied that this lack of resources limited participants' ability to meet student where they are and to develop strategies to assist them in attaining their individual higher education goals. Edward explained, "If you are expecting the interaction between professor and the students to be robust, you can't put 60 students in a class."

Larry said succinctly, "The larger the class, the less help I can give an individual student. That's just generally the way it works." Sara described how resources influenced individualized learning practices in her program, adding, "Because of the numbers of students and the limited number of full-time faculty, because we have a lot of adjuncts here, we kind of try to meet the needs of the entire class rather than an individual student."

Participants' responses indicated that financial resources available for staff professional development were affecting individualized learning practices that required

innovative ideas. Thomas advised that his institution did not have a formal professional development program, but he provided professional development on a host of issues to his staff because he felt “these kinds of conversations give, for people that teach, access to the type of theoretical and practical information they should know and I would be abdicating my responsibility if I did not make it available to them.” Another participant advised that at his institution, “We are very lean at our operation in terms of staffing, in terms of support for what you call ancillaries, travel, professional development; we’re very lean and very efficient.” Other participant responses seemed to indicate that professional development had some degree of ancillary status across all three institutions. Ewell (1997b) found that “at most colleges and universities development and training efforts tend to be considered auxiliary to core institutional functions” (p. 14).

Participants indicated that technology resources had a profound and continuing effect on the implementation of individualized learning practices. Participants said that technology had enabled their institutions to develop strategies to deliver courses, content, and assessments in a variety of methods, locations, and times at a large scale. David stated, “We are competitive in higher education today because of our technology. Our familiarity with technology and being able to use it to serve students and meet the needs of students”. Peter provided further context stating,

I think we’re using technology in appropriate ways that are cost effective and our online learning activities and even the way we reach out and interact with students with webinars and the phone center. I think we’re close enough to the core way a lot of students are used to doing business, you know you call someplace you get a call center and you try to work through your problem and I

think, you know we do that pretty well. You go online you get what you need, our use of online testing I think is pushing us even further in that direction making it more convenient and more efficient.

Participants mentioned technology enabled strategies to identify student academic and nonacademic issues more quickly. These improved strategies increased communication among faculty, students and administrators and allowed the institution to more quickly deliver a wider spectrum of support services. Mary advised that,

We have a retention alert system at our institution...We can submit a retention alert for a variety of issues and then it's routed to the right person...If someone has stopped attending class, academic advisor or counselor, we talk to them. If someone discloses that their parent just died and they're really struggling, then one of our counselors will reach out to them. We have a really good system that we make sure our adjuncts know about; we make sure our full-time faculty know about. This retention alert makes sure that our faculty can be supported and not feel like they have to be the counselors in the classroom. If it's something that they're [faculty] not comfortable addressing, we can make sure that that student gets the support they need.

Marvin advised that his institution,

We also have programming that assist students when they are placed on academic probation. We will provide them with a series of workshops to get them back on track. So we are doing those types of passive and active programming and using technology in order to help students persist through the institution.

Technology was a key component of each institution's plan to meet students where they are and facilitate student success. Interview and document data indicated that all three institutions had implemented software and alert systems to identify students having academic or nonacademic issues, with the aim of improving student performance. Peter suggested that technology could do more than identify struggling students and enhancing student performance. He advised that technology could be used to develop strategies that really met students where they were. Peter said,

Why not use the technology to help students figure out and map what they're really interested in, where they have passion, what they need to know versus what they already may know, because some kids come to college knowing a fair, a fair amount.

Participants viewed technological resources as resources that could advance individualized learning practices at scale and predicted that technology would someday revolutionize the institution of higher education. Peter advised,

If you really think about it the sophistication of the technology is in my view we're close to being able to have students go online do some very basic but thorough assessments of what they know in a particular area and essentially get a report that says you know this stuff sufficiently well enough, go study this. And this is all part of the movement to get away from the credit hour. I mean this credit hour thing does not really facilitate the kind of student individualization that we should be able to move towards. And I think that as the government sees the light, and it is seeing the light, that the credit hour needs to be more flexibility defined that this is going to be possible. One of the reasons that we're

going slow is because right now we have to look at the credit hour. And we have a lot of students on financial aid we have to play all those games. But I think if we get that redefined in the right way. To me, I'm excited. The whole, the flood gates would open up. And the institutions that are ready to deal with that I think are going to be highly successful.

Twigg (2003) advised, "Colleges and universities have not yet begun to realize the promise of technology to improve the quality of student learning and reduce the costs of instruction" (p. 1). Thus, for these participants, the aforementioned contextual conditions—institutional focus, faculty and administrator comportment, and resources—either enhanced or restricted implementation of individualized learning practices depending on the level of influence each exerted on the process.

Intervening Conditions

Creswell (2007) advised that intervening conditions are the "broader conditions—broader than the context—within which the strategies occur. They might be social, economic, and political forces, for example, that influence the strategies in response to the central phenomena" (p. 239). The intervening conditions discovered in this study consisted of societal pressure and regulatory paradigms.

Societal Pressure

Participant data indicated that societal pressure regarding higher education had a dramatic influence on participants' implementation of individualized learning practices. For example, participants believed society expected higher education institutions to increase access, increase degree completion, bring back students that have stopped out, reduce student costs, and speed time to degree completion. Participants felt compelled to

meet these pressures by developing practices that accomplished these goals. Steve's comments supported the linkages between societal pressures, state funding, and the obligation of institutions to increase access:

We are a state institution and, you know, we were given this tremendous gift from the State with all the resources for the new buildings. But I think with that support, I think, comes with an obligation for us and I think there's going to be an obligation to open up [access] a little bit.

Participants noted that society's increased demand for higher education credentials drives up student enrollment and reveals the many reasons students attend higher education institutions, which then affects the strategies used to assist students in attaining their higher education goals. Phillip was concerned about the changing societal view of higher education, stating,

There is more of a demand for, I call it market based learning and I mean that, mostly in a pejorative way that I think that really higher education is being viewed as a commodity more than it ever used to and I think that's very disturbing.

Similarly, Kelly noted the diversifying student body was the biggest challenge for her institution, saying, "How do you meet the needs of all ranges of students? All the diversity, the diversity in income, diversity in academic skills, readiness, the diversity and race, gender, age, backgrounds." Joseph noted that his team's challenge was to determine why the students were at the institution so they could develop strategies to assist students. Ellen advised that her team develops strategies to assist students with their diverse goals. She stated,

Some people come in with very simple goals. I want to take a business class because I want to learn how to use a computer or just want to take something just because I've been home for a long time and I just want to see if I can, you know, can take a class. Can I open my brain? Then some students want to get a certificate. Some people aren't degree seeking. But then some start taking a class or two and then realize, oh, I can matriculate, I can do this. So their goals sort of change as the students change. Or their goals change as they change. And so, the successes kind of change. So not everybody comes in necessarily deciding that they want to get a degree, but many end up doing that.... So sometimes we work with students and some find out that this is not the institution [for them]. We can refer them other places.

Finally, participant data showed that society's acceptance of constant change as a normal practice resulted in phenomena like student "swirling," which participants said had influenced individualized learning practices concerning student transfers and credit transfer policies. Peter said his institution had established numerous practices to deal with the swirling issue but more could be done. He suggested,

I really think if higher education was more open to allowing students to do things at other institutions, that we could even refine this approach more than we have and that students could, I mean we talk about this swirling effect of students, but that's the world they live in and they're comfortable with.

Peter added that in a little state like New Jersey, a student could go to a community college, to a private college, or even to a state institution, and "if we all said look, we'll all accept each other's product as valid or we developed a way to make sure we were

comfortable in doing that, then students could swirl around all those institutions.”

Participants further suggested that transfer credit was an increasing issue for institutions trying to meet students where they are and manage societal pressures for change.

Andrew advised that because of societal pressures and financial pressures his institution has taken the transfer credit issue to a new level where,

two-year colleges are now completely integrated into their four-year college. You [the student] enroll there [at the two year institution], you do the first two years [at the two year institution], we'll do the last two years[at the four year institution].

We'll still educate you on your campus. You're still with the two year institution, our professors come there, finish off the last two years of education, you get a discounted tuition. That is the model, you're going to see more and more of.

Erik advised that transfer credit was so important to his institution that, “We have a section within the registrar’s office called the evaluation section. The evaluation section is staffed by about 13 evaluators who do nothing but look at transfer credit from other institutions and from other collegiate level sources”.

Participants expected change to accelerate in the future and further affect implementation of individualized learning practices. Ewell (1997b) acknowledged the presence of constant change and advised that student-centered institutions must “monitor student progress more proactively and helpfully, especially if, as is increasingly the case, students take the curriculum in unusual ways or attend multiple institutions to attain a degree” (p. 14).

Regulatory Paradigms

Participants were particularly outspoken about regulatory paradigms across state, federal, and accreditation agencies that frequently change, generating a profound effect on the implementation of individualized learning practices. The National Conference of State Legislatures (2015) indicated that the regulatory environment has shifted to an outcomes-centric evaluation of higher education away from an access and time-based evaluation. Participants suggested that this shift had significantly influenced strategies for delivering and assessing academic courses and content. Every interviewee discussed the impact of the shift toward an outcomes focus to some degree at their institution. Mindy described learning outcomes committees in her division, Steve described a Capstone course designed to assess outcomes and Pamela provided a very honest description of the impact of the shift toward an outcomes centric focus at her institution stating,

it was a culture shift really. So, every program was given a framework, a template, you know. What are the goals of your whole program, what are the goals of the course, the outcomes of the course, how do you, you know, what are the exercises, how do you know that you're achieving them.

Peter advised that his institution had a different model than many traditional institutions and was prepared for the shift toward an outcomes focus stating,

we can pretty much measure the outcomes [of every course] because every course is basically following the same template. At a traditional institution every faculty member has the freedom to approach the subject matter however they wish so it's

much harder to focus in on the learning outcomes because one faculty member may emphasize one a great deal and not so much the another one.

Interview data highlighted the fact that regional accreditation agencies have shadowed this regulatory shift and have allowed some innovative delivery and assessment models but also required different practices and reporting rules. David acknowledged, “a lot of times decisions or rules are being made, sometimes coming from legislators and implemented or put into practice by an accrediting body”. Erik advised,

At the state, the federal and even in some cases the local level, specifically for community colleges, everybody wants into the act on determining or defining the value of your educational experience....but what they often actually translate into is a requirement that you have much more reporting at every level; state, federal and local. And in order to provide those reports you have to change your operations and you have to dedicate resources that could have gone towards instruction, research or even community service.

Participants reported that financial aid rules have been much slower to adapt to innovations in higher education, a fact that has influenced the available strategies at these institutions. Paul said that innovative approaches to learning, such as prior learning assessment and competency-based education (which have been praised by legislators and authorized by accreditors for years) were still not authorized programs to receive financial aid as a general rule. Paul believed this restriction limited his institution’s ability to offer this possibility to students who were dependent on financial aid. The federal government seems to agree, Fain (2015) reported “The U.S. Department of Education will allow at least 40 colleges to experiment with competency-based education and prior

learning assessment, granting them a waiver from certain rules that govern federal financial aid”. Barr and Tagg (1997) supported this notion, stating, “There is no more powerful feedback than revenue. Nothing could facilitate a shift to the Learning Paradigm more swiftly than funding learning and learning related institutional outcomes rather than the hours of instruction” (p. 23).

Mary provided a specific example of how her institution implemented an individualized learning practice influenced directly by financial aid policy. Her institution developed one-credit developmental courses instead of traditional three credit courses to meet student academic needs out of concern that students not waste financial aid dollars. She stated,

When they're in developmental and they're spending their financial aid dollars on developmental courses that aren't going to get them towards their degree and aren't going to really transfer to where they're going, to me, that's a waste that they don't need to take on.

Participants indicated that regulatory paradigms had the effect of enhancing the use of individualized learning practices in some cases and limiting their use in other cases. In general, participants believed that the more educators are able to manage the issues of higher education, the better the outcomes for students, faculty, and administrators. Mark provided a warning concerning the failure of higher education professionals to proactively manage higher education issues such as access, affordability, and completion rates stating,

If higher education doesn't get ahead of its issues, other people will fix them for us and when you invite people, directly or indirectly, whose knowledge of higher

education ends at having been to college, to fix your problems the amount of shock you can have when the solution doesn't work the way you would want it to is fairly limited.

Participant interviews provided evidence that the factors influencing faculty and administrators implementation of individualized learning practices at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University involved a combination of contextual and intervening conditions. The participants further suggested that the most significant of these conditions affecting an institution's amount of implementation of individualized learning practices were institutional focus, faculty and administrator comportment, resources, societal pressure, and regulatory paradigms.

Consequences

The implementation of individualized learning practices described by participants in this study had consequences for students, for the faculty and administrator participants, and for the three higher education institutions. Although the students were not the focus of this study, certain consequences for students seemed reasonably discernable from the comments of the participants.

The individualized learning practices described by participants provided students with greater access to the three higher education institutions. This was accomplished specifically through practices that assisted students in gaining academic readiness for college and enabled the transfer from one institution to another, as well as online programs and returning student degree programs that provided access to these institutions that had not previously existed for some students. Students were also better able to persist at the three institutions because of practices designed to limit costs for students, to

conserve financial aid dollars, to provide flexible course delivery methods, times, and locations, and to provide tutoring and nonacademic support services. Student goal attainment and time to goal attainment benefited from practices that reduced nonpedagogical barriers, allowed reasonable credit transfer among institutions, and provided multiple venues for obtaining college credit, including prior learning assessment, testing, and college credit for military or corporate training. Anecdotal evidence provided by faculty and administrator participants concerning students that were assisted by the aforementioned types of individualized learning practices provide a degree of understanding concerning the student benefits of these practices and highlight an area for future research.

The implementation of individualized learning practices also had consequences for the faculty and administrator participants. The main consequence for faculty and administrators implementing individualized learning practices was the change in mindset from the institution, faculty, and administrators being the priority to the student being the priority. Susan articulated this idea very well, stating, “it’s all about student centeredness which is a harder model.... if I’d base all my decisions on what makes it more attractive for the student, I’ll be more successful”. Mark furthered this student centered idea stating,

We’re controlling the prices, we are increasing the chances of students progressing through in time and we are removing artificial barriers that we [the institution] impose, often accidentally to completion.... we have been very reticent to put barriers to [student] progress unless there is a compelling pedagogical reason why you need to do so.

Additionally, developing and implementing individualized learning practices seemed to have caused faculty and administrators to question many traditionally held assumptions about institutional practices and opened them to the possibility of offering new ways for students to learn and demonstrate knowledge. Carl stated that his institution has initiated a program to assist faculty that, “allows them to create instruction that is accessible to every learner in their classroom through multiple means of representation of material and it will allow them to assess learners through multiple means of expression”. Faculty and administrators also experienced increased cross-disciplinary collaboration within the institutions and even collaboration across institutional boundaries of four-year and two-year institutions. Steve advised that he is collaborating across disciplines at his institution attempting to develop a,

Degree in Engineering for students, who don't want to be Mechanical, doesn't want to be an Electrical, doesn't want to be a Civil, but wants the rigor of Engineering. Who also might want to go to Medical school, Law school, Business school and might want to go to work as an engineer for a year or two before they do that. That's what a new degree in Engineering would have, it would give them [students] flexibility in their curriculum.

Peter provided an exceptional example of collaboration across institutional boundaries stating,

one of the things that in my career here that really impressed me was we did a special program with the NJ Network on the Middle East. We provided our expertise with assessment. We developed a series of assessments exams.

Princeton, because it has a whole department on Middle East studies, provided the

subject matter experts and they're the ones that worked with us in terms of what should be in these programs. NJ Network because they were media specialists did all of the filming and editing and so on. We put this series of programs, on public television, on the Middle East and anyone who wanted to do addition work, there was a reading list, and then wanted to earn college credit could take one of our exams that were focused on that [program]. To me that was sort of a symbol of if you could get institutions to cooperate you could create a whole new approach to how somebody might want to learn about the Middle East and give them more flexibility and more options.

The traditional time, location, and roles of faculty and administrators were changed by implementation of these practices. Compared to the traditional schedule, their courses were now scheduled during the day and at night and on weekends. Their course session times now varied in length and some courses were conducted asynchronously with no specific time of day required. The implementation of individualized learning practices also allowed students to send requests for support to faculty and administrators at all times of the day and night. Additionally, the type of interactions they had with students and the speed with which the communication happened between faculty or administrators and students had significantly changed. The quotes from Andrew, Kelly and Erik, on p.84 and p.85, concerning their new types and speed of interaction with students based on changed student expectations of connectedness provides evidence of the change in communication between faculty, administrators and students and the challenge it presents for faculty and administrators to keep up with the communication. The research of Prensky (2001) foretold of this change in communication advising, "if Digital Immigrant

educators really want to reach Digital Natives – i.e., all their students – they will have to change.... and their successes will come that much sooner if their administrators support them” (p.6). Joseph provided another example of the changed interaction and communication advising that his institution had recently, “created a student success coach program... to create a personal connection” between faculty, administrators and students to ensure students were aware of services and provided any assistance needed in a timely manner. Faculty and administrators also experienced a change in the physical location of their activities: Classes and support services at the three institutions moved around campus or to off-campus locations, and in some instances where there was no physical location at all, the class or support services were conducted virtually.

The roles of faculty and administrators also changed with the implementation of individualized learning practices. Some faculty saw their role change from exclusively instructing to serving as subject matter expert on a course design team, or as mentor of self-directed learners, or even acting as student advisor. Bill advised that aside from being a faculty member he is also on his school’s curriculum committee, and his institution’s academic council and that he and his colleagues are continually asked by Deans to be “content area specialist who are then assigned to work with an instructional technologist [as part of a design team] to decide what content is appropriate for a course and what materials should be used in the course”. Kelly a faculty from a different institution provided additional insight explaining, “I have a line next to my desk at the end of the class and they all want help, they all want to talk. They all want connections, they all want advice, you know”. Kelly explained that she understood the need for her to

act as a student advisor because, “you have 65 in a class and 10,000 students wandering around and we have three fulltime advisers”.

The role of administrators also changed as they gained increased responsibility for student learning outcomes, assessment of student learning, development of support systems to enhance student learning, and increased levels of specialization specifically in the student services, advising, and credit evaluation areas. Pamela advised her institution’s administrative team is now dealing with the linkage of courses and learning outcomes stating,

This is also a relatively new exercise for my institution. So, we are rushing this week or next week. We're getting a new director of assessment. Some things have become more and more important. So, about three or four years ago now we realized that we're all over the place and we're not really sure what's happening [concerning learning outcomes]. So, we have developed an assessment framework. We have a centralized office, institutional effectiveness research and planning.

Carl, from a different institution, advised that he and administrators at his institution are working with faculty on enhancing student learning outcomes and the assessment of student learning by development and implementation of the Universal Design support system. Carl advised , “Universal Design hopefully allows them [faculty] to create instruction that is accessible to every learner in their classroom through multiple means of representation of material and it will allow them to assess learners through multiple means of expression”. Erik advised that his institution has increased levels of

specialization specifically in the student services, advising, and credit evaluation areas.

Erik advised,

when the students come in we do the evaluation of their credit very specifically.

The advising though is done by a group of prepared professional advisors who substitute for what most colleges would have faculty do and they have to be knowledgeable in all of the degrees... We have a section within the registrar's office called the evaluation section. The evaluation section is staffed by about 13 evaluators who do nothing but look at transfer credit from other institutions and from other collegiate level sources.

Institutions have changed organizationally and functionally based on the implementation of the individualized learning practices. Academic affairs offices and student support offices have realigned in organizational structures to better support these practices. Mark highlighted his institution's efforts stating,

So for the past seven years, there has been a deliberate effort to more closely align the academic and the student life pieces to work and build upon each other.... this is now culminated with move of Student Affairs under Academic Affairs. There's still a vice-president there but he now a direct report of the Provost.

Whole divisions have been created to specifically develop courses and to provide support services aligned with these individualized learning practices. Participants advised that Thomas Edison State College established the Center for Learning Technology and Learner Support Center, Burlington County College established the Office for distance education and integrated learning resources and the Division of Student Success, and Rowan University established the Division of Global Learning and

Partnerships and realigned the Division of Student Services. Institutions have experienced the creation of new degree programs, curriculums and courses in support these practices. All three institutions have also developed programs to credential learning obtained outside institutional classrooms in support these practices. Mary advised,

many of the students at the base have military experience, have training that they've done through the military that can transfer into some of these courses.

Maybe they were an MP and they are in Criminal Justice now and they've taken some of those courses. Our military student and veteran affairs group will work with them to help them bring those courses in.

Paul advised that his institution has a specific division focused on providing college credit for prior learn outside the classroom through the use of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). Paul stated, “we have a much more generous policy than most school do. So it's possible they [students] reached their 30 credit PLA limit at other schools and then came here. Some institutions cap PLA at 30 credits, for instance. We don't have a cap”.

Mark advised that his institution is,

partnering with another institution with the idea that the other institution will do the experiential learning evaluation...because they have expertise in the assessment of the students' outside experience and then the other institution will give us a credited analysis and we will bring those credits in [to our institution] and then we offer the student the opportunity to complete what they need for the general studies degree with us.

The overall consequences of implementing individualized learning practices for the faculty, administrators, and their institutions is that the student has become the

primary consideration in decision making and student needs and goals have become the priority.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Implications

This research study discovered that faculty and administrators at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College and Rowan University are utilizing individualized learning practices as strategies to meet students where they are academically, financially and developmentally in an effort to enable the students to attain their higher education goals. Grounded theory was the perfect method for conducting this research study, because grounded theory relies on the emergence of theory from participant data rather than on prior theory or research.

The foundation of this research project was a desire to understand the faculty and administrator use of individualized learning practices at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College and Rowan University. I had attended each of these institutions and the individualized learning practices I experienced at each institution provided me access to higher education, reduced the costs of my education, facilitated my retention in higher education and reduced my time to graduation at various degree levels in higher education. Access, retention, cost and graduation rates are all key elements of the higher education narrative today and understanding practices that improve these areas will benefit the higher education community and contribute to the body of knowledge in this area.

Grounded theory also provided the opportunity to deviate from the dominant paradigm of student success in higher education which Bensimon (2007) advised is based almost exclusively on the personal characteristics of students and conduct research based on the perspective of faculty and administrators, who are charged with making higher

education work on a daily basis. Finally, when I began this research project I hoped to set the framework for additional research in the area of faculty and administrator practice enabling student success in higher education and the grounded theory approach provided the opportunity to establish a theory from which additional research can build and hopefully one day result in a more general theory. The Grounded theory method allowed for the review practices based on a holistic view of individualized learning practices across course, program, and institutional levels without the limitations of current theories.

The holistic review of individualized learning practices across course, program, and institutional levels as described by faculty and administrators resulted in the discovery of the core phenomenon of faculty and administrators “meeting students where they are”. The discovery of the phenomenon of faculty and administrators feeling compelled to “meet students where they are” academically, financially, and developmentally to assist students in achieving their higher education goals was unexpected. Finding this phenomenon provided a clearer picture of why faculty and administrators were changing practices and making policy exceptions on what seemed to be a continual basis. This phenomenon lead faculty and administrators to develop strategies, individualized learning practices, that the faculty and administrators believed would enable students to attain their individual higher education goals. The discovery of the “meeting students where they are” phenomenon led to an understanding of the causal conditions; societal pressure, evolving student characteristics and a desire for student success that compelled faculty and administrators to adjust institutional practices to meet students where they are. It also led to an understanding of the various strategies, individualized learning practices, utilized in academic and non-academic areas of the

three institutions and to the contextual and intervening conditions that assisted or mitigated the implementation of these practices. The discovery of the core phenomenon also enabled the development of a theory based on practitioner data that highlights the conditions influencing faculty and administrator practice at the three institutions which was the purpose of this research study.

An additional significant discovery concerning the core phenomenon, meeting students were they are, and the conditions and strategies surrounding this phenomenon was the lack of a systematic process, at any of the institutions, to assess, record and communicate where students are academically, financially and developmentally or what the students higher education goals are across any of the organizations. There is a significant amount of effort and resources being applied toward strategies, individualized learning practices, to assist students in attaining their higher education goals without a deliberate systematic effort to determine what those goals are, where the students are academically, financially or developmentally and what strategies can actually bridge that divide.

The individualized learning practices that I first observed and benefited from as a student at these institutions have clearly expanded over the years and apparently continue to expand. I found that these practices affected most academic and nonacademic programs within each institution and varied in scope and complexity. The nature of the efforts and initiatives led me to conclude that the three higher education institutions in this study were attempting to move toward the learning paradigm espoused by Barr and Tagg (1995), in which the students and student learning become the focus of institutional

decisions rather than the institution and instruction. However, these institutions had not yet completely adopted this model.

The three institutions appeared to have significantly addressed the access issue, and even though one institution remained selective for a portion of its academic programs, all three had developed multiple access paths into their institutions for the diverse population of prospective students. The larger issue remained students' successful attainment of their higher education goals. Many of the individualized learning practices described by participants were directly related to addressing this issue; however, participants described situations that indicated many of the individualized learning practices that had been implemented or attempted suffered from the type of piecemeal approach Ewell (1997b) warned had cause numerous similar initiatives to fail.

Based on the participant descriptions, there often appeared to be a lack of acceptance from all stakeholders in the programs and sometimes even a lack of knowledge that an initiative was underway. Specific examples included resistance to cross-discipline degree programs, lack of knowledge among staff about online tutoring programs, lack of knowledge among staff concerning student orientation and developmental assistance programs, and lack of knowledge among staff of higher education reform initiatives like Maryland's course redesign and Carnegie Mellon's OLI program. Some of the lack of willingness to initiate change appeared to be the result of factions within the institutions protecting their turfs, and some appeared to be related to resource constraints; however, there also appeared to be a lack of institution-wide organizational focus. By this I mean a lack of focus on the overall goals of the institution versus a compartmentalized school-specific or program-specific focus.

There also did not appear to be a coordinated organizational synchronization of efforts within any of the three institutions. Participants described various individualized learning practices; however, I did not sense a coordinated effort. Ewell (1997b) suggested, “Change initiatives require a fundamental shift in perspective of both the organization and its members...and that change initiatives need to be thought about systematically” (Ewell, 1997b, “Organizational Structure and Culture” para. 2). The individualized learning practices that were described by participants during the interviews seemed to lack the level of systematic implementation that Ewell (1997b) described or the fundamental shift in perspective required from all members of the organizations.

Implications

The main implication of my research was that faculty and administrator at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College and Rowan University espouse a belief in the need to “meet students where they are” in order to implement practices that enable the students to attain their higher education goals but lack a systematic process to implement such practices in an informed, coordinated and deliberate manner. The lack of a systematic process seems to indicate a lack of student centered focus that researchers (Ewell, 1995; Barr & Tagg, 1997; Twigg, 2003; Arum & Roksa, 2011) have found is necessary to improve institutional practice and student success. Meeting students where they are appears to require the ability to understand where students are academically, financially and developmentally and what the student’s higher education goals are in order to bridge the divide between where they are and their higher education goals. Unfortunately while participants from all three institutions had engaged in sincere efforts that could shift the focus of the institutions from just providing a quality education to

assisting students in attaining their higher education goals, their efforts do not demonstrate a coordinated effort to determine where the students are academically, financially and developmentally, to determine what individual students higher education goals are or any coordinated effort to communicate the information they do know concerning these issues within the institutions. The lack of a systematic process to capture and communicate this information to faculty and administrators making decisions concerning how to improve student attainment of their higher education goals limits data informed decision making and seems to have resulted in piecemealed efforts. Current faculty and administrator efforts consume vast amounts of time, resources, and human capital and to date do not appear to be part of a coordinated systematic approach or reflect a fundamental shift in perspective by all members of the organizations.

The subtext of the aforementioned main implications was that current efforts, while helpful to a number of students, will probably not result in a significant acceleration of students attaining their higher education goals or a significant change in higher education practices at these three institutions because there is no scalable systematic process to enable the institutions to know where students are or meet the majority of students where they are. Until a scalable systematic process, that allows institutions to assess, record and communicate where individual students are academically, financially or developmentally and what their individual higher education goals are, is instituted efforts to significantly accelerate students attaining their higher education goals or significantly change higher education practices will be limited by resources, lack of data informed decisions and piecemealed efforts.

Any scalable solutions will likely involve a technological component and a further implication of this research was that although all of the institutions had implemented technology solutions to gain efficiencies and improve student learning, none of these three institutions met Twigg's (1999) standards for readiness to implement course redesign initiatives. It appeared each of the institutions generally lacked what Twigg (1999) called a learner-centered focus. Ewell (1997b) elaborated on this issue, advising that change requires a fundamental shift from treating knowledge and the mechanisms of delivering it as the institutional priority to an approach in which the learner and their needs are the main priority. Twigg (1999) and Ewell (1997a, 1997b) both suggested that until institutions truly shift focus to prioritize the learner, including adjusting structures, incentives, and resources, the piecemeal initiatives will not substantially improve student goal attainment, accelerate traditional higher education processes, or increase the production of college-educated citizens. Barr and Tagg's (1995) research on the learning paradigm versus the instructional paradigm supported this conclusion.

My research achieved its aim of discovering why and how faculty and administrators at Burlington County College, Thomas Edison State College, and Rowan University implemented individualized learning practices. The study also provided an understanding of the factors influencing the implementation of the individualized learning practices. I discovered the phenomenon of faculty and administrators feeling compelled to "meet student where they are" academically, financially, and developmentally to assist students in achieving their higher education goals. Finding this phenomenon was unexpected, but provided a clearer picture of why faculty and

administrators changed practices and were making exceptions at each institution. This study provides a new insight for higher education professionals and adds to the body of knowledge concerning higher education practices and the factors that influence faculty and administrator practice.

This study also indicated a number of areas that require additional research. The discovery of the practitioner belief in the need to meet students where they are coupled with the lack of a systematic process to determine where student are academically, financially and developmentally as well as what the student's higher education goals are indicates an area for future research. Laird, Chen and Kuh (2008) had a similar finding stating, "Meeting students where they are in terms of their academic preparation, developmental level and motivation and finding ways to help them succeed is a complex task to be sure, one deserving greater attention from researchers and practitioners" (p.96). The discovery of the lack of faculty and administrator knowledge about course redesign and other reform initiatives, coupled with the apparent treatment of professional development as an ancillary need, seem to be areas that could benefit from research. Additionally, research concerning the impact of current individualized learning practices on student goal achievement would be an excellent follow-up to this research. Finally, research concerning the factors that would be required to move these three institutions or any one of these institutions, to adopt the learning paradigm espoused by Barr and Tagg (1995) would be provide insight into why it has not already happened and if it could ever happen.

A significant policy and practice implication of this research project is that higher education institutions need to become student centered institutions. When this occurs the

need to develop a scalable systematic process to determine each student's higher education goals and where they are academically, financially and developmentally will become obvious. In practice the system for assessing, analyzing and communicating this information to faculty and administrators coupled with current and yet to be discovered individualized learning practices will provide the opportunity to increase student goal attainment across the diversifying student population and at an accelerated rate.

Finally, this research project has enhanced my knowledge about how higher education organizations operate, shown me what drives practices among faculty and administrators, and exposed me to some of the research behind higher education learning theories. I plan to use my knowledge to continue to improve the institutions I work with and to develop systems to disseminate the knowledge learned from this research to the higher education professionals in my institutions and among my peers.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

I agree to participate in a study entitled "A Grounded Theory of Individualized learning practices in New Jersey Higher Education," which is being conducted by Dennis Devery, an Education Leadership doctoral student at Rowan University.

The purpose of this study is to develop a theory grounded on data provided by faculty and administrators concerning how individualized learning practices are used in higher education today and how they could be used to improve higher education in the future. This study is a dissertation research project in fulfillment of Dennis Devery's Education Leadership doctoral program requirements. The research may be submitted for publication in a research journal.

I understand that I will be required to participate in an initial interview and possibly two follow up interviews. My participation in the study should not exceed one hour for each interview.

I understand that my responses will be kept confidential. I agree that any information obtained from this study may be used in any way thought best for publication or education provided that I am in no way identified and my name is not used.

I understand that there are no physical or psychological risks involved in this study, and that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time without penalty.

I understand that my participation does not imply employment with the state of New Jersey, Rowan University, the principal investigator, or any other project facilitator.

If I have any questions or problems concerning my participation in this study, I may contact Dennis Devery at dennis.devery@comcast.net or (856) 630-3124 or his faculty advisor, JoAnn Manning. JoAnn Manning can be reached at 856-256-4500x3653 or manning@rowan.edu.

If you have other concerns about this study and would like to contact someone not directly involved in the research study, please contact Associate Provost for Research, Shreekanth Mandayam, at 856-256-5333.

Participant Name (Please print)

I agree to be audio recorded:

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

By signing this form, the participant understands and acknowledges all of the terms listed above, and the participant had chances to ask questions about the study.

(Signature of Investigator/or person explaining the form)

(Date)

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Interview 1 Protocol

Directions: Start with informal introduction and then state, "I am going to turn on the tape recorder and start taking general notes. My notes help me understand and remember what we have discussed during this interview. As I stated in the Informed Consent document you can choose to stop the interview at any time. You can also ask me to turn off the audio recorder, stop taking notes or skip a particular question at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

General information (establishing knowledge of higher education and Individual Learning Practices)

- How long have you been employed in Higher Education?
- What do you think are the major challenges in Higher Education today?
- How do you think we can make higher education better?
 - Are any of the ideas you identified being implemented at your College?
- Do you and/or your College recognize and implement programs to meet the individual learning needs and paths of different students?
 - If yes, how does this occur?
 - If yes, is this scalable to the entire student body
- Are you familiar with any other actions, activities or procedures that recognize the individual learning needs and degree paths of students that could be used to assist students as they progress thorough the higher education system?

Course Level

- What practices do you or your institution use at the course level to improve student learning?
 - Are you familiar with any other practices that could be used to improve student learning?
- Are there any technological applications that you or your institution uses at the course level to improve student learning?
 - What are these applications and how were they introduced to your institution?
- How do you and/or your institution identify and assist individual students that are struggling with course material?

Program Level

- How are program and course curriculums developed at your College?
 - Are there other ways to develop program and course curriculums?
- Are you familiar with the concept of course or program scaffolding?
 - If so, is it required as part of curriculum development at your College?
 - If yes, why?
 - If yes, what impact does scaffolding have on students?
 - If yes, what impact does it have on transfer students?
 - If not, are their pre-requisites for some courses at your College?

- If yes, why?
- If yes, what impact does it have on transfer students?

Institutional Level

- What are the measures of success for your College?
 - Do these measures affect student learning and degree completion?
 - If yes, how?
- How could your institution reduce the time it takes a student to attain a degree?
- Does your College have multiple means to acquire course credit?
 - If yes, what are these methods
- Does your College allow students to develop their own program of study to attain a degree?
- Does your College encourage students to transfer into or out of your institution? Why?
- How many credits can a student transfer into your institution? Why ?

Philosophical

- Should your College or any College be concerned about how long it takes a student to attain a degree?
 - Why, or why not?
- Can and should Colleges individualize instruction and/or degree programs?
 - Why, or why not?
- Why do you think students drop out of College?
- Why do you think student drop out of your College?
- Many students transfer between schools, why do you think that occurs?
- How do transfer students typically perform at your College.

I don't have any other questions for you. Is there anything else you would like to share about our discussion today?

Note: Interview sessions two and three will involve the same participants as interview session one and I expect to follow the same general interviewing categories. Session two and three will be conducted, as required, to gain understanding of the categories and themes that emerge from answers provided in session one. Since the nature of grounded theory research is that information emerges from participant answers it is not possible to provide the specific questions for interview sessions two or three until interview session one has been completed.

Interview 2 Protocol

Directions:

Start with informal conversation and then state, "I am going to turn on the tape recorder and start taking general notes. As you may recall from our last interview, my notes help me understand and remember what we discussed during the interview. I also want to remind you that you can choose to stop the interview at any time. You can also ask me to turn off the audio recorder, stop taking notes or skip a particular question at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

General

- Have any questions or thoughts come up since our last interview?

- I want to follow up on a few ideas you told me in our last interview, to help me understand your answers.

I don't have any other questions for you. Is there anything else you would like to share about our discussion today?

Interview 3 Protocol

Directions:

Start with informal conversation and then state, "I am going to turn on the tape recorder and start taking general notes. As you may recall from our last interview, my notes help me understand and remember what we discussed during the interview. I also want to remind you that you can choose to stop the interview at any time. You can also ask me to turn off the audio recorder, stop taking notes or skip a particular question at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

General

- Have any questions or thoughts come up since our last interview?

- I want to follow up on a few ideas you told me in our last interview, to help me understand your answers.

I don't have any other questions for you. Is there anything else you would like to share about our discussion today?