DO THEY SEE US?

UNDERSTANDING HOW ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP IMPACTS

BLACK COLLEGE STUDENT OUTCOMES:

A MULTI-METHOD CASE STUDY


By

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Black college students everywhere. I see you.

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Abstract

**Background**: Black college students have long experienced wide racialized disparities in degree completion. The issue of Black college student degree attainment has implications for the present and the future of higher education—and the entire nation.11.6 million new jobs were developed from 2009 to 2016 and 99 percent of those jobs were afforded to persons with at least some college education. To prevent deficits of college-educated workers needed to sustain both the national economy and international competitive standing of the United States, we will have to address the wide racial gaps in completion across the nation. At the campus level, institutional leaders play a significant role in developing and implementing policy interventions that aim to increase college completion, making it important to examine organizational efforts and resulting approaches that proclaim to improve student outcomes. **Purpose**: The purpose of this research was to examine how one institution developed and implemented a campus-wide strategy to improve degree completion and understand how this strategy impacted Black student outcomes. Two central research questions guided this investigation: 1) What was involved in the institutional-level policy development processes of Urban University campus leaders as they set out to introduce a campus-wide completion strategy? And, to what extent did they specifically consider Black student completion during this process? 2) To what extent does participation in the policy intervention affect the likelihood of degree completion for Black students at the Urban University? **Methods**: A multimethod case study approach was used to examine the institution's policy process and organizational approach to implementing a completion-focused intervention and the impact of this 15 to Finish modeled initiative on Black student degree attainment at a

large, moderately selective, urban institution. Guided by theoretical notions of organizational theory, qualitative methods—specifically, semi-structured interview techniques—were used to explore the policy process surrounding the initiative. Interview data was collected from nine campus leaders, including senior-level administrators, faculty, and staff involved with the planning, implementation, or management of the program. A logistic regression analysis was used to examine the likelihood of degree completion for Black program participants. The quantitative sample was comprised the 4,048 students in the 2014-2015 cohort of full-time, first time in college (FTIC) students at Urban University. **Findings**: The findings of the study reveal several key themes associated with the institution's policy process, including the organization's generalized focus on completion, the resources required to advance a 15 to Finish model, and how the implementation of such models shift campus cultures. Additionally, the results of the logistic regression analysis suggest that while the program increased the likelihood of completion for students generally, it did not impact outcomes for Black students specifically. **Conclusion**: The findings of this research point toward a need for increased racial consideration in organizational leadership and institutional policy development. While Black students often benefit from policies that are not explicitly racialized, the findings from this analysis lend support to the notion that equitable completion outcomes require clear attention to race as a factor in implementing scalable strategies.

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**Chapter I**

**Introduction**

As a result of the anti-Black racism deeply engrained in the United States'

postsecondary education system, Black college students continue to experience wide

racialized disparities in degree completion (Allen, McLewis, Jones, & Harris, 2018).

According to a report from the National Student Clearinghouse, 46 percent of Black

students completed bachelor's degree programs at public four-year institutions, as

compared to 55.7 percent of Hispanic students, 75.8 percent of Asian students, and 77.1

percent of white students (2017). Despite efforts to draw attention to this issue, Black

student success outside of the Historically Black College or University (HBCU) setting

remains elusive.

Attempting to address student success in higher education broadly, higher

education practitioners, researchers, and policymakers have designed and implemented

practical solutions, often grounded in policy or legislative directives (DesJardins &

McCall, 2014; Perna, 2016; Stolle-McAllister, Domingo & Carrillo, 2011). While various

categories of stakeholders comprise the constituency of professionals working to improve

rates of completion, postsecondary leaders nationwide remain at the forefront of

organizational efforts to develop and implement completion-based policies.

Notwithstanding such efforts, many institutions continue to face challenges in scaling

their initiatives, particularly in ways that result in equity of student outcomes.

In recognizing that campus leaders play a significant role in deciding which

efforts are introduced to foster college completion, there must also be an

acknowledgement of the long history in higher education of arguably well-intentioned

policy interventions that have exacerbated instances of racial inequality (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). Ledesma, Parker, and Museus (2015) cite the Morrill Land Grant Acts, affirmative action, and the G.I. Bill among such policies. However, more contemporary institution-based policies enacted by campus leaders often escape the broad scrutiny undergone by high-level federal and state policies, demonstrating the need to develop a deeper understanding of the approaches and scaled initiatives that proclaim to improve student outcomes, in an effort to ensure that they do not produce further inequities.

**Black Student Access and Success in Higher Education**

Black Americans arguably have a more complicated relationship with postsecondary access and degree attainment than any other racial or ethnic group (Allen & Jewel, 2002; Allen et al., 2018; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009). In fact, the challenges associated with Black participation in higher education are rooted in the country's early beginnings when enslaved African persons served as the main labor force and contributed significantly to the economic foundations of the American colonies (Wilder, 2013). Despite their presence as unpaid laborers in colonial colleges, Black persons would be denied access to postsecondary institutions for years to come. As time passed and the infrastructure of the American higher education system developed further, few colleges admitted African-Americans. Moreover, serious considerations for access did not begin until the post-Civil war Reconstruction Era, and even these motions were challenged (Allen & Jewel, 2002; Harper et al., 2009). In the years following, assorted policy efforts such as the Morrill Land-Grant Acts, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), and the Higher Education Act of 1965 helped improve Black student access to higher

education (Harper et al., 2009). Notwithstanding these efforts, Black students continued to experience inequities in postsecondary institutions. Though progress was made in the post-Civil Rights era, scholars have brought to light the ways in which legal decisions (e.g. *Gratz v. Bollinger (2003), Grutter v. Bollinger (2003), and Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin (2013)*) and legislation (e.g. California's Proposition 209) have historically influenced, constrained, or, in some cases eliminated, racially conscious efforts to promote Black participation in higher education (Allen et al., 2005; Allen et al., 2018; Harper et al., 2009; Ledesma, Parker, & Museus, 2015). The impacts of these policies and practices have permeated the postsecondary landscape for many years, as Black college students continue to face adverse conditions such as disparities in resources and harsh racial climates (Allen et al., 2018). After vacillating between periods of growth and decline, access is currently trending downward as the U.S. Department of Education (2018) reported a decrease from 14.4 percent of total enrollments in higher education in 2012-2013 to 13.2 percent in 2016-2017.

Though the issue of access and enrollment deserves attention, many would argue that the true measure of success lies in the completion of a degree; and, as noted earlier in this paper's introduction, racial disparities exist in this area as well. Despite prior research demonstrating how Black students often aspire to attend college more so than their white peers (Schneider & Saw, 2016), this population remains underrepresented at most public state institutions across the nation (Nichols & Schak, 2019). In addition to being less likely to complete college than their other race peers, Black students are also more likely to leave institutions with higher amounts of student loan debt and no degree (Jackson & Reynolds, 2013), handicapping their employment prospects and their ability

to repay those loans. Analogous to these issues, Black students also remain underrepresented at more selective universities across the U.S. For example, Black student enrollment at public flagship institutions remains disproportionately low in comparison to the overall Black population in many states, particularly the ones with a history of challenging affirmative action (e.g. California and Texas) (Allen et al., 2018).

**The Role of Campus Leaders in Improving Completion Related Outcomes**

In their 2003 report, Swail, Redd, and Perna demonstrate the connection between college campus leadership and completion related outcomes such as retention, persistence, and degree attainment. These researchers describe campus leadership as the "key ingredient" needed to implement student retention and success programs. According to Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003), executive leaders—specifically—are responsible for uniting the campus toward broader retention goals and monitoring graduation rates. Moreover, the attitudes of leaders toward matriculation issues impact the general campus response to student success, posing explicit considerations for engagement from college presidents.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the degree completion crisis is largely a racialized issue with specific racial and ethnic populations, such as Black students, lacking representation or inclusion in terms of equity of outcomes. In acknowledging that campus leaders remain on the frontlines of completion related policy efforts and maintain a significant influence on the outcomes associated with degree attainment, it is also essential to recognize the role they play in addressing racial disparities in this area. Despite the increased discourse on racial equity in completion, some institutions continue to rely on initiatives that lack a specific focus on race, leaving room for consideration of

how colorblind racism impacts the decision-making processes around student success efforts.

**Colorblindness in higher education leadership.** As noted above, racial advancements in postsecondary access and success have been curbed though legal decisions and legislative mandates. Additionally, higher education often mirrors society's racialized hierarchies and ideologies (Allen et al., 2018; Solórzano & Villalpondo, 1998), as several scholars have postulated how the U.S. postsecondary education system both liberates and maintains hegemonic forms of oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Patton, 2016). As a result, campus leaders have been forced to negotiate how to move institutions forward regarding racial diversity amid legal, political, and ideological barriers. In Texas, for example, the legal aftermath *Hopwood v. Texas* required institutions across the state to discontinue the use of race in decision-making and evaluative processes. However, several years later the outcomes of the *Grutter* and *Fisher* cases reversed the *Hopwood* ruling.

In addition to these external forces, institutional administrators must also work within the internal culture of the field of postsecondary education, as well as their specific organization. According to Allen et al. (2018), "higher education is deeply implicated in perpetuating white supremacy. Although colleges and universities have the expertise, power, and resources to eliminate racial inequities, they have lacked the *will* and commitment to implement enduring systematic change" (p. 43). Notwithstanding the legislative restraints and guides, postsecondary institutions have maintained racial power structures by employing—whether intentionally or unintentionally—the racial construct of colorblindness (Diggles, 2014). While the issues at the nexus of racial ideology and

higher education policy have largely been framed around admissions and enrollment, it is worth considering how race consciousness v. colorblindness— or 'race neutrality'—play out across all institutional contexts. In the case of this study, completion related policy development is a focal point.

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva poses colorblindness as the prevalent racial ideology of the post-civil rights generation; and, postsecondary education is not exempt from this consideration. Colorblind racism evolved in the wake of the shame and potential implications that were borne of the changes to popular rhetoric and federal legislation resulting from the Civil Rights Movement (Diggles, 2014). As *de jure* segregation and the acceptance of overt racism faded in society, higher education transitioned from a mostly white, mostly male space to gradually enrolling more African Americans and students of color (Anderson, 2002). As a result of continued student activism, the aforementioned shifts in enrollment were often followed by periods of racially conscious programmatic development, as many institutions implemented initiatives that sought to support campus racial diversity (Anderson, 2002). However, as notions of pluralism, multiculturalism, and racial diversity expanded in practice, conflicts over the use of race in policies and statutes remained (Anderson, 2002). Reflecting on this time period, it becomes evident that efforts to comply with anti-discrimination mandates did not likely include an actual commitment to anti-racism. Institutions instead relied mostly on the adoption of blanket nondiscriminatory policies and statutes to create the appearance of fairness, while never actually levying the power structures that made inequality possible (Ray & Purifoy, 2019). This remains true to this day as Diggles (2014) states the following:

color-blind attitudes, even as they exist in the most well-intentioned of

people, ignore the fact that (1) certain laws and policies continue to imply

white superiority over racial minorities, (2) privileges are afforded to

people belonging to the white race that inherently place racial minorities at

certain disadvantages, and (3) general race-based discrimination continues

to pervade the daily lives of racial minorities (Neville et al., 2000). (p. 32-

33)

Postsecondary education in the United States is undoubtedly racialized, as equity

scholars contend that "colleges and universities should engage more directly with the

relationship between race and place in their institutional histories and in their current

priorities" (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015, p. xxv). However, many campus leaders,

researchers, and policy makers choose to evoke racial-neutral or colorblind approaches to

solving some of higher education's most salient issues, including the degree completion

imperative (Diggles, 2014).

**Addressing Inequities in Degree Completion through Policy and Programming**

At the federal, state, and local levels, there is a long history of developing policy

and programmatic interventions that seek to reduce inequities in postsecondary

educational outcomes. Among the first was the federal TRiO Educational Opportunity

Program which aims to improve enrollment and completion of underrepresented students

seeking to move to and through college by offering college prep (Perna, 2015).

Authorized under the Higher Education Act, TRiO works to achieve these goals through

a wide assortment of programs such as Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and

their Educational Opportunities Centers (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). While the

TRiO initiative has been lauded for its contributions to advancing educational attainment, higher education researchers have also acknowledged how these programs lack the capability to produce more far-reaching and scalable shifts needed to truly address inequities in degree completion.

More recently, the number of college promise programs has risen dramatically. The major aim of these programs is usually to reduce the cost of college tuition and remove financial barriers in completion (Perna & Leigh, 2018). These programs have been introduced via federal, state, and local policy and encompass a broad spectrum of designs and structures (Perna & Leigh, 2018). Examples of promise programs include the Tennessee Promise and Indiana's Twenty-First Century Scholars program (which combines the college promise approach with the 15 to Finish model). Research from Perna and Leigh (2018) suggests differences in outcomes from programs that assume the promise label that are based on the nature of sponsorship (state v. non-state), eligibility criteria, and financial award structure. Scholars have also critiqued how some of these programs provide undue benefits to upper-middle class students (Jones & Berger, 2019), leaving much uncertainty around the appropriateness and scalability of college promise efforts and their ability to level the playing field with regard to college completion.

In additional to these popular federal and state initiatives, organizations such as the Lumina Foundation, the Gates Foundation, and Complete College America (CCA) have made it a priority to address the completion imperative and improve outcomes across various student populations (Gandara, Ripner, & Ness, 2017). CCA, specifically, has gained traction with their 15 to Finish approach which aims to "boost the number of students who are on time to graduation by encouraging enrollment in 15 credits each

semester" (Complete College America, n.d.). Despite the paucity of empirical evidence surrounding this approach, many two-year and four-year institutions across the country have employed the 15 to Finish concept as a strategic initiative to address the degree completion imperative within their college, university, or state system.

**15 to Finish model.** Based on the University of Hawaii's 15 to Finish completion initiative, Complete College America adopted this version of a Guided Pathways model in 2012. 15 to Finish soon became one of the CCA's signature completion-based approaches under the organization's umbrella of strategies known as "Game Changers" (CompleteCollege.org). As acceptance of the model grew, campus leaders across the nation—at times under the mandate of policymakers (e.g., Indiana)—developed and implemented a variety of programs modeled after the 15 to Finish initiative (Chan, 2019). While this pragmatic approach to guiding students toward completion continues to grow in popularity, it is increasingly important to expand the empirical knowledge base supporting this model. Though scholars, researchers, and other stakeholders have examined outcomes relating to this type of programmatic intervention, little is known of the effectiveness of this model, particularly around its effects on underrepresented populations.

Gandara et al. (2017) examined Complete College America's role as an intermediary in the state policy diffusion process. These researchers identified a number of emergent themes regarding CCA's positioning within and impact upon the state-level policymaking process, including evidence of their role as gatekeepers of empirical research that impacts policy learning and the organization's function as an agenda-setter seeking to elevate the completion imperative as a policy agenda item. Also, among the

relevant findings from this case study is the unique partnership between CCA and Texas. While Complete College America engages broadly, and with multiple states, in policy activities that center on the issue of college completion, the organization employed a unique "regional strategy" in Texas by joining forces with a specific university system (p. 712). The relationship established between CCA and the university system requires the embrace of CCA's Game Changer strategies. While the policy emphasis of Gandara et al.'s (2017) study is performance-based funding, this work illuminates how states, intermediaries, and institutions attempt to address and improve college completion outcomes and identifies several ways that CCA influences institutional policy.

**The Statewide Completion Imperative in Texas**

Texas, like many other states, sees much disproportionality in terms of the state's racial and ethnic demographics and its percentages of Black bachelor's degree earners (Nichols & Schak, 2019). In 2017, Black Texans comprised approximately 12 percent of the state's total population, yet they earned only 9.8 percent of the total bachelor's degrees awarded at four-year public institutions (U.S. Census Bureau).

In 2000, the state's governing authority on postsecondary education, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), put forward the Closing the Gaps by 2015 plan which sought to improve postsecondary participation rates and success while also increasing research productivity (Texas Higher Education Data, 2018). In 2015, the 60X30TX plan was introduced as the next guiding effort to help the state reach the goal of having 60 percent of its residents between the ages of 24-36 complete a degree by the year 2030 (60X30TX.com)—aligning with the national postsecondary attainment benchmarks set by former President Barack Obama in 2013. While the institutions within

the state are not legislatively mandated to follow the plan, they are charged by their governing body with helping to advance the specific goals set forth within it.

Acknowledging the educational inequities experienced by Black Texans, both Closing the Gaps by 2015 and the 60X30TX plan maintained explicitly racialized state-wide goals aimed, in part, at improving outcomes in student completion (60X30TX.com; THECB, 2000 & 2015). While this is noteworthy and important from a racial equity perspective, it is also essential to have a plan for the enactment (or implementation) of strategies proven to reduce racialized disparities (Jones & Berger, 2019). Notably, the strategies offered via THECB remain largely race-neutral in their approach (THECB, 2019), leaving Texas public institutions to their own devices when it comes to addressing the racial degree attainment gap. Further, there is no actual policy or mandate that requires institutions to develop programs or strategies that meet specific standards. While THECB does provide tools to collaboratively develop strategies, the organization posits that each of the ten regions possess unique needs and leaves room for stakeholders within the region to design and implement efforts to meet the targeted goals of the plan (60X30TX.com). Despite the sound logic behind this approach, the freedom and flexibility allotted to the regions makes it imperative to develop a deep understanding of the development and implementation of the approaches intended to meet targets and improve student outcomes, further demonstrating the importance of conducting institutional-level research.

**Urban University's 4Years2Finish program.** Colleges and universities across Texas contend with the issue of completion—particularly for underrepresented students—and have implemented various interventions to address the student success

imperative. One such institution, the Urban University (UU) (*pseudonym*), developed the 4Years2Finish program (*pseudonym*), which has been recognized as a Texas Star Award winner for its contributions toward achieving one or more of the goals of Texas' strategic plan for higher education. Following the 15 to Finish model, the program requires students to opt in and comply with a comprehensive degree plan specifically designed to aid participants in their quest to earn a degree in four years. In addition to the predetermined Four-Year Graduation Plan, 4Years2Finish students also have access to a fixed-rate tuition plan which provides an opportunity to lock in the cost of their education throughout the duration of the program (UU Office of the Provost, n.d).

This program serves as a clear example of the application of the 15 to Finish model in a real-life setting among a variety of contextual factors. Among these factors are Texas' history of grappling with racial issues in access in four-year public institutions along with the state's higher education plan. Also, the institution itself has a history of exclusionary practice resulting from its early roots as a private historically white institution which until 1962, had denied admission to Black students (UU Integration Records). Further, withstanding a recent increase in their African American four-year graduation rate in 2018, UU has historically maintained lower rates of degree attainment for Black enrollees (UU Institutional Research). The unique combination of the Texas policy landscape and the contextual factors within UU's institutional structure makes this university prime for a single case study examination.

**Purpose of the Study**

This dissertation uses a multi-method case study approach to examine the policy process and impact of the 4Years2Finish program at the Urban University. The purpose

of this study is two-fold: first, to show how one institution developed and implemented a campus-wide completion strategy that has both contributed to an increased graduation rates and been acknowledged for its impact on state-wide degree completion goals. Second, this study seeks to better understand how this strategy impacts Black student completion at this particular institution.

Drawing on Ray and Purifoy's (2018) colorblind organization framework and Kezar's (2014) Change Macro Framework, this study evaluates the decision-making processes of institutional leaders, as well as the likelihood of a chosen intervention to improve completion rates among Black students at the institution. This study follows one campus site through a basic policy process cycle, including: 1) problem identification; 2) selection of policy options; 3) policy adoption; 4) policy implementation; and 5) policy evaluation (Benson & Jordan, 2015), while purposely considering Black student consciousness within the organizational context. With regard to Black student degree attainment, it is worthwhile to consider how the institutions with the power to change the postsecondary education system use their influence to move the needle forward in this area. Inquiry in this space is critical, as public colleges and universities are the main mechanisms through which the Black student completion imperative will be remedied and little is published on institutional-level practices or the effectiveness of interventions, particularly those modeled as 15 to Finish programs.

**Research Questions**

This work relies on a multi-method case study approach to develop further understanding of organizational processes that aim to improve student outcomes. Set against the backdrop of Texas' higher education policy context, the qualitative portion of

this study explores institutional policy-making among campus leaders involved in the planning, development, and execution of the 4Years2Finish initiative. The quantitative portion of the study relies on student-level administrative data and logistic regression analysis to study the likelihood of Black student degree completion for 4Years2Finish program participants. More specifically, this dissertation explores the following research questions:

1) What was involved in the institutional-level policy development processes of Urban University campus leaders as they set out to introduce a campus-wide completion strategy? And, to what extent did they specifically consider Black student completion during this process?

2) To what extent does participation in the programmatic intervention (4Years2Finish) affect the likelihood of degree completion for Black students at the Urban University?

**Significance of the Study**

The issue of Black college student degree attainment has implications for the present and the future of higher education—and the entire nation. According to Carnevale, Jayasundera, and Gulish (2016), 11.6 million new jobs were developed from 2009 to 2016 and 99 percent of those jobs were afforded to persons with at least some college education. To prevent deficits of college-educated workers needed to sustain both the national economy and international competitive standing of the United States, our nation will have to address the wide racial gaps in degree attainment across the nation (Perna & Finney, 2014; Nichols & Schak, 2018). Along with these social and economic goals, Museus, Ledesma, and Parker (2015) remind us that addressing racial disparities in

education is a worthy cause on its own and that is does not require justification beyond the moral imperative implicated in this justice issue.

As states contend with closing racial degree attainment gaps, additional research is needed to determine how institution-level student success strategies contribute to improving outcomes in this area. This dissertation study aims to enhance knowledge of how a widely adopted approach impacts degree completion for Black college students—who often experience the greatest disparities in this area.

Despite the long history of researchers investigating issues related to degree completion generally (e.g., Adelman, 1999; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; Zwick & Skylar, 2005) and Black student completion specifically (Allen, 1985; Allen, 1992; Allen et al., 2018), a lack of published empirical findings remains regarding the processes by which college campus leaders undergo when developing or adopting interventions to address the completion crisis. Additionally, even less is published about contemporary programs and strategies that aim to improve outcomes and what impact these mechanisms have on degree completion among Black college students who broadly experience greater disparities with regard to higher education access and success (Espinosa et al., 2019).  The findings from this study will provide evidence of both the process and outcomes related to a specific, widely-used intervention. This knowledge will be beneficial to practitioners and policymakers alike as they seek to advance efforts that are effective in increasing educational attainment.

**Researcher Positionality**

With more than ten years of practical and administrative experience in various Texas university settings, I approach this research with specific knowledge and

involvement in the state's postsecondary system. Fully acknowledging that it will take a focus on equitable change for Black and Hispanic students, rural and urban students, and lower-income students (Perna & Finney, 2014) to make true progress, I chose to focus on Black student completion, because, for several years now, Black Americans have often been cited, along with Hispanics, as the lowest percentage of four-year degree earners in the United States (National Student Clearinghouse, 2017). It is my belief that if you are going to fix the system, you should start by addressing the most vulnerable populations within said system. Additionally, there is something to be said for an inquiry which seeks to explore organizational decision-making among management in organizations, as the act in itself can be viewed as political (Pfeffer as cited in Hatch, 1997, p. 292).

**Inquiry Worldview**. While many paradigms exist under the umbrella of inquiry, this research is being conducted under transformative worldview which posits that research inquiry should be political in nature, be change-oriented and aimed at confronting social oppression across all levels (Creswell et al., 2007). Moreover, a transformative paradigm emphasizes the importance of studying the lives of those marginalized by oppressive systems and structures, including the ways they persist and engage in resistance (Creswell et al., 2007). Because the structure of postsecondary education is inherently oppressive (Mustaffa, 2017; Tisdell, 1993), the transformative research paradigm offers a rationale for inquiry that centers Black students as a minoritized population in higher education.

**Organization of this Dissertation**

This dissertation is comprised of five chapters. The first provides background on the research topic, explains the policy and practice issues related to the study, details the

purpose and significance of the current research, and provides insight into the researcher's positionality. The second chapter includes a review of relevant literature, beginning with the conceptual framework, which is followed by an overview of research on postsecondary completion, and finishes with more in-depth exploration of the 15 to Finish model. The third chapter describes the study's methodology and includes the overall research design, case selection, and methods of analyses. The results of this multi-method case study are shared in chapter four, and concludes with a discussion and conclusion in chapter five.

**Chapter II**

**Conceptual Framework and Review of Literature**

The foundations of this research are broadly organized around three major concepts: 1) postsecondary institutions as organizations; 2) campus leaders as change agents through their leadership efforts; and, 3) Black student degree completion. With this in mind, the current chapter begins with the study's conceptual framework which encompasses multiple theoretical and conceptual paradigms. Because research question one seeks to understand the process by which an institution—represented by its campus leaders—sets out to improve student success outcomes within a specific state and institutional policy context, it is necessary to use organizational and leadership theories to explore the decision-making, interpretations, and considerations undertaken by the study participants. Based on this, *The Colorblind Organization* (Ray & Purifoy, 2018) serves as a central component of this framework. After the initial proposal, Kezar's (2014) Change Macro Framework was added to supplement the analytical capabilities of the study's framework and more appropriately capture the complexities of the processes explored within the case study. The Leadership/Agency concept in the Macro Change Framework replaced Racially Responsive Leadership (RRL) (Harper, 2017) as the central leadership theory that supports the study. RRL, detailed below, is used later in chapter five to pose recommendations for leadership practice.

In support of research question two, the study's conceptual framework concludes with a synthesis of literature on bachelor's degree completion which, in addition to providing an overview of research on this topic, will guide the statistical modeling efforts in stage two of this research. Ultimately, the conceptual notions will permit exploration

of change and leadership within an organization that emanates colorblind ideologies and facilitates an examination of how this impacts Black student completion outcomes.

Following the conceptual framework, the remainder of this review covers the additional literature and contextual information associated with the case study. This includes an overview of the Texas higher education policy context, as well as a summary of Complete College America's Alliance efforts with existing research on CCA's 15 to Finish model of degree completion. Finally, chapter two concludes with a summary and synthesis that aims to integrate the theoretical concepts, literature, and context supporting this dissertation.

**The Change Macro Framework**

Comprised of suppositions from multiple theoretical lenses, Kezar (2014) developed the Change Macro Framework based on studies that show how colleges and universities find success in enacting change. Encompassing four main components—type of change, context for change, agency/leadership, and approach to change—this framework captures the complex nature of change and the many concepts leaders must consider as they guide organizational processes. Pertinent to this study are two components: leadership and agency of change and the context of change. For the purposes of this study, two tenets of the Change Macro Framework (Leadership and Agency of Change and the Context of Change) provide an alternate lens through which the efforts of organizational actors can be examined.

**Leadership and Agency of Change.** Kezar (2014) highlights how leaders can enact change within challenging contexts. With this in mind, the Agency/Leadership component of the Change Macro Framework draws upon scientific management and

political theories to conceptualize a variety of leadership approaches visible within higher education settings. The scholar notes how leaders fare better when working in concert with other institutional stakeholders. Based on this ideal, shared leadership methods—particularly top-down and bottom-up approaches—are constructed within the Agency/Leadership category.

Top-down leadership focuses on those with the ability to make change while situated in positions of power. The agency of such leaders relies on their ability to attached rewards and resources as mechanisms to enact change. More specifically, those in positions of power are able to make mandates that support their vision, use planning mechanisms that allow for delegation of roles and responsibilities, and restructure organizations (i.e. create new centers or positions) as needed.

Bottom-up or grassroots leadership tactics involve "coalition building, agenda setting, and negotiation of interests" (Kezar, 2014, p. 139). These approaches leverage a variety of strategies such as professional development, student learning, and existing networks to facilitate change (Kezar, 2014, p. 139). Moreover, these methods reinforce the academic focus of  institutions and refocus attention to the values of student learning.

Collective leadership, which focuses on the interconnectedness of people within the change process, is also included in the model. This differs from shared leadership in that it is leadership conducted by multiple people and relies on their collective ability to make decisions, and solve problems to ignite organizational change. This approach also exceeds other models due to the additional support network garnered by working across different groups. Further, relationship skills are required to facilitate change in this fashion. The framework details how leaders engaging in this form of leadership need

strong interpersonal skills ranging from emotional competence to conflict resolution (Kezar, 2014, p. 146). Ultimately, collective leadership can generate shared understanding of the objectives the organization seeks to achieve through the change process.

   **Context for Change.** For change to be successful, context matters. Kezar (2014) purports that "successful leaders need to understand the various context that shape initiatives, whether historical, external, or organizational" (p. 109). This component of the Change Macro Framework draws on several broad theories including evolutionary, institutional, and cultural paradigms. Kezar describes how the evolution of organizations requires contextual factors to be accounted for to maximize the potential for success. This remains true for higher education as institutions have evolved in many ways. Of note in this dissertation study, are the racial and gender demographic shifts that have occurred within colleges and universities over the course of the last 60 years or so. As illustrated in Figure 1, the factors included in this component of the framework are: 1) social, political, and economic factors; 2) external stakeholders; 3) higher education as an institution; and 4) institutional culture.
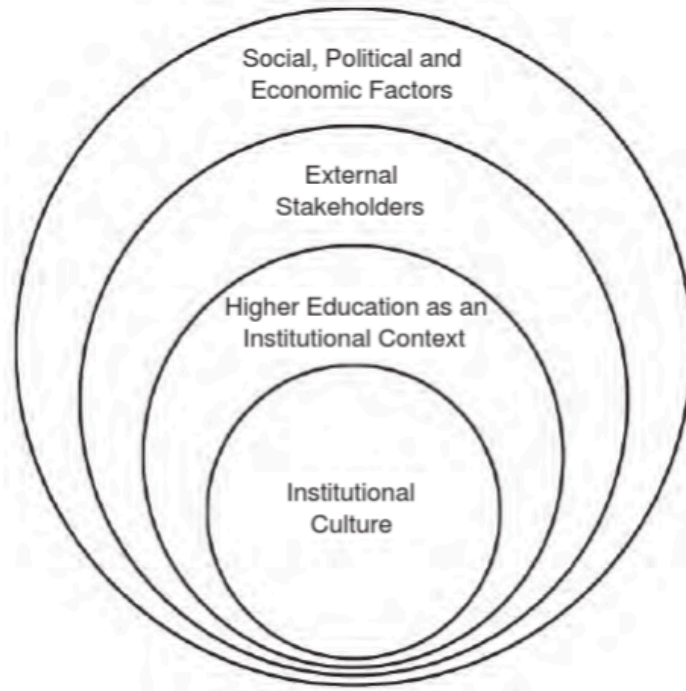
*Figure 1.* Context of Change

Source: Kezar (2014)

*Social, political, and economic factors* are at the most outer level, framing the organizational context. The framework suggests that organizational actors should consider these influences as they set out to develop change initiatives. Among the examples from this segment are federal and state legislation, public opinion, and economic trends.

The next level down highlights the impact of *external stakeholders* on institutional settings. Kezar (2014) describes how an "organizational field" made of external influencers such as "professional organizations, private foundations, and accreditation agencies" are a feature of the higher education landscape (p.113). While they may only be peripherally related, they facilitate operational processes by providing guidance, oversight, financial contributions, and many additional features that cause leaders to experience pressure from these external forces.

The external stakeholders category is followed by *higher education as an institutional context*. This framework posits that the postsecondary sector maintains a specific institutional context with its own values and principles. Focusing on higher education as a social institution, Kezar posits that the shared governance structure long present with the field requires a unique change process to occur. Noting how this institutional context remains in transition, the scholar details how professional bureaucracy, governing boards, and the dual power and authority structure, among other factors are key features to be consider as campus leaders enact change initiatives.

Finally, *institutional culture* signals the very specific cultural aspects present within each organization. Like most organizational cultures, history, values, attitudes, and beliefs often undergird the institutional setting. History is emphasized within this component as a salient feature of any effort to make change. Also noted is the notion that organizational actors are more likely to find success with their initiative when they consider the institutional culture in their planning and operations.

These conceptualizations of leadership couched within contemplations on the nature of change support this study's effort to explore organizational leaders engaged in a policy process that seeks to transform their institutional outcomes related to graduation. The elements of the Change Macro Framework add to the foundations supporting this case study, providing theoretical support for the analysis of the leader's actions and environmental outcomes associated with the policy process examined through this research. Finally, the addition of a change focused framework aligns with the transformative worldview of this inquiry described in chapter one.

**The Colorblind Organization**

By employing the theoretical notions of colorblindness in organizations, this dissertation explores the degree to which campus leaders, as representatives of their organizations, embrace policies, practices, and procedures that explicitly acknowledge and aim to close racial equity gaps in the context of their university setting. Incorporating this theoretical lens also permits exploration of whether the outcomes associated with their policy decisions aided in reducing or exacerbating racial inequalities in degree completion rates. Using tenets from Bonilla-Silva's (2007) theory of colorblind racism, Ray and Purifoy (2019) posit four ways in which colorblindness operates as an organizational phenomenon:

The first tenet, *abstract liberalism,* extends notions of classic liberalism and permits those who subscribe to this ideology to advance theoretical perceptions of equality while defying actual action in the form of procedural and policy changes that aim to reduce inequality (Ray & Purifoy, 2019). These performative efforts often rely on concepts such as merit to generate a façade of equality. Another example is seen in the way many higher education institutions purport—via their missions and mechanisms—that a major aim of their organization is to support the educational needs of diverse populations of students while maintaining neutral stances in their effort to address a wide spectrum of issues.

The second tenet, *cultural racism,* acknowledges the marginalization of cultural groups and practices that depart from white norms. Through this principle, Ray and Purifoy (2019) purport that "nonwhite organizational actors must perform identities at work that simultaneously counter negative stereotypes, amplify positive stereotypes, and mimic a white prototypical Identity" (p. 142). Additionally, the scholars theorize how the

standards of identity deemed acceptable within organizational settings are usually

grounded in whiteness and are operationalized through concepts such as teamwork,

loyalty, and collegiality. In higher education settings, this notion potentially relates to the

enactment of white-based environmental norms by nonwhite campus leaders, particularly

in executive leadership spaces where a strong majority of the organizational actors tend

to be white. As stated by Roy and Purifoy (2019), "to perform otherwise constitutes a

'prototype threat,' undermining the social status quo in ways that result in the loss of

white control" (p.142). In this study, this tenet creates an opportunity to explore the racial

composition of the campus policymakers *and* how individuals perform certain identities

while carrying out organizational duties.

Third*, the minimization of racism,* is germane to colorblind ideology and creates a

way to refute the presence or enactment of discrimination, which in turn bolsters racial

hierarchy. Diggles (2014) argues that "those with color-blind attitudes are less likely to

take action against modern-day systemic oppression of racial minorities because they do

not acknowledge or cannot recognize that it even exists, thereby supporting pro-racist

ideologies by tolerating the status quo (Frankenberg, 1993)" (p. 33). Furthermore, the

minimization of racism fails to recognize how histories of oppression impact

contemporary institutional settings and maintain racial injustice.  Diggles (2014) also

notes how this denial often precludes policymakers and stakeholders from addressing

racial inequities at the source, instead allowing space to blame social conditions on

individuals. Affirmative action policies serve as an example of this in higher education,

as legal strategists have historically downplayed the ways in which these policies work to

combat systemic racism as a way to the endure scrutiny (Ledesma, Parker, & Museus,

2015). With regard to the proposed study, this tenet supports the investigation of how campus leaders either acknowledge or minimize the role of racism in developing campus-wide students success interventions.

Tenet four, *naturalization,* "sees racial inequality as a result of nonracial forces" (Ray & Purifoy, 2019, p. 145). Ray and Purifoy (2019) espouse how this notion is connected to the tendency to assign propensities toward certain types of labor on "biological traits" instead of "social dominance" (p.145). This organizational phenomenon is illustrated in the works of Hawkins (2013) and McCormick and McCormick (2010) which shows how in many university settings, the uncompensated labor of Black athletes is often managed by white coaches. Despite the implications of this hierarchal relationship, this is often viewed as the norm, instead of the residual effects of a systemic oppression that upholds whiteness as a dominant feature in athletic department leadership. Essentially, this tenet is useful in demonstrating how the racial hierarchy is accepted to the natural order of things. In other words, "whites are presumed to simply belong in positions of organizational power, regardless of their relationship to the organization itself" (p.145). As evidenced by the example above, this potentially plays out in postsecondary settings in a variety of ways, including efforts to address inequities. For example, Ray and Purifoy (2019) note how diversity and inclusion measures rarely work to actually eradicate identity-based hierarchies. With regard to this study, it is important to explore how notions of naturalization permeate efforts to address the completion imperative. If organizational actors involved in the development of programmatic initiatives fail to disrupt the racial hierarchy of college completion, then Black students are likely to remain in the bottom percentage of degree earners.

In their work, Ray and Purifoy (2019) demonstrate how organizational theory largely ignores race as a feature or organizing principle. Thus, the colorblind organization component of this conceptual framework will facilitate the study's research design and analysis by generating a theoretical understanding of policy related completion efforts by joining a racial lens with an organizational theory. Decision-making, including what Hatch (2018) would identify as 'top managers' within university setting, is multilayered and complex with a variety of influences and a multitude of considerations with regard to outcomes. For example, in southern states such as Texas, large, public research universities like UU maintain very specific contextual factors that affect decision-making and the implementation of broader campus policies and programming efforts. One such factor is the political climate across the state, as Texas is a largely a conservative state with a majority of Republican legislators who are less likely to promote race specific initiatives (Perna & Finney, 2014). Given these and other contextual factors present in policymaking and program implementation, the colorblind organization facilitates understanding of how race functions in organizations within the higher education policy pipeline.

In this research, the tenets presented above create a mechanism for analysis of the institutional efforts to facilitate change in degree completion rates led by campus leaders within the context of an organization that has enacted many of the manners associated with colorblindness. Functionally, this concept will guide the development of interview protocol and the qualitative stage of the analysis. Given what is publicly known of the 4Years2Finish program, a major proposition of this case study (Yin, 2018) is that the organization's approach was steeped in colorblindness. Using the Change Macro

Framework and the Colorblind Organization as part of the conceptual guide facilitates an exploration of the degree to which UU campus leaders considered the needs of Black students in the development of their programmatic intervention.

**Racially Responsive Leadership**

In addition to the function of colorblindness in organizations, also integral to this study is an understanding of campus leaders' capacity and competency in addressing racial campus issues, specifically equity with regard to degree completion. Museus, Ledesma, and Parker (2015) purport that campus leaders need a strong understanding of the ways in which racism functions within policy processes if ever to address racialized inequities in the education system. Based on this concept, the current study relies on Harper's (2017) framework of Racially Responsive Leadership (RRL) as a component of the overall lens through which the development and implementation of 4Years2Finish is explored. Harper (2017) defines a racially responsive leader as an organizational actor who: 1) makes race a salient feature of practice and policy; 2) authentically, strategically, and courageously confronts race problems versus enacting more convenient, temporary, or symbolic resolutions; 3) includes a layered approach to accountability that is inclusive of whites and all racial and ethnic groups; and 4) works with intention to acknowledge, understand, and redresses historical, personal, cultural, structural racism (pp.188-119).

Harper (2017) developed this concept as a result of their work on racial campus climate with perspectives from various institutional actors who served as research participants. These participants, comprised mostly of persons from minoritized backgrounds, gave voice to "what they want leaders to be and what they hope leaders will do" to respond to racialized issues (p. 118).

**Bachelors Degree Completion**

Postsecondary researchers have a long history of examining the racialized differences and influences on bachelors degree completion (Pascarella, 1985). Many scholars have explored these phenomena through research studies that aim to capture the elements of the completion imperative specifically for Black students. This component of the conceptual framework focuses on factors that impact degree completion broadly and research on Black student completion specifically, to provide necessary context and considerations for the overall framing, protocol development, and statistical modeling associated with this study.

**Student Demographic Characteristics**

Several studies have demonstrated the relevance of students' demographic characteristics to predicting degree attainment. Specific considerations in this area include race (Ciocca & DiPrete, 2018; Flores, Park, & Baker, 2017), gender (DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003), and age (DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002). The wide body of research in this area is mixed, however, due to the longstanding gaps in completion among specific demographic populations, these characteristics are often examined in completion focused studies.

**Race and ethnicity.** In their study examining the Black-White completion gap, Ciocca and DiPrete (2018) note that Black students continue to have lower rates of bachelor's degree completion than their white counterparts. In their attempt to identify the main sources of this gap, they found evidence of a variety of racialized factors that contribute to the completion gap between Black and white students, their work adds to prior research from many scholars (Flores & Park, 2013; Flores, Park, & Baker, 2017)

who consider race among other predictors of degree attainment. While racial/ethnic background is widely considered a predictor of completion, Flores and Park's (2013) research found minimal effects for race when examining the six-year graduation rates of students enrolled in Texas minority serving institutions (MSIs), providing additional support for further research in this area.

**Age.** Age is also a consideration for student outcomes-based studies. In their study of factors related to degree completion, DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2002) pose considerations for including age as a variable. The researchers offer that "students who are older at matriculation have higher opportunity costs and shorter time horizons over which to recoup their educational investment" (p. 557). They posit that the life circumstances and responsibilities of older students make them more likely to stop out and/or leave, making them less likely to graduate. In his seminal research in Black student completion, Allen (1985) also found that older students fared better academically.

**Gender.** With regard to gender, more research is needed to understand the role this variable plays as a potential predictor variable for exploring degree completion. This is an important consideration for Black colleges students as Black undergraduate women maintain higher graduation rates than Black undergraduate men (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Moreover, Black males are often identified as one of the most vulnerable groups in postsecondary education, with several researchers citing issues of Black male achievement as its own urgent matter outside of the general Black student completion crisis (Harper, 2015; Harper, 2012; Palmer & Gasman, 2008; Palmer & Maramba, 2010).

Research spanning the general student population is mixed with regard to gender. For instance, Thompson, Gorin, Obeidat, and Chen (2006) found that gender was the strongest indicator of postsecondary degree attainment. And, Buchmann and DiPrete (2006) and DiPrete and Buchmann (2013) cite the prevalence of gender gaps and gender specific outcomes that positively lean toward women across higher education. Further, in one of the few studies that explicitly focuses on gender disparities in bachelors degree attainment, Buchmann and DiPrete (2006) show the role of gender in both student experiences, and other behaviors that do impact persistence. However, DesJardins, Kim, and Rzonca (2003) found that female identifying students maintained a higher probability of dropping out. Despite the paucity of published inquiry centered specifically on this topic, there is evidence to support gender as a significant background factor in predicting degree completion (Lundy, 2010).

In the current study, research showing the relationships between student characteristics and degree attainment are not offered in support of the notion that disparities in this area are due to racial identification, age, or gender. While these variables help illuminate trends and are integral to answering the study's research question, they are not considered the source of the completion problem as the racial equity in degree attainment is viewed as a systemic and structural issue, not an individual one. This notion is reflected in Allen's (1992) seminal Black student completion work in which the researcher contextualized the problem within the resurgence racialized issues on college campuses. In his discussion, the scholar explicitly reminds readers how issues with Black student completion and the disadvantages Black students face in higher education are a result of years of subjugation within the larger society (Allen, 1992).

Allen (1992) acknowledged that disparities in student success for this population are directly related to the socio-political, economic, and psychological conditions that have plagued Black Americans for centuries.

**Prior Academic Background**

Prior academic performance has been identified as a factor in persistence and completion (Horn & Kojaku, 2000; Ishtani, 2006). Ishtani (2006) and Horn and Kojaku (2000) found that high school academic attributes impact retention, persistence, and degree completion among both first-generation and (non)first-generation students. Moreover, research on academic preparation shows that minority students often experience academic preparation that is of a lesser quality than that of their majority counterparts (Deil-Amen & DeLuca, 2010; Jennings et al., 2015; Rich & Jennings, 2015). Additionally, Fletcher and Tienda (2010) show how high school quality accentuates race-based inequalities in outcomes associated with college performance. This is particularly important for research on Black students, as we know from research that issues such as racial segregation, underfunding, and lack of resources impact students' K-12 experiences often leaving them less prepared for college (Rich & Jennings, 2015). Further, using Fairlie's (2005) decomposition techniques, Ciocca Eller and DiPrete (2018) found that these variables were significant contributors to the Black-white completion gap.

**College entrance exam scores.** Additional characteristics such as academic pre-enrollment factors are important predictors as well. Among these pre-enrollment factors, student's academic testing outcomes and performance on college entrance exam scores (Adelman, 1999; 2006) and high school achievement have been shown to relate to degree

completion; however, this effect is also greater for white students than for students of color (Hoffman & Lowitzki, 2005). Test scores, such as ACT and SAT are frequently used as proxies for aptitude (DesJardins et al.,1999; Zwick & Sklar, 2005). DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (1999) found that, when controlling for GPA, both ACT and high-school rank have varying effects on departure. Though they relied on an older, longitudinal data set (1980-1992), Zwick and Sklar (2005) found that SAT scores (and HS GPA) were significant predictors of first year college GPA. In the same study, the researchers also discovered that these standardized test scores had a significant effect on graduation rates for white and Hispanic participants in the study (Zwick & Sklar, 2005).

**Final high school GPA.** While exploring the relationship between college readiness and college outcomes, Jackson and Kurlaender (2014) identified high school GPA as a predictor of success in four-year postsecondary institutions system. According to DesJardins et al. (1999) and Zwick and Sklar (2005), high school rank/GPA, as a variable, is also reflective of a student's academic potential, an important consideration for a student's ability to navigate the path to graduation. Moreover, in his seminal study on Black student completion, Allen (1985) also found that high preforming high school students earned better grades in college. This evidence points to the need to consider final high school GPA in completion centered analyses.

**Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate credits.** Framed around the term 'resource disadvantage,' Ciocca Eller and DiPrete (2018) highlight how pre-college experiences such as rigorous curriculum is also applicable. For the purpose of this study, advanced placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) credits are representatives of high school (HS) program rigor. With regard to first time in college

(FTIC) students' prior curricular participation, Desjardins et al. (2003) also found that students with lower college GPAs were more likely to depart and students who arrived on campus with credit were more likely to complete their degree program. Adelman (2004) and Iatarola, Conger, and Long (2011) also identified AP/IB and dual credit to have an effect on college completion. These findings, along with the American Institute of Research's (2011) report on dual-credit in Texas, support this study's consideration for dual-credit and AP data. Because this study focuses on first-time in college students, traditional transfer credits will not be considered.

**Enrollment Characteristics**

Enrollment variables have been shown to be important considerations for completion-based studies. A variety of characteristics, such as part-time vs. full-time enrollment status, academic major, and participation in student success programming, have been shown to be related to degree attainment (Pike, Hansen, & Childress, 2015). One of the main enrollment variables shown to influence degree completion outcomes is academic major.

**Academic major.** Earlier research from Kolb (1981) also shows the importance of major as a consideration, citing the variance across disciplines in philosophy, standards, and requirements. With regard to students' academic majors/college of enrollment, DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall's (2002) research reveals the relationships between academic discipline and completion outcomes when examining single-risk graduation rates. And, DesJardins, Kim, and Rzonca (2003) found that students from different majors had different outcomes with regard to likelihood of first year persistence and graduation. In a study of the impact of college major and persistence, St. John et al.

(2004) found that Black students who maintained sophomore status in fields such as business, health, and STEM were more likely to persist to graduation than students in other majors; however, the researchers found no statistically significant differences for student in their freshman year of study. Despite much evidence in support of academic major as a potential predictor, the body of work in this area features mixed-results as Alexander and Eckland (1977) and Pascarella, Smart, Ethington, and Nettles (1987) did not find that academic major influences degree attainment outcomes. The work of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) and Hearn (1987) also speak to the nuance of results in this area. Essentially, more research is needed to determine the impact of major selection on degree completion, particularly for students who participate in campus-wide student success programs such as 4Years2Finish.

**Academic Performance**

**Semester credit hours.** With regard to students' post-enrollment performance, evidence suggests that enrolling in more credit hours is linked to both a reduction in time-to-degree and the successful completion of a bachelor's degree (Knight & Arnold, 2000). Further, Desjardin et al.'s (2003) analysis of factors that explain persistence and completion showed that students who take fewer credits were more likely to depart. This variable is also relevant because the intervention examined in the current study requires students to enroll in a specified number of semester credit hours to stay on the path to four-year graduation.

**College GPA.** Farmer and Hope (2013) found that GPA (pre-college and first-year) is a strong predictor of retention for Black students. Based on these findings, success initiatives that aim to improve completion for Black students should feature

supplemental support around academic development, especially faculty engagement (Grier-Reed et al., 2016).

**Degree conferred.** The main outcome or dependent variable for this study is degree completion and the degree conferred variable will be used to demonstrate whether or not a student has completed their degree. Also included in the data, the variable 'degree award date' shows the time to degree and the inclusion of 'degree type' also supports inquiry on how completion may vary by major/college or school within the institution.

**Faculty Engagement**

Allen's (1992) as well as Wood and Ireland's (2014) work show that faculty-student interaction is a facilitator for success for Black college students. Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003) also detail a number of programs that have been effective in increasing student success among minoritized populations, and faculty are frequently included within these strategies. Further, Allen (1985) found that Black students who had developed relationships with faculty, held favorable views of campus race relations, and participated in student organizations had higher rates of student involvement. Additionally, students who reported positive faculty engagement had the highest college grades.

**Financial Need and Socioeconomic Status**

Similar to race and ethnicity, it is widely accepted that income and wealth inequality contributes significantly to existing disparities in college completion. Using data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, Ciocca Eller and DiPrete (2018) used regression-based analysis to pinpoint the main causes of the gap in bachelor's

degree completion. They found the lack of socioeconomic resources experienced by Black students to be one of the largest contributors to the gap. In a study exploring how institutional financial context impacts the likelihood of degree completion, Titus (2006) found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds had a decreased likelihood of attaining a degree within six-years. Along similar lines, several studies cite family financial background/parental income as drivers of persistence and completion (Dowd, 2004; Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Further, Paulsen and St. John's (2002) research suggests that low to middle income students' persistence is related to their potential to also have low levels of social and/or cultural capital, which research suggests is an important characteristic in navigating college environments.

**Financial aid.** In a study that specifically examines the impact of financial aid on college completion, Goldrick-Rab et al. (2016) found that need-based grants had a strong relationship to bachelor's degree attainment for their sample of students from 13 institutions in Wisconsin. Furthermore, Pell Grant eligibility has long been used in studies to examine graduation related outcomes. For example, Bettinger (2004) found that Pell Grant awards significantly impact dropout rates and improve persistence. While student loans potentially have negative impacts on degree attainment (Dowd, 2004; Kim, 2007), research demonstrates that students using scholarships and grants have an increased likelihood of completing (Fenske et al., 2000).

In the current study, expected family contribution (EFC) serves as a proxy for familial financial support and/or socioeconomic status. Student dependence and support have the propensity to change throughout their academic career; however, EFC remains a key indicator of student financial resources. Also of note is prior research that shows how

the impact of this characteristic (EFC) can be mediated by high achievement in academic background and other institutional characteristics (Choy, 2001; Titus, 2006).

**Environmental Factors**

Though not included in the proposed statistical model, it is worth noting how environmental factors influence degree attainment. Prior research from Allen (1992) and Farmer and Hope (2013) show how environmental factors contribute to success among African American students and the researchers found campus residency to be a significant predictor of Black student success. Also, considering the campus environment, Patton's (2006) work shows how cultural centers and services serve as important factors in facilitating retention among this population. Further, Arroyo and Gasman (2014) provide support for the notion of supportive environments as a contributor, citing how an HBCU-based approach to supporting the needs of this population can facilitate success in non-HBCU institutions.

**Campus climate.** In their 2003 study, Swail, Redd, and Perna argue that campus climate impacts minoritized students' academic performance. In fact, much of the literature on what contributes to Black student success offers climate-oriented, engagement-based factors for minority student success (Palmer, Maramba & Holmes, 2011). Some of the important considerations in this area include experiences with microagressions, a lack of engagement and connections to faculty, and the positive impact of student support services (Palmer et al., 2011). In their highly cited piece, Solarzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) used qualitative focus group interviews to explore African Americans students' experiences with racial microaggressions and campus racial climate. This research revealed further the ways in which microagressions—emitted by

faculty and peers—impact Black students' classroom and social experiences and caused feelings of invisibility and isolation. This and other research (Allen et al., 2018; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992) suggests that racism permeates Black students' collegiate experiences. However, many policies and programmatic interventions seeking to improve success for populations that include African American students fail to acknowledge how racial campus climate affects attainment outcomes (Brown, Morning, & Watkins, 2005; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008). Like faculty engagement, campus climate will not be used as a component of the statistical modeling framework, however, a question related to this area will be included in the qualitative interview protocol. While it is apparent that 4Years2Finish does not seek to address climate or other environmental factors, these remain relevant considerations for exploring campus leaders' policy related thinking and decision-making.

**The Role of the State in Addressing Inequities in College Degree Completion**

As a result of the racialized disproportionalities in degree attainment, national discourse and policy efforts around the issue have increased. Perna and Finney (2014) posit that state governments play a highly instrumental role in improving postsecondary attainment for all students. Fortunately, several states have acknowledged existing disparities in completion and have outlined policy goals aimed at addressing these issues. Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, South Carolina, Texas, and Virginia are among states that have identified gaps and developed some variation of a strategic plan for higher education (Perna & Finney, 2014).

After examining policy efforts in five specific states (i.e., Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Texas, and Washington), Perna and Finney (2014) contend that higher

education access and completion vary both across and within state boundaries. The researchers concluded that "the forces that influence higher education attainment are highly idiosyncratic and are determined by state-specific contextual characteristics" (p. 201). These characteristics include but are not limited to a state's demographic make-up and economic landscape, in addition to many other historical, social, and political factors. With so much variety across states in terms of what impacts the postsecondary landscape, it is important to examine more deeply how state policy inspires change and influences the enactment of mechanisms to address inequities in degree completion. With this in mind, the current case study centers Texas as the primary state of inquiry. While the findings may not be generalizable, this research poses important considerations for other states with similar higher education policy concerns.

**Texas' Efforts to Address Inequities in Black College Degree Completion**

Through their plans for higher education, Texas has demonstrated efforts to increase educational attainment for African Americans. Developed by the state's postsecondary governance organization, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), Texas has followed other states such as Tennessee in developing strategic efforts aimed at improving college student success across the state (THEC/TSAC, n.d.). The next section provides background context of Texas' efforts over the past few years that have led the state to modest improvements in collegiate outcomes.

**Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.** The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) was created in 1965 by the Texas Legislature as the highest authority in state matters of public higher education and acts as a unified guardian to the interests of the public regarding public higher education (Texas Higher Education

Coordinating Board [THECB], n.d.a.). Since 2000, the THECB has advanced multiple strategic plans to meet specific goals for public higher education in Texas. The following section provides an overview of both the Closing the Gaps by 2015 and 60x30TX plans.

**Strategic planning for higher education.** In October of 2000, the THECB created a strategic plan to solve critical issues regarding Texas higher education called Closing the Gaps Higher Education Plan (THECB, n.d.c.). This strategic plan had four overarching goals: to close the gaps in student participation, student success, excellence, and research funding over the course of 15 years (THECB, n.d.c.). With specific focus on the research funding goal, the Closing the Gaps Higher Education Plan initially centered on increasing federally funded science and engineering research at Texas institutions as well as increasing research expenditures at Texas public universities and health related institutions (THECB, n.d.c.).

In 2015, the THECB initiated the 60x30TX strategic plan for higher education with the vision that Texas be one of the highest-achieving states in America (THECB, n.d.a.). The overarching goal of this strategic plan is that 60 percent of Texans between the ages of 25 to 34 have a certificate or higher by the year 2030. There are four specific goals within the 60x30TX strategic plan that individually focus on the percentage of the educated population aged 25 to 34: 1) 60X30: Educated Population 2) Completion, 3) Marketable Skills and 4) Student Debt. Of particular significance to this study is goal number two—completion—which includes the following statement: "to ensure completions improve throughout the plan years, Texas set statewide student completion benchmarks: 1) 138,000 Hispanic, 48,000 African American, and 168,000 males by 2020; 2) 198,000 Hispanic, 59,000 African American, and 215,000 males by

2025; and 30 285,000 Hispanic, 76,000 African American, and 275,000 males by 2030"
(*see Figure 2*) (60X30TX.com). As mentioned in chapter one, THECB mostly leaves the
specific actions that will aid in reaching these goals up to institutions. While THECB
does provide tools to collaboratively develop strategies, the organization posits that each
of the ten regions possess unique needs and leaves room for stakeholders within the
region to design and implement efforts to meet the targeted goals of the plan
(60X30TX.com). Despite the sound logic behind this approach, the freedom and
flexibility allotted to the regions makes it imperative to develop a deep understanding of
the implementation and development of individual approaches that seek to meet targets
and improve student outcomes—a primary aim of this research. As evidenced by the
target populations presented in Figure 2, Texas specifically seeks to improve completion
rates for African Americans in higher education and all Texas institutions—governed by
the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board—are responsible aiding the state in
reaching this goal of the 60X30TX plan.

## Target Populations: African American, Hispanic, Economically Disadvantaged, and Males Completing in Texas

Completion Target for 2030:
African American 76,000
Hispanic 285,000
Economically Disadvantaged 246,000
Males 275,000

African American: 38,964 38,813 41,027 41,594 76,000

Hispanic: 96,657 103,889 111,344 115,735 285,000

Economically Disadvantaged: 114,176 119,490 124,178 124,424 246,000

Male: 131,037 135,849 141,564 143,981 275,000

Number of Completions

Target Population, by Year

2015  2016  2017  2018  2020  2025  2030

*Figure 2*. Target Populations of the 60X30TX Plan

Source: 60X30TX.com

**Institution Focused Policy Efforts to Address Black Degree Completion**

Institutions nationwide have implemented various programmatic initiatives aimed at improving degree completion rates. A 2012 report from Ed Trust, Nguyen, Bibo, and Engle outlines how colleges and universities address this imperative through efforts such as the university college model and other core programs that intentionally focus on the "quality" and "execution" of institution-wide initiatives. Among those considered "top gap closers" were the University of Southern California (USC), The University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Appalachian State University, and North Carolina State at Raleigh. These institutions made progress in this area through a variety of means including faculty engagement, early risk identification, and other student success

initiatives such as "cohort-based curriculum systems" and "proactive advising" (Nguyen et al., 2012, p. 6). Worthy of note in this report is the omission of race in the language used by campus leaders to describe campus-wide interventions. While, on one hand, this demonstrates how race neutral institutional programming has the potential to help close racial completion gaps, it also leaves space to consider how much more improvement is possible through the advent of race conscious initiatives.

<div align="center">**15 to Finish Literature**</div>

Luna-Torres, Leafgreen, and McKinney (2017) provide an overview of Guided Pathways in relation to the completion imperative. While this study mainly centers on issues related to financial aid in the community college setting, it offers insight into the history and background of the Guided Pathways movement which aligns with the solutions focused efforts such as 15 to Finish (the basis for 4Years2Finish). According to Luna-Torres et al. (2017), the Lumina Foundation offered the first iteration of this type of effort with its Achieving the Dream (ATD) initiative. Through ATD, Lumina aimed to address the issue of low completion among community college students. Informed by ATD, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation subsequently developed the Completion by Design (CBD) program, thus beginning a movement—that would come to be known as 'Guided Pathways'—to address the completion issues through the implementation of evidence-based models that feature structured roadmaps to completion and more aggressive guidance in the form of academic and career advising (Luna-Torres et al., 2017).

The models provided through ATD and CBD served as the foundation for the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Pathways Project (AACC, n.d;

CCRC, 2015; Luna-Torres et al., 2017). "The Guided Pathways approach promotes institutional efficiency in supporting college access as well as ensuring completion of a postsecondary credential. By providing students with a roadmap to program completion, institutions can be more intentional with staff and faculty resources, allowing students to minimize their time to degree" (Luna-Torres et al., 2017, p. 103). This is the core concept of the movement; provide a clear path to degree completion while leveraging institutional resources and encouraging efficiency for students and the colleges and universities in which they are enrolled. This is achieved through specific strategies such as 'sequencing' to prevent students from wasting credit hours and proactive advising (Luna-Torres et al., 2017). As the paper shifts toward exploring barriers to completion, the authors go on to focus on the financial aid implications for the Guided Pathways approach.

Based on the University of Hawaii's 15 to Finish completion initiative, Complete College America adopted this version of a Guided Pathways model in 2012. As acceptance of the model grew, campus leaders across the nation—at times under the mandate of policymakers (e.g., Indiana)—developed and implemented a variety of programs modeled after the 15 to Finish initiative. While this pragmatic approach to guiding students toward completion continue to grow in popularity, it is increasingly important to expand the empirical knowledge base supporting this model.

Beginning his piece with an acknowledgement of the demographic shifts in the postsecondary student population, Jones (2015) details Complete College's efforts to improve student success. This paper claims that CCA encourages states to "take a hard look at their data" and develop goals that around student completion (p.25). Citing Texas among CCA's Alliance of States, the author describes how this group of policymakers

and higher education leaders are advancing reform efforts through policy implementation. Labeled in this publication as "Game Changer #3," the 15 to Finish model is outlined and contextualized within the completion imperative. Jones (2015) describes how 15 to Finish seeks to increase the number of students earning at least 30 credit hours per year using targeted campaign tactics to encourage students to enroll in the additional courses needed to graduate on-time. Citing the 2013 Beginning Postsecondary Student Survey, Jones grounds this approach in research outcomes that demonstrate how students taking at least 30 credits in their first year earn better grades have an increased likelihood of retention and graduation, despite their prior academic preparation. This paper corresponds with many of the reports disseminated by Complete College America. The organization repeatedly signals that the problem with completion is that students are not earning enough credits (Complete College, 2018). Often described as 'enrollment intensity,' this issue is framed—along with affordability—as the reason students do not earn a degree within the traditional two or four-year timeframe.

CCA (2015) also invokes the language of equity recommending that institutional leaders "monitor the results of scaling efforts to verify that they close gaps for underrepresented and lower-performing populations, and adjust as necessary" (p. 8). According to the organization, "structural changes may not be enough to close gaps, necessitating more targeted interventions to address the unique challenges of each underserved student population" (p. 8). Despite Complete College's efforts to encourage campus leaders to consider equity in their scaling efforts, it stands that the central premise of the program and the model fail to acknowledge the historical events and social circumstances at the root of the completion imperative.

While 15 to Finish and Guided Pathways initiatives encompass a variety of programmatic characteristics, a major premise of this approach is the reduction of time to degree (TTD). TTD equates to the length of time it takes college students to earn a degree (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2012). Citing how TTD has increased over time, Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner (2012) explain why this concept has garnered much attention from policymakers. In their TTD focused study, the researchers found that institutional factors affect time to degree in public institutions, irrespective of student demographic characteristics (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2012). For many students, this could translate to extra tuition dollars or loss in earnings. For Black students, who often take on more student loans than their peers (Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, & Joule, 2014), this could mean an increase in debt associated with the cost of education. Some of the specific factors identified as having an impact on time to degree include lower college preparedness, rising cost of tuition, and decreases in institutional resources at public institutions (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2012). Due to disproportionate access to resources in the P-12 system, many Black students are often consider underprepared for college work (Barnes, 2010). Add in the higher potential for these students to come from lower income background, these characteristics arguably make them more susceptible to the TTD conundrum. The authors found no relationship between course-taking patterns and TTD. Additionally, TTD "reflects the magnitude of individual investments in college education, given the greater opportunity cost of extended enrollment, and serves as an important indicator of how students move from enrollment to degree attainment" (Bound, Lovenheim, & Turner, 2012, p.378). In their 2012 study, Bound and colleagues were able

to produce evidence to support the notion that course taking patterns impact time to degree.

In a 2007 study, Stratton, O'Toole, and Wetzel used Beginning Post-Secondary Survey (1990/1994) data and a sequential decision model to examine on enrollment intensity. Influenced by prior research on dropout rates for part-time vs. full-time students, the researchers sought to study attrition behavior. Grounding their work in the Human Capital Model of Attrition, Stratton, O'Toole, and Wetzel (2007) cite literature that shows how various factors, such as cost, proximity, familial obligations, and other opportunity costs impact student dropout rates. These research findings suggest that part-time enrollment or lower enrollment intensity is not correlated with attrition and the corroborating factors are what ultimately lead to dropout.

**Empirical Research on 15 to Finish Modeled Initiatives**

Few researchers have published work related to the effectiveness of the 15 to Finish model. Even less is published regarding the model's impact on underrepresented student populations. In a study on academic momentum, Davidson and Blankenship (2017) examined how 15 to Finish impacted students credit accumulation, ability to pay, and likelihood of degree completion. The researchers found that taking more credit hours increased first to second year persistence of both 2-year and 4-year students. Regarding degree completion, Davidson and Blankenship's results suggest that students who earned 30 credit hours at the end of their first year were more likely to graduate and took less time to complete their credential.

In an unpublished dissertation, Smith, Barone, Cook, Miltenberger, Mitchell and Sanchez (2017) used qualitative methods to study the policy implications and student

responses to Nevada's statewide 15 to Finish effort. The findings show a 49% increase in the number of students taking 15 credit hours; however, the first set of participants had not graduated at the time of the study so they did not have data on completion. Several qualitative themes were derived from this analysis including the ways in which internal data was influential in terms of policy selection; Complete College America data was also used to make decisions.

The findings also emphasize that Nevada did not have a culture of completion prior to implementing the 15 to Finish model. The focus on completion represented a cultural shift in the state higher education system and resulted in raised expectations for students across its many campuses. Smith and colleagues also reported how the messaging campaign surrounding the program impacted students, often causing confusion around program requirements. Other themes showed how the policy interacted with previously implemented academic policies within the institution and how the campus leaders failed to include advisors in the planning prior to program roll out. This findings also suggest that 'fit' of the 15 to Finish model varied across discipline and that advisors had concerns related to student performance. The researchers also gauged students' responses and found that some participants made appeals based on the problematic nature of class schedules and lack of access to needed courses. Students also cited familial obligations and work responsibilities as inhibitors to progress in this type of program.

In one of few empirical research efforts directly examining the outcomes associated with this model, Chan (2019) studied the impact of a large scale 15 to Finish initiative mandated by policymakers in Indiana—specifically for low-income and first-

generation students. The researcher found the intervention to be produce the best outcomes for the targeted population within a 'moderately selective' institutional type, demonstrating some evidence of 15 to Finish's effectiveness. Among these outcomes were "positive effects on the academic progression variables for participants" at the state flagship but not for students at the smaller university (p.114). Like students in the Smith et al. study, 15 to Finish students in Indiana were taking more amassing credits at a more rapid pace than students had prior to policy implementation. However, Chan reports the policy having no effects on degree completion at either university. The logistic regression analysis suggests that 15 to Finish participation did not improve or delay the time to graduation.

As demonstrated above, prior research (Bound et al., 2012; Stratton et al., 2007; Davidson & Blankenship, 2017) on the underlying concepts of the 15 to Finish model such as time to degree, enrollment intensity, and academic momentum and their impact on completion offer mixed-results. With regard to studies that specifically focus on 15 to Finish initiatives in four-year settings, Chan (2019) and Smith et al.'s (2017) work offers some of the few empirical findings related to policy implementation, student response, and completion outcomes. While these important efforts to document the outcomes associated with completion remain useful, more empirical knowledge of how 15 to Finish initiatives impact the most vulnerable populations is needed to determine how this model helps or hinders educational leaders in closing the racial degree attainment gap.

**Chapter Summary**

Across the country, state policy actors, in combination with institutions and other stakeholders (e.g., foundation and policy organizations), have introduced policies,

programs, and strategies that seek to improve degree attainment among students through a variety of means. In spite of the well documented racial crisis in postsecondary education, leaders guiding higher education institutions often employ mechanisms that fail to explicitly address structural racism as the root of the problem. While exploring power and politics within higher education plan pathways, this dissertation uses theorizations on the institutional change process in higher education to explore how campus leaders at one institution, following the 15 to Finish model, implemented the 4Years2Finish initiative as a major strategy to improve student outcomes. The conceptual framework, as outlined in this chapter, will help interrogate the organizational approach and leadership actions undertaken by this institution in developing and implementing a large-scale student success intervention amid a well-documented local, state, and national completion imperative for Black students.

As evidenced in this chapter, bachelor's degree completion is impacted by a variety of factors that span various levels of student variables. Further, research on Black bachelor's degree completion shows how success is affected by multiple factors, including some that are more unique to racial and ethnic populations. While programmatic interventions are needed to address the completion imperative at the institutional level, many of the initiatives that aim to improve completion rates do not encompass many of these factors. Particularly the 15 to Finish programs, which focus mainly on requiring students to maintain enrollment in a minimum number of course hours each semester in order graduate in four years (Complete College America, n.d). Conversely, 15 to Finish modeled initiatives like 4Years2Finish do offer broad benefits to program participants. For example, Urban University advertises the program as an effort

that saves students time and money by providing a comprehensive graduation plan and preserving their tuition obligations, which potentially allows them to enter the workforce or pursue graduate studies sooner.

While the 15 to Finish model generally addresses important considerations for college student success, the pursuit of racial equity necessitates the probing of well-intentioned practices (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Along the same lines, confronting systemic racial equity issues, such as degree completion, requires investigation of organizations operating through seemingly race-neutral policies in order to understand how their actions may or may not exacerbate inequalities (Ledesma, Parker, & Museus, 2015). Based on the wide-scale adoption of the 15 to Finish model, efforts to increase empirical knowledge of outcomes associated with this type of program on students traditionally underserved in higher education are warranted. While the findings are not meant to be generalizable, this work helps fill a gap in the literature on institutional practices and racial equity at the campus level.

The following chapter focuses on the study's research methodology and includes contextual support for this dissertation. The chapter begins with rationales for employing a multi-method case study approach and the site selection for this research. The chapter closes with an overview of the study's research design and known limitations of the proposed inquiry.

**Chapter III**

**Research Design amd Methods**

Leading voices across the higher education research and policy spectrum have acknowledged the need to increase degree completion among Black college students (Espinosa et al., 2018; Nichols & Schak, 2019; 60X30TX.com) who, as a result of many historical and contemporary factors (e.g., legal precedents, segregated P-12 system, and affordability issues) fall into the lower percentiles of graduation rates (Allen, McLewis, Jones, & Harris, 2018; Barnes, 2010; Ciocca Eller & DiPrete, 2018; National Student Clearinghouse, 2017). This phenomenon is evident at the national, state, and institutional levels, highlighting the need for structural change. As a variety of actors and constituents across multiple areas attempt to address this issue through a host of methods, the actions and processes undertaken by postsecondary leaders and policy actors on the frontlines at institutions across the country remain a crucial component to attending to the completion imperative.

This dissertation examines such a process at the campus level by exploring one institution's approach to developing a university-wide completion initiative. The organization, Urban University, is situated within a state policy context and institutional milieu that is representative of the contextual factors many higher education institutions are attempting to navigate. This context includes state-level strategic goals for higher education, changing institutional demographics, and low degree attainment rates for historically marginalized students, specifically African Americans. Amid these factors, UU developed and implemented 4Years2Finish, a campus-wide initiative that aims to provide more specific guidance and structure for students on the path to graduation.

While institutions often implement such programs with all students in mind, improving

Black student success and degree completion requires specific attention to how policies

and practices impact racialized populations. Therefore, this dissertation examines the

actions taken and outcomes associated with this initiative with specific considerations for

Black consciousness within the organization and Black student outcomes. In this work,

the organization's efforts to advance student completion through a 15 to Finish modeled

program and the program's impact on Black student completion, is explored using a

multi-method case study approach that is framed by theoretical notions of change and

color-blindness.

The remainder of this chapter details the dissertation's empirical approach and

provides an overview of the study's methods. The case selection is explained and the

research design and procedures undertaken for each phase of this research are detailed.

Finally, the chapter concludes with the known limitations of the study.

**Multi-method Research**

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) speak to the nature of inductive and deductive

research approaches. The researchers describe how inductive work or research-driven by

discovery is usually qualitative in nature and deductive inquiry aimed at testing a specific

hypothesis is generally quantitative. Tashakkori and Teddlie also state that multi-method

research designs may have both, inductive and deductive processes, whereas a project

with a dominant drive may include a minor component.

This duality of approaches is relevant to the current study, which uses QUAL +

quan methods to aid in answering research questions that require variation in measures

and instruments and explore multiple dimensions of an inquiry. Where qualitative

methods are dominant and represented by an uppercase 'QUAL,' the plus sign is indicative of the simultaneous nature of data collection, and the less-dominant quantitative methods are notated by a lowercase 'quan.' The heavier emphasis on the qualitative paradigm is indicative of how this research aims to focus on organizational change by examining the actions of its actors. While the quantitative focus on student outcomes remains an essential component of this research, a significant portion of existing literature relies on statistical analysis to quantify completion at the micro or individual level.

Though many have questioned the use of multiple methods in one research project due to the epistemological and ontological differences associated with the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms (Brannen, 1992), Morse (2003) provides instances where it is permissible for methods to be used together. For example, the use of multi-methods may counteract shortcomings and maximize the benefits related to each research paradigm, which is of particular importance for drawing conclusions associated with policy and practice (Hammersley, 2000; Hussein, 2009). This notion is valid for the current study, which seeks to advance knowledge of both the efforts expressed by policy actors and the outcomes associated with those efforts.

**Multi-method Case Study**

Yin (2018) defines a case study as "an empirical method that: 1) investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when 2) the boundaries between the phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p.15). Within the context of examining how policy works in a naturalistic setting, Schramm (1997) describe how policy driven case studies often highlight decision-making

processes, implementation efforts, and associated results. Further, the research questions guiding this case study require the use of multiple methods to understand the phenomena under consideration, making a multi-method case study approach an appropriate methodology for this inquiry.

**Case Study Methods**

Case study methods provide tools for researchers to examine a specific phenomenon—in this case, organizational leaders' approach to addressing the college completion imperative. Further, multi-method strategies are "research designs in which the research questions are answered by using two data collection procedures or two research methods, both with either the QUAL or QUAN approach" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 712). According to Morse (2003), this methodology is beneficial in terms of expanding the scope of a research study. While much of the literature on completion explores the contextual factors that promote success or facilitate departure, much of the recent research focused on state-level and institutional completion-based policy-making describes the policy landscape without much of the nuance associated with organizational leadership practice. While this work is highly beneficial to understanding student outcomes, the pragmatic nature of completion work requires a closer examination of practical leadership efforts. With this in mind, the current study aims to fill this gap in the literature that examines higher education completion policies and policy-related outcomes in real college settings. Furthermore, the purpose of this multi-method case study is to develop an understanding of one organization, its actors, and the student outcomes associated with their efforts. The following research questions guide this dissertation**:**

1) What was involved in the institutional-level policy development processes of Urban University campus leaders as they set out to introduce a campus-wide completion strategy? And, to what extent did they specifically consider Black student completion during this process?

2) To what extent does participation in the programmatic intervention (4Years2Finish) affect the likelihood of degree completion for Black students at the Urban University?

**Conceptual Framework**

According to Grant and Osaloo (2014), the conceptual framework guides the thinking, assumptions, and decisions of a dissertation study, including the research design and methodology. In this research, tenets of the Change Macro Framework and the Colorblind Organization Theory are used to understand the complicated facets of an institutional change effort and Black student consciousness in the Urban University setting. By employing these conceptual and theoretical presuppositions, this work takes the position that campus leaders as organizational agents are largely responsible for enacting institutional change, and their efforts and resulting outcomes are understood through the tenets and concepts offered through these paradigms.

To support the qualitative thought processes involved in this work and the intentional focus on race consciousness required for research question one, the Colorblind Organization mainly guides the development of the study's interview protocol and the analysis of policy artifacts. For the quantitative phase associated with research question two, the Colorblind Organization and completion related knowledge from prior literature were used to facilitate modeling and the analysis of relationships among variables. The

Change Macro Framework was later added to understand qualitative data, facilitate

analysis of the policy process, and interpret the findings from the case study as a whole.
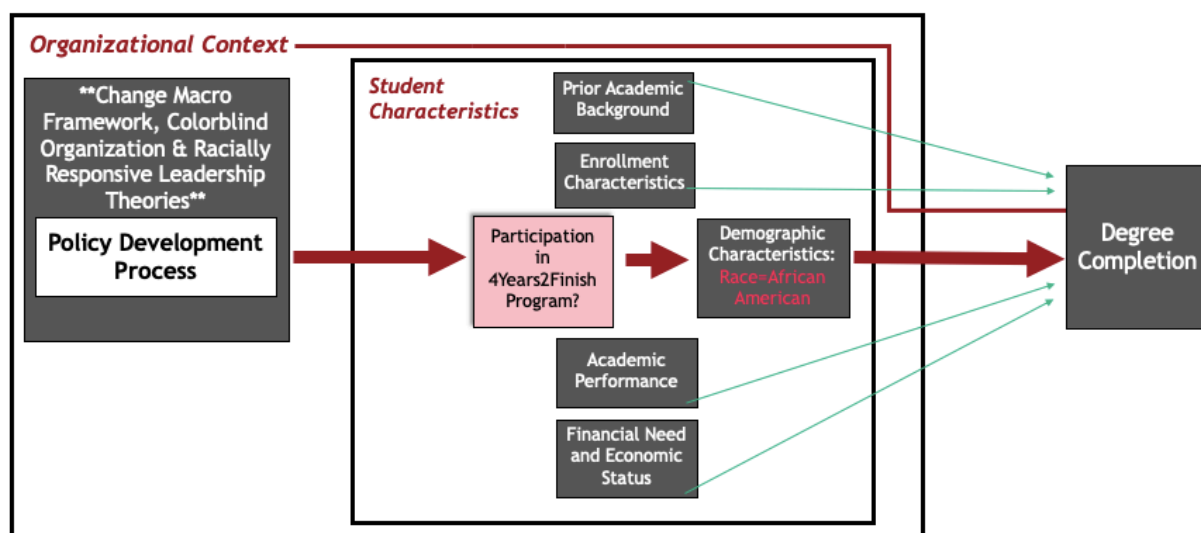


*Figure 3.* Conceptual Framework

## Case Selection

For the purposes of this study, the 'case' is the institution—Urban University

(UU)—which is a large, urban research university located in the southern sector of the

United States. Enrollment at UU topped 45,000 in the fall of 2017, and 9.7 percent of the

student population is Black. This moderately selective institution is an appropriate site to

conduct this research due to its history of lower Black student graduation rates (UU

Office of Institutional Research) and recent implementation of a student success

intervention, which aims to improve four-year degree completion.

As one of the largest public universities in Texas, Urban University has grown in

a variety of ways. In the past ten years alone, the institution has earned Carnegie Tier One

status, excelled nationally in athletics, and increased the number of first-time in college

residential students by more than 50 percent (Urban University, 2018; UU Student

Affairs and Enrollment Services, 2018). In addition to these feats, the university has

increased enrollment of bachelors degree-seeking students for the past five consecutive years (Urban University, 2018).

Historically, the institution has also maintained disparities in enrollment and degree completion, particularly among its Black student population. In 2010, for example, UU enrolled 4,869 African American students who constituted 12.6 percent of their total enrollment; however, this figure dropped to 4,173 in 2014, which represented 10.2 percent of the university's enrollment (Office of Institutional Research, 2018). According to the university's Office of Institutional Research, the most recent figures from 2018 show an increase in African American student enrollment with a total of 4,401 students who made up 9.7 percent of the student body.

As shown in Table 1, the graduation rate of African American first-time, full-time, bachelor's degree-seeking students was 27.60 percent in 2016, lagging behind the national average of 40.9 percent for this population (Urban University, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Although this figure [27.60%] is nearly triple the four-year completion rate among Black students at the university just eight years prior, it remains a striking example of the inequities that existed within this institution. By 2018, the university's four-year graduation rate for Black FTIC students increased significantly, reaching 35.7 percent. In a 2018 address, the UU president stated that the gap in 4-year graduation rates between African American and white students decreased 8 percentage points, going from 10 percent in 2017 to 2 percent in 2018. While commendable, the variability in these figures raises questions about the university's efforts to improve student success outcomes, such as: what contributed to the steady decline in the percentage of African Americans enrolled? And, to what does the institution attribute its

rise in four-year completion rates among Black FTIC students? Further, are institutional leaders consciously considering Black students' needs?

Table 1

*Four-Year Graduation Rates for First Time in College Students from 2012-2018*

| Students By Race | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| African American | 12% | 12% | 16% | 23% | 28% | 28% | 36% |
| Asian | 22% | 25% | 30% | 32% | 34% | 37% | 41% |
| Hispanic | 14% | 15% | 17% | 21% | 24% | 25% | 31% |
| International | 25% | 25% | 21% | 18% | 30% | 28% | 32% |
| Multiracial/Native/Pacific Islander/Unknown | 25% | 14% | 23% | 23% | 28% | 37% | 38% |
| White | 22% | 24% | 27% | 26% | 32% | 38% | 38% |

*Source:* Urban University Office of Institutional Research

As evidenced by the University's standing in the top percentile of the most diverse colleges in the country, as well as the receipt of three Excellence in Diversity Awards, there is no question as to whether or not UU is structurally diverse (HEED, 2018; U.S. News and World Report, 2017). The university also maintains designations as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American Native American Pacific Islanders Serving Institution (AANAPISI), indicating that the student population is at minimum 25 percent Hispanic and 10 percent Asian. With this in mind, the university reportedly maintains elements of inclusiveness and works to sustain institutional policies and practices that support student success (UU President, 2016).

**4Years2Finish Program**

In 2014, the Urban University implemented 4Years2Finish, a four-year graduation plan aimed at simplifying the process of earning and funding a bachelors degree at the institution (UU Office of the Provost). Based on the Guided Pathways or 15

to Finish model, participation in 4Years2Finish requires students to complete 15 hours per semester or 30 hours per academic year. UU's iteration of the program also requires students to maintain continuous enrollment, remain in good academic standing, meet departmental requirements, and seek regular advising from their academic advisor (UU Office of the Provost, n.d.).

Defined as a 'partnership' program, the University also abides by specific responsibilities to meet the needs of program participants. These responsibilities include providing an academic map for all eligible majors, guaranteed academic advising, guaranteed course availability, tools and resources to monitor progress to degree, and a yearly evaluation of progress to degree goals (UU Office of the Provost, n.d). Also written into the program policy, is the provision of substitute courses or a waiver of course requirements in instances of course unavailability. 4Years2Finish requires students to enroll in a minimum of 15 credit hours per semester—30 credits per year—to reach the goal of graduating in four years. Further, the program also offers a fixed-tuition plan to participants to mitigate financial barriers that students face on the path to completion.

In short, the program seeks to guide the course-taking patterns of students and provide a clear pathway to completion. Ideally, this would reduce time to degree and promote four-year bachelors degree completion. The main assumptions of this design or model are that students will stay on track to graduate by agreeing to follow a specific degree plan. Of contextual note is the program's seeming inattention to factors that promote degree completion beyond course-taking patterns, affordability, and advising. While the institution may rely on other initiatives to address these needs, this remains a

key consideration, particularly for Black students, who research has shown thrive when individual and institutional factors, such as faculty engagement and campus climate, are addressed. Despite the program's narrow scope, early reports from the university indicate that the initiative does, indeed, promote success among traditionally underserved populations (UU Office of the Provost, n.d.). More specifically, UU purported through an internally developed brochure that "African-American students saw the greatest increase in both participation in the [4Years2Finish] program and the percentage of students completing 90 hours by the end of their third year" (UU 4Years2Finish Brochure, 2015, p. 2).

This institution was selected as the case for this single-case study because it represents an organization that is critical to the theoretical propositions posited through the conceptual framework (Yin, 2018). For the purpose of this research, UU exemplifies a university that adopted a race-neutral degree completion initiative in the midst of many factors, namely lower rates of Black bachelor's degree completion. The university is also situated broadly within a state context that accentuates the complexities of race-conscious policy development.

## Research Design

Qualitative methods are integral to this study as they offer depth and detail to a process of which less is known. With regard to the current literature, less of the currently published work focuses on the approaches used by organizational actors to develop completion-based policies at the campus-level. Research question one, stage one, focuses on the qualitative aspects of the research and will require original data collection in the

form of semi-structured interviews of the campus leaders who were instrumental in developing and carrying out the 4Years2Finish initiative.

While there are many aspects of a programmatic intervention to evaluate in determining its effectiveness, the current study primarily focuses on a single dichotomous outcome: degree completion. To assess this outcome variable, the quantitative phase of this research will examine student-level administrative data from the university's Office of Institutional Research. Logistic regression will be employed to explore whether participation in the 4Years2Finish program leads to an increased probability of completion for Black students at the Urban University. Prior completion focused studies (Dowd, 2004; Palmer, Elliott, & Cheatham, 2017) show how logistic regression is useful in examining whether participation in targeted programming or other phenomena impacts degree attainment. Further, the nature of this research does not permit the use of an experimental design/random assigned control group because students self-select into the program.

**Study Participants**

The sample for the qualitative portion of this study is comprised of campus leaders who had a role in advancing the 4Years2Finish program as a mechanism to enhance student success and degree completion rates at the Urban University. The participants were identified using purposeful sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) describes purposeful sampling as an appropriate sampling technique for qualitative research used to identify participants with especially relevant knowledge of the research phenomena who offer rich information. As noted by Palinkas et al. (2015), criterion sampling is a purposeful design that aims to "identify and select all

cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (p. 535). For the purposes of this study, this includes the university's executive leadership in the area of academic affairs, the director of the 4Years2Finish program, and other campus leaders such as program directors and advisors who are associated with the 4Years2Finish program. The specific criteria for the sample are as follows: 1) UU main campus administrator, faculty, or staff person 2) direct experience with the 4Years2Finish program in a current or prior role. Based on these criteria, senior-level, mid-level, and student-facing staff and administrators, as well as faculty who hold advising or administrative positions, were eligible to participate. This criteria was intentionally developed to ensure a wide variety of perspectives and reflections on process of the integrating the initiative across the campus.

**Participant recruitment.** The participants holding the title of executive leader were contacted directly, and the researcher worked with staff assistants to schedule interviews. The remaining faculty and staff participants were recruited via email using an IRB approved email template and an initial recruitment form to collect background information and confirm that participants met the criteria. The call for participants was sent to specific campus leaders, either identified by the researcher as having a current or prior association with the program or based on recommendations from other participants. Additionally, the call for participants was shared over the institution-wide advising listserv to elicit responses from a wider pool of faculty and staff. The recruitment email included a link to an initial consent form and recruitment questionnaire in which respondents were asked to describe their role in the planning, development, implementation, or facilitation of the 4Years2Finish program at UU. This form was used

to ensure that participants met the criteria for this purposeful sample prior to scheduling

the interview. These combined efforts resulted in a total of nine participants in total

(Table 2). To maintain confidentially, the participants' names have been replaced with a

pseudonym and generic titles are used to describe their role within the institution.

Table 2

*Study Participants*

| Participant Pseudonym | Position | Race and Gender | Length of Service at UU |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dr. Hill | Senior-level Admin | White woman | 2012-2019 |
| Dr. Ellison | Senior-level Admin | White woman | 1997/2013-2019 |
| Leann | Director | White woman | 2010-2019 |
| Devon | Former Academic Advisor/Current Program Director | Black man | 2016-2019 |
| Dr. Gold | Former Director/Current Faculty | White man | 1988-2019 |
| Kelly | Program Director | White woman | 2012-2019 |
| Katrina | Advisor | Black woman | 2017-2019 |
| Allison | Program Director | White woman | 2008-2019 |
| Regina | Assistant Director/Instructor | Hispanic Woman | 2012-2019 |

**Quantitative Data Sample**

For the current study, the sample for the quantitative data collection and analysis

efforts is comprised of individual student-level information for all degree-seeking, first-

time in college (FTIC) students who entered the university in 2014-2015 and completed

in 2018. In support of the aforementioned analytic approach, this sample includes both

students who did (n=1,983) and did not (n=2,075) opt to participate in the 4Years2Finish

program for a total n = 4,048. Students who enrolled in the summer prior to fall 2014 and

students who completed after spring 2018 were excluded due to the study's focus on

four-year graduation.

**Data Collection**

Multiple sources provided data for this multi-method case-study. Access and approval for this research has been provided by the Urban University Office of the Provost. Following submission and approval of a detailed memo and data request document, the university's Office of Institutional Research agreed to support this research, including access to interview campus leadership and the creation of administrative data needed for the study. In alignment with procedures and protocols for research involving human subjects, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted from the Urban University prior to data collection. The data collection plan for each stage is outlined below.

**Qualitative data.** Qualitative data was collected via semi-structured interviews with campus leaders. The interviews ranged from a minimum of 30 to a maximum of 60 minutes and were audio-recorded to be transcribed at a later date by the researcher. Each interview was conducted in a private setting chosen by the participant. In all nine cases, this location was their office on the Urban University campus.

**Interview protocol.** The interview protocol used to guide the semi-structured interviews varied according to the participant's role, and questions were removed, added, or reframed to be most relevant to each level of campus leadership (senior-level, mid-level, or student-facing staff). Additionally, the protocol used for senior-level administrators was reviewed by and revised with the guidance of a dissertation committee methodologist. Subsequent versions of the protocol were drafted with this feedback in mind.

**Post-interview questionnaire.** For less-structured interview methods such as those used in this study, Green (1998) promotes reflection through the use of follow-up questions that re-orient participants to the central focus of inquiry. A post-interview questionnaire (Appendix C) was distributed via email using Google Forms to provide participants the opportunity to reflect on their conversation with the researcher. Of the nine participants, four returned the form, providing some form of reflective data.

**Case study documentation and artifacts.** To support the qualitative portion of the case study, 4Years2Finish related artifacts were collected from participants; this included: marketing materials, advising resources, and institutional memos. In addition to the artifacts collected during the interviews, publicly available documents and resources were collected as well; this included: media/news releases, university communications (i.e., presidential speeches), and presentations collected via a systematic search (Yin, 2018) for documentation of 4Years2Finish using internet search techniques to identify relevant artifacts.

**Sources of quantitative data.** For the current study, the quantitative data is comprised of individual student-level information for all degree-seeking, first-time in college (FTIC) students who entered the university in 2014-2015. In support of the aforementioned analytic approach, this sample includes both students who did and did not opt to participate in the 4Years2Finish program (n = 4,048). The administrative data from the 2014-2015 cohort of first-time, full-time college students used in this stage of research was acquired from the university's Office of Institutional Research (IR). The data from IR was delivered electronically via email and housed on a university-issued computer protected by encryption software. To meet the needs of this study, the data set

includes available individual student-level information from the categories offered in the

conceptual framework: 1) student demographic characteristics, 2) enrollment

characteristics, 3) academic background, 4) academic performance, 5) financial need and

socioeconomic status. Based on the nature of the 4Years2Finish program, this dataset is

limited to degree-seeking, first-time in college (FTIC) students from the 2014-2015

cohort of entering students. A summary of data requested from UU's IR can be found in

appendix A, and a description of the variables used in the study can be found in the Data

Preparation and Model Specification section later in this chapter.

Descriptive analyses were conducted to generate pertinent contextual information

for the quantitative data set. Table 3 features a summary of descriptive statistics for the

full data sample (n = 4,048). As noted in the table, African American students comprise

nearly 10 percent of the sample, and close to half of the 2014 cohort opted into the

4Years2Finish program. The summary also shows that 38 percent of the cohort enrolled

in exploratory studies upon entering the institution. Additionally, the descriptive analysis

also shows that 55 percent of this cohort completed in four-years.

# Descriptive Analyses

Table 3

*Descriptive Statistics* (N=4,048)

| Variable | Descriptor | Percent (%) | Mean | Minimum | Max | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Dependent Variable** | | | | | | |
| Completion | Bachelors Degree in Four Years | 55.1 | | 0 | 1 | |
| **Independent Variables** | | | | | | |
| *Student Characteristics* | | | | | | |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | | | |
| | African American | 10.4 | | 0 | 1 | |
| | Asian | 27.5 | | 0 | 1 | |
| | Hispanic | 29.6 | | 0 | 1 | |
| | International | 4.5 | | 0 | 1 | |
| | Multiracial/Native/Pacific Islander/Unknown | 5.0 | | 0 | 1 | |
| | White | 23.0 | | 0 | 1 | |
| Gender | Female | 47.5 | | 0 | 1 | |
| | Male | 52.5 | | 0 | 1 | |
| *Academic Background* | | | | | | |
| | SAT Total | | 1137.5 | 680 | 1600 | 135.5 |
| | ACT Composite | | 24.7 | 13 | 35 | 3.9 |
| *Enrollment Characteristics* | | | | | | |
| College | | | | | | |
| | Architecture | 2.0 | | | | |
| | Business | 6.0 | | | | |
| | Education | 2.0 | | | | |
| | Engineering | 10.0 | | | | |
| | Exploratory Studies | 38.0 | | | | |
| | Hotel Management | 2.0 | | | | |
| | Liberal Arts | 18.0 | | | | |
| | Natural Science | 16.0 | | | | |
| | Technology | 5.0 | | | | |
| Graduation Plan | | | | | | |
| | 4Years2Finish | 48.7 | | | | |
| | Other | 51.3 | | | | |
| *Academic Performance* | Semester 1 GPA | | 2.93 | 0 | 4 | .96 |
| *Financial Need* | Financial Aid Award* | | 11,674.39 | 100 | 41,959.88 | 6,601.88 |

*Note.* Full-time, First-time in College (FTIC) Students;
*Total of loans, scholarships, and grants
Source: Urban University Office of Institutional Research

Table 4 shows the full racial and ethnic breakdown of students from the 2014-2015 FTIC cohort who opted into 4Years2Finish versus those that did not. African American students were split nearly even across the groups; however, a slight majority (224 students or 53 percent) opted into the program.

Table 4

*Racial and Ethnic Breakdown of 4Years2Finish Participants vs. Non-participants*

| | | (N=4,048) |
|---|---|---|
| Race/Ethnicity | 4Years2Finish Participants | Non-Participants |
| African American | 224 | 195 |
| American Indian | 3 | 0 |
| Asian | 536 | 576 |
| Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 4 | 5 |
| Hispanic | 589 | 610 |
| International | 60 | 121 |
| Multiracial | 75 | 83 |
| Unknown | 19 | 15 |
| White | 463 | 470 |

*Note. Number of participants and non-participants in each racial category in 2014; Source: Urban University Office of Institutional Research.*

## Analytic Strategy

The main unit of this case study analysis, the organization/Urban University, was examined via separate analyses of the smaller subunits—campus leaders and students (Yin, 2018). As outlined above, stage one of this research involves leaders/organizational actors, and stage two examines programmatic outcomes using student-level data. The following section includes details of the procedures for stages one and two, which were conducted simultaneously.

### Stage One: Qualitative Procedures

The case study artifacts were organized into an electronic case study database in which related documents were scanned, uploaded in computer files, and reviewed for

relevance. According to Yin (2018), preserving data in this manner allows other researchers to examine the database and improves the reliability of the study's findings (p. 131).

The interview audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher and checked for accuracy. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times to gain familiarity with the data, and open coding was enacted to identify segments of the data relevant to the research question. Stage one of the analysis relied on the qualitative statistical software known as MaxQDA to code the qualitative dataset (policy artifacts and transcripts of the audio-recorded semi-structured interviews).

The data reduction process included multiple phases of open/in vivo coding to identify both data-driven codes specific to this study's dataset (Saldaña, 2009). This analytic strategy permits inductive and deductive identification of codes, as each process has been proven useful for analyzing qualitative data from policy case studies (Gandara et al., 2017). MaxQDA was used to organize the codes and form thematic categories (Kuckartz & Kuckartz, 2002). This coding effort resulted in the formation of multiple categories of data. These categories were used to form the emergent themes presented in chapter four as the results of this thematic analysis process.

**Stage Two: Quantitative Procedures**

A logistic regression analysis was used to answer research question two. In combination with regression coefficients, the dichotomous outcomes of this logit model show the likelihood or probability of experiencing an event—in this case completing a degree—based on a 1 unit change in the independent variables (Pampel, 2000). Prior scholarship (Peng et al., 2002) confirms the appropriateness and preference of using

logistic regression techniques to explore college completion for several reasons: 1) logistic regression permits the use of continuous and categorical variables; 2) this form of regression analysis makes no assumptions pertaining to linear relationships between the dependent variable and continuous predictor variables; and, 3) logistic regression models are not limited by the assumption of normality (Peng et al., 2002).

The dependent variable or outcome variable for this study is bachelor's degree completion. For the purpose of this analysis, this dichotomous variable will gauge whether or not students from the 2014-15 freshman class who participated in 4Years2Finish have an increased likelihood of having earned a bachelor's degree in 2018 relative to those students who did not participate in the program (*see Appendix A for a full list of the variables requested)* Logistic regression models the chance of an outcome based on individual characteristics. Because chance is a ratio, what will be modeled is the logarithm of the chance given by:

$$\log\left(\frac{\pi}{1-\pi}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \cdots + \beta_m x_m$$

$\pi$ denotes the probability of a specific event such as bachelor's degree completion. In this model, $\beta_i$ represents the coefficients for the model's reference group, and $x_i$ represents explanatory variables.

The logistic regression model for the five categories of predictors is:

$$\log\left(\frac{\pi}{1-\pi}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \beta_3 x_3 + \beta_4 x_4 + \beta_5 x_5 + \beta_m x_m$$

Where the first vector represents the variables associated with student demographics, and the second vector of variables represents enrollment characteristics. These are followed by a third vector of variables that represent academic background.

Then, the fourth vector of variables represents academic performance, and the fifth vector

above represents the category of financial need and socioeconomic status.

**Data Preparation and Model Specification**

Several steps were taken to prepare the data prior to modeling. The initial step

involved identifying the students who fell within the study's parameters of who began in

the fall of 2014 and completed in 2018 and converting the data set from wide to long to

reorder the records chronologically by student and semester. Next, string variables were

recoded to categorical variables, and missing data were identified. Based on the missing

data analysis, the test-score variable (SAT/ACT) was standardized using z-scoring

techniques, which resulted in n = 61 missing test scores leaving  n=3,987. Dummy

variables were created for categorical variables such as race and ethnicity and gender into

dichotomous variables. Pairwise correlations were run to examine variable correlation.

The resulting variables for the study were as follows:

**Dependent Variable**

*Degree Conferred*-graduation in four years (2014-2018); re-coded as no = 0 and yes = 1
(BINARYGRAD)

**Independent Variables**

***Demographic Factors***

*Race and Ethnicity*-Student demographic; Dummy variables were created to represent
Asian, African American, Hispanic, International, and other (American Indian, Hawaiian
Pacific Islander, Multiracial, and unknown) white students were the reference group
(NETHNICITY)

*College of Enrollment*-Dummy variable created to represent student's college of
enrollment. Exploratory studies was the reference group (COLLEGE_1)

*Graduation Plan*- Dummy variable created to represent student's self-selection into the
4Years2Finish program; recoded as other = 0 and 4Years2Finish = 1 and (GRADPLAN)

*SAT & ACT Scores*-used to represent prior performance; standardized using z-score techniques (ZSATACT)

*Semester 1 GPA*-represents student ability and performance upon entering the university (SEMESTER_GPA_1)

*Financial Aid Award*-represents student financial need/socioeconomic status the combined grants, scholarships, and loans awarded to students in the first semester (FIN_AID_AWARD_1)

**Selection of dependent variables.** Based on prior literature on degree completion, the proposed degree completion model for this study includes several vectors based on student characteristics. Parametric T-tests, correlation tables, and chi-square analyses were used to examine the data to determine which variables were correlated to the independent variable and investigate the degree to which possible predictor variables were correlated. Based on the literature that shows first semester indicators such as GPA and enrollment characteristics predict graduation outcomes (DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003; Gershenfeld, Ward Hood, & Zhan, 2016), semester 1 GPA and college of enrollment are used and modeled as fixed effects. The assumption of no multicollinearity is central to binary logistic regression. Correlation tables for continuous variables and Chi-square tests for categorical variables were created for all combinations of possible predictor variables. The final selection of predictor variables were made so that no two moderately- or strongly-correlated predictor variables were included together in the model.

***Semester one GPA.*** An independent sample T-test was used to compare the mean semester one GPAs of students that did and did not graduate. The results, $t = -32.48$, $df = 4046$, $p = 0.0000$, show a significant difference in the mean GPA of students who graduated in four years (M=3.32) as compared to those who did not (M=2.45).

*African American students.* A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between African American as a student demographic characteristic and degree completion. The relation between these variables was not significant, $X^2$ (1, N = 4,048) = 0.69, p = .405. Based on this data, there is no relationship between Black racial identity and degree completion. Despite the lack of relationship shown here, this variable remains central to this research, and this relationship will be examined further using logistic regression analysis.

*College/major and degree completion.* A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between the college of enrollment and degree completion. The relation between these variables was significant, $X^2$ (1, N = 4,048) = 95.69, p = 0.00.

*Grad plan.* A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between participation in 4Years2Finish and degree completion. The relationship between these variables was significant, $X^2$ (1, N = 4,048) = 106.36, p = 0.00.

### Data Triangulation

Yin (2018) cites the use of different sources of evidence as a strength of case study research. Triangulation occurs in two ways. In an effort to enhance construct validity, data triangulation occurs within stage one as the qualitative data collection, which features analysis of documentation and artifacts, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires. In combination, these sources offer different views of the study's central phenomena—campus leaders' approach to advancing the completion initiative.

Further, the separate findings from each stage of the research are triangulated to answer the overarching problem explored within the study (Morse, 2003, p.199). In a

QUAL + quan study, the results from each completed stage are used to respond to the overarching question. In other words, the qualitative and quantitative findings show what is involved in the institutional-level policy development processes of Urban University campus leaders and how (if at all) they considered the specific needs of Black students, while also demonstrating the likelihood of the program to promote four-year degree completion among Black students.

**Validity**

Within the context of multiple methods, validity is defined as "the ability of the researcher to draw meaningful and accurate conclusions from all data in the study" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 146). This concept is integral to the pursuit of knowledge development. Further, Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) describe validity as a prominent issue in studies that feature multiple methods. Acknowledging the importance of establishing appropriate measures to assure accurate analysis and interpretation of data, this research relies on recommendations provided by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) to appropriately address the subject of validity, thereby incorporating procedures from both the qualitative and quantitative paradigms. Multiple sources of data were collected for the qualitative analysis. Additionally, the quantitative stage of this research follows rigorous model specification procedures, also a known validity threat minimizer (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

<div align="center">

**Limitations**

</div>

As with most research studies, there are several limitations to the current inquiry. While the qualitative data collection effort is not intended to produce generalizable results, the quantitative stage seeks generalization to a degree. However, these data

represent one cohort from one institution, leaving space for critique of the applicability of these findings to other institutions. Also, examining outcomes for one 4Years2Finish class or cohort poses considerations for cohort bias. However, time constraints prevent investigating additional cohorts. Administrators and policymakers should exercise caution when interpreting this study's findings, as the results are not intended to provide evidence of causal relationships. Other data limitations include the limits on secondary administrative data that prevent researchers from capturing other exogenous variables that may impact completion (Chan, 2019). As cited in the review of literature, faculty engagement and campus climate are shown to impact Black student persistence and completion; however, they will not be included in the statistical models in stage two of this analysis. Prior research also indicates a number of institution-level characteristics impact Black student completion; however, due to the study's main focus on the 4Years2Finish program, these predictors are not supported in this administrative dataset and not included in this analysis.

## Chapter Summary

In summary, this dissertation aims to explore the organizational policy process and the student outcomes associated with a major policy initiative at a moderately selective, urban institution. This chapter provided an overview of the study's methods and research design. The study's guiding research questions were reiterated along with context and rationale for choosing the case study site. In addition to outlining the analytical approach, this section includes details of model specification and variable selection in support of the results presented in chapter four. The chapter concludes by outlining some of the limitations of the data and methods used in this analysis.

**Chapter IV**

**Findings**

As mentioned in earlier chapters, this research is broadly organized around three primary foci: 1) postsecondary institutions as organizations; 2) campus leaders as organizational actors and change agents; and, 3) Black student degree completion. While prior literature has examined change within organizations, organizational leadership, and student outcomes separately, few studies offer findings on these topics combined and contextualized within a specific institutional context. The purpose of this research is to show what was involved in the policy process surrounding the institution's adoption of a campus-wide completion strategy and to understand better how this strategy impacts Black student graduation outcomes.

The findings from this study are organized into two major sections, each one featuring results from one of two stages of analysis. Each section of results supports one of the study's research questions:

1) What was involved in the institutional-level policy processes of Urban University campus leaders as they set out to introduce a campus-wide completion strategy? And, to what extent did they specifically consider Black student completion during this process?

2) To what extent does participation in the programmatic intervention (4Years2Finish) affect the likelihood of degree completion for Black students at the Urban University?

**Research Question One**

This case study is bound—timewise—from 2012, the beginning of the policy process to 2018, when the first cohort graduated. The case narrative begins with the installation of a new provost in the University's academic affairs unit and the unit's decision to adopt Complete College America's 15 to Finish model as the prevalent mechanism through which the institution would seek to improve student success related outcomes (i.e., excess credit hours and low four-year graduation rates).

Through the themes offered below, the inquiry necessarily follows UU's campus leaders through several of the basics of a policy process, including 1) problem identification; 2) selection of policy options; 3) policy adoption; 4) policy implementation; and, 5) policy evaluation (Benson & Jordan, 2015). Several of these components also align with the information provided to administrators in Complete College America's Implementation Guide for 15 to Finish programs. CCA encourages administrators to 1) know the problem; 2) generate buy-in, and 3) create an action plan (completecollege.org). This policy process resulted in the development of 4Years2Finish, a program that does not stray far from CCA's 15 to Finish model requiring students to earn 30 credits per year. A key feature added to UU's iteration of the model is the Fixed-Rate Tuition option, which gives students the opportunity to lock-in tuition rates when they opt into the program. To maintain eligibility, program participants must follow a degree map specifically designed to aid participants in their quest to earn 30 credits per year for four years.

As stated earlier in this paper, 4Years2Finish serves as a clear example of the application of the 15 to Finish model in a real-life setting among a variety of contextual factors. Urban University exemplifies a rising research university with one of the most

racially diverse student bodies in the country. UU also represents a historically white institution with a steady record of lower graduation rates among its Black student population. This paper examines what happened as this institution, within this context, adopted and implemented a campus-wide policy to address completion. Though the initiative only served first-time, full-time students, the six years characterizing the policy process represented a time of sweeping change for the organization. The introduction of 4Years2Finish marked what Kezar (2014) would call a *Second-order Change* for the institution. This type of change is defined as a significant adjustment that requires "underlying values, assumptions, structures, processes, and culture to be addressed" (Kezar, 2014, p. 71). The findings detailed in the following section demonstrate many of the nuanced facets of this type of change throughout the policy process, relaying the leadership approaches and organizational experiences captured through this case study inquiry. Table 2, which contains the list of study participants, is presented again below for reference.

Table 2

*Study Participants*

| Participant Pseudonym | Position | Race and Gender | Length of Service at UU |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dr. Hill | Senior-level Admin | White woman | 2012-2019 |
| Dr. Ellison | Senior-level Admin | White woman | 1997/2013-2019 |
| Leann | Director | White woman | 2010-2019 |
| Devon | Former Academic Advisor/Current Program Director | Black man | 2016-2019 |
| Dr. Gold | Former Director/Current Faculty | White man | 1988-2019 |
| Kelly | Program Director | White woman | 2012-2019 |
| Katrina | Advisor | Black woman | 2017-2019 |
| Allison | Program Director | White woman | 2008-2019 |
| Regina | Assistant Director/Instructor | Hispanic Woman | 2012-2019 |

**Qualitative Themes**

The next section of the chapter covers the results of the study's qualitative analysis. Three major themes were identified during the qualitative phase of this research. Resulting from inductive and deductive analysis of both the case study artifacts and the data collected from interview participants, each theme is comprised of multiple categories that lend to an understanding of the larger concept. Each theme also responds to research question one, showing either '*what was involved*' or '*the extent to which Black students were considered*' in the policy process.

**Theme One: Reciprocal Relationship Between Organizational Completion Culture and the Policy Process**

While the early 2000s characterize a time when higher education leaders focused on access, the 2010s reflect an increase in encouraged or required efforts to shift their focus from college access to student success, often making persistence and degree

completion a higher priority than was the case in the past. As demonstrated by President Obama's higher education reform efforts, this heightened awareness of institutional performance outcomes was evident on a national level. The discourse and programming at the federal level translated to increased attentiveness to degree related outcomes across the states. In Texas, this was reflected by the enhanced focus on completion in THECB's second iteration of its strategic plan for higher education (i.e., 60X30TX).

While the best policies and practices to achieve performance goals, are often at an institution's discretion, some form of policy adoption is usually required to transform the institutional foci in support of student success. In this study, the data reflect a nuance in policy adoption not commonly explored in the higher education literature, which is the *Reciprocal Relationship Between Organizational Completion Culture and the Policy Process.* This theme highlights how organizational completion culture influences institutional policy work and vice versa. Of note is the intentional use of the term 'completion culture' to signify the attitudes, beliefs, discourse, and actions related to student success and graduation during this time, as opposed to the overarching campus culture or climate.

This theme is supported by two major categories: 1) taking a comprehensive policy approach; and, 2) shifting organizational completion culture. The analysis shows how earlier in the policy process organizational culture influenced administrative decision-making in terms of problem identification and the policy approach to improving graduation rates. However, later in the process, the policy shifted the culture from one that supports a large population of commuting and part-time students to one with a strong focus on FTIC students completing degrees was the priority at that time.

**Taking a comprehensive approach.** In many ways, the data show how that approach to completion was indicative of the organizational culture. The policy artifacts demonstrate how many of the years before 2012 were spent on very broad, sweeping changes designed to raise the profile of the institution and achieve status as a top research university. The data also show that when the program was in its earliest phases, student success administrators viewed completion issues much like they viewed other institutional change efforts, through a lens they believed to be race-neutral.

By 2012, the university's low graduation rates had become sort of an 'institutional albatross' for UU's senior leadership. As one of the program directors, Kelly, who began her tenure at UU that year, shared in her interview: "*during that time they were really just trying to push those graduation rates.*" Prior to 2012, the institutional leadership had made significant headway in raising the university's profile, and low completion did not align with the vision of the newly minted Tier I Research institution. For an institution seeking national prominence, the issue had to be solved. In a 2012 speech, UU's president described the completion issue as "*the single measure keeps us from making advances on the USN&WR rankings.*" During her interview, Dr. Ellison also expressed the view that shifting the focus to completion was "*just the right thing to do.*" As a result, the leadership galvanized the community around student completion and made it a priority. As stated in a 2019 New York Times article featuring the institution's approach to improving graduation outcomes, *"[the campus president] had made lifting [the university's] rate a no-excuse priority.*"

UU's graduation rates were among the lowest in the state; in fact, they were lower than both peer institutions, which were more similar in size and scope and non-peer

institutions that maintained smaller enrollment numbers and were less well-resourced. Taking note of this pattern, Dr. Hill used this data to garner more attention within the state legislature to the institution's completion:

>*I even spoke to the Senate and said, you know, completion rates, graduation, six-year graduation rates at Texas, Texas State University, Sam Houston university are higher than us...How can it be? So I was trying to prime them to get agitated and concerned about that and build an interest in really focusing on raising our graduation rates.*

As the national and state conversation continued to shift toward a focus on graduation, there was increasing institutional pressure to place attention on this area. Dr. Ellison recalled: "*well, I think at that time, certainly, there was...it was a national conversation, as well as a state and institutional conversation about the need to improve completion rates, we needed to get more students graduated.*"

It was also evident by 2012 that the institution's student body was among the most racial and ethnically diverse in the state. However, the issue of completion was not framed around racial disparities in completion or centered in any way around Black students having the lowest completion rates. Through this analysis, it became evident that the focus was on the institution's four-year and six-year rates, generally, with the reason being that they were so low in the aggregate sense. Further, though institutional data played an instrumental role in identifying the policy problem, the study data do not reflect consideration of which demographic populations fared the worst. Dr. Hill reflected on her early examination of institutional data, explaining how low completion and the accumulation of excess credit hours was a problem, largely, for most students:

*"So I asked for the data on our degree completion, asked for the data on*

*our accumulated credit hours for students when they graduate, and,*

*frankly, was disturbed and alarmed when I saw those data because it was*

*very obvious that students were taking...you know...our six-year*

*completion percentage was somewhere around 43 or 44 percent."*

According to data from the institution's research office, the four-year graduation rate for

FTIC students, at that time, was 18 percent—12 percent for Black students. Dr. Ellison

echoed Dr. Hill's sentiments as she conveyed what they were looking at, in terms of data,

in the beginning:

"*what we saw in the data was that not nearly enough students were taking*

*15 hours a semester... And so that, I think, in our minds made it essential*

*to use what had been a successful campaign for the University of Hawaii,*

*for example, 15 to Finish.*" Stating further: "*we decided that we needed a*

*comprehensive program, that would really help—all students—put things*

*together.*"

This response was reiterated further during interviews with mid-level and

frontline staff who conveyed the general nature of completion-related messaging and

communications. Allison said: *"at that time, our graduation rate was being heavily*

*scrutinized because it wasn't great at all."* Dr. Gold recalled similar notions, adding that

the state had some influence on the level of attention being drawn to this issue: "*yeah,*

*there were some things coming down from Austin, that we had to deal with...indicating*

*that we weren't doing this alone, but that this was they were trying to do...raise these*

*graduation rates.*"

In addition to the discourse surrounding the topic, early efforts to get students

closer to completion focused on removing individual barriers for *any* student who was

close to graduation, regardless of any identity characteristic. According to Allison:

> "*I'm on a committee that—and this all kind of started around that time—*
>
> *where we had to...they would send us a spreadsheet of the students who*
>
> *were about to hit the graduation timeline, and we had—well, we still have*
>
> *to do this—we had to have a note for each one...are they going to*
>
> *graduate within the frame, the timeframe, and, if not, then why.*"

Concerning the extent to which Black students were considered in the problem

identification phase of the process, the analysis does not reflect an explicitly articulated

or apparent concern or acknowledgment of this student population. There were instances

in the data that represent this lack of clarity. For example, when asked how African

American completion goals, in relation to the 60X30TX plan, were considered in

decision-making and strategic planning around student success programming, Dr. Hill's

response does not clearly articulate how or if Black completion was distinctly factored.

There was, however, an acknowledgment of the racial gap in completion and some

articulation of her thinking about 4Years2Finish's relationship to outcomes for

underrepresented students:

> "*Well one of the things I'm really proud of when I looked at the data last*
>
> *year, is that there is no gap now, here...between completion by*
>
> *our...particularly, our African American students and our white students.*
>
> *There's essentially no difference—now they complete at the same level.*
>
> *And, so that means that we—and, many of them sign up for*

*[4Years2Finish]...so, for me, it, it's appeared—when we put it*

*together...because I was thinking...are we putting together the kinds of*

*support things that would be a benefit, particularly for students that feel*

*like the university isn't necessarily addressing their needs. I hear this a lot*

*that we're not doing things that support financial needs, or we don't care,*

*or we're not paying attention... And, I felt like, [4Years2Finish] had pieces*

*to it that would resonate with underrepresented students who I think can*

*feel marginalized here.*

Essentially, you gain a sense that the executive leaders maintained awareness of the

different needs of distinct student populations regarding student success, but did not

specifically maintain consciousness of Black students, or any particular racial group,

when it came to addressing campus-wide student completion. This notion becomes

increasingly evident as Dr. Hill further explains her thoughts on the subject, describing

how underrepresented students have equal access to the benefits UU affords: "*Here,*

*they're in the club, and they're just as important as any student. And, with what we're*

*trying to do, they get the same benefit, they get the same advising, they get the same*

*everything. And so, that was one way that I looked at it.*

This data point from Dr. Ellison also captures the notion of how senior leadership thought

4Years2Finish could support the population of underserved students:

*"there were a lot of things happening, but not in a very strategic or*

*coordinated way. So, for example, for low-income and first-generation*

*students, we had and still have [programs]...you know, different*

*things...we have an office that works with veterans. And so we had all of*

*these entities, all kinds of trying different things...and there were lots of*

*efforts going on campus to address, you know, different populations of*

*students who had different needs...the problem was, they were just all*

*happening in isolation. And there was nothing really to pull the big*

*picture together for students."*

Only one participant, Regina, spoke directly to her awareness of Black students

having lower rates than other racial groups, a statistic which she claims to have noticed

on her own, not as a result of any institutional communication. "*I didn't realize how low*

*graduation rates were for African American students. I had no idea until I looked at the*

*numbers myself to see exactly just what it was, and I didn't realize... and, I was just*

*astonished.*" Other than this sentiment expressed by Regina, the data analysis did not

reveal race or Black students to be a specific concern in relation to the broader

completion issue.

**Shifting organizational completion culture**. Before the 2010s, many campuses

possessed less of an organized culture around student success or a focus on *timely*

graduation. This phenomenon is even more common for campuses that transitioned from

commuter to residential colleges—as was the case for UU—inevitably forcing student

success administrators to actively sway the prevailing campus ideologies surrounding

student completion to succeed in policy adoption and implementation. Changing cultural

aspects are no easy feat, and leaders were met with resistance in implementing

4Years2Finish. The campus-wide implementation of a 15 to Finish modeled program

required much of the organization to embrace the notion that students could complete

their degree in four years. Several points of data revealed that this was not a widely

accepted belief across the organization before 2012, including this one from Dr. Ellison: "*I think around that time our four-year graduation rate was...it was less than 20 point something, it was very, very low. And, at that time, there just wasn't a culture on our campus to even expect four-year graduation.*"

The attitudes and beliefs that permeated the organizational culture were largely representative of the institution's previous status as a commuter school, responsible for educating many of the area's part-time and working students. Participants shared how the campus culture featured an ethic of care for students, but maintained low expectations and less than enthusiastic attitudes around time to completion. Some mid-level campus administrators did not even see four-year graduation as the appropriate metric to gauge student success, Dr. Gold recalled his thoughts regarding the four-year completion rate: "*most people think it is a good metric. I did—do not...because you can increase graduation rates by lowering standards.*" He further explained the logic behind this sentiment: "*if we just start passing the students in our difficult courses. Our graduation rate will go up dramatically. We will produce, what I think, are poor engineer-- which will be a bad thing overall, and yet the metric would say we are doing a better job.*"

Before the implementation of 4Years2Finish, the data evidence two specific notions: 1) a lack of organizational culture in support of timely completion; and, 2) student success focused efforts—including several that support the needs of underserved students—were occurring isolation. However, the adoption and implementation of the 4Years2Finish program changed both the pragmatic and cultural underpinnings related to student success across the campus. Executive leaders described how the organizational attitudes and beliefs around student enrollment capacity and student success changed

with the advent of 4Years2Finish. Dr. Hill explains that with the advent of

4Years2Finish, "*faculty have seen that students can do it.*" The program helped four-year

graduation become a norm or an expectation. Dr. Ellison offered a similar sentiment in

reflecting on the years that past since the program began: "*the culture of the campus has*

*shifted so much to focus on student success, to focus on timely graduation.*"

As leaders began to push 4Years2Finish, they became increasingly aware of the

mindset around student enrollment capacity held across the organization. One of the main

concerns was around students' capacity to successfully manage more hours. Dr. Hill:

*Because what I was hearing [from institutional stakeholders] when I talked about it, was*

*everybody going, "Oh, no, our students can't finish...they have to work...they can't*

*take...they couldn't be successful if they take more than nine or 10 or 12 hours"... And I*

*thought, well, that's just selling our students short."* Dr. Ellison shared similar feedback:

"*We heard from [staff] that faculty members or even parents were routinely telling*

*students: 'oh, take 12 hours...take an easy load...you're doing this...you're working or*

*doing other things, you know, take it easy.*'" As a result, there was much emphasis placed

on changing this mindset. As Dr. Ellison also recalled, *"there was a real focus on shifting*

*the culture of the campus to expect timely graduation."*

Also identified in the analysis were how student success efforts influenced the

language around completion. Like the senior administrators, mid-level and student-facing

staff repeatedly framed their response to questions regarding African American students

by using proxies such as minority, first-generation, underserved, underrepresented,

diverse, or identifiers in place of Black or African American in racial discourse. The use

of the term 'achievement gap' to refer to lower rates of Black completion was also noticeable.

Further, the data show how later in the policy process, UU leaders increasingly emphasized African American student outcomes as markers of success in public-facing discourse. The adaptations brought on through 4Years2Finish paved the way for increased data disaggregation, and this influence was evident within the policy artifact data as the institution's attention to racial diversity became increasingly advantageous, there was a recognizable shift in how the organization articulated Black student outcomes. Despite the lack of apparent concern around Black student completion in the beginnings of the process, organizational actors explicitly expressed how the program (post-implementation) fostered success for Black students:

*From fall 2013*: "*To those who question whether our commitment to minorities and our Tier One status are in conflict, I would like to offer an important data point. Despite having an excellent historically black-serving institution, Texas Southern, right across the street, we serve more African American students than [other leading universities] combined!*"

*From fall 2014*: "*Looking at the other end of the pipeline, we are awarding more degrees than ever before...And we are awarding them to students from historically underserved populations. Even when the high school pipeline for African American college students declined, we helped more of them to succeed and earn their [Urban University] degrees.*"

*From fall 2015*: "*Yet, our commitment to serving students from underserved communities remains as strong as ever, growing by 34 percent since 2008. During a year when high*

*school graduation rates for African Americans declined overall in the state, our African*

*American enrollment has grown by 10 percent.”*

This quote from Dr. Hill from a campus news release announcing that the program had

won a Star Award also exemplifies this notion at the senior leadership level: *“The*

*[4Years2Finish] program has shown outstanding success, especially among our African*

*American students.”*

     ***Racial data disaggregation.*** In the organizational narrative around completion

after 4Years2Finish, acknowledgments of racial disparities and African American

students became more present as the program entered the phase where evaluation was

possible. Student data became an increasingly important component of program

operations. This also became an area where racial differences in completion were

acknowledged. Leann: *“the first year, it was just getting up and running, and general*

*broad views of program benefits, and then as we were moving through and we were*

*looking at success markers, and that's where you could start to really see the disparity,*

*and I feel like our conversations changed when our analyst joined our team...She's*

*phenomenal...and, so the way that she was able to pull data together for us and help*

*create a narrative of what—what, I guess what our landscape looked like and like where*

*we needed to focus our efforts or where we were doing well in terms of like removing*

*achievement gaps.”* This is in contrast, however, to the mid-level staff who report not

disaggregating data by race or ethnicity or reviewing data in this fashion. Kelly shared

her interest in seeing racially disaggregated data:  “I would be interested in looking at our

departmental numbers because I don't think I've ever looked at it broken down like that.”

Across the data, there were several indications that, in addition to moving forward with a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to student success, the institution is also moving toward more conscious efforts. Dr. Hill described her efforts to garner feedback from Black and Hispanic students while also acknowledging that there is work to be done: *"I also try to learn everything I can about what the expectations are from various groups of students and talk a lot to African American students here and Hispanic students here. And—and, we have a long way to go...I can tell you that."* Additionally, Leann shared some thoughts on the future direction of student success unit:

*"We recently had a conversation though at one of [Dr. Ellison's] team meetings. And we were talking about our student populations and talking about ideas to kind of like keep students engaged and also, thinking like how do we use the technology and Navigate to...to be more targeted in our approach to different student populations and the messaging for them. We want to think more about how our students learn and how our students do well...What are the different attributes or what are other programs in place across the country for affinity groups, different kinds of affinity groups and then what makes sense for our population and so we're taking a look at a bunch of peer institutions and looking at best practices and so I'll be interested to see kind of what comes from that research to see what our next step is..."*

***Focus on first time in college students.*** Black students were not the only population impacted by the cultural shift brought on by the policy. The data reflects an increased focus on full-time, first time in college (FTIC) students, the population of students that matter most to the calculation of graduation rates. As Allison said: *"I think there's been a greater focus placed on the FTIC population...that's a lot of what's*

*determining our retention rate and our graduation rate, so as far as reporting and*

*tracking and meetings and programs that are created and everything...that's all really*

*focused around the FTIC population.*" Devon reflected on the current state compared to

the institution's prior reputation as a commuter campus, stating: "*we've seen a complete*

*reversal*" in terms of student focus. While this seems like a natural consequence of the

move to focus on degree production, participants expressed concern with the unintended

consequences these shifts have on part-time students, working students, and students

whose academic success does not align well with the 15toFinish model. This data point

from Allison showcases this notion well:

> "*The pushback we were getting from art students, in particular, is that*
>
> *many of them are intentionally part-time. At least, that's our reality in this*
>
> *department. So some of them were getting really irritated that we were*
>
> *encouraging them to take more hours. So we've had to be a little more*
>
> *sensitive with those conversations. We definitely suggest it, you know,*
>
> *four-year degree plan or completion in a more timely manner, but with so*
>
> *many students who are working, in particular, in a studio...they spend a*
>
> *lot of time in their studio, you know, working on their art and that's*
>
> *incredibly time intensive. So adding more academic requirements to that*
>
> *just sometimes it's not feasible, especially if they're also working.*"

**Theme Two: The Role of Converging External Policy Influences**

This theme centers on the role of external influences on the organizational

leaders' thoughts and decision-making regarding policy solutions for student success

reform. Specifically, how a variety of influences external to the organization impacted

completion strategizing and ideas about the best approaches to addressing completion related issues such as the accumulation of excess credit hours and low graduation rates. Three primary influences were found across the qualitative data: 1) Complete College America; 2) New Texas Legislation (Texas House Bill (HB) 29); and, 3) Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) Strategic Plan. These influences form the three subthemes or categories for this theme. It is important to note that public institutions are required to take specific external influences, such as state laws, policies, into account during decision-making (Kezar, 2014). However, it is also important to unpack how and which influences drive leadership action. Further, the data reflect an unequal amount of weight from each influence. Particularly, these data reflect how Complete College America and Texas House Bill (HB) 29 were more of a consideration than the state strategic plan for higher education, ultimately converging to form the basis of the 4Years2Finish program.

**Complete College America.** The prior knowledge and experiences of organizational actors appeared to be a primary influence on institutional decision-making around student completion and the adoption of a 15 to Finish model as the university's banner student success program. The decision to join forces with a policy intermediary— Complete College America—and the selection of the15toFinish model were based on a variety of factors, including prior relationships with the organization. In this case, the relationship between UU and CCA proved to be strong. Contextually the relationship makes sense, CCA was familiar to senior-level leaders, and it is not uncommon for an institution to adopt a model that has shown success on other campuses. As Dr. Hill described her role as the lead executive administrator in 4Years2Finish, it was evident

that her background developing policy at the state-level and prior experiences with the

policy intermediary, Complete College America, significantly impacted her motivation to

approach the completion issue at UU:

> *I had served as [in a state-level leadership role], and we were very much*
>
> *focused on degree completion in [said state], that was a big, big emphasis.*
>
> *And so, I got very involved in Complete College America, got very*
>
> *involved working with them as a content expert, and helped spearhead*
>
> *initiatives in colleges [across the state] that focused on helping students*
>
> *be successful and completing their degree.*

The senior-level executive also described her time working on assignment at the

University of Hawaii and witnessing first-hand the success associated with their 15 to

Finish program. This impact carried over to the student success area, as Dr. Ellison also

alluded to CCA while describing her primary influences in program development:

> "*When I first got the assignment to basically do research and help design*
>
> *what the components of the program would be, I certainly looked at other,*
>
> *you know, peer institutions or institutions in Texas, looking to see what*
>
> *they were doing and asking what are—you know, just other top tier*
>
> *institutions across the country doing...but, I also looked a lot at what*
>
> *Complete College America was putting out in their research—their Game*
>
> *Changers, the GPS strategies...a lot about 15 to Finish, which is a core*
>
> *component of our program.*"

**Texas House Bill (HB) 29.** State-level policy influences were also key factors in

deciding the components of 4Years2Finish. In 2013, Texas passed legislation requiring

public colleges and universities within the state to offer a fixed-rate tuition option to students. As one of the state's college affordability policy efforts, House Bill (HB) 29, also called the Fixed-Tuition Price Plan, would become highly influential in the design of the 4Years2Finish program. Because the fixed-tuition plan was a state mandate, senior administrators were forced to decide how they would fulfill the new requirement per the newly passed law. Dr. Hill stated: "*Administration and Finance were working—I think—in collaboration with some folks over here...on developing what the four-year fixed-rate offering would be—well, what that would be at [UU]...what the actual rate would be and figuring out what the parameters surrounding the rate would be. And so, as we were planning out [4Years2Finish], a decision was made to pull that right in as a part of [4Years2Finish] and use it to incentivize four-year graduation.*"

Outside of the executive leaders, several of the directors and advisors made mention of the fixed-rate, although it is only optional for students, demonstrating how the 4Years2Finish program and the fixed-rate tuition plan became synonymous. Devon shared during his interview: "*When I first got here, I thought it [4Years2Finish] was great that students could use it for, you know, the fixed-rate...as we know, tuition goes up...so with this, you get locked in at a certain point.*" And Leann conveyed the following:

"*The program had to have incentives for students to buy-in. And the incentive they decided to go with was to effectively reduce tuition—so the students get to pay a fixed-tuition. And, for those colleges with higher tuition rates, you get to pay the rates everyone else pays.*"

It also became a talking point for messaging and marketing for 4Years2Finish. A feature story from the institution's daily newspaper highlighted the fixed-rate:

*"incoming freshmen who choose to sign up for the [4Years2Finish]*

*program can also choose to take part in the fixed four-year tuition plan*

*that serves as a budgeting tool to effectively pay for the overall tuition at a*

*fixed rate, even if it is over 15 semester credit hours."*

In a speech to the campus, the UU president said in reference to 4Years2Finish: *"just as a reminder, the program offers fixed tuition, intensive advising and aggressive support to ensure student success*."

**THECB strategic plan.** As highlighted earlier in the case study, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board also maintains a statewide strategic plan for higher education, which sets state and regional objectives around completion. However, the data reflect a significant difference between the uptake of the fixed-rate mandate and the emphasis placed on the goals outlined in the strategic plan. Framing the plan as a policy lever, Dr. Hill described the usefulness of the state's completion goals in relaying success imperatives and the need for 4Years2Finish to campus constituents:

*"I had a history of that coming from [another state] where I worked with*

*their state commission to develop their state plan for higher education,*

*and it was focused on very similar goals, right, so I already knew about*

*statewide goals to increase the number of people who have a post-*

*secondary degree. So that was not new stuff to me; in fact, I see it as a*

*lever, a policy lever to help sell the idea of [4Years2Finish] to faculty"* ...

*"I've used it also, when I worked on the funding commission, at the state level with the coordinating Board, to argue that they ought to incentivize completion in better ways."*

Leann also shared how the state's strategic plan played a role in the early policy development process surrounding 4Years2Finish: "*that was definitely part of the original charge, and it's mentioned in a lot of the documentation that I had when I was creating it...it was always couched in that lens and through the lens of student success.*"

However, those in roles outside of academic affairs were less familiar with the state's strategic plan. For example, most of the student-facing staff were only aware that the institution is accountable to the state in some capacity regarding completion; however, this could be attributed to many factors. Kelly, for example, expressed not having strong knowledge of the strategic plan or specific completion goals: "*honestly, I would say that I don't know a lot, I go to some meetings for [a different campus student success effort]. And sometimes we talk about it in those meetings...*" She also shared that this may be due to the length of tenure or proximity to senior leaders: "*when I first started, I probably wasn't interacting with those types of administrators, right? So maybe at that time, like when they were implementing 4Years2Finish,  maybe they did have conversations about that, but I feel like now it's just...we're just rolling along like, this is what we are doing here.*"

Only one interviewee was aware of the racialized nature of the state's completion objectives or the focus on African American student completion. Regina, again, was the only staff person that expressed some specific awareness of the strategic plan, describing how her participation in a professional development session for her role in the career

center increased her knowledge in this area: "*the area consortium center—so it's about 14 different universities in the area that always get together, and we have professional development, and there was actually a symposium about 60x30TX. I had a whole bunch of those 60x30 brochures that talked about completion and things like that.*"

**Theme Three: Leading Through the Complexities of Organizational Change**

As is the case with many targeted policy efforts, a significant amount of change was required to realize the campus' goal of improving completion rates. Identified within the data, were multiple complicated leadership efforts needed to shift organizational structures and processes to meet the strategic priorities. Creating conditions conducive to launching a scalable program required investment across several areas and required an investment in resources to achieve strategic priorities providing mechanisms that facilitate shifts in culture. Four subthemes or categories comprise this theme: 1) Dedicating organizational resources; 2) Coordinating campus student success services; 3) Engaging with internal stakeholders; and, 4) Navigating buy-in and resistance.

**Dedicating organizational resources.** The following subtheme illustrates the organizational resources allocated to take 4Years2Finish from planning to implementation; this included: financial resources, technology-related resources, and labor in terms of human skill and leadership resources. While the campus had previously maintained student success programs, the development of 4Years2Finish involved the creation of a department for student success*,* immense effort in terms of engagement with internal stakeholders*,* and significant changes within every individual college a with specific attention to transforming the approach to academic advising.

A part of the organizational process for implementing the 4Years2Finish model was the creation of a new department focused solely on student success. "*So we created a unit focused on implementing [4Years2Finish] for that serves kind of as coaches to students—they certainly don't replace their academic advisors—but, certainly they do coaching and outreach...They do student success workshops, and they do the annual monitoring and those types of things.*"

Leann, hired as the inaugural director, led the charge of developing the infrastructure around 4Years2Finish. The early focus of this unit was on the development of software systems that would support the program. Leann shared: "*I had to build a registration point of entry for a program, and I had experience working with developers already...So my initial role was figuring out what had to exist in PeopleSoft so that students could join the program.*" This also required multiple other iterations of development, including the back-end functions that would support the process for monitoring and reporting eligibility:

> "*And so we had multiple phases—and, so initially like, how do students enter into the program? How do we capture that how do we restrict or limit entrance based on criteria? And then, the second part of that was developing the back-end, which is where our advisors were going to review students for eligibility and make determinations each academic year on continuing eligibility. And then, there were the reports that need to be run from the colleges, etc...*"

The department was also responsible for the mass marketing campaign aimed at convincing students, and often their parents, of anticipated benefits the program. Leann explains how generating awareness was instrumental to the success of the program:

> "*just sitting there and thinking about the entrance point for any freshman student, and then how do you attack that? how do you make sure that there is (theoretically) no way that they wouldn't have heard about this program? ...Because there's only one chance to join.*"

> The marketing effort also included an email campaign that used analytics to understand how students engage with or respond to communications. Leann described this feature: "*in terms of our emails, our email system allows us to see click rates and all these different things, and so we use analytics to figure out which pieces do well which don't...and then we start streamlining our pieces...we get a collective understanding of that data and use that to influence the way that we market.*"

This immense effort and investment in communication resulted in over 1,900 students opting into the first cohort of 4Years2Finish participants.

**Coordinating campus student success services.** Executive leaders responsible for the program reflected on the outcomes and shared how one of the main unintentional features that came as a result of 4Years2Finish was structure, specifically with the addition of the department of student success. Dr. Ellison:

> "*So we, we've got 4Years2Finish staff now, who can you know, tie it together...and we're talking to students looking at where they are in terms of their progress...we have people who can say, 'you look*

*like you're falling off track'...people who, in addition to their*

*academic advisor, who is focusing more on academic types of*

*issues...there's another layer of support to help connect students*

*with resources.*"

There had been efforts to support student success on the UU campus prior to the

adoption of this initiative, and the options continued to grow over the six-year

period. Dr. Ellison stated: "*there are academic reasons that students are*

*progressing or don't graduate in four years, and there are certain there are*

*absolutely non-academic reasons. And, and the university now has programs that*

*address all of these factors.*" With the student success infrastructure further

developed and culture changed, the institution seems to be moving forward

toward even more cohesive efforts to guide students on the path to completion.

These efforts will be coordinated through a new software system called *Navigate*.

Dr. Ellison described how the software would aid their campus efforts to be more

intrusive and identify students who risk getting off track:

"*we now heavily use Navigate to identify high-risk students and do*

*campaigns to...to really focus on the students who are...according*

*to our predictive analytics...not only are they not on track, but*

*maybe there are other things that are putting them at risk.*"

Further, in a presentation given by executive leadership in 2017, student success

strategies were outlined under the umbrella of 'Timely Completion Pathways,' which

includes 4Years2Finish as a central feature. Among the other strategies listed were

*Financial Support Incentives*, *Informed Choice Major and Career Incentives, Proactive*

*Advising, High Impact Engagement Opportunities*, and *Academic Support,* which even featured a nod to the Texas Higher Education Board's Minority Male Incentives Grant.

**Engaging with internal stakeholders.** The data show how the senior and mid-level leaders responsible for 4Years2Finish put forth significant effort in maintaining a coordinated effort to communicate with internal stakeholders in the adoption, implementation, and management of the program. This engagement occurred in a variety of ways, including multiple meetings negotiating the policy terms with nearly every unit on the campus. Outside of Academic Affairs and the academic units, this involved Student Affairs—specifically enrollment management and orientation—Faculty Affairs—specifically the undergraduate student success committee, and the Office of Student Financial Services. Regarding the units required to make 4Years2Finish work, Leann shared: "*it's everyone from student business services to orientation to admissions.*"

Dr. Ellison worked alongside key stakeholders, navigating the material and structural needs associated with adding a guided pathways approach to each college's degree offerings.

> "*I worked with the faculty senate...I was very much in contact with the undergraduate committee—the chair was very supportive. We worked with the undergraduate associate deans and the guiding leadership of every college. We even worked with the Student Government Association. And I'm sure there are others, such as...Student Affairs...So it was very much a collaborative effort in terms of making sure we had all the right components in place. And then, working with the college's to make sure that everyone who would be kind of promoting it and supporting students.*"

A substantial portion of their time and effort was spent researching the campus' use of degree planning tools and subsequently developing a template for the 4Years2Finish degree map that would be required for all participating majors on campus. Dr. Ellison: *"we did an inventory...so I've got binders...I probably still have them somewhere with all of the old maps...I worked with the Student Success subcommittee of the Undergraduate Committee, which is part of Faculty Senate to help come up with— well not the content—because the college's needed to develop their own the content—but a simple four-year map...eight boxes...fall and spring for four-years."* On the cross-departmental engagement required to support the initiative, Leann added: *"We worked a lot with the Bursar's Office because they would be the ones doing the tuition rate and putting, assigning the tuition, right to calculate using the tuition rate to calculate students' fee bills and answering questions about that."*

Prior to the roll-out, the leadership in the department of student success trained faculty and staff in each college or department on how to implement and manage the 4Years2Finish program within their unit. Presentations outlining the program structure and requirements were developed to guide this process. Leann described this effort:

> *"Before we rolled it out to students, we did training for every*
>
> *single college and every unit that would be that would need to*
>
> *answer students questions or need to be involved in some*
>
> *way...residence halls, orientation leaders...we tried to touch every*
>
> *unit on campus that would be student-facing or need to answer*
>
> *questions or need to implement a component."*

And these efforts continued multiple times per year as Leann also conveyed the cyclical nature of the 4Years2Finish training effort:

> "*And then, at the end of each year, we do kind of a roadshow where we go to all of the colleges to remind them how to review students in PeopleSoft because it's been a year...we go at the end of the review cycle to capture anything that they find frustrating. And then we work over that year to try to remove those barriers so that when we go back for the roadshow again, we're telling them how things work now.*"

**Navigating buy-in and resistance.** The analysis also shows the significant effort required to generate buy-in of the initiative—a common feature of change initiatives. Acceptance across the organization varied; while some departments more immediately adopted the policy and integrated it into their unit, others remained resistant. For example, Katrina shared that her department the 4Years2Finish degree plan was not far outside the scope of their usual practice: "*it's wasn't really difficult to navigate through because we typically try to encourage 15 hours anyway.*" Leann also communicated how buy-in and resistance varied by college:

> "*there are some colleges who are naturally on board because it's a provost initiative and because it's the right thing to do...there are other colleges that were not, and it doesn't matter what you ask, they're just not going to get on board.*"

While some colleges came on board voluntarily, several did not, requiring additional effort in securing their buy-in. Senior leadership, in combination with the department of student success, worked on a micro-level with each unit to address their

concerns until all were on board. The data show some consensus among the mid-level leaders interviewed that the senior administrators spearheading the 4Years2Finish initiative displayed strong leadership skills during this process. Directors, coordinators, and advisors shared how involved Dr. Ellison was in the process, and they either worked with her directly or received messaging from her via email regarding the student success initiative. Dr. Gold, who was a director in charge of undergraduate success at this time, shared a very clear recollection of efforts to include campus stakeholders in the development process:

> "*Dr. Ellison and others from the provost's office, went to a great deal of trouble to explain what they were doing in [4Years2Finish] and how they were doing it. She came over to [our department] and met with faculty and advisors. In what I remember being a very long and contentious meeting where most of the faculty thought this was a bad idea and pushed back strongly argued against it—and even though I was against it as well—I was very impressed with her calmness. She carefully listened to and addressed our concerns—taking input and responding...I can remember...very clearly thinking, you know, we're pushing her really hard...I had pushed her one on one before that pretty hard as well, but they were pushing even harder than I had...She responded very effectively in terms of saying, 'Well, yes. But we think this is important, and here's why' and 'All right, that's a concern? Well, we will look into that'...those kinds of responses. She was very appropriate.*"

Various components of an institution's structure and culture are often impacted by the implementation of a major program or initiative, requiring organizational resources to shift to support these structures. In this case, the academic advising community of Urban University may have experienced the most dramatic shift in practice outside of those directly working in the academic affairs office. Given the parameters of the program and the general role of advisors in terms of guiding students toward completion, this is not surprising. According to Allison, the original intention was to not rely heavily on advisors to conduct the tedious work of checking each student's eligibility semester by semester: "*When this program was very first introduced to us, we were told advisors wouldn't have to do any of the reviews.*" However, the massive effort in individualized student attention required these staff to take on a great deal of work and responsibility to make the program work. These efforts were met with resistance as well; Allison described the climate around this change:

> "*Across campus, there was a lot of resistance when that changed, and the advisors did have to do the reviews. I wasn't resistant to that because I really wanted to be able to advocate for those students who earned less than 15 hours, so I was happy to do the reviews.*"

In addition to the added responsibilities and effort required, there was also an intentional effort to advance advising practice across the institution. Allison describes how advising became more intrusive and proactive:

> "*part of it was just the gathering of data, I think before this we weren't gathering as much data. Now I can't speak for the higher levels of the university, but as far as on the ground, in the trenches, gathering data on*

*each and every student and having advisors, you know, go into every*

*single student and not just go "oh yeah they're graduating, or they're not*

*but why..." and then write it out and send it in. So I think it just by forcing*

*that practice you know it does change how people operate, and it*

*encourages us to be more proactive in other ways too."*

With regard to changing practices, Allison offered her perspective on the ways in which 4Years2Finish altered advising efforts in her department:

*"So they're really wanting us to drill down and put why the students were*

*not graduating on time...and it forced advisors to talk to every single one*

*of them, you know?... sometimes students...if they know they're not*

*graduating anytime soon they don't bother, you know meeting with their*

*advisor...so it was just really good to make advisors do that and make it as*

*a regular part of our routine. I mean, I think advisors were operating on a*

*'whoever shows up to talk to me' type basis as far as who we talked to and*

*now we do a lot more proactive checking each person and making sure*

*we've checked in with them, so I think it kind of changed the culture a little*

*bit as far as what was expected."*

Kelly echoed similar thoughts on advising practice in her interview:

*"we will email you when you're when you are getting close to not meeting*

*the goal. We're going to email you if you don't come into advising because*

*we have to do those checks. We're going to email you and say like, "Hey, I*

*noticed that you know, you might be six hours short after your second*

*semester, what are your plans to make these hours up? ...so that you can*

*have that dialogue with an advisor, and sometimes just that reaching out*

*to the student helps...Because they don't necessarily all come in for*

*advising...we're doing kind of an early alert or trying to be proactive*

*instead of reactive.*"

Other advisors and program directors alluded to the shift to the more holistic advising approach. The change to holistic or intrusive advising did not, however, increase the focus on students' racial backgrounds. Kelly communicated how students are categorized for advising outreach in her department:

"*So we do lots of like different types of campaigns to get students into*

*advising...but we don't necessarily do it for any sort of targeted group.*

*Yeah, typically for...I mean...it's targeted populations like based on like*

*course completion or GPA or like something of that nature...but we*

*haven't necessarily done one that's like specifically based on racial or*

*ethnic population guidelines... I think it's a good idea and I'm not sure why*

*we don't, I don't get why people are scared to like say like 'we're going to*

*target a specific population'... like, do they know the data shows that might*

*be necessary?*"

These advising efforts are confounded by the work required to address complex student situations and ensure that 4Years2Finish participants have access to the courses they need.

## Research Question Two

Like many prior degree completion focused studies, logistic regression analysis was used to examine how the 4Years2Finish program affects the likelihood of completion

for first-time, full-time Black students who entered Urban University during the 2014-15

academic year. While multiple regressions were modeled using the study's full

quantitative data sample (n = 4,048) to examine the relationships among specified

variables, the last two regressions include only students who participated in the

4Years2Finish initiative (n = 1,973). The final model, in direct response to research

question two, examines the graduation outcomes for Black students in the sample of

4Years2Finish participants. Table 3 includes descriptive statistics for the complete

sample of administrative data from the university's Office of Institutional Research,

which is comprised of individual, student-level information for all degree-seeking, first-

time in college (FTIC) students who entered the university in 2014-2015.

### Results of the Binary Logistic Regression Analyses

The model specification process led to the identification of four independent

variables to be examined. Guided by these outcomes, as well as prior literature, several

regressions were performed to test the relationships between the variables and

completion. First, the possible predictor variables were selected for their strong

correlation or relation to the outcome variable of interest. Then, the predictor variables

were examined for multicollinearity so that the predictor variables included in the final

model were independent. While examining the pseudo $R^2$ for each, this basic model was

run several times with a different combination of predictor variables to ensure that the

final model was the model with the highest pseudo $R^2$ or best fit for the data.

To reflect the study's emphasis on Black student completion, the final model

(*shown in Table 6*) examined the impact of racial identity as a factor in four-year

graduation, focusing solely on African American students. Versus the model with only

semester 1 GPA, college of enrollment, and participation in 4Years2Finish, the inclusion of African American to the model resulted in fewer significant colleges, as the relation between Liberal Arts enrollment and completion present in prior models was no longer significant. However, Business (odds-ratio = 2.079764, p < .05) Architecture (odds-ratio =1.328267, p < .05), and Science and Math (odds-ratio =1.328267, p < .05) remained significant. Exploratory Studies majors served as the reference group for this set of variables.

The characteristic of being African American shows no significant relationship with four-year degree completion; however, semester 1 GPA and participation in the program continue to have a significant relationship. The pseudo $R^2$ for this model was equal to .1851. Holding the graduation plan, African American racial identity, and college of enrollment constant, the results show that a one-point increase in semester GPA increases the odds of graduation by 3.45 times. Further, holding semester 1 GPA, college of enrollment, and African American racial identity constant, the results show that participation in 4Years2Finish increased the odds of graduation in four-years by 1.629 times.

Table 5

*Logistic Regression of First Semester GPA, Participation in 4Y2F, College Enrolled, African American, and Graduation*

| Variable | Odds Ratio | Standard Error | (N=4,048) Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|
| First Semester GPA | 3.455391 | .179309 | 0.000 |
| Participation in 4Years2Finish | 1.629974 | .1192881 | 0.000 |
| | | | |
| Architecture | 1.814836 | .4891806 | 0.027 |
| Business | 2.093246 | .3584251 | 0.000 |
| Education | 1.144184 | .278471 | 0.580 |
| Engineering | 1.213408 | .1527912 | 0.124 |
| Hotel & Restaurant | 1.073257 | .2551603 | 0.766 |
| Liberal Arts | 1.219484 | .1254234 | 0.054 |
| Science & Math | 1.332195 | .1443936 | 0.008 |
| Technology | 1.224994 | .2144049 | 0.246 |
| | | | |
| African American | 1.136614 | .1351406 | 0.281 |
| Constant | .0201178 | .0034222 | 0.000 |

*Note. Full-time, First-time in College (FTIC) Students; Reference = Exploratory Studies; Significance: p<.05; Source: Urban University Office of Institutional Research.*

The final model (Table 6) examined the associations between the same variables among the population of 4Years2Finish students only. Within this sample (n=1,973), the African American identity variable remained insignificant[1]. First semester GPA and enrollment in the College of Business remained significant. Overall, the results of the logistic regression models show that participation in Years2Finish increased students' odds of graduation generally, but not explicitly for Black students.

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[1] logistic regression model shows significant results when examining only Hispanic students (odds-ratio = .7451404, p < .05) and only Asian American students (odds-ratio = 1.642436, p < .05), suggesting that program participation improves their odds of four-year graduation.

Table 6

*Logistic Regression of First Semester GPA, College Enrolled, African American, and Graduation for 4Years2Finish Only*

|  | | | (N=1,973) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Odds Ratio | Standard Error | Sig. |
| First Semester GPA | 4.316973 | .3658728 | 0.000 |
|  | | | |
| Architecture | 1.973491 | 2.281208 | 0.556 |
| Business | 2.154638 | .4982566 | 0.001 |
| Education | 1.499528 | .5666868 | 0.284 |
| Engineering | 1.06056 | .2024991 | 0.758 |
| Hotel & Restaurant | 1.26893 | .4234906 | 0.475 |
| Liberal Arts | 1.139728 | .1705557 | 0.382 |
| Science & Math | 1.301951 | .2063067 | 0.096 |
| Technology | 1.529945 | .4044818 | 0.108 |
|  | | | |
| African American | 1.083049 | .1844023 | 0.639 |
| Constant | .0167497 | .0045412 | 0.000 |

*Notes: Full-time, First-time in College (FTIC) Students; Reference = Exploratory Studies; Significance: p<.05*
*Source: Urban University Office of Institutional Research*

**Convergence of Findings**

One of the strengths of a multi-method approach is the ability to examine one phenomenon using multiple sources, thus increasing a study's validity. Researchers have posited how triangulation also helps bring clarity to research findings and reduces bias (Denzin, 1978). Citing several scholars, Josen and Jehn (2009) assert that "the essential assumption is that the validity of inquiry findings is enhanced when two or more methods that have offsetting biases are used to assess a given phenomenon, and the results converge or corroborate (Greene et al., 1989; Scandura and Williams, 2000)" (p. 126). The multi-method approach is also beneficial in the sense that it helps the researcher show a more complete illustration of a phenomenon (Jonsen & Jehn, 2009).

The qualitative themes shown above demonstrate part of the process undertaken to improve Urban University's four-year degree completion rates. The analysis highlights

the significant considerations and influences that guided campus administrators, as well as the magnitude of effort it took to shift numbers and the belief system. In an attempt to extend the study's findings beyond what can be captured through rigorous qualitative research, stage two of this research design featured quantitative analysis in the form of logistic regression.

Using the guiding conceptual framework as a lens, each set of findings were examined to identify conceptual linkages and 'lessons' reinforced from both. In this study, the quantitative analysis serves to supplement the qualitative findings by showing the outcomes associated with the organizational process (Jick, 1979). In cross-checking both sets of independent findings, this research arrives at this key takeaway: an intervention designed within the confines of an organization that engages in colorblindness around policy adoption may not directly improve or detract from Black student outcomes. Due to the model's capacity as a mechanism for change, a 15 to Finish program may be an efficient first-step in reorienting a campus toward completion; however, it cannot be the only or the last.

**Chapter Summary**

In closing, this chapter provided results from the two stages of analysis conducted to answer the study's research questions. There is a general view of the process and events that occurred in support of the 4Years2Finish program. While the implementation aligned closely with that of 15 to Finish modeled initiatives, the emergent themes demonstrate some of the nuances in organizational culture and leadership approach at Urban University. The results of the logistic regression analysis provided an opportunity to extend the case study beyond understanding the policy development process and gain

knowledge of the actual outcomes from the first cohort. Taken together, we can gain a better understanding of the complicated nature of organizational actions around racialized issues and the effects of not centering race, and in this case, the needs of Black students in meaningful ways. The results show how UU made progress with completion generally; however, there is no statistical support in this study for the program's impact on student completion for Black students.

**Chapter V**

**Discussion and Implications**

The objective of this dissertation was to examine how one institution developed and implemented a campus-wide strategy to improve degree completion and understand how this strategy impacted Black student outcomes. Using case study methods to explore the institution's policy process, this research investigates the implementation of a 15 to Finish modeled initiative and analyzes the impact of participation on the likelihood of graduation for the program's first cohort of graduates. Grounded by a conceptual framework that includes the Change Macro Framework (Kezar, 2014) and the Colorblindness Organization (Ray & Purifoy, 2019), this study contributes to extant empirical knowledge of the 15 to Finish model as a scalable strategy to improve degree completion. This research purposely centers Black student success while investigating institutional action regarding degree completion outcomes. For the qualitative phase of the research, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data related to organizational practices around student degree completion. Guided by prior literature showing the characteristics that impact degree completion, the quantitative analysis relied on binary logistic regression techniques to analyze the relationship between race, program participation, and four-year degree completion. Two central research questions guided this investigation:

> 1) What was involved in the institutional-level policy processes of Urban University campus leaders as they set out to introduce a campus-wide completion strategy? Moreover, to what extent did they specifically consider Black student completion during this process?

2) To what extent does participation in the programmatic intervention (4Years2Finish) affect the likelihood of degree completion for Black students at the Urban University?

This chapter concludes the study, offering an in-depth discussion of how the results of this investigation correspond to prior literature and can be understood in the context of the study's conceptual framework. The summary of findings is followed by a discussion and a section on implications for policy and practice. Next, the chapter advances with recommendations for policy and practice—at both state and institutional levels—that illuminate possibilities in terms of forging a path forward. Finally, this section ends with a conclusion, which ends this case study and offers final thoughts and reflections on the work.

## Discussion of Findings by Research Question

Chapter four provided the results from each stage of analysis conducted in response to the study's research questions. The following discussion is organized by the research questions, summarizing the main findings, and contextualizing this research within the theory and prior literature.

**Research Question One: *What was involved in the institutional-level policy processes of Urban University campus leaders as they set out to introduce a campus-wide completion strategy? To what extent did they consider the specific needs of Black students during this process?***

Broadly, the qualitative themes highlight the complex nature of leading an organization through a wide-scale change process, reflecting important considerations for institutional policymaking and practice. The case study's findings show the perspective

of this single site; however, the completion issues facing UU leaders are similar to the problems organizational actors face nationwide. Namely, in a higher education system with an evolving demographic population, what is the best approach to improving student success?

One of the key findings within the qualitative data is that UU leaders decided to take a comprehensive approach to advancing student success. More specifically, within the period of problem identification, the leadership was more inclined to address the degree completion issue from a general, non-racialized perspective. These data suggest organizational actors were focused on the aggregate four and six-year graduation rates and low numbers of students earning at least thirteen semester credit hours as the problem to address through this policy intervention.

In many ways the findings reflect how colorblindness was the default setting within the organizational culture. Despite the particularly low graduation rates among the African American population, Black student completion did not show up as an apparent concern within the interview data or policy artifacts. From the view of senior leaders, a blanket policy that addressed completion in the same way, regardless of student populations characteristics, was optimal for a campus contending with low degree completion rates across the board. While this line of thinking is common among postsecondary leaders, it less likely to yield equitable results. As prior literature has shown, Black students have a specific context through which they enter and exist in higher education (Allen et al., 2018; Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Kurlaender & Flores-Montgomery, 2005) and the failure to address this context is one of the primary means through which racial inequities in outcomes persists.

The analysis also reveals how external influences were instrumental in shaping problem identification and identifying policy solutions. Importantly, *The Role of Converging External Policy Influences* shows how prior professional experiences influenced decision-making in this area. This finding aligns with previous research by Smith et al. (2017) that demonstrates the influence of Complete College America in policymaking. While Smith et al. described CCA's influence on a state system, this research shows the impact of CCA affiliation at the institutional level. In both studies, CCA affiliation proved to be highly influential in administrative decision-making.

Furthermore, Gandara et al. (2017) researched the role of CCA as a policy intermediary at the state-level and, to some extent, these findings reflect how CCA is also an intermediary at the institutional level. Moreover, their case study shows how the organization relies on coercive tactics such as financial incentives to influence policy diffusion. However, institutional financial motivations were not revealed in this analysis, prompting considerations for prior research in this area.

Complete College America's data and literature promotes the 15 to Finish model as a scalable solution to the completion imperative. The organization's main assertion, that increasing the number of hours students enroll in per semester will improve four-year completion, seems like a plausible approach. This notion, combined with the sense of urgency and pressure for institutional leaders to transform their campuses, makes the adoption of a 15 to Finish modeled program understandable. However, educational policy research has, for quite some time, shown race-based disparities in completion, and little literature is published in the way of empirical evidence of the model's impact, especially on outcomes for students of color.

Regarding external influences, this qualitative analysis also encourages reflection on varying degrees to which CCA, state legislation, and the strategic plan for higher education influence institutional policymakers. This work suggests that the state strategic plans for higher education were less influential in terms of the direct impact on institutional strategizing and policymaking at this site. While there is a need for further research on the adoption of these goals at the institutional level, this research implies that HB 29 or the Texas Fixed Tuition Price Plan was a substantial factor in shaping the policy design.

Acknowledging the educational inequities experienced by Black Texans, both Closing the Gaps by 2015 and the 60X30TX plans, maintained explicitly racialized state-wide goals aimed, in part, at improving outcomes in student completion (60X30TX.com; THECB, 2000 & 2015). However, based on this study's data, the racialized goals and objectives set by the state coordinating board did not appear to be as influential. Even in the administrator's description of the strategic plans as a 'policy levers' used to influence the campus' completion agenda, it was not evident that the THECB goal centering African American completion was considered instrumental in the policy process.

The findings around *Shifting Organizational Completion Culture* shows the difference between where the campus completion culture was situated in 2012-2013 and where it evolved to by 2018. The data shown here as well as in the category labeled *Navigating Buy-in and Resistance* are indicative of the challenges faced by organizational actors in policy adoption and how momentum in the policy process can require shifting the culture of the organization to one that is student success centered. This finding was also similar to what Smith and colleagues (2017) identified through their inquiry,

supplementing evidence that shows, 1) how campuses and systems have historically lacked a culture of completion, and 2) the type of leadership and change that is often required to move a campus forward toward improving student success related metrics.

Along similar lines, the data also demonstrates the significant investment of resources required to make 15 to Finish models succeed. In showing how policy implementation of such programs requires much in the way of institutional assets, this research supports Swail, Redd, and Perna's (2003) work, which describes how student success programming efforts are complex and consuming. While the knowledge of what it takes to implement collegiate programming is not new, the qualitative outcomes reported here pose particular implications for institutions seeking to adapt and adopt programs at scale. Similar to Smith et al. (2017), this work illuminates many of the institutional considerations for is needed to adopt the 15 to Finish model specifically. This intervention requires dedicated personnel to manage program components and strong leadership efforts to guide the collective engagement necessary for a campus-wide initiative to succeed. The coordinated messaging campaign and the development of the degree maps are a prime example of how a policy feature can require extensive effort to execute.

*Shifting organizational completion culture* also shows where the campus completion culture was situated in the years after 4Years2Finish implementation. This finding was also similar to what Smith and colleagues (2017) demonstrate in their study showing how 15 to Finish implementation induces a shift in the culture of completion, in this case, shaping campus attitudes and beliefs, as well as the focus on particular student populations.

Based on this analysis, the extent to which UU campus leaders demonstrated Black student consciousness or posed considerations for Black student completion were more pronounced later in the policy process. In the earlier phases, there was less concern about Black students specifically and more concern about degree completion generally. As the cycle progressed, there was more confirmation of Black student consciousness, as evidenced by some of the discourse on the achievement gap and the reporting of Black student outcomes within institutional and public-facing mediums.

This research effort also provides insight into how this model shapes campus advising practices. The findings offer evidence of 4Years2Finish's impact on advising across two fronts: 1) the administrative labor required for reviewing and monitoring student eligibility; and, 2) the individualized attention that advising staff is required to provide to students. Research on proactive or intrusive advising in higher education has been ongoing for several years now, with studies spanning both two-year and four-year settings (Donaldson, Lee, McKinney, & Pino, 2016; Museus & Ravello, 2010; Ohrt, 2016). Moreover, there is promise in this area regarding the impact of more forward advising tactics on outcomes for racial and ethnic minority students. For instance, Museus and Ravello (2010) found that advisors in majority white institutions have enabled success for minoritized student groups by humanizing advising practices, adopting multilayered approaches to advising, and engaging in proactive academic advising practices. Proactive advising was also named by Nguyen et al. (2012) as a practice maintained by institutions they found in their research to be 'Top Gap Closers.'

**Setting a New Foundation for Student Success**

Taken together, the qualitative themes are reflective of the leadership and policy actions required for a campus seeking to improve degree completion rates. Of note is how the institution installed new leadership and how these leaders went beyond prior policies and practices to move the needle on completion. It is evident that their efforts moved the organizational culture from a setting less conducive to supporting students on the path to degree completion, to a setting where graduation in four-year graduation was more normalized throughout the campus community. Through this Second-Order Change, UU essentially reset the campus completion culture and set a new foundation for student success. Further, this analysis shows improving campus degree completion requires meaningful change, takes time, and necessitates extensive effort in terms of overall leadership, effort in generating buy-in, and a willingness to invest organizational resources. In summation, an overarching theme that can be drawn from the case study's data is that the right combination of these efforts will result in varied sums of institutional progress.

***A second, Second-Order Change.*** Another broad takeaway from the study's findings is that the policy process, as we know, is not perfect, and efforts to improve conditions may need to be advanced on a continuum of sorts. 4Years2Finish helped UU set the foundation for change concerning student success across the campus broadly, and the results from this research show that it is possible to use a 15 to Finish model to make progress toward improving degree completion, perhaps less so for Black students. However, change often happens in waves, and the next wave should include working more explicitly toward equity for Black students and other students of color. Ushering in this wave of change would require another Second-Order Change or another deep shift in

attitudes, beliefs, and actions to occur. As history has shown, this type of work is challenging and push-back is expected. However, as noted above, the organization has demonstrated that with the right combination of intention and efforts, change is possible.

**Research Question Two:** *To what extent does participation in 4Years2Finish affect the likelihood of degree completion for Black students at the Urban University?*

The results of the binary logistic regression analysis show that participation in 4Years2Finish increased students' odds of graduation generally, but not explicitly for Black students. With specific regard to race and ethnicity, the regression analysis did not offer statistical support showing that 4Years2Finish impacts the likelihood of graduation for Black students, meaning that it did not delay or improve time to degree. Surprisingly, there was still no relation between 4YearsFinish and African American racial status when the African American variable was interacted with program participation. Similar to the outcomes reported by Chan (2019), the findings from this research shed light on the notion that 15 to Finish modeled programs may not increase the likelihood of graduation for students who are historically underserved by our institutions.

While the results of the analyses did not show a significant difference based on African American racial identity and participation in 4Years2Finish, this lack of significance could be attributed to a variety of factors. For instance, Chan (2019) suggests that 15 to Finish program participation may not change odds for graduation but may student may benefit from the broader effort. In this case, Black students may benefit from the overarching shift toward student success and the culture of completion that came as a result of the policy. As exhibited through this study's findings, and the work of Smith et al. (2017), implementation of a 15 to Finish model spurs changes in the campus culture

related to completion. Among these changes are embracing the notion that students can complete their degree in four years. At UU, that became more of an expectation, and this expectation could have spillover effects that help improve degree attainment across student populations.

The analysis also suggests that first-semester GPA was a significant predictor of graduation for all FTIC students in this dataset. These results align with prior research from Farmer and Hope (2013), who found that GPA (pre-college and first-year) is a strong predictor of retention for Black students. Further, the results of the logistic regression analysis also show differences in the likelihood of completion based on the college of enrollment, adding to prior research from scholars (Kolb, 1981; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002; DesJardins, Kim, & Rzonca, 2003, St. John et al., 2004) showing a relationship between academic major or college and completion. With the major of Exploratory Studies as the reference, the findings show how enrollment in the colleges of business and architecture and participation in 4Years2Finish increased students' odds of reaching the four-year graduation target. This finding suggests that students who begin their careers with a specific academic major may benefit more from 15 to Finish. While further analysis is needed in this area, these results also pose implications for the study's focus on Black student completion as Black students make up nearly 12 percent of Exploratory Studies majors.

The finding for Black student participation in 4Years2Finish and graduation is not intended to say that Black student completion is not being addressed in any way through the organization's policy efforts as the graduation rate for Black students increased by 24 percentage points from 2012 to 2018. Again the changing campus completion culture

could have influenced these outcomes producing an indirect impact not examined through the regression model. Chan (2019) also points to the possibility of culturally-engaging factors (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017) that improve outcomes for students of color that may explain non-significant race and ethnicity variables in modeling.This consideration is also possible for UU as a campus with student support. In terms of environment, Farmer and Hope (2013) found that campus residency to be a predictor of Black student success posing considerations for the way that UU's transition from a commuter campus to a residential campus may have impacted outcomes as well. Though the results signal that the program itself may not be wholly sufficient in improving Black student success, UU demonstrates how the introduction of a 15 to Finish model combined with other factors may help advance completion rates for this student population. One could argue that the type of investment in university resources required to implement 4Years2Finish successfully requires that the program is equally beneficial to all students. However, it is also important to consider how the policy conditioned various outcomes in the campus environment (i.e., advising).

As discussed earlier, advising support may play a role in improving outcomes. For example, this research suggests that academic advising became more individualized, while this approach was not racially conscious, it was more intrusive and forced contact with students. While it was not a measure in this study, there is empirical evidence that supports the relationship between advisor contact and persistence to graduation (Wheatley, 2018). Black students who were not in the program may also experience the benefits of new advising approaches. There is also evidence that shows that Black students in HBCU settings benefit more from developmental advising (Harris, 2014).

While these supports were not the focus of this study, they should be examined in future research on Black student success to assess their role in rising graduation rates.

Though outside of the scope of this analysis, Black students likely also benefit from the other student success-oriented services first-year experience (FYE) courses, tutoring-based programs, and targeted programs within departments. As previous research shows that Black students benefit from early warning systems (Furr & Elling, 2002), and UU recently introduced this type of software platform. Alternatively, the trend in Black student completion may have been attributed to the changes UU made in admissions standards. As UU transitioned to become a residential institution and a Tier One Research institution, the institution also raised its standards, gradually becoming more selective.

### Situating the Findings within the Conceptual Framework

While remaining mindful of the study's scope, it is important to examine the outcomes of this research in the context of the theoretical suppositions in which it is grounded. The following offers a discussion of the research findings in contextualized within tenets of the Colorblind Organization and the Change Macro Framework.

### The Colorblind Organization

The Colorblind Organization framework is useful in this analysis because it provides a lens for inquiry that shows how organizations who choose to operate without explicit consideration for racial equity may unintentionally further structural racism and perpetuate inequality. As Dowd and Bensimon (2015) argue, "in postsecondary education in the United States, the core educational concepts of college, college student, and education are racialized by ideological values of merit and equal opportunity" (p. 1). This

means that the shifting demographics require many colleges and universities to acknowledge race as a standard feature of their organizational environment.

This research did not examine the entirety of UU's organizational environment, more so the organizational approach to implementing a student success program. The organizational actions shown in this case study demonstrate how leaders enacted more of a 'rising tide lifts all boats' approach to improving completion. Relying on academic momentum to propel students to the finish line, regardless of their background or identity characteristics, is just one way that we see the colorblind ideology enacted in practice.

The tenet of *abstract liberalism* is useful in reflecting upon how espousals of equality, not backed by practices that aim to disrupt structural inequalities, are rendered ineffective. A more micro example found in the data is Dr. Hill's description of how underrepresented students have the same access to support, resources, and benefits as any other student on campus. The data offer insight into how the organization approaches policymaking through the lens of fairness. However, due to the nature of inequality in higher education settings, the distribution of resources is rarely fair or equal. Dowd and Bensimon (2015) citing Haney-López (2010), posit that "educational practices can be discriminatory in the absence of conscious, overt, interpersonal acts of racial discrimination" (p. 3). In other words, equal access among student populations with disparate contexts is likely insufficient in terms of producing desired outcomes (i.e. degree completion).

Further, this study's findings suggests that, when explicitly analyzing racial identity, Black students' graduation outcomes were not impacted positively or negatively by the policy effort. Ray and Purifoy call policy efforts such as this "facially neutral" and

posit that they reinforce a "racially unequal environment" (p. 141). Likewise, if students whom we know are impacted by structural racism have access to the program but fail to receive the same positive benefits as their peers, the program is not achieving its fullest equity potential. This notion is a part of the logic behind the shift from focusing on equality to promoting equity, ensuring that students get what they actually need to succeed.

**The Change Macro Framework**

This framing is helpful in postulating the overarching role of change and its relationship to campus student success. This research shows how campus-wide efforts to improve completion must advance the organizational paradigm surrounding the policy issue. Organizational actors reflect the attitudes, beliefs, and values demonstrated to them from leaders (Kezar, 2014). This notion held true in this case study, as evidenced by the fact that the institutional focus on completion shifted when leaders enhanced the practical efforts and messaging focused on four-year graduation. Through their leadership, the culture moved forward and achievement improved; for all intents and purposes, the 4Years2Finish initiative was successful when examined within a traditional framework of change in higher education.

**Integrating shared and collective leadership to facilitate change.** While the initiative was conceived at the top level of leadership, the data show a pattern of action that would suggest that executive leaders combined their power and resources with bottom-up and collective approaches to facilitate the change needed to implement the program. There was a consensus among the upper and mid-level leaders interviewed that the senior-level administrators spearheading the 4Years2Finish initiative displayed strong

leadership skills during this process. Directors, coordinators, and advisors shared how involved senior leadership was in the process, and they worked with her or often heard directly from her regarding the student success initiative. This collective approach aligns with the research report produced by Swail and colleagues (2003) that includes engagement of cross-campus departments and personnel among the multiple factors for consideration when implementing student success programming.

   **Considering the full context of change.** The qualitative data analysis shows how leaders considered of the several elements included in the context of change component of the Change Macro Framework. These elements consist of both internal (e.g., organizational culture) and external (e.g., prior experience, institutional data, and data from CCA) facets. However, not evident are the degrees to which organizational actors considered the historical and sociopolitical factors that led the institution to have some of the lowest graduation rates in the state or how higher education functions as a social institution—two components vital to the development of policies aimed at improving conditions for Black college students. As stated critical scholars have argued "colleges and universities should engage more directly with the relationship between race and place in their institutional histories and in their current priorities" (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015, p. xxv). A key consideration from this supposition is that institutions must rely on the full context of change to move forward equitably.

   As shown through this work, the context of change is a useful tool for the analysis of leadership in higher education settings. Theoretically, accounting for the historical and sociopolitical factors or the ways in which higher education functions as a social institution would lead enable more nuance in problem

identification and exploring policy solutions. This notion overlaps with the

*minimization of racism* (Ray & Purifoy, 2019) further demonstrating how failure

to recognize the ways in which histories of oppression impact contemporary

institutional settings helps maintain racial injustice. This brings to mind part of

the conversation with Dr. Gold, who has served at the university for over 30

years. He was the only person to mention the historical record of race in practice

at the university and offered a reminder of how, post-*Fisher*, institutions may

continue to have unresolved conflict over the use of race in institutional

policymaking. His quote makes it clear that structural ramifications of the

*Hopwood* decision still policy and practice in this institutional setting :

> *"You know, we used to have a program for minority engineering students.*
>
> *It was called PROMES. We still have the program, but it is no longer a*
>
> *minority engineering program. It's an everybody all y'all come program.*
>
> *Oh, and it became that after the lawsuit in the late 1990s, that basically*
>
> *said, you cannot have race-based programs. Now, that later got*
>
> *overturned, but we never put it back. So, we have programs to help*
>
> *engineering students succeed, that were intended to be targeted based on*
>
> *race. But we don't do it that way anymore. And so, we don't tend to collect*
>
> *data like that anymore. At least I'm not aware of it, right now, it can be*
>
> *found through the database, not saying it isn't there. But I don't hear it*
>
> *talked about much, because we don't, we don't...I want to say this the*
>
> *right way...We don't try to look at things that way anymore, because we*
>
> *were told not to..."*

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings from this study poses implications for organizational practice and policymaking in higher education settings. The qualitative findings that suggest a lack of apparent concern for Black students in problem identification, combined with the quantitative results showing no significant impacts on race and graduation, imply that equitable change will require moving forward as more conscious organizational leaders seeking to develop a more conscious organization. This requires getting more comfortable discussing race (e.g., avoiding the use of racial proxies) and openly speaking about the needs of specific populations (i.e., Black students). Though Black students may benefit from practices that are not explicitly race-conscious, these efforts are not sufficient in combatting racial inequality (Jones & Nichols, 2020).

**Toward Racially Responsive Leadership**

This analysis did not reveal instances of leadership that fit the criteria outlined in this construct. However, RRL remains relevant to the study because it helped guide the thinking associated with the methods and analysis. The four tenets are used below to guide recommendations for moving forward with more race-conscious and equity-oriented practice solutions.

The framework of Racially Responsive Leadership is useful in accentuating organizational leadership practices. The notion of *making race a salient feature of decision-making and policy development* is an important consideration for a campus organization seeking to move away from colorblindness. While this study did not have data to support that UU campus leaders were responsive in this way, it is a recommend consideration for future efforts.

The second tenet suggests that leaders should "authentically, strategically, and courageously confronts race problems versus enacting more convenient, temporary, or symbolic resolutions" (Harper, 2017, p. 118). Though this analysis did not reveal that UU campus leaders viewed completion through the lens of race early in their process, ample evidence suggests that degree completion is a racialized problem. Moreover, there are race-conscious options when it comes to developing strategies that aim to improve completion and for leaders to be considered racially responsive, they would have to engage in actions that are reflective of efforts to face racial issues head-on. Practical examples of interventions are offered below to demonstrate this concept further.

The third conceptual notion for leadership offered through RRL is taking a multifaceted approach to accountability that seeks to include all racially and ethnic identities, including an institution's white population. The Change Macro Framework helped shed light on the missing layer of sociopolitical and historical context in considering how to usher in change with regard to degree completion at UU. The fourth tenet of the Racially Responsive leadership framework echoes this sentiment, offering that leaders should "work with intention to acknowledge, understand, and redresses historical, personal, cultural, structural racism" (pp.188-189). UU, as a historically white institution, maintains a clear history of racial exclusion. Though the population grew to become structurally diverse, leaders must work to formally and explicitly confront and dismantle the structures of inequality that lie at the foundations of the institution. A recommendation to address both of these areas is to consider professional development resources such as the Racial Equity Leadership Academy at the University of Southern California's Center for Race and Equity.

Essential to the discussion of this dissertation's findings are considerations of what Racially Responsive Leadership looks like in practice. With this in mind, I offer that racially responsive efforts require the adoption of race-conscious interventions grounded in empirical and practice-based knowledge of what improves degree completion for Black students. Of note is how it is possible to endeavor down this path in conjunction with current student success efforts.

For years, higher education leaders and researchers have acknowledged the changing demographics of postsecondary students, mainly focusing on the increases diversity among student racial and ethnic populations. Less often recognized is the notion that these increases in structural diversity require leaders to enact structural change on behalf of students of color. The responses to shifts in racial and socioeconomic diversity have often focused on the student's economic backgrounds in addressing student success issues. However, change on behalf of students living at the intersections of society's race and income systems must be race-conscious (Jones & Nichols, 2020). An example of this is possibly found in the example of Georgia State, an institution known for improving completion rates across racial and ethnic populations, and an institution that has both scalable initiatives (MAAPS) and race-specific student support (Black Student Achievement).

While the majority of our efforts will continue to focus on student success for all, to truly respond to the need to improve student success for African-American students, university leadership should invest in strategic efforts to address inequities and disparities for this population. Given that UU's African-American student population historically has the lowest degree attainment rates, in working toward equity, this campus must

enhance and develop initiatives and programs that focus on their individualistic needs and provide support for their pathway to success and completion efforts.

While this could take on many forms, I recommend focusing on systemic or structural change efforts grounded in evidence-based practices that have demonstrated success for Black students. For example, scholars have posited that replicating the components of HBCU environments that foster success could lead to better conditions for Black students on non-majority Black campuses. Commonly cited reasons for Black students' academic disparities include financial strains (e.g., Chenoweth, 1999; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jackson & Reynolds, 2013), deficits in social capital (Museus & Neville, 2012), decreased sense of belonging (e.g., Museus & Saelua, 2016; Strayhorn, 2008) discrimination, racism, and a legacy of racial trauma (Harper et al., 2009; Harper, 2015; Womack, 2016). Strategic planning efforts should include specific objectives aimed at enhancing success for this population, for example:

1) Install a director for Black student initiatives to assess the needs of Black students at UU and design deliberate reforms to address academic and student affairs. Depending on the findings of the assessment, other possible efforts include:

- Expand and relocate the Center for African American Studies to provide Black students with a physical space on campus. Dedicated physical space improves a sense of belonging and makes campuses environments more conducive to African-American student success. According to Strayhorn and Terrell (2010), "creating institutional environments that are welcoming and meet the needs of African-American students does not happen solely by addressing human aggregate concerns," the authors go

on to say, "these students need to see themselves in the physical, organizational, and perceptual spaces on campus as well" (p. 75). Patton's (2006) research on-campus cultural centers also demonstrates how culture-specific services are an important factor in facilitating retention among this population as well. Budget permitting, moving the current unit to a more centralized location, and expanding its features would send a strong signal in support of African-American cultural integration within the campus.

- Introduce peer or near-peer mentoring programming to increase institutional knowledge and know-how in terms of navigating the college as a Black student. When effectively monitored, peer or near-peer mentoring programs support the social relationship needs of Black students by fostering symbiotic relationships which support the academic, personal and professional growth needed to find collegiate success (Grier-Reed et al., 2016).

2) Take further steps to increase faculty diversity and engagement. Diversifying the faculty is an important first step and a step that UU has already taken. While representation is important, leaders must also be intentional about connecting Black students to faculty who share their racial identities and engaging with non-Black faculty who possess the skills to support their learning and development (Bonner, 2010; Strayhorn, 2008). Wood and Ireland (2014) identified faculty-student interaction as a facilitator of success. Based on the needs mentioned above, Black student-focused success initiatives often feature supplemental support around mentoring, faculty

engagement, and social development. These supports are especially critical for students, as researchers have demonstrated how student engagement and campus integration assist in success goals for this population (Strayhorn & Terrell, 2010).

3) Survey advising satisfaction and evaluate the response from student populations, including racial and ethnic groups. Institutions should also consider expanding race-based reporting requirements and the use of disaggregated data beyond senior leadership in academic affairs to include student-facing staff to arm them with the knowledge and skills needed to understand the varying needs of Black students (Blake, 2007; Kuh et al., 2005; Lundy, 2010).

Overall, the literature on Black student success reveals factors that span the academic, social, and environmental realms of the collegiate experience, demonstrating that programmatic models with these features are critical to addressing the racial disparities in degree attainment gaps. Black students should feel seen across every facet of the institution. With this in mind, the next phase of investing in Black student success should also consider Black student needs across the intersections. In recognizing that students are, for example, Black and low-income, Black and first-generation; or, Black and woman identifying, Black students potentially have experiences that are impacted by one, few, or all of the systemic influences associated with these identity characteristics.

While more research and time is needed to determine the impact of interventions that have been implemented at scale, this research also poses consideration for whether or not scalable efforts serve as shorter-term solutions and may not induce the change required to integrate Black students and students of color into campuses fully. The issues that impact Black students are entrenched in the systems and structures supporting the

very foundations of our educational system (Allen et al., 2018). Viewed through a racial justice lens, full integration moves beyond scalable initiatives and requires deep structural change and radical transformation. It requires that higher education leaders match the force with which we seek inclusion with the same amount of force through which Black students have been educationally disenfranchised. Finally, it recognizes how the history of overt racism and the contemporary colorblind approaches that often characterize the U.S. postsecondary education continue to impact student experiences and outcomes to this day.

**Recommendations for Campus-level Policy**

The current state of Black higher education is the result of intentional policy choices made over the course of many years and to remedy the issues, leaders must be intentional in their policy development efforts. To develop policies that facilitate equity in outcomes among racial populations such as Black students, leaders must incorporate critical frameworks for decision-making. Campus-level policymaking efforts would benefit from intentional efforts to integrate empirical research and reports that explicitly focus on Black higher education.

An additional recommendation for campuses seeking to develop equity-minded efforts at the institutional level is to disaggregate data for frontline staff such as advisors. Holistic advising approaches that seek to address 'the whole student' also require consideration for race. Therefore, student-facing staff need data that shows how outcomes vary across racial populations.

UU and other universities seeking to improve degree completion rates can draw several possible considerations from this case study. First, the importance of considering

race—as appropriate—as a factor throughout the policy process—from policy identification to policy evaluation. 15 to Finish is a promising practice and institutions with similar conditions (i.e., low rates of Black student completion) may consider how to add race-conscious modifications to this type of policy effort.

Secondly, while it is common for leaders at campuses with low degree attainment rates to address completion though an aggregated lens, strong evidence points to completion being a multifaceted policy problem that spans institutional and student characteristics which are influenced by sociopolitical and historical factors. With this in mind, institutions could also consider evaluating future and current efforts through critical or equity-grounded frameworks to better understand how interventions impact the most vulnerable populations.

**Recommendations for State-level Policy**

As mentioned in chapter one, the strategies offered via THECB are race-neutral in their approach. The findings from this study pose considerations for issues of accountability with regard to strategic plans for higher education. Legal decisions and legislative mandates have historically played a significant role in the advancements of racial groups in postsecondary education. Based on this analysis, it is recommended that THECB research and explore possibilities of equity-driven institutional strategies that target completion and hold institutions accountable for the specific racialized goals set within completion targets.

**Implications for Future Research**

The findings from this dissertation verify the need for more research on bachelor's degree completion that seeks to identify the factors the promote degree

completion among Black student populations. Further research is also needed to develop additional empirical knowledge of Black student outcomes on campuses that rely on 15 to Finish modeled strategies. Research efforts that focus on this area and examine other scalable strategies need to center Black students in analytical approaches. For example, more Black student-centered inquiries on intrusive advising practices and early-alerts systems may provide beneficial evidence in support of advancing these resources.

Specific to this institutional site, further research is needed to examine the outcomes of future 4Years2Finish cohorts. More specifically, qualitative research is needed to develop a greater understanding of the lived experiences of Black students participating in 15 to Finish modeled programs. This could include focus groups of program participants with specific considerations for race and ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status.

Finally, the conceptual framework separates this work from other research aimed at examining organizational approaches to completion and student outcomes. Further research grounded in critical, equity-driven frameworks is needed to glean knowledge of outcomes for racial and ethnic populations as critical theories provide leaders with a lens to understand completion as an issue of racial inequality.

### Limitations

As with every study, it is important to consider the limitations of the methods and approach. A central limitation of this case study is that it focuses on one institution. Though the findings may be relevant to other campuses with similar concerns and contextual features, administrators and policymakers should be mindful of the scope when interpreting the results of this study. Further, case studies analyses very often

include observation and occur for longer periods (Yin, 2018); however, due to the constraints of this dissertation study, this was not feasible.

Additionally, there were also limitations with the administrative dataset used in this analysis. First, the site's Office of Institutional Research was not able to provide data for the high school GPA variable. Also, as mentioned earlier in this paper, cohort bias impacts the interpretation of this data as well. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that student academic outcomes are impacted by external factors not captured in this data (Chan, 2019).

Based on the 4Years2Finish program parameters, the data are also limited to first-time, full-time students. While it is important to analyze outcomes for this population, the results are not applicable to part-time or non-traditional students. Also, considering the nature of the program, the data were intentionally requested to focus on four-year completion; therefore, the data does not account for students who eventually earned a degree beyond the four-year marker (spring 2018) for the cohort.

While binary logistic regression analysis is an appropriate approach for completion-focused studies (Peng et al., 2002), it is also important to acknowledge that this approach is not without limitations. For example, Long and Freese (2014) recommend exercising caution in interpreting the odds ratios as "they do not indicate the magnitude of change in the probability of the outcome" (p. 234). Moreover, other modeling approaches, such as difference in difference, are commonly used in examining policy outcomes; however, time and data availability did not permit this type of analysis.

**Conclusion**

Our long history of examining and documenting how policies have intentionally disenfranchised Black students, denying them access to—and meaningful participation in—higher education requires us to be equally diligent in examining policies that claim to foster their success. If we are genuinely interested in equity, then we must interrogate the systems and structures that are responsible for student outcomes. I began this dissertation research as a practitioner turned researcher with unanswered questions pertaining to—what has always been to me—the most imperative issue in postsecondary education: African American degree completion. In the very pragmatic sense, I wanted to know what actions were being taken by the people with the power to make change on this well-documented issue. I wanted to identify strategies that succeed in facilitating Black student success in hopes of disseminating this knowledge to others seeking to make change in this area as well.

The contextual factors present within this case study site made it appropriate to explore these questions on a micro-level. Mainly the institutions status as a rising research university with one of the most racially diverse student bodies in the country that also happens to be a historically white institution with a history of low Black graduation rates. These factors combined with their targeted efforts to improve completion made it an ideal locale for this research. My first thought upon hearing about the 15 to Finish framework was, "does it work for Black students?" Proponents of the 15 to Finish model often cite this intervention as a 'gamechanger' in terms of college completion strategies. In many ways, this dissertation sought to answer the question: for whom? As in, for whom exactly is this strategy a gamechanger for? Ideally, it would benefit the populations in need of the most significant boost with regard to graduation rates; thus

making it possible for institutions to see more equitable outcomes among specific

demographic groups such as Black students who have endured a history of discriminatory

policy and have continually been less likely to complete at rates that are comparable to

their non-Black peers or proportional to their representation within the population.

We are reminded of through this inquiry that in real organizational settings

advancing college degree completion is much more challenging than it may seem. In

many ways this dissertation shows how even with institutional actors working diligently

with the best intentions in creating a way for every student to succeed, institutions may

miss this mark in some capacity in terms of helping Black students achieve to their

highest potential. Finally, this work offers significant contributions to the literature on 15

to Finish policies and Black student success. Through this investigation and others, it is

increasingly evident that organizational leaders should invoke more race-conscious,

equity-minded approaches if ever to create campuses where Black students can truly

thrive.

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**Appendix A**

**Logistic Regression Variables**

| Student Demographics | Variable | Time Period | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Unique ID | Entry/AY 14 | a unique identifier (e.g., PSID) for each student. |
| | Race/Ethnicity | Entry/AY 14 | |
| | Gender | Entry/AY 14 | |
| | Year of Birth | Entry/AY 14 | |
| | Residency | Entry/AY 14 | *Indicates whether the student is a Texas resident, out-of-state resident or international student as identified by his/her permanent address at the time of application to the institution. |
| **Academic Background** | **Variable** | **Time Period** | **Description** |
| | High School | Entry/AY 14 | Name, city & state of high school |
| | SAT Scores (if applicable) | Entry/AY 14 | Total *or* disaggregated SAT math and SAT reading/writing (whichever is more readily available)<br><br>*National standardized test provided to college-bound high school students by the College Board to provide a measure of students' academic preparation. The sum of the scores for each section is called the SAT Total score. UU uses the SAT scores as an admissions criterion for FTIC freshmen. |
| | ACT Scores (if applicable) | Entry/AY 14 | ACT Composite *or* ACT English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science Reasoning scores (whichever is more readily available)<br><br>*National standardized test provided to college-bound high school students by the American College Testing Program to provide a measure of the student's academic preparation. ACT composite score as an admissions criterion for First-Time-in-College students who do not submit SAT scores. |

| | Final High School GPA | Entry/AY 14 | Final measure of academic performance reported by diploma-granting HS |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Dual Credit (if applicable) | Entry/AY 14 | Number of credit hours transferred in as a result of taking dual credit courses in HS |
| | Advanced Placement (AP) Credit (if applicable) | Entry/AY 14 | AP testing scores/credits<br><br>**A national program of standardized high school courses by which high school students can earn college credit(s) at most institutions of higher education. The state provides funding for AP classes through an appropriation to the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The AP examination is administered by The College Board. |
| | International Baccalaureate (IB) Credits (if applicable) | Entry/AY 14 | Number of IB credit hours<br><br>**An internationally recognized curriculum that offers 11th and 12th grade high school students the opportunity to earn an IB diploma. IB diploma holders may obtain advanced standing at some colleges and universities. In the IB Program, students gain a broad world view; take an in-depth approach to academics; and develop time management, problem-solving, research, and organizational skills that will help them well beyond college. |
| **Enrollment Data** | **Variable** | **Time Period** | **Description** |
| | College of Enrollment | Per Semester | Name of college within the university in which the student is enrolled. |
| | Enrollment Semester (i.e., Fall 2014) | Entry/AY 14 | First semester student enrolled at UU |
| | Mode of Admission | Entry/AY 14 | First-time in college |
| | Graduation Plan | Per Semester | 4Years2Finish/Freshman Four-Year Graduation Plan or Other |
| | Academic Major | Per Semester | Student's declared major/degree program; please also include undeclared majors |

| | Classification | Per Semester | Freshman - Senior |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Enrolled Status | Per Semester | Enrolled or Withdrawn |
| **Financial Need\*\*\*** | **Variable** | **Time Period** | **Description** |
| | FAFSA on Record (Yes or No) | Yearly | UU has received the student's Federal Application for Financial Aid (FAFSA) |
| | Expected Family Contribution (EFC) | Yearly | Financial measure of student/family financial strength according to a formula and calculated during FAFSA processing. |
| | Pell Grant Eligible (Yes or No) | Yearly | Student meets the minimum requirements for eligibility to receive federal Pell Grant |
| | Financial Aid Award Amount | Yearly | Amount awarded to student as a result of completing the FAFSA. |
| | Unmet Need | Yearly | Difference between a student's financial need and their financial aid award. |
| **Academic Performance** | **Variable** | **Time Period** | **Description** |
| | Semester Credit Hours (SCH) Attempted | Per Semester | *Student SCH is the SCH for a student determined by adding the credit hours from all the students' courses. |
| | Semester Credit Hours (SCH) Completed | Per Semester | |
| | Semester Credit Hours (SCH) Withdrawn | Per Semester | |
| | Semester GPA | Per Semester | *Semester GPA represents the graded academic performance of a student or population of students during a single semester. |
| | Cumulative GPA | Per Semester | *Cumulative GPA represents all graded academic performance for a student or population of students at the university across all semesters. |
| | Degree Conferred | n/a | Student was awarded degree from UU (Yes or No) |
| | Degree Type (if applicable) | n/a | Specific name/type of bachelors level degree conferred |

| | Degree Award Date | n/a | Date degree was conferred |
|---|---|---|---|

*Source: Urban University Reporting Glossary

**Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) Data Glossary
http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/reports/PDF/1316.PDF

**Appendix B**

**Interview Protocol**

*(Senior-level/Executive Administrators)*

*Lead-off Question: Thanks so much for your willingness to speak with me about [4Years2Finish] and supporting my policy research focus on org leaders and student success strategies. In terms of outcomes, this office reported (2017) gradual increases in student participation, increases in the number of students completing 90hrs by the 3rd year, and success with this initiative among underserved students...It is my understanding that, as [an executive leader] you played a major role in decision-making process supporting this initiative. Can you tell me more about your role in this?*

**Domain I: The Path to 4Years2Finish [policy context; deliberate policy processes; role of intermediaries (e.g. THECB; CCA)]**

1. Can you speak to the policy context and campus needs that led up to the development of this program?

   a) What did you identify as challenges to improving the campus' degree completion outcomes? What decisions were made as a result?

   b) One thing that I've always been curious about during my time as a professional and student, is the influence of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) on campus level decision-making...the UU system has its own board and decision-making body...how do the state's (THECB) goals around educational attainment (CTG and 60X30TX) work with the University's agenda-setting and policy-making around the issue of completion?

   c) Part of my interest is also specifically around Black student completion or black educational attainment for Texas residents. And that was another thing that caught my attention in the 60X30TX plan is that there were more explicit goals for completion around certain populations. And, one of them was African American population...So I was curious, also, to see how administrators such as yourself, look at the more specific goals. And think

about those when you're making decisions in terms of strategic programming around student success on this campus.

2. Can you describe the deliberate process[2] undertaken to reach degree completion goals?

   a) Were there any other entities or intermediaries (on or off-campus) that influenced this process?

   b) Were there any other programmatic initiatives or models under consideration? If so, which ones?

   c) Can you describe some of major factors that made you all choose a 15-credit strategy model?

**Domain II: 4Years2Finish Implementation, Evaluation/Outcomes [initial reception; outcomes; impact]**

1. Switching gears slightly...tell me more about the actual implementation of 4Years2Finish

2. We began our conversation with some of the outcomes that have been reported...can you share more of your thoughts about program impact and outcomes?

   a) In our policy class we explored the idea of intended strategies vs. unintended outcomes during the policy process...can you speak to this notion in relation to 4Years2Finish?

   b) In class, we've also spent considerable time exploring access and success for historically unrepresented racial and ethnic populations. For me, this has resulted in a research focus that centers racial equity in outcomes for African American students...how have you seen 4Years2Finish impact the AA student population?

3. And, lastly...five years later...what are your thoughts about this initiative? Plans to proceed?

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[2] "Institutional changes involving change to institutional policies, programs, and practices that will presumably lead to the ultimate impact policymakers seek, i.e. increased graduation rates" (Dougherty & Reddy, 2013; Dougherty et al., 2016, p. 149)

**Appendix C**

**Post-Interview Follow-up Questionnaire**

Thank you again for participating in my research study which examines the administrative policy development and practice, as well as the impact of 4Years2Finish— particularly on African American students at the university. I greatly enjoyed speaking with you and learning more about your role and experience as it pertains to the program.

As I continue to analyze the data gathered thus far, I am reminded of the importance of reflexivity and critical reflection (Berger, 2015; Daley, 2010) in qualitative research practice and collecting post-interview reflections from participants where feasible. That said, I would greatly appreciate a few more minutes of your time and assistance in capturing the most rich data possible. Please review the attached interview protocol questions to refresh your memory of our discussion and respond to the following:

1) What were your general thoughts after the interview/conversation? Are there any discussion points that you would like to add, reiterate, or remove from the record?

2) In what ways, if any, did our conversation impact your administrative practice or thoughts on future work in your role?

3) In what ways, if any, have you thought differently about the 4Years2Finish program after reflecting on your experience with and/or knowledge the initiative?

4) In what ways, if any, have you thought differently or been more conscious about supporting the academic success and completion trajectory of African American students?

5) What would you hope your participation in this research study contributes to student degree completion outcomes locally (at UU) and broadly in higher education?