IMPLEMENTING A PIVOTAL TALENT POOL STRATEGY TO IMPROVE COLLEGE STUDENT RETENTION: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY ON IMPROVING PERFORMANCE OF A CENTRALIZED ACADEMIC ADVISING UNIT

by

ERIC JUSTIN TACK

(Under the Direction of Wendy E. A. Ruona)

ABSTRACT

Improving student retention rates is imperative for U.S. colleges and universities; however, despite decades of research, a universal strategy for increasing retention rates remains elusive. The purpose of this study was to determine if a pivotal talent pool strategy (PTPS) helped to improve performance in a centralized academic advising unit at a regional state university, resulting in an increase in student retention rates. The director of advising at the study site led an action research (AR) team, consisting of two academic affairs leadership personnel, in a two-year study engaging five assistant directors of advising and 14 front-line academic advisors as research participants. Academic advisors served as the pivotal talent pool for this study.

Two research questions guided this research: (1) How, if at all, does implementing a PTPS affect the performance and short-term impact of a centralized academic advising unit? (2) What is required of a centralized advising unit to create the conditions that support the development and implementation of such a PTPS? Qualitative data were collected using several methods, including benchmarking and semi-structured interviews, meeting notes, email correspondences, researcher journal entries, and organizational documents. Additionally, data were generated by examining term-over-term undergraduate student re-registration rates. The AR team adhered to Coghlan and Brannick's (2010) traditional AR cycle, comprising four basic steps: constructing, planning action, taking action, and evaluating action. This study consisted of one mega-research cycle focused on improving the performance of the academic advisors, with an embedded sub-cycle focused on the performance of the supervisors of academic advisors. The AR team integrated Ruona's (2004) consulting to improve the performance process to intervene with academic advisors and their supervisors. The data were analyzed both inductively and deductively using the constant comparative method (Ruona, 2005). The findings showed that using a PTPS (Ruona, 2014, 2017) improved the performance of a pivotal talent position. The results also highlighted factors impacting performance that practitioners must consider when implementing a PTPS. Moreover, the study revealed opportunities to further explore how the PTPS employed by the study site has a long-term impact on improving student retention rates at the university and other institutions.

INDEX WORDS: Action research, Pivotal talent pool strategy, Strategic talent management, Human resource development, Higher education, Academic advisors, Strategic talent development, Consulting to improve performance, College student retention

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DEDICATION

#makingmemoriesofus

This doctoral dissertation is dedicated to my family.

First and foremost, Heather, you have always believed in me and inspired to me to be a better husband, father, and person on a daily basis. You made untold sacrifices over the past five years to ensure that I had the space I needed to reflect, process, write, and achieve this goal. You never gave up on me even when I wanted to give up on myself. There is no one else with whom I would rather take this journey. I love you!

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A thank you to Cohort II, the members of which spent many nights and weekends listening and supporting me through this journey. Byrd, Shakiyla, Bev, Tosh, Karen, and Vickie, you all made this journey that much more enjoyable. It was never a competition but about finding an authentic way for us to lift each other up. Success was defined collectively rather than individually—although your individual successes continue to impress.

To Sherry, Bill, Alison, and Curtis, who also encouraged me to persist and were always willing to give me space to write on the dining room table while holiday dinner was cooking. Time to celebrate with another round.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Even in the domain of higher education, which includes some of the oldest, most traditional types of organizations in the world, the external environment is changing. Unless colleges and universities adapt, their traditions may not last, at least not for the centuries they have in the past. (Burke, 2017, p. 15)

Numerous studies have identified factors impacting student retention and persistence at colleges and universities across the United States (Bean, 1980; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Pascarella & Terranzini, 2005; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1997, 2004, 2006). A Google Scholar search of the term *college student retention rates* yielded approximately 618,000 results, of which about 35,300 were published since the mid-2000s. Despite such extensive research, retention and persistence of students continue to represent a major challenge for many colleges and universities (McCoy & Bryne, 2017; Tinto, 2015). Missing from the retention literature is a consideration of how other disciplines outside of higher education, such as Human Resource Development (HRD), could be applied to address this challenge. Specifically, building on the strategic human resource development (SHRD) literature, Ruona (2014, 2017) proposes that the theoretical framework of a pivotal talent pool strategy (PTPS), which focuses on aligning your people strategy with your organizational strategy, can be applied to improve the performance of individuals who are strategically positioned to differentially impact an organization's strategic objectives.

Intersection of Higher Education Performance Outcomes and HRD Theory and Practice

Improving the retention, persistence, and graduation rates of students at colleges and universities across the nation is an issue of increasing importance not only to higher education institutions concerned about their financial bottom lines, but also to external stakeholders as state and federal governments increase oversight of the funding formulas used by public and private universities (Burke, 1998a, 1998b; Snyder, 2015; University System of Georgia [USG], 2011). The U.S. Department of Education has begun to play a greater role in improving the completion rates of students, going so far as to create a "College Scorecard" (https://collegescorecard.ed.gov) that provides a grade for colleges and universities in the hopes of providing students and their families more information relevant to selecting a school. State legislators are also beginning to implement outcomes-based funding at a policy level to align the focus of institutions with state and federal priorities (Snyder, 2015; USG, 2011). Indeed, the topic of improving retention and persistence remains important across the variety of institutional types and missions that comprise the higher education landscape. For some institutions that are dependent on secondary funding sources (i.e., federal funds, state funds, and private foundations) their short- and long-term financial futures are directly tied to improving student retention rates (King & Sen, 2013). With 35 states currently relying on some form of performance-based funding, future state and federal allocations are sure to focus on completion metrics (Snyder, 2015).

The theoretical frameworks of talent management are still emerging. Collings and Mellahi (2009) reviewed talent management literature and indicated that "from a theoretical point of view, the area of talent management is in its infancy and a significant degree of theoretical advancement is required" (p. 311). The term "talent management" is even used in varied, distinct ways in the literature—often meaning entirely different things to different authors. In her review of the literature, Ruona (2014) identified four distinct talent management streams of research and practice: leadership pipeline, high performers, pivotal talent pools, and specific talent segmentation. She describes the cohesive themes linking all the varied streams of talent management literature together is (1) they are all talent segmentation methodologies and (2) all of them focus on getting the right people in the right positions at the right time. Ruona argues this does not happen by chance and requires an intentional organizational strategy and architecture to achieve a successful talent management strategy. Ruona (2014) proposes that a focus on pivotal talent pools is a particularly promising method by which organizations may maximize the performance of employees that are uniquely positioned to impact strategic organizational outcomes. For the majority of institutions of high education improving student retention rates is one of those strategic organizational outcomes.

There remains a dearth of studies exploring the role of talent management strategies in higher education settings (Riccio, 2010; Wolverton & Gmelch, 2002; Woodard, 2015). Woodard (2015) found, when applying strategic talent management practices in higher education, that

> since higher education has been slow to adopt talent management strategies in the past, strategic talent management represents culture change for colleges and universities. Therefore, HR practitioners who wish to implement strategic talent management may also choose to build their competence in leading change initiatives. (p. 198)

Herr and Anderson (2005) describe an evolving phenomenon of knowledge generation and problem solving by scholar-practitioners that are directly engaging systems, testing theory, and developing new and informed practices.

> With the advent of highly educated professionals who have acquired research skills and are enrolled in doctorate programs, action research dissertations are often done by organizational insiders who see it as a way to deepen their own reflection on practice toward problem solving and professional development. (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 29)

This phenomenon supports Woordward's (2015) argument that practitioners need to create their own structures to build competencies and lead change initiatives rather than waiting for their college or university to implement training and development systems. For this study the intersection of a rapidly changing environment focused on outcomes connected to funding (Snyder, 2015) and limited understanding by institutions of higher education of how to leverage their most abundant resource, the talent of its faculty and staff, represents a potential blind spot within the current field of practice and requires further study (Ready & Conger, 2007). Burke (2017) claims this failure to change as organizations may prove to be ultimate undoing of some colleges and universities.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

This research study explored the ways in which the concept of PTPS was applied using an action research (AR) methodology in an effort to improve the retention and persistence of college students at Regional State University (RSU)—the pseudonymous institution at which this study took place. From fiscal year 2008 to 2014 RSU's state allocation remained flat. This funding scenario is not unique to RSU; Mitchell and Leachman (2015) found that while states have restored some funding that was cut during the recession of the mid-2000s, their funding of higher education remains on average 20% below pre-recession funding levels. Yet, despite these funding cuts, many institutions' operating costs remain fixed regardless of changes in enrollment (e.g., faculty and staff salaries, facilities, utilities). Due to declining enrollment in fiscal year 2017, RSU experienced an 8.8% cut in its state allocation, and the university expects an additional 1.5% budget cut in fiscal year 2018. A study conducted by RSU in 2013 found that an increase of 1% in all student retention rates over a period of three years would result in the graduation of an additional 44 students and the generation of an additional $1.4 million in annual operating revenue (Appendix A).

While making the "business case" is important in a limited-resource environment, improving retention and persistence can also be seen as moral and ethical imperatives for colleges and universities. RSU's student population consists of roughly 60% first-generation students, many of whom rely heavily on federal loans and grants. Moreover, 91% of RSU students receive some form of state and/or federal financial aid. As such, the importance of retaining students is implied in the institutional commitment to providing value to students while equipping them with the skills necessary to compete in the workplace. Failing to retain students often results in students being saddled with debt and lacking the credentials and skills needed to succeed in the job market.

Integrating the performance improvement and human resource development literature opens new strategies for addressing the challenges of student retention, which often require significant additional financial and personnel resources. The purpose of this study was to determine if a pivotal talent pool strategy helped to improve performance in a centralized academic advising unit at a Regional State University, resulting in improvements in student retention rates. The following research questions shaped the study:

- How, if at all, does implementing a pivotal talent pool strategy affect the performance and short-term impact of a centralized academic advising unit?
- What is required of a centralized academic advising unit to create conditions that

support the development and implementation of pivotal talent pool strategy?

This research comprised an action research study in once site since it and was bound by the confines of RSU. Therefore, the results of the study are not generalizable; however, according to Herr and Anderson (2005), this case may still serve as map, with built in reflection on learning, for other institutions of higher education engaged in efforts to increase student retention rates through alignment and devleopment of pivotal talent pools.

Study Significance

The field of strategic human resource development and the concept of strategic talent management has the potential to provide a compelling direction for human resource development professionals within higher education (Riccio, 2010; Woodard, 2015; Ruona, 2014). Missing, however, are empirical studies that bridge the gap between theory and practice of strategic talent management (Bethke-Langenegger, Mahler, & Staffelbach, 2011). In addition, the student retention literature has not sufficiently tapped methodologies outside of higher education to address this critical challenge of retaining students (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). The findings from this study could influence the way higher education organizations approach talent development processes, while addressing the strategic needs of internal and external stakeholders in a typically resource-constrained environment.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

> *Only by becoming thoroughly familiar with prior research and theory can you hope to contribute something that others will build upon, thereby extending a discipline's knowledge base*. (Merriam & Simpson, 1984, p. 29)

A strong conceptual framework articulates how a researcher believes a topic or issue should be studied (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). It can ultimately serve as "an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous" (p. 7). The study's conceptual framework comprises a series of cross-disciplinary connections. Strategic human resources represents a convergence of human resource management, human resource development, and organizational development theory and practice (Ruona & Gibson, 2004). A subset of the human resource development literature includes research around improving employee performance. These theoretical areas provide an interesting alternative to the traditional approach and research identifying factors that impact college student retention and persistence (with a strong or even sole focus on the individual student). A well-designed literature review establishes connections among the variables in the researcher's conceptual framework to allow him or her to refine research questions and bound the study, while providing a logical starting point for determining an appropriate methodology (Creswell, 2013). In this chapter I outline the study's conceptual framework and ground it the empirical and theoretical scholarly literature. The theoretical framework of the study, centering on a pivotal talent pool strategy (PTPS), is described in detail. In addition, I situate the research in the context of academic advisors in higher education.

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

The conceptual framework that informed this study is depicted in Figure 1. The conceptual framework integrates theory and practice on pivotal talent pools, performance improvement, and strategic human resources development (SHRD), and highlights how these concepts could be applied to the adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 2009) of enhancing student retention rates. Each of these circles are addressed in detail in the chapter that follows.

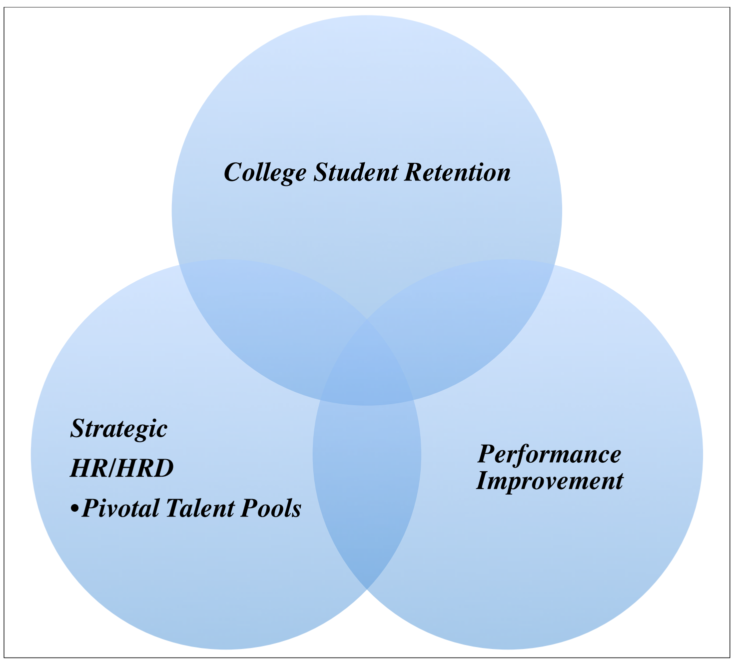

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

To inform this study, I explored the existing literature related to student retention literature, which covers more than 40 years of research surrounding the factors that impact student retention. Changing economic markets and state and federal funding structures demand that institutions of higher education strategically address student retention (Burke, 1998a, 1998b; Snyder, 2015; USG, 2011). The retention literature provides quantitatively and qualitatively validated information about variables that impact a student's decision to persist and graduate (Cabrera et al., 1992; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Yet, national statistics demonstrate that graduation rates have not improved (ACT, 2015; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). For this study understanding the variables that impact retention aided in the identification of the pivotal talent pool as well as the cultivation of a performance model that would improve student retention.

The strategic human resources development circle represents a growing body of literature that considers human resources professionals as strategic partners within an organization (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Garavan, 2007; Peterson, 2007; Ruona, 2014, 2017). Much of this literature has focused on talent management (TM)—that is, attracting, identifying, and developing talent to meet the strategic goals of an organization. Authors have suggested leveraging pivotal talent pools comprise the bridge between talent management and becoming a strategic partner (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Ruona, 2014; Whelan, Collings, & Donnellan, 2010).

Performance Improvement is the field of study around the factors that impact employee performance (Binder, 1998; Gilbert, 1978; Robinson & Robinson, 2008; Rummler & Brache, 1995a; Swanson, 1995). It explores the role of the manager in creating the conditions that foster improved performance of an employee and moves beyond training programs as the solution to performance deficits. It serves as an important link for this study by providing a way to move beyond the identification of pivotal talent pools to fostering exemplary performance of those pivotal talent pools.

The specific theoretical framework used for this study is Ruona's (2014, 2017) Pivotal Talent Pool Strategy Model (Figure 2), which highlights the importance of crafting and leading a pivotal talent pool strategy (PTPS) to translate organization strategy to guide the strategy of the human resource/human resource development. Specifically, Ruona (2017) asserts that HR/HRD professionals aiming for strategic impact must address each of the following elements:

- Organization strategy: "HR/HRD professionals much have a deep and intimate understanding of the organization strategy and the basis of the organization's competitive advantage" (Ruona, 2017, slide 13).
- Pivotal talent pool strategy: There must be a "logic that ties the strategy to specific talent pool(s) that can differentially affect the strategy. A PTPS includes: (1) the identification of critical talent pools required to achieve organizational goals--that is, the roles where a 20% performance improvement would make the difference between achieving (or not); (2) the aligned action and (3) the integrated systemic place to foster effective performance of that talent" (Ruona, 2017, slides 10, 13, 18 and 21). This study uses Robinson and Robinson's (2008, 2016) GAPS! Map ® model to address parts two and three of or Ruona's (2014; 2017) PTPS model. However, Ruona (2014; 2017) does not specify a particular model.
- Human resource strategy: Based on the PTPS, the HR/HRD function can "craft specific implications for its strategy" (Ruona, 2017, slide 20).

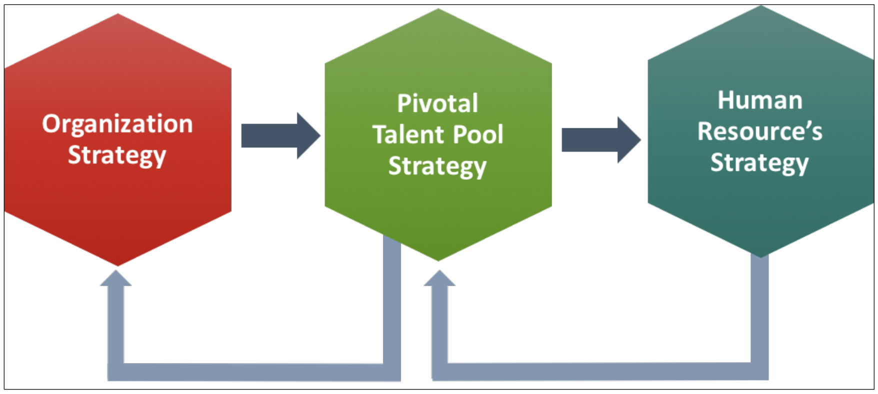

Figure 2. Ruona's (2014) pivotal talent pool strategy model.

Context for the Literature Review

In an effort to move qualitative studies beyond mere description, Glaser and Strauss 1967, 2014) argued that novice researchers should focus on developing explanatory theoretical frameworks that lead to conceptual understandings of the studied phenomena (Charmaz, 2006). As such, the following section provides a rigorous examination of the literature in relation to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this study.

The Frontier of a Pivotal Talent Pool Strategy

In discussing the future integration of the human resource management, human resource development, and organizational development fields, HRD scholars have suggested that people will be the primary source of an organization's competitive advantage and that HRD professionals should become strategic partners in optimizing this resource (Garavan, 2007; Peterson, 2008; Ruona, 2014; Ruona & Gibson, 2004). Such a framework is built on the foundation of the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991; Barney, Wright, & Ketchen, 2001; Wernerfelt, 1984), "which considers sources of competitive advantage turning attention toward intersection of strategy and HR issues…[R]esources which are rare, valuable, inimitable and nonsubstitutable can provide sources of sustainable competitive advantages"

(Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001, pp. 702-703). Optimizing this resource has opened a new field of research around what is known as talent management, which assumes that a highly skilled and motivated workforce is a sustainable advantage (Barney, 1991; Barney et al., 2001). This focus has led to the seemingly inevitable evolution of strategic talent management practices.

Strategic talent management is an offshoot of the talent management movement (Hanif, Masood, Tariq, & Azhar, 2013). Some professionals have debated whether strategic talent management represents the future of HRD or is merely a fad (Iles, Preece, & Chuai, 2010). External pressure has driven the evolution of HRD professions, as evidenced in Hammonds' (2005) article "Why I Hate HR." The title suggests a sense that HR is monolithic and does not serve as a strategic partner in achieve the organization's strategic outcomes. Hammonds asserted that "typically, HR people can't, or won't. Instead, they pursue standardization and uniformity in the face of a workforce that is heterogeneous and complex" (p. 5). He went on to suggest that to remain relevant, HR professionals must be able to strategically align themselves with organizational strategic priorities. While the literature has suggested that this movement is taking place (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Whelan et al., 2010; Ruona, 2014), Lawler, Boudreau, and Mohrman (2006) found that HR professionals overestimated the time they devoted to strategic business partnerships between 1995-2004.

Strategic talent management may offer opportunities to bridge the gap preventing HR professionals from becoming strategic partners by focusing on aligning TM functions with the strategic needs of an organization. Jackson and Schuler (1990) described talent management as the process of getting the right people with the right skills into the right job at the right time. However, the practitioner-scholar role of the profession moved the concept forward when in the 1990s consultants for McKinsey coined the phrase "the war for talent" (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels, 1998), triggering substantive discussion among HRD scholars. Since then, talent management has been defined more formally "an integrated set of processes, programs, and cultural norms in an organization designed and implemented to attract, develop, deploy, and retain talent to achieve strategic objectives and meet future business needs" (Silzer & Dowell, 2010, p. 18). Despite this definition, there remains confusion about what talent management is; Collings and Mellahi (2009) noted that part of the confusion has arisen because researchers and practitioners often substitute the term talent management for basic human resource management function. In a critical review of the TM literature, Lewis and Heckman (2006) observed that within the literature of talent management has been used interchangeably to represent talent strategy, succession management, and human resources planning. In an attempt to define current approaches TM, Ruona (2014) argued that there are four distinct streams of research and practice (Figure 3):

- leadership pipeline: Intentional development of talent pools to fill organizational vacancies and develop a plan for effective succession planning;
- high performers: Management of people identified as particularly talented or high-performing (or the "A performers");
- pivotal talent pool: Focusing on key positions that have the ability to most significantly improve and impact organizational strategic priorities; and,
- specific talent segmentation: Focusing on developing talent (rather than the total workforce) to impact organizational goals.

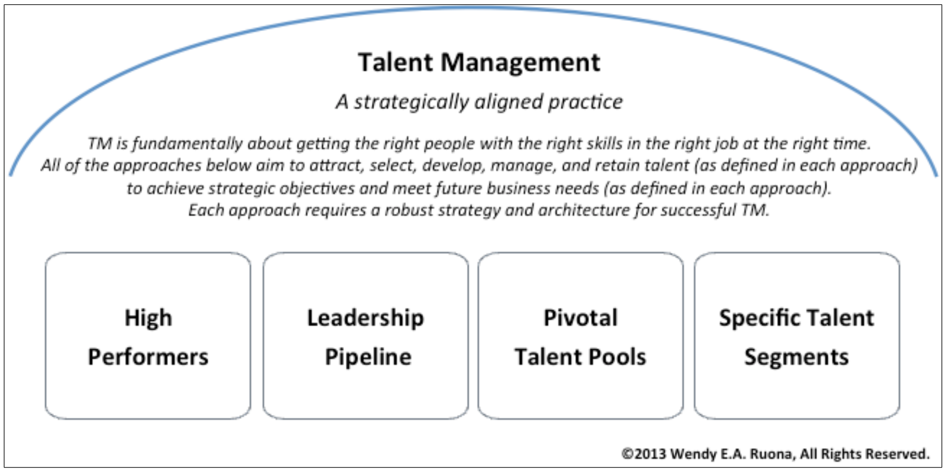

Figure 3. The streams of talent management research and practice.

The last two of Ruona's streams—pivotal talent pools and specific talent segments—have the potential to capitalize on the resource-based view of strategic human resource development and push HRD professionals to engage at a new level of strategic partnership. Table 1 represents the variety of definitions of strategic talent management and their application to TM research and practices.

Table 1

Defining Strategic Talent Management

Author	**Definition**	**Talent Management Practice**
Caplin (2013)	"The aim of strategic talent is to secure long-term profitability by developing and engaging all of your people in the goals and success of your business." (p.16)	Leadership pipeline
Collings & Mellahi (2009)	"We define strategic talent management as activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization." (p. 305)	Pivotal talent positions Leadership pipeline High performers Specific talent segments
Rani & Joshi (2012)	"A core sub-set of an organization's strategic management system, to develop a resource assets base that is capable to support current and future organizational growth directions and objectives." (p. 20)	Leadership pipeline Specific talent segments

Moving from Talent Management to Talent Development

Hanif et al. (2013) noted there is still not a clear theoretical explanation for how strategic talent management can become a competitive advantage for an organization. One approach is to consider the role of increasing the performance of pivotal talent positions in order to demonstrate the impact of their work (Boudreau & Jesuthasan 2011; Ruona, 2014). As Ruona (2014) noted, "the practice of identifying, assembling, and channeling all those inputs into an integrated, coherent system focused on getting the right people with the right skills in the right job at the right time requires more than a collection of inputs." (p. 9). Ruona suggested that TM that focuses on pivotal talent positions "forwards a way of identifying and developing talent that is quite similar to, and would be greatly enhanced by, the theory and practice of performance improvement/performance consulting" (p. 8). Ruona (2014) original referred to this approach as Strategic Talent Development but evolved her thinking toward a more integrated approach of that has HRD practitioners using all of the tools at their disposal. Ruona (2017) refers to this integration as a pivotal talent pool strategy. The conversation around TM and the focus on strategic alignment and development has the potential to provide a powerful rebuttal to HRD detractors and allow the profession to gain credibility as a strategic partner (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005a; Ruona 2014). Boudreau and Jesuthasan (2011) argues, "It is often not economically optimal for progressive HR functions to achieve 'top performance' or acquire 'the very best talent' in every role. A more optimal approach is to understand how various talent roles contribute to strategic success" (p. 34). This type of demand-side talent segmentation has the potential to uniquely advance an organization facing adaptive challenges within the marketplace. In the first quantitative study of TM strategies, Bethke-Langenegger et al. (2011) found that Swiss corporations that had implemented talent management practices focusing on strategic alignment with corporate strategies out-performed those focusing on other areas of TM (i.e., succession planning, and attracting and retaining talent) and on organizational outcomes (i.e., company attractiveness, achievement of business goals, customer satisfaction, and corporate profits).

Critiques of Talent Management and Talent Development

Talent management strategies raise ethical challenges, since they inherently create a differentiated talent pool (Swailes, 2013). Several researchers have noted a dearth of empirical research around the application of TM strategies and the issues such an application may solve as well as cause (Bethke-Langenegger et al., 2011; Iles et al., 2010; Lewis & Heckman, 2006).

Furthermore, while authors have suggested pivotal talent positions comprise the bridge between talent management and a pivotal talent pool strategy, no one has developed a systematic method for identifying them (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Ruona, 2014, 2017; Whelan et al., 2010). Most importantly, while Ruona (2014, 2017) identified a link between pivotal talent positions and performance improvement, she did not provide a concrete definition of what a strategic talent development represents. Hanif et al. (2013) used the term a pivotal talent pool strategy and suggested that such practices "will enable organizations to ensure succession in valuable talent pools and create new valuable sources of competitive advantages before others lose their value" (p. 9-10). While Hanif et al. referred to a strategic talent development strategy, the authors failed to go as far as Ruona in identifying a method for selecting talent groups. Hanif et al.'s definition more closely relates to traditional talent management practices and does not encapsulate the strategic alignment and development aspects identified by other theorists (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Ruona, 2014, 2017; Whelan et al., 2010). Ruona's lack of a clear definition and Hanif et al.'s (2013) potential misuse of the term plays into the critiques of talent management theory (Lewis & Heckman, 2006).

It is the continuous development of talent that allows for an organization to truly capitalize on the competitive advantage of the talent pool (Hanif et al., 2013; Ruona, 2014, 2017). Church (2014) described the potential problem for HRD practitioners if they fail to change:

> If practitioners remain fixed in their mindset regarding the use of feedback tools for development only purposes (versus decision-making) they will become increasingly less relevant to senior leaders in organizations. In short, there needs to be a better balance struck between ensuring an emphasis on development while also adding demonstrable

value (and "teeth") to the strategic talent agenda.

Regardless, these views align with the foundations of the resource-based view of the firm, which holds that the source of a firm's competitive advantages must transform resources over time to remain valuable in ever-changing markets and environments (Barney, 1991; Barney, Wright, & Ketchen, 2001; Wernerfelt, 1984).

While many have critiqued the practical application of talent management methodologies, missing from the discussion are responses to questions about the roots and roles of the HRD professions and whether the primary focus of HR professionals should be on learning or performance (Bierema, 2000; Swailes, 2013). As Bierema (2000) argued, "HRD research is based on an agenda driven by performativity values and management interests. Yet, performance is just one factor of many to consider when undertaking workplace development" (p. 287). In addition, Swailes (2013) questioned the ethics behind creating differentiated talent pools. These are important critiques that strategic HRD professionals must be aware of and to which they much be prepared to provide a response.

Integrating the Performance Improvement Literature

While Boudreau et al. (2010) highlighted the importance of pivotal talent in moving the HRD profession toward a decision science where business, math, technology, design thinking and behavioral science are used to enable better decisions. Ruona (2014, 2017) furthered their argument by citing the importance of the performance improvement literature. It has been estimated that 80% to 85% of the problems that organizations face are not due to a lack of knowledge and/or skills (Rummler & Brache, 1995a). With this in mind, training interventions are not the most effective primary solution for performance issues. To improve the system, organizations must therefore consider the deficiency of the management system (Gilbert, 1978).

Gilbert (1978), the “father” of the performance improvement literature, advised, that “whatever the most immediate cause of the poor performance, I, as the manager have no one to blame but myself. The cause of incompetence is my management” (p. 76). Many models have been developed to identify ways to operationalize the performance system of employees. These models attempt to identify the performance gap between the desired performance and current performance (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004; Robinson & Robinson, 2008). Table 2 provides an overview of the factors impacting human performance. While the terminology may vary, I suggest the factors of goal setting, system design, recognition and consequences, feedback and coaching, expertise, and individual capabilities represent conditions that support performance improvement of employees. It may also have the ancillary benefit of helping to avoid job burn out by addressing mismatches in the areas of work life as described by Maslach, Schaufeli, and Leiter (2001).

Table 2

Overview of Factors Impacting Human Performance

	Goal Setting	**System Design**	**Recognition & Consequences**	**Feedback & Coaching**	**Expertise**	**Individual Capabilities**
Binder (1998)	Expectations and feedback	Tools and resources	Consequences and incentives	Expectations and feedback	Skills and knowledge	Selection and assignment Motives and preferences
Gilbert (1978)	N/A	Instrumentation rooted in the environment	Motivation rooted in the environment mad individual	Motivation rooted in the individual Information rooted in the environment	Information rooted in the individual	Information rooted in the individual Instrumentation rooted in the individual
Robinson & Robinson (2008)	Clarity of roles and expectations	Work systems and processes Access to information, people, tools, and job aids	Incentives	Coaching and reinforcement	Skills and knowledge	Inherent capability
Rummler & Brache (1995a)	Performance specification	Task Support	Consequences	Feedback	Skills & Knowledge	Individual Capacity
Swanson (1995)	Mission/Goal	System Design	Motivation	N/A	Expertise	Capacity

Ultimately, improving the performance of individuals in organizations is complex and adaptive for HRD professionals (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 2009). While these models provide a guide to understanding ways to impact the system and intervene to create success, HRD professionals still struggle with their implementation:

> A problem faced by almost all organizations, and by those who work in them, is in meeting the constant demand for high performance. The demand for high performance

> affects everything, from assuming sustainable financial growth of the organization to satisfying the next customer standing at the front counter, but without a holistic mental model of performance and the theoretical elements that drive it, practitioners are left with the task of dissecting and interpreting each situation they face or even worse, they simply charge ahead in a trial-and-error mode. Performance improvement theory results in powerful and practical principles and models to help practitioners identify and solve performance problems. (Swanson, 1999, p.1)

However, applying performance improvement theory to all levels of an organization is not financially sustainable and may not be necessary at all levels or for addressing all problems (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011). This study explored how a pivotal talent pool strategy was able address strategic priorities in an environment of scarce resources by capitalizing on performance improvement theory, which has been noticeably absent in the TM literature (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; Ruona, 2014).

Factors Driving Student Retention and Persistence

Over recent decades, student retention has been one of the most studied aspects of college enrollment dynamics, with numerous articles, studies, models and theories, practices, programs, consultancies, and conferences devoted to improving retention and degree-completion rates. However, overall rates of college degree completion have not changed considerably (ACT, 2015; Kalsbeek & Hossler, 2010; Tinto, 2004, 2006; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Four key theories exist around factors impacting student retention: Spady’s (1970) model of the undergraduate drop out process, Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 2012) model of student departure, Bean’s (1980) model of student attrition, and Astin’s (1984) model of student involvement. Each of these theories has similar constructs of key variables impacting student retention. A synthesis of these theories by Strauss (2001) found that they all focus on the following variables:

- structural/organizational characteristics of institutions;
- pre-college variables;
- encouragement from significant others;
- financial aid, financial attitudes;
- social integration and social growth; and,
- academic integration, academic growth, and college grade point average.

Building on the work of Strauss (2001), Table 3 represents a synthesis of how each retention theory covers each of these characteristics.

Table 3

Synthesis of Retention Theories Focusing on Variables

Variables	Astin (1984)	Bean (1980)	Spady (1970)	Tinto (1975, 1993, 2012)
Structural & Organizational Characteristics	Resource theory	Institutional quality, major, satisfaction with courses, institutional fit	N/A	N/A
Pre-college Variables	Individualized theory	Socioeconomic status	Academic Potential	Individual attributes, pre-college schooling
Encouragement from Significant Others	Friendship support	Parental approval, encouragement of Friends	Friendship support, family background	Family background
Financial Aid & Attitudes	Resource theory	Finance attitudes	N/A	N/A
Social Integration & Growth	Student involvement theory	Integration, communication of rules and requirements, staff/faculty relationships, campus organizations	Social integration	Social integration, peer group interactions, faculty interactions
Academic Integration & Success	Subject matter theory, student/faculty interaction	University GPA, opportunity to transfer	Grade performance, intellectual development	Grade performance, intellectual development, academic integration

Evidencing the Gap in the Literature

Changing economic markets and state and federal funding structures demand that institutions of higher education strategically address student retention (Burke, 1998a, 1998b; Snyder, 2015; USG, 2011). The retention literature provides quantitatively and qualitatively validated information about variables that impact a student's decision to persist and graduate (Cabrera et al., 1992; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Yet, national statistics demonstrate that graduation rates have not improved (ACT, 2015; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Table 4 outlines the empirical studies that have focused on improving retention.

Table 4

Empirical Table of Student Retention Research

Researcher	**Contribution to the Literature**
Spady (1970)	Developed the first model around student retention, model of the undergraduate drop out process.
Tinto (1975)	Building on the work of Spady, created the most popular model of student retention, model of student departure.
Pascarella & Terenzini (1979)	Validated the work of Spady and Tinto.
Bean (1980)	Brought a workforce attrition model to student retention, model of student attrition. Demonstrated that retention principals exist across disciplines.
Astin (1984)	Brought a more simplified model of student retention, model of student involvement. Provided clear connections to interventions around retention.
Tinto (1987)	Revised his original theory and served as the "call to arms" for more attention to student retention rates.
Cabrera et al. (1992)	Statistically validated Spady's and Tinto's models of student retention.
Tinto (2004)	A retrospective of student retention rates that demonstrated that, despite individual success, no universal truth around retention had been found. Retention rates had remained stagnant for the last decade.
Pascarella & Terenzini (2005)	Seminal work on the best practices and actions in higher education to help transform student outcomes.
Tinto (2006)	Proposed a new direction for retention initiatives that included more research on specific populations (e.g., first-generation college students).
Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009)	Demonstrated the confusion and critiques of the seminal retention theories. It showed how far the research had come but how little success had been realized. Advocates for the need for new approaches to improving retention outcomes.

I propose that research on retention is not enough to improve retention; that is, retention represents a challenge that cannot be solved with normal ways of thinking (Heifetz & Laurie, 2009). Heifetz and Laurie (2009) suggested that adaptive challenges require adaptive work "when deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge" (p. 124). A gap exists in the way institutions approach improving retention. In an environment with scarce resources, strategically reallocating existing slack resources toward pivotal talent positions provides a new perspective on improving retention. Boudreau and Jesuthasan (2011) suggested this type of approach can provide an optimal way of allocating organizational resources to meet customer demand that results in a optimal value proposition for both the customer and organization. Institutions must focus on ways to improve the performance of these positions to maximize the Return On Improved Performance (ROIP) and optimize the system. I argue that using the a pivotal talent pool strategy approach advanced by Ruona (2014, 2017), which builds on Boudreau and Jesuthasan's (2011) concept of pivotal talent pools would allow institutions to implement interventions within the system by utilizing existing resources. This is important because, as Boudreau and Ramstad (2007) noted, "for all the evidence that the quality of talent and organization matters, it is still frustratingly difficult for most business leaders to know precisely where and how investments in employees' talent and organization actually drive strategic success" (p. 5). Table 5 represents the body of work around pivotal talent positions and a pivotal talent pool strategy.

Table 5

From the Resource-Based View of the Firm to a Pivotal Talent Pool Strategy

Researchers	Contribution to the Literature	Point of View
Barney (1991)	Advances the concept of the resource-based view (RBV) of the firm, which will ultimately become the foundation for the conversation of strategic human resource development (SHRD).	RBV
Chambers et al. (1998)	Seminal article from the consulting world that initiated the scholarly conversation around talent management (i.e., RBV)	Talent management-pipeline
Wright et al. (2001)	Building on the work of Barney (1991), Wright et al. advanced the RBV theory as a strategically aligned practice.	RBV, SHRD

Researchers	Contribution to the Literature	Point of View
Boudreau & Ramstad (2005a, 2005b)	First to articulate the concept of pivotal talent and the concept of return on individual performance. Becomes the foundation for a pivotal talent pool strategy. Integrates theories from the field of economics into HRD theory and practice.	SHRD, Pivotal Talent Pools
Lewis & Heckman (2006)	Provided a critique of the talent management literature and suggested that it may be more of a fad than a strategic practice.	Talent management practices
Garavan (2007)	Formally connected the theoretical context of the RBV and SHRD.	RBV, SHRD
Boudreau & Ramstad (2007)	Expanded on earlier work to suggest moving HR toward a decision science rather through their concept of talentship.	Strategic talent management-pivotal talent pools and SHRD
Collings & Mellahi (2009)	Provided an overview of the literature surrounding strategic talent management and the possibilities to advance HR professionals as strategic partners.	SHRD and overview of talent management
Whelan et al. (2010)	Case study that attempted to put into practice the concept of pivotal talent positions from a knowledge- intensive gatekeeper perspective.	Strategic talent management-pivotal talent pools
Boudreau & Jesuthasan (2011)	Expand on their earlier work to further refine the economic advantages to organizations by strategically aligning talent development principals for their employees with their organizational strategy.	A pivotal talent pool strategy
Bethke-Langenegger et al. (2011)	First quantitative study to evaluate the effectiveness of talent management strategies on a variety of measures of individual and firm performance. Provided validation to support the cases studies around strategic talent management and a pivotal talent pool strategy.	Strategic talent management
Ruona (2014)	First attempt to link performance improvement, talent development, and strategic talent management together. Suggested a new path forward that built on the work of Boudreau & Ramstad (2005a, 2007, 2011).	Strategic talent management and a pivotal talent pool strategy
Hanif et al. (2013)	Through a critical review of the strategic talent management literature, the authors found theoretical connections to resource-based view of the firm. Suggested that a pivotal talent pool strategy is the future of strategic talent management.	Strategic Talent Management and A pivotal talent pool strategy
Caplin (2013)	Advanced the discussion by explaining how a dynamically trained workforce can and should be developed to deal with an ever-changing global economy. Incorporated components of human resource development (i.e., employee engagement)	A pivotal talent pool strategy
Sparrow, Scullion, & Tarique, (2014)	Provided a comprehensive look at the variety of definitions and applications of talent management.	Talent management practices

Researchers	Contribution to the Literature	Point of View
Sparrow & Makram (2015)	Provided insights into the value propositions of a strategic talent management approach as well as ways to examine talent management systems and organizational architecture.	RBV and strategic talent management
Gallardo-Gallardo, Nijs, Dries, & Gallo (2015)	Provided an updated comprehensive review of talent management literature and proposed a recommended structure in which to frame future talent management research.	Talent management practices
Woodard (2015)	Demonstrated how the concepts of human performance technology (HPT) and talent stewardship can be integrated using an action research methodology to improve the performance of Chief Business Officers.	Strategic talent management
Mayfield, Mayfield, & Wheeler (2016)	Provided guidelines for how leaders of change can use HRD capabilities to improve organizational performance and associated outcomes.	Pivotal talent pools, Strategic talent management
Jenkins (2017)	Discussed how strategy develops in organizations and how strategy may affect the organizations approach to managing human resources.	Strategic talent management
McDonnell, Collings, & Mellahi, (2017)	Provided a systematic and comprehensive review to trace the evolution of talent management scholarship and propose a research agenda to move the field forward. Two primary streams of literature dominate: the management of high performers and high potentials, and the identification of strategic positions and talent management systems.	Pivotal talent pools, strategic talent management
Bratton & Garavan, (2017)	Advocated for the learning and development processionals to further align and demonstrate the impact of their work with the organization's strategic priorities.	Talent development, RBV

The results of this study help to fill the gaps in the literature regarding each of the three areas of the conceptual framework. Notably, while the frontier of a strategic human resource development has received scholarly attention (Bratton & Garavan, 2017; Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Collings & Mellahi, 2007; Mayfield et al., 2016; McDonnell et al., 2017; Jenkins, 2017; Ruona, 2014, 2017), much of the discussion is conceptual in practice. Limited case studies exist around the concept of a pivotal talent pool strategy and pivotal talent positions (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005a; Rani & Joshi, 2012; Whelan et al., 2010). While Bethke-Langenegger et al. (2011) quantified the efficacy of strategic talent development practices; they were not able to link that efficacy to empirical practice. This research has the potential to add to the scholarly literature related to how a pivotal talent pool strategy works and to support the evolving concept of a pivotal talent pool strategy by linking it to the established field of performance improvement/consulting literature. Boudreau and Ramstad (2007) suggested that HR must embrace this type of strategic movement as the profession evolves toward a decision science and away from a field of professional practices.

Rethinking the Role of Academic Advisors in Student Success

The National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggested that the role of first-year academic advising is even greater than previously thought. In 2013, the NSSE was expanded to include a voluntary module of academic advising; Grasgreen's (2013) analysis of NSSE data related to academic advising found that the number of times a student met with his or her academic advisors correlated positively with how supported he or she felt on campus. Grasgreen (2013) quoted Jennifer Joslin, associate director of content development for the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA):

> When you don't require advising or set high expectations about contact and the importance and meaningfulness of contact, and when you don't work to make advising a very obvious piece of the puzzle, these are precisely the students you don't reach. (p. 2)

This further validated Astin's (1984) research focusing on the role of engagement in student retention, but it did not explain how to engage those who did not participate in the advising process even when the benefits had long been clear and researchers had validated the theoretical constructs. In a follow-up the NSSE, Mu and Fosnascht (2016) found that "advising experiences had a positive relationship with students' grades and self-perceived learning gains … The results also showed that the relationships of advising and students' learning and development varied across institutions" (p. 2). Mu and Fosnascht recommend that administrators should critically evaluate advising services and ensure that the roles of academic advisors aligned with the goals of supporting student success outcomes.

Evolution of Academic Advisors' Roles in Student Retention

Student success has become a more prominent institutional value at colleges and universities due to national conversations around measuring outcomes (Burke, 1998a, 1998b; Snyder, 2015; USG, 2011). However, the role of academic advisors is not a new topic within the literature of student success or the academic advising field itself. Noel (1985), building on Astin's (1984) model of student involvement, stated, "It is the people who come face-to-face with students on a regular basis who provide the positive growth experiences for students that enable them to identify their goals and talents and learn how to put them to use. The caring attitude of college personnel is viewed as the most potent retention force on a campus" (p. 17). Habley (1994, as cited in Nutt, 2003), claimed that "Academic Advising is the only structured activity on the campus in which all students have the opportunity for one-to-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution." Tinto (1987), who developed the model of student departure, stated that in order to improve student retention and success efforts, colleges and universities must understand that academic advisors represent the core of any initiative. Nutt (2003) argued that

> in these times of financial cut backs, student retention, persistence, and success will continue to be a major emphasis on our college campuses. Any retention effort must clearly recognize the value of academic advising to the success of students and the necessity that advising become a central part of a collaborative campus-wide focus on the success of our students.

In an interview with Straumsheim (2017), Ed Venit, of the education consulting firm EAB, described academic advising as undergoing an "exponential upswing in the field of student success in the years following the financial crisis [of the mid-2000s], as colleges have added financial wellness, career development and degree progress programs to better serve at-risk students." Comprising this evolution (or upswing) are four categories of best practices that connect directly to academic advisors: early interventions, degree planning, next generation academic advising, and timely degree progress (see Appendix C). None of these, however, began in earnest, coordinated ways across colleges and universities until the early 2000s according to EAB (2017). EAB described this period as one of technological evolution in which

> new early alert technologies allow advisors for the first time to understand risk in terms of behaviors, not just demographics. Emphasis returns to graduation rates, and long-term degree planning becomes more commonplace as schools strive to translate first-year retention gains into degree completions.

This focus on academic advisors as ambassadors to student success has resulted in a closer alignment between theory and practice (Miars, 2017). Miars (2017) added that with the transition of advising offices to student success offices "many institutions will need to fundamentally change their structure and attitude toward advising. We are seeing progressive institutions explore new advising models, increasingly specialized roles for advisors, and new methods of advisor evaluation and promotion." This is an evolution along a continuum comprising four eras of academic advising as described by Himes and Schulenberg (2013)—a nearly 400-year period during which academic advising went from unrecognized (1620-1870), to an era of recognition of academic advising without examination of the role (1870-1970), followed by an examination of the advising field with the advent of retention literature (1970-

2003), and then leading to an era of active examination toward the development of a definition of academic advising and the creation of core competencies (2003-present).

Conclusions

The role of academic advisors as a pivotal talent position in impacting student success outcomes is not a new concept; it is grounded in seminal case-study research around student retention (GSU, 2014; Douglas-Gabriel, 2015). However, despite the fact that academic advisors have been around since the founding of colleges and universities, research continues to reveal their limited success in systematically changing student retention rates across colleges and universities. Emerging theories and practices outside of higher education in the fields of human resource development and organizational development provide a new lens through which to understand the challenge of closing the student performance gap. The pivotal talent pool strategy model advanced by Ruona (2017) may allow for the creation of the conditions necessary for implementing a new way of addressing student retention problems at colleges and universities without the dedication of new resources. Chapter 3 describes the methodology this study followed. Chapter 4 puts the conceptual and theoretical frameworks into practice at RSU.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter moves beyond the problem framing presented in Chapter 1 and the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2 to provide a methodological grounding for this study. This chapter outlines the design of the study and the selection of an Action Research methodology. It provides an overview of Action Research and how it was applied at Regional State University. Chapter 3 goes on to describe the design of the study, identifies the study participants, outlines the data collection and analysis procedures, and expounds on procedures to ensure validity and trustworthiness for this study in an attempt to answer the study's research questions.

- How, if at all, does implementing a pivotal talent pool strategy affect the performance and short-term impact of a centralized academic advising unit?
- What is required of a centralized academic advising unit to create conditions that support the development and implementation of pivotal talent pool strategy?

It concludes with a discussion of the delimitations and limitations of this study.

Design of the Study

This study used Shani and Pasmore's (1985, p. 439) definition of action research (AR) to frame this study. Shani and Pasomore (p. 439) stated

> action research may be defined as an emergent inquiry process in which applied behavioral science knowledge is integrated with existing organizational knowledge and applied to solve real organizational problems. It is simultaneously concerned with

bringing about change in organizations, in developing self-help competencies in organizational members and adding to scientific knowledge. Finally, it is an evolving process that is undertaken in a spirit of collaboration and co-inquiry.

Their definition highlights key elements that constitute the AR process: applying behavioral science knowledge, solving real organizational problems, bringing about change, adding to scientific knowledge, adopting a spirit of collaboration, and utilizing co-inquiry (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). At its core, AR is:

1. research *in* action, versus *about* action;
2. done in collaboration through a democratic process;
3. about conducting research and action simultaneously; and,
4. a systematic approach to problem solving. (Coghlan & Brannick)

In light of these characteristics, I believed that an AR process could provide a bridge between the practical results-driven world in which Regional State University operated and the scholarly world of grounded theory and practice.

Traditional Action Research Process

The AR process, as outlined by Coghlan and Brannick (2010), is initiated with a pre-step, or an evaluation of the context and purpose of the AR project. Once this pre-step is complete, the AR cycle follows a four-step process:

- Constructing: collaboratively identifying the key issues that the AR project will explore and the change it will attempt to implement;
- Planning action: collaboratively developing the first steps and interventions the AR project will address;
- Taking action: implementing the steps identified in the planning action step; and,

- Evaluating action: examining the intended and unintended outcomes of the AR project.

While these steps may appear linear, the process of moving between them rarely is. In fact, a strength of the AR process is its ability to be flexible enough to allow for movement between steps, which can create multiple interventions and/or other AR cycles. Since AR is in action, the process typically involves multiple AR cycles, sometimes occurring simultaneously (Figure 4). This is a key factor that differentiates AR from other research methodologies.

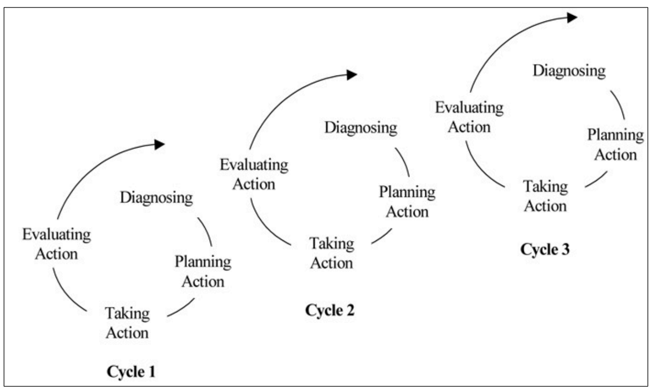

Figure 4. Spirals of the action research cycle (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010).

The Interventionist Roots of Action Research

While action research roots trace to the 1940s, specifically to the work of Kurt Lewin's training groups, Coghlan and Brannick (2010) noted it has served as the theoretical foundation for many current management theories (e.g., McGregor's theory x and theory y, Senge's systems theory). Rooted in these management theories is the process of intervening with employees. Argyris (1970) suggested, "to intervene is to enter into an ongoing system of relationship, to come between or among persons, groups, or objects for the purpose of helping them" (p. 15). Argyris added that three conditions must be fulfilled if the interventions are going to help the client. First, the intervention must lead to the generation of valid information in order for learning to be assessed. Second, free and informed choice must exist in order for the client and the system to maintain their autonomy from the consultant. Lastly, the system must commit to continuing sustainable learning beyond the original intervention. The collaborative inquiry aspects of action research are designed to ensure that these conditions are met (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010; Herr & Anderson, 2005). This AR study represented what Argyris described as the rarest type of interventionist activities. In this AR case study the resources of the client and the interventionist were joined to help the client better understand the problem while also contributing to scholarly theory.

Integrated Action Research Design at Regional State University[1]

This study sought to integrate Ruona's (2004) Consulting to Improve Performance process with an AR methodology to determine if focusing on a pivotal talent pool's performance effectively helped to improve performance in a centralized academic advising unit and results in improvements in student retention rates. Integrating Ruona's (2004) Consulting to Improve Performance process with Coghlan and Brannick's (2010) meta-cycle of action research provided a methodologically grounded approach to researching ways to positively affect student retention. In Figure 5, Ruona's stages are listed in italics next to the corresponding AR stage. This model represents what Coghlan and Brannick referred to as classical action research, describing it as Lewinian in origin, "involv[ing] a collaborative change management or problem solving relationship between researcher and client aimed at both solving the problem and generating new knowledge" (p. 44).

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[1] The full context of the RSU AR study is described in Chapter 4.

[2] This section represents a symbolic breaking of the fourth wall of the AR case narrative process to provide additional context regarding actions I took that impacted the study before resuming the AR case narrative in the *Planning Action* phase. As such, the chronology jumps backwards to the *Pre-Step* and *Diagnosing* phases and ahead to the *Planning Action* phase section. This is necessary to provide additional context to the AR case narrative.

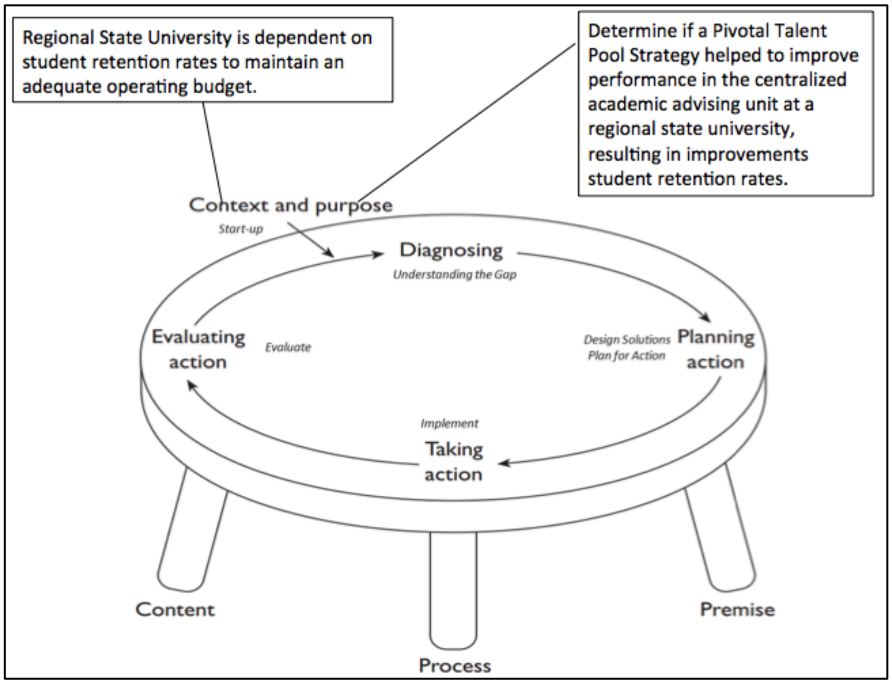

Figure 5. Integrated action research design process, used at RSU.

RSU's core action research and thesis action research projects. From a methodological perspective, action research studies must address questions related to both the core AR project and the thesis AR project (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010; Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002). Zuber-Skerritt and Fletcher (2007) illustrated this process and its influence on the thesis writing process (Figure 6). The study's primary purpose— was to determine if a pivotal talent pool strategy helped to improve performance in a centralized academic advising unit at a Regional State University, resulting in improvements in student retention rates—represented a combination of the core and thesis AR projects. The core AR project represents the project design, implementation, and evaluation (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). The core AR project's was to determine if a pivotal talent pool strategy helped to improve performance in a centralized academic advising unit at a Regional State University, resulting in improvements in student retention rates. The thesis AR project captures the researcher's reflections on the core AR project, the researcher's role, and the overall process (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). The thesis AR project's purpose was to evaluate if Ruona's (2017) pivotal talent pool strategy model effectively integrated the conceptual frameworks of pivotal talent pools and performance improvement in a higher education setting.

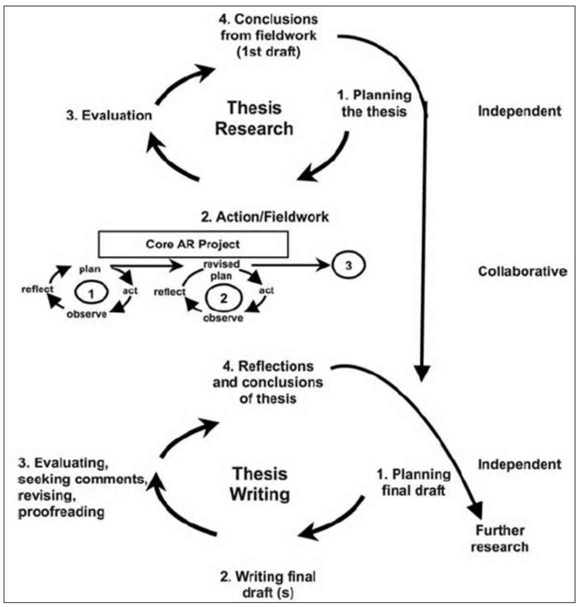

Figure 6. Zuber-Skerritt & Fletcher's (2007) conceptual model of an action research thesis.

Insider action research. This AR project represented what Herr and Anderson (2005) defined as "Insider in Collaboration with Other Insiders" (p. 32). Herr and Anderson suggested that this type of AR team develops a collaborative community that engages members in the learning process and that can lead to personal, professional, and institutional transformation. In this type of research, validity is established through the co-counseling model, which places a high value on the relational aspects of the research (Heron, 1996). According to Herr and Anderson, "for a study to have validity, authentic relationships must be maintained between the group members and initiating researchers as well as among group members themselves" (p. 59).

The meta-learning that grows from these authentic relationships, group interactions, and AR team interactions is included in the action research framework of learning about learning, or the intentional inclusion of the learning of those conducting the research in addition to those impacted by the research (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005).

The Success Case Study

This research study utilized Brinkerhoff's (2005) success case methodology a framework to evaluate the impact of the study's interventions on participants. This methodology provides an evaluative approach designed to capture the performance management context of human resource development. Brinkerhoff's model consists of exploring in-depth stories to document effects and identify factors that seem associated with successful application of the intervention. Brinkerhoff argued that practitioners of this model must ground these stories in rigorous qualitative or quantitative analysis. Viewing the analysis of impacted participants through a storytelling lens while simultaneously grounding that analysis in data (Brinkerhoff & Dressler, 2002) is an effective means for representing the story of the case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Chapter 5 uses a selected student story that served as a key narrative for representing the change of performance of the academic advisors, which was also grounded in qualitative and quantitative data.

Study Participants

Data for this study were collected from multiple individuals and groups. Five groups served as the primary sources of data for this study (Table 7). The project sponsor recommended which staff should participate on the AR team. The AR team identified participants for the study based on information we generated and on institutional data. Description of the data collection method for each group in Table 6 is describe later this chapter. The next section outlines more specifically which groups were involved in various aspects of data collection.

Table 6

Data Collection Groups

Target Group/Person	Description	Number of People in Sample
AR Project Sponsor	Person contracting the study	1
AR Team Members	Team that is responsible for identifying pivotal talent positions, performance gap, and interventions	3
Supervisors of Pivotal Talent Positions at RSU Peer Institution	Persons responsible for the supervision of pivotal talent position at RSU's peer institution	2
Pivotal Talent Positions at RSU Peer Institution	Exemplary employees in pivotal talent position at RSU peer institution as identified peer institution director	8
Supervisors of Pivotal Talent at RSU	Persons responsible for the supervision of pivotal talent position at RSU and co-constructing interventions	5
Pivotal Talent Positions at RSU	Employees in positions identified by the AR team, supervisors, and director	4
Students	Students impacted by new academic advisor performance behaviors	3

As established in 1979 by the *National Commission for the Protection of Human of Biomedical and Behavioral Research*, also known as the *Belmont Report*, all research subjects were given the opportunity to choose whether or not to participate in this study. I obtained institutional review board (IRB) approval from the University of Georgia as well as Regional State University. Each study participant was provided an approved IRB informed consent form (which allowed them to consent to participate). Pritchard (2002) pointed out that one criticism of action research is that "researcher processes are not fully formed a priori … so the ability to fully inform potential participants is limited" (p. 119). While the nature of co-construction implies informed consent and free will to participate, I also adopted the processual consent approach proposed by Rosenblatt (1995) whereby I made clear the ongoing direction of the research as the AR team reached a new stage in each cycle of the research. This is detailed in Chapter 4.

Data Collection

This study used qualitative data collection methods to inform the research questions and answer the core and thesis AR project purposes. Multiple data sets and methods of analysis were used to develop conclusions in this study. Due to the cyclical nature of AR, data was constantly collected and analyzed through an inductive and recursive research process based on the study's research questions (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). The research plan for the study is outlined in Table 7. This study utilized multiple qualitative data collection methods, including interviews, casual conversations, incidental observations, email correspondence, meetings notes, and organizational documents. The AR team used the data to inform and evaluate interventions. The data were also used as supporting documentation for the AR project with the project sponsor and the supervisors of the academic advisors. A researcher's journal and interviews with AR team members informed the thesis AR project. Throughout the study, I captured my thoughts and questions about the process in my journal, which also served as a place to explore alternate meanings and interpretations outside of the core AR project. I conducted interviews to capture the reflections of the AR team members, academic advisors, and supervisors of academic advisors. This process was critical from a methodological perspective, as it enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of the data and the overall action research process.

Table 7

RSU Research Plan

Data Collection Method	Purpose	Source/Number of Participants	Proposed Method of Analysis	Proposed Method(s) to Ensure Trustworthiness	Timeline	Research Question
Interviews at RSU Peer Institution	AR team will develop a deeper understanding of exemplary performance of academic advisors to assist in the development of the GAPS! Map® and intervention development	Exemplar performers focus group at peer institution (8)	Constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ruona, 2005)	Interview exemplar performers for talent pool, document review, audit trail, AR team member-check review, and reflexivity	August 2015	N/A Used for Intervention Development
	AR team will develop a deeper understanding of exemplary performance of Academic Advisors to assist in the development of the GAPS! Map® and intervention development	Supervisors of pivotal talent position at exemplary peer institution (2)	Constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ruona, 2005)	Interview exemplar performers' supervisors for talent pool, document review, audit trail, action research team member-check review, and reflexivity	August 2015	N/A Used for Intervention Development
Interviews at RSU	Researcher will develop a deeper understanding of current exemplary performance post-intervention phase and the larger efficacy of the AR study	Pivotal talent positions: Academic advisors at RSU (4)	Transcribe recorded interviews; review and identify themes; code data and look for patterns. Constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ruona, 2005) and success case method (Brinkerhoff, 2005)	Member check, audit trail, and reflexivity	August 2017	1 & 2

Data Collection Method	Purpose	Source/Number of Participants	Proposed Method of Analysis	Proposed Method(s) to Ensure Trustworthiness	Timeline	Research Question
	Researcher will develop a deeper understanding of current exemplary performance post-intervention phase and the larger efficacy of the AR study	Pivotal talent position: Supervisors of PTPs at RSU (5)	Transcribe recorded interviews; review and identify themes; code data and look for patterns. Constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ruona, 2005) and success case method (Brinkerhoff, 2005)	Member check, audit trail, and reflexivity	June 2017	1 & 2
	Researcher will develop a deeper understanding of impact of exemplary performance on student outcomes to support the development of student cases as part of Brinkerhoff's success case study method	Students (3)	Transcribe recorded interviews; review and identify themes; code data and look for patterns. Constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ruona, 2005) and success case method (Brinkerhoff, 2005)	Member check, audit trail, and reflexivity	June 2017	1 & 2
	Researcher will develop a deeper understanding of the efficacy of the AR study and its impact on RSU	Project sponsor (1)	Transcribe recorded interviews; review and identify themes; code data and look for patterns.	Member check, audit trail, and reflexivity	June 2017	1 & 2
	Researcher will develop a deeper understanding of the efficacy of AR study and the impact on RSU	AR team members (2)	Transcribe recorded interviews; review and identify themes; code data and look for patterns.	Member check, audit trail, and reflexivity	August 2017	1 & 2

Data Collection Method	Purpose	Source/Number of Participants	Proposed Method of Analysis	Proposed Method(s) to Ensure Trustworthiness	Timeline	Research Question
Documentary Information (casual conversations, incidental observations, email correspondence, meeting notes, & organizational documents)	Researcher will develop a deeper understanding of the efficacy of the AR study and its impact on RSU	All study participants	Constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ruona, 2005)	Audit trail and reflexivity	Duration of AR project	1 & 2
Researcher analytical memos and personal journal notes	Researcher will develop a deeper understanding of the AR study and his role in the study	Researcher's notebook; laptop; voice memos on smartphone	Constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Ruona, 2005)	Audit trail and reflexivity	Duration of AR project	1 & 2

Interviews at the Peer Institution and RSU

Interviews served as the primary data sources for this study. The AR team developed the interview protocols for the RSU peer benchmarking process and the final interview protocols with participants were developed by the researcher. By developing the peer benchmarking protocols together the AR team could first explore the methodological constructs of the performance-improvement field and then connect it to information the team hoped to learn from the peer institution. In advance of the interviews at RSU's peer institution, the director of the advising center was provided a one-page overview of the study along with the informed consent form and also additional interviews with the front-line academic advisors and their supervisors. The director then recruited the interviewees. Two rounds of interviews were conducted, each in a group setting. The first interview was held with the director and the associate director of the advising center; the second interview with six exemplary academic advisors and two of their supervisors.

Interviews at RSU

For the interviews at RSU, the AR team used a criterion-based selection method whereby the AR team identified specific attributes and characteristics of those who would be studied (Roulston, 2010). Interviews with the exemplary academic advisors and their supervisors, RSU students, and the project supervisor were conducted. The AR team identified these populations in order to provide a holistic perspective of the academic advisor performance paradigm at RSU. The AR team identified the supervisors, who were then invited to participate in a group interview. The supervisors of the advisors identified the exemplary academic advisors who were invited to participate in a group interview. The exemplary academic advisors recommended student interviewees who exemplified the impact of the new advising performance paradigm on student success. The use of multiple participants within each sample was important as multiple case sampling added confidence to the findings (Miles et al., 2013).

Documentary Information

The use of all documentary information included in this study (i.e., meeting notes, consensus documents, organizational documents, email correspondences, incidental observations, consensus documents, organizational and casual conversations) was approved under the initial IRB protocol. Potential data sources were kept in a password-encrypted folder on my cloud drive. This drive was shared with the members of the AR team to allow them to upload documents they found relevant to the study. These sources were sorted into a filing system based on their larger thematic relevance.

Researcher Analytical Memos and Personal Journal Notes

All of my memos and personal journals were considered as case evidence of the study. Memos and notes ranged from scanned copies of notes I took during meetings to formal journal entries submitted to my dissertation committee. Meetings with my major professor and those associated notes were included in this process. Personal journals represented formal reflections that were submitted as part of my doctoral defense process. These formal and informal documents were stored in a password-encrypted folder on my cloud drive or in a locked filing cabinet in my home office. These memos and notes were not shared with the AR team or participants. These memo and journal notes represent approximately a dozen different documents throughout the research study. I used a keyword identification system on the top of each memo or note to aid in the final data analysis process.

Data Analysis

I used multiple established methods of data analysis as outlined by Miles et al. (2013). I primarily employed the constant-comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and described here by Merriam (1998 p.159):

> The researcher begins with a particular incident … and compares it with another incident in the same set of data or another set. These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances. Comparisons are constantly made with and between levels of conceptualization until a theory can be formulated.

The process is recursive, and the researcher does not wait until all data is collected but, rather, uses the data to decide how to narrow or widen the study, identify missing or new data sources that were not originally included in the study, develop and refine research questions, pilot themes and ideas, and inform the literature (Ruona, 2005). Aligned with action research methodology, "this simultaneous process of data collection and analysis ensures that [the researcher is] critically reflecting and continually learning throughout the data analysis process and that [his or her] learning is being used to conduct better research" (p. 237).

The constant-comparative method allows for more rigorous methodologies to take place by taking the emerging categories and themes across incidents to analysis with qualitative research software. For instance, the method was used in relation to participant interviews and documentary information. The qualitative research software HyperResearch was used to aid in the coding and interpretation of interviews of the target data-collection groups, documentary information. The use of this software tool offered additional ways to analyze and visualize the data in order to connect themes by applying a common structure to previously unstructured information.

Interview Data

All participant interviews were recorded, transcribed, uploaded to HyperResearch, and then analyzed for key ideas, critical incidents, key participant comments, discrepancies, descriptions of actions and relations, etc. I used member checking with interview participants and documentary information originators to ensure that the intent of participants' comments were fully understood whenever I felt unclear about their statement. This approach was consistent with the first-cycle coding process described by Miles et al. (2013) and Saldaña (2012). The findings from this first-cycle analysis were shared with the AR team. I then proceeded with a second-cycle pattern-coding process in order to refine categories, themes, and constructs (Miles et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2012). Once coded, I linked categories, themes, and constructs to the research questions as outlined in the research plan. At the conclusion of the study, all interview data went through a member-checking process to ensure that each participant's intent was accurately represented in the final dissertation.

Quotes from interview data are formatted and treated in ways that may differ from APA formatting guidelines. Quotes are italicized regardless of length to differentiate participant quotes from quotes from the literature. Moreover, the use of personal communication and dates are included with participant quotes even though APA style recommends only using this citation format if a subject is willing to go "on the record" with their statement. While subjects were granted anonymity and would were not going "on the record", the narrative format of this study is aided by the inclusion dates since it helps situate the quote within the chronology of the AR study.

Documentary Information

Documentary information is relevant (Yin, 2014). For this study, documentary information included emails, incidental observations, consensus documents (defined in this study as documents created by the AR team that represented members' collective understanding at a given point in time), organizational documents, and casual conversations. Whenever appropriate, based on the themes, categories, and constructs identified in the interviews by the AR team, data were uploaded to HyperResearch and analyzed and coded for key ideas, critical incidents, key participant comments, discrepancies, descriptions of actions and relations, etc. Generally, this type of data provides unique insight into the contextual nature of the case as well as the interpersonal behavior and motives of the individuals involved in the case (Yin, 2014). Inferences drawn from these documents were not used as primary evidence, but rather as a way to provide suggestions for further inquiry into the process to be verified through other sources. To deal with concerns about bias, reflexivity, and subjectivity, such insights were shared with AR team members to solicit alternative perspectives (Yin, 2014).

Researcher's Analytical Memos and Journal Entries

Reflection represents a key support within the action research process (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). Researcher reflexivity was central to this AR study because I, the researcher, was involved directly in the study and in developing interventions (Coghlan & Brannick). Through analytical memos and journal entries, I explored connections between the subjects and me. Coghlan and Brannick recommended a clearly defined approach to reflecting on a study in a way that ensures that theoretical and methodological presumptions are taken into account and that considers how the researcher interacts with the theoretical, cultural, and political contexts. I addressed this by writing memos to myself as part of the preparation for examining each critical milestone. The memos were composed in an open stream-of-thought process, date stamped in a Word document on my desktop computer. I also completed private confidential reflections that I later shared with my dissertation committee at pre-determined intervals. The memos were intended to address privately my subjectivity and my thoughts about the action research study. This method also served as a way to ensure my learning about the practice, as a scholar-leader (Ruona & Watkins, 2014), was captured (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Appendix E illustrates the format for the private reflective memos.

Ensuring Validity and Trustworthiness

Action research goes beyond other research methodologies concerned primarily with the trustworthiness and validity of collected data by also focusing on other outcomes besides knowledge generation (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The term validity, preferred by positivists, and trustworthiness, preferred by naturalistic researchers, are insufficient for AR since they do not acknowledge the action-oriented outcomes of action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010; Herr & Anderson, 2005). As such, Herr and Anderson provided four validity criteria to consider when evaluating AR: (1) dialogic and process validity, (2) outcome validity, (3) catalytic validity and (4) democratic validity. I used each of these criteria to guide action taken to enhance trustworthiness (Table 8). Moreover, the quality and rigor of the study were addressed by exposing the activities of the AR team to critique through the dissertation-writing process and by connecting my conclusions to the development and/or expansion of theory and usable knowledge via peer-reviewed publication (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Table 8

Methods to Ensure Action Research Validity

Herr & Anderson's (2005) Validity Criteria	Herr & Anderson's (2005) Description of Validity Criteria	Actions Taken By Researcher
Dialogic and Process Validity	• Generation of new knowledge • A sound and appropriate research methodology	• Utilization of multiple iterative cycles of learning and reflection • Intentional exploration and documented decision-making process by the researcher to determine what counted as evidence • Completion of a peer-review process
Outcome Validity	• Achievement of action-oriented outcomes	• Strong research questions that consisted of measureable outcomes • Following agreed upon research protocols regarding data collection and analysis • Utilization of multiple methods of data generation that allowed results to be triangulated (e.g., interviews and observations)
Catalytic Validity	• Education of both researcher and participants	• Utilization of a research journal to document the reorientation of the researcher and participants to the problem and their role in co-constructing solutions
Democratic Validity	• Results that are relevant to the local setting	• Engagement with an action research team to co-construct interventions • Engagement with participants to co-construct interventions

Linking the goals of action research with the quality/validity criteria and the actions that researchers should take to support quality/validity provides a roadmap for researchers to democratize AR, broadens the view of the problem being studied, and serves as a reference point of discussion for AR dissertations (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Jacobson (1998) described outcome validity as the "the quality of action which emerges from it, and the quality of data on which the action is based" (p. 130). This criterion ensures that the results of the research project are credible from a naturalistic inquiry and valid for positivist research (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Process validity comprises reflection on the steps the researcher took that led to the reported outcomes, including reflection on the original problem through the use of multiple reflective cycles. Cunningham (1983) described democratic validity as local validity whereby the problem and solutions are deemed appropriate to the context. Herr and Anderson (2005) suggested that researchers should examine how relevant stakeholders are treated in regard to whether they are deemed insiders or outsiders to the inquiry process. Catalytic validity represents the ability of the researcher and participants to describe how their own orientation to the problem has evolved as a result of the research process; it separates itself from process and democratic validity by representing the transformational opportunities of action research. Dialogic validity represents what Myers (1995) referred to as the "goodness-of-fit" test, or how well the definition of the problem and the results fit the local setting. This can be demonstrated by engaging a critical perspective that is familiar with the setting, leading, in some cases, to an alternative explanation of the results (Martin, 1987).

This study relied heavily on qualitative data. To address concerns about trustworthiness of qualitative research, I followed established qualitative data-analysis procedures outlined by Miles et al. (2013). In addition to member-checking, I also applied what Miles et al. described as first-cycle and second-cycle coding procedures to separate the process of summarizing the data from the process of clustering the data. Whenever possible triangulation of data was used to support any finding by providing three independent measures of agreement. In addition, I employed what Miles et al. described as reality checking by running the author's data past supervisors, mentors, or peers. For this AR study, the AR team and my dissertation committee filled this role to ensure that I attended to the goodness criteria of the study and followed established protocols for research.

Trustworthiness in Interviewing

Roulston (2010) described the complexities that novice researchers face in understanding the theoretical underpinnings of interviewing, which can lead them to "experience[e] paralysis in the creative process, though striving to first know everything of relevance concerning relations to their prospective studies … too little theory may result in simplistic interview studies in which an unreflective researcher produces [a] naïve analysis of interviews" (p. 4). For this study, I attempted to follow the constructs of reflective interviewing. Rouslton argued that a reflective interviewer understands his or her own subjectivities; the dynamics of the relationship of the researcher participants and the researcher, and their associated impacts on the study; the theoretical perspectives on interviewing that can impact research design and process; and the analysis of interview interaction and the impact on analysis and practice. Rouslton (2010) added that in order to demonstrate quality in the research process, a researcher can use triangulation to support the validity and trustworthiness of interview data. I attempted to accomplish by having supervisors complete reflective journals after their interview. I also had AR team members separately listen to the final interviews to come up with their own key themes and learning from the interviews.

Broader Trustworthiness Controls

For all data collected during this study, an audit trail was used by logging and then describing the procedures clearly enough so other researchers could understand and evaluate the process and conclusions (Miles et al., 2013). Member checks were conducted whenever I was felt unclear of the intent of the interviewee to help ensure that the transcriptions accurately represented the intended meaning. This process helped to address issues related to accuracy and intent by checking my interpretations against those of the participants (Miles et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2012). Having AR team members separately listen to and identify key themes and learning also allowed me to check my internal thinking process, creating what Saldaña (2012) referred to as windows of opportunities to clarify ideas and gain new insights from the study participants.

The AR approach can be enhanced by non-textual materials, which allows the research to provide the reader with other ways to understand the data beyond statistics (Yin, 2014). Stake (1995) and Yin (2014) suggested that case study writers should consider multiple sources of data and evidence to increase the validity and reliability of their narrative and conclusions. Thus, through the methodological approach of AR, my study also included reflection on my own role. As Stake (1995) maintained, the richness of telling a case—not just reporting on it—defines case study as an art:

> Because it is an exercise in such depth, the study is an opportunity to see what others have not yet seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretative powers, and to make, even by its integrity alone, an advocacy for things we cherish. (p. 136)

This statement resonated with me because of the personal nature of my action research project; that is, the study represented a personal journey of exploration and reflection in the way I see and understand myself. If I used the case study methodology correctly, these personal elements could be, as Stake (1995) illustrated, the splendid palette with which I could paint the case story.

Maintaining awareness of my subjectivity by keeping a researcher journal not only enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of the action research methodology, but it also provided a richer picture to support the reporting on this case. This process of articulating my sense making also made my tacit knowledge explicit (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010).

Limitations and Opportunities

One of the most significant benefits of AR methodology is its ability to move beyond words to the creation of practices (Gustavsen, Hansson, & Qvale, 2008). While words are often relevant contextually and risk being misconstrued, AR practices comprise an observable reality (Gustavsen et al., 2008). Gustavsen et al. (2008) noted that the social construction that underpins an AR project limits it to an individual AR study. This limitation also places researchers in a paradox of aiming for generalities in an effort to make a study transferable to another context (Gustaven et al, 2008). For this reason, AR is strongly criticized by descriptive-analytical researchers. The AR researcher's direct involvement in knowledge production also raises challenges around how the positionality of the researcher and his or her navigation of the political landscape in taking action further restrict a study's applicability beyond a single case (Ospina, Dodge, Folby, & Hofmann-Pinilla, 2008). A researcher can address this limitation by using tools designed to ensure first-, second-, and third-level reflection with participants. However, confidentially requirements from institutional review boards as well as the participatory nature of the research methodology that is grounded in a local context impacts generalizability (Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

While action research is not generalizable because it is context-specific, it can be transferable (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). This allowed RSU to serve as a case study for exploring both the theoretical constructs of a pivotal talent pool strategy as a potentially innovative way to address retention among a highly financial-aid-dependent student population at greater risk for not being retained. Such approaches are advocated within the literature as necessary to move beyond theoretical understandings of factors impacting student retention and toward practical applications for improving and sustaining student success outcomes (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Conclusions

This chapter provided background on action research as a methodological approach to engaging systems, exploring problems, and co-creating solutions. For this study, AR served as the holding environment in which the local context of RSU shaped the study. The research plan for this study, including data collection methods, sources of data, and methods for analysis, was described. The constructs of action research require special attention to be paid to the role of the researcher in the process; thus, ethical considerations for action researchers were discussed, and a description of the steps I took to ensure validity and trustworthiness were examined.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed narrative that describes the context of the AR study and how the AR project and process took place at RSU.

CHAPTER 4

CONTEXT OF THE ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

To intervene is to enter into an ongoing system of relationship, to come between or among person, groups, or objects for the purpose of helping them (Argyris, 1970, p. 587).

Using Regional State University's integrated research design as a framework (Figure 5), this chapter describes the context of the AR study and highlights the ways in which the study incorporated the central tenets of action research. It is important to note, however, that the chapter does not comprise an exhaustive audit trail of every detail of the AR study. As Herr and Anderson (2005) argued, "because of the ongoing nature of action research, it may not be possible to write up the whole understanding, but rather just a piece of the understanding or intervention that has come about through the inquiry". In traditional action research, each cycle is iterative, evolving in a linear fashion; however, this study's model consisted of one mega-research cycle with an embedded sub-cycle focused on the performance of the supervisors of academic advisors (Figure 7). The iterative nature of action research was nevertheless built into the mega-research cycle in the planning, development, implementation, and evaluation of interventions. This chapter weaves reflections on my first- and second-order learning into the AR study narrative, focusing on the way the AR process impacted change at RSU, and concludes with my own reflections on the process of conducting insider action research and becoming a scholar-leader (Ruona & Watkins, 2014).

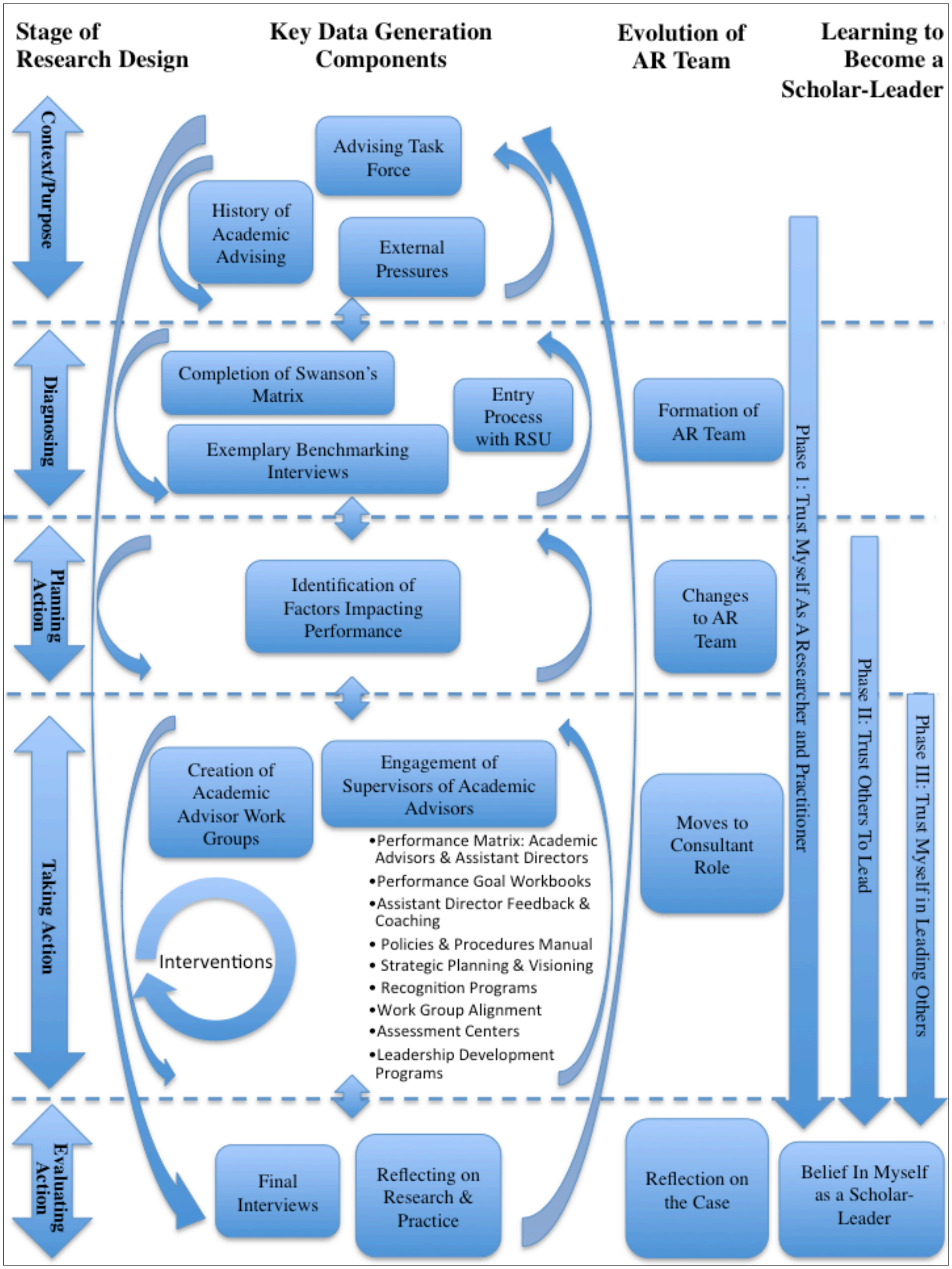

Figure 7. RSU's action research study model.

Context and Purpose of the RSU AR Study

All action research begins with a pre-step in which the researcher develops an understanding of the context and purpose of the study (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). This research model refers to this as understanding the purpose and context for the study. For this study, answering these questions helped to determine the overarching purpose of the research—to determine if a pivotal talent pool strategy helped to improve performance in a centralized academic advising unit at a Regional State University, resulting in improvements in student retention rates.

About Regional State University

Regional State University is a suburban public university in the southeastern United States. It enrolls more than 5,000 undergraduate students and 600 graduate students from 34 states and 99 countries. RSU is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). In January 2015, I was hired by the Provost of RSU to serve as the university's director of a newly formed centralized academic advising initiative. The Provost viewed this initiative as an integral aspect of RSU's strategic plan to improve retention. Prior to my arrival, academic advising services had been offered in a variety decentralized formats across multiple units and divisions. The centralization of academic advising represented RSU's move toward an intentional, coordinated effort to improve student academic success, and consequently retention, through the implementation of a proactive intervention based advising model where academics advisors develop interventions and implement strategies that are informed by predictive data analytics to improve student success outcomes. At the time, centralization of advising services and the adoption of predictive data analytics had gained significant media attention (Douglas-

Gabriel, 2015; Georgia State University, 2014) and were seen by the RSU leadership as keys to addressing consistent, term-over-term declines in enrollment.

Regional State University's annual operating budget is $62 million, with an endowment of $2 million. RSU has become increasingly tuition-dependent, with $27 million of its annual operating budget derived from tuition dollars. In fiscal year 2017, RSU experienced an 8.8% cut in its state allocation, and the university expects an additional 1.5% budget cut in fiscal year 2018. At RSU, the executive cabinet of the university has identified improving retention rates as critical to supplementing the overall annual operating budget in times of decreasing state allocations (Dr. P., personal communication, January 11, 2015). Similar to many businesses, RSU relies on revenue (i.e., tuition) from its customers (i.e., students) to cover its operating costs. The more students the university can recruit and retain, the easier it is for RSU to predict and stay within budgets (Kalsbeek & Hossler, 2010).

History of Academic Advising at RSU

In many ways, the foundation of the pre-step stage for this AR study was already in place prior to my engagement with Regional State University as an insider action researcher. To establish context for the study, I first had to understand the history of RSU's movement toward professional academic advising, described during a new academic department chair orientation (RSU Dean, personal communication, July 15, 2015). Prior to 2004, faculty were responsible for all academic advising; however, after 2004, RSU colleges began to hire professional academic advisors to handle the caseload of students who had 45 or fewer credits, thereby allowing faculty to focus on assisting students who had chosen their major. In 2010, professional academic advisors took on the advising of students with up to 60 credit hours. In 2012, in an effort to improve the retention of first-year students, RSU created a first-year advising center to address the academic needs of all new freshmen, while transfer students with fewer than 60 credit hours were assigned to the professional academic advisors. Although RSU saw incremental improvements in first-year student retention, graduation rates did not increase (see Appendix B). This was not unique to RSU as there are distinct trade-offs when institutions prioritize aligning available resources with efforts to enhance the overall student success of first-year students rather than all students (Figure 8). This stagnation, combined with the success of RSU's peer institution in transforming its academic advising model to improve retention and graduation rates for all students, attributed to the peer institution's adoption of a centralized advising model and utilization of a predictive data-analytics approach to advising. All of this served as motivators for RSU to implement more effective academic advising strategies (Dr. P personal communication, January 11, 2015). In 2014, RSU's Provost contracted with the same software provider (i.e., EAB) in hopes of achieving results similar to those of RSU's peer institution. Shortly after this process began, however, the provost left RSU. The new provost Dr. P. realized there was limited adoption of the software platform. Dr. P charged a task force of faculty and professional advisors to make recommendations on how to proceed with restructuring advising at RSU that would capitalize on the predictive analytics software and move to a student-centered approach to advising.

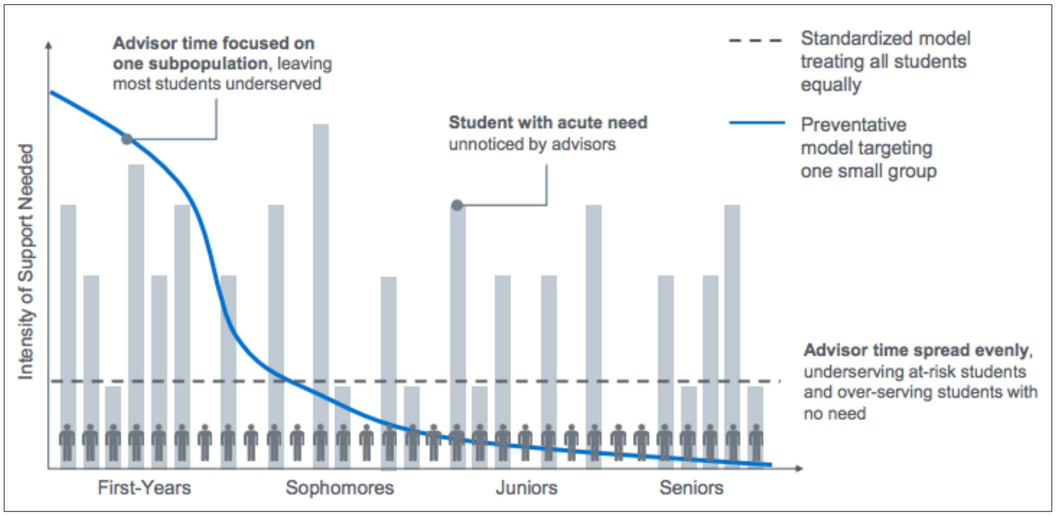

Figure 8. A student-centered approach to advising (EAB, 2014a).

The task force came up with the following recommendations regarding future academic advising at RSU:

- Hire a new director of advising no later than July 2015;
- Change reporting lines so that all professional academic advisors report to the newly hired director of advising;
- Train faculty in the use of the predictive analytics platform to assist with mentoring;
- Create a new task force to outline the role of faculty in mentoring;
- Adopt the following priorities for new academic advisors:
    - Hire an assistant director
    - Restructure the advising system by
        - Implementing advisor-tier career ladders
        - Cross training advisors
        - Redefining ownership of advising through graduation

        - Including non-college-based advising units (e.g., first-year center, learning support)
    - Define advisor workload
    - Clarify faculty advisor role during transition
    - Hire an administrative coordinator

These were the conditions that led to my hiring as director of academic advising and would ultimately put into motion this action research study. Three years later during my final interview with the Provost he mentioned this task force process as a critical component to the ultimate success of the centralized advising process. Dr. P (personal communication, August 30, 2017) stated he felt it was this collaborative approach the severed as the genesis to create the necessary support and buy-in from faculty and staff to centralize the advising system.

Reflecting on the Context and Purpose of the RSU AR Study

Coghlan and Brannick (2010) argued that a critical condition for achieving the pre-step phase of action research is the establishment of collaborative relationships among those who have or need to have ownership over the key pre-step questions outlined earlier in this section. In the context of this study, much of the work of answering these questions was completed prior to my arrival at RSU and the initiation of the research project. The task force laid the groundwork for shared governance in the decision-making process around academic advising—which was regarded as both necessary and desirable. Moreover, external forces, such as performance funding from state legislators and RSU's peer institution's success in transforming retention and graduation outcomes put a spotlight directly on academic advisors at RSU. Internally the process of transforming RSU's academic advising from a fully faculty-based model to a professional academic advising model was already taking place. Even more critical to the project, a cultural awareness that RSU must improve student retention and graduation rates was growing at the university. Argyris (1970) argued that this free will to participate in change initiatives is a necessary and critical condition when intervening with organizations. The recommendations of the task force ensured that condition was met, and the tenets of action research helped to create the conditions for successfully executing the plan.

The Diagnosing Phase

In action research the *Diagnosing* phase, also known as the *Planning Action* phase, is designed to surface the practical and theoretical foundations of the actions that must take place in a study. Central to this phase is the creation of a collaborative approach by the action researcher to engage others in constructing the desired future state and the associated interventions to achieve that future. In this study, action research provided a methodological vehicle for exploring the theoretical framework of a pivotal talent pool strategy.

Formation of the AR Team and Focus at RSU

During the interview process for my position it was made clear by the search committee that improving RSU's retention and graduation rates was a strategic imperative, and I had spoken with the provost about what I perceived as major challenges facing the university. I also outlined my initial doctoral research comprising my theoretical framework (Figure 2). As an insider action researcher, my official entry into RSU occurred in February 2015 when I received a letter of support from the provost to pursue my research at the university. At that time, I had been working at RSU for one month. During this meeting, I provided the provost with an overview of my doctoral program and key aspects of my dissertation work. Later, the provost would mention that my research around developing talent and improving performance was a factor in my hiring (Dr. P., personal communication, February 11, 2015). During this meeting, we identified three individuals who were invited to participate on the action research team: AR Team Member A, assistant dean of student success for the College of Science and Mathematics (now assistant vice president for external programs); AR Team Member B, director of continuing education; and AR Team Member C, academic advisor for the College of Business. AR Team Member A was the co-chair of the provost's Advising Task Force as well as the chair of the director of advising search committee. AR Team Member B was selected due to her familiarity with the AR methodology. AR Team Member C was a member of the task force and a member of the search committee.

A robust discussion during two AR team meetings in April 2015 resulted in the team suggesting additional resources regarding talent management approaches and the exploration of potential pivotal talent positions at RSU. I tried intentionally to influence the team to consider pivotal talent positions other than academic advisors in light of my role as their supervisor. However the team felt strongly that while there were certainly other pivotal talent positions that existed at RSU, the academic advisors seemed to have already been identified by the university as the primary talent position in improving student retention and graduation rates. To evidence this the AR team identified the ongoing centralization efforts of undergraduate advising, the movement toward a fully professional advising system, the significant investments made in predictive analytics software, and the budget prioritization across all units of the university to hire three additional academic advisors in the 2016 fiscal year. Table 9 was developed by the AR team to represent the previous interventions by RSU to support academic advisor performance and improve student retention rates. Moreover, two of the members of the AR team (AR Team Members A and C) were academic advisors. AR Team Member A was in the process of transitioning to the provost's office, but AR Team Member C was to be centralized and could provide a participatory voice to inform the process.

Table 9

RSU Retention Interventions

Intervention Name	Description	Results	Limitations
First-Year Advising and Retention Center	Centralized location for advising and first-year programs for all new students in the federal cohort	In 2010, the university created the center to focus on improving first-year to second-year retention rates. During this time, the federal cohort retention rates improved from 65.9% to 68.0%.	Limited to first-year students; data suggest that the bump in retention rates has not lead to improved graduation rates
Complete College America	State-level project for all state institutions to improve graduation rates	Campus-wide planning process that identified programs and strategies for improving access and graduation rates of students at RSU	No one is officially responsible for the plan, and many of its objectives have only been superficially met.
Degree Works	Software package to automate degree evaluation process; can be run independently by student and advisor	Fully implemented for fall 2014	Limited adoption by advisors and students due to programming glitches and inaccurate information
Student Success Collaborative	Software platform deigned to allow advisors to identify and intervene with at-risk students based on predictive data analytics	Fully implemented in fall 2014, but remained unutilized until fall 2015	Limited adoption and limited accountability for not utilizing; lack of clear training or expectations around how to utilize the software platform
Hiring of 3 New Academic Advisors	Prioritized 3 new state funded lines to improve advisor to student ratios as part of plan to centralize advising. Positions were hired for Fall 2015.	Fall 2015 to Spring 2016 reregistration rates decreased by 1.2% from Fall 2014 to Spring 2015.	Gap in performance across centralized advisors between current performance and identified exemplary performance.

After these AR team meetings I reflected on why I had pushed so hard against the recommendation that academic advisors would be the pivotal talent positions researched for this study. Looking at my notes from after that meeting I determined I was seeking to affirm that what I knew as a scholar—that the academic advisors were clearly the pivotal talent position that should be focused upon—agreed with what I feared as a practitioner—that I was not strong enough to lead this AR study. I would realize later that only when I began to trust others in both my research and practice would both be allowed to integrate and move forward.

The Decision to Focus on Academic Advisors as the Pivotal Talent Position

As described in Chapter 2, understanding performance and how to capitalize on exemplary performance are essential to implementing an organization's strategic direction, but that knowing what exemplary performance looks like is not enough to change performance. This became clear throughout the action research team meetings during the summer of 2015 as concerns surfaced not about whether academic advisors could improve their performance, but what measures RSU would have to take in order to foster exemplary performance. Using Swanson's (1995) diagnosing matrix of enabling questions as a learning tool, the AR team tried to identify based on our own knowledge the extent to which we though the performance system supported the academic advisors (Table 10). The assisted me in educating the AR team about the how the system affects performance. This learning tool also helped the AR team coalesce our thoughts around the factors that impact performance and begin to start to understand the system. This tool illustrated to the AR team the interconnectedness of organizational and process level performance levels on individual academic advisor performance. Based on the discussions with the AR team they felt that the majority of advisors had the capacity and desire to perform at a high-level needed organizational- and process-level support. The team also identified the need to identify a common understanding of how an academic advisor should be performing. This is represented by a statement made by AR Team Member C (personal communication, April 22, 2015), “In all fairness, does everyone really know what student-centered advising is?” This question, as well as our shared insights from this activity, informed the next phase of the AR study, planning action, which focused on articulating the new academic advisor performance model and understanding the gap between current performance and desired performance.

Table 10

RSU's Matrix of Enabling Questions

	Performance Levels		
	Organizational Level	**Process Level**	**Individual Level**
Mission/Goal	*Does the organizational mission/goal fit the reality of economic, political, and cultural forces?* Advising center: There is a lack of goals related to the organizational mission. This is a priority for the university based on strategic plan, Complete College America documents, but cultural forces suggest that RSU is stuck in neutral. • "Here's another initiative."	*Do the process goals enable the organization to meet the organizational and individual mission/goals?* The few process goals that currently exist are disconnected. • "How do we utilize DegreeWorks versus major checklists?" • "What is the role of the Student Success Collaborative?"	*Are the professional and personal mission/goals of individuals congruent with the organizational mission?* It is unclear if advisors understand their role in accomplishing the larger goal/mission of the university.
Systems Design	*Does the organizational system provide structure and policies to support the desired performance(s)?* RSU appears to be committed to providing a structures based on the hiring a new director, preferencing new advising lines, centralizing advisors, and an investment in software.	*Are processes designed in such a way as to work as a system?* Deans are open to conversations about policies; however, several policies/procedure work against each other (i.e., course sub, transfer credit evaluation process, DegreeWorks updating, mismatch of catalog and curriculum guides, graduation audits).	*Does the individual design support performance?* Yes. The lack of consistency in execution of policies breeds apathy and disengagement within the larger system.

	Performance Levels		
	Organizational Level	**Process Level**	**Individual Level**
Capacity	*Does the organization have the leadership, capital, and infrastructure to achieve its mission/goals?* Yes.	*Does the process have the capacity to perform (in terms of quantity, quality, and timeliness)?* Not at this time; a rethinking of the outputs based on the number of people and available resources is required, which may lead to new processes.	*Does the individual have the mental, physical, and emotional capacity to perform?* Yes.
Motivation	*Do the policies, culture, and reward systems support the desired performance?* There are no awards and no formal promotion tracks. Merit raises are equal and minimal.	*Does the process provide the information and human factors required to maintain it?* SSC, AdvisorConnect, and DegreeWorks all are unutilized tools and dashboards.	*Does the individual want to perform no matter what?* A vast majority do, but some are more concerned with maintaining employment Everyone wants to perform well, but not everyone is interested in improving his or her performance.
Expertise	*Does the organization establish and maintain selection and training policies and resources?* No formal training processes exist. They differ among advising units. Professional development funds do exist, but access and support vary among units.	*Does the process of developing expertise meet the changing demands of changing processes?* No. Expertise in knowledge about curriculum is valued over expertise in support student success.	*Does the individual have the knowledge, skills, and experience to perform?* Yes. The AR team believes that everyone has the ability. It is believed the training has not been put in place to support the development of expertise.

Note. Based on Swanson's (1995) performance diagnosis matrix of enabling questions.

Analyzing Academic Advisor Performance at RSU

In this phase of the study the AR team focused on identifying what exemplary performance of academic advisors would look like and collectively understanding what it might take to close the gap between the current performance and exemplary performance. The provost was using the term “student-centered advising” but from AR team conversations it was clear that the term was not commonly understood. Moreover, there was an implied assumption that the centralization of academic advising would automatically resulted in improved retention rates. I brought Robinson and Robinson’s (2008) GAPS! Map® model to the AR team as a way of visualizing how we could move from understanding the strategic goal to what had to change in regard to the performance of the academic advisors. Robinson and Robinson’s model provides an approach to identify the connections between the business needs and performance needs by considering the pivotal talent position that has the ability to provide the largest Return On Improved Performance (ROIP) as described by Boudreau & Jesuthasan (2011). Figure 9 represents the completed GAPS! Map ® for RSU and the process for developing it is described in detail in the below sections.

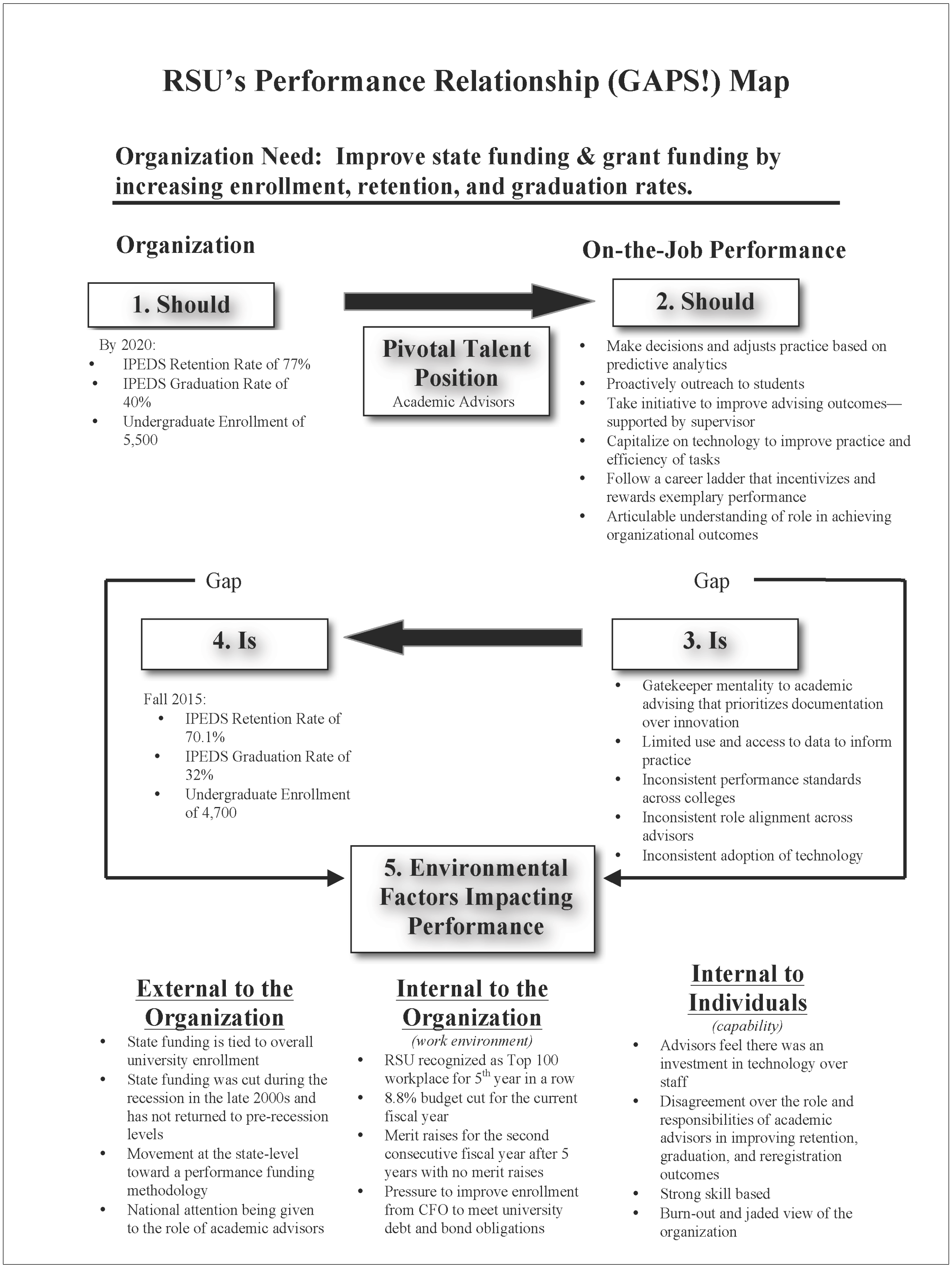

Figure 9. RSU's GAPS! Map®, adapted by Ruona (2005).

Identifying and understanding the gap in performance. The GAPS! Map®, "describes the performance of people as it must be if the organization's goals are to be achieved… [and] identifies the causal linkage between performance and operational results. This ensures that the best practice or competencies are linked to the business and organizational goals" (Robinson & Robinson, 2008, p.118). The components of the model include identification of the performance results, best practices, the quality criteria used to measure performance, and the obstacles that are encountered in accomplishing performance results.

Organizational need. The model begins by identifying the organizational need. The AR team identified this by using RSU's strategic plan that called for improvement in overall enrollment, student retention rates, and graduation rates in an effort to improve state funding and grant funding opportunities. Once the organizational need was established the AR team attempted to fill in the five remaining boxes of the model: *Organization Should*, *Organization Is, On-the-Job Performance Should*, *On-the-Job Performance Is,* and *Environmental Factors*.

"Organization Should" and "Organization Is". The *Organization Should*, Box 1, represents a quantifiable measure for the strategic priority for an organization (Robinson & Robinson, 2008). The *Organization Should* was based on the established 2020 enrollment, retention, and graduation targets that outlined that by the year 2020 first-to-second year retention would be 77%, the six-year graduation rate would be 40%, and overall undergraduate enrollment would be 5,400 students. The *Organization Is*, Box 4, demonstrates with valid evidence-based metric the current level of performance. This represented the current first-to-second year retention rate of 70.1%, 6-year graduation rate of 32%, and undergraduate enrollment of 4,700 students.

"On-the-Job Performance Should." The *On-the-Job Performance Should,* Box 2, integrates work around exemplary performers to provide a behavioral description of performance that takes into account performance results, competencies, best practices, and environmental criteria that are supporting the performance. Based on the AR team conversations that informed the individual level performance responses in Table 10 the AR team decided to use RSU's peer institution that had seen significant improvement in retention and graduation rates by changing academic advisor performance as a baseline to understanding the *On-the-Job Performance Should*. Robinson and Robinson (2008) do not advocate look outside the institutions talent pool to identify the *On-the-Job Performance Should* model. However, Elliot and Folsom (2013) and Rummler and Brache (1995a) do support looking outside of an organization's talent pool to identify exemplary performance. Elliot and Folsom (2013) describe this as creating "synthetic" exemplary performers. Elliot and Folsom (2013) argue this is necessary when there is, "…a situation in which there is no pool or performers to question observe, such as when there is a newly created job or job category." (p.51) Elliot and Folsom add, "Eventually, all the work you put into exemplary performer selection comes down to a single question—whose performance do you want to replicate?" (p. 52). The AR team made the decision to benchmark performance from outside of RSU based on the movement toward a new performance-based advising model that was not currently being practiced at RSU and therefore the AR team felt we needed to look outside of RSU to define exemplary performance.

The AR team developed an interview protocol (Appendix D) to be used in these interviews. The interviews were designed to elicit information about two critical areas. First, we sought information to better understand the performance required for exemplary performance—that is, what effective performance for academic advisors really is. This is required to develop a performance model (Robinson & Robinson, 2008). Second, we wanted to gather information about what factors affect that performance. We utilized Rummler and Brache's (1995a) Factors Affecting Human Performance model (Appendix F) as a framework for shaping these questions due to the AR team's comfort level with their model.

In August 2015 I conducted two rounds of group interviews at the peer institution. The first round included the director and associate director of advising at RSU's peer institution, and the second included six exemplary academic advisors and two supervisors of exemplary academic advisors that were identified by the director and the associate director. From these interviews the AR team developed the performance model that comprised the specific actions taken by exemplary academic advisors to support improve student retention and graduation rates. The performance model included making decisions and adjusting practice based on predictive analytics, proactively outreaching to students, taking initiative to improve advising outcomes with support of supervisor, capitalizing on technology to improve practice and efficiency of tasks, following a career ladder that incentivizes and rewards exemplary performance, and articulating an understanding of their role in achieving organizational outcomes.

"On-the-Job Performance Is." The *On-the-Job Performance Is,* Box 3, illustrates the current performance of the pivotal talent position at the on-set of the study. This performance model was constructed based on the conversations that informed the individual level performance responses in Table 10. The *On-the-Job Performance* was understood as RSU academic advisors currently serving in a gatekeeper mentality to that prioritizes documentation over innovation, having a limited use and access to data to inform practice, demonstrating inconsistent performance standards across colleges, having inconsistent role alignment across advisors, and lacking consistent adoption of technology. The *On-the-Job Performance Is* model was validated by the supervisors of academic advisors at RSU during the *Taking Action* project phase.

Environmental factors. The *Environmental Factors*, Box 5, identifies how the internal and external environmental variables, as well as the abilities of the individuals enable or restrict the possibilities of closing the *On-the-Job Performance Should* and *Organization Should* gap. This was critical to filling out the bottom the GAPS! Map®, which represents how *Environmental Factors* bound the *On-the-Job Performance Is* box at RSU. This is where performance improvement literature, described in Table 2 in Chapter 2, comes into play. The AR team decided to use Rummler and Brache's (1995a) model to identify where interventions could be developed to impact the *Environmental Factors*. It is important to note that Robinson and Robinson (2008) have their own performance factors that they refer to as root causes. As outlined in Table 2, Robinson and Robison's (2008) root causes do not significantly differ from Rummer and Brache's (1995a) factors. The decision to use Rummler and Brache's factors to develop interventions to address the root causes of the *On-the-Job Performance Is* was based on the AR team's comfort with their model.

The transcripts of the peer institution interviews were shared with the AR team, and the members collaboratively analyzed them. Each AR team member initially coded the interviews for key themes as they related to Rummler and Brache's (1995a) model and then reconvened as a team to jointly code the themes. The full table of codes is included in Appendix G. Each member of the AR team shared the key findings he or she identified from the interviews, and the entire AR team identified the following factors that most seemed to affect performance:

- The need for improved task support across academic advisors (i.e., centralized calendar of campaigns)—(Task Support);

- The need to create systems that support in taking agency to become self-managers—(Performance Specification);
- The need for a common philosophy and approach that underpin academic advisors' approach—(Performance Specifications and Skills/Knowledge);
- The need to highlight the role of supervisors of academic advisors in supporting exemplary performance—(Task Support and Feedback).

Reflecting on Developing RSU'S Gaps! Map®.

The results of the exemplary performance benchmarking institution process were not initially shared outside of the AR team, which would prove to be a problem during *Planning Action* phase of this study. Moreover, this use of non-RSU specific data in the exemplary performance model was not in alignment with Robinson & Robinson (2008) model. While the AR felt it was necessary to use non-RSU information it had an unforeseen impact. Since the AR team had not fully engaged with the actual pivotal talent positions, and as a result, they did not understand the current climate well enough to ensure the interventions we were considering were appropriate to the RSU setting and to challenge me on my own thinking regarding the development of the performance model. It was not until the supervisors of the academic advisors were engaged in the discussion that the *On-the-Job Performance Should*, Box 2, and *On-the-Job Performance Is*, Box 3, models became relevant and actionable for this study. This is described in the *Planning Action* and *Taking Action* phases of the project.

Balancing the AR Methodology with My Real Life[2]

Effective July 1, 2015 all academic advisors were officially reorganized the centralized advising center. Along with this centralization came the creation of a new organizational structure and hierarchy. I developed this new structure independently of the AR team and shared the new structure with the academic advisors. Advisors were able to interview for assistant director positions that would supervise teams of advisors based on colleges or special populations. Four out of five of these assistant director positions I was able to select and one was inherited during the reorganization. While this worked for those that felt rewarded by the promotion in the new structure those that were not promoted struggled to accept that their former peer was now their supervisor. Assistant Director A (personal communication, October 5, 2017) described the complexities of this situation:

> *Even though I was excited about the new role, I also dreaded it because I knew that I was going to be leading the people who were not selected. From the beginning, I felt this constant need to prove myself as a leader, because in my mind everyone was questioning why I was chosen in the first place. In my first year, a lot of my decisions as a leader were motivated by a fear of failure.*

In retrospect, I believe I harbored many of these same fears.

Simultaneous to the actions described in the previous sections I was taking actions without consultating with the AR team. At the onset of the centralization in July 2015 the Provost requested additional clarity regarding how the newly centralized unit was meeting some the outcome of improving retention rates. AR team was working though the process of

[2] This section represents a symbolic breaking of the fourth wall of the AR case narrative process to provide additional context regarding actions I took that impacted the study before resuming the AR case narrative in the *Planning Action* phase. As such, the chronology jumps backwards to the *Pre-Step* and *Diagnosing* phases and ahead to the *Planning Action* phase section. This is necessary to provide additional context to the AR case narrative.

benchmarking performance, but I did not share this request with them as I conceived of it as an administrative request rather than an integrated research request. In July 2015, individual performance goal workbooks were created to start to provide additional data on the current performance of academic advisors as well as capacity limitations based on caseloads. While the performance goal workbooks did eventually end up as a performance-based intervention, described in the *Taking Action* phase, the performance goal workbooks were not initially developed as part of the AR process which limited further restricted the AR team from engaging in RSU specific data and emerging challenges. My learning from the performance goal workbooks validated the need to include the advising leadership team in the *Taking Action* phase of the AR project as well as the need to approach the next iteration in a different way.

These organizational restructuring and performance goal workbooks started to move academic advisor performance forward, but it also caused confusion within the AR team regarding their role in the process. The AR team stalled and we struggled to define their role in intervention development as they were planning interventions from the diagnosing phase at the time the centralization and introduction of performance goal workbooks were taking place. I was simultaneously observing a group of academic advisors that were struggling to integrate the change and the resistance was increasingly resulting in the use of authoritative directives outside of the AR process with the centralized advising team rather self-initiated actions by the academic advisors and without the guidance or perspective the AR team. In journal entry after a conversation with my faculty advisor in November 2015 I wrote about my concerns about proceeding with the project and how to integrate my scholar and leader identities.

Pressure to Integrate My Scholar and Leader Identities

I was experiencing significant pressure as a manager to establish the center and to get it moving forward while waiting for the AR team to define our role in this process. I created the idea that the work of organizing and launching the advising center was separate from developing a performance-based orientation for the center. This separation of my scholar and leader identities caused significant challenges for the AR team. The stagnation of the AR process was a direct result of my initial inability to trust myself, which kept me from trusting others. My hesitation around feeling like I should always know the next step kept the AR team from progressing since I felt that they were looking to me for guidance. My inability to fully trust myself as a scholar-leader impacted the AR team and the research project. For several months after the benchmarking process, the project remained in neutral.

Although the project moved swiftly and smoothly during the *Diagnosing* phase, I realized that I had not been doing the necessary “self-work” for the project. Phase 1 of my own development required me to learn to trust myself as a scholar-leader, as evidenced in the selection of AR Team Member. AR Team Member B was a scholar-leader of action research. I noted during an AR team meeting in April of 2015 that I found myself checking my understanding of the description of AR with AR Team Member B. It was not that I did not know the process; rather, I did not trust myself to execute the process successfully. The inclusion of Dr. A. was also intentional, going beyond his leadership position within academic advising at RSU. At the time, AR Team Member A was completing his doctorate, and I felt his participation would provide another scholarly perspective to guide the project. However, I found myself deferring to his expertise over mine. As the study progressed I would learn that trusting myself would not be the only core issues that I would need to learn in becoming a scholar-leader.

The Planning Action Phase

It is critical during the *Planning Action* phase of the AR process to articulate both the current state of the problem and the desired state upon the completion of the AR process. Once these are established, action researchers can focus on the question, "What is it in the present which needs changing in order to move to the desired future state?" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 67). For RSU, this meant understanding the current performance, *On-the-Job Performance Is,* of academic advisors as well as their desired performance, *On-the-Job Performance Should*, in order to achieve the objective retention rates outlined in the university's strategic plan.

Getting Back on the AR Track

After months of inactivity coming off of the *Diagnosing* phase I consulted with the AR team for recommendations on how to move forward with addressing the performance gap while surfacing and addressing the current resistance to change. The performance goal workbooks discussed above helped provide an increased level of accountability within the academic advising team; however, during multiple conversations with academic advisors and their supervisors it became clear they were not being understood or consistently adopted as intended by the academic advisors. Moreover, many advisors continued to express confusion over their new role. This manifested in several ways that included a request for an advising philosophy and requests for clarification on what factors were considered and weighed as part of their evaluation process.

The AR team decided to use an already planned summer strategic planning (June 2016) and training process (July 2016) with the full advising team to validate possible interventions that were identified by the GAPS! Map® process within RSU's local context. AR Team Member B recommend the use of Hall's (1974) concerns-based adoption model (CBAM) to better understand the current state of the academic advising unit in preparation for the upcoming academic advising summer strategic planning retreats. After she explained the instrument, the team agreed that it would be helpful in gathering useful information.

In March 2016 the survey was administered to all 13 academic advisors and five assistant directors (the supervisors of academic advisors). Demographic questions related to the name of the respondent, students served, and role within the unit were not asked as the focus was on the group change effort rather than the individual change effort. Once the survey responses were received, the AR team recommended sharing the results with the supervisors of the academic advisors to engage them in identifying the next steps of moving the academic advisors forward. This was done during an advising leadership team retreat in April 2016.

The AR team decided to focus on the immediate supervisors' capacity for understanding and supporting the change effort. While each advisor experienced the change in a unique and individual way, the supervisors and the AR team each identified common concerns around information and the personal nature of the current innovation of a performance-based centralized advising effort. While the results of the CBAM did not provide significant new insight to the AR team, I realized during the advising leadership team retreat in May 2016 that engaging the supervisors in the discussion about these concerns and dynamics was critical to advancing the project as the CBAM served as a tool for beginning the discussion around what they were experiencing with the advising team. An outside consultant was temporarily added to the AR team during June and July 2016 to assist in facilitating the discussions that would ultimately lead to the development and validation of the intervention plan. The development and execution of interventions also provided the opportunity to engage in building the leadership capacity of the supervisors of the academic advisors.

Remaining true to the collaborative inquiry roots of AR, the AR team decided that groups of advisors needed to develop and implement the interventions associated performance-related outcomes that had been identified during the exemplar benchmarking process that resulted in the performance model outlined in the *On-the-Job Performance Should*, Box 2, of Figure 8. To ensure that the advising center had the capacity to support this performance, the direct supervisors were provided feedback and coaching via individual and group meetings to support leading the advisor work-groups in constructing the interventions. While the project had the attention of those at the highest levels of the RSU, it had not sufficiently integrated the knowledge and expertise of the academic advisors until this critical turning point. With the summer retreat and training process complete, the AR team assumed more of a consultative role to the researcher for the remainder of the project because the work that would need to take place to move the project forward would require co-creation within the advising team.

Developing Interventions

Building on the work of the supervisors of the academic advisors and the academic advising work groups, the AR team helped to articulate the interventions for this project. Based on the analysis and work outlined above and available resources, an intervention plan was developed using a logic model to provide a framework (Brinkerhoff, 2005). The intervention plan outlined the proposed interventions, identified measurable outcomes/metrics, assigned responsibility for execution of the intervention, provided justification for the intervention, and connected each intervention with the associated factor(s) impacting performance that it was designed to address. The AR team believed that the collective implementation of these interventions would likely improve the performance of academic advisors who engage all undergraduate students and there was a likelihood this would lead to improved student retention rates.

The process for outlining the intervention plan, Table 11, began by connecting the *On-the-Job Performance Should* performance model, Box 2, from Figure 8 and the action items from the academic advisor retreats into the performance tool literature. I elected to use Langdon, Whiteside, and Mckenna's (1999) naming conventions for this task—column 1. The next step was to determine a model for evaluating these interventions. Brinkerhoff 's (2005) logic model informed the design of the evaluation strategy as it forced me to articulate a plan for evaluating the interventions based on outcome/output, questions to focus the evaluation, and evidence for evaluating—columns two-four. Column five was added to clarify responsibility for each intervention. Column six was based one described the impact level of the intervention. Column seven was added to situate the interventions in the current AR study. Lastly, column 8 was added to connect the interventions with the factors of performance they address using Rummler and Brache's (1995a) model that was described in the *Diagnosing* phase.

Table 11

Academic Advisor Intervention Plan

Interventions	Outcome/Output	Questions We Care About	Evidence	Responsibility for Intervention	Impact Level	Justification for Intervention	Factor(s) Impacting Human Performance
Performance Matrix: Academic Advisors and Assistant Directors	Clarify roles and define exemplary performance	Was it created?	RSU performance matrix created for pivotal talent positions & their supervisors	Supervisors of PTP; PTP via strategic planning process	Individual performance	Requests from PTP during strategic planning process for role clarification and evaluation criteria. Stated they were unclear on what their priorities were and what they were being evaluated on.	Performance specifications, task support, feedback
		Does it enhance performance?	Interview with supervisors				
		Do users find it useful?	Interview with supervisors				
Performance Goal Workbooks	Improve performance	Was it created?	RSU performance goal worksheet created	Supervisors of PTP	Work group performance, system performance	Minimal accountability systems to see individual and group performance to determine impact on organizational strategic outcomes and inform system-level process related to enrollment and course scheduling. Feedback from key stakeholders: Advisors were not responsive to proactive outreach when advisors were provided student lists.	Performance specifications, task support, feedback
		Does it enhance performance?	Interviews with supervisors				
	Improve communication	Do stakeholders find it useful?	Interviews with key stakeholders				
		Does it improve communication?	Interviews with key stakeholders				

Assistant Director Feedback and Coaching	Provide supervisors of pivotal talent positions with tools and information needed to support performance	Feedback provided regularly?	Audit of employee records	Director; supervisors of PTP	Work group performance	Four out of five of the supervisors of PTP groups were new to supervision. Based on exemplary advisors interviewed, the leadership and management skills of the supervisors were identified by the AR team as key factors supporting exemplary PTP performance.	Feedback, skills/knowledge
		Helpful to performer?	Interviews with supervisors				
Policies and Procedures Manual	Clarify policies and procedures to support exemplary performance	Was it created?	RSU Advising Manual Created	PTP via committee Structure	Process	Requests from PTP during strategic planning process for simplification and unification of work processes. PTP felt that communication within the unit needed to be improved. When asked for further clarification, PTP stated he/she felt that different policy and procedures were being implemented within the advising work groups.	Performance specifications
Strategic Planning and	Engage employees in creating desired	Do users find it useful?	Interviews with managers	AR team, director;		Requests from PTP to develop a clearer	Performance specifications,

Visioning	performance system	Does it enhance performance?	Interviews with managers	Supervisors of PTP; PTP via committee structure		understanding of the mission, vision, and goals for the centralized advising unit based on the new performance standards that are being implemented. "Why am I doing this?" "Should we be doing this?"	skills knowledge
Recognition Programs	Provide support to exemplary performers via merit increases	Was it created?	Audit of employee records	PTP via committee structure	Work group performance	Observations from supervisors of PTP related to morale and need for community development. Need to recognize PTP that embraced the exemplary performance model.	Consequences
		Does it enhance performance?	Interview with supervisors				
Work Group Alignment	Restructure organizational resources to impact strategic goals	Was it completed	Organizational documents	AR team, director	System performance	Benchmarking of best practices by Advising Task Force. Validation from exemplar interview process. Need to provide an advisor career ladder to retain and promote exemplary PTP.	Task Support
		Does it enhance performance?	Interview with supervisors				
Assessment Centers	Improve performance and communication	Was it created?	RSU Assessment Plan developed and implemented	PTP via committee structure	System performance, process, work group performance	Mandate from university to demonstrate impact of centralized advising unit on improving reregistration and graduation rates—total quality management (TQM). Allowed for	Feedback
		Does it enhance performance?	Interviews with supervisors				

		Does it improve communication?	Interviews with key stakeholders			integration of the collaboratively developed mission, vision, and goals to be evaluated within the context of improved retention rates.	
Leadership Development Programs	Improve performance	Does it enhance performance?	Interview with supervisors	AR team, director; supervisors of PTP	Individual performance	Requests from PTP and observations from director that PTP desired to develop the skills necessary to execute the exemplary performance model.	Consequences, skills/knowledge
		Was it created?	Audit of employee records				

Reflecting on the Planning Action Phase

This section describes the moment I began to learn to trust the advising leadership team with the co-creation of the change process in order to reach the desired future state—which would serve as Phase 2 of my own growth toward becoming a scholar-leader. I spoke with the Action Research team about my learning moment with the supervisors of the academic advisors in April 2016. They agreed that for the project to move forward the supervisors of the academic advisors needed to be involved in the intervention implementation process. A plan was put in place by the AR team to move toward a more consultative role and to recast members of the advising center leadership team as the primary actors for intervening on performance. The work of the AR team was critical to moving the process forward, but the advising team had to be integrated during the *Taking Action* phase for the interventions to be owned by the advising team. The decision to integrate the advising leadership team into the process was transformational.

The Taking Action and Evaluating Action Phases

This stage of the AR process is the most important and also the most complex: "[T]his transition state between the present and the future is a typically difficult time because the past is found to be defective and no longer tenable and the new state has not yet come into being" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p. 68). Coghlan and Brannick added that managing the organizational politics at play at every research phase is more important than adhering rigidly to the idealized picture of AR. Thus, in this study it was critical to identify interventions that would lead to the desired future state and build a commitment of action toward that future state, not only in relation to the AR team but also those impacted by the research—that is, academic advisors and their supervisors (Table 11).

According to the tenets of insider action research, collaborating with other insiders has several advantages because “they engage in inquiry in ways that help the group move from working as isolated individuals toward a collaborative community; they seek to engage their members in learning and change; they work toward influencing organizational change; and they offer opportunities for personal, professional, and institutional transformation” (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 35-36). These aspects served as a framework for evaluating the action stage of the AR project.

The data collection methodology that informs the evaluation of these interventions is included in Chapter 3. A robust discussion of findings is included in Chapter 5, but this section integrates the processing of taking action and evaluating actions taken by the AR team, the supervisors of the academic advisors, and the academic advisors. The following sections outline the process the implementation of the interventions and an evaluation of the learning that took place.

Intervening at RSU

The initial step of moving from the AR team to the integration of the leadership team and advisors took shape during the June 2016 and July 2016 strategic planning and vision retreats. Outside of the advising team planning and visioning process I shared the GAPS! Map® with the advising leadership team. After providing an overview of how the model came to be and the original intervention Table 11, leadership team and I discussed how we could best bring this into action. I asked them to start this process by identifying concerns they were hearing and dealing with from their advising teams. Assistant Director B was very interested in this and asked for more information about the theory and process. Together Assistant Director B and I developed Table 12, which is a recast of the interventions originally developed by the AR team as part of a presentation we would do at a national advising conference. Based on my learning from my struggles with keeping the AR team engaged in the process I allowed Table 12 to be more organically developed to represent Assistant Director B's understanding. Assistant Director B and I shared it with the full leadership team with a robust discussion related to the observable behaviors, column one, and how the interventions, column two, would actually help address those behaviors. Column three represented the performance model, Box 2, from Figure 8 and column 4 identified how the interventions connected to Rummler and Brache's factors. The process of developing Table 12 as a team was significant as it forced me to trust the leadership team with the study. Table 12 ultimately represented how the leadership team made meaning of the interventions in practice and answered the all-important "why should we spend our time on these things?" and "why does do these things matter?" questions.

Table 12

Supervisors of Academic Advisors Connecting Interventions with Observable Performance and Desired Performance

Observable Behavior of RSU Advisor by Advising Leadership Team	**Intervention Recommended by AR Team**	**Associated GAPS! Map® *On-the-Job Performance Should* Performance Model**	**Associated Rummler and Brache Factor**
Requests for role clarification	• Performance Matrix: Academic Advisors and Assistant Directors • Assessment Centers • Assistant Director Feedback and Coaching	• Articulable understanding of role in achieving organizational outcomes	• Performance Specifications • Consequences • Feedback • Skills/Knowledge
Disconnect with new institutional advising outcomes that are enrollment driven	• Performance Goal Workbooks • Assessment Centers • Work Group Alignment • Assistant Director Feedback and Coaching • Strategic Planning & Visioning	• Take initiative to improve advising outcomes—supported by supervisor • Articulable understanding of role in achieving organizational outcomes	• Performance Specifications • Task Support • Consequences • Feedback • Skills/Knowledge
Complaints about the lack of consistent approaches to work across advisors by faculty, staff, and students.	• Policies and Procedures Manual • Work Group Alignment, • Performance Matrix: Academic Advisors and Assistant Directors • Assessment Centers • Assistant Director Feedback and Coaching	• Take initiative to improve advising outcomes—supported by supervisor	• Performance Specifications • Consequences • Feedback
Technology was purchased but end users had minimal training or support for product enhancement resulting in technology being under utilized	• Work Group Alignment • Performance Matrix: Academic Advisors and Assistant Directors • Policies & Procedures Manual	• Make decisions and adjusts practice based on predictive analytics • Capitalize on technology to improve practice and efficiency of tasks	• Performance Specifications • Task Support • Skills/Knowledge
Lack of accountability for poor performance or rewards for exemplary performance causing advisor frustration	• Recognition Programs • Performance Goal Workbooks • Assistant Director Feedback and Coaching	• Follow a career ladder that incentivizes and rewards exemplary performance	• Consequences • Feedback

Observable Behavior of RSU Advisor by Advising Leadership Team	Intervention Recommended by AR Team	Associated GAPS! Map® *On-the-Job Performance Should* Performance Model	Associated Rummler and Brache Factor
Frustration with lack of a clear career development ladder and having non-advising related role creep	• Leaderships Development Programs • Recognition Programs, • Strategic Planning and Visioning • Assessment Centers • Assistant Director Feedback and Coaching	• Follow a career ladder that incentivizes and rewards exemplary performance	• Performance Specifications • Consequences • Feedback
Confusion of direction and role of new centralized unit	• Assessment Centers • Strategic Planning and Visioning • Assistant Director Feedback and Coaching	• Proactively outreach to students • Make decisions and adjusts practice based on predictive analytics	• Performance Specifications • Task Support

The following sections represent the nine interventions selected and implemented for the action research study: Performance Matrix: Academic Advisors and Assistant Directors, Performance Goal Workbooks, Assistant Director Feedback and Coaching, Policies & Procedures, Strategic Planning and Visioning, Recognition Programs, Work Group Alignment, Assessment Centers, and Leadership Development Programs. In these sections interventions are described in detail and framed with participant responses based on data collection procedures outlined in Chapter 3.

Performance Matrix: Academic Advisor and Assistant Director. The advising center had just finished annual evaluations in April 2016. During that process it surfaced that many academic advisors had never had a performance evaluation. The advising leadership team attempted to bring consistency to the process by meeting to discuss the template provided by HR, and found that it was lacking in its ability to represent the work of the advisors. The performance matrix was selected as an intervention by the AR team based on multiple requests by academic advisors during the June 2016 retreat process for clarity. Rather than developing it in abstention of those responsible for using the matrix I began with Assistant Director B. The process started by showing Assistant Director B the completed performance GAP! Map®. We integrated the themes and categories under the *On-the-Job Performance Should,* Box 2, of Figure 8 and attempted to link it to language on the human resources evaluation form for congruency purposes. It also served to validate the performance model that was developed by the AR team through benchmarking interviews in the local RSU context for the first time. During this process Assistant Director B and I realized the need to better ground the performance dimension of the matrix with the advising centers goals—that process is described in the Assessment Centers section below. This resulted in us inviting Assistant Director C into the process. The final product was brought to the advising leadership team in September 2016. During that meeting the advising leadership team adjustments and talked through the meaning and purpose of the tool. Each member of the leadership team provided a draft of the matrix to their team and asked for feedback. To my surprise the primary question was whether this would replace human resources evaluation template and process and not regarding the performance outcomes or what constituted the criteria for meeting or exceeding expectations. During the November 2016 staff meeting the final matrix was shared by Assistant Director B with the full advising team and emphasis was placed on the fact this was not designed to be a primary evaluation tool but rather a way for advisors to understand the performance expectations of their supervisors and to help facilitate on-going conversations regarding academic advisor performance outside of the annual evaluation process. An Assistant Director version of this matrix was developed in July 2017 in attempt to provide the same role clarity to the members of the leadership team as they had provided the advising team. Assistant Director B (personal communication, October 2, 2017) shared his understanding of he described the performance matrix role in enhancing performance:

> *I saw several changes occur during the past two years while working in the Center for Advising and Retention but one of the changes I played a pivotal role in was the development of a Performance Matrix...The Advising Center concluded that there should be a platform used to better understand the performance evaluation process for advisors. Advisors had a few concerns about the way they were evaluated by their supervisors. The center did not have a concise way of providing the reason, so we implemented the Performance Matrix to allow for a more efficient way of validating performance outcomes. The Performance Matrix was approved by the leadership team and advisors. After approval, it was used as a tool to measure any concerns an advisor has in reference to his/her performance.*

The efficacy of the Performance Matrix was confirmed by Exemplary Advisor B (personal communication, August 25, 2017) during her final interview, "*[Academic Advisors] have a matrix for each of the positions within our office so those have been outlined and we can refer to them*".

The performance matrix has proven to be of interest for directors of advising outside of RSU. The academic advisor performance matrix and the performance goal workbooks, discussed next, were highlighted on a national webinar as a promising practice for improving academic advisor accountability by a best practice research firm.

Performance Goal Workbooks. This intervention was described earlier in this chapter as an intervention not led by the AR team. The format of these performance goal workbooks evolved during the study based on feedback from the leadership team and academic advisors on what they wanted to be sure was included. The second iteration included the number of "touches" an advisor had with a student, the number of students they have advised, and the number of their students that have reregistered. Moreover, with two years' worth of data the goal projections are now tied to historic performance data and aligned with Enrollment Management goals. The project sponsor (personal communication, August 29, 2017) described this shift toward visualizing the performance of the advising team in his interview:

> *So it's a much more holistic approach, and also a more analytical approach, in terms of using data and resources to identify problems, and then to come up with remedies based on the data that's collected, and then to assess the effectiveness of any interventions that are designed.*

Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described the goal workbooks role in supporting her performance:

> *[The director] provides numbers to the assistant directors which are shared with the colleagues in a particular unit, that way an advisor can see if they're meeting goals as far as re-registration rates, re-enrollment, we also have a campaign calendar. These are just a number of different ways how we can see if we're performing properly.*

Assistant Director C (personal communication, August 18, 2017) described how the performance goal workbooks support performance of her direct reports.

> *I think it does. It gives you that clear, define, right ... As far as how many students you currently have in your population or on your caseload. How many you got in to the reregistration rate. How many you've seen that come in and get advised. So it does give that clear, definition, or defined what your performance, or what you've been doing, or what you haven't been doing and making that, addressing that with your staff member*

as far as that caseload and expectation. So, yes, that workbook does help. [The Performance Goal Workbooks] give you that clear understanding.

Assistant Director Feedback and Coaching. This process began at the formation of the centralized academic advising unit in July 2015. Each assistant director has a bi-weekly meeting with the director that is designed to answer specific questions and also serve as a place for reflection. In addition, there were bi-weekly leadership team meetings that were designed to allow the group to provide feedback to each other and to problem-solve together related to current challenges facing the center. Assistant Director D (personal communication, August 18, 2017) described the importance of these feedback and coaching structures as critical to her development:

Definitely, early on, they were very key and vital to my growth and development as a leader. Being a new leader, I needed those meetings. Sometimes I felt like I needed them weekly, instead of bi-weekly... It is that time that we meet, that we touch bases on things that I may need to address with him, what's going on with the unit, or just some concerns I may have. As well as my supervisor would address different issues or different things that he would need to let me know what's going on, or what he has concerns with, or, even just an encouraging time it could be. So definitely those bi-weekly meetings were very important. They were vital to my growth and my development as a leader.

Policies and Procedures Manual. This intervention came out of the summer 2017 retreat and planning cycle of the full advising team. Leading into the process advisors were asked for topics they wanted the center to focus on as a team. One of consistent themes was the standardization of policies and procedures across the advising team. Prior to this the leadership team recognized the need but were hesitant to give up the autonomy the individual teams and supervisors had in approaching their work. During the months of June and July 2017 the work group for policies met to try to standardize the policies and procedures of the advising team. Assistant Director D (personal communication, October 8, 2017) described her role in leading the work group in the development of common policies and procedures and how she worked to integrate the development of policies and procedures with other advising center initiatives from the retreats:

> *One of the common themes derived from CAR retreats and meetings was the need for the standardization of practices. Many colleges within the CAR were continuing their original practices. This proved inconsistent and confusing to new hires as well as current staff who were working much more cohesively as a team and were sharing ideas and best practices… I found myself consistently reminding them of the customer service model from which everything we did should ultimately flow. Many provided great feedback and ideas, however, they did not coincide with our new service model…It was important we address policies and procedures that would supplement what the [expectations] committee established as the expectations, roles and responsibilities of the advisors. I met with the other assistant directors and [we] agreed on my ideas to work more strategically. We began attending each other's meetings to share our ideas with the other committees and to ensure the committees' efforts would complement each other. It required a lot more time than we thought, however we were using our time and energy much more wisely.*

Two exemplary advisors discussed the role of common policies and procedures during their final interview:

Touching back on something that [Exemplary Advisor A] said earlier in the interview with being centralized and having all of the different policies and procedures streamlined, I believe that has definitely helped as a centralized unit and allows the students to be successful. Often students may change majors so if that happens and since we're centralized they're receiving a lot of the same basic information that will help them be successful. (Exemplary Advisor B, personal communication, August 25, 2017)

Assistant Director E (personal communication, August 18, 2017) explained how she has seen the common policies and procedures impact advisor performance:

I think it was helpful in supporting performance, because it gave more clear expectations around what we should be doing and how we want to function as a CAR. And so for that, I think it was very helpful to get that written and on paper and so that I think that we can really begin to tweak and figure out what works, what doesn't, moving forward.

Strategic Planning and Visioning. The strategic planning and visioning activities ultimately served as the spaces that allowed the centralized advising team to come together to discuss who we are, who we wanted to be, and who we needed to be. The intervention happened for the first time in April 2016 and the advising team have committed to it being an annual process. Part 1 is the advising leadership team retreat that is held in April and is designed to engage the leadership team in the planning and development of the full advising retreat. Part 2 happens in June and is the full advising team retreat that is facilitated by director and assistant directors. It is designed to address 2-3 big questions facing the advising team. Part 3 is the summer Advising Institute that is led by a committee of academic advisors and designed to be a personal and professional development workshop. Part 4 are action plan work groups that are composed of 4-5 advisors and led by 1-2 assistant directors. These action plan work groups spend the fall and spring semester attempting to focus on center-wide initiatives that have included assessment, policies and procedures, and staff recognition/support. Exemplary Advisory B (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described how the retreats helped build community within the advising team: *"One of the things that I saw in the summer institute was how everybody pulled together. There was a lot of that kind of behavior during [the summer retreats].*" Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described the Advising Institute as a reward. The planning and visioning process have also been critical to our development as a team according to Assistant Director D (personal communication, August 18, 2017):

> *It made the [centralized advising center] team [feel] like they ... really [were] a team… [I]t made them feel that the ideas of the goals of the leadership team were being properly communicated to them. And I hope the co-creation of these things have given them some ownership in the process.*

Recognition Programs. The AR team conceived of recognition programs based on the benchmarking interviews with RSU's peer institution. Many of the exemplary advisors spoke about the promotion and merit increases as ways they felt recognized for doing good work. Starting in July 2016 a merit increase structure was implemented with the centralized team where the merit increase was tied to an advisors overall evaluation. This was continued in July 2017. Interestingly, the exemplary advisors at RSU did not see a merit increase as a form of recognition. This finding is discussed more in Chapter 5 but is summed up by Exemplary Advisor C (personal communication, August 25, 2017):

> *I don't think the merit raises or salary plays a role in being a reward or consequence. The reason why is because a lot of us professionals that go into the educational*

field/human service field have an idea that we want to be starting off in a low salary type career. We come and we come to work for other reasons other than pay because we already have that expectation that's it's going to be low.

This proved to be nuanced view related to the intervention in that it may motivate not performance on its own, but it did help facilitate performance related conversations:

> *I don't know if that ever was made clear to the advisors. So unless they're talking to each other about what kinds of merit increases they got, I don't think that they recognized that... I did with a staff member who was not performing to let him understand why. He did not receive an increase that year and then I explained what my expectations were so that he could get one in the upcoming year. And I also used it when I initially had the formal conversation about his performance to say that what I wanted was for him to try to get back to a level where he would be eligible.* (Assistant Director A, personal communication, August 18, 2017)

During the exemplary advisor final interview I asked them if they were all aware of the merit pay increase structure. All four responded yes. While the exemplary advisors did not see merit increases as a reward that motivated them to achieve they did identify other rewards related to other interventions, as described by Exemplary Advisor A in the Strategic Planning and Visioning section.

Work Group Alignment. This intervention was designed to restructure organizational resources to achieve the advising center's goals. During the course of this AR study RSU received two progressive budget reductions due to historical declines in enrollment. This provide a significant capacity challenge for the advising team as the centralization process required advisors to maintain their caseload of continuing students rather than transitioning them to faculty advisors at a predetermined credit marker. This growth was compounded by growth in new student enrollment. To absorb this increased growth the advising leadership instituted two practices. First, all vacant positions would be downgraded to an entry-level advising position and salary savings would be used for the collective good of the advising team. Second, all vacant advising positions were not guaranteed to be restored to the same advising team. As a result of these two approaches the advising team was able to hire two graduate assistants and instituted a model where advisors would work across teams to help balance caseloads. The shared advising model represented the reorganization of one vacant line in the special populations unit to a shared line across two college units. The graduate assistants provided 39 hours of additional advising capacity and allowed for lower-level advising tasks (i.e., drop-in withdrawal questions) to be delegated to the graduate assistants to allow more complex advising tasks to be completed by the primary advising team (i.e., proactive outreach based on predictive models). The impact of this process was described by Assistant Director D (personal communication October 8, 2017):

> *Several members sought & secured other positions. Rather than re-hiring under the current structure, the leadership team decided it best to assess the needs of the CAR and re-examine the structure to determine if the exact positions needed to be replaced of if relatively minor modifications could be implemented to heighten optimization. The decision was made for the latter which provided for the addition of graduate assistant positions and one new advisor position. This experience vividly demonstrated to me, the importance of not hiring for the sake of hiring which is the practice I have almost always seen implemented in my professional experience. The department or organization becomes so overwhelmed with the loss, time is not taken to identify the real losses or*

deficits because the focus is more on the short term, rather than the long term potential and success. While I realize there are risks and there are factors which may not provide for such opportunities, I now know taking the extra time and consideration to assess our structure has been essential to the manner in which we have been able to move forward and because of this I hope to incorporate and practice more forward and more innovative thinking.

These organizational work group alignment interventions had the unanticipated impact of surfacing the need to explore a cross-trained advising team and seeing ownership of student success beyond an individual advisor's caseload. Since this organically came from the work group alignment decisions of the advising leadership team and they advocated for a model where an advisor would also be on duty every day and would see any walk-in student regardless of their major. This has had a significant impact on the centralized advising team's service model since it was implemented in August 2017 as described by Exemplary Advisor D,

It feeds the student's strength in feeling that he or she can get through this process that we call education and it makes them also believe and know that they have a support system. That has been of an added plus by us being centralized and them being assigned to one or two advisors from the time they reach sophomore till the time they graduate. It's less miscommunication or less misinformation about a program. (personal communication, August 25, 2017).

This sentiment was echoed by Assistant Director A:

I was going to add to that that I think just having common goals and expectations, that they weren't previously common goals and expectations across the different advising areas prior to centralization. I think that part of it, in terms of retention, I think that it *just gave everyone a sense that everyone's role is retention. Really, part of everyone's role and not just one particular unit's role*. (personal communication, August 18, 2017)

Assessment Centers. The implementation of assessment centers was one of the first intervention with the advising team. It began with a full-day retreat on April 2015 that was designed to begin the process of the advising team developing a mission, vision, and goals. There was a follow-up retreat in February 2016 that allowed the advising team to flush out the goals of the advising center and connect them to a comprehensive assessment plan. This process was led by Assistant Director D and the assessment team.

> *From the very beginning of the process, the [advising center director] incorporated everyone into the evolution of the [advising center]. We didn't have a name until it was agreed upon by the team. Other tasks and infrastructures were established, one of which was a committee for which I was to chair, the Assessment Committee. My goal was to continue this way of thinking and practice with the Assessment Team. I was fortunate to have a significant amount of autonomy and freedom to lead the [advising center's] Assessment Team and equally fortunate to be paired with the university's assessment specialist early on in this process. These things allowed me to plan several full day retreats to address assessment, the first of which was to establish our mission, vision, values and goals…Even though the [advising center] had not yet been fully set in place, having the retreat early on was a imperative as the university's assessment period begins the fall of each year, and there were so many objectives we needed to identify, assess and achieve*. (personal communication, October 8, 2017)

The development of the advising center's mission, vision, and goals was a key component in norming the work of the advising center. The goals were integrated into the performance matrices that were developed by the advising leadership team and descried in that section. The evolution of the role of assessment was illustrated by Assistant Director C (personal communication, August 18, 2017): "*Before there was really no predictive analytics model that we were using. There was also very little assessment being done for advisors. And so, now that more heavily influences the expectations of the advisors for the [advising center]*". The assessment data collected also allowed the advising center to respond to Department Chairs needed for data in support of external program accreditation for her program "Excellent! Just saw the raw data. Thanks for sharing!" (Program Coordinator A, personal communication, April 14, 2017).

Leadership Development Programs. Internal leadership development programs were vitally important according to interviews of exemplary academic advisors and their supervisors at RSU's peer institution. This intervention was designed to provide supervisors of academic advisors and academic advisors with the chance to engage in leadership experiences and programming to enhance their skills. Both exemplary academic advisors identified the efficacy of leadership development programs and members of the advising leadership team at RSU "*I think the opportunity that the director and the AD[s] give us to participate in campus activities. I think the fact that we're encouraged to go to…professional development organizations…*" (Exemplary Advisor C, personal communication, August 25, 2017). During the final interview several members of the advising leadership team linked back to the Leadership Development Programs intervention in helping them grow as leaders. Assistant Director B (personal communication, October 3, 2017) described how participating in the development of a presentation of the advising center's work impacted his growth and learning as a professional:

> *I co-presented at the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) on [our work]…The presentation was essential to my career as a leader and added value. This intervention allowed us to demonstrate what we incorporated or were in the process of incorporating into the advising center to administrators, nationally.*

Concluding Reflections

In many ways, knowing when to evaluate action is arbitrary (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010); however, "at the same time, it is important to set a date, after which whatever takes place, however exciting and relevant, will not be included in your story" (p. 76). Herr and Anderson (2005) added that inquiry is likely to continue to unfold, but it is bound for the purpose of the dissertation. For this study, the end date was established as August 31, 2017, which represented the completion of one year's worth of intervention, development, and action. The sections above provide case narrative around the implementation and evaluation of the interventions. Table 13 summarizes these actions and connects them back to the original AR Team intervention plan (Table 11). As stated through the final interviews, much of the work is still a process. This is in alignment with the iterative nature of action research that is constantly guiding us to learn from previous actions to improve future actions.

Table 13

Evaluation of RSU AR Study Interventions

Interventions	Outcome/Output	Questions We Cared About	Response to Questions	Method of Data Generation and Evaluation
Performance Matrix: Academic Advisors and Assistant Directors	Clarified roles and defined exemplary performance	Was it created?	Yes	RSU performance matrix created for pivotal talent positions and their supervisors
		Does it enhance performance?	Yes	Interview with supervisors
		Do users find it useful?	Yes	Interview with supervisors and Exemplary Advisors
Performance Goal Worksheets	Improve performance	Was it created?	Yes	RSU performance goal worksheet created
		Does it enhance performance?	Yes	Interviews with supervisors and Exemplary advisors
	Improve communication	Do stakeholders find it useful?	Yes	Interviews with key stakeholders
		Does it improve communication?	Yes	Interviews with key stakeholders
Assistant Director, Feedback and Coaching	Provide supervisors of pivotal talent positions with tools and information needed to support performance	Feedback provided regularly?	Yes	Audit of employee records
		Helpful to performer?	Yes	Interviews with supervisors
Policy and Procedures Manual	Clarify policies and procedures to support exemplary performance	Was it created?	Yes	RSU advising manual created
Strategic Planning and Visioning-Action Learning	Engage employees in the co-creation of desired performance system	Do users find it useful?	Yes	Interviews with supervisors
		Does it enhance performance?	Yes	Interviews with supervisors and exemplary advisors
Recognition Programs	Provide support to exemplary	Was it created?	Yes	Audit of employee records

Interventions	**Outcome/Output**	**Questions We Cared About**	**Response to Questions**	**Method of Data Generation and Evaluation**
	performers via merit increases	Does it enhance performance?	No	Interview with supervisors and exemplary advisors
Work Group Alignment	Restructure organizational resources to impact strategic goals	Was it completed	Yes	Organizational documents
		Does it enhance performance?	Yes	Interview with supervisors and exemplary advisors
Assessment Centers	Improve performance and communication	Was it created?	Yes	RSU assessment plan developed and implemented
		Does it enhance performance?	Unclear	Interviews with supervisors
		Does it improve communication?	Yes	Interviews with key stakeholders
Leadership Development Programs	Improve performance	Was it created?	Yes	Audit of employee records
		Does it enhance performance?	Yes	Interview with supervisors and exemplary advisors

After listening to the final interviews and reflecting back the inertia to move forward with the project came from direct feedback from the advising team members and their supervisors. The “stall” in the process required me to explore my role in impacting the study. From these interviews and my reflections during that time it is clear they trusted me to lead them to our future state, and they needed help in creating it. This represented Phase 3 of my growth as a scholar-leader. As I learned to trust the supervisors of the academic advisors with the development of the interventions in practice, I learned simultaneously to lead them and become a better supervisor and researcher.

The process of ending the research project was somewhat surreal. After spending the previous two and a half years imagining what conclusion would feel like, I can say that it felt nothing like I thought it would. After completing the final interviews with RSU representatives, the project still fells unfinished. Even though the participants articulated the future state in which academic advisor performance has improved and re-registration rates have increased (to be discussed more in Chapter 5), I struggled with the indefinite end to the iterative cycles. I found myself overwhelmed by the task ahead as the success of the advising teams led to increased pressure on other student support offices to create wrap-around services. Perhaps because of the rawness of the previous two years and the attendant personal and professional growth, I fell stretched thin.

When I began the process, I thought I would arrive at the end point, advisor performance would be improved, and then RSU advisors would move toward a maintenance stage. Instead, the success of the project and the cultivation of the engagement and abilities of the supervisors of the academic advisors and the engagement created conditions whereby the process of improvement became continuous. As a practitioner, this was exciting; but as a researcher it felt like the story would never quite finish. Listening to the final interviews, it was clear that there is still more work to do in relation to my ability to trust myself to lead others, but I also have learned that the question is no longer whether I can be a scholar-leader but how I can be a more authentic with myself as a scholar-leader.

Argyris (1970) wrote about the unfreezing of systems, or allowing the system to become unstable enough to accept a new future state that it can stabilize around, when leading change. He added that a system, when faced with too much change, will seek stability. I often wondered throughout this research process if the changes within RSU's performance-based advising system would be integrated or rejected by the university after I left. The final interviews affirmed that this new state has been adopted and integrated by the academic advising team and the RSU leadership. However, interviewees also clearly articulated that the current state is not stable enough to allow the process to stop.

When I was stuck back in November 2016, I wrote in my journal about why I felt that I needed to keep my research identify separate from my practitioner identity. I must have stared at that researcher journal entry for three weeks while the research project stalled. It was not until I realized that I could not keep these parts of my identity separate—that I indeed needed to integrate these identities—did I evolve as both a scholar and a leader. I often wondered during difficult times, when advisors were struggling with the change, if I would lead change in that way if not for my research identity. The honest answer is "Probably not", but that misrepresents the complexities of the situation. The reality is that as a leader, I needed the scholar side of me to push me out of my comfort zone as a leader to evolve and grow. The future state has been "achieved", but it looks and feels different than what I imagined it would.

More importantly, to me, as a scholar-leader, the reflections of the academic advisors and their supervisors on their own growth and their understanding of the change process demonstrated profound learning and growth as a result of this process. I realized that for all the growth I gained in becoming a scholar-leader, the academic advisors and their supervisors also benefited. I started out feeling selfish when I asked them to help me with my personal goal of completing my dissertation. It is now clear that action research, unlike other research methodologies, requires that those who are engaged in the process must do more than help the researcher; they must also find their own purpose within the research in order for the project to be successful. Based on the interviews with participants I was able to see how they benefited from the research process.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

In July 2015, Regional State University created a centralized academic advising unit, believing that centralization would automatically improve the retention and graduation rates of its students. This study sought to determine if a pivotal talent pool strategy helped to improve performance in a centralized academic advising unit at a Regional State University, resulting in improvements in student retention rates. Chapter 4 detailed the study's research process and the associated interventions that were implemented. Chapter 5 examines specific findings in relation to the study's research questions. Key themes are organized to address the research questions based on responses from interviews with exemplary academic advisors, supervisors of academic advisors (i.e., assistant directors), the project sponsor, and a member of the action research team.

The following research questions guided this study:

- How, if at all, does implementing a pivotal talent pool strategy affect the performance and short-term impact of a centralized academic advising unit?
- What is required of a centralized academic advising unit to create conditions that support the development and implementation of pivotal talent pool strategy?

In an effort to contextualize of these research questions—and the associated findings—I begin this chapter's discussion with Nacholl's story.

The Success Case: Nacholl

> *Without your advisor …following you through your time at the university, it's going to be impossible for you to make it through because … you don't know. Some students think they know it all, but you don't know it all.*
>
> —Nacholl, May 2017 RSU Graduate

Nacholl was the quintessential RSU student. The challenge for her was not whether she was academically capable of earning her degree from RSU, but whether she could manage all of her obligations and responsibilities outside of the classroom. Originally from Chicago, Illinois, Nacholl received a scholarship to attend a prestigious private historically black college/university (HBCU). However, as Nacholl described in her own words, she began living out what seems like a familiar teenage narrative:

> *I fell in love, grades dropped, ended up losing my [HBCU college] scholarship, and ended up enlisting in the military [for] four years…. That was part of the gap. Then, the rest of it was just basically trying to find my way and figure out what I wanted to do with my life.*

Ten years later, Nacholl was still trying to "figure out" her life while working two jobs just to pay the bills. She enrolled at a technical college close to RSU to help acclimate herself to the college environment but quickly found that "*this degree is not getting me anywhere. An associate's degree is not going to open too many doors for me*." So Nacholl did what many RSU students do: She transferred to RSU to earn a four-year degree—not because RSU was her dream school, or that she believed that an RSU degree offered a distinct advantage in the career marketplace, but because it was the cheapest:

> *Yes. It [i.e., finances] plays a big role because without finances, I can't go to school. Financial aid has been a big help. Some classes I pay for out of pocket in the summers, but other than that, the finances ... [play] a big part because a lot of students, they can't afford to pay for these classes out of pocket. Without those resources— just not going to happen.... I definitely did not choose quality, but my experience at [RSU]—I wouldn't change it for anything.*

Nacholl transitioned to RSU smoothly. She was performing academically, she was involved in and successfully pledged to a Greek letter organization, and she was on track to achieve her dream of earning her degree. Nacholl was working two jobs and going to school full-time. However, her financial aid was not enough. She was stressed and did not know what to do, so she approached her academic advisor. Nacholl vividly described this crucible moment:

> *My last semester as an undergrad ... was [a] stress. I think I was taking like five classes at that time. I came to [my academic advisor]. I'm like, "[Academic advisor], I'm stressed. You know, I don't know what to do. I just finished doing a whole lot of things here, and it was just like work, school." I was like, "I don't know what do to," even though I was determined to complete that degree, and I was not going to give up. She just encouraged me, you know? "Just talk to your professors. See where you are in the courses. Just hang in there. You can do it. You can do it." That encouragement of her pushing me helped out a lot ... I don't think I would've given up, but I probably would've dropped a couple of those classes, and it would've pushed back my graduation. With that encouragement, I did not [drop a class], and I managed to graduate in May of 2017… She's a great advisor. She cares about her students. She's going to tell you ... "Get it together. You know, you're not going to pass this class" or "Just get your life together.*

Focus on your education. Focus on ... your ultimate goal. What is your ultimate goal? What is your end goal? Maintain that focus. Get it done." She was my friend, that confidant, that mentor, that advisor; it's a lot under just one umbrella. I see that [advisors] do a lot ... When you have an advisor, you have to go to them. If you're having trouble focusing, go to them. Talk to them. Ask them for help—you know, what resources can I use here on campus? What resources can I use outside of campus that will help me? ... [The academic advisor] was all of that.

As a result of Nacholl's on-time graduation, she kept her seat in her RSU graduate program and began coursework in the summer 2017 semester.

Findings discussed in the remainder of this chapter, based primarily on interviews with participants in this study, describe what was contained under this new umbrella of academic advising at RSU, what motivated advisors to sustain the umbrella, and how advisors learned to carry the umbrella in new ways. After all, as Nacholl expressed, academic advising at RSU had undergone significant changes:

Previously, on the outside looking in, [students] just think, "Okay, [the academic advisors are] just sitting there. They're not doing anything. They're just waiting for us to come and speak to them or whatever," but no. That's where the umbrella comes in. Everything is under there. You guys are a mentor, a friend, a confidant. You're doing paperwork. You're ensuring that [we] graduate on time. You're ensuring that the enrollment is high. It's just a lot that goes into that. A student just coming in to visit the office or coming in to see their advisor, they wouldn't know that ... I mean, if [students] need you guys, you are there.... It's not like you're going to turn us away.

Performance-Related Effects of Implementing a Pivotal Talent Position Strategy

According to an analysis of the study data, implementing a pivotal talent pool strategy did have a positive short-term impact on RSU's centralized advising unit. Participant interviews, in conjunction with RSU re-registration information, comprised the data that revealed three categories supporting this finding related to research question one (Table 14). Category one grew out of the coding themes around how academic advisors described their emerging understanding and ownership of their new performance-based role. Category two emerged from coding themes that described how the academic advisors and their supervisors articulated their new learned behaviors and how they integrated those behaviors with the new performance outcomes. Category three comprised a quantitative measure of the impact of the new behaviors and performance outcomes described by participants that made up category two.

Table 14

Research Question 1: Categories and Coding Themes

RQ1: How, if at all, does implementing a PTPS affect the performance and short-term impact of a centralized academic advising unit?	
Categories	**Coding Themes**
1.1 Understanding Academic Advisor Ownership of New Role	1.1.1 Intrinsic Motivation 1.1.2 Co-Creation of Role
1.2 Rapidly Evolving Academic Advisor Behaviors and Performance Outcomes	1.2.1 Relationship Building 1.2.2 Holistic Understanding of Student Challenges 1.2.3 Leveraging Technology 1.2.4 Proactive Outreach Via Data-Informed Decision Making
1.3 Inconsistent Improvement in Student Reregistration Rates	N/A: Term-Over-Term Re-registration Date

Understanding Academic Advisor Ownership of New Role

Chapter 2 provided a historical overview of the role of academic advisors in higher education. The process of how RSU advising staff embraced the transition from serving as interpreters of policies and curriculum to focusing on student success advisors emerged from the final interviews. Two key coding themes emerged. First intrinsic motivation was a key factor that impacted the way exemplary advisors approached. Second the co-creation of the new role had a significant impact in academic advisors taking ownership of the new role.

Intrinsic motivation. Significantly, the study data suggested that rewards centering on financial gain and career advancement were not motivators for exemplary advisors. Interviewees were aware of and had received such rewards, but they did not identify them as lasting incentives for doing their work. As Exemplary Advisor D (personal communication, August 25, 2017) commented:

> *The reason why is because a lot of us professionals that go into the educational field/human service field have an idea that we want to be starting off in a low-salary-type career. We come ... to work for ... reasons other than pay because we already have [the] expectation that's it's going to be low.*

Instead, interviewees like Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described intrinsic motivators:

> *I think all of us pretty much probably do this job because we love what we do. The idea that you can help someone else get a degree, the same degree that you got—whether that was a couple of years ago or just yesterday—there's something about being able to share an experience with somebody and being able to give them the opportunity or see an opportunity ... [to] better themselves financially and educationally.*

The supervisors conceived of the intrinsic motivators of exemplary performance in different ways. Assistant Director E (personal communication, August 18, 2017) described this motivation in relation to work ethic: *"I don't feel like there's necessarily rewards other than just basically ... having a good work ethic."* Assistant Director A's (personal communication, August 18, 2017) response was more closely aligned with those of the exemplary advisors but also reflected the mindset that connects the work in a performance-based advising role with intrinsic motivation:

> *Sometimes the appreciation of our students is a reward as well ... You work really hard to ... to help a student in a tough spot. And it finally works out for them. I think that's also a reward in itself.... And I guess the credit that we get for the work that we're doing in our role in getting students back and getting enrolled again ... is also kind of a reward.*

Assistant Director C (personal communication, August 18, 2017) echoed the notion that exemplary advisors engaged in their work helping students for the reward of seeing the students succeed rather than for an external reward:

> *I feel in order to be successful one need [only] to find their position and responsibilities rewarding. It starts there and simultaneously radiates forth. It improves interactions with others, the ability to work through tasks, [to] multi-task, and overall efficiency and effectiveness.*

The exemplary advisors who were interviewed described the importance of aligning their professional role with their personal value systems, and how this alignment allowed for student success to emerge as an important reward motivating them to help others and to adopt the new performance-based advising role.

Co-creation of role. According to study participants, the interaction with the researcher in the co-creation of their new role was important. Many of the interventions identified by the AR team and described in Chapter 4 were completed by work groups composed of members of the advising team. According to the participants, the creation of work groups, tasked with designing and implementing the new performance-based advising model, helped them to understand and take ownership over their new role. Many participants indicated that the co-creation process fundamentally transformed the conversation about the direction of the centralized advising center and instilled a level of commitment and ownership necessary for changing the culture of the advising team and recognizing its potential. Assistant Director C (personal communication, Oct. 8, 2017) summarized this larger co-creation process: "*From the very beginning, the [advising center director] incorporated everyone into the evolution of the CAR. We didn't have a name until it was agreed upon by the team.*

When asked to describe the co-creation of the mission, vision, goals, and philosophy of the centralized advising center, Assistant Director C (personal communication, August 18, 2017) responded:

> *It made the [centralized advising center] team [feel] like they ... really [were] a team… [I]t made them feel that the ideas of the goals of the leadership team were being properly communicated to them. And I hope the co-creation of these things have given them some ownership in the process.*

When asked to follow up on the use of the word *hope*, Assistant Director C added:

> *Hope, because I don't know that we can please everyone. We have a staff of over 20 ... some people would have liked to [have] seen some things done differently. But I think as [Assistant Director E] and, I think, [Assistant Director A] said, ... I think that there will*

be an opportunity to see how this works and potentially grow and include other things … [T]he things that work the best we will certainly move forward with, and I think there's an opportunity to evaluate those.

The exemplary academic advisors also identified the co-creation process as important in helping them to feel valued in the process. As Exemplary Advisor C (personal communication, August 25, 2017) shared:

I really feel that taking the time to bring the full team together to discuss what direction we should take and to give feedback as we worked toward a performance-based center has been a positive experience. Of course, it meant taking time to reflect and meet and talk through different issues, but I appreciate that there was opportunity for feedback. I don't think it's common for the frontline advisors to get the opportunity to provide as much input into the changes in the center. I hope that everyone feels that these experiences were worthwhile like I do. I'm really proud of how far we have come, and I'm looking forward to seeing how we continue to evolve and improve.

Rapidly Evolving Academic Advisor Behaviors and Performance Outcomes

The research process began with the AR team asking a basic question: "Do we even know what student-centered advising is?" During the course of this study, the centralized advising team participated in a series of retreats (described in Chapter 4) that led to the development of a mission, vision, goals, and, ultimately, an advising philosophy:

> The [centralized advising center at RSU] has adopted *intrusive advising* also known as *proactive advising* as its primary advising philosophy. The [center] will be intentional with its outreach efforts to contact students early in their academic career to help identify and solve academic and social issues. We will utilize predictive analytics as one of our

> primary tools to collect data and make informed decisions on academic advising and to collaborate with other departments across the university to schedule referrals to various campus resources. Through this approach, the [center] will also develop opportunities and foster positive relationships with students that lead to increased academic motivation and persistence.

Many study interviewees referred to this philosophy when describing their understanding of the role of RSU's centralized advising unit.

This AR study did not seek to create a competency matrix for the centralized advising team. However, themes around competencies surfaced during the final interviews with participants and are included in this discussion as a way of highlighting how the advising team defined the new role. The key competencies of relationship building, holistic understandings of student challenges, leveraging technology, and proactive outreach via data-informed decision making emerged during the final interviews with exemplary advisors and the supervisors of the advisors, and help to illustrate the impact of the new behaviors on the performance outcomes of the position.

Relationship building. Serving as an academic advisor is ultimately about earning others' trust in order to help them. Study participants built trust in different ways, but according to the data, trust building was seen as core to fostering effective relationships with students, staff, and faculty. In their final interviews, the exemplary academic advisors identified this competency as significant. For instance, Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described the process of building relationships with students:

> *I try to build relationships with all of the students that I have come in contact with. Kind of piggybacking [on] the idea of being an advocate, as an academic advisor I want to*

ensure that students know that they have someone on campus who they feel comfortable with, whether it's dealing with academics specifically or just wanting to know where they should go to figure out something that may not necessarily pertain to my role on a day-to-day basis.

Exemplary Advisor B (personal communication, August 25, 2017) added:

For me, it's [about] open communication. Allowing the student the opportunity to actually speak about what his or her goals might be, and us finding a way together, creating a plan ... [for] how they're going to address some of those needs that they're going to come up with, in addition to the campus resources that exist on campus as well as other individuals that they'll have to come in contact with. Communication is the biggest thing for me, being able to communicate with them, whether it's by my email or by phone, and just always leaving my door open for them regardless of when it is.

Holistic understanding of student challenges. Exemplary academic advisors also described how they viewed factors outside students' academic performance in supporting their success—a key theme in understanding the behaviors that support exemplary performance. According to many interviewees, the process of supporting student success starts with an understanding of the complex challenges that students bring and face. Exemplary Advisor D (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described herself as a success coach rather than an academic advisor:

Success coach, life coach, I see them [as] interchangeable in that you're just not working with your student on making a decent grade or helping to select classes; you're also working with them to find that part-time job in career services, you're also working with them if they have health issues [or] disability issues with our veterans.

Exemplary Advisor E (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described her connection to the success coach mentality:

> *In having previous experience with success coach[ing] ... in grad school, it kind of is similar to what we do currently... Make sure that the student is progressing well academically, but also making sure that they are having all of the different resources available to them to succeed in other areas. Like what [Exemplary Advisor D] said earlier…having that holistic approach when interacting with our students.*

Ultimately, as the interviewees described, the integration of this holistic understanding of students involved academic advisors connecting students with other offices and using technology to intervene. According to Assistant Director E (personal communication, August 18, 2017):

> *I'm excited about using [a predictive analytics platform] and being able to actually refer students and have some follow up. I think that for a long time we've recommended that students go to the [tutoring center], go to career services, go to different offices to get the additional support that they need. But we lacked any follow up and follow through and accountability as it relates to that. So I'm really excited about being able to move into that in the future ... because I think that our students need those wrap-around services. I think that our students bring quite a few issues to the table that are outside of their academics, necessarily, that may hinder their success in terms of progressing towards graduation. So I think that will be something that will be a very useful tool.*

During the final interview with Dr. P. (personal communication, September 2, 2017), he explained how the role of academic advisors had evolved since the centralization of advising:

> *I'd say, initially coming into the position as a faculty member, I was probably more focused on curriculum and academic programs than I was on student success. As an*

individual instructor ... it's always wanting my students to be successful, but I saw that a lot of that was referring students to services as needed, and through the advisement process. At that time, faculty were the primary advisors for student. Now I see it as a much more holistic ... or a process that needs to be holistic.... [S]tudents come from a wide variety of backgrounds; they have a variety of learning styles, a variety of academic issues that come into the classroom with them—learning styles, situations at home, work, different types of factors that will impact their success in the classroom.

The project went on to describe the integration of this holistic view of the student by academic advisors, and the need to leverage technology and to proactively intervene:

So it's a much more holistic approach, and also a more analytical approach, in terms of using data and resources to identify problems, and then to come up with remedies based on the data that's collected, and then to assess the effectiveness of any interventions that are designed.

The study data suggested that academic advisors must be able to understand the "full picture" of a student and have the capacity to connect them with resources beyond the traditional domain of academic advising. This evolution requires new knowledge, skills, and abilities that cannot be taken for granted, including leveraging technology and proactive data-informed interventions, discussed in the following sections.

Leveraging technology. Prior to the centralization of academic advising unit, RSU had invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in technology to improve student success outcomes; however, these costly efforts had minimal impact. Though the technology was in place, the learning necessary to use the technology was not. Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described the gap between understanding a piece of technology and actually leveraging it:

> *My own learning experience has changed [in] that I'm becoming more knowledgeable about how to use technology, whereas in my previous job, which was here on campus in enrollment services, I used specifically Banner®, and that's all we would use and we didn't have the opportunity to experience other technology.*

Exemplary Advisor B (personal communication, August 25, 2017) shared similar observations:

> *I've seen this role as an academic advisor evolve over the past two years, I've only been here for about a year and half, but since starting in my role, the use of technology has really evolved. I feel that as an advisor I am not only using intuition and studies that I've had to assist the students, but also using the technology and the data that I now have access to in order to assist the students better.*

Both of these academic advisors were hired from other student support offices on RSU's campus. While they were aware of many of the core student information systems on campus, they both spoke to their level of dependence on technology in their daily work.

Proactive outreach via data-informed decision making. Understanding technology, however, is not enough to meet the new performance outcomes of the centralized academic advising center. During the final interview process, exemplary academic advisors and their supervisors spoke about using data they gathered via the technology to provide proactive outreach to RSU's student population. Exemplary Advisor D (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described this process:

> *I think something that we are implementing this fall with our data action plan that ties directly to our advising philosophy of being proactive. We're using the technology, we've*

seen the data, and we have each devised a plan to help these students in kind to get ahead and address any concerns that we may see based on historical data.

The supervisors of the exemplary academic advisors also described this process of using data to inform interventions. Assistant Director D (personal communication, August 18, 2017) commented:

We really rely heavily on [our predictive analytics platform], which is a great platform for us. Even with ... retention and graduation, being able to pull different data and reach out to those students and helping them to be successful. If they are struggling in a particular area, just being able to reach out to them ... helps out a lot.... For me, in particular, being able to do a lot of initiatives in my special population's role, being able to reach out to those students, pulling the data and reaching out to those particular students, getting them back in, maybe to classes, or getting them the additional resources they would need to get them back in to the university to complete their degree. And I think that helps out our advisors as well to be able to pull that information easily because, two years ago, I couldn't say that we were able to do the things that we're doing now.

The importance placed on this knowledge and approach was represented in the advising team's development of the advising philosophy (included at the start of this section), which included proactive intervention-based advising as the core tenet.

Inconsistent Improvement in Student Re-Registration Rates

The terms *retention rates* and *persistence rates* are often used interchangeably in higher education to discuss the number of students who return from one semester to the next. While each of these terms has a distinct meaning within the student success literature, for the purpose of this study, they are treated as interchangeable and referred to as a *re-registration rate*. The term-over-term re-registration rate was established as a key metric for evaluating the performance of the centralized advising center by the RSU community since it served as a quantifiable metric with historical context. While there are a variety of methodological approaches for calculating this rate, RSU, in 2015, adopted the formulas illustrated in Table 15. Data integrity issues related to changes in staffing and reporting make it difficult to compare accurately re-registration rates prior to fall 2015. Re-registration rates improved since the advising center was created. However, this improvement has been inconsistent due to changes to non-payment policies and a shift in student profiles toward students with fewer credit hours.

Table 15

RSU Undergraduate Re-Registration Rate Calculation Formulas

Fall to Spring	=	Number of Continuing Students Registered for Spring / (Number of New and Continuing Students Registered for Fall – Number of Fall Graduates)
Spring to Summer	=	Number of Continuing Students Registered for Summer / (Number of New and Continuing Students Registered for Spring – Number of Spring Graduates)
Spring to Fall	=	Number of Continuing Students Registered for Fall / (Number of New and Continuing Students Registered for Spring + New Summer Students)— (Number of Spring Graduates — Number of Summer Graduates)

The re-registration rates were calculated for undergraduate students at RSU. The results of the calculations (Table 16) reveal a trend—albeit an inconsistent one—toward improved term-over-term re-registration rates. During fall-to-spring semesters, the rate increased by 0.4% since the centralization but did not reach the 2014-2015 rate. The summer re-registration rate saw an increase of 1.7% since the centralization of advising at RSU. However, while the summer 2017 rate was a significant improvement over summer 2015, it represented a 1.9% decline from the summer 2016 re-registration rate, which was a 3.6% improvement over the summer 2015 re-registration rate. Thus, the improvement from summer 2015 to summer 2017 was seemingly less significant than it would have been since the summer 2017 re-registration rate was less than summer 2016 re-registration rate. The fall 2017 re-registration rate was flat in comparison to fall 2015. It is important to note that RSU made significant changes to its account-reconciliation process to ensure compliance with a new state directive that all balances must be paid in full by the last fee payment deadline. Prior to fall 2017, RSU did not drop students who had balances of less than $500. However, the new account-reconciliation policy resulted in 70 students being dropped from their courses in fall 2017; had they remained enrolled, the re-registration rate prior to centralization would have represented a 1.7% improvement from fall 2015. To help understand the impact of this change, RSU's Office of Enrollment Management developed Table 17, which represents peak enrollments prior to each non-payment date and the percentage of students who were able reinstated. The table highlights the achieved re-registration rate based on factors within the control of academic advisors.

Table 16

RSU Undergraduate Re-Registration Rates

	Fall Semester to Spring Semester		
Term	2014-2015[1]	2015-2016	2016-2017
Re-Registration Rate	90.4%	89.1%	89.5%
	Spring Semester to Summer Semester		
Term	2015[1]	2016	2017
Re-Registration Rate	39.1%	42.7%	40.8%
	Spring Semester to Fall Semester		
Term	2015[1]	2016	2017[2]
Re-Registration Rate	77.5%	78.8%	79.2%

Note. [1] Re-registration rates prior to centralization of advising. [2] This is an adjusted re-registration rate to model previous non-payment compliance process. Non-modeled rate was 77.5%

Table 17

Impact of Non-Payment on Re-Registration Rates

Percentage of Students Dropped and Reinstated			
1st Fee Payment Deadline	*Fall 2015*	*Fall 2016*	*Fall 2017*
Enrollment	6733	6808	6897
Total Dropped	654	733	672
% Dropped	9.7%	10.8%	9.7%
% Reinstated	58.4%	54.8%	53.0%
% Not Reinstated	41.60%	45.20%	47.00%
Final Fee Payment Deadline	*Fall 2015*	*Fall 2016*	*Fall 2017*
Enrolled	7139	7135	7224
Dropped	142	145	289
% Dropped	2.0%	2.0%	4.0%
% Reinstated	33.8%	31.7%	49.5%
% Not Reinstated	66.2%	68.3%	50.5%

There is a another way that the change in performance can be quantitatively measured. Table 18 applied Bourdeau and Jesuthasan's (2011) return on improved performance (ROIP) to RSU. It provided an approach to identifying how changed performance impacts the financial bottom-line. Table 18 demonstrated this ROIP by showing the tuition-generation differences among on the fall semesters between 2015 and 2017, based upon the improved re-registration rates in Table 16.

Table 18

RSU Return on Improved Performance for Fall Semesters—Head Count

	Re-Registration Rate	Number of Extra Students Realized Over Baseline Rate	Cost of Predictive Analytics Software[1]	New Tuition Revenue Realized[2]	Total ROIP
Fall 2015	77.5%	N/A	($66,500)	N/A	($66,500)
Fall 2016	78.8%	56	($66,500)	$142,475	$75,975
Fall 2017	79.2%[3]	72	($66,500)	$183, 182	$116,682

[1] Cost of analytics suite was half of actual cost to coincide with RSU budgeting process where cost is split across the fall and spring semesters. [2] Tuition calculations were based on tuition and fees for a student taking the institutional average 11 credit hours [3] Using adjusted reregistration rate to account for change to non-payment process outlined in Chapter 5.

Data shown in Tables 16, 17, and 18 supported that investments in improving academic advisor performance were effective in improving the re-registration rates of undergraduate students at RSU and positively impacted RSU's financials. However, the inconsistency of re-registration, as illustrated in Table 16—which only shows final numbers and does not represent the financial factors outlined in Table 17—affected the project sponsor's overall view of the success of the AR study. During his final interview, he explained, "*We've had modest growth.*

Growth has not been as profound as I expected it would be, but it's been moderate and steady." (Dr. P, personal communication, September 2, 2017).

The following section addresses the process for achieving non-numerical success and discusses findings related to research question two.

Creating the Conditions that Support the Development and Implementation of the Pivotal Talent Pool Strategy

The data from this study informed research question two. Specifically, three key findings emerged from the participant interviews (Table 19). First, the process of developing an academic advising community that supports student success required specific actions to sustain the development of that community and to impact performance. Second, the factors impacting performance, discussed in Chapter 2 and 4, did have a positive impact on academic advisor performance. Third, learning must be embedded in the process to allow participants to make their own meaning and to lead both personal and departmental change.

Table 19

Research Question 2: Categories and Coding Themes

RQ 2: What is required of a centralized academic advising unit to create conditions that support the development and implementation of pivotal talent pool strategy?	
Categories	**Coding Themes**
2.1 Developing Strong Community	2.1.1 Centralization of policies, procedures, and practices
	2.1.2 Role of culture, philosophy, and sense of identity
	2.1.3 Role of communication and collaboration
	2.1.2 Owning student success
2.2 Actively Intervening to Supporting Employee Performance	2.2.1 Goal setting
	2.2.2 System design
	2.2.3 Recognition and consequences
	2.2.4 Feedback and coaching
	2.2.5 Individual capabilities
2.3 Role of Reflexivity and Learning in Leading Change	2.3.1 Personal learning and change
	2.3.2 Departmental learning and change

Developing Strong Community

Throughout the final interview process, the topic of the transformation from individual advisors and advising units to a single centralized unit came up consistently. The simplest intervention of the RSU study was the centralization of academic advising services. However, collecting all of the advisors under one umbrella was not enough to generate a new culture of student success. Rather, interviewees described how the development of an advising community served as a key catalyst for the creation of a strong community focused on student success. Based on the data gathered from interviews with exemplary advisors and their supervisors, several key themes emerged around the actions that encouraged a community focus on student success. These actions included the centralization of policies, processes, and procedures, the development of a culture, philosophy, and sense of identity as an advising team, and the assumption of ownership over student success.

Centralization of policies, procedures, and practices. Chapter 4 detailed the centralization of policies, process, and procedures around advising at RSU. The centralization effort was co-created by the advising team rather than from a top-down directive. Exemplary Advisor B (personal communication, August 25, 2017) indicated that adopting a common approach had a positive impact on student success:

> *Touching back on something that [Exemplary Advisor A] said earlier in the interview with being centralized and having all of the different policies and procedures streamlined, I believe that has definitely helped as a centralized unit and allows the students to be successful. Often students may change majors so if that happens and since we're centralized they're receiving a lot of the same basic information that will help them be successful.*

The process of developing one set of policies and procedures from six different units was complex. Rather than forging a single path forward, two assistant directors were charged with leading a work group to develop policies and procedures collaboratively. Assistant Director E (personal communication, August 18, 2017) reflected:

> *I think that ... we are in the development stage and really starting to figure out and iron out some of the details. I think that when you're dealing with so many people, both the advisors as well as the students in some of these situations, that it's important to have some background and some understanding before developing policies and procedures. And I think that we're at the point where we know what we need. We just need to, I think, spend more time developing them and getting into the details and finding out what works,*

what doesn't, what [we can] be for the student. What can't we be? And just further clarifying our roles. And I think that that's something that comes with time.

Continually updating and refining these processes, policies, and procedures ultimately represented the full ownership of the process by the advising team, according to Assistant Director C (personal communication, August 18, 2017):

I think that there will be an opportunity to see how this works and potentially grow and include other things as to our policy and procedures, the things that work the best when people certainly move forward with, and I think there's an opportunity to evaluate those—everything really. And then see what we've decided to keep and what we decide to modify or update.

However, possessing common policies and procedures does not, in itself, create community. Many participants that also identified the process of the advising team creating our own culture and identity impacted the development of community.

Role of culture, philosophy, and sense of identity. This act of applying approaches and policies from another institution to the local context (i.e., to RSU) was important, as described by AR Team Member A (personal communication, September 27, 2017):

Why we thought we would have that, I think, is because we used the model that was coming from [the RSU peer institution], frankly, and they had had success that was celebrated in the media. We knew that we were going to have complications because we didn't have the resources that [they] had. We didn't know whether or not those complications would completely derail or inhibit in some way some of the successes that they had celebrated. We look back on that now and see that everything wasn't roses, even with [the peer institution]... We are more of a smaller institution [that] is trying to use, in *part, some of their strategies without those resources and doing a lot ad hoc. Again, coming from an area that was different [from the peer institution] baseline area. And so having a strategy to move in the exact same way that [the peer institution] would have moved was probably not reasonable because, again, we had a completely different structure, a completely different mission with our students, a completely different student demographic with different goals and outcomes for themselves that may not have [been] included.*

Upon centralization, the first action the team undertook was the development of the mission, vision, and goals of the new advising unit. The creation of these statements would connect directly to that of the performance matrix, which connected performance outcomes to departmental goals. It also provided the guiding principles for implementing a new student service model. During her interview, Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described the importance of this intervention:

In addition to those things that my colleagues have mentioned, I think just us uniting together, uniting all the college together and coming under one center has been very impactful ... On the advisors, we get to share ideas. There is a higher level of cross-training now that allows us to best service the students. Again, with the uniting of all of the colleges under the [centralized advising unit at RSU], we also work together to establish our own mission, vision, values, and goals moving forward. This information has been shared with the University and is placed on our website. And so, again, just uniting and collaborating together as a center and as an entire advising body, I think has been very impactful for the advisors as well as the students.

This process resulted in the creation of a common identity among the members of the advising unit, which was observed by the advising team. Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) said:

> *By us becoming centralized and having students from the time [of] their sophomore year till graduation year ... you actually do build a strong bridge, a strong relationship. It helps to feed the student's strength in feeling that he or she can get through this process that we call education, and it makes them also believe and know that they have a support system.... It's less miscommunication or less misinformation about a program.*

The Dr. P (personal communication, September 2, 2017) also spoke about this change during his final interview:

> *One is giving them a sense of identity.... [W]hen they were in the colleges, I think oftentimes [they] felt overlooked ... as key players in the process. Deans frequently will focus primarily on faculty and less so on the advisors, so oftentimes I think they felt out of touch with what was going on, felt that their input was not valued. And so, one, just putting them under one structure, gave them more of a sense of identity and common purpose. I think that having a common location also was ... beneficial; that it helped to solidify that sense of identity and commonality. It also gave them just more of a sense of a home, of "This is where we belong" and a sense of camaraderie with colleagues that have a similar mission and vision. I think providing them with a common supervisor, a director to advocate for their needs, but also to help structure their professional development, creates new opportunities for advancement, identify resources and help acquire those resources.*

Interviewees identified the development of an identity as an advising team and the prevalence of a culture and philosophy that prioritized student success as key supports in the development of a strong academic advising community.

Role of communication and collaboration. Interviewees described how communication and collaboration changed during the research project. Some of this change can be attributed to the new centralized location of the advising team. However, the key finding within this theme was that improved communication and collaboration ultimately enhanced the ability of the academic advisors to support students and improve student success outcomes. This was described by Assistant Director D (personal communication, August 18, 2017) during her final interview:

> *I do definitely agree with [Assistant Director B] and [Assistant Director C] in what they said as far as being able to be together, just being here as one center. And all the advisors here, if we're dealing with a student and they're wanting to change their major, being able to go down the hall and talk to another advisor and get that assistance instead of the student happen[ing] to walk across campus, or try to find that particular advisor in another department. And we are all centralized here. And I think that drives the students' success here at [RSU].*

This new culture of student success and communication also had significant impacts on the ways the advisors engaged with colleges. This was significant since one of the main critiques of the centralized advising model is the potential loss of connectivity with departments and colleges. Communication and trust were also central to interviewees' descriptions of how relationships with faculty and staff on campus were built. As Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) commented:

I've found that with the center becoming a center—meaning each advisor initially was housed in a college or school and us being pulled into one particular centerpiece of a building—as an advisor I've found that the communication amongst the advisors as well as the communication with the colleges or the schools has created or creates an atmosphere where the college or the schools actually come to the advisors for that added information in regards to policies and graduation requirements. It kind of minimizes, to some extent, being told one thing and something else differently from someone else since all the advisors are in one center and we all get the information at the same time.

Assistant Director A went on to describe the path the collaborative path the advising team took to implement a performance-based advising model that was accountable to improving student retention rates and how it was communicated by the leadership team:

The easy way to transition to a performance-based advising unit would have been for the person at the top to say, "This is how we are doing things from now on. Here's the new manual. Here's how you'll be evaluated." That's not what happened here, and I've been at places where new policies were dictated to me, and I didn't have any say in the matter. Instead, we took time to get feedback and to get input about how to move forward. We didn't agree about everything, but at least there was time spent learning about how things currently worked before attempting to make changes. I really feel that taking the time to bring the full team together to discuss what direction we should take and to give feedback as we worked toward a performance-based center has been a positive experience. I hope that everyone feels that these experiences were worthwhile like I do. I'm really proud of how far we have come, and I'm looking forward to seeing how we continue to evolve and improve.

Exemplary Advisor B (personal communication, August 25, 2017) provided an example of how collaboration allowed her to solve a student's problem:

> *In regards to collaboration, that word was thrown around earlier. I think it's important that we build relationships with other offices as a whole or maybe have a point of contact with an individual within an office. I had an instance just the other day with a student who—it's peak season, add/drop season—who was kind of getting the runaround. I reached out to my director who helped me assist the student. Thankfully I did know someone in the particular office that could also help resolve the problem, and I was able to get in contact with that person quickly. Whereas if an advisor or a colleague did not know anyone in that office they may have had some delays with getting the issue resolved. I think if we put ourselves out there, make ourselves known to other offices, and kind of bridge that gap and have those stairwell conversations, as they say, that will kind of help with barriers.*

Here, Exemplary Advisor B highlights her decision to ensure that the student's issue was resolved. Her story evidenced one way in which RSU advisors "owned" student success after centralization.

Owning student success. The concept of the success advisor/coach came up organically during the final interviews with the exemplary advisors. The exemplary advisors described their role as advocates, success coaches, and life coaches in supporting student success. This theme integrated many of the components that made up the emerging picture of academic advisor performance, but also went on to articulate how academic advisors actually performed in this new role. Exemplary Advisor B (personal communication, August 25, 2017) summed up this conversation about owning success regardless of it being in an academic advisor's official title:

Success coach, life coach, advocate, we've thrown around a lot of different terms, I think they're good. The term academic advisor*, as I mentioned earlier, we are already in academia so it's kind of intuitive that we want to cover academics. Not only [RSU] but other universities, in their mission is the word* success*, student success, so I think it is fitting that we use the word success to describe us whether … formally or informally.*

During the final interview process, I asked the Dr. P for his perspective on using the term *success advisor* in place of *academic advisor*:

It would be very positive. I know I see one of two approaches, and I'm not sure which is the best…. The one approach would increase cross training, where the success advisors coach themselves, become knowledgeable about career services, about financial resources, just so students dealing with perhaps homelessness or a food [scarcity]… in which they would become … knowledgeable with themselves, of all the resources available. Whereas, the other model would be just being the one who makes referrals to send students … to give them resources they need to locate others on the campus to help with these different efforts. It'll probably be somewhere in between; it's hard to make referrals if you don't understand the basics of what … resources are … available. (Dr. P, personal communication, September 2, 2017)

Actively Intervening to Support Employee Performance

Chapter 2 offered an in-depth analysis of the factors impacting employee performance, as well as a synthesis of these factors and a common nomenclature used to evaluate how study participants felt about these factors. These factors mapped directly to Rummler and Brache's (1995a) factors impacting performance framework, which guided this study and was used in the development of the RSU GAPS! Map®. Many interviewees maintained that universities must actively ensure that the organizational system supports the performance of the pivotal talent pool.

Chapter 4 mapped the ways in which interventions were developed to address each factor. The following sub-sections provide evidence that the interventions described earlier assisted in developing a system that fostered academic advisor performance. Data from academic advisors, supervisors, and key stakeholders evidenced the difference these interventions made from their perspective. As part of his reflection on the process of developing and leading a session on this topic at the national academic advising conference, Assistant Director B (personal communication, October 8, 2017) described his understanding of how the intersection of these factors impacted RSU advisor performance:

> *The information we delivered at the [National Academic Advising Association] conference allowed me and other administrators to envision how we can improve retention efforts and hire the right personnel for the job. Also, I learned how I can ... execute effectively across my advising unit and beyond. I can plan in a more effective manner, which can add value to an organization. I will be able to manage a group of individuals on ways to better serve them and help continue to build upon their human performance. Another key component of [this process] was understanding the GAPS! Map® and the factors impacting human performance [model]. This information was [essential] and [I] felt that we presented the proper information to our audience at the NACADA presentation. Our evaluation results can attest to that, and [I] also, conversed positively with a few of the participants after we presented.*

Goal setting. Goal setting represents a clear understanding of what an employee is supposed to do and/or achieve. Two interventions described in Chapter 4 were related to goal setting: performance matrix and goal workbooks. Assistant Director A (personal communication, August 18, 2017) described the role of the performance matrix in defining expectations:

> *The expectations for all the academic advisors, I believe they're clear, because I believe it was last year we developed a performance matrix, within the center for the advisors, and the performance matrix pretty much has all the expectations listed for even exemplary advisors, or whoever meets standards, or below standards. So, I think we have information ... we can provide advisors ... that pretty much has some clear indication of what the expectations are.*

Exemplary Advisor B (personal communication, August 25, 2017) affirmed the importance of goal setting in her description of how the performance matrix clarified her role while also offering autonomy to customize her position:

> *I believe the performance expectations are clear. Our center does have a matrix for each of the positions within our office so those have been outlined and we can refer to them. I think even outside of that formal matrix, myself and most of the other advisors have the free will to make the position their own and can be creative and find new ways that may not be outlined in the matrix to help with their performance.*

The goal workbooks were one of most contentious interventions, as described in Chapter 4. However, as Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) observed, the goal workbooks did, as intended, create a sense of accountability within the advising team while also allowing advisors the ability to intervene with their students in a timely manner:

> *By you informing or having a situation where the [assistant directors] are then informed and then the information is ... also given to the rest of the advisors that are in the team,*

what you are creating is an atmosphere where if there's an area where [academic advisors] need to build on or strengthen a skillset, you're spreading that information across the board to all [academic advisors] that are involved. Then that way [assistant directors] kind of enhancing the abilities of all the advisors, those who are both doing it well and those who did some work in getting it done—you're kind of bringing everyone up.

The assistant directors viewed the impact of the goal workbooks on goal orientation in the same way. Assistant Director C (personal communication, August 18, 2017) indicated that this helped to support performance as well as the evolution of understanding around advisors' role and purpose:

> *I think initially, because it was new ... I think for some it was a little bit overwhelming.... I think it was a little bit overwhelming in that some of the advisors were initially concerned that there would be significant consequences if they did not meet the goals that were listed on the form. But I think as they continued to receive them, I think it became a little bit more apparent that it was just a level of accountability that needed to be maintained. And ... that there was time to work through goals, to achieve those goals. And there was also support from their peers, or even potentially from their [assistant director] to get those goals accomplished as well. But I definitely think it, ultimately, I think it did increase and improve performance and accountability.*

System design. The term *system design* was original coined by Swanson (1995) and was meant to represent the combination of training and technical support required to perform successfully at a high level. Although not exclusively linked, this performance outcome can be connected to the intervention of centralized policy and procedures. The strategic planning and visioning intervention, from which the Advising Institute—a two-day personal and professional development workshop—grew as an offshoot of the annual retreat process, also complemented it. Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) described the ways in which system design in the centralized advising helped to increase efficiency and effectiveness:

> *I would say, yes, there's been a change: I actually work smarter now. Still as hard but it's smarter in that I'm able to use tools and resources that help with the conversations that I'm having with my students. Also, it leaves the door of communication open between us, so that sometimes it's not always just about the academics; it might be about other things, but it leaves that communication line open.*

The consistency of work also allowed the center staff to learn from each other and grow together. Many study participants, for example, indicated that the centralized calendar for campaign outreach created conditions whereby everyone knew whom to be reaching out to, in what order, in what way, and how to track those contacts. As Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017) elaborated:

> *Then that way you're kind of enhancing the abilities of all the advisors, those who are both doing it well and those who did some work in getting it done, you're kind of bringing everyone up along at the same time. By having campaigns and things of that nature, those different types of activities that take place, that kind of creates that atmosphere.*

Recognition and consequences. The intervention designed by the AR team focused on implementing a merit-raise system to serve as recognition for exemplary performance. As described in Chapter 4, money was not a motivating factor for exemplary employees; as discussed earlier in this chapter, intrinsic motivators actually drove exemplary advisors to perform their work at a high level. That is not to say that merit and promotions are not still seen by RSU leadership as an important recognition tool. According to Dr. P. (personal communication, September 2, 2017): "*I think it'll ... probably ... be rewarding those who buy in to the model of proactive advising, and leading campaigns. So that, in a sense, working around those that may be resistant*". This finding does not suggest that there were not other important recognitions and consequences that participants identified. Recognition systems were organically developed by the team in a variety of ways, resulting in the creation of a Sunshine Committee. Exemplary Advisor B (personal communication, August 25, 2017) cited the work of this group as an example of how advisors receive recognition for their hard work:

> *That committee each semester or each month actually selects one advisor who is performing well and awards them at a staff meeting and recognizes their hard work and effort for that particular month. At the end of each semester, colleagues vote and can award [an] Advisor of the Semester as well, so that is one way in which we are rewarded within the center.*

None of exemplary advisors interviewed for this study articulated consequences for poor performance; however, the supervisors of academic advisors were able to identify consequences. This may be attributable to selection bias of advisors who are exemplary in their work. Assistant Director D and E both explained the consequences in the form of accountability for completing work:

> *Consequences, like [Assistant Director E] said, [advisors are] just held to that accountability for consequences if we're not meeting those performance expectations or doing the job performance. Those accountabilities are addressed [with] us. And we try to address both immediately [rather than] letting it lag on for a long period of time and then*

addressing it when it arises. (Assistant Director D, personal communication, August 25, 2017)

It was not always this way, however. Assistant Director A (personal communication, October 5, 2017) shared that the performance goal workbooks made her feel that there was a new sense of accountability within the centralized center:

I think it creates a level of accountability that was not previously there. I especially appreciated the accountability because first-year retention was always being monitored, and so, as a first year advisor, I always felt accountable, so it was nice to have all the advisors have the same accountability.

Feedback and coaching. The ability to provide timely and relevant feedback was critical to supporting employee performance. This intervention focused on the capacity-building potential of the assistant directors to lead change with the help of feedback and coaching from the director (i.e., me). During their interviews and in personal communications, the assistant directors credited this feedback and coaching as central to supporting their increased capacity to lead. Assistant Director D (personal communication, August 18, 2017), for instance, described how the bi-weekly meetings were a critical part of her professional development:

Certainly in the beginning ... very, very essential to my role. As they continued to be very, very essential, it's good to have that space, that one-on-one opportunity to share your concerns as well as some personal goals. So that space has been essential also to receive feedback, consistent feedback, and that open line of communication has been key.

During the exemplary advisor interviews, I observed that participants also referenced the feedback and coaching they received from their supervisors as being central to their success. While not an intended intervention, there appears to be an important trickle-down effect from this intervention while also highlighting other ways exemplary advisors receive feedback, as described by Exemplary Advisor A (personal communication, August 25, 2017):

> *Also my supervisor has a great open-door policy that I can always stick my head in and ask him a question while he's working on something else but he makes the time and will listen to my question. As [Exemplary Advisor B] just said, student feedback is always good and then sometimes it could be a parent's feedback or a significant other's feedback, those are also other ways.*

The role of feedback and coaching on supporting improved performance should not be undervalued since it represented the heart of the research process, allowing the all of the other interventions to be co-created.

Individual capabilities. Individual capabilities refer to variables that are inherent to an employee—that is, the employer or system cannot provide it. In this study, they were best understood as intrinsic motivations, as evidenced in the exemplary advisor interviews. Discussed earlier in this chapter, the notion of intrinsic motivation was supported by participant comments about why they were motivated more by a sense of personal fulfillment rather than a monetary reward in supporting student success.

Role of Reflexivity and Learning in Leading Change

The conclusion of this AR study provided a formal opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences, many of which were described in previous sections. Participant data reflected learning on two levels. The first level related to their personal learning, or how they grew as individuals. The second level centered on departmental learning, or how the centralized advising unit drew from our shared learning to improve practice. This AR study represented an approach to improving practice that included conditions designed to support learning that would result in improved individual and departmental performance. From the interviews, I was able to better understand how the action research methodology created conditions for personal and departmental learning, and provided the necessary flexibility for implementing the critical talent pool strategy.

Personal learning. Personal learning was a key theme that emerged during the final interview process. This individual-level learning was the core of capacity building for leading the change initiative. Assistant Director B (personal communication, Sept 9, 2017) described the ways he learned to be a more effective leader:

> *Over the past two years, I have matured as a leader and [become] more cognizant in decision-making. I benefited from my supervisor's leadership style and his mentorship. I learned ways [to become] a more effective leader by juggling different tasks and responsibilities to better serve my colleagues, the students, and [RSU].*

Assistant Director B also referenced the intervention of assistant director feedback and coaching, which was described in Chapter 4. The supervisors of the exemplary advisors were not the only ones learning through this action research study. The advising teams were simultaneously being asked to approach their work in a new way. Exemplary Advisor C (personal communication, August 25, 2017) commented on her personal learning, which led to a deeper understanding of the role of an academic advisor:

> *When I first started working as an academic advisor, I believed I really put the word* academic *at the forefront. I always knew you needed to talk [to] and know your students and build that rapport, but I think when I first started, my conversation immediately turned to, "How can I help you? What's going on with classes?" Not necessarily with "How are you? Anything new? What's going on?" I think now in my interactions with*

students there's a nice balance between the two, so I can get to know them and that will help me do my job better because I can kind of piece that and see how it's relating and affecting their academics rather than just diving into curriculum.

Assistant Director A (personal communication, October 5, 2017) described a critical learning experience through which she gained a deeper understanding of how her role as a member of the advising leadership team had evolved, along with her ability to provide leadership to her advisors:

> *I would say that my position has evolved in that in the first year, I mean the first year of me being in the role, I was heavily concerned with trying to maintain what was first-year programming from the previous model of what we had in first-year advising, which was a different staffing level and there was more staff to handle first year. And so as that was evolving, we went from a staff of five to a staff of three first-year advisors trying to maintain the same level of touch with students, meeting with them more frequently, as well as programming that we had. So ... my first year was really about maintaining.*
>
> *And then my second year was more about trying to edit and figure out where we could still improve and increase retention of first-year students, but with not as much staff and with us not being able to do as much programming. And then, as I'm rolling into this third year, it's really been about trying to figure out what can we really do a little bit differently in innovating how we're handling and working with this population of students. So it's more about making it more student-focused. Figuring out what we need to do to grab students, to get students to take the actions that they need to so they can be successful in their first year. And I just feel like it's just been evolving from there, so I went from trying to keep things the way they were to realizing that that wasn't going to be*

possible, to try to innovate and strategize more effectively on how to maintain this population.

As described in Chapter 4, I was also learning during this process. During the final interview with AR Team Member A (personal communication, Sept. 26, 2017), he shared his perception of my growth in leading the centralized advising team:

> *I think initially you struggled, probably too much. I'll be cut and dry about it. That you struggled too much about the adoption of the strategy by the team.... While I do recognize it, and it was a struggle ... You really kind of needed to figure out how to get onboard, and rather than have the person-to-person back and forth about, and it sometimes failed, because you were new, I think you were treading lightly on making sure you didn't offend each and every person and their support, if you will, meaning those who had support of other administrators. Sometimes you didn't want to offend that group being the new person. I think maybe you spent a little bit too much time on that.*

Action Research Team Member A was unknowingly describing my self-growth during the AR process. He added:

> *I think the questions that you ask have improved, for lack of a better word. Rather than saying, "How are we going to make this work?" I think you are saying, "As we're making this work how can the performance be disseminated such that others buy-in to this approach without the questioning the process?". It's not so much that [you] have to show tomorrow that this worked. This is a long game. How can [you] incrementally show when it is working so that people start to understand where we're going rather than having long and sometimes pointless conversations about, "If we are able to do this, this happens." You've just said, "Okay, we're doing this, and this is what happened." Then the*

transition is just happening. It's your vision kind of being implemented, and sometimes without apology and without permission. I think that's what you have to do in an environment like ours.

Departmental learning. Departmental learning also took place over the past two years according to participants. Departmental learning represented a movement beyond individual-specific learning toward collective learning that impacted the larger approach of the centralized advising center. Assistant Director B (personal communication, September 30, 2017) described this in the context of improved communication:

Through the leadership of the director, I saw the way advising and leadership retreats/meetings were executed to allow the center to become more effective as a centralized unit. According to Tuckman's stages of group development—forming, storming, norming, and performing—I could identify how each stage was developed within the advising center throughout. I have witnessed the way we communicate as a team during the forming stage and how we presently communicate during the performing stage. Overall, I believe we have become a more cohesive unit.

In this reflection, Assistant Director B references the intervention of strategic planning and visioning.

Conclusions

The research questions of this AR study were addressed using a narrative format focusing on participants who were directly engaged in the study. Their answers and reflections helped to illustrate the interconnections between the interventions (explored in Chapter 4) and the findings of the research questions. Key findings for research question one related to how academic advisors understand and adapt to mounting pressures from internal and external stakeholders to improve student success outcomes and their understanding of new performance outcomes and behaviors required to meet these outcomes. Key findings for research question two described how participants experienced the development of a community, experienced the factors designed to impact performance, and ultimately learned on a personal and departmental level.

Based on the responses from interviewees, I believe the processes for centralizing and professionalizing academic advising services, which were designed to improve student success outcomes, would have been very challenging without building a collaborative approach into the study's methodology. Supervisors of academic advisors and exemplary academic advisors did report that many of the interventions outlined in Chapter 4 had a positive impact on their performance and learning. Data from Chapter 5 evidenced improvements in academic advisor performance. Quantitative data for validating the impact of this changed performance were promising, and the system is primed for success and to achieve continual improvements in student retention rates in the longer term.

Chapter 6 brings the AR study together and recommends a path forward for institutions considering how to support pivotal talent within advising services in an effort to improve student success metrics.

CHAPTER 6

ANALYSIS, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Go as far as you can see; when you get there you'll be able to see farther.

—Thomas Carlyle

Carlye's quote captures the essence of the journey represented by this action research study. Reflecting on this journey, study participants were able to see how far the centralized advising unit had come while simultaneously perceiving how much farther RSU had to travel in order for the study's purpose to be fully realized. In Chapter 1 I examined the adaptive challenge facing colleges and universities around improving student retention rates and the potential that human resource development theory and practice might have in helping to improve the performance of a pivotal talent pool. In Chapter 2 I situated this challenge within the context of the literature, highlighting the potential for this study to add to the literature. In Chapter 3 I described the action research methodology utilized for this study as well as the methods of inquiry, data collection, and data analysis. A "write up" of the AR case study itself is provided in Chapter 4, offering a deeper reflection and understanding of not just what happened but why it happened and how interventions impacted the centralized advising unit from multiple perspectives. In Chapter 5 I built on these reflections in a way that allowed for key themes, categories, and learning to emerge. In this final chapter, I offer an analysis of what was learned about the original problem, the study's impacts at the individual, group, and system levels, and the implications for RSU, higher education administrators, human resource development scholars, and HRD practitioners.

The purpose of this study was to determine if a pivotal talent pool strategy helped to improve performance in a centralized academic advising unit at a Regional State University, resulting in improvements in student retention rates. The analysis, conclusions, and implications in this chapter were guided and shaped by this study's research questions:

- How, if at all, does implementing a pivotal talent pool strategy affect the performance and short-term impact of a centralized academic advising unit?
- What is required of a centralized academic advising unit to create conditions that support the development and implementation of pivotal talent pool strategy?

This chapter discusses two conclusions that grew from an analysis of the study data; considers implications for theory, practice, and future research; and concludes with my final reflections on becoming a scholar-leader (Ruona & Watkins, 2014).

Study Conclusions

Three main conclusions emerged from the findings of this action research study, all of which aligned with the study's research questions and informed Ruona's (2014, 2017) pivotal talent pool strategy model. These conclusions emerged from the learning detailed in Chapter 4 and findings discussed in Chapter 5, and are situated within the current scholarly literature to provide a potential path forward for practitioners and scholars.

Conclusion 1

Conclusion one was this study validated the efficacy of Ruona's (2014, 2017) pivotal talent pool strategy model and the PTPS model shows promise in regards to its ability to impact the performance of a pivotal talent pool resulting in the achievement of an organization's strategy. Ruona (2017) argued there must be "logic that ties the strategy to specific talent pool(s) that can differentially affect the [pivotal talent pool strategy]". Ruona's (2017) PTPS model includes three parts: (1) the identification of pivotal talent position required to achieve organizational goals; (2) the aligned action of the pivotal talent position; and (3) the integrated systemic place to foster effective performance of that pivotal talent position. The pivotal talent position for this study was the academic advisors in the centralized advising center. The process of identifying this critical talent pool was based on the work of Boudreau and Jesuthasan (2011), Boudreau and Ramstad, (2007), Collings and Mellahi (2009), Ruona (2014, 2017), and Whelan et al. 2010. This study used Robinson and Robinson's (2008) GAPS! Map ® model to meet requirement two and three of Ruona's (2014, 2017) PTPS model. However, there are other models that could be explored that may accomplish the same end result (Mayfield et al, 2017). The selection of Robinson and Robinson (2008) for this study was based on how their model "identifies the causal linkage between performance and operational results. This ensures that the best practice or competencies are linked to the business and organizational goals" (p.118). Using Robinson & Robinson's (2008) framework the following logic model was implemented:

> IF historical performance of the academic advisors as defined by the *On-the-Job Performance Is* (Box 3) from RSU's GAPS! Map ® results in established baseline re-registrations rates, AND performance of the academic advisors is improved to the *On-the-Job Performance Should* (Box 2) level from RSU's GAPS! Map® and that results in improved re-registration rates, THEN improved academic advisor performance has positively contributed to improved re-registration rates.

Figure 10 represents the logic model employed for this study.

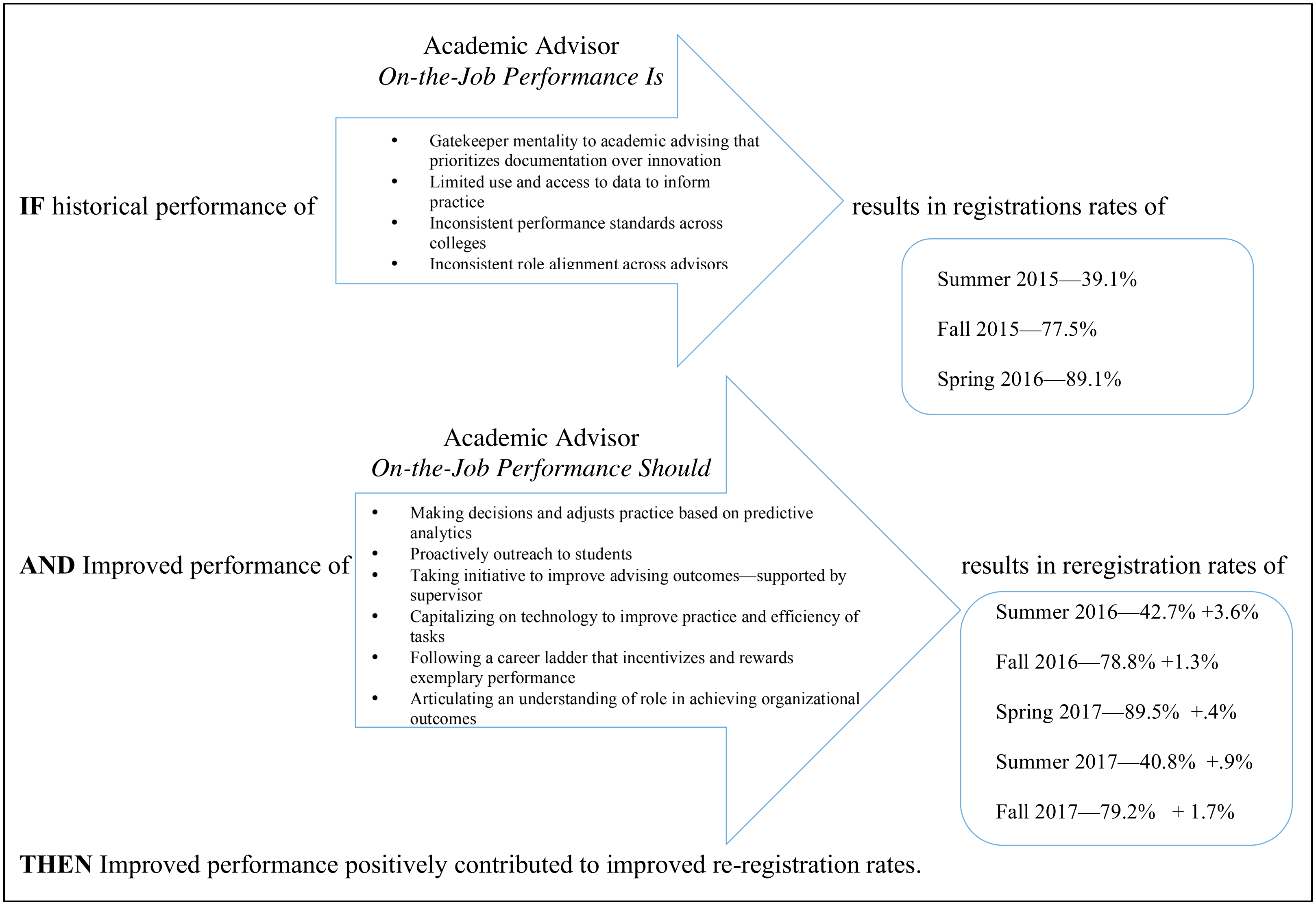

Figure 10. Logic of improving performance of academic advisors.

Ruona’s (2014, 2017) PTPS model provided a specific way for RSU to focus its limited resources, in a time of budget reductions, to improve student retention rates. This logic model was important because it connected the potential to provide a quantifiable measurement of the efficacy of the centralized advising center and the costs associated with improving performance. Ultimately, the results of this AR study demonstrated the ability of an institution to implement a PTPS model (Ruona 2014, 2017) to address strategic priorities in an environment of scarce resources by capitalizing on performance improvement theory—a topic noticeably absent in the TM literature (Bratton & Garavan, 2017; Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; McDonnell et al., 2017; and Ruona, 2014, 2016).

Jackson and Schuler (1990) discussed the value of getting the right people with the right skills in the right job at the right time. Ruona (2014) added that “the practice of identifying, assembling, and channeling all those inputs into an integrated, coherent system focused on getting the right people with the right skills in the right job at the right time requires more than a collection of inputs” (p. 9). Without a change in the performance orientation of the advisors, the centralization of advising would likely have been another failed RSU intervention to improve student retention rates. Indeed, Ruona (2014) was correct in maintaining that administrators must identify and address existing gaps between the current and desired performance and behaviors of the pivotal talent pool. This can be understood by evaluating the academic advisor performance at the start of the study (column 1) and comparing how observable performance at the end of the study (column 3) connected to the desired performance that was identified by RSU (column 2) of Table 20. Table 20 uses data on performance described in Chapters 4 and 5, and then overlays it with the knowledge, skills, and abilities RSU academic advisors needed to develop in order to meet performance outcomes. For the purpose of this study, knowledge (K) is defined as the requisite understanding of a task or process for performing the job function correctly; skill (S) is defined as a measurable outcome of a task or performance expectation; and ability (A) is defined as a documentable action that fulfills a desired performance expectation. The cultivation of the changed KSAs were a result of study's interventions and were informed by the performance improvement literature (Binder, 1998; Gilbert, 1978; Robinson & Robinson, 2008; Rummler & Brache, 1995a; Swanson, 1995).

Changes in performance outcomes and behaviors were central to this study. Improving the performance of individuals in organizations are complex and adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 2009) for human resource development professionals. Many of the comments from the exemplary academic advisors comprised a collective view of the advising unit, not just of the advisors themselves. The use of the terms *we* and *all of the advisors* was important and should not be taken for granted. Rummler and Brache (1995b) argued, "If you pit a good performer against a bad system, the system will win almost every time. We spend too much of our time 'fixing' people who are not broken, and not enough time fixing organization systems that are broken" (p. 8). The centralization of RSU's advising center was the first step in creating the conditions that would allow for a common set of performance outcomes and behaviors for improving student retention rates.

Table 20

Changes in Required Behavior and Performance Outcomes for Supporting Changed Performance

Academic Advisor Performance at Start of the Study	RSU identified Desired Performance	Observable Performance by the End of This Study[1]	Requisite Knowledge (K), Skill (S), and Ability (A) Change
Gatekeeper mentality of academic advising that prioritizes documentation over innovation	Proactively reach out to students	• Advisors used a centralized campaign calendar. • Advisors used an early-alert notification system to intervene with at-risk students. • Advisors built custom intervention action plans based on predictive data.	K: Understands factors impacting student success and how to identify those factors in students S: Utilizes advising platform to identify and engage at-risk students and document work A: Reaches out to students over the phone to engage in difficult conversations
Limited use and access to data to inform practice	Make decisions and adjust practice based on predictive analytics	• Advisors built custom intervention action plans based on predictive data.	K: Understands factors impacting student success and how to identify those factors in students S: Utilizes advising platform to identify and engage at-risk students and document work A: Reaches out to students over the phone to engage in difficult conversations
Inconsistent performance standards across advisors	N/A	• Advisors had a common set of expectations presented in a performance matrix.	K: Understands the performance expectations of academic advisors and the requisite actions for servings as an exemplary academic advisor S: Utilizes performance matrix to prioritize and construct advising tasks A: Demonstrates ability to meet performance expectations as outlined in the performance matrix
Inconsistent adoption of technology	Capitalize on technology to improve practice and efficiency of tasks	• All advisors adopted and integrated the advising software platform into their daily practice.	K: Understands how to use the advising software platform S: Leverages advising software to improve practice and share this learning with other advisors A: Utilizes advising software and follows established work flows
N/A	Take initiative to improve advising outcomes—supported	• Advisors participated in strategic planning activities.	K: Understands the strategic priorities of the centralized advising unit and how they connect to institutional strategic priorities

Academic Advisor Performance at Start of the Study	RSU identified Desired Performance	Observable Performance by the End of This Study[1]	Requisite Knowledge (K), Skill (S), and Ability (A) Change
	by supervisor	• Advisors participated in work groups that included policy and procedures, assessment, and advisor and advisee expectations.	S: Implements strategies for improving advising outcomes in alignment with established policies, procedures, and practices A: Participates in the creation of policies, procedures, and practices in alignment with strategic priorities
N/A	Follow a career ladder that incentivizes and rewards performance	• Career ladder was implemented but was, at the time of the study, still awaiting funding. • A merit-raise system was implemented that connected to annual performance evaluation.	K: Understands actions and behaviors required to move up the established career ladder and receive merit increases S: Meets targets outlined as exemplary on the advising center performance matrix A: Demonstrates ability to meet performance specifications
N/A	Articulable understanding of the role in achieving organizational outcomes	• Advisors created and adopted an advising philosophy statement that represented their understanding of organizational strategic priorities.	K: Understands how the actions taken by an advisor and the advising center support organizational strategic priorities S: Effectively executes proactive interventions that result in improved student retention rates A: Takes action in support of the advising philosophy

Note. [1] Data collected to support these observations is outlined in Chapter 3 and described in Chapter 4 and 5.

Boudreau and Jesuthasan (2011) suggested that changes in performance behavior can be quantified to business leaders as the return on individual performance (ROIP) which was detailed by Table 18 in Chapter 5. Data from this study supported Boudreau and Jesuthasan's (2011) assertion that organizations can create an optimal way to allocate organizational resources to meet customer demand that results in an optimal value proposition for both the customer and organization. Thus, institutions must focus on ways to improve the performance of these positions to maximize the ROIP and optimize the system. This approach is important as Boudreau and Ramstad (2007) noted, "for all the evidence that the quality of talent and organization matters, it is still frustratingly difficult for most business leaders to know precisely where and how investments in employees' talent and organization actually drive strategic success" (p. 5). Bratton & Garavan (2017) make a similar argument in regard to the need for learning and development practitioners to align their work and demonstrate how it impact achieving organizational strategic goals.

The findings from this study begin to address the dearth of empirical research around the application of talent management strategies and the issues that such strategies both solve and cause (Bethke-Langenegger et al., 2011; Iles et al., 2010; Lewis & Heckman, 2006, McDonnell et al., 2017, Whelan et al., 2010). Furthermore, it explored how pivotal talent positions may comprise a critical bridge between strategy and action which the literature currently lacks a systematic method for identifying (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Mayfield et al., 2017; Ruona, 2014; Whelan et al., 2010). Validating the efficacy of Ruona's (2014, 2017) PTPS model is important since applying performance improvement theory to all levels of an organization is not financially sustainable and may not be necessary for addressing all problems (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Swanson, 1991).

Conclusion 2

Conclusion two was building the leadership capacity of the supervisors of the pivotal talent pool was an essential part of this study and should be considered as part of a pivotal talent pool strategy intervention. While the literature base has generally assumed that effective leadership is key to successful change, there is a dearth of empirical literature to support this position (Ford & Ford, 2012). Moreover, it is estimated that 80-85% of the problems organizations face are not due to a lack of knowledge and/or skills (Rummler & Brache, 1995a). Thus, training interventions are not the most effective primary solution for resolving performance issues; rather, organizations must consider the deficiencies within the management system itself (Druker, 1999; Gilley, 2005; & Gilbert, 1978,). Gilbert (1978), the "father" of the performance improvement movement, held that "whatever the most immediate cause of the poor performance, I, as the manager, have no one to blame but myself. The cause of incompetence is my management" (p.76). Gilbert (1978) described worthy performance as "W" represents worthy performance, "A" is the observed or measurable accomplishment, and "B" represents the observed or measurable behavior (Figure 11). Thus, according to this equation, worthy performance is only reached when the accomplishment is achieved, not just when the behavior is changed.

$$\boxed{W = \frac{A}{B}}$$

Figure 11. Gilbert's (1978) behavior engineering model.

Gilbert's (1978) model helps illustrate the role of the supervisors of academic advisors in orchestrating worthy performance in this study (Table 21). Behavior (B) represents the academic advisor performance model developed as part of the GAPS! Map® process described in Chapter 4. Accomplishment (A) represented the measurable action supervisors expect to see; such actions aligned with the performance matrices intervention for academic advisors and assistant directors which is descried in the intervention section of in Chapter 4. The role of the supervisor was included to illustrate how supervisors served as the bridge between the behavior and accomplishment components of this model and is based on participant interviews described in Chapter 4 and 5. When behavior, supervision, and accomplishments were aligned, advisors were able to achieve worthy performance (W), resulting in improved retention rates. This is important as Herold, Fedor, Caldwell, & Liu (2008) noted that the research focusing on the relationship between leadership and change is lacking. Moreover, Herold et al. (2008) added that the literature around change management and leadership is lacking integration.

Table 21

Role of Supervisors of Academic Advisors in Supporting Worthy Performance

Behavior (B)	**Role of Supervisor**	**Accomplishment (A)**	**Worthy Performance (W)**
Make decisions and adjust practice based on predictive analytics	Supervisors led the advising team in developing action plans based on institutional predictive analytics.	Academic advisors identified students in need of intervention	Improvement in student retention rates
Proactively reach out to students	Supervisors used goal workbooks to follow up with advisors who were not meeting outreach targets.	Advisors proactively intervened with their advisees	
Take initiative to improve advising outcomes—supported by supervisor	Supervisors provided environments in which advisors received feedback, and supervisors shared that feedback at leadership team meetings.	Leadership team integrated advisor feedback into policies, procedures, and practices	
Capitalize on technology to improve practice and efficiency of tasks	Supervisors ensured that advisors were utilizing technology in alignment with policies and procedures, and provided feedback and training to those who were not.	Increased capacity of advisors to identify students in need of assistance and increased utilization of advisors	
Follow a career ladder that incentivizes and rewards exemplary performance	Supervisors provided timely feedback and professional development plans to advisors, and recommended advisors for merit increases and promotion.	Advisor became engaged in the creation of the culture and philosophy of the advising center	
Articulable understanding of role in achieving organizational outcomes	Supervisors developed and implemented an academic advisor performance matrix.	Advisors articulated desired performance and changed practice to achieve desired performance	

One of the major critiques of strategic talent management has been around honoring the roots of human resource development, which focused on the learning of the individual in addition to performance outcomes (Bierema, 2000; Swailes, 2013). While improved retention rates comprised the ultimate measure of worthy performance, individual and departmental learning was described in Chapter 5 and provides an important way to understanding how supervisors supported exemplary performance and changed their approaches to work. The learning of the supervisors described in Chapter 5 proved to be a key factor in building the leadership capacity of the supervisors of the assistant directors. This is important as Burke (2008) described that for all of the literature discussing the impact of leadership on organizational change there is a dearth of evidence that scientifically demonstrates the leader's impact. This study demonstrated that by engaging the employees in the co-creation of interventions, learning could be embedded in the creation of the performance improvement process. This is in alignment with Ford and Ford (2012) argument that successful change leadership activities requires behaviors and activities associated with expressions of leadership that move beyond positions of authority. This simultaneously honored the individuals by privileging their voice in the process. While the "boardroom pitch" of PTPS may focus on measurable strategic outcomes of the organization, described in conclusion one and in implications for practice section that follows, this study showed that the strategy has the capacity to support the learning of individuals while simultaneously addressing the performance outcomes of the organization.

In Chapter 4, I discussed a moment of tension that occurred when the path forward was not clear. Feeling that the centralizing advising center was on the precipice of failure, I made the decision to trust others and to trust myself to lead others. Only when I began to trust the supervisors of the academic advisors did the team came together and the movement toward a performance-based advising center began to accelerate. The future of the RSU advising center seems more promising because of the increased capacity of the supervisors to lead their teams.

Summary of Conclusions

This discussion of these conclusions aimed to provide additional insight into the purpose of this study, which was to determine if a pivotal talent pool strategy helped to improve performance in a centralized academic advising unit at a Regional State University, resulting in improvements in student retention rates. Connecting the impact of a PTPS (Ruona 2014, 2017) on academic advisor performance in a centralized academic advising unit with behavioral and performance-based outcomes (i.e., knowledge, skills, and abilities) that must be addressed to close the gap between actual performance and desired performance provides a way of establishing a causal relationship to the impact on student retention rates as advocated by (Bratton & Garavan, 2017; Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Ruona, 2014, 2017; Whelan et al., 2010). The conclusions of this study reinforced that practitioners must include leadership capacity building for supervisors of the pivotal talent if the desired performance of these employees is to be achieved and sustained (Burke, 2008; Ford & Ford, 2012) and to honor the roots of the HRD profession (Bierema, 2000; Swailes, 2013).

Implications for Practice and Future Research

This study addressed the need for college and universities to look beyond the established literature base around factors impacting student retention. It used student retention theory to inform the process of identifying the pivotal talent position that resulted in a different approach to improving student retention that integrated strategic human resource development and performance improvement theories via Ruona's (2014, 2017) PTPS model. The outcomes of this study have implications for future research and practice, especially for colleges and universities that need to improve retention rates but do not have the resources to hire additional student support staff. However, since this was a context-specific AR study, the results are not generalizable to other higher education institutions. Therefore, additional studies should explore ways in which Ruona's (2014, 2017) PTPS can be applied to improve the performance of key positions that can differentially impact strategic organizational priorities.

Implications for Future Research

This research process depended upon a knowledge base around strategic human resource development literature. Woodard (2015) and Riccio (2010) asserted that the lack of literature around this topic requires practitioners to simultaneously build their knowledge base while taking action. This study validated the potential for this to happen, but future research should explore how universities are doing this in practice.

Future research should continue to explore how the field of HRD can contribute to strategic outcomes in higher education at a time when the consolidation of HR functions at system-office levels is rapidly increasing (EAB, 2014b). These changes in responsibilities and degrees of transactional automation have contributed to inconsistent HR office staffing across the higher education landscape (EAB, 2014b), and the prioritization of function and process has severely restricted access to the knowledge base of trained professionals in the theory and practice of HRD. This has created conditions in which practitioners must forge ahead in what Swanson (1991) described as a trial-and-error approach to developing high-performing individuals. Thus, research must provide clear evidence of the quantifiable impacts of HRD's value to colleges and universities beyond human resource management functions (i.e., hiring, firing, and compliance).

In conclusion one, I provided a data-centered understanding of the success of RSU advisors in improving retention rates as a result of their changed performance by connecting the changed performance model to re-registration rates that was built on the findings in Chapter 5. Moreover, data from this study was used to demonstrate how the technical solution of centralizing academic advising services will not solve the adaptive challenge (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Laurie, 2009) of improving student retention rates if the behaviors and performance outcomes of academic advisors do not simultaneously change. Since the interventions were co-created and are context specific to RSU, future research should explore applying performance improvement techniques to other academic advising settings and other structures (i.e., decentralized). Moreover, while participants in Chapter 5 credited the co-creation process of performance improvement interventions as being important, future research should explore how this study's interventions are received outside a co-creation process due to time and resource limitations that practitioners face and were described in Chapter 4. Future research should also explore creating a consensus around a model for officially calculating ROIP (Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011) as it has the potential to be a powerful narrative during budget allocation discussions and can provide a more quantifiable view of the work of HRD practitioners.

In conclusion two, I connected the role of the supervisor in supporting the improved performance of academic advisors. While this connection may be implied in the strategic talent management literature around pivotal talent pools, it has not been stated explicitly (Bratton & Garavan, 2017; Boudreau & Jesuthasan, 2011; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; Collings & Mellah, 2009; Mayfield et al., 2017; Ruona, 2014, 2017, Whelan et al., 2010). Future research should explore how the leadership capacity of supervisors impacts their ability to improve the performance of employees in pivotal talent positions. Moreover, the learning of the individuals impacted by such approaches must continue to be held up as central to HRD approaches (Bierema 2000, Swailes, 2008). Ruona's (2014, 2017) movement toward a holitistic view of pivotal talent leadership—one that encompasses all of the tools at the disposal of an HRD professional—may provide a path forward by integrating HRD theories and practice into action.

However, Ruona's (2014, 2017) approach needs further exploration and validation with additional empirical studies.

One of the key findings discussed in Chapter 5 was the rapidly evolving nature of the academic advisor role on college campuses. As desribed by Nacholl, the RSU student profiled at the start of Chapter 5, RSU students expected their academic advisors to be more than just interpreters of academic policies. Due to high student expectations combined with equally lofty expectations from senior administrators looking for an immediate return on investment via predictive analytics, advising administrators have increasingly found themselves in high-stakes environments where the performance of advisors must change rapidly, but advising administrators are not trained to reconstruct these systems. Such confounding variables must be addressed through future research to develop a deeper understanding of the knowledge, skills, and abilities required of academic advisors, supervisors of academic advisors, and chief advising administrators (EAB, 2014a; Miars, 2017; Straumsheim, 2017). Furthermore, while case studies are emerging from vendors of predictive analytics suites, researchers must provide robust studies on how academic advisor performance was systematically changed to integrate the data insights from these software platforms. This AR study demonstrated that the HRD field has the ability to contribute to this conversation and provide a path forward (Riccio 2010; Woodard, 2015). Future research should further validate this approach in additional settings.

Implications for Practice

Two threads of implications evolved from this study. First, academic advising administrators that are asked to improve student success outcomes must look beyond student retention literature for solutions. Second, HRD professional in a higher education setting must find new ways to demonstrate and measure the value of their work. While this AR study was able to integrate these threads as a result of my unique scholar-leader positionality (Ruona & Watkins, 2014) this should not be taken for granted in practice (Riccio, 2010; Woodard, 2015). As advising administrators look for these alternative approaches (Wolf-Wedell et al., 2009), HRD practitioners in higher education must engage administrators outside their traditional communication channels to demonstrate how they can provide expertise to strategic organization outcomes (Garavan, 2007; Peterson, 2008; Ruona, 2014; Ruona & Gibson, 2004). This is important since non-HRD practitioners have historically struggled with discovering ways to positively impact the system to create success (Swanson, 1999).

The challenged described in the RSU case of having the data to act but not the performance model is not unique. According to the *2015-2016 Higher Education Industry Outlook Survey* (McGuirt, Gagnon, & Meyer, 2015), which found that 41% of survey respondents had access to predictive data analytics to inform decision making. However, many survey respondents indicated that their schools did not have the internal resources to best leverage data and analytics to achieve maximum benefit (Burroughs, 2016). Advising administrators must understand that predictive data insights are only as good as the ability of the end user to act on them. This implication was raised during a keynote speech at the 2017 Education Writer's Association by Dr. Timothy Renick:

> *What we've found is the real challenge is not coming up with the data. But once you have all these thousands of risk factors identified, do you have a system to take those alerts, put them into action and have mediation so that students can be helped?* (Abdul-Alim, 2017, p. 1).

The findings from this study demonstrated that simply knowing which students are at risk is not enough to meaningfully change student success outcomes. Implied in the well-crafted argument by predictive analytics software providers is if an institution has access to data analytics and then invests in academic advisors to act on these predictive analytics, then student retention rates will improve and costs will be covered. However, this reductionist view of the process fails to capture the changes in academic advisor performance that supported the improved retention outcomes. As demonstrated by this study, academic advising administrators must understand the complexities of improving performance and HRD professionals must advocate for consideration of their expertise and begin to engage academic advising administrators in leading these initiatives.

Final Researcher Reflections

Action research is difficult work. It required me to become vulnerable in ways that I could not imagine when the study began. It has forever changed me as it forced me to simultaneously explore myself as a scholar and a leader. As a result, I learned how to trust myself, to trust others, and to trust myself leading others. I understood conceptually that writing this story would require me to become vulnerable and to grow, yet I certainly did not understand that in practice. My biggest surprise was that I was not alone in this process. The co-inquiry nature of AR forced me to be vulnerable with others and, as a result, for them to become vulnerable with me. I realized that I learned from them and in turn they learned from me.

This was my second attempt at completing an action research study. During my first attempt, I left my former institution to join RSU. The differences between the first study and this study are like night and day. The first study centered on me and simply going through the motions to get the dissertation done. This study, however, taught me the value of patience and substance over rigid adherence to structure. I had to learn to let the process "breathe" at RSU. I learned that in trusting others I was not just doing right by the AR method; I was unknowingly supporting growth and development of the academic advising team. The ownership that the exemplary advisors and supervisors of the advisors felt over this project was a surprise discovery for me. Ultimately, I think this speaks to the power of AR methodology to privilege inquiry, learning, and action. I have changed, the advising team has changed, and RSU is beginning to change.

I wrote in a journal entry just over a year ago about how I wondered if the change would hold if I left RSU. I can see now that I was really questioning whether the university' change to a performance-based advising unit was about me or about RSU. What became clear from the final interview process was that the participants were proud of what we created and that the change was about them, not me, and not RSU. There were daily reminders from the team about how we would not—could not—go back. The process of conducting this study provided the clarity I needed to advocate for the next iteration of performance improvement to further impact student success at RSU. Referring to the epigraph as the opening of this chapter, now that the study is complete, I see how much more there is to the story. For now, the story stops here, but there is more to learn and more to share as the journey continues—and I know now I am not alone on this path.

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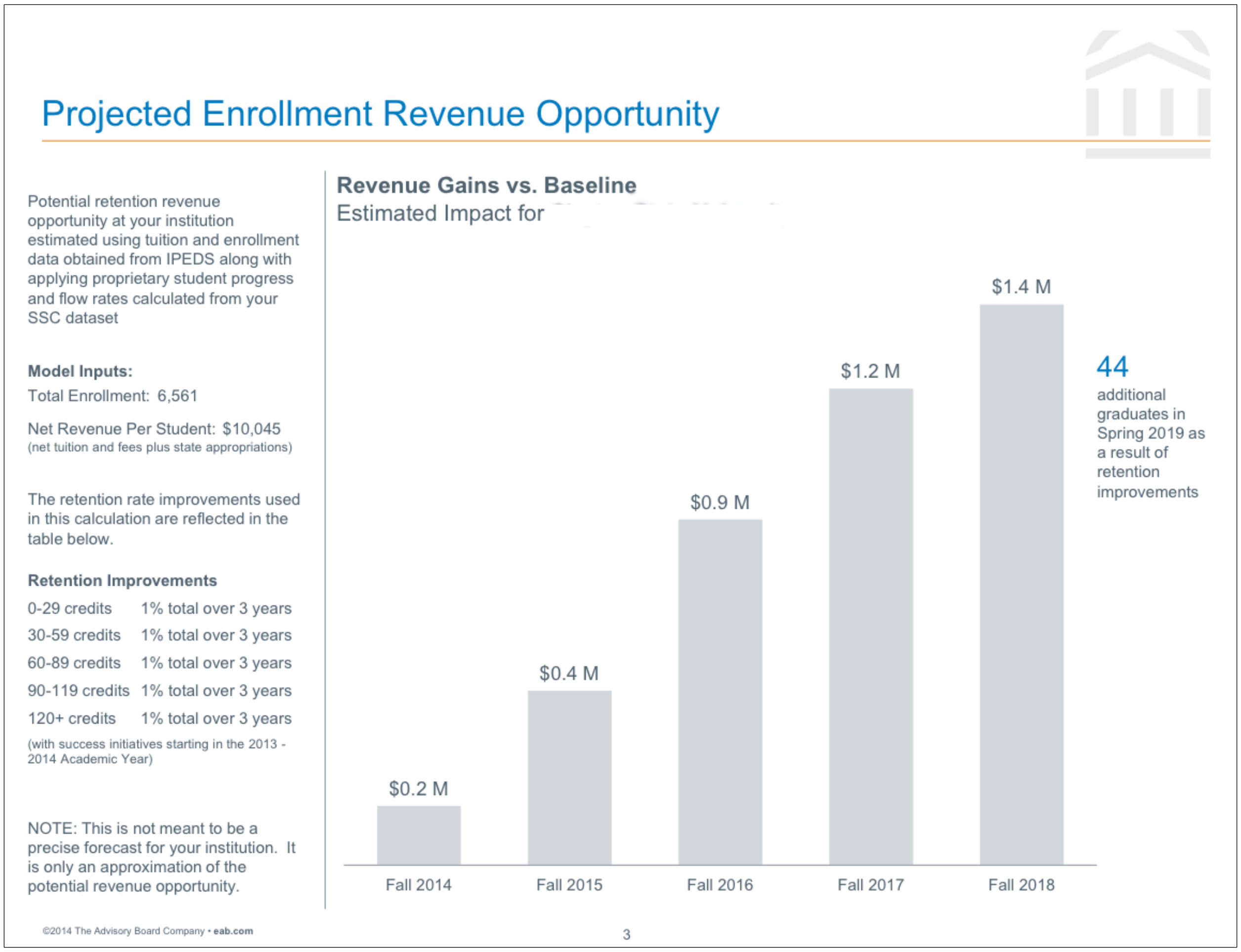
APPENDIX A

RSU IMPROVED RETENTION RATES REVENUE PROJECTIONS



APPENDIX B

RSU IPEDS RETENTION AND GRADUATION RATES PRIOR TO AR PROJECT

Retention and Graduation Rates of Fall First-Time Full-Time Freshmen Students
2005 - 2015

Term Entered		Fall 2005	Fall 2006	Fall 2007	Fall 2008	Fall 2009	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	Fall 2014	Fall 2015
Information about the First-Time Full-Time Freshmen Students												
Mean	SAT Verbal	498	502	492	491	495	477	477	479	476	476	484
	SAT Math	488	500	483	480	484	480	479	466	464	466	467
	High School GPA	3.00	3.00	2.98	3.02	3.11	3.11	3.14	3.00	3.00	2.98	3.05
Retention Rate for All Students												
Beginning Cohort	# Enrolled	626	581	483	373	373	457	454	535	476	458	502
First Year	# Enrolled or Graduated	377	355	283	249	228	301	308	387	324	321	
	Retention Rate (%)	60.2	61.1	58.5	66.7	61.1	65.8	67.8	72.3	68.0	70.0	
Second Year	# Enrolled or Graduated	279	257	222	177	172	242	231	288	238		
	Retention Rate (%)	44.5	44.2	45.9	47.4	46.1	52.9	50.8	53.8	50.0		
Third Year	# Enrolled or Graduated	224	234	181	160	148	201	195	238			
	Retention Rate (%)	35.7	40.2	37.4	42.8	39.6	43.9	42.9	44.4			
Fourth Year	# Enrolled or Graduated	204	205	173	146	136	188	177				
	Retention Rate (%)	32.5	35.2	35.8	39.1	36.4	41.1	38.9				
Fifth Year	# Enrolled or Graduated	193	196	172	145	131	180					
	Retention Rate (%)	30.8	33.7	35.6	38.8	35.1	39.3					
Sixth Year	# Enrolled or Graduated	198	182	174	142	130						
	Retention Rate (%)	31.6	31.3	36.0	38.0	34.8						
Seventh Year	# Enrolled or Graduated	199	187	164	141							
	Retention Rate (%)	31.7	32.1	33.9	37.8							
Eighth Year	# Enrolled or Graduated	196	192	166								
	Retention Rate (%)	31.3	33.0	34.3								
Ninth Year	# Enrolled or Graduated	198	186									
	Retention Rate (%)	31.6	32.0									
Tenth Year	# Enrolled or Graduated	199										
	Retention Rate (%)	31.7										
Graduation Rate for Bachelor's Degree Seeking Students in the Cohort												
Term Entered		Fall 2005	Fall 2006	Fall 2007	Fall 2008	Fall 2009	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	Fall 2012	Fall 2013	Fall 2014	Fall 2015
# Bachelor's Degree Seeking Students		550	514	420	336	342	424	428	495	446	415	456
Within 4 years	# Graduated	38	55	38	46	48	53	48				
	Graduation Rate (%)	6.9	10.7	9.0	13.7	14.0	12.5	11.2				
Within 5 years	# Graduated	110	110	93	86	94	109					
	Graduation Rate (%)	20.0	21.4	22.1	25.6	27.5	25.7					
Within 6 years	# Graduated	149	142	120	112	109						
	Graduation Rate (%)	27.1	27.6	28.6	33.3	31.9						
Within 7 years	# Graduated	161	155	134	124							
	Graduation Rate (%)	29.3	30.2	31.9	36.9							
Within 8 years	# Graduated	167	164	145								
	Graduation Rate (%)	30.4	31.9	34.5								

APPENDIX C

EVOLUTION OF STUDENT SUCCESS (EAB, 2017)

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

RSU Peer Institution Interview Guides

Director/Associate Director

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

The purpose of this interview is to gain information about your experience working supervising academic advisors. While your reflections will be shared with the Action Research team, they will remain confidential and be combined with responses from other stakeholders to inform this study.

The final product for this study will be a dissertation that will be published as part of my doctoral program requirements. Your responses are very important to helping Clayton State University benefit from furthering effective retention interventions. To that end, I encourage you to speak openly about your opinion, experiences and to provide specific examples, when possible. You may not have responses to all of the questions, but just answer to the best of your ability. I expect that this interview will take between 45-60 minutes to complete. Now that you have been informed of purpose of my study, the intent of this interview, how the information from this interview will be used, and how the interview will be conducted, would you like to proceed with the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

- *Taking into consideration your advising team, describe the characteristics of your best academic advisor.*
- *How is the performance of an exemplary academic advisor different from other academic advisors in your unit?*
- *How are your performance expectations communicated to academic advisors?*
- *What rewards and/or consequences have you put in place to encourage high-level performance? If so, how are those communicated to academic advisors?*
- *How are individual performance expectations of your academic advisors connected to your unit's desired outcomes?*
- *How do you evaluate the performance of an academic advisor beyond traditional HR evaluations?*
- *How do academic advisors receive feedback to encourage desired performance?*
- *How would your academic advisors describe their ability to achieve their performance expectations? Does this differ for your exemplary academic advisors?*

- *Have you encountered barriers outside of your unit as you attempted to implement new performance specifications for your academic advisors? What have you done as a director to help mitigate these factors to support the expected performance outcomes?*

Exemplary Academic Advisor

Dear Exemplary Academic Advisor

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

The purpose of this interview is to gain information about your experience working supervising academic advisors. While your reflections will be shared with the Action Research team, they will remain confidential and be combined with responses from other stakeholders to inform this study.

The final product for this study will be a dissertation that will be published as part of my doctoral program requirements. Your responses are very important to helping Clayton State University benefit from furthering effective retention interventions. To that end, I encourage you to speak openly about your opinion, experiences and to provide specific examples, when possible. You may not have responses to all of the questions, but just answer to the best of your ability. I expect that this interview will take between 45-60 minutes to complete. Now that you have been informed of purpose of my study, the intent of this interview, how the information from this interview will be used, and how the interview will be conducted, would you like to proceed with the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

- *Taking into consideration your position, describe the behaviors of exemplary academic advising that supports student retention.*
- *Do you have clear performance expectations? If yes, how are performance expectations communicated?*
- *What rewards and/or consequences exist to encourage high-level performance? How are those communicated to academic advisors?*
- *How do performance expectations connect the unit's desired outcomes?*
- *In what ways are you given feedback about your performance?*
- *Describe your ability to achieve performance expectations that lead to student retention. What internal barriers get in the way of this performance?*
- *Have you encountered barriers outside of your unit as you attempted to meet performance expectations? What has your director done to help mitigate these factors to support the expected performance?*

Are there things I have not asked you about that you hoped I would?

Action Research Team Post Project Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

The purpose of this interview is to gain information about your experience participating in an action research project. Your reflections will be confidential and be combined with responses from other action research team members to inform this study.

The final product for this study will be a dissertation that will be published as part of my doctoral program requirements. Your responses are very important to helping organizations benefit from furthering effective action research teams. To that end, I encourage you to speak openly about your opinion, experiences and to provide specific examples, when possible. You may not have responses to all of the questions, but just answer to the best of your ability. I expect that this interview will take between 45-60 minutes to complete. Now that you have been informed of purpose of my study, the intent of this interview, how the information from this interview will be used, and how the interview will be conducted, would you like to proceed with the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

How has the experience of working on an AR team affected your way of thinking about working as part of a group to create a solution for an organization?

- *Describe the most significant impact this project has had on you – professionally and/or personally.*

- *What have you learned about yourself during this action research project?*

- *How has your participation in this action research group impacted your way of thinking about improving employee performance changed during this project?*

- *What other significant observations have you made about this experience?*

We've come to the end of the interview. Thank you for your time. Again, do you have any questions or comments before we end?

Project Sponsor Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

The purpose of this interview is to gain information about your experience as the project sponsor for this research project. Your reflections will be confidential and be combined with other study participants.

The final product for this study will be a dissertation that will be published as part of my doctoral program requirements. Your responses are very important to helping organizations benefit from efforts to improve student success and retention rates. To that end, I encourage you to speak openly about your opinion, experiences and to provide specific examples, when possible. You may not have responses to all of the questions, but just answer to the best of your ability. I expect that this interview will take between 45-60 minutes to complete. Now that you have been informed of purpose of my study, the intent of this interview, how the information from this interview will be used, and how the interview will be conducted, would you like to proceed with the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

- *Can you state your name and position at Clayton State University?*
- *How long have you been in this role?*
- *Please describe your role in supporting student success and retention at Clayton State University.*
- *Please describe the role of academic advisors in supporting success and retention at Clayton State University.*
- *How have you seen this role evolve over the past three years?*
- *Taking into consideration your position, describe the actions academic advisors at Clayton State University take to support student retention and success.*
- *What things have been put in place to support academic advisors in achieving these actions?*
- *How has the changes in academic advisor performance impacted Clayton State University in terms of:*
    - *Student success and retention outcomes?*
    - *Knowledge about ways to achieve organizational strategic outcomes?*
    - *Approaches to problem-solving at Clayton State University*
- *How has this research impacted Clayton State University on a system level?*
    - *Culturally*
    - *Structurally*
    - *Decision-making*
- *How has this research project impacted your own learning or approach to work?*
- *Are there things I have not asked you about that you hoped I would?*

That concludes our interview. Thank you for your thoughtful and reflective answers.

PTP Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

The purpose of this interview is to gain information about your experience as the academic advisor, which this research project considers a pivotal talent position. Your reflections will be confidential and be combined with other study participants.

The final product for this study will be a dissertation that will be published as part of my doctoral program requirements. Your responses are very important to helping organizations benefit from efforts to improve student success and retention rates. To that end, I encourage you to speak openly about your opinion, experiences and to provide specific examples, when possible. You may not have responses to all of the questions, but just answer to the best of your ability. I expect that this interview will take between 45-60 minutes to complete. Now that you have been informed of purpose of my study, the intent of this interview, how the information from this interview will be used, and how the interview will be conducted, would you like to proceed with the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

- *Can you state your name and position at Clayton State University?*
- *How long have you been in this role?*
- *Please describe your role as an academic advisor at Clayton State University?*
- *How have you seen this role evolve over the past three years?*
- *Taking into consideration your position, describe the actions you take to support student retention and success.*
- *What things have been put in place to support you in achieving these actions?*
- *Can you describe your performance expectations?*
- *Do you feel like your performance expectations are clear?*
- *What rewards and/or consequences exist to encourage high-level performance to meet these expectations?*
    - *How are those communicated to you?*
- *How do your performance expectations connect the unit's expected outcomes?*
- *In what ways are you given feedback about your performance?*
- *Describe your ability to achieve performance expectations that leads to improved student retention rates.*
- *What internal barriers get in the way of this performance?*
- *Have you encountered barriers outside of our unit as you attempted to meet performance expectations?*
- *What has your supervisor done to help mitigate these barriers to support the expected performance?*
- *How have changes over the past three years impacted your own learning or approach to work?*

- *How have changes over the past three years impacted organizational learning or approaches to work?*
- *Are there things I have not asked you about that you hoped I would?*

That concludes our interview. Thank you for your thoughtful and reflective answers.

Supervisors of PTP Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

The purpose of this interview is to gain information about your experience as a supervisor of academic advisors, which this research project considers a pivotal talent position. Your reflections will be confidential and be combined with other study participants.

The final product for this study will be a dissertation that will be published as part of my doctoral program requirements. Your responses are very important to helping organizations benefit from efforts to improve student success and retention rates. To that end, I encourage you to speak openly about your opinion, experiences and to provide specific examples, when possible. You may not have responses to all of the questions, but just answer to the best of your ability. I expect that this interview will take between 45-60 minutes to complete. Now that you have been informed of purpose of my study, the intent of this interview, how the information from this interview will be used, and how the interview will be conducted, would you like to proceed with the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

- *Can you state your name and position at Clayton State University?*
- *How long have you been in this role?*
- *Please describe your role as a supervisor of academic advisors at Clayton State University?*
- *How have you seen this role evolve over the past three years?*
- *Taking into consideration your position, describe the actions you take to support student retention and success.*
- *What things have been put in place to support you in achieving these actions?*
- *What things have been put in place to support academic advisors in achieving these actions?*
- *Can you describe your performance expectations?*
- *Do you feel like your performance expectations are clear?*
- *Can you describe the performance expectations of academic advisors?*
- *Do you feel like their performance expectations are clear?*
- *What rewards and/or consequences exist to encourage high-level performance to meet these expectations?*
- *How are those communicated to you?*
- *How do your performance expectations connect the unit's expected outcomes?*
- *In what ways are you given feedback about your performance?*
- *Describe your ability to achieve performance expectations that leads to improved student retention rates.*
- *What internal barriers get in the way of this performance?*
- *Have you encountered barriers outside of our unit as you attempted to meet performance expectations?*
- *What has your supervisor done to help mitigate these barriers to support the expected performance?*
- *How have changes over the past three years impacted your own learning or approach to work?*
- *How have changes over the past three years impacted organizational learning or approaches to work?*
- *Are there things I have not asked you about that you hoped I would?*

That concludes our interview. Thank you for your thoughtful and reflective answers.

Student Interview Questions

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me.

The purpose of this interview is to gain information about your experience as a student at Clayton State University. Your reflections will be confidential and be combined with other study participants.

The final product for this study will be a dissertation that will be published as part of my doctoral program requirements. Your responses are very important to helping organizations benefit from efforts to improve student success and retention rates. To that end, I encourage you to speak openly about your opinion, experiences and to provide specific examples, when possible. You may not have responses to all of the questions, but just answer to the best of your ability. I expect that this interview will take between 45-60 minutes to complete. Now that you have been informed of purpose of my study, the intent of this interview, how the information from this interview will be used, and how the interview will be conducted, would you like to proceed with the interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

- *Can you state your name and major?*
- *Please describe your life experiences and ultimate decision to attend Clayton State University.*
- *Previous Schools (if applicable)*
- *What prevented you from achieving your graduation goal at your previous schools?*
- *How, if at all, are academic advisors at Clayton State University different than your previous institution?*
- *Life (kids, family, jobs)*
- *Were there ever times when you consider leaving Clayton State University? If so, what caused you to stay at Clayton State University?*
- *Please describe your academic advisor's role in supporting your success and retention at Clayton State University.*
- *Have you noticed a change in your academic advisor(s) over the past three years?*
- *If yes, please describe?*
- *Are there things I have not asked you about that you hoped I would?*

That concludes our interview. Thank you for your thoughtful and reflective answers.

APPENDIX E

REFLECTIVE MEMO FORMAT

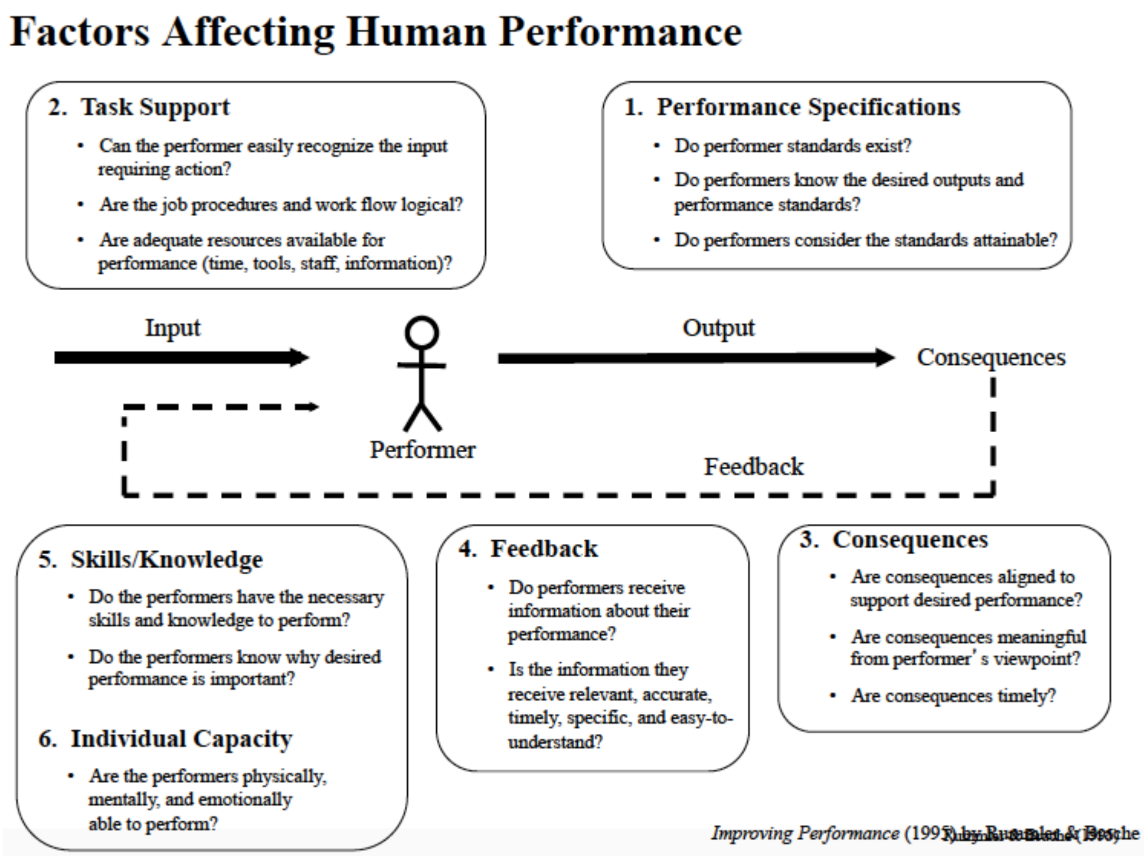
Reflection: Sent to committee as a *separate* document [5-10 pages]

In addition to CMS 2, craft a *Confidential Reflective Memo* that makes your reflections and insights about the process and impact of you AR and doctoral journey thus far. Analysis and evidence from your active journaling is encouraged and expected.

- How has the process of enacting change in the way Action Research requires affected you (personally, professionally, and as related to your identity as a "change leader")?
- What has gone well thus far as related to your capacity to facilitate change?
- What has been challenging? Why?
- What are you learning about yourself? What important insights or "lessons learned" have you identified to carry forward in your leadership practice?

APPENDIX F

RUMMLER AND BRACHE'S FACTORS IMPACTING HUMAN PERFORMANCE



APPENDIX G

FINDINGS AND CODING FROM BENCHMARKING INTERVIEWS

Supervisors

	Example	Performance Specifications	Task Support	Rewards/ Consequences	Feedback	Skills/ Knowledge	Individual Capacity
Supervisors	Clearly defined the role of an advisor with a promotion hierarchy-Advisor 1, Advisor 2, & Advisor 3			X		X	
	Clear Expectations (Customer service, civility, technology utilization)	X				X	
	Willingness to take initiative, Ability to understand servant leadership						X
	Not required to have the knowledge, but willingness to learn it (i.e., EXCEL)		X				X
	Performance Specifications Are Explained 3 Ways: (1) Job descriptions, (2) Reinforced by policy and procedures, (3) Meetings w/ supervisors	X			X		
	Goal Calendars: Weekly, Monthly	X	X	X			
	Advising logs to document work	X	X				

	Data driven ongoing performance evaluations that use advising logs and communications w/ students to create a 3 tiered grouping of performance (high performers, standard performers, and low performers)	X		X	X		
	Publicly sharing advising logs across the advising teams w/ one-on-one feedback on performance that can impact competiveness for promotions			X	X		
	Salary raises are guided by workbooks			X			
	Student survey of their experience after each appointment				X		
	Use of shadowing to help improve performance (peer-to-peer training and lunch and learns)		X			X	
	Top achievers get it and understand how to work smarter not harder. It's common for advisors to struggle with management of time. Low performers struggle with understanding why they have to continue to call or outreach.	X					X
	People need to understand themselves and determine if this is their career and what they						X

	want to do. Is this something they can be passionate about?						
	Utilization of college level cluster meetings to keep departments and faculty engaged				X		
	Setting a clear mission and vision for what were doing from the beginning that allowed us to change our advisors view of who are students actually are.	X				X	
	Advisor of the Day: Never turn a student away	X					
	Minimum number of appointments each day (10 is expectation, but a minimum of 6 per day)	X					
	Transparency of communication from the leadership team with the advisors				X		
	Allow exemplary advisors to meet with colleagues during site visits			X			

Exemplary Performers

	Example	Performance Specifications	Task Support	Rewards/ Consequences	Feedback	Skills/ Knowledge	Individual Capacity
Exemplary Academic Advisors	Strategic prioritization of your work list and ability to manage time (knowing who will respond when)		X				X
	Effectively address your full population	X					
	Self-management (how does the response let me know if what I'm communicating is being received, mange my time without being told on how to do it-manipulating the schedule to your advantage e.g., work the hardest first,)		X			X	X
	Go above beyond what they are asking for to what you know they need					X	X
	Understanding of the need for logs and deadlines	X					X
	Understanding, living, and demonstrating the mission and connecting how what an advisor is doing with connects to the mission	X				X	
	Clear understanding of expectations via goal calendar—every student, every term, in front of you	X	X	X	X		
	Accountability within the team when other team members aren't making their goals			X	X		

	Transparency with the goals by leadership team: this is where we are, this is where we need to be, and this is what we should be working on				X		
	Exemplary advisors are self-directed and are self-aware to manage their own schedules						X
	This is more than raw percentages, but rather a representation of larger questions (missed the opportunity for impact, value lost)						X
	Exemplary performers give feedback on the goals and can lead to changes to goals				X		
	Strategic Outreach toward a common goal but the goal calendar ensures we don't overlook a population	X	X				
	Promotions and performance raises are seen as a key reward – leads to feeling supported in career path			X			
	Exemplary performers understand that you have to manage to the bottom performers	X	X	X			
	Accountability through peer pressure-logs are available for public consumption			X	X		
	On-going feedback during the process for those that aren't meeting goals. Advisors trust those are held accountability and			X	X		

	have a limited amount of freedom, and limited access to additional opportunities						
	Embraces technology as a system-SSC, Dual-Monitors		X				
	Feel supported—voices are heard, changes to the orientation process, adding new sections of courses, investment of resources				X		