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How University Department Heads Have Encountered and Overcome Adaptive Challenges in Student Persistence: An Application of Critical Incident Technique

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HOW UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT HEADS HAVE ENCOUNTERED AND
OVERCOME ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES IN STUDENT PERSISTENCE: AN
APPLICATION OF CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE

DISSERTATION

Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Sciences in the College of Education at the
University of Kentucky

By
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Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

2016

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

HOW UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT HEADS HAVE ENCOUNTERED AND OVERCOME ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES IN STUDENT PERSISTENCE: AN APPLICATION OF CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE

In the United States, the average attrition rate from freshmen to sophomore year for a 4-year university is 21.7%. After freshmen year, the dropout rate raises to 41% before graduation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). As an administrative appointment, the department head is in a unique position to work with the university and college-level executives to lead faculty in better student persistence efforts. However scholarly inquiry on the relation of student persistence and department heads is lacking. Gmelch (2004) says “academic leaders may be the least studied and most misunderstood management position in the world” (p. 74).

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of the university department head position in relation to student persistence. A secondary purpose is to understand how each department head is able to adapt, or is currently adapting, to the challenges they identify. By identifying and learning from such challenges, this research will contribute to more intentional efforts for higher education leaders when dealing with student persistence.

A group of 20 department heads across multiple fields underwent an open-ended interview, resulting in 138 incidents of student persistence challenges and outcomes. The department heads were drawn from three universities and worked within one of five undergraduate colleges. This research uses Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to identify individual occurrences of department heads leading undergraduate student persistence efforts. The results are conceptualized through the lens of Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), where the complex nature of a department head’s role is related to the student persistence efforts.

KEYWORDS: Higher education, complexity leadership theory, critical incident technique, department head, student persistence

Kevin L. Flora

12/8/2016

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APPLICATION OF CRITICAL INCIDENT TECHNIQUE

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a report of a qualitative study examining the role of the university department head position in relation to student persistence. Due to the dearth of empirical literature found on the department head's experiences with student persistence, this study strives to fill a key gap in this field. This research uses Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to identify individual occurrences of department heads leading student persistence efforts. The results are conceptualized through the lens of Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), where the complex nature of a department head's role is related to the student persistence efforts.

Among other duties, department heads are charged with connecting the college and university mission with the department's goals. With student persistence being one of the most relevant ways to continue program and faculty funding (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011), the department head is uniquely positioned to emphasize such efforts (Schuh & Kuh, 2005). This chapter presents the problem under investigation and specifies the purpose and significance of the study. The chapter closes with the research questions and the design of the dissertation.

Statement of the Problem

More than 2,500 4-year higher education institutions are in operation throughout the United States, where nearly 21.8 million students attended college in the fall of 2013 – an increase of 6.5 million since the fall of 2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Of the first-time, full-time freshmen, only 72.9% of the 1.48 million were retained into their second year. Since 2006, the retention rate in public 4-year

institutions has climbed incrementally from 71% to 72.9% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). The 27.1% of freshmen who drop out make up approximately 400,000 individuals, or a loss of \$7 billion dollars (based on the reported \$17,474 average cost of a 4-year public university during the fall 2013 school year) in institutional funding from student tuition dollars (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). After freshmen year, the dropout rate raises to 41% before graduation (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). Cuseo (2010) found retention efforts are three to five times more cost efficient than recruiting. So when discussing the loss of tuition money and the attrition of students, increasing retention efforts must be at the forefront of the conversation.

Students come in contact with many individuals throughout their first year of college, but no one has more face-to-face contact with a student than faculty. Student-faculty interaction, inside and outside of class, is vital to the success of an individual student and institutional persistence efforts (Astin, 1993; Arendt, 2008; Bowman, 2010; Kerka, 1995; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Roueche & Roueche, 1994; Tinto, 1993, 2004, 2006; Umoh, Eddy, & Spaulding, 1994). When looking at the role faculty play in student persistence, “the research in this regard is quite clear, namely that the frequency and perceived worth of interaction with faculty outside the classroom is the single strongest predictor of student voluntary departure” (Tinto, 1990, p. 9). A more recent study has found high levels of debt play a large factor in a student leaving the university—especially for women (Dwyer, Hodson, & McCloud, 2013). Rudd (2012) further hypothesizes *student circumstances* (e.g. – lack of funding, health and family issues, time management issues, and other student entry characteristics) as a main reason for attrition.

However the results showed that of those students who dropped out, 2 out of 3 students left in their first year due to their perceived self-efficacy (the belief they could accomplish the course work), the teachers' classroom practices, or both (Rudd, 2012). Knowing that faculty play a role in student persistence and that there is not a clear understanding of why students drop out, this dissertation focuses on the department head to find *how* faculty are being led in student success efforts and *what* role each faculty member plays.

Faculty members, for the most part, are housed in departments led by department chairs or heads. Some universities have undergraduate units housed outside of the typical departmental structure with an individual overseeing the efforts of the faculty within freshmen colleges. In this dissertation, instructors are included in the role of a faculty member and are considered to be any person teaching, including teaching assistants, appointed within a department and under the purview of the a person serving in a department head position. Despite the variation in terminology across universities, this research will utilize *department head* to represent the department chair, department head, or a similar position within the departmental structure. As an administrative appointment, the department head is in a unique position to work with the university and college-level executives to lead faculty in student persistence efforts. Scholarly inquiry on the relation of student persistence and department heads is lacking. Gmelch (2004) says "academic leaders may be the least studied and most misunderstood management position in the world" (p. 74). With individuals having to adapt to the changes and challenges in higher education, the study of department head's role in student persistence is continuously taking new shape and form.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of the university department head position in relation to student persistence. A secondary purpose is to understand types of leadership department heads utilize when addressing student persistence challenges. At the time of this dissertation, the researcher has experienced a vast decrease in state funding allocations to public higher education institutions. For this reason, institutions are challenged with new budget models; including two of the three universities within this study. The responsibilities of the faculty have changed from teaching to increased research and grant writing (Melguizo, 2011), and with ongoing decreases in state funding, a focus on student persistence has become imperative. The evolving nature of higher education has brought us to an emphasis on student persistence for budgetary purposes and re-examining the roles and responsibilities of our university leaders.

Previous studies have examined the reasoning behind student attrition and proposed models and theories for increasing retention (Astin, 1991; Bean, 1980; Durkheim, 1961; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975), have proposed conditions for institutions to encourage student persistence (Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1999), and have made mention of the importance behind faculty-student interaction to increase student persistence (Astin, 1993; Arendt, 2008; Bowman, 2010; Kerka, 1995; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Roueche & Roueche, 1994; Tinto, 1993, 2004, 2006; Umoh, Eddy, & Spaulding, 1994). And despite the suggestions for increasing faculty-student interaction, few studies have inquired about the leadership role of a department head and how he or she can prime faculty to develop such relationships. There is little research identifying the challenges a department head has perceived when attempting to work toward increased rates of

student persistence. Similarly, the data on how department heads overcome their barriers to student persistence is relatively absent. This study is positioned to fill a gap in the field between how department heads can work top-down to increase student persistence.

Research Questions and Design

Two research questions drive this dissertation:

- a. What challenges have university department heads perceived in regard to undergraduate student persistence?
- b. What type of leadership do department heads employ when addressing student persistence barriers?

In social and behavioral sciences, quantitative research has led to laboratory-like results (Tashakkori & Teddue, 2003), not helping to further explain theory or delve into the “why” of results. This qualitative study implores department heads to reveal the challenges they have faced in relation to student persistence, discuss how they approached each challenge, and deliberate the outcome of their efforts through an open-ended interview. These personal interviews are needed to study “people’s understanding of the meaning in their lived world” (Kvale, 1996, p. 105).

Critical Incident Technique (CIT), a set of principles by which researchers can adapt to understand and extract information (Flanagan, 1954) will provide clarity to the methodology and data analysis. CIT is a qualitative tool designed to extract meaningful aspects of an event or experience from the interviewee (Ruben, 1993). Twenty university department heads underwent an interview with an open-ended interview protocol (see Appendix A). Through the department head’s recall of meaningful experiences, the

researcher easily identified and themed challenges, barriers, and trials – making CIT the preferred method for this study.

Potential limitations exist in this study. One potential weakness is related to the amount of time a faculty member has been working with students to reach the level of a department head. It may be difficult for the interviewee to recall each of the challenges and outcomes to their efforts in student persistence. Likewise, it may be difficult for the department head to differentiate their role as an administrative faculty from their previous position as a non-administrative faculty member in recalling their leadership role in the context of student persistence incidents. Also, student attrition tends to be individualized and interviewing 20 department heads will not capture all challenges related to a student's college success. Although themes will develop among the mentioned critical incidents, these themes and data are not all encompassing. Finally, because departments and universities vary with regard to financial models, structure, focus on student success, enrollment numbers, advisor to student ratios, and countless other factors, comparing the efforts of department heads in one discipline or institution with those in other disciplines or institutions leads to a sizable and irrational generalization. Thus the interpreted results are vague in nature and not intended for application within a specific university, department, or study demographic type.

Summary

This chapter commenced an introduction to the study overall, followed by a statement of the problem. Through understanding the background of the how student persistence and a department head's role intertwine, the purpose and significance of the study were discussed. The chapter concluded with an overview of the research questions

and design of the study. Chapter 2 begins by reviewing the literature on student attrition and terminology related to the field of understanding. Theorists in the realm of student attrition and persistence are overviewed to gain insight into the progression of thought processes of researchers through the years. The literature review continues into explaining the researched benefits of student persistence for students, institutions, and external constituents. Chapter 2 closes out with looking at the faculty member's role in student persistence, the obligations for a department head, and understanding how Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) can be used to better understand the research. Chapter 3 provides a review of CIT and its use in this dissertation and delivers in-depth details regarding the research design, setting, and sample. It also outlines the analysis procedures and the role of the researcher.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examines the unique experiences of department heads in United States four-year colleges to understand how their administrative appointment assists and leads students toward higher retention rates and increased graduation rates. Using an open-ended interview protocol (see Appendix A), 20 department heads across multiple fields were interviewed about their specific challenges and experiences regarding student persistence.

The literature review begins with the topic of student attrition, examining the knowledge base on barriers to graduation. The 1970s saw theorists and researchers begin to postulate solutions to increase retention rates in four-year colleges. Because researchers at that time utilized different terminology, a breakdown of common terms is presented. The main theories of William Spady (1970), Vincent Tinto (1975), John Bean (1980), and Alexander Astin (1991) are discussed, followed by an overview of the benefits to students, institutions and external constituents when student persistence is high. Finally, the literature review closes with a look at faculty and their role improving student success. The importance of the faculty role is defined; the student's viewpoint of faculty is reviewed, and the obligations surrounding the role of the department head are discussed. The chapter finishes with the research on Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) and its use in this study.

The researcher searched applicable academic databases (e.g., ERIC, Google Scholar) to locate empirical studies between 1955 (pre-student persistence theory) – 2016 (current) that had not already been identified. Search terms included student persistence,

student retention, student success, student continuation, department head, department chair, university department head, and university department chair. Outside of the contents within this literature review, no new articles were found to represent the connection between the department head and increasing rates of student persistence or how department heads overcome barriers to student persistence efforts.

Student Attrition

For today's high school junior in the United States, the process of deciding which college to attend, taking standardized tests, and completing the application process is long and difficult. Conversely, once in college, that same student's ability to withdraw from college typically only requires completion of a simple form. Dropping out of college, known as student attrition, is logically viewed as a deficit by higher education personnel. Nonetheless 41% of first-time, full-time college students at 4-year degree-granting institutions choose to leave before graduating (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). After hearing the statistics of attrition, most administrators only express one word – *why?* Why are the students leaving? Why can't we keep them around? Why does a student pay or borrow so much money and decide to quit? Why?

Student withdrawal is rarely due to any single reason. Students typically leave as a result of multiple factors (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009); most typically are a combination of financial, personal, and social reasons. But unsatisfactory academic experience remains a prominent issue for why students leave before graduation (Jones, 2008). After the tremendous growth of higher education in the United States after World War II, attrition of students was associated with their inability to adapt socially or lack of

ability to complete a degree. The idea of academic culture contributing to student attrition was not conceptualized until almost 30 years later (Tinto, 2006).

Prior to the 1970s, student attrition defined individuals who were “less able, less motivated, and less willing to defer the benefits that college graduation was believed to bestow” (Tinto, 2006, p. 2). As student attrition became a more focused subject in higher education and psychological research, early theorists (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975) began considering how the environment, or the institution, may be related to student attrition. As a result, focus on individual attrition as a subject matter began to transform into one of institutional retention. Throughout the late 1970s and late 1980s, research on retention focused on student involvement and engagement techniques for university systems and found improved retention to lie within first year experiences and faculty-student interactions (Tinto, 2006).

Retention, Continuation, and Persistence

A broadening of the research focus by higher education researchers from the topic of attrition to other possible factors helped grow the research base and develop other theories for consideration. The shift in focus from examining attrition to evaluating retention also brought new terminology, which now tends to be interchangeable throughout literature on the topic. Terms such as student retention, student continuation, and student persistence are essentially synonyms. Nonetheless, the terms do possess some distinctions. Definitions of the aforementioned terms are in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1

Definition of Terminology

Term	Definition
Retain ^a	To continue to hold or have
Persist ^b	To continue steadfastly or firmly in some state, purpose, course of action, or the like, especially in spite of opposition, remonstrance, etc.
Continue ^c	To remain in a particular state or capacity

^a(Retain, n.d.)

^b(Persist, n.d.)

^c(Continue, n.d.)

The common thread among the three definitions in Table 2.1 is the notion of a student continuing through each term toward the goal of graduation. Throughout this study the term of student *persistence* will mean as follows: students attempting to battle the environmental, personal, financial, and social opposition around them. By describing *persistence* in this way, the department head's experiences will have clarity in terms of context of the student interaction. The environmental, personal, financial, and social issues being the researched barriers to persistence in college, aligning the definition with the context of the dissertation will output more clarity in the analysis of data.

Understanding Student Persistence Theory

Since 1913, student dropout rates have been published through descriptive statistics at single institutions (Bean, 1980). It was not until 1970 that researchers began to understand student attrition and begin to question why so many students were not persisting through graduation. To theorize how to increase student persistence, researchers had to understand why students were leaving higher education (Bean, 1990). For this reason, the early research focused on student attrition.

Bean (1990) credits William Spady with the first fully developed theoretical model for student attrition. In Spady's (1970) initial publication regarding student success, he faults previous researchers in the field as lacking rigor, methodological support, and analytical intricacy. Spady desired to bring an interdisciplinary approach to the student attrition research and related student dropout to Durkheim's (1961) research on suicide. Durkheim divided suicide into three categories: anomic suicide, egoistic suicide, and altruistic suicide. Anomic suicide was said to be a measure of alienation, and egoistic suicide a measure of the decline of self-restraint. Altruistic suicide was a reflection of socially acceptable self-sacrifice (Durkheim, 1961).

In comparing Durkheim's (1961) views to student attrition, Spady (1970) focused mainly on the concept of self-alienation (or lack of social integration) and understood an individual's willingness to resign their life is comparable to a student's desire to withdraw academically. Spady (1970) explained attrition as being a lack of shared values or normative support. Spady defined *shared values* as the student's acceptance of the importance of academic work and *normative support* as the student having family, close friends, or significant others to support their academic persistence. He also formed the first statistical attrition model using multivariate statistics (Spady, 1970, 1971). This model examined the interaction "between student attributes (i.e., dispositions, interests, attitudes, and skills) and the influences, expectations, and demands imposed by various sources in the university environment" (Spady, 1970, p.2). Spady used multiple regression techniques to isolate variables that have a statistically significant effect on student attrition. Spady's sample group to test his model consisted of 683 students who entered the College of the University of Chicago as freshmen in September 1965. In

relation to student attrition, the outcome of the multiple regression model showed academic preparedness and academic performance to play a secondary role to one's attitude toward their learning environment, which is primarily shaped through friendships, outside contacts with faculty, and extracurricular activities (Spady, 1971).

Vincent Tinto refined Spady's research by further separating the social and academic factors, drawing out the importance of the student's background features, and emphasizing attrition as a process that happens over time as a student slowly makes the decision to withdraw (Tinto, 1975). Tinto (1993) classified this work as student development theory; also known as the student integration model. This theory posits that students transition through different stages toward maturity. The stages are influenced by social and academic integration. His theory became the focal point of researchers as the attributes in the longitudinal attrition process and the background factors were drawn out (Bean, 1990).

John Bean (1980) veered away from Spady and Tinto's theories based off of Durkheim's (1961) suicide research, and instead related student attrition to turnover in the working environment. Bean believed Spady and Tinto's theoretical models to be vague in their conclusions of student attrition. As an example, Bean (1980) explains Spady's (1970) definition of *normative support* to be multi-faceted rather than a single, identifiable attribute. Bean's casual model of student attrition states, "organizational determinants are expected to affect satisfaction, which in turn is expected to influence dropout" (Bean, 1980, p. 160). Bean soon expanded on the influences to include a more psychological approach. He suggested the student's resulting behavior to stay or leave college is a cycle of beliefs affecting attitudes, attitudes changing intentions, and

intentions enacting a behavior (Bean, 1983). So the student's belief about their experience at school leads to a certain attitude toward school. The *attitude* of whether or not they are enjoying their experience will affect the student's *intent* to leave or stay and will *result* in retention or attrition. Although the university has no control of external factors related to a student's intent to withdraw, the institution can work toward a stronger institutional environment that is more conducive to retention (Bean, 1983).

The mid-1980s brought a shift from researchers focusing on student *attrition* to student *retention* and *persistence*. Bean and Metzner (1985) continued to add to the causal model of student attrition by stating the most important support groups for traditional students are the faculty and their peers. Tinto (1993) would continue the emphasis on retention attributes. His student development theory explained that socially, students choose to involve themselves with programs such as Greek life, student organizations, clubs, service opportunities, or other events on campus or in the community. Likewise for academics, students can make a choice to attend tutoring sessions and utilize the various academic resources on campus. The lack or increase of integration determines the student's decision to stay or leave college (Tinto, 1993).

Another well-known theorist is Alexander Astin, known for input-environment-outcome model (Astin, 1991). According to this model, the outputs of an institution (degrees earned, number of graduates, etc.) should be assessed in terms of the environment (faculty, facilities, peers, courses, programs, values, and institutional goals) and the input (age, gender, major, student ability, etc.) (Astin, 1991). Astin's model was derived from a movement toward higher quality assessments and outcome measurements for post-secondary education during the late 1980s. Astin suggested universities take a

longitudinal approach to the casual connections between an institution's values and goals of student development and the actual output of the student. Once quality assessment practices were utilized, Astin believed institutions should use the outcome data as decision-making tools for future goals. These theorists provide a rich context by which researchers and professionals view and interpret student success and attrition.

Attributes of Retention Models

In the last several decades, researchers have tested the previously mentioned theories through both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Tinto (1999) and Thomas (2002) rationalized the research into retention models, providing suggestions to institutions for increased student persistence rates. Through his multiple studies in the field of student persistence, Tinto proposes six conditions that institutions should exhibit: (1) commitment to student success, (2) high expectations for students, (3) academic, financial, and social support, (4) performance monitoring and feedback, (5) academic and social involvement opportunities, and (6) a learning environment (Tinto, 1999). This outline of proposed university characteristics sparked other researchers to suggest similar institutional traits.

An expanded set of suggestions for universities to embody is noted only three years later. Thomas (2002) expanded upon Tinto's six conditions, suggesting institutions could encapsulate student success if they embarked on the following strategies: (1) academic preparedness of students for higher education course work, (2) great academic experience provided to the students, (3) institutional expectations and commitment, (4) academic and social integration, (5) financial and employment support, (6) family support and commitments, and (7) university support services (Thomas, 2002). Although

Tinto's (1999) model and Thomas's (2002) appear similar, Thomas emphasizes the student's environment to a greater extent by expanding the university's role in student success to the preparedness of students and outreach to the student's *family*.

Tinto (1990) agrees with the large influence the environment surrounding the student contains in relation to success. However, Tinto's student development theory posits the primary influence behind a student's sense of belongingness and desire to thrive inside the college community resides inside relationships between themselves and the faculty. The importance of the faculty-student relationship was mentioned as Tinto was presenting his research to college personnel at a conference in Maryland. He used the implementation of classroom activities as an example for his discussion:

This is not to say that classroom activities do not matter. Of course they do. They play an especially important role not only in student learning but also in the development of patterns of student-faculty contact beyond the classroom. This is the case because faculty classroom behavior serves to notify students of the availability of faculty for further contact outside the classroom. But it is that availability, the occurrence of contact, not its mere promise, that seems to underlie student retention. (Tinto, 1990, p. 10)

Much work goes into the creation and maintenance of an environment that fosters student success, but the return on student persistence is a great reward to the student, the institution, and other outside entities.

Benefits of Student Persistence

The success of a student does not rely on their persistence in academics. There are extraneous circumstances, such as needing to financially provide for the family, an injury, or other conditions where a student would be more successful by quitting their current academic path. Student persistence is not about overcoming the debilitating life circumstances that need to be addressed. Rather, student persistence regards the fight

against opposition that can be continually improved or fixed. The student, the institution, and outside stakeholders have the potential to benefit from each student persisting through graduation.

Benefits to the Student

The student is the primary beneficiary of graduating college with a degree. The student is the responsible party for investing in their future by paying an extraordinary amount, by most people's standards, for a degree without a guarantee of a career or job. Thus it is reasonable for students to question the return on investment (ROI) for attending and completing college (Robbins, 2006). Parents' concerns tend to surround the investment they have provided their child up until the point of college and the assurance of success when handing their child off to a college, while the student's concern revolves around the career placement opportunities upon graduation if they have to pay for college themselves (Karen, 2002; Mathews, 1998; McDonough, 1997; Robbins, 2006). To answer such a question is two-fold: the earning potential over a lifetime and the employment potential after graduation.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes end-of-year reports on earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment. For the year 2013, students earning a bachelor's degree can increase their earning potential over non-post secondary degree holders by \$331 per week (\$17,212 per year) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Obtaining a bachelor's degree also decreases an individual's potential unemployment likelihood by 1.4%. Table 2.2 describes the data for each attained educational level.

Table 2.2

2013 Unemployment Rate and Median Weekly Earnings per Educational Attainment

Education attained	Unemployment rate (Percent)	Median weekly earnings
Doctoral degree	2.2	\$1,623
Professional degree	2.3	\$1,714
Master's degree	3.4	\$1,329
Bachelor's degree	4.0	\$1,108
Associate's degree	5.4	\$777
Some college, no degree	7.0	\$727
High school diploma	7.5	\$651
Less than a high school diploma	11.0	\$472

Note. Table 2.2 adapted from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

The 2013 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data on educational attainment provides a clear sense of the benefits to students who graduate. The earning potential difference in an associate's degree and bachelor's degree is a large jump in a graduate's potential to be successful in today's culture. This data offers a strong correlational argument, however the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics does not show causality between one's educational attachment level and financial earnings.

An earlier study attempted to find a rough estimate on the exact ROI of attending college. Comparing the 2005 average out-of-pocket costs for attaining a bachelor's degree with the added value of earned income over a lifetime, the study found a college graduate obtains a 27% ROI (Kantrowitz, 2007). Considering other forms of investments, the college ROI is a rewarding and logical plan. The best personal savings

account will only earn 1.05% of the original investment in 2015 (Quinn, 2015). Hanlon (2014) found the average for all mutual fund investors is at 2.6% net annual return for a 10-year time period. Other investment comparisons include owning a home in the United States at -2.2% average return, 4.4% average return on bonds, and 7.8% average return with stocks (“Was my home a good investment”, 2015). Comparatively, the ROI for a college degree is high, but one must be cautious when interpreting Kantrowitz’s (2007) finding. Kantrowitz’s (2007) ROI formula only accounts for the *average* cost of college in the United States and the *average* earned income over a lifetime of a college graduate. More questions on the return on investment exist than do answers, but the previously mentioned studies show that having a bachelor’s degree increases the earning potential over an individual who has not graduated college.

Benefits to the Institution

Institutional factors related to persistence are typically associated with the institution’s budget and funding structures. Although these funding structures are not evident to outsiders, the administration within any college or university understands the benefit of student persistence and the deficit that comes from student attrition. Financial models differ by institution and by state, making the institutional financial benefits of student persistence discussion difficult to generalize. In some states, a public 4-year institution receives more state funding per student or per graduate, whereas the private institution might rely more heavily on higher tuition rates or a large endowment to maintain a successful learning environment. For instance, the state of Tennessee enacted a performance-funding policy on retention and six-year graduation rates at public four-year institutions. Sanford and Hunter (2011) examined Tennessee’s public four-year

institutions between 1995-2009 and found the performance funding did not result in changes in the metrics over the 15-year period. In 2005, the state of Tennessee doubled the performance funding and continued to experience no change in retention (Sanford & Hunter, 2011). Yet, student persistence remains a factor for institutional funding in various states. Regardless of the multiple potential benefits, every institution benefits from student persistence.

For an institution to operate, to employ faculty and staff, to build and maintain facilities, and to work toward higher quality, money is a requirement. Each institution varies on the percentage of total budget that comes from student tuition, however without tuition many budgets are cut. Cofer and Somers (2001) note current year subsidies are positively associated with persistence. Essentially, tuition income is required and each student lost to withdrawal presents a financial issue. In 2003, the University of St. Louis researched the institutional ROI its own student persistence efforts. They found the University of St. Louis to generate approximately \$500,000 in revenue for each 1% increase in first-year retention rate by the time the students graduate (Nicholl & Sutton, 2003).

Tinto (2006) noted that it takes more money to recruit a student than it does to retain a student. The more students an institution retains, the lower the expenses are for recruiting students to meet or exceed budgetary needs. Cuseo (2010) found retention efforts are three to five times more cost efficient than recruiting. One early student retention theorist stated the obvious when he said a student who is retained for four years generates the same income as four new students who leave after one year (Bean & Hossler, 1990).

The institutions accrue benefits, organizationally, when students earn degrees. Schuh (2005) noted that students who do not graduate from an institution are less likely to recommend that institution to other students or become a donor to that institution later in life. A graduate who had a good experience and was engaged in a learning environment is more likely to become a lifelong ambassador and recruiter for the institution. Just as important as peer recruitment and alumni donations is the reputation of the institution's graduate rates. "Graduation rates are institutional attributes as much as they are institutional accomplishment and are largely a function of institutional and student profile" (Kalsbeek, 2013, p. 6).

Benefits to Other Stakeholders

Barring a few well-known exceptions, such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, not dropping out of college proves to be beneficial. From a parent's pride to presidential candidacy, stakeholders outside of the student and the institution reap the rewards of graduates from higher education. Elam, Stratton, and Gibson (2007) write that the parents of today's millennial students are becoming more involved in their child's educational success. "Parents may serve as advisors and active advocates for their children – initiating interactions with educational faculty, staff, and administrators" (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007, p.22). Millennial parent research seems to suggest that the parent becomes not only an advocate to student persistence, but also a beneficiary upon graduation. In a more specific example, 2016 conservative presidential candidate Ben Carson wrote about his experience in higher education in his book *Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story*. Carson's mother was unable to read, but continued to encourage and push him and his brother toward a stronger educational foundation (Carson &

Murphey, 1996). Through his mother's support, overcoming all opposition, and environmental resistance, the persistence through graduation and pursuit of even higher educational goals has offered a highly motivated individual to be in the running for the leader of the free country. Despite political preferences, the ascension to the presidency through higher education, rather than through the traditional political ladder, provides support for the importance of such an experience and validates the benefit of persistence through graduation.

Further research recognizes the loan companies as a beneficiary to student persistence. Volkwein and Cabrera (1998) found that students who do not graduate are more than five times more likely to default on their college loans than those who graduate. Thus graduating and increased employment rates evidence a student who will pay the loan back with interest to the lending company. The graduating student who does not default on his or her loans is more likely to be employed, has increased earning potential based on their education, has an opportunity to enter the housing market, the economy through spending habits, public businesses through trading and investing, and multiple other facets of life. It is difficult to measure the graduate's benefits to society, however it is apparent that persistence outweighs attrition.

The Impact of Faculty on Student Persistence

Up to this point, this review of literature has examined the historical student attrition studies, defined the multiple terms in the field, delved into theorists and their postulations, and discussed the many beneficiaries to student persistence. With this understanding of the importance of student persistence, the following section examines

the faculty-student relationship and focuses on the department head position as it relates to student persistence.

The student-faculty interaction, inside and outside of class, is vital to the success of an individual student and institutional persistence efforts (Arendt, 2008; Astin, 1993; Bowman, 2010; Kerka, 1995; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Roueche & Roueche, 1994; Tinto, 1993, 2004, 2006; Umoh, Eddy, & Spaulding, 1994). The definition of persistence mentions “to continue steadfastly... in spite of opposition” (Persist, n.d.). Opposition can set in during the shift in social atmosphere from the student’s previous environment to the college campus. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) found that students who transition from high school to college often experience anxiety, low self-esteem, personal and emotional problems, depression, somatic distress, and global psychological distress.

A student’s life during the first semester of college is occupied by forming a new social structure, with friends and activities, adjusting to new living conditions, and going to class. Aside from the student’s peer group or the housing staff, the faculty member will most likely have the greatest opportunity to interact with the first-year student. The faculty member is the only other individual, outside of the student themselves, to know the grade, attendance, participation, engagement, and many other factors related to the individual student. With such knowledge, that allows the faculty member to be a first and primary point of contact for intervention with the student.

Faculty have a responsibility to provide a setting that facilitates students’ engagement and learning and gets students to participate in activities that lead to success in the classroom (Kuh, 2003). With the faculty member taking initiative in academic interventions, the student is able to voice issues outside of the academic setting that are

contributing the academic problems. Facing opposition is made easier on a young adult with the guidance and listening ear of the faculty member who may be able to empathize with the student issue or know how to quickly advise the student on settling the problem. Each student is unique and transitions to college with their own social, academic, financial, and personal issues. The department head can exemplify student persistence efforts by simply inspiring the faculty to be aware of student concerns and encourage more individual conversations with students.

Kuh (2003) suggested ways faculty can be more proactive in student success. One way to increase learning is to make course assignments smaller in length so the faculty can better engage each student with feedback and work directly on improved quality of fewer tasks. Another suggestion is for faculty to set higher expectations for students within each assignment and classroom activity, rather than allowing average performance to be what is needed (Kuh, 2003). While allowing students to assist with research projects and having casual interactions outside of class with students is a great relationship builder, Kuh (2003) suggested faculty should be more intentional with student interactions and prioritize giving feedback, discussing grades and assignments, and conversing about academic ideas. By increasing informal interactions with faculty members, the student is more likely to thrive academically, and expand their intellectual and personal development than a student who does not experience such relationships with faculty (Pascarella, 1980). While the suggestions are not necessarily incorrect in their assumptions, faculty are not pressured to increase their student success efforts. The expectations on increased faculty awareness of student success do not meet the reality of the faculty position. Boyer (1990) discussed how the expectations of faculty members

over the years have gone from teaching to service and then research. Institutional expectations are also what drive promotions and higher pay, thus driving the faculty motivation.

Faculty-Student Interactions

In a world of smartphones, social media, and backchannel conversations, the faculty-student relationship is easy to bypass for both the student and the faculty member throughout college. Students who maintain continuous informal contact with faculty tend to persist in college at higher rates than their peers without such relationships (Pascarella, 1980). A student does not only benefit educationally through a strong relationship with the faculty, but can continue the relationship into internship placement, research projects, and higher-level intellectual activities that can develop the student on a professional level (Kuh & Hu, 2001).

Engagement between faculty and students is important for academic persistence. By broadening the scope of the faculty-student relationship outside strict academics, the faculty member is contributing to the overall development of the young adult. Researchers found “general cognitive growth during college is fostered not just by course work and academic involvement, but also by social and intellectual interactions with peers and faculty” (Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, Zusman, Inman, & Desler, 1993, p. 219). Faculty are the driving force behind starting and maintaining these interactions with students. One faculty interaction can reframe the social and academic landscape for a student and result in greater persistence. The research on student persistence noted the more contacts the students have with faculty in and out of the classroom, the greater the student satisfaction and the likelihood they will persist to graduation (Astin,

1993; Arendt, 2008; Bowman, 2010; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 2004, 2006).

Lumpkin (2004) noted an important role of a department head is to model student-faculty interactions and to create a mentor-like environment through celebrating student accomplishments. Through student-faculty interactions and relationships, researchers have found the outcome to be increased student satisfaction, retention, and graduation rates (Arendt, 2008; Astin, 1993; Bowman, 2010; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 2004, 2006).

Role of the Department Head as Leader

Gmelch (2004) noted “academic leaders may be the least studied and most misunderstood management position in the world (p. 74). Nonetheless, 50,000 professionals across America hold this misunderstood position and one in five turn over each year (Gmelch & Miskin, 2010). Carroll and Wolverson (2004) reported 80% of university decisions are made at the department level, yet only 3% of these chairs receive training in leadership (Gmelch, Reason, Schuh, & Shelley, 2002). Over a decade later, Gmelch, Ward, Hirsch, and Roberts (2016) found that 33% of department heads received training, but the research does not mention any training specific on student persistence. On the whole, only 34% of those trained believed the training to adequately prepare them for the role. There exists a need for research on the position of the department head, and in particular its relation to student persistence.

The governance and organizational chart of a department do not typically concern the student. “From a student perspective, a professor is a professor” (Hecht, 2004, p. 30). But the responsibilities of a department head stretch beyond the duties of a typical

professor. When looking at student persistence and the faculty role, “the research in this regard is quite clear, namely that the frequency and perceived worth of interaction with faculty outside the classroom is the single strongest predictor of student voluntary departure” (Tinto, 1990, p. 9). Many faculty may wait on the student to make the first approach, however Bryson and Hand (2007) say the engagement is not the sole responsibility of the student as it concerns the students interacting with the learning environment.

The role of a department head is unique to higher education in that the job is split between administration and traditional faculty duties. The culture of higher education expects newly minted assistant professors, with their Ph.D.s and Ed.D.s, to be experts in the narrow field of their training. Later and without additional training, usually after promotion and tenure, these disciplinary experts are asked to take on administrative positions and become a generalist in their understanding and leadership. While some department heads may receive training after acquiring the position, what is asked of faculty administrators is typically contrary to how they are trained (Gmelch, 2004).

Setting the student concerns aside and focusing on the department head’s role in student success, research provides many great suggestions. Gmelch (2004) mentions three essential pieces of influence each department head needs, (1) a clear grasp of what the roles and responsibilities are for an academic leader; (2) the skills that are necessary to achieve the results with staff, students, faculty, and other administrators; and (3) accurate reflection to learn from past experiences and work toward better leadership. A more recent study showed increased training, more experience, and a clear job description would increase department head competency (Gmelch et al., 2016). These

leadership influences enable natural relationships to form between faculty and students and give the learning environment a culture of development.

The department head's responsibilities are seemingly never-ending. One responsibility is to lead the other faculty and staff members in how situations, from admissions to conduct issues, are handled (Hecht, 2004). Another aspect of a department head's responsibilities resides in positioning the department in a place relevant to the mission and vision of the college and university. To do this, Lumpkin (2004) states the department head must have multiple conversations with other department heads, colleagues, and the dean regarding student recruitment and retention, among other topics. On these grounds, we can argue that student success should be a central point of conversation and thought for the department head.

Hancock (2007) surveyed department heads on their thoughts related to the amount of time each job responsibility category consumes ($%J$) and the percentage of time the responsibilities in a particular category could be done by a non-faculty individual ($%M$). Hancock then multiplied the two percentages to output the percentage of time that could be saved ($\$R$). The seven categories in Table 2.3 were taken from Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch, & Tucker (1999). In the category of *student matters*, the respondents believed it took up almost 11% of their job and that almost 50% could be done by non-faculty personnel, including handling student complaints and connecting students with college and university resources. The remaining categories and percentages are in Table 2.3.

Table 2.3

Department Head Functional Breakdown

Function	%M	%J	%R
Department governance and office management	85.5	25.6	21.9
Curriculum and program development	45.0	14.2	6.4
Faculty matters	62.5	21.7	13.6
Student matters	49.5	10.5	5.2
Financial and facilities management	90.0	15.2	13.7
Data management	81.5	5.6	4.6
Institutional support	82.5	7.2	5.9
Total job time recoverable %			71.3

Note. %M, percent of time-demands within category that could be done by non-faculty (0-100 percent); %J, relative time-demands of entire category (all categories sum to 100 percent); %R, percent of job time recoverable if the department head is relieved of duties assignable to non-faculty.

Hancock's (2007) survey to department heads found that nurturing students was among the top three most rewarding opportunities, along with mentoring junior faculty and influencing the vision and quality of the institution. Among the least rewarding responsibilities resided in student complaints. Hecht (2004) found students complain when multiple faculty have inconsistencies in grading policies, standards for conduct, and curriculum requirements. Hecht's (2004) findings help in understanding why department heads find student complaints less rewarding – because the complaints may force the department head into an administrative role where he or she will have to investigate the actions and policies of their peer and colleagues to satisfy the complaint.

The department head can nullify many student complaints by simply becoming

more knowledgeable about policies and procedures and ensuring the other faculty have the same information. Hecht (2004) also noted,

In order for the department to fulfill its responsibilities to students, you need to know the due dates for filing grades, the schedule for class registration, dates for dropping classes, and timetables for filing graduation requirements. Your task in regard to these items is to be sure that all department members are informed and that you arrange the agendas of faculty meetings to handle required business to meet institutional schedules. (Hecht, 2004, p. 39)

While working with faculty, the implementation of structure and being a resource for recruitment, retention, and graduation fall directly upon the department head's shoulders as well. Exemplifying instructional leadership in the classroom includes handling student concerns professionally, treating the student respectfully, and ensuring flexibility through class scheduling (Lumpkin, 2004).

Regarding student persistence, Lumpkin (2004) echoes Gmelch (2004) and Hecht (2004) in suggesting tasks for the department head. The department head is a faculty-administrator and should model equitable interactions with students, celebrate student accomplishments to develop a mentor-like culture, support graduate and faculty interests by seeking out and securing grants, and keep departmental courses relevant and innovative (Lumpkin, 2004). Since the year 2004, the research concerning a department head and student persistence is extremely limited.

Theoretical / Conceptual Framework

The previously discussed attrition and retention theories aid in understanding the components related to the student. For this dissertation, the theoretical focus relates to the leadership of the department head. For this reason, the study uses Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007) to put in context the leadership approach of department heads with student persistence. The term *complex* is

defined as being “composed of many interconnected parts” (Complex, n.d.). On these grounds we can say that complexity leadership is the concept of leadership being composed of many interconnected parts. Complexity in an organization and an individual’s life is said to produce change in thought processes and decision-making, meeting structure, overall operations, leadership and personnel, as well as any other fragment of the organization (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey (2008) describe leadership this way:

In CLT, we recognize three broad types of leadership: (1) leadership grounded in traditional, bureaucratic notions of hierarchy, alignment and control (i.e., administrative leadership); (2) leadership that *structures* and *enables* conditions such that complex adaptive systems are able to optimally address creative problem solving, adaptability, and learning (referring to what we call, enabling leadership); and (3) leadership as a *generative dynamic* that underlies emergent change activities (what we will call, adaptive leadership). (p. 187)

It is reported that only 33% of department heads received formal leadership training in 2016 (Gmelch et al., 2016); which is a slight increase from 3% over a decade ago (Gmelch et al., 2002; Gmelch, 2004). While making approximately 80% of the university decisions, student success and other responsibilities in each department are not being given the optimal support from the top of the hierarchical department structure (Gmelch, 2015). Leadership training for department heads can be beneficial to more clearly articulate institutional goals, impart knowledge on current best practices across multiple job duties, and/or learn from other’s situations. Instead of suggesting more financial resources to increase department head training for student success, CLT theorizes a natural type of leadership development through *adaptive challenges*. An adaptive challenge is described as a trial that is difficult to identify but requires change and experimentation to produce a solution (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Essentially, leaders

undergo a natural form of training through experience in their field, by facing a challenge and finding a solution.

In the higher education organization, leadership type and development is filtered through the CLT for clearer understanding of the connection between adaptive challenges and leadership development in complex organizations. The existing leadership theory has negated the complex and dynamic organizational structure in a leader's development (Sims, 2009). This study makes use of CLT to ascertain how adaptive challenges grow a leader throughout the career in higher education and to understand what type of leadership department heads employ when addressing student persistence barriers.

Summary

Complexity Leadership Theory is used to frame the understanding of department head leadership techniques related to student success. Through analyzing multiple adaptive challenges faced by each department head in the sample, this study shows how current and future department heads develop professionally by their individual experiences. The final outcome of this study outlines the successful accounts of student persistence and how the department head organizes and leads their department for better retention and graduation rates.

Understanding student attrition and previous research concerning college dropouts provided a strong foundation for the last forty years of research. In the 1970s, the research shifted from a focus on attrition to a focus on persistence. Despite many synonymic terms, *persistence* offers the extra understanding of an individual having to face opposition to reach the goal. College-age students facing such opposition require the high quality assistance of their home department, led by a department head. The over

50,000 department heads across the United States each have unique and untold stories of how they have adapted their leadership to challenges faced. This research tells the stories, analyzes across adaptive challenges, and outputs actionable techniques and suggestions for today's departmental leaders.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to identify challenges that university department heads across multiple disciplines encounter in relation to student persistence. Based on the previous chapter's rationale, *persistence* is a student's attempt to battle the environmental, personal, financial, and social opposition around them. The department head, as part faculty and part administrator, should model equitable interactions with students and celebrate student accomplishments to develop a mentor-like culture (Lumpkin, 2004). This chapter presents the research design, the setting and context of the research, and the research sample with the instruments and procedures. The chapter will end with a description of the analytic strategies used.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study address the experiences and challenges of department heads in relation to student persistence. The two research questions are:

- a. What challenges have university department heads perceived in regard to undergraduate student persistence?
- b. What type of leadership do department heads employ when addressing student persistence barriers?

To adequately address the research questions, an open-ended interview protocol (see Appendix A) was developed. In keeping with university requirements, the cover letter and the interview protocol were submitted to the Institutional Review Board for approval. While the main focus of the research is on inductively producing themes to better understand the challenges department heads encounter when supporting students to

persist in their department, the research additionally focuses on how department heads adapted, or are adapting, to the challenges. Therefore, the interview protocol allowed for the information retrieval of the lived experiences as well as the participants' conceptualizations of how the lived experiences result in advice and suggestions that can be shared. Capturing the lived experience is based on the phenomenological approach, which can be described as both a research method and a way of thinking (Burns & Grove, 2005). Within phenomenology, individuals can know their world and selves only through their perceptions (Speziale & Carpenter, 2003). The data for this research are multiple individual experiences, and the analysis draws the different experiences into fewer objective themes.

Critical Incident Technique

This study uses the critical incident technique (CIT) to address the research questions. The CIT is designed to investigate meaningful events of the subject participants (Symon & Cassell, 1998). John Flanagan (1954) developed the CIT, first applying it in the subject area of industrial technology, using interviews and observations to explore effective pilot performance during World War II. Flanagan and his team of social researchers had previously employed the techniques of the CIT in the Aviation Psychology Program and also at the University of Pittsburg with dentistry, business, higher education, and medicine (Flanagan, 1954). It was not until 1954 that Flanagan named the technique and wrote guidelines for methodological implementation. The use of the CIT has since stretched to many other content concentrations (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Fivars & Fitzpatrick, 2001).

The logistical premise behind the technique is drawing out personal accounts and

experiences from the research subject and evaluating the outcome of each critical incident. Flanagan (1954) defined critical incidents as:

Any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects. (p. 327)

Collecting the critical incidents can be done a number of ways. Although research has traditionally depicted the CIT to fall within the qualitative paradigm of research methods, some studies have implemented the technique within quantitative approaches.

The CIT “does not consist of a single set of rules governing such data collection. Rather it should be thought of as a flexible set of principles that must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand” (Flanagan, 1954, p. 335). The CIT is a qualitative tool designed to extract meaningful aspects of an event or experience from the interviewee (Ruben, 1993). For this dissertation, the CIT was used as the practice by which the study is designed and data were collected. Flanagan (1954) outlined the steps originally employed in the CIT:

1. Identify the general aims of the activity under study by providing a functional description from which to judge the effectiveness or success of the activity.
2. Develop a plan for how to gather data or “incidents,” including specifications for ensuring consistent data collection processes.
3. Collect the data by observation, interview, group interview, questionnaire, or written records.
4. Analyze the data by identifying a frame of reference, creating categories, and identifying general behaviors.

5. Interpret and report the findings, with care to review and identify judgments made in both collecting and analyzing the data.

Critical Incident Technique Steps for This Study

Flanagan's (1954) steps originally employed in the CIT are outlined below, with a description of how this dissertation will address each stage. Following the description of each step is a discussion on how the data credibility process and the open-ended interview protocol aid in reporting findings.

Step 1: Identify the General Aims

The researcher made a study of how department heads' efforts are related to student persistence. The researcher believes that because of their position as both administrator and faculty member, the department heads are especially well qualified to tell how they lead other faculty and work individually to help students persist. The purpose of this study is to identify incidents, or unique experiences, each department head has perceived in relation to student persistence efforts.

Step 2: Identify Events to be Collected

The events being collected are the experiences and interactions that a department head has with students. The questions on the interview protocol are written to prompt the participant to recall individual interactions with students and also discuss more general experiences in regard to student persistence (e.g., departmental events or initiatives to help students persist). Three assumptions underlie the critical incidents being gathered for the dissertation. The first assumption is that the department head has dealt with students and has incidents to discuss. Second, the researcher assumes that the participant can accurately recall both positive and negative incidents related to student persistence.

Finally, the researcher assumes the department head is aware of the outcome or personal response to the incident.

Step 3: Collect the Data

This study elicited the use of an open-ended interview protocol for collecting the critical incident data. Flanagan (1954) noted that aside from interviews, observations are useful when evaluating behaviors that are explicit enough to be observable. Since the general aim of this dissertation does not focus on observing the behavior of department heads, this data collection method was not used.

Step 4: Analyze the Data

This dissertation made use of an inductive approach to the data analysis, allowing categories to emerge from the data through an iterative process (Creswell, 2007). The number of incidents recorded is significantly more important than the number of participants (Flanagan, 1954). The interviews were coded based on the individual critical incidents. A code-and-retrieve process was used to analyze the data (Richards & Richards, 1994). In the code-and-retrieve analysis process, the pertinent incidents are assigned a code, and from the differences, commonalities, and patterns among the incidents, themes emerge for a clearer written explanation (Richards & Richards, 1994).

Step 5: Report the Findings

In accordance with the CIT process, the researcher first restated the issue being addressed through the dissertation with clarity and explained how the CIT contributed to the full examination of the problem. Definitions of each theme and further discussion about the analysis process were also considered. Finally, the analysis addressed the trustworthiness and credibility of the data.

The credibility of the data was checked in two ways. Both credibility check methods come from Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, and Maglio (2005) and their research conducted at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. First, an independent judge placed 25% of the critical incidents, randomly chosen, into the categories formed by the researcher. The independent judge was given the randomly selected incidents, along with the titles and descriptions of each category, and asked to place each incident in a specific category. The independent judge method is also consistent with Andersson and Nilsson's (1964) reliability checks. The second credibility check was with the calculation of the participation rate. Borgen and Amundson (1984) calculated participation rates by determining the number of participants who cited a specific incident and then dividing that number by the total number of participants. Flanagan (1954) suggested that an incident is an aim of the study by the greater number of independent observers who report the incident the same. A valid category participation rate is considered to be 25% (Borgen & Amundson, 1984).

An open-ended interview protocol (see Appendix A) was developed to collect the data. Flanagan (1954) suggested some features to include in the protocol to improve the quantity and quality of data collected. This includes:

- Beginning the interview with a reflection of a positive event or experience (Flanagan [1954] noted a 10% increase in incidents from respondents), and
- Ending the interview with the respondent sharing experiences he or she believes will aid current and future department heads in relation to student persistence.

This parting piece of advice assisted the subjects in recalling more incidents (Flanagan, 1954). The researcher purposefully selected department heads from certain universities

that met a specific Carnegie classification and worked within one of five undergraduate colleges.

Research Sample

A purposeful sampling method was used to select the participants (Merriam, 1998). The sample included department heads in three universities within the eastern half of the United States that met the Carnegie classification system:

- Level: 4 year or above
- Control: Public
- Basic Classification: Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity
- Undergraduate Instructional Program: Professions plus arts and sciences, high graduate coexistence
- Graduate Instructional Program: Research Doctoral: Comprehensive program, with medical/veterinary school

Eleven universities fall within the aforementioned criteria. Only three universities were chosen based on the strongest commonalities, being close in proximity with one another and sharing an athletic conference status.

The three universities have a variety of colleges and departments. Five main colleges were found to be in common among the universities, comprising much of the undergraduate population in each institution: agriculture, arts and sciences, business, education, and engineering. The department heads across these colleges make up the sample set for this dissertation. Although there were departments similar in name and possibly structure, each individual department head was expected to employ different techniques for leading and directing the department; the student demographic makeup

was not the same, and areas of importance differed across departments. Results were categorized within colleges and across colleges to find the similarities and variances.

The recruitment procedures were built upon the researcher's previous experience with recruiting research participants, recruiting potential students into the university, contacting students enrolled in the university, and working with faculty for the last 4 years. The following process for recruiting research participants is based on the researcher's experience and current mainstream communication channels (i.e., telephone and email). An initial email was sent to each of the department heads to recruit them. If the individual did not respond within a week of the initial contact, the researcher called the listed office phone number. A third point of contact was through a final email giving the individual one last opportunity to participate.

Flanagan (1954) suggested using a range of 50–100 critical incidents rather than setting an approximate number of participants for the CIT. Based on the organization and questions within the interview protocol, it was anticipated that at least three critical incidents would be uncovered in each interview, with more incidents possibly arising from additional comments from the participant. Therefore, the study required approximately 20–30 participants to meet the needs of the CIT's suggested saturation point of 50–100 critical incidents (Flanagan, 1954). The ultimate goal was to experience saturation across content categories in data analysis (Radford, 2006). Saturation, also known in the CIT as exhaustiveness (Flanagan, 1954) or redundancy (Woolsey, 1986), is achieved when new categories stop emerging from the data.

Participants had the option, during or after the study, to withdraw their name and data from the research. Upon participants' agreement to participate in the dissertation

study, they received an email with the consent form and a link to schedule their interview. The researcher contacted participants via telephone for the interview and orally confirmed they read and agreed to the consent form.

Research Design

With approximately 41% of students who enter a 4-year, public college never graduating (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), more research is needed to understand the actions stakeholders in higher education are taking to promote persistence. Department heads offer an opportunity to evaluate how an administrative–faculty position can influence other administrators, other faculty, and students toward higher rates of student persistence. Evaluating the lived experiences of a department head is most adequately conducted through qualitative research.

The tasks, focus, and determination of department heads are unique to their individual institutions and colleges. By the very nature of the position, descriptive and inferential quantitative statistics are inappropriate for this research. In social and behavioral sciences, quantitative research has led to laboratory-like results (Tashakkori & Teddue, 2003) that do not help to further explain theory or delve into the why of outcome. Merriam (1988) said that qualitative research “is hypothesis-generation” rather than purposing to test a hypothesis (p. 3). The fields of higher education and educational leadership will benefit from this qualitative study by extracting department heads’ self-reported experiences and challenges through the CIT and linking the inductive analyses with complexity leadership theory (CLT).

Research Instrument and Procedures

In this qualitative dissertation, an open-ended interview protocol was used to interview the participants. This section will discuss the research instrument used to collect the data and how that instrument was reviewed, edited, and implemented. The section will end with an in-depth overview of the research procedures.

Instrument

The qualitative approach allows for an inductive style of data analysis, a focus on individual meaning, and an importance of reducing the complexity of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2009). The use of an open-ended interview protocol within qualitative research is intended to draw the participant's knowledge and experiences from each question asked to gain maximum quality data (Turner, 2010). McNamara (2009) suggested multiple recommendations for creating an interview protocol, including keeping the wording open-ended, having the questions be as neutral as possible, and asking only one question at a time. The interview protocol underwent expert review by three published faculty members within the field of student persistence. The first reviewer suggested the protocol be more specific so the research participants are clear regarding the subject matter and each question. Several questions were formatted to reflect more specificity in the protocol. The second reviewer suggested minor revisions to three of the questions on the protocol. These suggestions were taken into consideration when rewriting for specificity. The final reviewer recommended defining *student persistence* for the research participants, rather than allowing each participant to define the term. The protocol was reorganized to have the participants understand how

the researcher was defining *student persistence*, and then the remainder of the interview was based on that baseline definition.

Upon completion of the expert review and appropriately changing the interview protocol, a pilot test was conducted with two previous department heads at the researcher's university. Doing the pilot test assisted in identifying flaws or weaknesses within the interview design and allowed time for revisions prior to conducting the study (Kvale, 2007; Turner, 2010). Through the pilot test, one question was reworded for a more open-ended response, and both interviewees recognized that questions toward the end of the protocol might result in redundancy. The researcher decided to leave all the questions in the protocol because redundancy could help the participants offer more details, or the question could lead the participants to reflect on a new incident.

Procedures

Initial contact and ongoing communication with respondents took place via telephone or email. The interview was conducted through the use of a telephone and a handheld recording device connected to the researcher's telephone. The data was transcribed and analyzed to inductively locate themes related to a department head's experiences and challenges with student persistence. The inductive data analysis outcome was intended to understand the challenges department heads experience in student persistence.

The participants in the study were chosen based on a specific Carnegie classification. In combination with the Carnegie classification, each participant also had to be a department head inside a college of agriculture, arts and sciences, business, education, or engineering. Because the environment can influence the interactions under

study (Gremler, 2004), narrowing down the sample to a smaller group of individuals in similar environments assisted in acquiring more trustworthy data.

Each participant received a consent form and a link to schedule his or her interview through email. The participant was contacted via telephone for the interview and verbally confirmed having read and agreed to the consent form. Each interview took approximately 30–45 minutes, and the participant had the opportunity to review the interview transcript for accuracy. As a follow-up to completing the data collection, the participant received a letter of gratitude from the researcher.

Data Analysis

The transcripts of the interviews were coded for emergent category development. Charmaz (2014) stated that coding means “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data (p. 111). The coding process allows the researcher to begin taking subjective accounts from participants and develop themes—allowing for a more objective understanding of the research problem. Coding the data was a two-step process:(a) the initial phase, where the researcher identified each incident, and (b) the focused phase, where each significant or frequent initial code was used to organize the large amounts of data and synthesize the data into themes (Charmaz, 2014). The research questions for this dissertation address analyzing the data with emergent themes and also through the lens of CLT. “Theory-driven analysis does not preclude the analyst from uncovering emergent, data-driven themes, which may then be added to the analysis, and similarly data-driven analyses may generate theories to explain emergent structure” (Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2008, p. 139).

The critical incidents were viewed through the lens of CLT. Complexity in an organization and an individual's life produces a change in perspective and typically results in a more adaptive style of leadership (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). CLT frames how complexity shapes a leader within an organization. Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey (2008) described leadership this way:

In CLT, we recognize three broad types of leadership: (1) leadership grounded in traditional, bureaucratic notions of hierarchy, alignment and control (i.e., administrative leadership); (2) leadership that *structures* and *enables* conditions such that complex adaptive systems are able to optimally address creative problem solving, adaptability, and learning (referring to what we call, enabling leadership); and (3) leadership as a *generative dynamic* that underlies emergent change activities (what we will call, adaptive leadership). (p. 187)

When analyzing the data in this research, the three aforementioned types of leadership were used to connect CLT with the critical incidents. For example, an incident related to a department head giving another faculty member in his or her department the responsibility of student persistence programming would be considered administrative leadership. The researcher was able to deductively place each critical incident into the different types of CLT-recognized leadership styles for a better understanding of the data in terms of an existing theory.

In higher education organizations, leadership type and development can be filtered through CLT for clearer understanding of the connection between adaptive challenges and leadership development in complex organizations. Most existing leadership theories, such as trait theory, behavioral theory, contingency theory, and social exchange theory, have negated the complex and dynamic organizational structure in a leader's development (Hall, 2013; Sims, 2009). Instead, the previously mentioned leadership theories generally focus on the ability of leaders to use formal structures to

influence others and achieve goals and objectives (Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001). This study makes use of CLT to ascertain how adaptive challenges grow a leader throughout his or her career in higher education.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher was the sole investigator in this study. The researcher has 6 years' experience working in higher education, with 2 years' experience in student persistence. The researcher feels comfortable working with department heads and did not have difficulty establishing trust and rapport with the research participants. The researcher's role consisted of locating the participants, asking the interview questions, and analyzing the data.

A qualitative researcher has two roles: researcher as researcher and researcher as learner (Glesne, 1999). Along with being the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, the researcher applied his previous experience in qualitative research to find common patterns and emerging themes across the participants' accounts. Throughout the past decade, state-funding allocations to 4-year, public universities have decreased and the reliance upon other revenue streams such as student tuition dollars has increased. Department heads should be aware of the need to increase tuition revenue and leading their department in such efforts. The researcher's assumption was that department heads may be involved in student persistence efforts as a faculty member, but they are not intentionally leading their departments toward increased persistence rates. Although the researcher had this assumption, the open-ended interview protocol kept biases and assumptions from being present during the data collection.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand the challenges in improving student persistence perceived by department heads in three U.S. universities. These challenges were identified through 20 open-ended interviews guided by the practices of the CIT. This chapter presents a description of the sample, an analysis of the data, and validation of the qualitative data. After the definitions and analysis of each theme, the chapter ends with an application of the data within CLT, advice from the participants to future department heads, and the study's limitations. Two research questions drive this dissertation:

- a. What challenges have university department heads perceived in regard to undergraduate student persistence?
- b. What type of leadership do department heads employ when addressing student persistence barriers?

Description of the Sample

Twenty participants from three universities in the eastern United States comprised the sample. A purposeful sampling method was used to select the participants (Merriam, 1998). The sample included department heads from these three universities that met the following Carnegie classification system criteria:

- Level: 4 year or above
- Control: Public
- Basic Classification: Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity

- Undergraduate Instructional Program: Professions plus arts and sciences, high graduate coexistence
- Graduate Instructional Program: Research Doctoral: Comprehensive program, with medical/veterinary school

Eleven universities in the United States fall within the aforementioned criteria. Three universities were chosen based on the strongest commonalities within the Carnegie classification system, being close in proximity with one another, and sharing an athletic conference status.

Department heads were selected from five colleges which were in common across the three universities, comprising much of the undergraduate population in each institution: agriculture, arts and sciences, business, education, and engineering.

Department heads in these colleges comprised the sampling frame for this dissertation.

From this frame, 149 department heads were invited to participate in the study with the majority of critical incidents being mentioned by a single university's department heads.

With the exploratory nature of this study and focusing generally on the department head's role in student persistence, the researcher focused on perspectives from different individuals rather than ensuring an even distribution of individuals or critical incidents across the universities. Table 4.1 shows the number and percentage of critical incidents found across the universities.

Table 4.1

Number and Percentage of Critical Incidents by University

University	Number of Critical Incidents	Percentage of Critical Incidents
A	38	27.5%
B	87	63.0%
C	13	9.4%
Totals	138	99.9%

While the majority of the critical incidents were mentioned by a single university's department heads, the participants averaged 6.9 critical incidents each. Table 4.2 shows the breakdown of critical incidents for each participant.

Table 4.2

Total Number of Critical Incidents per Participant

Participant	Number of critical incidents
1	7
2	4
3	8
4	8
5	5
6	6
7	7
8	6
9	7
10	6
11	10
12	10
13	7
14	7
15	6
16	11
17	8
18	8
19	4
20	3
Totals	138

Table 4.3 shows the number and percentage of critical incidents by college.

Table 4.3

Number and Percentage of Critical Incidents by College

College	Number of critical incidents	% of critical incidents
Agriculture	36	26.1%
Arts & Sciences	53	38.4%
Business	14	10.1%
Education	28	20.3%
Engineering	7	5.1%
Totals	138	100%

Findings

One hundred forty-nine higher education department heads from three universities were invited to participate in the study. After an initial email, followed by a phone call for those who did not respond, and a final email for those who still had not responded, 47 individuals responded, giving a response rate of 31.5%. Of those invited to participate, 17 replied that they did not wish to take part in the study, and eight department heads replied that they did not have or teach undergraduates through their department. In total, 22 individuals agreed to participate in the study. Two of the 22 participants were unable to be reached upon three different attempts to contact, leaving the final number of participants at 20 individuals—a participation rate of 13.4%. Participants were interviewed using the interview guide found in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

Throughout the 20 interviews, transcriptions were completed and data analyzed. Flanagan (1954) suggested data analysis be done throughout the data collection process rather than at the conclusion. With a target of 50–100 unique for a research study using the CIT, data saturation could occur before a targeted number of participants are interviewed (Flanagan, 1954). This study's design called for 30 participants to fulfill the target of approximately 100 incidents. Ultimately, 138 critical incidents were identified through 20 participant interviews.

The transcribed data was imported into Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis tool, for coding purposes. Each interview was vetted for critical incidents (see Table 4.4 for the number of incidents identified for each participant). Once all 138 incidents were coded, a second round of data analysis took place. In this second round, each incident was considered for best fit into emerging categories. During this process it was discovered that many incidents were similar, thus resulting in the creation of overarching categories. Eleven categories, or themes, resulted from the 138 critical incidents found in the data. Of the 11 categories, two categories contained ambiguous critical incidents, meaning the incidents within each category could fit within the other category. For example, one category was entitled *student personal issues*, while another category was entitled *student financial issues*. Upon revisiting the critical incidents within each of these categories it was determined some incidents could be applied to either category. For instance, one department head described an incident in which a student was struggling to pay for college because his family was not supporting him. This incident could have been categorized as *financial* or *personal* depending on how the department

head interpreted the incident. Additionally, the outcome of the incident involved the department head providing the student both support and financial resources. For this, and other incidents like it, a single category of *personal and/or financial issues* was created.

For an incident to be valid within the study, a specific challenge had to be identified within the context of student success and an outcome described. Because data analysis coincided with the data collection, categories emerged throughout the interviews. Over time data saturation was reached once incidents were repeated. Because the CIT demands an outcome for each incident, the researcher used these outcomes to understand how a department head makes decisions and their respective leadership styles. Based on a department head's critical incident outcome, incidents were additionally coded as to whether the department head applied an administrative, enabling, or adaptive approach for the reported outcome. By examining the data yielded via the CIT through the lens of CLT, this study allows for a theoretical analysis of the data in addition to a simple enumeration of the emergent themes.

Qualitative research can be misconstrued if the data is subjectively viewed through the sole lens of a single researcher. This study used multiple validation measures to ensure the quality of both data collection and analysis. The initial transcriptions underwent a three-step process of aggregation: (a) initial labeling of critical incidents; (b) categorization of incidents; and (c) category quality checks based on the identified incidents. The next section details the initially proposed and research-suggested credibility checks.

Data Credibility

Two credibility checks were applied to the data (Butterfield et al., 2005; Andersson & Nilsson, 1964). First, an independent judge placed 25% of randomly chosen critical incidents into the categories formed by the researcher. The independent judge was given the randomly selected incidents, along with the titles and descriptions of each category, and asked to place each incident in a specific category. Within the 138 incidents, 35 (25%) were randomly chosen by placing each incident in a numbered row (138 rows) and then using an online random number generator tool to select 35 unique incidents. The independent judge matched the researcher's categories with 33 of the 35 incidents on the first round of categorization. Of the two incidents which did not match, the independent judge and the researcher discussed the reasoning for each categorization and came to a mutual agreement, ultimately categorizing both incidents where the researcher originally had them. After the second round of categorization by the independent judge, 25% of the randomly selected incidents matched the researcher's categorization. The independent judge was then given the description of each type of leadership within CLT and asked to categorize each of the 35 incidents into one of the three types of leadership. All 35 incidents matched the researcher's, providing a 100% match on the first round within the CLT and incident categorization round.

The second credibility check was a calculation of participation rates. Borgen and Amundson (1984) calculated participation rates by determining the number of participants who cited a specific incident and then dividing that number by the total number of participants. Flanagan (1954) suggested an incident is an aim of the study by the greater number of independent observers who report the incident the same. A valid

category participation rate is considered to be 25% (Borgen & Amundson, 1984). With the final 10 categories, a 25% or greater participation rate was achieved. Table 4.4 shows the participation rates for each category.

Table 4.4

Number and Percentage of Participants Within a Category

Category	Participants in category	% of participants in category
Lack of student preparation	5	25.0%
Need to remain contemporary in practices and content	9	45.0%
Academic student issues	9	45.0%
Data- and/or student-informed decision-making	9	45.0%
Desire to be proactive as department head	8	40.0%
Faculty reluctance	13	65.0%
University pressure	11	55.0%
Low enrollment	6	30.0%
Need for personnel and/or resources	7	35.0%
Personal and/or financial student issues	13	65.0%

Data categorization and validation allows for further analysis of the data by digging into the individual incidents within each category and answering the research questions for this study. To better understand the analysis and answers to the research questions, the next section defines each category for a clear understanding of the incidents within it.

Department Heads Perceptions of Student Persistence

This section describes the findings related to the first research question: *What challenges have university department heads perceived in regard to undergraduate student persistence?* Transcription and analysis of each interview was completed during the collection of data. Across 20 interviews, 138 unique critical incidents were extracted from the data and were then categorized and validated into 10 themes.

Definitions of Themes

The 10 distinct themes are: (a) *lack of student preparation*, (b) *need to remain contemporary in practices and content*, (c) *academic student issues*, (d) *data- and/or student-informed decision-making*, (e) *desire to be proactive as department head*, (f) *faculty reluctance*, (g) *university pressure*, (h) *low enrollment*, (i) *need for personnel and/or resources*, and (j) *personal and/or financial student issues*. Table 4.5 displays the total number of incidents found within each category.

Table 4.5

Total Number of Critical Incidents per Category

Category	Total number of critical incidents	% of critical incidents
Lack of student preparation	5	3.6%
Need to remain contemporary in practices and content	10	7.2%
Academic student issues	15	10.9%
Data- and/or student-informed decision-making	12	8.7%
Desire to be proactive as department head	19	13.8%
Faculty reluctance	24	17.4%
University pressure	14	10.1%
Low enrollment	7	5.1%
Need for personnel and/or resources	8	5.8%
Personal and/or financial student issues	24	17.4%
Totals	138	100.0%

The themes are defined as follows:

Lack of student preparation. Some students are either academically unprepared for their first semester of coursework or are personally not equipped to handle the emotional pressure of college.

Need to remain contemporary in practices and content. Faculty have a need to keep pace with their field's curriculum, assessments at the state and national levels, and resources and practices needed to stay modern when teaching current college-level students.

Academic student issues. Students experience an aspect of difficulty with their academic setting or content, while the faculty struggle with poor student attendance and related negative correlates to student academic success.

Data- and/or student-informed decision-making. Faculty and administration make decisions based on student interviews/suggestions, data sent from the university, and data derived within their own department and college.

Desire to be proactive as department head. The department head aspires to be proactive by getting students involved in department affairs, updating curricula to match the needs of the field of study, and supporting faculty interaction with students before problems arise.

Faculty reluctance. Faculty within a department purposely do not focus on student success and believe their position should not have an emphasis on such.

University pressure. The university administration, strategic plan, or budget determines the weight of importance on a department head's focus of student persistence.

Low enrollment. Programs within departments have a low student enrollment, causing the need for department heads to focus on recruiting and retention.

Need for personnel and/or resources. To achieve higher rates of student success, the department head identifies the need for more personnel or resources to assist with such direction.

Personal and/or financial student issues. Students are able to enter college and then run into issues with their finances or personal issues.

Presentation of the Themes

This section presents a description of the themes and the interconnected ideas found within the interviews. Participant quotes are included to provide a deeper description and to help authenticate the themes discovered.

Lack of student preparation. This theme relates to the idea that some students are academically unprepared for their initial semester of coursework or that they are personally not equipped to handle the emotional pressure of college. *Lack of student preparation* consists of 3.6% (5) of the total critical incidents. The likelihood of student success is dependent upon multiple variables, including the preparation students undergo prior to their higher education experience. Similar to a forthcoming category of *personal and/or financial issues*, *lack of student preparation* is a preexisting barrier to an undergraduate's opportunity to succeed. For example, one department head has been meeting individually with students who lack academic preparation in the hard sciences.

[Students from] Allen County [Public Schools] had Geometry and Algebra I, so they don't even know what trigonometry is. They don't know what calculus is. So, they're [the students], and then they've got a chemistry class, but they've not got an AP chemistry class. And they've got a biology class, but they've not got an AP biology class. So, if they're interested in medicine, they're almost doomed to start with, because what they're going to see the first day of chemistry and the first day of biology is all they've ever seen. And so from then on, it's a large amount of material. (Participant 17)

Two participants identified other areas of unpreparedness in addition to the academic rigor of university coursework. Participant 15 mentioned that students do not feel a sense of belongingness when they are academically behind their classmates. Another participant stated,

A lot of students have grown up in an environment where lots of things have been spoon-fed to them a little bit. So when they hit college, and it becomes more challenging, where more responsibility is put on them for their success, some of them struggle with that. (Participant 14)

Due to academic unpreparedness, department heads noted students feel they do not belong and have an increased responsibility.

Although universities, colleges, and departments have been putting programs and tutoring in place to address the absence of student preparation, two participants mentioned that students struggle with their writing. One said, “We’re finding that students don’t write as well, and that really hurts them” (Participant 16). Another mentioned, “Sometimes we face the issue that students are not really academically prepared ... especially with their writing and oral communication” (Participant 9).

Need to remain contemporary in practices and content. Portrayed by 7.2% (10) of the critical incidents, this theme relates to the challenge of remaining modern in both practices and teaching content from the department head's perspective. Almost two-thirds (63%) of department heads believe remaining current is a top stressor in their role (Gmelch et al., 2016). Department heads are continuously challenged to allocate their time and departmental resources toward outdated issues. The first identified concern is the department and, more specifically, individual program curricula and assessments. In dealing with accreditation bodies, state and national certifications, and various other outside constituents, demands are placed on each program and department to remain up-to-date in their curriculum. In relation to student persistence, these four participants who discussed updating curricula and looking at current assessments look past the success within college and look toward the success of their students upon entering the career field.

In a variation of the need to remain contemporary, unforeseen challenges arise in keeping up with program or field-specific changes. One participant detailed such an event:

Our newest challenge we have [is that] our profession has decided that instead of just bachelor's requirement to get the internship, they now have to have a master's as well before they can compete for the internship. So that's going to throw a monkey wrench in our programming ... I've started out by saying, "Remember, in the end, we're all going to the same place. In the end, we're providing our students with the education they need and the internship that they need to be able to be successful. That's the bottom line." How we get there, there's 100 different ways we could get there, and we've got it down to three. (Participant 17)

A similar incident is detailed by a department head who has to teach undergraduates differently than how she learned and practiced in the field. "I think one of the challenges now [in] recruiting some special education teachers is the role of the special educator in the schools has changed" (Participant 10).

Department heads also need to remain current in other areas, including the categories mentioned by two participants with the need to keep classroom technology, resources, and practices up-to-date and "incorporate the latest and greatest in the classroom" (Participant 3). Participant 18 implemented an opportunity for students to go to professional meetings at the regional, national, and international levels to continue gaining contemporary knowledge and relationships within the field. The final incident addressed the department head's desire to keep faculty and students under a uniform understanding of the expectations and standards in their field. This department head (Participant 18) created a dynamic professionalism document which everyone annually signs.

Academic student issues. This theme, consisting of 10.9% (15) of the total critical incidents, recounts the challenges a department head faces related to the *academic*

student issues they are presented. The critical incidents discussed by participants within this category fell within two dominant areas: difficult specific courses with large numbers of students and students struggling on standardized tests.

Seven incidents within this category dealt with students who have problems with a specific course. Although the challenge which existed for each participant was similar, the way each department head handled the students' difficulty varied. Outcomes within each incident included hiring upperclassmen to help tutor (Participant 11; Participant 15), having college-level advisors warn students of the course difficulty upon registration (Participant 7), and assigning different faculty to teach the course (Participant 4). Two of these incidents were handled in a more organizational way. The first incident noted students who were failing the first theory course in the program. To stay on track with the program plan, the department head added a trailing course, where the freshmen who failed in the fall semester could retake the course in the spring semester (Participant 8). The second incident took a different approach on the front end by increasing restrictions for getting into various math courses (Participant 2).

The second dominant area concerned students struggling with standardized tests. Participant 8's department employed a high stakes proficiency test that students were required to pass to graduate from the program. Even students who passed all coursework were not considered successful if they did not pass the department's proficiency test. This department head, who felt disdain for the test, successfully lobbied faculty to vote at a faculty meeting to discontinue the policy. Most of the other incidents had outcomes involving the hiring of individuals to work one-on-one with students to help them pass exams. One department head talked about entering his first year in the position and

finding many students were not able to pass their teaching certification exams. “There was a significant need for curriculum revision. Students were not performing well on certifications to become teachers” (Participant 3). This department head worked with program chairs to revise curricula that would meet the needs of students to be more successful on the certification tests.

Aside from the two dominant areas, a few incidents were also included in *academic student success*. The first of these incidents concerned individual students who struggle with different aspects of their coursework. The department head who reported this formed a committee to consider all academic student concerns (Participant 9). A second incident related to students struggling with on-time graduation due to academic course sequence. Participant 4 mentioned giving authority to his director of undergraduate studies to grant elective course substitutions so students could graduate on time. The third independent incident mentioned how Participant 2 led his department in changing how the statistics course was taught. Historically, students in Introduction to Statistics struggled to grasp the concepts with a lecture style of teaching, so the course was changed to a hands-on style in which the students are taught through object lessons in class and are expected to read the material outside of class. Changing the teaching style enabled students to grasp concepts quicker and perform better on tests.

Data- and/or student-informed decision-making. This theme relates to the use of data, whether from college and university reporting or student-informed, that leads to decision-making on the department head’s behalf and is made up by 8.7% (12) of the critical incidents. Participants from each of the three universities discussed various uses of data. The department head has access to data from many angles, but there are times

when a simple understanding of missing data can drive action. For instance, Participant 16 did not have class attendance records of students and decided to implement a policy in her department to track attendance for undergrads in the hope of having earlier intervention with students who were not going to class. Another department head mentioned an incident where freshmen reported they were not able to register for a required general education statistics course because the upperclassmen had priority registration, thereby filling all seats prior to freshmen registration. Because of this student data, the participant was able to hold seats for freshmen, thus making the general education requirements in statistics more easily attainable in their first year (Participant 2).

Students sometimes provide information upon which department heads could act to enhance student success. Participant 4 described a student who desired to be more involved with a specific faculty member's research, so the department head formulated a program by which the student could know of all the faculty members' research and could better elect how to become involved. Another participant had collected years of exit interview data from program graduates. In a faculty meeting focused on student success, this department head used the data to plan and execute initiatives to increase retention (Participant 17).

Class attendance and retention rate data also drive the department heads toward action with student success efforts. One participant gave a clear example:

I look at the numbers on our retention rates and our various programs, and if I see a program that's struggling with retention—they have a large turnover in students—we certainly get together and talk about that and try to come up with strategies to overcome that. (Participant 1)

Three incidents discussed using data to identify bottleneck courses, with one participant using data to further understand why a particular course was a stumbling block.

We've got online homework type things so we can track them [the students]. We know exactly who's doing what. We can tell you after 3 weeks who's going to fail the course. Because they're just not doing it [the homework]. If they don't do it, they won't pass it [the class]. If they do it, they will pass it. (Participant 19)

Two other participants were shown data of minority student success barriers and have begun working more diligently to identify particular student groups that need intervention and to be more intentional in how they address specific issues (Participant 7; Participant 9).

Desire to be proactive as department head. This theme conveys how a department head's proactive behavior is used to diminish future challenges from arising and making efforts to improve student persistence. This theme is portrayed by 13.8% (19) of the critical incidents. The participants discussed multiple incidents of being proactive in their efforts to address challenges to student success. Three department heads mentioned their determination to lead by example. One participant said,

It just requires, for my part, just reinforcing that behavior with my own behavior. And so I remain engaged with the students as much as I can, make sure that I know the students, the students know me. I'm leading by doing. (Participant 20)

Another discussed how he leads by example because "[I] desire a culture of dedication to student success" (Participant 15).

Another group of participants talked about becoming aware of issues that were not conducive to student success and how they became proactive in addressing such matters. One concern addressed the students who were not accepted into an upper-level program in which they had applied. In discussing these students, a participant said, "So they're accepted to the university, and they're pre-elementary education majors, but when

it comes time to be formally accepted into the elementary education program, a lot of them don't make it" (Participant 1). Acting on this concern, the department head spearheaded the creation of a non-certification route for such students. Other participants realized challenges before they were at the forefront of their department and faced them head on. Participant 16 began sitting in on student exit interviews, taking notes on student feedback so as to remain knowledgeable about student's thoughts regarding curricula, class size, professors, and other programmatic details. Another wanted freshmen to enroll in departmental courses earlier and petitioned the university to classify courses within his own department as core courses. (Participant 18). And a third participant recognized a growing concern in regard to the lack of physical space for his departmental courses and began working with stakeholders within the university to remedy the issue before the small physical space began to negatively effect student enrollment and retention rates (Participant 3).

Another group of department heads acted proactively to resolve issues when they became aware of student desires. Two participants learned students wanted after-hours access to the building for studio and practice time. Both department heads used departmental funding to have keypads placed on the exterior doors for student use (Participant 12; Participant 16). Another participant heard of undergraduate students complaining about a lack of quality relationships with the faculty members. This participant held focus groups to obtain student feedback on suggested program improvements, while adding one or two undergraduate courses to his teaching load per semester to better understand undergraduate student experiences and needs (Participant 1).

In a similar strand of proactivity, department heads gave numerous examples of the desire to help get freshmen and undergraduates more involved with faculty, their professions, and the community.

We try to get them involved in all manner of extracurricular activities. For example, a couple of years ago, we started something called the Water Dogs. It's a student wild land firefighting team. They actually on the weekends work for [the state's] Division of Forestry and travel throughout [the state] fighting fires. (Participant 18)

With the previous example, there were six other incidents where department heads recognized the need to get students involved and found ways to bring students into the culture of each university more easily.

Faculty reluctance. This theme pertains to barriers to student persistence due to faculty reluctance and consists of 17.4% (24) of the critical incidents. One of the largest themes emerging from the data relates to department heads interacting with faculty who resist student success efforts. Five of the 20 participants expressed their belief in a student-first focus when matching faculty with courses. In expressing this belief they identified incidents in which faculty requested specific teaching schedules and courses – thus placing the faculty member's desire as a priority rather than departmental or student needs. These five department heads found themselves in the position of having to argue for making student success a driver in teaching assignments. Maintaining a priority on student success was a continual challenge for these department heads.

Another dominant area within the data on *faculty reluctance* was misperceptions held by faculty members on the topic of student perfection. These misperceptions were challenges to student success, and the department heads had to focus on changing them. One participant discussed how faculty and students in his department worked with

community partners on project-based learning initiatives. Due to the students' inexperience in the field, the faculty felt the need to ensure all their projects were perfect. Another faculty member within the same department believed that unless a student received an "A" in every class, the student was not successful. This particular department head mentioned the need for constant reorientation on these misperceptions and encouraged faculty to not place as much pressure on students (Participant 12).

In a more negative sense, incidents were described where (a) faculty treat students differently based on their own personality traits (Participant 12), (b) a young faculty member was unaware of her own biases, and a student issue arose because of her bias (Participant 9), and (c) new faculty were inflexible regarding student expectations (Participant 4). Participant 4 expounded by stating, "I think that greater flexibility comes with more experience. And so sometimes the challenge is helping newer faculty think through the consequences of inflexibility, like what do you really gain by this? Does this really help the student?" One participant made a general comment about his entire faculty: "The challenges are clearly getting all the faculty on board and getting all the faculty to value undergraduate education as much as they do graduate education" (Participant 5).

Participants mentioned four incidents in which they had to intervene with faculty. Participant 10 vaguely discussed how there are times when faculty are not doing what they are supposed to, and she has to talk with them individually to get them back on track. Likewise, Participant 3 mentioned the difficulty in discussing faculty evaluations when student issues were at the forefront of a faculty complaint. Two other issues arose: an adjunct faculty changing grading policies in the middle of a semester (Participant 11)

and the need for teaching improvement within the department (Participant 4). Some department heads choose to face the faculty challenges with individual meetings, faculty retreats, and a variety of other ways, but one department head chooses simply to model and lead by example by attending events with the students and inviting other faculty along (Participant 9).

Of the 24 incidents in this category, eight regarded faculty complaining when asked to focus on undergraduate student success. Challenges arose from faculty not liking their teaching load (Participant 8), complaining about collecting and reporting data (Participant 10), and just resisting any change in general (Participant 13; Participant 14). When asked about dealing with efforts related to student success, one participant mentioned, “Striking a balance between keeping the college happy [in regard to helping students succeed] and keeping the faculty happy, that’s the number one challenge” (Participant 13). Within this specific university sample, faculty complain of being overworked due to the pressure to publish research, teach, graduate doctoral-level students, and complete various other tasks. Participants mentioned that when they talk with their faculty about undergraduate student success, faculty express a belief that it is not one of their responsibilities. Another incident reported that due to this perception of being overworked, faculty want to “fight the system” and that administrations need to create committees that can help better communicate responsibilities and needs (Participant 7).

University pressure. This theme relates to the challenges that arise from pressure put on the department head from the university and is made up by 10.1% (14) of the critical incidents. Five participants reported incidents about (a) the university giving

significant attention to student success, (b) a new university budget model contingent upon increased retention and a decrease in time to degree, and (c) pressure from administrators to put forth resources toward increased student success. The pressure from the university resulted in a challenge for one department head:

There's one other element that's been challenging, too, given the imperative to increase graduation rate. We don't want that to mean that we are just going to make it easier for students to succeed. We aren't going to just lower standards so everyone can graduate. And sometimes I feel as though faculty equate graduation rates with grade inflation or lower standards. That's the route that we don't want to take. We want the degrees from here to be meaningful, and we want to certify the students coming out of here have a strong degree and will be successful. I think those are some of the lessons learned—student persistence, success, retention all sound pretty good, and it sounds like “How could anyone not want that?” But at the same time, there are some people who look at it skeptically that it's just a push for me to pass students along who shouldn't be passed along. You hear “student retention, student retention, student retention” enough then you feel like it—student retention—is what they're pushing, and I'm failing students, then maybe I shouldn't be doing that as much. (Participant 11)

The universities have applied pressure on department heads through other routes, such as the supply of data to show low success rates in individual departmental courses (Participant 19). Participant 4 mentioned her university administrators sent an email to suggest more built-in activities where students and faculty could interact. Related to these examples of delegated responsibility, one department head summed up a common underlying emphasis throughout all data collection: “I think faculty feel overwhelmed” (Participant 17).

In a more indirect manner, the department heads feel pressure being placed on them from the university because of issues outside their control. Regarding one such incident, Participant 15 noted, “If this university can't figure out that they can't let students withdraw two thirds of the way into the semester, then there's no hope for improving retention.” This department head suggested a withdraw policy that is much

more strict in terms of how long a student has to decide to withdraw from a course without a consequence. Participant 14 discussed how student admissions are decided at the university level and not at the program or department level. This department head suggested “having very stringent entrance requirements” if student retention is going to be a priority. Despite the difficulty in not having a vote in student admissions, this participant noted, “I am very much of the mindset that if we admit students, we have to do everything we can to help them succeed” (Participant 14).

Low enrollment. This theme relates to the challenges in student persistence due to low departmental enrollment. In 5.1% (7) of the total critical incidents, participants discussed low enrollment as an issue that is being watched from university administrators. Participant 13 mentioned how his university has considered having all incoming students be undeclared and then decide at a later time what their major is. This participant feared the unknown with this potential policy change, thinking that a complete lack of interaction between incoming students and their major program areas would hurt student success rather than help.

Another participant within a specialty area within a college of agriculture noted that their college handled most recruiting efforts and, unfortunately, generally recruited students who did not meet the demographic needs of this participant’s department. The department head was continually challenged by students and stakeholders not having knowledge regarding his department’s field (geoscience), thus making recruiting potentially successful students a challenge (Participant 5). A department head within a college of education suspected her department’s low enrollment issues to be the cause of a decrease in interest within the field of education (Participant 8). A third department

head struggling with low enrollment found an opportunity when he discovered that his neighboring state's large universities give preference to high school students who are in the top 10% of their graduating class. Now, the department head, along with many other colleagues across their university, recruit students from the neighboring state who are in the top 11% to 20% of their class (Participant 11). These high-quality students are still expected to be successful in higher education, thus giving this department head a defined student population to recruit from that will more than likely be retained and graduate.

Two participants from the same university were particularly concerned with low enrollment. Participant 12 has data showing the needs of his field of study in terms of how many jobs are currently available and what the future holds for job development. He and his departmental faculty set a goal of attracting enough applicants to admit 25 new students each year but have struggled to meet this goal. As a result, the department head was working to hire an academic coordinator to focus more intentionally on recruiting efforts for his department. The low enrollments spurred another department head to change the process by which her faculty are involved in the recruiting process. This department head led her faculty by being more active in a summer program for students and calling incoming, confirmed students to welcome them to the department (Participant 4).

Need for personnel and/or resources. This theme captures the challenge associated with a need for more personnel and/or resources to improve student persistence and is represented by 5.8% (8) of the critical incidents. Where some departments are plagued with low enrollment, others have the opposite issue, growing student populations. As the student population grows, department heads recognized the

need for increased personnel and new resources. In regard to student success efforts, one department head found that almost one fourth of the incoming student body was taking an introductory core course within his department. Upon realizing the amount of freshmen in his departmental course and being asked to focus on student success from the university administrators, this department head appointed a faculty member as associate chair to explicitly address retention efforts (Participant 15). Similarly, Participant 19 believed student success would increase with an updated lab and he advocated for more resources for his accounting lab. Another department head reallocated her budget for a director of community outreach to help get students more involved in her college and community for the purpose of increased student success (Participant 17).

Another issue discussed by two participants was faculty advising students. The first participant felt advising undergraduate students was too time-consuming for faculty. To free up time for faculty and allow the students access to a professional advisor and asked the dean of the college to hire college-level advisors (Participant 6). The second participant discussed his experience when he first began as department head:

When I first got here, almost all student advising was handled by faculty, which was not a good situation because, frankly, faculty don't really pay that much attention to administrative and curriculum rules. Everyone is interested in their own area. (Participant 11)

As a result, this participant helped develop a professional, college-level advising system to give students the attention needed for increased success.

The final grouping of incidents related to the *need for personnel and resources* lies with the need for teaching faculty. Two participants talked of their growing student population and the need to hire more individuals to teach courses (Participant 3;

Participant 14). A third participant discussed how administrative buy-outs impact teaching loads:

Six out of 11 [tenure-track faculty] have really significant administrative responsibilities, some of which are almost 100% of their time. So that creates a big challenge for us because everyone has reduced teaching loads. And in some cases, reduces it down to basically zero. (Participant 11)

This department head then discussed how hiring adjunct faculty only to teach has been the solution for this ongoing critical incident.

Personal and/or financial student issues. This theme refers to students' personal and/or financial issues that prevent them from persisting and consists of 17.4% (24) of the total critical incidents. This category is the merger of two originally separate categories. The incidents could not be explicitly defined into the original categories and showed much overlap in their interpretation. Combining the categories into one all-encompassing category removed ambiguity from the categorical interpretation. As one of the two largest categories (in terms of incidents per category), *personal and/or financial student issues* encompasses many of the hidden challenges that exist in student persistence efforts due to the whether or not the student is willing to disclose their personal information and allow the department head, or others, to help.

Six participants noted that when a student has a personal or financial issue, they take time to meet with the student immediately and try to help him or her come to a resolution. This direct relationship between the department heads and the students has resulted in three participants finding jobs in their departments when students were dealing with financial difficulties and needed assistance. These ideal outcomes were possible because of the student's willingness to openly share the issue at hand, coupled with the department head's willingness to listen and act.

The need for students to have someone to confide in and the need for departments to financially assist students is evident throughout the data in this category and is sometimes handled more indirectly by a department head. In regard to working individually with students on personal and/or financial issues, some department heads delegate the direct intervention to other faculty or staff. Participant 4 mentioned assigning a lecturer to handle her departmental advising rather than the roles being spread among faculty. As a result, students have a common individual they can trust with their personal and financial issues and the department head is not directly involved in first-response interventions (Participant 4). Likewise, Participant 5 employees a director of undergraduate studies who handles student issues, while a third department head has an “academic coordinator to pamper the students for the first 2 years” (Participant 17).

Thus far, participants discussed how they directly and indirectly handle student personal and financial issues. Further responses show how department heads leverage resources to address these same student matters. Two participants discussed how they had influenced their alumni to create scholarships and worked with the university to develop more scholarship programs to help with financial difficulties (Participant 5; Participant 18). Two participants explained variations of how members of their departments confer to decide on the best advice to give individual students (Participant 10) and how they have worked together to create freshmen programs to provide a support structure (Participant 11).

Three incidents stand out within the category of *personal and/or student financial issues*. These incidents show department heads who are not reactionary in their responses, but rather have a sense of empathy toward their students’ situations and put

the greater good of the students above anything else. The first participant identified student financial issues as becoming increasingly common. When discussing the steps the department was taking, the participant said, “I can help them find jobs, but sometimes that’s detrimental for some people” (Participant 17). This simple understanding that one solution is not best for all shows a furthered sense of concern and care on the department head’s behalf. The second participant mentioned two separate incidents, the first being a discussion on students’ financial difficulties. Despite pressure from the university and data reports on this participant’s desk encouraging a faster time to degree, the department head stated,

I don’t judge on whether or not they get done in 4 years. I judge the success of our program on whether or not they’re able to finish, however long it might take them to do that, within the challenges of their lives. (Participant 9)

The participant also described an incident in which a student faced discrimination at her internship placement, and the department head advocated on the student’s behalf and decided future students will not be subjected to that site. The sharing of a personal or financial hardship comes through a trusting relationship between the student and the department head, or other individual. This theme included incidents from 13 of the 20 participants, showing that the majority of department heads in this study are taking action to assist students with their *personal and/or financial student issue*.

Between and Within Colleges

When originally proposed, the researcher sought to examine data both within and between colleges. After data were finalized, the researcher decided the response rate across colleges was too low for a comparison section. For example, only one participant represented a college of engineering, resulting in seven critical incidents, whereas eight

participants are in colleges of arts and sciences, resulting in 53 critical incidents. To compare across or within colleges, and even with interdepartmental analysis, would be insufficient without more participants making up a more even distribution across the colleges.

The researcher sought to explore the relationship between the department head and undergraduate student persistence. A more in-depth study across colleges could address the centralization of student services versus the colleges who house student services within individual departments. Another suggestion is to evaluate a teamwork approach to student persistence efforts within colleges. For instance, a department head's role may look different if a college has professional advisors, associate deans, and department heads working in a collaborative atmosphere toward increased student persistence.

Types of Leadership Department Heads Employ

This study employs Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) as a lens for understanding how adaptive challenges contribute to the leadership growth of department heads. CLT helps in comparing incidents related to student persistence and the reactions of the leaders to those incidents. CLT is also used to answer the second research question, *what type of leadership do department heads employ when addressing student persistence barriers?*

The researcher originally decided to group each theme under the guise of the three CLT leadership types: administrative, enabling, and adaptive. However, after data analysis and theme development, he determined that the overarching themes did not fit into the CLT types. Thus, the three types of leadership in the CLT are discussed separate

from the themes. Deductive coding was used to place each of the 138 incidents were placed into one of the three pre-determined categories of administrative, enabling, or adaptive based on the outcome variable within each incident (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Table 4.6 shows the distribution of critical incidents among the three types of leadership, with 95% of the participants (19 out of 20) falling within each leadership type.

Table 4.6

Distribution of Critical Incidents Among CLT Leadership Types

CLT leadership type	Number of critical incidents	% of participants in leadership type ($n = 20$)
Administrative	44	95.0%
Enabling	50	95.0%
Adaptive	44	95.0%

Each participant reported numerous incidents within their interview, with the number of incidents per participant ranging from three to 11 and a mean of seven incidents per participant. Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) suggested that complexity within an organization and an individual's life produces a change in perspective and typically results in a more adaptive style of leadership. Table 4.8 charts the number of years each participant has served as a department head and the number of reported incidents that fall inside each CLT-defined type. To compare Uhl-Bien et al.'s (2007) research with the current study, Table 4.7 is ordered in terms of the number of years as department head to determine whether the more experienced participant has more adaptive leadership techniques when handling incidents.

Table 4.7

Number of Incidents Within CLT Type per Participant

Participant	Years as dept. head	Incidents within CLT types		
		Administrative	Enabling	Adaptive
4	13	5	2	1
1	9	2	2	3
2	9	1	1	2
16	8	1	3	7
19	8	0	4	0
17	7	1	3	4
6	6	2	2	2
11	6	4	5	1
12	6	2	4	4
15	6	2	3	1
18	6	3	4	1
3	5	2	4	2
5	4	2	2	1
20	4	1	1	1
7	3	3	2	2
8	2	3	2	1
10	2	3	0	3
13	2	2	2	3
9	1	1	3	3
14	1	4	1	2

The three types of leadership discussed are administrative, enabling, and adaptive. For an incident to be valid within the study, a specific challenge had to be identified within the context of student success and contain a mention of an outcome. In developing themes based on the student persistence challenges for department heads, more emphasis was placed on each incident's presenting issue. In placing each of the 138 incidents into the three pre-determined categories of the CLT, more emphasis was placed on the outcome of each incident to determine the approach taken by the participant.

Administrative approach. Firstly, I address the administrative approach. This refers to department head leadership style that is “grounded in traditional, bureaucratic notions of hierarchy” (Uhl-Bien et al., 2008, p. 187). Of the 138 critical incidents, 44 were found to be an administrative type of leadership. There are certain incidents which seem to adhere more to an administrative approach, such as leading departmental meetings where student success is the focus of the meeting due to the pressure of the college dean or the university provost. Another example is hiring more personnel. A department head is able to take an enabling or adaptive approach once an employee is in place, but hiring a new employee is more of an administrative task. As one participant noted, “Certainly, if we had a larger number of faculty members, that would be beneficial in terms of reducing the number of student-to-faculty ratios” (Participant 3). This participant was meeting with other college administrators at the college level to hire more faculty.

Within the administrative approach also fall incidents related to launching new programs, orchestrating strategic planning, updating curriculum, assigning faculty to specific courses, addressing scheduling issues, and conducting ongoing meetings with faculty and students who are having issues. These administrative tasks happen because of the department head having specific responsibilities and being a departmental decision-maker and administrator. The outcome of some incidents could have resulted in a different leadership approach; however, the data in this study show the majority of incidents are handled administratively because the department head is unable to take an enabling or adaptive approach to resolve the issue.

Enabling approach. Next, the enabling approach is discussed. When a department head is faced with a challenge, and the outcome occurs due to a structural change through the empowerment of another individual, he or she is taking a leadership approach of enabling. Participants took an enabling approach in 50 of the 138 incidents, making it the most used approach among the participants. While the data varies within this second approach, a couple of issues are pertinent.

The main incident cited within this leadership approach concerns finding ways to get students involved. The department heads view the importance of student involvement differently. One department head focused on the student organization side of involvement by stating, “We try to get them involved in all sorts of extracurricular activities. For example, a couple of years ago we started something called the Water Dogs. It’s a student wild land firefighting team” (Participant 18). Another incident by the same participant put more professional emphasis on student involvement: “They [students] get to go interact with professionals in the field all the time. They go to national and international and regional meetings to the extent that they are able and want to” (Participant 18). Participant 17 highlighted a more informal type of student involvement in which they are simply getting involved in the community: “The college doesn’t pay; the university doesn’t pay. We pay for this director of community outreach because we feel like it’s so important.” Getting students involved is a way of empowering the student to take action and give them a sense of belongingness. Department heads are not mandating the student involvement in an administrative approach, nor are they adapting to a specific incident. These participants have created a culture of empowerment.

A second overarching refrain in the enabling approach data is setting up structures that promote student success. Participants discussed how they have set up tutoring services within their departments, started a faculty mentorship program, initiated first-year experience programs where incoming students are grouped together and intentional conversations are had and skill sets are taught, and even put automated structures in place for early intervention. An automated system one department set up allowed the director of a living and learning program to be notified through the university's learning management system if a student missed more than two classes. This system allows the director to follow up with the student before a potentially bigger academic issue occurs with the student (Participant 3). Through structuring programs and systems, the department head enables students and other essential personnel to oversee student persistence efforts, leaving a feeling of empowerment and belongingness.

The department heads have led the way to increase student success in many other areas. Another effort seen within the data is setting up scholarships to help students who need financial assistance to continue in their coursework. Participants mentioned involvement such as "talking with the chancellor about getting more scholarships" (Participant 9) and "Our alumni are very engaged with our department ... we raise money to provide [alumni] student scholarships" (Participant 5). Other examples of this enabling approach include (a) taking data to faculty meetings and getting faculty input on action plans to address low enrollment or retention (Participant 13), (b) working with a "young faculty member who is not always necessarily aware of issues around race and class" (Participant 9), and (c) team teaching so faculty can get ideas from each other on better teaching practices (Participant 12). The planning and implementation of each of

these examples resulted in empowering others to take ownership of a student persistence aspect. Whether creating a scholarship to financially help a student, or challenging a young faculty member's biases, each stakeholder is empowered to do something better.

Adaptive approach. Finally, the adaptive approach is discussed. Uhl-Bien et al. (2008) described an adaptive leader as one who has a “*generative dynamic* that underlies emergent change activities” (p. 187). Alternatively defined, the adaptive approach is when a leader can continuously institute change toward progress. The adaptive approach is seen 44 times out of the 138 incidents in the data. The main topic within this data set focuses on students and/or faculty approaching the department head with an issue. The department head, in most cases, is charged with needing to set his or her administrative approach aside and become a colleague or mentor in that situation. He or she does not have the time to set up a structure to enable success in the moment. Being adaptive and intuitive in their approach, the department heads repeatedly exemplify why this is a better approach given these circumstances.

A participant described this adaptive approach clearly in one incident:
A couple years ago, I had a student come in the front office here. He wasn't talking to me directly. He was talking to my administrative assistant. I came into the conversation halfway through. I'd learned that he was having severe financial struggles. His family was not supporting him to go to college. He was working with multiple jobs. This is typical of our students. A lot of them work multiple jobs just to keep afloat. This guy was clearly upset because he wasn't going to be able to come back the following semester. Long story short, we found some things here in the department that we needed help with, and he rolled up his sleeves. He comes from a rural area. He's accustomed to working hard. He got a lot of good things done around our department building. It helped him get back on his feet. (Participant 18)

Along with supporting students in a timely fashion, another department head shared, “It's my job to support the faculty so that they have the resources that they need to address student needs” (Participant 16). Adaptive leadership is evidenced through this approach

of being able to react in the moment and help both the students and faculty reach a higher rate of student success.

The data within the adaptive approach consistently shows the department heads listening to and meeting student needs. Take, for instance, the aforementioned matter of students desiring to enter their buildings after hours (Participant 12; Participant 16). Both participants said that they immediately had keypad locks put on the doors so students could have the freedom to come and go as they please. Although each incident tells its own story of the adaptive leadership approach, the more insightful examples are in department heads' discussions about the *need to remain contemporary in practices and content*. One participant said, "I think one of the challenges now recruiting some special education teachers is the role of the special education teacher has changed" (Participant 10). Another participant encourages faculty "to not be afraid to push the envelope—to shake up the status quo ... try to continuously stay on top of the curriculum to ensure that it is as contemporary and cutting-edge" (Participant 3).

With the identification of overarching categories for the data and also sorting each incident into a leadership approach to understand the theory underlying the data more clearly, the final research question addresses the advice current department heads would give to future department heads. In light of the critical incidents and experiences faced throughout each participant's tenure as department head, his or her position is naturally transformed into a type of informal mentorship for an aspiring department head. The next section addresses the advice given from the participants.

Advice for Future Department Heads

Each participant interview ended with an opportunity for the department head to give advice to future department heads for improved student success. These bits of guidance are summarized below for the benefit of current and future department heads.

Six participants described the importance of staying in contact with the undergraduate population. The universities within this study's sample have a strong focus on research and graduate student production. Staying in contact with the undergraduate population means a great time commitment as well as one setting aside his or her own research, teaching of graduate coursework, and individual time with graduate students for a department head to help undergraduates. However if the department head is to focus on undergraduate student success, a time commitment to undergraduate education and a sacrifice of time in other areas is necessary. One participant mentioned, "I see them [undergraduates]. I'm staying connected with them, which is good, so when we are talking in a program faculty meeting, I can talk about those particular students" (Participant 10). Another participant agreed, adding, "I would also say to whatever extent possible, establish a relationship with your students because you'll hear things that you wouldn't otherwise hear. You'll understand things that you wouldn't otherwise understand" (Participant 18). Participant 1 reflected this same sentiment: "I meet with every undergraduate student in the late spring before graduation," and "Get engaged with the students as much as you can." While pondering advice to give a future department head, one participant internalized the thought and said, "Something that I'm going to try to do more of is to get a better sense of who our students are, what their interests are"

(Participant 11). Six out of the 20 participants emphasized the need for the department head to be personally connected with the undergraduate student body.

Some participants advised future department heads to use data for more informed decision-making. By seeing trends in longitudinal data, or even overviewing current snapshot of student enrollment and retention, a department head can make a better-informed decision for greater student success. Four participants suggested operating from a position of understanding, whether it's an open door policy for students and faculty, simply listening to people, staying connected with the students and "not getting wrapped up in administrative day-to-day mundane tasks" (Participant 9), or helping students know that you are in your position for their success. Individual suggestions included staying contemporary with resources and practices, listening to both sides of every story, consult other experts around campus for advice, and persist in doing what is right. From a teaching perspective, Participant 2 recommended, "Take the students that you're given and teach them as much as possible, which is different than teach the same thing you've always taught."

Although the advice is focused on undergraduate student success, many of the underlying meanings ring true for any profession. The lived experiences of these 20 department heads allows both current and future department heads to grasp concepts and actionable ideology at an earlier point in their careers. With the final research question being addressed, the next section will discuss the limitations.

Study Limitations

This research compared the three leadership types of CLT with the critical incidents of the participants. The main purpose of this study's use of CLT was to look at

the experience of the participants as department heads and conclude whether greater experience resulted in a more adaptive type of leadership as Uhl-Bien et al. (2007) suggested. Although an open-ended interview was created for this study, the protocol was designed using CIT research. Using CIT best practices in designing the protocol did not allow for a rich analysis of the individual participants in terms of their changes in leadership type over time. The protocol limited the participants' incidents over their span of leadership to an average of seven incidents per participant. This research showed only a glimpse of the use of CLT in research due to the protocol design.

With thousands of universities and department heads, and even more students, these research findings should not be transferred to all situations and environments. This research is intended to bring attention to the department head's role in undergraduate student success. The three universities in this study's sample have many commonalities; however, a similar university in the western United States may have a completely different student makeup and policies driving student success. This study's data and findings are limited to the sample within.

Even within the sample universities, each college provides a different tradition and culture by which a department head's responsibilities are made up. For instance, a college of arts and sciences typically has more personnel and services available at the department level and a college of music has such services at the college level that each department has access to. Keeping the size and opportunities within each college in mind, one can expect the various responsibilities to vary greatly for department heads.

Another limitation of this study is the researcher's personal experience in regard to student success efforts. Maxwell (1996) warned that a threat to qualitative data

validity is when the researcher has a lack of understanding of the meaning behind each interviewee's content and biases. In like manner, serving as the director of recruiting and the director of retention for a single college within one of the sample universities, the researcher's development of protocol question wording and interpretation of data might be limited to the confines of his own experience. The data was validated in two parts to aid in neutralizing this limitation; however, it must still be acknowledged.

Summary

This chapter presented the results of the study collected via interviews. Additionally, a discussion of the research findings was covered, as well as how the findings relate to the CLT. The chapter concluded by presenting the study's limitations, which establishes the foundation for consideration of major conclusions and implications in the final chapter. Chapter 5 provides an overall summary and discussion of this research, including conclusions and implications for further study and practice.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study shows the role of department heads in relation to undergraduate student success. The purpose of this study was to understand the challenges department heads at three predominant universities in the eastern United States faced when attempting to improve student persistence. In order to answer the overarching research questions, open-ended interviews were conducted with 20 department heads. Two research questions drive this dissertation:

- a. What challenges have university department heads perceived in regard to undergraduate student persistence?
- b. What type of leadership do department heads employ when addressing student persistence barriers?

This research used the CIT to identify individual occurrences of department head challenges leading student persistence efforts. The results were conceptualized through the lens of CLT, in which the complex nature of a department head's role was related to the student persistence efforts. This chapter discusses the results of the research, notes the researcher's conclusions, presents the implications of the study, and summarizes the dissertation.

Discussion of Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of the university department head in relation to student persistence. A secondary purpose was to understand how each department head is able to adapt, or is currently adapting, to the challenges he or she identifies. The study included a total of 20 department heads across the departments of

agriculture, arts and sciences, business, education, and engineering. These individuals were invited to take part in a 30- to 45-minute, open-ended interview examining the challenges they have experienced regarding student success. From the data emerged 10 themes that the 138 critical incidents fell within. Each of the theme's results are discussed below.

Lack of Student Preparation

The first theme is titled *lack of student preparation*. Most incoming university students take a standardized test (e.g. the ACT or SAT), thus providing the university an indicator of their academic preparedness. Still, standardized testing does not provide an exact predictor for success. The data in this category is not a surprise, but more an expectation by the researcher. Through the use of first-year courses, student support services across the university, and many other programs, this challenging theme has taken precedence at the university level for many years. Having a background in counseling psychological studies, the researcher sees the need for a more intentional effort on behalf of the universities to help students become more emotionally stable upon entering college by assisting each student in getting involved and having a sense of belongingness.

This study shows that ill-preparedness on the part of the student, both academically and personally, is a challenge department heads face. Spady (1971) found in his multiple regression study that academic preparedness plays a secondary role to one's attitude toward their learning environment, which is primarily shaped through friendships, outside contacts with faculty, and extracurricular activities. Just as there is no single answer for how to increase student persistence, a single theme does not explain the entirety of student attrition. Despite a student's lack of preparation, actions such as

increasing faculty-student relations and getting students involved in extracurricular activities can still be taken to increase their likelihood of persisting.

Need to Remain Contemporary in Practices and Content

A second theme relates to the *need to remain contemporary in practices and content*. A focal point for some participants was the challenge of adapting curricula to fit the current field of practice. While keeping up with curricula is important, emphasis was also placed on having updated resources in the classroom and lab space for teaching and learning. Lumpkin (2004) mirrored this study by suggesting that department heads should keep departmental courses relevant and innovative. While faculty have historically felt overwhelmed (Hancock, 2007) and also discussed such feelings in this study, the innovation of teaching practices and the updating and relevancy of curricula should constantly be of utmost importance.

Academic Student Issues

Another theme emerged through incidents related to students having academic issues. The reasons cited by participants as to why students struggle academically vary greatly throughout this study. Jones (2008) mentioned unsatisfactory academic experience is still a prominent issue for why students leave before graduation. Tinto (1993) suggested that a student's choice to integrate themselves into the academic atmosphere of tutoring service and the like determines their retention as well. Regardless of why a student is having academic issues or if they make the conscious decision to seek assistance, department heads play a role in addressing the issues and working with faculty to encourage students toward greater success.

Although the researcher acknowledges the role a student's ongoing choices have in their persistence, the focus of this study lies on the role of the department head. Coinciding with Jones' (2008) findings of unsatisfactory academic experience being a prominent issue for why students leave, this study found the participants to be evaluating and improving the academic experience overall. The department heads formulated outcomes by starting committees to address the academic issues, changing the course offerings structure, and giving authority to other individuals to work individually with students. As an administrator, a department head has much flexibility in how to address student academic issues. By talking with other department heads, researching best practices, and working through specific issues with the department faculty, new and innovative actions may arise to improve student success.

Data- and/or Student-informed Decision-making

In another theme, the incidents revealed multiple examples of department heads who used data and students to inform their decision-making. When data is available to help identify gaps or evaluate student success efforts, it can contribute to department heads being more adaptive in their leadership style. And when department heads can cater to individual student suggestions, in particular listening and considering students' remarks as they pertain to leading a department, this can improve student success. Tinto (1990) theorized a sense of belongingness to improve student persistence. Students appreciate the feeling of being valued. Participants in this study believed they were working toward greater student persistence by listening to students and acting on their suggestions. Whether the department heads are consciously or subconsciously giving

way to Tinto's (1990) theory is unknown. This theme echoes an earlier study suggesting the use of data is student persistence.

Departmental efforts to create change can be hampered by the lack of data available to inform reform decisions. Without reliable information about where students encounter barriers, the nature of the barriers, and profiles of the students who encounter barriers, it can be difficult for leaders to determine what actions to take. (Malcom & Feder, 2016, p. 93).

Desire to be Proactive as Department Head

This section relates to the *desire to be proactive as department head*. Perhaps the most encouraging aspect of this study's data is when a department head mentioned the desire to be more proactive when it comes to helping students succeed. Many of the participants discussed a desire to set up a culture where faculty and students can be engaged with one another. Tinto (1990) wrote, "The research in this regard is quite clear, namely that the frequency and perceived worth of interaction with faculty outside the classroom is the single strongest predictor of student voluntary departure" (p. 9). Lumpkin (2004) noted that an important role of a department head is to model student-faculty interactions and to create a mentor-like environment through celebrating student accomplishments. Through studying student-faculty interactions and relationships, researchers have found the outcome to be increased student satisfaction, retention, and graduation rates (Arendt, 2008; Astin, 1993; Bowman, 2010; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 2004, 2006). This study shows some department heads that are proactively setting up cultures and exemplifying behaviors that the previous research says will lead to increased student persistence.

Further research should be conducted longitudinally with individual departments to see the effects on student retention when new programs, such as faculty mentorship,

students working with faculty on research, and faculty–student engagement opportunities, are put into place. Department heads should consider Kuh’s (2003) suggestion that faculty should be more intentional with student interactions and prioritize giving feedback, discussing grades and assignments, and conversing about academic ideas. These more detail-oriented items can more easily be measured for effectiveness as well.

Faculty Reluctance

In another theme, the data surrounding the reluctance of faculty to focus on student success initiatives were most surprising to the researcher. With the vast amount of research mentioning the importance of faculty–student interaction (Arendt, 2008; Astin, 1993; Bowman, 2010; Kerka, 1995; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Roueche & Roueche, 1994; Tinto, 1993, 2004, 2006; Umoh, Eddy, & Spaulding, 1994), the researcher assumed faculty–student interactions are a part of higher education culture. Despite the suggestions for increasing faculty–student interaction, no one to date has inquired about the leadership role of a department head and how he or she can prime faculty to develop such relationships. The research on student persistence noted that the more contacts the students have with faculty in and out of the classroom, the greater the student satisfaction and the likelihood they will persist to graduation (Arendt, 2008; Astin, 1993; Bowman, 2010; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella, 1980; Tinto, 2004, 2006).

This study shows that despite more than three decades of research emphasizing the importance of faculty-student relations, many faculty themselves are the barrier due to their reluctance to change. This faculty reluctance presents an internal problem for the department, the college, and the university culture as a whole. Further research should be conducted on the progress of faculty–student interactions over time to highlight ways in

which individuals or groups of individuals have effectively engaged students for increased student persistence. In this dissertation's sample, the universities have a tradition of focusing on research and graduate student development. Tinto's (1975, 1990) student integration theory was developed through his research in liberal arts institutions, providing a different emphasis on a faculty member's roles and responsibilities. Still yet, Melguizo (2011) notes the faculty's responsibilities evolve as the scope and needs of the university changes. This cultural shift for faculty at large, research-based institutions to focus on undergraduate student success comes in addition to the previously stacked responsibilities of teaching, research, community service, and much more.

University Pressure

An expected theme, based on the researcher's personal experience, was the pressure the university-level administration applied to colleges and departments. The decrease in state-funding allocations has pressured 4-year, public universities to increase their efforts toward increased tuition revenue. In the case of this study's sample, the majority of the budget allocated to each department trickled down from the overall university budget model. Students are paying tuition to attend these universities, and strengthening student persistence is one of the most relevant ways to continue program and faculty funding (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011).

This study shows that some universities are considering budgets models contingent upon student persistence, to where a department is allocated specific amounts of funding based partly off their growth in this statistic. Recent research has shown this model is not successful in discussing how the state of Tennessee went to a performance-based funding model for the 4-year, public universities and even after doubling the

incentive, no significant change in student persistence was found (Sanford & Hunter, 2011). Still yet, the discussion of switching to a performance-based budget is prevalent and has faculty in some participant's departments loosening up on their grading so that more students would persist. The implications of university pressure applied on departments could help with the overall budget by retaining student tuition dollars, however, falsely allowing students to pass is not helping that individual student's future, the future of the workforce, or the reputation of the university. The researcher expects even more university-level pressure on student success efforts due to decreases in state-allocated funding to the universities in this sample and the need to focus on student tuition dollars as a main source of revenue. To meet budgetary needs—and in some cases to satisfy strategic plans related to diversity across multiple demographics—universities are accepting and enrolling academically unprepared students. Being able to identify such students and focus on being intentionally engaged with those students before they enter the classroom can help to improve student success.

Low Enrollment

Another theme of *low enrollment* also emerged from the data. The participants raised issues related to the low enrollment numbers within their departments. With fields of study always changing as the needs in and around universities adapt, students may choose not to involve themselves with majors that cannot promise a job upon graduation. For instance, one participant discussed his department of geoscience and how in other regions of the United States, programs and departments are thriving. However, in this department head's university, the physical location and environment was not necessarily the best fit for his department's field of study. Due to this challenge, recruiting high-

quality students who have an interest in a specific field of study and ensuring they will be retained each year until graduation is imperative. Department heads should be able to identify who their recruiting demographic is and where those individuals reside. Developing strong alliances with alumni who are in the same career field is a great start to finding prospective students and helping graduates with job placement. This study's findings on the challenges of low enrollments emphasize the point of needing to retain each student that is enrolled. A student who is retained for four years generates the same income as four new students who leave after one year (Bean & Hossler, 1990). Instead of lessening admissions standards to increase enrollment, departments and universities should focus on enrolling high quality students and giving them each the individual attention necessary to retain them year-to-year.

Need for Personnel and/or Resources

Another theme relates to the *need for personnel and/or resources*. Many of the department heads in this study mentioned faculty feeling overwhelmed by their various responsibilities. Hancock's (2007) survey on department head responsibilities demonstrated the category of *student matters* accounted for almost 11% of their job and almost 50% of *student matters* could be handled by non-faculty personnel (see Table 2.3). As the duties of the department head continue to increase, so does the need to bring in other individuals who can assist with the workload on student matters. This study supports the strategy of department heads advocating for, and bringing in, more personnel to assist with student matters, as it can have a positive influence on student persistence.

The addition of personnel and resources can be costly; however, if a position is created to help increase student retention and recruitment efforts and has positive

outcome variables, then the position is justifiable to the funding source. For example, if a university elects to fund a retention director for each college, then an annual targeted retention goal could be set to cover the cost of such positions. Department heads should take time during the summer months to evaluate the multiple personnel and resources in their department and throughout the college to determine what suggestions could be made for better organization resulting in increased student success.

Personal and/or Financial Student Issues

Personal and/or financial student issues emerged as another prominent theme. Each new generation of students values higher education differently. From students moving in early for “rush week” in Greek life to student organizations that strong-arm students to miss class for activities, a shift of focus away from academics in higher education has occurred over the last several decades. Students are more likely now to encounter social and emotional barriers that will distract them from their academic focus. Department heads, such as the ones in this study, should organize more first-year experiences centered on academic rigor and professionalism to assist students in comprehending the seriousness of their future careers. Doing so should help focus students on academics, bring faculty and students together with a common and unforced bond of knowledge, and alleviate some emotional and social stress by giving the students an outlet to focus on their future.

Personal and financial issues will be a constant plague for students with our current format of higher education. One study found high levels of debt play a large role in students leaving the university—especially women (Dwyer, Hodson, & McCloud, 2013). Rudd (2012) further hypothesized that student circumstances (e.g., lack of

funding, health and family issues, time management issues, and other student entry characteristics) are a main reason for attrition. These recent studies simply highlight what this dissertation's data and intuition show the common person about why students are leaving universities prior to graduation.

Conclusions

Results of this study indicate that, in general, each challenge that arise are handled differently. Through analysis of the critical incidents, each incident contained its own reason(s) for existing and its own outcome variable. Within each outcome, and how it was subsequently handled, was embedded a multifaceted approach based on the individual department head's biases, lived experiences, current situation, budget, and an endless number of other factors.

The use of the CIT focuses attention to the never-ending responsibilities and situational encounters a department head endures. Despite the need for further research across multiple areas identified in this research and the demand for a baseline knowledge of the current research in student success efforts for department heads, the roles and responsibilities of their administrative position should be more clearly defined with the resources in place to aid in their own success and leadership development.

Complexity Leadership Theory

The distribution of CLT leadership types in relation to each participant's years of experience as department head (see Table 4.8) did not necessarily support Uhl-Bien et al.'s (2007) findings of a leader becoming more adaptive with increased experience. In this study, however, each participant gave only a limited number of critical incidents. This study's findings should not be used as evidence to dislodge the findings of Uhl-Bien

et al. (2007). With more incidents and certain variables accounted for (e.g., understanding that an administrative approach has its place when dealing with certain incidents), Uhl-Bien et al.'s (2007) research would more than likely stand true.

Uhl-Bien et al.'s (2007) suggestion that complexity within an organization and an individual's life produces a change in perspective and typically results in a more adaptive style of leadership should not force the view of the three leadership approaches being a continuum. Their research simply suggested that a leader is able to more easily institute change toward progress with more critical incident experiences and will most likely have that adaptive, intuitive style based on his or her previous experiences.

The Need for Support

University department chairs are plagued with funding shortages, demands for great quality, and balancing academic/administrative roles (Sarros, Wolverton, Gmelch, & Wolverton, 2007). A prominent finding in this dissertation supports the Sarros et al. (2007) research by calling for a need in department head support. Whether that support comes from the faculty within the department, administrators around the college, or the university as a whole, a department head is seemingly fighting a battle of student persistence with an indirect approach due to the lack of support. The themes that emerged showed that the challenges and barriers to student success are due to a lack of personnel and resources, the pressure that is applied from university-level administration, and faculty being reluctant to assist with initiatives. These environmental issues cannot be fixed overnight, and they also cannot be fixed by one person. The department heads should have the full support of their colleagues and administrators. After all, with student success as the focus, all employees being paid from student tuition dollars should have a

vested interest to help students succeed.

With the university and collegiate support, the department has great opportunity for positive change in student persistence. Regarding increased teaching practices, “the department is the practical unit that can affect change because it has the authority to establish on-campus programs that explicitly recognize high-quality instruction” (Malcom & Feder, 2016, p. 93). Support is also needed when developing and hiring new faculty positions. Malcom and Feder (2016) noted in their discussion on how students have fewer meaningful interactions, thus negatively affecting their persistence with part-time faculty. Part-time faculty were also found to less frequently use active and collaborative instructional strategies, have decreased academic expectations, and spend less time preparing for class than full-time faculty (Baldwin & Wawrzynski, 2011). The university and college can show support for each department by developing more full-time faculty lines rather than part-time.

The Need for Continuing Education

Gmelch (2004) noted, “Academic leaders may be the least studied and most misunderstood management position in the world” (p. 74). Nonetheless, 50,000 professionals across the United States hold this misunderstood position, and one in five turn over each year (Gmelch & Miskin, 2010). Carroll and Wolverton (2004) reported that 80% of university decisions are made at the department level. However, only 33% of these department heads receive training in leadership (Gmelch et al., 2016). Although the departments make approximately 80% of the university decisions, decisions concerning student success and other responsibilities in each department are not being

given the optimal support from the top of the hierarchical department structure (Gmelch, 2015).

There exists a need for training and research on the position of the department head and, in particular, its relation to student persistence. By adding best practices versus current practices training modules to department heads' annual undertaking, department heads may be able to actually save time by enacting what works and taking less time thinking about what might work and potentially wasting time and resources to evaluate their efforts—or even worse, implementing a plan and not evaluating it at all.

Implications

Findings from this research contribute to the general understanding of how the department head's role influences the success of undergraduate students. Because most previous studies do not adequately assess the role of the department head with regard to undergraduate student success, this study provides an initial look into future areas of research. It may be sensible to continue investigating the usefulness of CLT as a theoretical approach to research in this area, as the department head's responsibilities are complex in both nature and scope.

The researcher desired to look both within and between the data at the college level to determine if any general implications could be made regarding the leadership within the college level. Looking at department heads within the same department at different universities would yield greater, and possibly more valuable, information. A more refined study may allow specific fields to see and address the gaps in leadership training and growth. The use of CIT in this study kept the number of participants small because the focus is placed on the number of critical incidents rather than sample size.

To determine the department head's role within student persistence for a specific field of study, future researchers should limit their sample to a single department across various universities.

Further study is needed to investigate other universities which differ from the three examined in this dissertation. The commonalities within the Carnegie classification system which formed the population for this study are vastly different from much of the United States' higher education systems, and the conclusions of this study are reserved for the department heads in like settings. As research in this area builds, it is hoped that similar studies will take place at any level where a student is paying tuition to attain a higher degree of education. Collectively, research in this area may greatly assist in providing rationale and influencing university administrators to include student success issues within department head training, allocate more department-level funding to student success initiatives, and provide administrators in the university and college levels the ability to work transparently with department heads on student success goals and initiatives.

Further investigations are needed on the role of the department head in relation to student success. With the majority of the department's administrative duties resting on the department head's shoulders, this position that lacks formal training and knowledge in best practices for student success efforts should remain a point of focus. Another focus for further study lies in the use of CLT within the confines of the CIT. Using CLT in this research provided an interesting comparison of the department heads' types of leadership when handling a critical incident; however, the continued combination of CLT and the

CIT in research would strengthen the understanding of examining leadership within CIT inquiry.

Another consideration for future research would be the expansion of foundational theory regarding student persistence. The seminal theoretical developments for student attrition and retention, such as Spady (1970) and Tinto (1975), are important for understanding the beginnings of the overall issue. However student persistence is an ever-evolving situation that does not derive from a single issue and is not solved with a single solution. In discussing the out-datedness of Tinto's student integration theory, Melguizo (2011) states,

By failing to account for external factors and market pressures that changed the business of education, the theory failed to anticipate that the demands from faculty at research institutions would shift from teaching toward research. Financial constraints have also been changing the way institutions deliver content. Online education is gaining strength, and faculty at every single type of institution is strongly encouraged to devote their time to pursue grants and contracts. The reality is that postsecondary institutions have changed greatly since the mid-1970s because of demographic, technological changes as well as globalization that have changed the way institutions work. For this reason, the field has really suffered from taking an integrationalist view and ignoring the external factors that also affect the learning, interaction, and engagement of faculty and students. (p. 403)

Because of the budding external factors affecting all stakeholders within higher education, more empirical studies need to be conducted to look at theories in other disciplines such as psychology, economic, and sociology (Melguizo, 2011). This dissertation emphasized the importance on a department head's role as leader, the importance of faculty-student relationships, and many other factors related to helping students persist. Through the data and emerged themes however, sociological, psychological, and economic factors were addressed as student persistence challenges

and further research should explore such fields and their coexistence with helping students graduate.

Many implications for practice arose from the data and analysis in this dissertation. Following with the advice given from the participants, department heads should utilize resources such as analytics, success efforts from other department heads, and their own faculty to assist with student persistence. The department head should also stay directly connected to their undergraduate population through holding focus groups or exit interviews, having an “open door policy” for students, and even teaching an undergraduate course. From an ethical standpoint, the leader should operate from a position of understanding, listen to both sides of every story, and persist in doing what is right. Despite any barriers which arise, evidenced through the emerged themes in this study, the department head has much autonomy and empowerment to start programs, reposition personnel, and lead the change in their department toward greater student persistence.

Summary

This chapter discussed the research results, conclusions, and implications of the study. Through 138 critical incidents, a picture of the multifaceted and overwhelming requirements placed on department heads emerged. Serious attention should be given to the role department heads have with student persistence. Behind each incident is the face of an individual student who is having a difficulty. Keeping the personalization of student persistence at the forefront of a department head’s mind prevents the responsibility from diminishing. Today’s students are faced with an increasing number of barriers that keep them from graduating with an undergraduate degree, but with the

assistance of great leadership in the university to which each student is paying money, the individual student will be set on a path to thrive rather than having to fight to survive both academically and personally. Providing the necessary resources, personnel, training, and other types of support to department heads will change the culture of higher education back to the students and their professional relationship with faculty, which leads to a career and progress in the field of study.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Regarding your department demographics:

- Approximately how many undergraduate students are in your department?
- Approximately how many faculty work with the undergraduate student population?
 - Does your department use teaching assistants?
 - How do faculty work with students in your department?

Regarding your department's structure:

- How would you say your department is different than similar departments in similar universities?
- Does your department strategic plan have an emphasis on student persistence, graduation, retention, or any other form of "student persistence"?

For this dissertation, I have defined *student persistence* as: students attempting to battle the environmental, personal, financial, and social opposition around them in pursuit of graduation.

Based on this definition, what do you believe is your role as department head in relation to student persistence?

Has your view of student persistence changed since becoming a department head? How?

What was the biggest challenge you have faced – as a department head – with student persistence?

- How did you overcome this challenge (*or* how are you working to overcome this challenge)?
- What lessons have you learned from facing this challenge?

As the department head, can you tell me about a time when you were able to lead your department in regards to student persistence?

- What lessons have you learned from that experience?

What has been your biggest challenge in relation to leading a department in regards to student persistence?

What current student persistence challenges are you facing?

- How are you dealing with these challenges?

Based off of your experiences and challenges that we have discussed, what parting piece of advice would you give to a future department head that will have to lead in student

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Vita

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Education

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University of Kentucky (Lexington, KY) <i>Educational Specialist in Education and Counseling Psychology</i>	May, 2012
University of Kentucky (Lexington, KY) <i>Master's of Science in Education and Counseling Psychology</i>	May, 2011
University of the Cumberlands (Williamsburg, KY) <i>Bachelors of Science in Psychology</i>	May, 2009

Professional Positions

Data Analyst University of Kentucky – College of Education	July 2016 – December 2016
Lecturer & Director of Retention University of Kentucky – College of Education	July 2014 – June 2016
Director of Recruiting University of Kentucky – College of Education	April 2013 – June 2014
Research Assistant University of Kentucky – College of Education	August 2010 – May 2013

Scholastic and Professional Honors

<i>John Edwin Partington and Gwendolyn Gray Partington Scholarship</i>	2011
<i>“Who’s Who Among American College Students”</i>	2008
<i>T.J. Roberts Campus Leadership Award</i>	2008
<i>CoSIDA Undergraduate National Scholarship</i> (one of two in the U.S.A.)	2008

Professional Publications

Richardson, J. W., Imig, S., & Flora, K. L. (2014). Evaluating leadership development through a study abroad experience. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 17(3), 353-369.

Richardson, J. W., Nash, J., & Flora, K. L. (2014). Unsystematic technology adoption in Cambodia: Students' perceptions of computer and Internet use. *International Journal of Education and Development using ICT*, 10(2), 63-76.

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