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Recalibrating Student Services:
Examining Staff Perceptions of Services during COVID-19

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Adult and Lifelong Learning

by

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Abstract

As a result of the 2019 global coronavirus pandemic, nearly every business and industry in the United States was forced to adapt its operations to accommodate the restrictions that a community health crisis necessitated. This study examined the experiences of front-line Enrollment Services staff while serving students during the pandemic at one community college in the Midwestern United States. The study focused on staff perceptions of how college policies, processes, and leadership affected the student onboarding experience that encompasses the complete path a student takes from beginning as an applicant to becoming an enrolled student in the classroom. The study also took an in depth look at the ways in which front-line staff are involved in the institution's decision-making process. The findings from this study could inform contingency planning and illuminate innovative strategies for serving students. Incorporating data regarding the perceptions about deciphering and implementing college policies of front-line staff during COVID-19 could inform future institutional decisions.

Keywords: COVID-19, qualitative, student services, community college, enrollment services, higher education, onboarding, one-stop-shop, front-line staff, student-centric, student-focused

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Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to the front-line staff in Enrollment Services who work tirelessly day in and day out to positively change the lives of the students they serve. Thank you for the passion you have for learning and for the quality service you provide to meet students where they are and help them get to where they want to go.
“Students First, Always”!

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Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter Overview

This chapter provides the background of the study, statement of the problem, significance of the study, purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, definitions of terms, and assumptions of the study. The study explored the experiences of front-line enrollment services staff in serving students at one community college in the Midwestern United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, a novel Coronavirus , Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 or COVID-19 was discovered in Wuhan, China of which, has now infected people all over the world (Dong et al., 2020).

Background and Mission of Community Colleges

The American community colleges, originally called junior colleges, have provided higher education opportunities for local students since the inception of the first junior college in 1901, which stemmed from the Morrill Act of 1862. This “Land Grant Act” expanded post-secondary education access to those who, until this point, had not been provided this type of offering due to financial and place-bound disparities (Drury, 2003). In 1946, the term “community college” became formally used in publications and in the legislature (Drury, 2003). During this time, college leaders began to survey local employers, asking for their input on essential skills necessary to their respective industries, a method still used by institutions today to train citizens and fill workforce demand. The community college mission is often derived from public input by the authority of public figures and college leaders and can take the form of state law or be a part of a state’s master plan (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006). Attention to the mission is vital to the overall operation of the organization and in shaping the institution.

As a result of an increase in high school graduates and the lack of employment opportunities, junior college enrollment increased by 100,000 students from 1929 to 1939 (Brint & Karabel, 1991). Today, there are 941 community colleges in the United States that serve just over 5.5 million students, providing many with their only opportunity to pursue a higher degree because of the value proposition and quality programming they offer (Duffin, 2021). Community colleges allow students the opportunity to increase their lifetime earning potential. A recent study of Massachusetts community college students found that those who earned an associate's degree had annual earnings thirty-one percent higher than their peers with a high school diploma alone (The Boston Foundation, 2021). Community colleges serve their local communities by providing customized, formal education and continuing education for business, industry, and personal enrichment opportunities. These institutions play an important role in addressing critical challenges of the country: disparities in income and wealth, stagnant family incomes, and political polarization (Mintz, 2019). Additionally, they were founded under the assumption that a workforce with advanced skills would result in a stronger economy (Darby-Hudgens, 2012). Today there is added emphasis on industry and workforce training as the demand for skilled laborers is at an all-time high. Increased technology and lack of exposure to workforce trades has resulted in a significant decline in these skilled laborers over the past twenty years (Kramer et al., 2020). With the goal of offering relevant business and industry training, community colleges have long consulted with local workforce leaders to develop new programs in response to the demand of the economy and create a pipeline from student to employee to fill open positions.

Community colleges tend to be more connected to their community in mission and impact than four-year institutions (Bombardieri, 2020). Community college programs offer students a traditional path to a four-year bachelor's program or associate degrees developed to

enter the workforce directly following graduation (Kasper, 2002). They focus on meeting the labor market's demands and producing skilled workers and civic leaders who will contribute to the area by applying the knowledge they have acquired (Daggett, 2005). Often, the local community college is the only higher education opportunity for many students, because of either financial strain or the inability to move away from home. Others choose this route for specific reasons. The benefits of attending a community college include affordability, smaller class sizes, flexible scheduling, career exploration and the needed time to learn more about desires and interests (Morris, 2021).

State of the Community College

In 2019, community college enrollment decreased by just over three percent, making 2019 the eighth consecutive year of a decrease in overall student enrollment at community colleges in the United States (Fain, 2019). As community college enrollment around the nation continues to decline, it is important for college leaders to understand the needs of their students, especially in the process and navigation of college admission, onboarding and enrollment and its impact on student persistence, retention and completion. Onboarding, a continuous, individualized journey that begins at college acceptance and ends when the student meets the goal of being successfully integrated into the community, is of focus, and encompasses the individual processes of admission, financial aid, advising and registration and orientation (Reid, 2020). These components come together to ultimately determine a student's individual success, and with a national 4-year graduation rate of twenty eight percent, college leaders should certainly be concerned (Chen, 2021). Student onboarding is the precursor to student retention as well-planned and executed onboarding initiatives are among the highest impact on student retention practices (Rodgers et al., 2021). New student orientation is perhaps one of the most

impactful of the onboarding steps. Lenning et al., (1980) discovered significant increases in overall student retention in institutions that explicitly utilized new student orientation as a retention strategy. Another study conducted around the same time sought to identify college and university initiatives that had a positive impact on student retention and found that orientation programs designed to reduce student attrition had a significant impact on retention rates (Beal & Noel, 1980).

Because of COVID-19, colleges around the world were forced to implement contingency plans for the continuation of learning, services, and overall college operations. As a result, unprecedented challenges arose for faculty, staff, and students, but perhaps none more challenging than the student's application process and enrollment in college for the first time.

Researchers at North Carolina State University conducted a study examining the barriers that hinder students' success in community college. Of the factors disclosed, students seemed to struggle the most with barriers brought on by work and family obligations, followed by the ability to pay for their education due to financial strains (Smith, 2019). These life stressors paired with the global pandemic of COVID-19 has exacerbated the need for high quality, timely and accessible student services. This has been the situation at one community college in the Midwestern United States. The pandemic forced college staff to work differently to meet the needs of students and revealed the necessity to create better and more flexible processes for students who either want or require remote services. These services include admission, orientation, registration, advising, tutoring, counseling, career services and technology support, just to name a few (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions, 2019). The shift to a one hundred percent virtual environment in 2020 displayed the disparities that were present between services offered in person to students and the opportunity for students to receive remote services.

Community College Governance and Structure

American community colleges are governed in a myriad of ways. The state typically has the most control of the institution with governance both locally and federally (Dougherty et al., 2017). State control is administered through a coordinating board whose members are state-appointed, allocate state funding, and regulate the college operations (Fletcher & Friedel, 2016).

A local Board of Trustees who are either elected or appointed, depending on the system and state laws, serve as the local governing body of the institution. The Board of Trustees is responsible for overseeing the actions and high-level decisions made by the president or chancellor of the institution. Most Boards of Trustees operate under shared governance, meaning that authority is granted to the president/chancellor to conduct daily college operations and oversee all employees of the institution through collaboration and teamwork (Honu, 2018).

The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is titled chancellor when the college is a part of a larger system and reports to a higher board. The executive leader is named the president when the college is an independent institution (Seraphin, 2012). In either structure, there is an administrative cabinet or council comprised of leaders from Academics, Student Affairs/Services, Business Services, Public Relations and Marketing, Government Relations, and Workforce and Continuing Education. These upper-level administrators supervise deans, directors and executive directors and are to communicate on behalf of their designated areas in the decision-making process. Most decisions are made by the Cabinet, taking into consideration data and input from their subordinates (Seraphin, 2012). The heads of divisions have the authority to make decisions that primarily only affect their areas and the students or communities in which they serve. To stay relevant in today's educational environment, college leaders are

charged with changing their approach in creating and implementing a student-centric experience (Sabat, 2020). The chart below shows a typical structure of the community college organization:

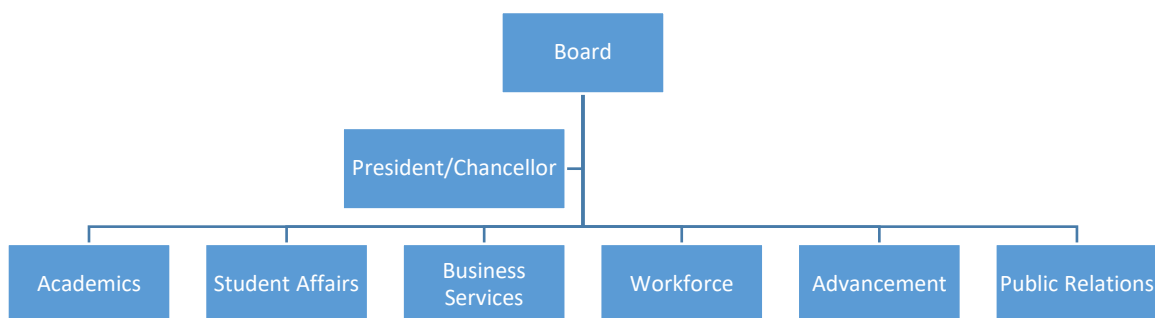


Figure 1. Example structure of community college hierarchy executive leadership.

Student Services Structure and Role

Research provides that the most vital pillars in the value of education are quality of teaching or learning, service systems and the support that students receive from the institution (Hill et al., 2003). Tinto (1993) relays that student services aid in decreasing the college dropout rate while increasing the overall student experience. Student Services is the division or departments that provide services and student support in higher education (Ciobanu, 2013). Its purpose is to ensure student growth and development during the academic experience. Community college students typically require more flexibility in all aspects of their educational pursuit, primarily because of their many, and often times, involved responsibilities (Owens et al., 2017). The structure of the student services division at many community colleges has evolved over the years from standalone offices independent of one another to a more integrated and student-orientated experience, abandoning the traditional, hierarchical and compartmentalized functional areas (Havranek & Brodwin, 1998). The traditional format forced students to navigate four diverse functional units as part of the onboarding process. These offices included admissions, financial aid, records and the advising center and required students to have contacts

in each, following processes that did not always coincide. Services provided to students under the traditional model were clunky and often difficult for students and staff to follow processes (Bowser, 2011). This traditional model of enrollment services operations required students to visit or contact each individual department for service as represented in the figure below.

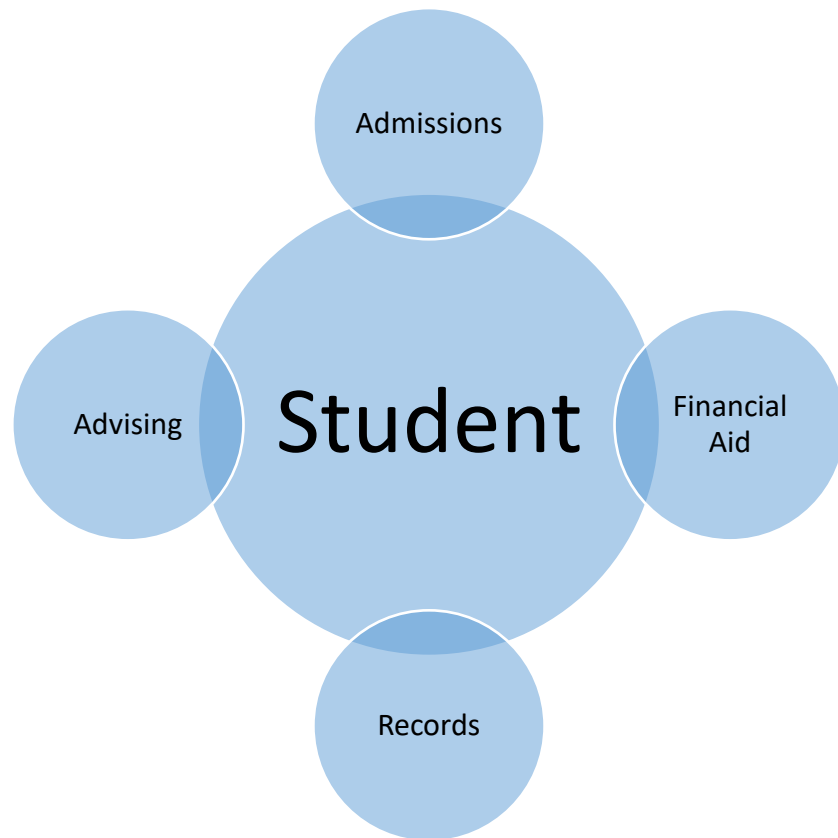


Figure 2. Traditional model of segregated enrollment services.

Problem Statement

College and university services and processes pre-COVID were not agile or quick to change, with staff having difficulty pivoting to serve students in a virtual environment. One reason this proved to be difficult is because front-line staff typically see students on campus only, it is likely they could not comprehend remote student perceptions and expectations (Forrester & Parkinson, 2006). COVID-19 has challenged the traditional methods that higher education institutions use to serve students. While face-to-face courses could adjust to online

offerings relatively quickly, many administrative units were unprepared to meet the needs of remote students. Therefore, there are gaps in how colleges provide services to students in ways that are practical and efficient.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how enrollment services staff at one community college in the Midwestern United States navigated and adapted internal processes and policies to support student onboarding during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Specifically, the study investigated staff perceptions of how students were impacted by the college's decision to shift to remote services and how the student onboarding process was affected. This study will provide valuable information to college leaders designing and implementing student-focused policies and procedures that are logical and efficient for students, specifically when offering services in a remote environment.

Research Questions

The primary research question that provided guidance to this study was, "How do staff describe the changes within student services that were precipitated by COVID-19?" The study took an in-depth look at current operations within the college in reference to the onboarding process (admissions, applying for financial aid, orientation, advising, and registration) of becoming a student. The following research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. How do staff describe successful student onboarding during COVID-19?
2. How do staff describe the efficacy of the institution's policy and procedures during COVID-19?
3. How have student services changed since COVID-19?
4. What is the significance of the changes made for the students?

5. What is the significance of the changes made for the staff?
6. What is the significance of the changes made for the institution?

Conceptual Framework

The Open Systems Theory was used to help frame and provide structure to this study, adding the “street level bureaucrats” or the front-line public institution workers who use discretion when serving the public, and in this study, community college students (Lipsky, 1983). Specifically, these workers must make, at times, quick and individual decisions for the good of the customer at hand. Street-level bureaucrats often work with very little resources and are put in situations where the demand will always increase to meet the supply of services available (Lipsky, 1983). For this study, front-line enrollment services staff were built into the process cycle to provide input and feedback. Open Systems Theory, as developed by Fred Emery (1997), involves two main purposes. The first purpose is the creation of change, strategically and consciously designed by people, for people. The second purpose is to create a consistent, internal conceptual framework of knowledge so that the primary purpose of societal change as influenced by the environment around the system is supported (Emery, 1997). The culture, decisions made and the environment around the institution influence institutional processes. The Open Systems Theory was selected for this study to designate Enrollment Services front-line staff as providers of valuable input in the environment surrounding the college as part of the decision-making cycle. Lunenburg (2010), states that open institutional systems are comprised of five core elements: inputs (front-line staff perspectives), the transformation process (formal institution approval process), outputs (policy and procedure creation), feedback (solicitation from stakeholders) and the environment (body of influence surrounding the college-faculty, staff, board members, community members, school districts, legislators, etc.). This study focused on

organizational input and feedback emphasizing how front-line staff are involved in the decision-making and communication of policy related to student services. The figure below provides a representation of the front-line staff, acting as street-level bureaucrats as part of the Open Systems Theory.

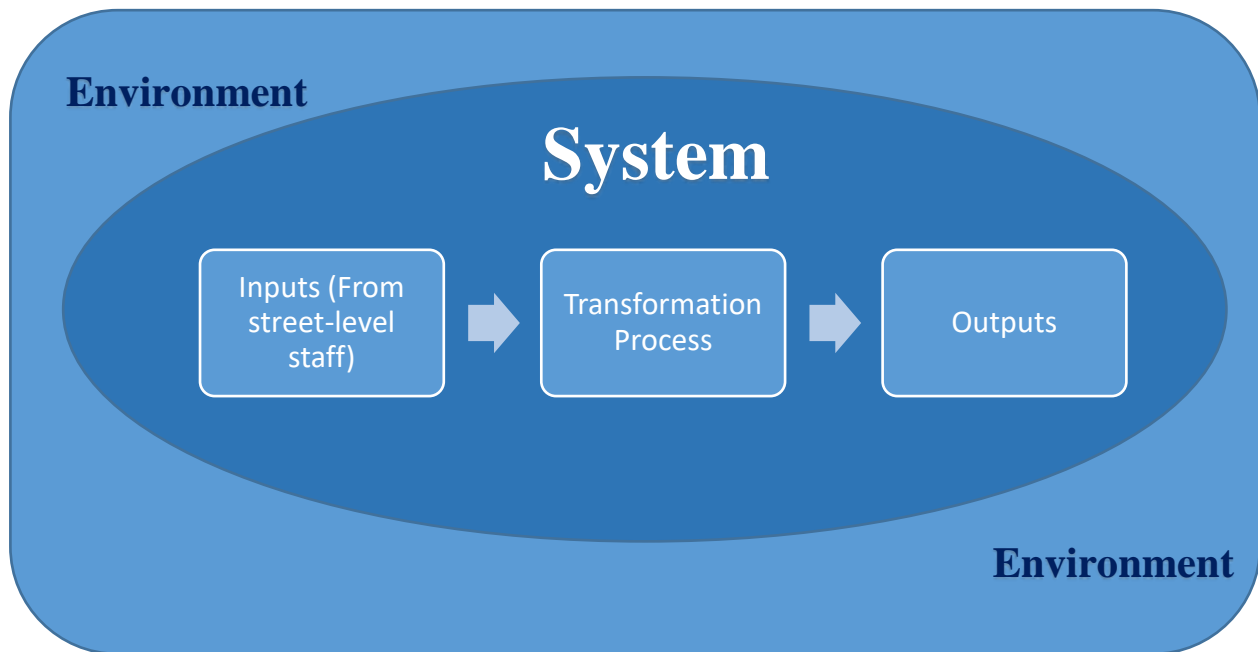


Figure 3: Open Systems Theory with front-line staff/street-level bureaucrats providing input.

Lunenburg (2010) provides that the four input sources are human resources (faculty and staff), physical resources (facilities), financial resources (tuition dollars) and information resources (governing policies/procedures and general knowledge). Leaders use these inputs in the transformation or change process to create outcomes or outputs. This is the stage in the organizational system where the “doing” actually takes place. The transformation process takes the input that is received and uses the information to update policy, rules and regulations for the institution. For a community college, an example of output would be an increase in college enrollment, the creation of new programming, or an increase in student success rates.

Feedback is another key element of Open Systems Theory. Feedback provides information needed to formulate change toward reaching goals and is essential in strategic planning, serving as a control for what is and is not working. Feedback also provides reassurance of things that are working in the operation to effectively meet targets and benchmarks and can be either positive or negative (Haines, 1972). For this study, front-line enrollment services staff served in both the input component of the cycle of decision-making as well as in feedback. Additionally, Haines (1972) states that feedback is a vital concept in order to understand how a system maintains consistency and stability. The final, possibly most important, and sometimes complicated element of the Open Systems Theory is environment. This environment entails social, political, and economic factors, forcing the organization to respond to these external demands (Lunenberg, 2010). When paired with the idea of street-level bureaucrats and the important role that front-line staff play in implementing policy and using discretion to provide services, the Open Systems Theory lends itself very well to the study.

Research Design

Case study research was used to conduct this study. This qualitative methodology was chosen so that the researcher could answer questions that come from the events and experiences that occurred to a specific group of people at a specific point in time (Yin, 2013). Case study research takes an in depth look into a real-life phenomenon within its natural and current state. These environmental conditions are not controlled, making them an important aspect of the actual research (Ridder, 2017). For this study, enrollment services front-line staff were the group of focus, serving as the selected participants as they served students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These staff members hold the formal title of Enrollment Specialist or Advisor, Enrollment Services. The description and analysis related to case study research provides an

advantage in that it provides a better than understanding of the “why” and “how” things occur (Fiss, 2009). Individual interviews were conducted with selected participants who were chosen exclusively for their formal paid position at the college and were serving students when the college shifted to remote teaching and services. These participants have extensive knowledge of student admission policies and procedures and are currently serving students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researcher also reviewed documents relative to this study, specifically institutional policies on student drop for non-payment, acceptance and use of electronic signatures, financial aid processes as well as information from the Department of Education. This provided a crosscheck for the researcher to compare topics that emerged from the interviews that were based on written institutional policy and procedures. A review of the college website was conducted to provide the researcher with background information specifically on demographic data, the history of the college as well as a look into the mission and vision of the institution. A review of the participants’ job descriptions and duties also took place as part of the selection process to ensure the appropriate front-line staff were included in the research. Individual interview transcripts were analyzed using open and thematic coding to identify emerging themes and patterns. Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to make sense of the cohesive responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic coding allows for a certain level of subjectivity from the researcher and is seen as a vital component of the research. Themes emerged from coding and by working with the new data.

Rationale and Significance

This study is significant because the perspectives of front-line staff are not typically built into the formal decision-making processes in higher education, yet it is the front-line staff who

are charged with implementing these decisions, often empowered to use their own discretion, shifting hierarchical control (Gofen, 2013). These staff members are referred to as street-level bureaucrats or what Barrett (2004) refers to as bureau-political players. Lipsky (1983) explains that these front-line public institution workers use discretion when serving the public, and in this study, community college students. Specifically, these workers must make, at times, quick and individual decisions for the good of the customer at hand. Street-level bureaucrats often work with very little resources and are put in situations where the demand will always increase to meet the supply of services available (Lipsky, 1983). According to Lipsky, (1983) when accumulated, the decisions of these front-line staffers come together to set the behavior of the institution and become policy through their use of individual discretion and service. Front-line workers are the ones serving students each day, setting the standard of service and perception for the college, resulting in unintentional influence over the student experience. However, front-line staff can choose not to implement the policy or procedures set forth by their leadership, making a situational decision that an alternative way of conducting business or offering service is more appropriate (Halperin & Clapp, 2006). This idea demonstrates that the position street-level employees are placed in each day to implement policies and follow procedures allows them to be a part of the decision-making process. Having the experience in serving and interacting with those directly impacted provides this unique opportunity (Lipsky, 1983). Therefore, it is imperative that the experiences of front-line staff are understood and formally constructed into the institution's decision-making process.

The Researcher

The researcher has worked in higher education for almost 14 years, specifically in the Student Services Division at one community college in the Southern United States and one

institution in the Midwest. He holds an Associate of General Studies Degree, a Bachelor of Science in Public Administration with a minor in Social Work and a Master of Arts in Administrative Leadership. Although the researcher and participants are employed by the same institution and work within the Student Services Division, there is no conflict of interest that may have bestowed bias on the study.

The researcher has the necessary skills and training to conduct the planned study. He has conducted multiple professional interviews as part of his undergraduate and graduate curriculum and in hiring staff. The researcher is a Student Services professional who specializes in enrollment management and has been responsible for student recruitment, admission, advising, registration and overall customer service at both institutions where he has led student-focused teams.

Assumptions

There are a few assumptions that could have formed before the study took place. For one, it was assumed that the more connected and supported students feel in the onboarding process of beginning college, the more likely it is that they will be retained in college and ultimately succeed in their educational goals. It was also assumed that since interviews were conducted to glean information from the research participants on their experiences in serving students, they were honest and forthcoming without fear of judgment or repercussion.

Definition of Terms

Persistence-Continued enrollment (or degree completion) at any higher education institution — including one different from the institution of initial enrollment — in the fall semesters of a student's first and second year, (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015).

Retention-Continued enrollment (or degree completion) within the same higher education institution in the fall semesters of a student's first and second year (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015).

Completion- Students who enter postsecondary education for the first time each year with diverse pathways the student traversed toward completion, as well as a degree or certificate completion rate within six and eight years of enrolling (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020).

Experiences-The events, situations, or correspondence that Enrollment Specialists and Advisors have been involved in with students while going through the college onboarding process.

Student Services-The divisions or departments that provide services and student support in higher education. Its purpose is to ensure the students growth and development during the academic experience (Ciobanu, 2013).

Student-Centric Policies and Procedures-Referencing a wide variety of educational programs, learning experiences, instructional approaches, and academic-support strategies that are intended to address the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students (Great Schools Partnership, 2014).

Onboarding- A continuous individualized journey that begins at college acceptance and ends when the student meets a goal of successfully integrating into the community (Reid, 2020).

One-Stop-Shop-A central location for students to seek assistance and a trained staff to either provide that assistance or make an appropriate referral (Latino, 2021).

COVID-19-Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory illness caused by a virus called SARS-CoV-2. Symptoms often include cough, shortness of breath, fever, chills, muscle

pain, sore throat, or new loss of taste or smell (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

Summary

In summary, COVID-19 reinforced the presence of barriers to students successfully completing the onboarding process, revealing gaps in how institutions of higher education provide services to students in practical and efficient ways. This study will help college leadership make informed decisions by taking into account the experiences of the front-line staff who provide services and guidance to students every day and who had to adapt to serving students through challenges brought on by the pandemic.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand how enrollment services staff at one community college in the Midwestern United States navigated and adapted internal processes and policies to support student onboarding during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Specifically, the study investigated staff perceptions of how students were impacted by the college's decision to shift to remote services and how the student onboarding process was affected. This study will provide valuable information to college leaders in designing and implementing student-focused policies and procedures that are logical and efficient for students. There is literature available on the topic of how barriers that students experience have an effect on overall student success in the onboarding process (e.g., admissions, financial aid, orientation, advising, registration, etc.). Additionally, there is increasing research focused on the impact that non-academic services have on student retention and completion. However, most of this work has revolved around four-year universities with little centered on what is taking place at local community colleges (Cooper, 2010).

This review of literature provides research on the unique role of the community college and its function within higher education. The review will include the following topics: history of the community college, community college governance and structure, Student Services structure, new student onboarding, negative implications to student success and COVID in higher education.

Search Strategy

The search strategy for this review of literature began by researching the history of the American community college for the historical context. This context gave the researcher the information needed to compare and contrast the community college mission and operation from past to present. The review included the function and structure of student services and the decision-making methods that influenced policy and procedures. Key terms searched included *history of community college, student services, new student onboarding, paying for college, college policies and procedures, barriers to student success and community college COVID-19*. Numerous databases were searched including ERIC, JSTOR, ProQuest and Google Scholar.

History of the American Community College

The Morrill Act of 1862 or the Land-Grant College Act provided 30,000 acres of land to every state for each of the state's congressional seats in order to finance the creation of colleges focused on agriculture and mechanic arts or A&M Colleges. The land was then sold by the states to either fund new schools or put the money into existing schools that would focus on the areas described in the act (Britannica, 2019). Also tied to the Land-Grant Act was the creation of Junior Colleges. These institutions were created on the belief that a more skilled workforce would mean a stronger and more profitable economy, and because of the opportunities made available through the Morrill Act, a larger number of students could take advantage of higher education offerings (Darby-Hudgens, 2012). Growing worldwide competition demanded more college graduates from United States higher education institutions during the early 1900s, but only one third of high school graduates went on to pursue this path (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). The Act, sponsored by Vermont Congressman Justin Morrill, provided appropriations for the established land-grant colleges and also led to the creation of

seventeen African American Colleges as well as thirty American Indian Colleges, further expanding the opportunities for a larger number of people (Britannica, 2019). One primary reason for such a low college-going rate during this time was that high school graduates did not have the financial means or desire to leave their hometown for higher education offerings elsewhere, so the fact that there were more options to attend college was a tremendous opportunity for local communities (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020).

In 1901, William Rainey Harper, President of the University of Chicago founded the first junior college. Harper and other college leaders began to realize that the first two years of college are approximately the same no matter where the learning takes place and that the freshman and sophomore years of college are not an integral part of university-level higher education (Drury, 2003). Harper spoke to this point at a National Education Association meeting and soon after, universities began to focus more on research rather than on teaching. This created a separation between the first two years and second two years of a college degree, which began to change the way Harper and other college leaders structured their programs. Harper began formalizing this separation when he divided the University into a junior college and senior college.

Community Partnerships

Harper collaborated with a friend and principal of Joliet High School, J. Stanley Brown to offer college-level courses as part of the high school curriculum. This historical buy-in from secondary partners resulted in the creation of the first independent public junior college in America (Drury, 2003). During this time, high schools sought ways to better serve their own communities through increased courses and programming offered at the high schools. This led junior colleges to flourish both privately and publicly, joined by the common goal of meeting

community needs (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020). Junior colleges were also connected to their communities in that they provided accessibility regardless of race, socioeconomic status or gender, which mirrors the community college mission and open door policies seen today (Thompson et al., 2018). Between 1932 and 1939, junior college enrollment increased by almost 50%. The states saw junior colleges as a great alternative to more expensive universities and students would rather be in school preparing for a career or learning a trade than to be unemployed (Callan, 1997).

Business Partnerships

Community colleges also exist to offer programs relevant to business and industry needs and provide transfer opportunities to four-year universities just as they have for over one hundred years (Baston, 2020). Community colleges are integral to the health of the communities they serve. They collaborate with local chambers of commerce and other local organizations to leverage resources and build strong partnerships. They host civic events and fundraisers and give back to the communities they were created to serve. Although community colleges are multifaceted in services and programming, the mission of the American community college is focused on three main areas of commitment: access, responsiveness to community demand, and equity for all who seek to be served (Troyer, 2015). The term “college” has grown to encompass more than a traditional four-year degree, giving students the opportunity to enroll in essential workforce training programs that lead to direct employment, further expanding the mission of access to education for all who have the desire (Mullin, 2017).

National Presence

In 1920, the American Association of Junior Colleges (AAJC) was founded to support these emerging institutions and gave junior colleges a national presence (Callan, 1997). U.S. Commissioner of Education Philander Claxton and higher education professional George Zook were instrumental in the creation of AAJC when thirty-four leaders from junior colleges first came together for a meeting in St. Louis. The goal of the AAJC was to accredit the junior colleges, address issues faced by leadership, and give overall guidance and support. However, the AAJC helped junior colleges define themselves and who they were within the higher education realm (Laden, 2021). In 1947, President Truman's Commission on Higher Education Report expressed the need for expanding higher education opportunities to Americans, specifically for women, veterans and low-income citizens with the goal of creating exemplary citizens within the workforce. The report stated that free and universal access to formal learning, in terms of student interest, ability, and need, must be a primary goal in American education (Callan, 1997). The call was the creation of degrees that would result in credentials for jobs. The junior colleges charged with doing this work were then called "community colleges" to emphasize their relationship to local community (Laden, 2021). Until this point, either the high school or the university in which they were a part had defined the junior college role. For instance, in 1925 forty-seven junior colleges were run by public school boards and primarily prepared students in local communities for transfer to a four-year university. Between 1950 and 1970, community college enrollment increased yet again from 217,000 to over 1.6 million, primarily driven by the Truman Report supporting the development of human talent in conjunction with the overall population increase (Callan, 1997).

Community colleges were designed to be open institutions, meaning no matter the placement score, socioeconomic status, gender or ultimate career aspirations, there is a place for everyone at a community college (Mullin, 2017). These institutions expand access for students ultimately seeking a baccalaureate degree made possible and facilitated through college and university partnerships, articulation agreements, and offering a wealth of services and resources for students (Martinez, 2017).

Community College Student Profile and Choice

With community colleges serving more students than any other sector of higher education, there are many reasons students choose to stay local (Turk, 2019). Community college students' reasons for choosing a two-year school are diversified, ranging from the affordability factor, to a more diverse student body, or to gain particular credentialing in a career-orientated program such as in workforce and industry training or by earning an Associate of Applied Science Degree. Using interviews and observational data, Holland (2020) conducted a study with twenty-nine first-generation college students and 22 high school counseling staff members to examine how students evaluated colleges during the search process and ultimately how they decided on which college to choose. It was found that first-generation college students engaged in three frames to weigh colleges: incidental, limited and personal fit (Holland, 2020). The process was informed by the student's cultural knowledge about college and social networks. Those students evaluating by the incidental frame were more focused on the actual act of attending college as opposed to the differences in the institutions. High school counselors directed their students to choose a college based more on personal fit, which was the least utilized mindset of the students researched (Holland, 2020). Often, these are students who have planned on attending college their entire life, driven by family ties, a particular career aspiration

demanding their attendance or simply because they wanted to experience true college life. Some universities have weeklong orientations where the institution focuses on developing communication, collaboration and communication to foster a community of learners (Poirier et al., 2007). Community colleges embrace the diversity that comes with a new entering class of students and understand the importance of creating new student orientations and onboarding experiences that are from a wide array of perspectives. This diversity brings a rich environment for intercultural awareness and competence for the broad array of students seeking education (Kirk, 2021). These initiatives aim to embrace the whole student, respecting and honoring what makes each student unique (Tucker & Hemphill, 2018).

Student services staff are available to answer questions and make the onboarding process for new students as seamless as possible. Student success starts with the admission process when expectations about their educational experience begin to develop (Calvano et al., 2019). The initial phase of the admission and enrollment process relies heavily on communication from the college, ensuring that students submit essential documents for admission as well as requirements for financial aid. Chen (2021) shares that this task can be especially cumbersome for first-generation college students. Being the first member of their family to attend college is exciting for the students and their family but can be a daunting endeavor, making the job of front-line staff even more vital. Many of these first generation students come from a diverse background. In fact, around thirty-six percent of first generation college students are of a minority. Over fifty percent of Hispanic college students are first generation and approximately forty percent of Native Americans and African Americans are first generations (Chen, 2021). Engle and Tinto (2008) revealed in their report on low-income, first-generation college students, that almost five million students in this demographic had enrolled in institutions of higher education over the

previous ten years, and the vast majority attended a community college or a for-profit institution. Their report concluded with offering guidance to practitioners on methods to better serve the population toward increased retention by creating a culture of connectedness and engagement both on campus and with relative staff and resources (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Trends in Serving Students

In the past, student services departments have been in different locations, staff reported to different areas of the college, and the technology, cultures, and metrics of success often differed (Felix & Griff, 2019). The new trend in serving students is to have a singular point of contact department for students to receive guidance and assistance in the onboarding and enrollment process. The staff that serve in this capacity offer front-line student services and meet the demands of students in real-time, meaning, the responses to their questions are conveyed in a quick and concise manner, usually via mobile device (text, email, app, social-media) and aid staff in building a relationship with students to show care as they provide information and guidance (Carr et al., 2021). The services provided to students must be mobile, intuitive and interactive (Altieri, 2019). This innovative department is cross-trained in admissions, financial aid and records and can provide services to students in a much shorter duration of time than the traditional higher education model (Walters, 2003). They truly are a one-stop shop for students both physically on campus as well as in theory. A student can come to campus and go to the one area designated for these processes to submit documents and complete all necessary requirements essential to get started. The one stop shop has changed the game in creating an easier, more student-centric process, relieving high anxiety for both students and parents not knowing where to go or what to do next. This model is usually the main communication hub for an institution in messages that both come in and go out. This integrated approach to providing

services to students was led by the University of Delaware in 1992 and mirrored those practices made common in banking (Lauren, 2006). Technology has allowed students to connect with staff in different ways; however, most students still prefer to come to campus to meet face-to-face with a representative. Although traditional students are not accustomed to conducting business in person or via the phone, this is still an option (Altieri, 2019). Behind the scenes staff in the integrated approach are connected via the same technology as the front-line staff and abide by common expectations of providing quality services to students (Felix and Griff, 2019).

Student Onboarding

COVID-19 has significantly affected the traditional process of onboarding first-time entering students. Colleges and universities have had to substantially adjust their programming and practices for this group. For instance, Georgetown University began supplementing its onboarding experience by creating a mobile app that new students are required to download onto their personal phones. The app uses a third-party provider to verify the student's identity with the school and provide information related to student onboarding (PYMNTS, 2020). San Diego State University rolled out virtual programs to allow new and prospective students to connect with staff and get answers to their questions quickly. Advisors held virtual office hours to make themselves available for students and conducted presentations using live-streaming and interactive technologies (Hyman, 2021). The sudden shift in course delivery modality to remote synchronous or 100% online learning resulted in students needing help with technology and access, increasing outreach to student services staff for assistance.

Community college onboarding entails the completion of the admission process and receiving acceptance, usually done only as a formality and to create excitement among incoming students. This recruiting tool is a great way for community colleges to embrace "student

acceptance” as a way to set their incoming class apart from those peers that chose not to pursue higher education offerings for reasons within or out of their control. Onboarding is the complete process a student goes through, from the point of application and acceptance to the college to beginning classes on the first day of the semester. After students are accepted to the college, they typically meet with their advisor to declare a major and choose classes based on placement scores. This process allows large numbers of students to begin taking college courses as quickly as possible (Jenkins et al., 2020). Typical scores used for placement are the ACT, SAT, Accuplacer or internal assessment used only at that particular college (Barnett & Reddy, 2017). Since community colleges mostly adhere to an open-door policy, no particular score is required for acceptance into the college, only for particular courses that require a certain score as a pre-requisite. Students must then be oriented to the college where they learn the basics of being a college student, including the services and resources that are available to them. Most of these services are based on student self-identification or selection; therefore, it is important for colleges to relay this information as early as possible so that students can begin taking advantage of what is available.

Supplemental Services

If students do not have access to adequate services, they are unlikely to develop an academic, emotional and social connection with the institution and are far more likely to give up their studies than their peers (Ciobanu, 2013). These services include individual guidance and navigation by student services staff. Community college students typically tend to self-advise, and rely on the course catalog and college website as well as friends and family to help them navigate the college environment (Jenkins et al., 2020). Higher education professionals are paying close attention to how these services influence a student’s overall success, specifically

looking at persistence, retention and completion rates (Cooper, 2010). Often times, students are connected with an advisor from the moment they apply and are accepted to the college. However, a percentage of students never gain the full benefits of these services either because they do not seek the services and resources available to them or do not know what is available to them in the first place (MDRC, 2010). Academic advising and counseling are the heart of student services at the community college and have been shown to be of utmost importance to both students and college administrators despite limited funding (Cohen et al., 2013). As colleges strive to link students with services and resources, staff are becoming more proactive in their approach. A study conducted at South Texas College in partnership with the Lumina Foundation and Achieving the Dream, highlighted an initiative where college employees were trained to go into lower-level math classes and visit with the students on the services and resources available to them (MDRC, 2010). These efforts also resulted in faculty referring students to more specialized services depending on the issue they experienced. Student use of on campus tutoring followed the program that South Texas called the Beacon Mentoring Program. Although this early intervention and information-sharing program did not result in the rate at which students passed remedial courses, a strong relationship was found between students who were involved in the program and lower dropout rates (MDRC, 2010).

There has been an increased focus on the services provided to students and how they impact student persistence, retention and completion (Cooper, 2010). These services typically start when a prospective student applies for admission to the college. In some instances, students are connected right away with an advisor to help provide guidance through the often times cumbersome enrollment process. Some of these services include financial aid, academic planning and advising, assistance in document submission and overall support to get started.

There are also specific services for select populations of students, which could include disability services, veteran's affairs, student life, programs for first-generation college students and parents, and counseling and wellness services.

Student services are crucial to the success of community college students. These services typically consist of academic guidance including educational assessments, educational planning, and major requirements, services such as tutoring, personal guidance, counseling and mental health treatment and career counseling. Supplemental services are also available at many community colleges where eligible students might receive childcare assistance, book vouchers, and funding opportunities for unforeseen circumstances (Purnell & Blank, 2004). For many students, it is important to go through a formal barrier identification process so that particular departments can reach out to students in the event that students do not immediately connect for help. This exercise is often done through a virtual assessment tool and in some cases, private interviews with an intake specialist or advisor where an informal conversation with the student helps identify potential fears, worries and preconceived ideas about college (Morton et al., 2018). This process is beneficial because often times, students have never thought about potential barriers to their individual success or how their perceptions could influence their success in college until they complete an entrance survey or visit with a college professional.

The community college embraces the whole student, going back to the original mission of meeting the needs of community members. Continuing the onboarding process, students are registered for their courses for the upcoming semester. Financial aid opportunities afford many students higher education opportunities that they otherwise would not have available and like low-income individuals in other situations, many low-income community college students live on the edge of economic hardship (Blank & Barr, 2011); therefore completing the financial aid

process gives many students the opportunity to earn federal Pell grants. Although the application to apply for federal aid is available to all undergraduate students, many aid eligible students do not complete the Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA), particularly those of low income (King, 2004). These federal gifts are based on family income and the estimated amount of funds they would be able to provide their student to attend college. This number, which is added to a student's financial aid file, is the EFC or Estimated Family Contribution amount (Park & Scott-Clayton, 2017). Scholarships have continued to expand on the state level and many community colleges now have Foundations that raise money and collaborate with donors from business and industry to fund student education. It is the hope of these donors that the investment in these students will create a pipeline from student to employee for many of the monetary contributors which can be tailored by the donor to facilitate and incentivize successful program completion (Skari, 2011). Additionally, and encouraged as a last option, is the opportunity for some students to take out student loans. Research on the issue of community college loan programs found that a student's access to federal student loans has positive impacts on student outcomes, specifically for low-income students. The same study using national data suggested that students who took out loans were more likely to transfer to a four-year college and less likely to work in their third year of college (Chochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2016). Receiving student loans is often the only way that a community college student can afford to attend college, but taking out these loans that students must begin to pay back six months after graduation are strongly discouraged by college staff unless absolutely necessary. Financial arrangements are usually secured before classes begin for the particular semester with flexible options including payment plans that stretch the duration of the enrolled academic semester (Gobel & Cetera, 2020).

Advising Toward Student Success

To prepare students for success, universities across the country have focused their efforts on providing academic and social support through implementing new programs. Just as resources are available to help first-generation college students, transfer services are provided for students planning to transfer to a four-year university after completing an associate's degree. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, approximately 80% of incoming community college students eventually plan to transfer to a four-year university to pursue a bachelor's degree; however, in 2011 only twenty-nine percent of community college students went on to transfer to a university within six years, emphasizing the importance of the student/staff relationship in persistence toward completion (Barrington, 2020). College advisors have found it extremely important to understand a student's end goal as in the event of student planning to transfer. This minimizes the time to completion and money spent on the degree, further emphasizing academic advising as one of the most successful retention strategies (McArthur, 2005). However, with such a small number of students who actually transfer compared to those who plan to, transfer services must work to remove barriers that are within the college's control. Transfer students face many of the same challenges that other community college students incur and usually stem from family obligations, under preparedness or financial hardships (Barrington, 2020). It is also important that career interest inventories be provided so that student success plans can be created that best align with their desires and ultimate goals. Although there is extensive literature on the best practices of academic advising, counseling students in this environment is ideal and should focus on long-term pathways (Karp, 2013). Regardless if a student plans to transfer from the community college after a certain point or go into the workforce directly following the earning of credentials, it is important for students to have the appropriate conversations with college staff as

soon as possible in their educational journey to map out their individual plan (Barrington, 2020). Higher education professionals can help students understand options and connect them with individual resources to set them up for success from the beginning. These student services can be found on most community college campuses today and is a trait that sets these institutions apart from the majority of traditional four-year universities. These wrap-around services, including tutoring and counseling, are vital to the overall student experience and the connection to people, resources and services relative to the individual student and have proven to be invaluable tools in overall student success and completion (Dembicki, 2019).

Orientations

New student orientation and onboarding (e.g., admissions, financial aid, orientation, advising, registration, etc.) are how colleges and universities inform students about information needed to succeed in the classroom. Pre-pandemic, colleges were beginning to look into different approaches to onboarding first-time entering freshman. For instance, a pioneer of innovative onboarding experiences has been Indian River State College (IRSC) in Florida. This large, public community college has refined the student onboarding process to include career exploration, in depth discovery of college programs and designated time to develop an individual plan forward (Kopko & Griffin, 2020). An applicant to IRSC selects a program from the eight meta-majors available to them at application and proceeds to new student orientation after acceptance where they have the opportunity to take a deep dive into a specific area of interest. The focus of career exploration continues through the college's mandatory student success course, which is required of all students with the intent to transfer after completing their two-year program. Students are also encouraged to meet with their assigned advisor to further expand their individual success plan (Kopko & Griffin, 2020).

In-person orientations provide students with the best experience in introducing essential resources to students (Stoebe & Grebing, 2020). A 2017 study of one hundred community colleges found that the majority of the institutions researched offered in-person orientation and onboarding experiences, although there were varying degrees of virtual supplementation as well as differences in the content covered by each program (Chan, 2017). The onboarding experience at a student's local community college can be very different from the experiences at a four-year university where attending orientation is sometimes optional (Jenkins et al., 2020). New student orientation programs are not just an exciting time; they have a significant impact on a student psychologically. Community college orientations range in duration and when they take place, with the majority occurring only a week or two before the start of classes. This gives students the most relevant information at a time when it is most applicable in their college career. Orientation programs have been tied to college enjoyment and higher grades and when surveyed, students who had a positive orientation experience were seventeen percent more likely to enjoy the overall student life experience at the college (Barger, 2018).

Once orientation is complete, students are prepared to begin their college journey. The heart of orientation is about the sharing of information geared to prepare students to be as successful as possible from the start. Connection is a common thread throughout orientation as to link students with the people and offices that can best offer support. Students have shown greater success once an appropriate connection has been established and a student has been integrated into the college community, a factor which contributes to student satisfaction, academic success and retention (Farrell et al., 2018).

Negative Implications for Success in the Enrollment Process

There are barriers that can prohibit students from successfully completing the college onboarding process and with multiple objectives and entry points, guidance from college staff is essential for students to discover a successful path forward (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). There are enough barriers that exist in life without the college admission process being a barrier as well. Many students find the college admission and enrollment process daunting and sometimes it is overwhelming enough that the student decides against college altogether. The community college seeks to identify barriers that the college itself can work to minimize so that students can flourish in their academic endeavors.

Although community college is an affordable option compared to a four-year university, the price tag may still be out of reach for many students and families. A recent survey of community college students conducted by the Center for Community College Student Engagement discovered that almost half of all student respondents said that the lack of finances is an issue that could cause them to drop out of college (Gewirtz & Thornton, 2018). Over sixty percent said that they live paycheck-to-paycheck, over fifty percent said they are carrying too much debt and almost half of those surveyed said they had run out of money in the last year (Gewirtz & Thornton, 2018). A large percentage of community college students do qualify for grants but that is only after the student checks every box for what the college and Department of Education demands in order to receive funds.

In a study conducted by CCSSE, Community College Survey of Student Engagement, forty five percent of those surveyed agreed that finances were a major factor in remaining enrolled in college. Additionally, over seventy-five percent of students felt that financial aid guidance was one of the most important student services available to them but was also the most

frustrating service they experienced (Cooper, 2010). The FAFSA is one the hardest things for students and families to complete, especially when reporting financial information, and is a task that is especially worrisome for first-generation college students. Many community colleges offer free workshops to the community where college staff guide parents and students through the FAFSA submission and provide training on matters of financial literacy. Best practices for financial educational for students and parents include workshops, online informational resource pages and individual advising (Eichelberger et al., 2017). The community college will usually collaborate with the local high schools to offer these workshops and help spread the word to encourage application completion by the deadline. The college sees this offering as a service to the community, whether the student decides to attend college locally or not. Taking the time to sit down and explain what it means to apply for federal financial aid is especially important to parents who are often already anxious about the process in preparing their child for higher education.

There are also flexible payment options, numerous scholarships at the community college and student loan options available to students. There are a number of families that fall into the category of making enough money that they do not qualify for federal aid while at the same time, not being able to afford to send their child to college. These families seem to inquire the most about options involving loans and flexible arrangements even with the lower cost of attendance.

A potential barrier that students do not always see is their ability to manage their schedules in the classroom and their schedules outside of the classroom and the pressures that come with that. The percentage of community college students who tend to have jobs is high, with many supporting a family while attending school at the same time (Valbrun, 2018). In fact, almost seventy-five percent of all community college students are enrolled part-time, most likely

as a result of the necessity to work (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021). The average age of a community college student is twenty-seven, higher than that of a student attending a four-year university with a much broader age range of adult students, thus increasing the likeliness of outside influential factors (Beer, 2018). Most colleges have a counseling center where students can receive professional counseling services at no cost. These center offerings range from individual and group therapy to more progressive forms of counseling, such as art therapy, which has been shown to reduce academic stress and aid in a student's self-evaluation and acceptance (Qiu-Qiang et al., 2021). Professional staff also offer workshops to get students acquainted with other students that may be facing similar struggles in their education that do not necessarily have anything to do with formal learning that takes place in the classroom. This provides students a connection group to share and support each other but also provides informal networking opportunities.

A barrier to a student's success, which also serves as tremendous opportunity, is indecisiveness. Researchers on the topic suggest that a student's restriction of self-concept and self-efficacy play a part in academic progression and in narrowing down a career path and deciding on a college major (Branch Moore, 2021). For these undecided students, selecting a major or career path is especially a difficult task and reinforces the necessity for career counseling (Santos & Goncalves, 2017). Community colleges give students more time to discover career opportunities and to learn more about themselves. This is also cost effective since the first two years of higher education are relatively the same in the courses that are required no matter the institution. Counselors and advisors are trained to facilitate in-depth thinking in the creation of student goals and career aspirations and help facilitate the discovery process through three dominant methods of advising, including developmental advising,

prescriptive advising and intrusive advising (Crocker et al., 2014). Using data from a 2017 study at a community college in the Northeast, intrusive advising was shown to be statistically significant in student retention and especially relevant in the growth of holistic student development (Rios, 2019). Staff asked important questions aimed to better direct the students' path in the shortest time frame possible and provide students with name of departments and people that can speak to the characteristics of a particular area of study. The community college is a great place for students to find out who they are as they begin think about future opportunities.

Lack of academic preparedness has also been shown to be a major barrier to student success with over one-third of incoming students needing remediation in English or Math. Students who place into these remedial courses are automatically put behind schedule, extending their time to degree completion (Long, 2014). Preparedness may have different meanings to students depending on the circumstance. For those students who are accepted into the college with placement scores that are below the standard for general transfer course placement, typically Math and English, they are enrolled into remedial courses. Of those students placed into these developmental courses, the majority do not complete their remedial requirements (Mejia et al., 2016). Around sixty percent of community college students are placed into at least one developmental education class (Bailey, 2009). A potential college student who did not do well in high school may think they are not cut out to pursue a college degree, making them feel discouraged or defeated before they even step foot in the classroom.

College is intimidating for many, with the idea that college is only for those who had high GPAs in high school and graduated top of their class, resulting in a lack of confidence. Research has found that self-efficacy and believing in one's self to be successful have a direct

correlation to how a student identifies academically, their motivation, aspirations, achievement and overall college persistence (Multon et al., 1991). Community college is a place for everyone regardless of background and educational intent. If students do feel academically underprepared, free tutoring and workshops are often offered on many community college campuses where classes are typically much smaller, allowing for more intimate conversations between students and their faculty with a more open and honest dialogue.

Staff are also available for students to check in and share what they are going through, either with the advisor who they have formed a relationship with or with a professional counselor at the institution. Porter (2011) revealed that community college students who sought counseling services on the campus were more likely to remain in college when compared to their peers. In fact, these students were retained at seventy six percent, compared to the general population with a retention rate of 62.7 % (Porter, 2011). The feeling of not being fully prepared is common among community college students; however, because of the diverse student body, students are sure not to be alone in these feelings. With opportunities to get up to speed if in fact students are truly underprepared for particular courses, they can quickly get on track toward achieving their goals. Other barriers to success as self-reported by students included: difficulties with taking online courses, faculty, college rigor and registering for courses as seen in the data chart below.

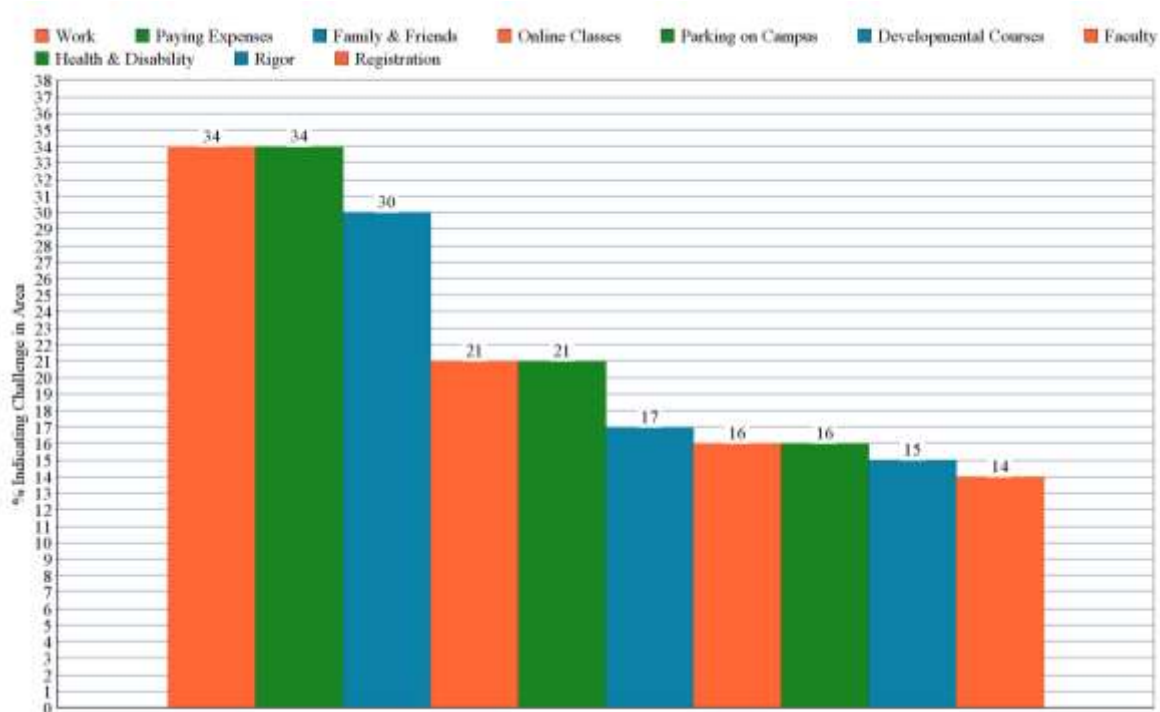


Figure 5. Student self-reported barriers to success (Porter & Umbach, 2019).

There are many factors that influence whether or not a student decides to enroll in college, remain enrolled and ultimately complete, and with high attrition rates of two-year college students, college administrators are concerned (Brown, 2020). Low retention and completion rates directly impact college financials in support of college services and resources (Schneider & Yin, 2011). Therefore, community college staff seek to identify and remove as many barriers as possible for students, especially when those barriers are within the college's ability to alter.

COVID and Higher Education

COVID-19 has greatly affected higher education and how college staff serve students, affecting more than ninety-four percent of the world's student population (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). According to data, over 4,200 higher education institutions and 25.7 million students across the United States were affected by the pandemic (Kelly, 2020). These high reproduction

and transmission rates forced leaders to implement strategies to help reduce the number of infections and for colleges and universities, resulted in the closing of campuses and shifting learning into an online, virtual environment (Day et al., 2020). The virus and sudden shift in operation has resulted in a negative financial impact on institutions in the United States, with approximately thirty billion dollars in lost revenue recorded (Burki, 2020).

For many community colleges, especially those in rural communities, driving to campus and having a sit down, face-to-face conversation with someone on the college campus was the way students conducted business, but was no longer an option. There was also very little time to communicate with students, faculty and staff on what the landscape of this new remote world would look like. Some colleges were able to survey students asking of immediate needs such as technology, now essential in a virtual learning environment (Day et al., 2020). After mandates were enacted that sent employees off-site to work remotely, colleges had to change how they were reaching both current and prospective students. Until this time, campus waiting areas were filled with students waiting to visit with staff on matters pertaining to admissions, financial aid or advising. With campuses closed to students and the public, this was no longer an option. Colleges began to utilize technology to meet with their students, holding virtual sessions via video conferencing through tools such as Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Zoom, Canvas and Blackboard (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Colleges found themselves piecing together technologies to allow for remote work in hopes to continue serving students. Large office desktop computers were replaced for laptops and hand-held phones were transitioned to electronic phones accessible from staff computers. Faculty and staff held meetings virtually to maintain some kind of normalcy within their operations. Staff were fully outfitted with the technology appropriate to perform duties safely from their homes as levels of productivity

fluctuated while employees trying to adapt to a new norm. Students were completely tossed about with face-to-face, on site courses transitioning to either asynchronous or live streaming remote learning (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020).

Graduating high school seniors were unsure of their future plans. Not knowing what was going to happen with the pandemic, some students rushed to enroll in college and continue on their path while others decided to take a gap year, many getting jobs to save money for the unknown and contribute to family expenses, some helping their parents who had lost job due to the pandemic (Kim, et al., 2021). A study of 487 prospective college students were surveyed on their educational plans after high school graduation. Of the respondents, one in six high school seniors who were planning to attend college decided on a different plan while three out of five surveyed, though planning to still enroll in college, questioned their ability to attend their first-choice school (Hoover, 2020). Students who decided to continue on their educational path found themselves completing everything online, including admissions, financial aid, records and course registration. These students were not allowed to come to campus and even if they did, there were no staff on site to serve them. College recruitment staff conveyed information virtually to prospective students. Recruitment practices that typically were conducted face to face and covered general college information geared at increasing enrollment, was now offered exclusively via online formats (Deeb-Sossa et al., 2021). First-time entering students completed online orientations, getting them acclimated to resources and services that for the most part, were previously in person and on campus. Community colleges loaded most of this content on the college's website, including information on programs of study and advising, additional information on orientation, college success courses, career services as well as other pertinent resources (Jenkins et al., 2020). College for these students did not feel real. In fact, most students

that began college in the fall of 2020 have still never stepped foot onto their college's campus, only knowing what it looks like from previous visits or pictures they have seen online. Students were forced to meet with advisors online or by phone and have never seen their instructors in person.

Front line student services staff were also hit hard with change. These staff members work at a community college because they love what they do. They enjoy interacting with students and providing guidance that will help students get to where they want to go. For them, working remotely has taken something away from them, creating a longing to get back to the days before COVID-19. So much of what was done to help and connect students was done on campus and COVID-19 took that all away. Community colleges nationwide have seen a decrease in enrollment, primarily because students are fearful of both what they do and do not know. COVID-19 has created uncertainty that both graduating high school seniors and nontraditional students have never seen before and it is wreaking havoc on their individual lives and on college enrollment. With great challenges come great opportunity and much has been learned through the COVID-19 pandemic that college leaders should take advantage of for the betterment of their students, employees and community.

Summary

The American community college was founded on the idea that everyone in the United States should have the opportunity for higher education no matter his or her age, gender, socioeconomic status, race or where they choose to live. The community college has been an accepting, melting pot for learners for over 120 years now and the mission remains the same, to meet the needs of the community. The community college is the community's college. It was built in the community, for the community and the primary focus should always remain to serve

the community. With forty-nine percent of students who earn a bachelor's degree gaining their start at a community college, the value to students and communities is vast (Turk, 2019).

As community college enrollment decreases during COVID-19, college leaders should take the necessary steps to evaluate current policies and procedures and to amend them if they are not in the best interest of the student. COVID-19 forced colleges to do things differently, but these same institutions should have been doing things differently a long time ago to best meet the needs of their students. All community college students are different. They come from different backgrounds, different learning environments and come with traits and characteristics that will only serve them well along their educational journey. However, colleges must pivot to create rules and regulations that promote college enrollment, increase student persistence, retention and completion and provide students with the higher education experience that they deserve and that the college can provide. This experience along with their academic learning will create the citizens and labor force that President Truman wrote about many decades ago. He aspired for the United States to be a place of accessibility to be educated, to pursue passions and give back to society and he was confident these institutions could do just that. Although the literature is limited on community college student services during the COVID-19 pandemic, history provides us with the foundation that colleges need to change the culture of the community college and truly serve as the beacon of hope for education attainment during a time that has taught the world so much about dreams, aspirations and common good.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand how student services staff at one community college in the Midwestern United States navigated and adapted internal processes to support student onboarding (e.g., admissions, financial aid, orientation, advising, registration, etc.) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiences were defined as the events, situations, or correspondence that front-line Enrollment Services have been involved in with students while striving to provide quality service and guidance as they work in a remote environment because of COVID-19. This chapter is divided into sections to address the chosen research design of the study based on the guiding research questions, the theory used to frame the study, site and participant selection, and data collection and analysis procedures.

Research Questions

The perceptions of staff provided information about how staff navigated the changes within student services during COVID-19. The study examined operations within the college in reference to the admission, onboarding, and enrollment phases of becoming a student. The following research questions provided guidance to this qualitative study:

1. How do staff describe successful student onboarding during COVID-19?
2. How do staff describe the efficacy of the institution's policy and procedures before and during COVID-19?
3. How have student services changed since COVID-19?
4. What is the significance of the changes made for the students?
5. What is the significance of the changes made for the staff?
6. What is the significance of the changes made for the institution?

Site and Sample

The community college where the research took place is in a more urban area, although it serves students in surrounding rural communities and school districts. The institution serves approximately 10,000 students in a fall semester between “for credit” students and those enrolled in workforce and continuing education programs. The college itself is a relatively young institution and saw increased enrollment in the last few years before the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost 60% of the students identify as female and 40% as male. The majority of students are white with the college having a relatively high population of Hispanic or Latino students. Many students attending the college are first-generation students with many of the overall student body planning to transfer to a four-year institution for bachelor degree attainment.

Student Services is a division of the college led by the vice president of Student Services. The vice president reports directly to the president of the College and oversees the departments of Dean of Students, Enrollment Management, Financial Aid, Records and one satellite full service location. For the purpose of this research study, Enrollment Services was the department of focus as referenced in the organizational chart below.

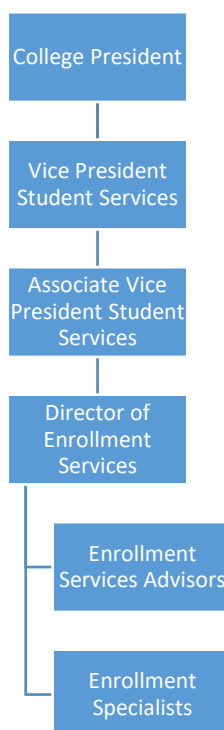


Figure 2. Student Services organization chart with enrollment services emphasis.

The Function of Enrollment Services

Enrollment Services uses a centralized one-stop shop model to provide support for students in every facet of the onboarding and enrollment process. This department is the largest in Student Services and is comprised of individuals that provide guidance for all things related to enrollment, including admissions, financial aid, advising and records. The staff are cross-trained operationally to serve as guides and resources to students needing help with the often daunting and cumbersome process. Staff understand that every student has individual needs and work to meet those needs based on formalized training and individual student circumstances.

The chart below provides a visual of the structure of the Enrollment Services department, which is led by the director whose counterpart is the quality assurance manager, serving as the liaison between the processing teams of records and financial aid. The quality assurance manager

sets the standard of customer service for the front-line staff at the service front desks as well as by phone, email and text.

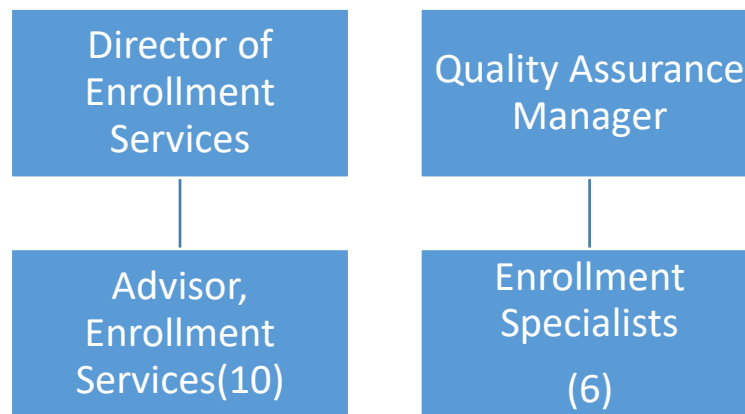


Figure 6. Chart depicting the structure of the enrollment services, front-line staff.

Researcher's Perspective of Research Site

Student Services Pre-COVID-19

The college campus looks very different today than it did before COVID-19 and before March 2020, when the college closed its doors and went virtual. It was common to hear the roar of students laughing, talking, and enjoying the company of their peers in between classes or while taking a break for lunch. There was also typically a line of students waiting to be served in Enrollment Services (one-stop-shop) to get their questions answered or receive guidance on admissions, financial aid or advising. Students would wait in these lines, at times in single file, front to back, until the next Enrollment Specialist was available at which time they were greeted with a smile you could see, and the physical welcome of a handshake. New students completed the admission process, submitting paper documents with wet signatures. They were welcomed on campus with hundreds of their peers for orientation and open house events and walked crowded hallways to get to their next mandatory training session. They played games, ate lunch, networked and met new friends, joined student clubs and organizations, toured facilities and

found their classrooms. Students danced in the plaza, took pictures with the mascot and proudly proclaimed through social media that they had begun their journey as a college student. They met with academic and enrollment services advisors in private offices, face to face, not separated by Plexiglas, and they chose to attend classes in person, working course by course to fulfill their lifelong dream of higher education.

Student Services Post-COVID-19, Today

Post-COVID-19 the college is quiet, there are very few students on campus and the words you can hear spoken are muffled by the cloth face-coverings they are wearing to protect themselves and others from contracting the COVID-19 disease. There are no lines of students to be served, only a few seeking services here or there. Students that are on campus are welcomed with “smiling eyes” and with no physical welcome of a handshake. Social distancing signs serve as reminders for faculty, staff and students to be cognizant of space with hand sanitizing stations around every corner. Current students submitted their documents via hard copy mail or took pictures of their forms with their cell phones and scanned them to staff via the newly created electronic drop box. They signed required forms via a newly purchased electronic signature provider in accordance with the newly created electronic signature college policy. Students completed orientation online and never met their advisor in person. They took virtual tours of the campus for their one or two courses that were on-site and were provided trainings on how to use Zoom and Microsoft Teams for remote-synchronous learning. They were not a part of any on-campus events, were not able to hear about college clubs and organizations and never got to meet other new students or take a picture with the college mascot to share with friends and family. Students connected with advisors over the phone, email or by videoconference to complete the onboarding process and receive their semester course recommendations.

The days before COVID-19 on campus were exciting, loud and purposeful. Post COVID-19, the days are dull, quiet and confusing. Most human-to-human interaction has now been replaced by virtual methods of communication, resulting in students not having to travel to campus to receive services. COVID-19 forced colleges to do things differently to continue to serve students. This shift, although delayed in some areas, proved to be good for student access.

Decision-making at Site

Decision-making at the institution is situational and often occurs in different settings, meaning that decisions happen dependent on the situation at hand or by division or department. College policies are owned by the various institutional divisions and are evaluated on a rotational and as needed basis. College-wide policies that are owned by these divisions are vetted and approved by Cabinet and those at the dean level before implementation. It is the responsibility of these leaders to be the representation of their area and share information from their subordinates and teams with the approval groups so that a holistic view is representative of the needs of students and individual departments. Department and division decisions are made independently from other college units when the outcomes only affect that group. It is the culture of the institution however, that the policies and procedures that impact multiple areas are discussed before a decision is made that could result in negative consequences for any involved.

Communication Pathways at the Site

Decisions at the college are communicated in various methods. Often, college wide information is shared by the president monthly by email or as needed, dependent on the content of the message. It is the responsibility of the division vice presidents to share with division leadership which trickles down through the various staff. Communication at the institution is reliant on leadership to share necessary information consistency within their specific populations

of staff in alignment with other college leadership, which fails sometimes depending on the priorities and communication style of the individual leader. Institutional policy, however, is very clear with all staff having real-time access to view all approved and implemented college rules and regulations. All divisions and departments have staff meetings to share information and gather feedback but the process college-wide is not systematic, leaving methods of communication delivery up to the various units.

Challenges during Pandemic

On March 13, 2020, the faculty and staff began working remotely for what was anticipated to be two weeks. Contingency plans for offering remote advising, document submission, payment, and financial aid had been discussed among the different Student Services departments with IT staff, but they were not approved when the college closed its campus at the start of COVID-19. Prior to COVID-19, the college did not allow electronic signatures for processing paperwork. Subsequently, the college was virtual for six months before having the capacity to accept electronic student signatures on required documents. The IT department in conjunction with Student Services leadership drafted the policy and took it forward for approval. A policy was created and approved by college leadership and took six months to implement the process.

Another challenge that student services faced was the college's policy to drop students for non-payment before each semester began. Typically, students that had not secured payment arrangements or paid their tuition in full were dropped 3 weeks before the first day of class. The wisdom of this policy has been debated for years by Student Services and Business Services but during COVID-19, it proved to be especially problematic for students and front-line staff. It is also important to note that front-line staff were charged with implementing these policies and

procedures that they had no voice in creating. These staff members were the ones who had to tell students that their signed admission documents must be mailed in because electronic signatures could not be accepted and that they would be dropped from their courses if they did not secure payment by a certain date. The proposal was made again by Student Services leadership and the public relations team to not drop students during the pandemic and provide more flexibility with down payments and deadlines in which students must pay their bill. After three semesters into the pandemic, a compromise was made that allowed for one final drop for non-payment the end of the first week of classes. This gave students approximately three more weeks to secure finances and make payment before being dropped from all of their courses for the semester.

Research Design

Case study research was the qualitative approach used in designing the research study. This qualitative methodology was chosen so that the researcher can answer questions that come from the events and experiences that occurred to a specific group of people at a specific point in time (Yin, 2013). For this study, Enrollment Services front-line staff were the group of focus as they served students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews were conducted one-on-one between the researcher and selected participants. Twelve participants was the target number selected with a maximum of sixteen to ensure data saturation. Saturation, a core principal in qualitative research, is used to decide when there is sufficient information from the study for the researcher to have a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Hennink & Kaiser, 2019). The staff were selected from the Enrollment Services team at the community college where the study took place. These staff members have a strong knowledge of general student admission, onboarding and enrollment policies and procedures, and have had first-hand experiences serving students during the COVID-19

pandemic. The questions posed to participants were open-ended and designed to solicit answers to specific questions associated with potential barriers brought on by the necessity to work in a remote environment because of the virus. Employees' responses were categorized as either a barrier to students, a practice conducive to successful student enrollment, or a neutral response. The responses were coded and analyzed to identify emerging themes. These themes will aid in the creation of a formal report that will be presented to college leadership with the objective to facilitate amendments to non-student-focused college policies and procedures that impede a student's successful completion of the onboarding and enrollment process.

The researcher also reviewed documents relative to this study, specifically institutional policies on student drop for non-payment, acceptance and use of electronic signatures, financial aid processes as well as information from the Department of Education. This provided a cross-check for the researcher to compare topics that emerged from the interviews that were based on written institutional policy and procedures. A review of the college website was conducted to provide the researcher with background information specifically on demographic data, the history of the college as well as a look into the mission and vision of the institution. A review of the participants' job descriptions and duties also took place as part of the selection process to ensure the appropriate front-line staff were included in the research. Individual interview transcripts were analyzed using open and thematic coding to identify emerging themes and patterns. Thematic analysis, seen as a vital component of the research, allowed the researcher to make sense of the cohesive responses and allowed for a certain level of subjectivity from the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes emerged from coding and by working with the new data.

The Researcher

The researcher has worked in higher education for almost 14 years, specifically in the Student Services Division at two community colleges, one in the Southern United States and the other in the Midwest. He holds an Associate of General Studies Degree, a Bachelor of Science in Public Administration with a minor in Social Work and a Master of Arts in Administrative Leadership. Although the researcher and participants are employed by the same institution and work within the Student Services Division, there is no conflict of interest that may have bestowed bias on the study.

The researcher has the necessary skills and training to conduct the planned study. He has conducted multiple professional interviews as part of his undergraduate and graduate curriculum and in hiring staff. The researcher is a student services professional who specializes in enrollment management and has been responsible for student recruitment, admission, advising, registration and overall customer service at both institutions where he has led student-focused teams.

Selection of Participants

Purposive sampling was the technique used to identify participants for the study. This technique is used extensively in qualitative research and involves selecting individuals who have specific knowledge of and experience with the research topic (Cresswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). Enrollment Specialists and Enrollment Advisors within the Enrollment Services Department in the Student Services Division of the community college of focus will make up the participant pool. These staff members will either have the title of Enrollment Specialist or Enrollment Advisor. Participants were chosen based on their formal job description and typical front-facing roles at the college as seen in the two charts below:

Position Description: Enrollment Specialist-Front Desk

The Enrollment Specialist working at the front desk of the Enrollment Support Center assists students with navigating the enrollment steps including Admissions, Student Records, Financial Aid, Advising, and other college processes and procedures. The purpose of this position is to ensure students complete the enrollment process. The Enrollment Specialist working at the front desk of the Enrollment Support Center reports to the Director of the Enrollment Support Center.

Enrollment Support Specialist-Front Desk Responsibilities and Duties
Provides superior customer service to students visiting the Enrollment Support Center
Understands the entire enrollment process including admissions, student records, placement, financial aid, advising, and other resources and student services available
Makes appropriate service and resource referrals including disability resources, career pathways, veterans, tutoring, etc.
Provides accurate information to prospective and currently enrolled students in the areas of admissions, financial aid, student records, scholarships, treasury services, new student orientation, advising, and registration
Triages students to determine need to meet with Advisors in Enrollment Services and make appointments as necessary
Assists students to complete FAFSA, setup payment plans, register for classes, view needed documents, etc.
Enters placement/test scores into Student Information System (SIS)
Assesses testing fees for students
Assists with Enrollment Services outreach events

Answers Enrollment Support student emails
Works closely with other members of Student Services to facilitate student recruitment, enrollment, and retention efforts
Maintains a working knowledge of Student Service resources, including software, equipment, websites, career assessments, testing, and class schedules
Participates in educational/professional opportunities provided for staff to facilitate continued learning of best practices
Rotates to the Enrollment Support Center Call Center as needed
Scans and indexes documents
Performs other duties related to the position as required or directed
Desired Professional Competencies
Associate Degree or equivalent work experience
Preferred experience working in higher education

Figure 7. Job responsibilities and duties for Enrollment Specialist.

Position Description for Advisor: Enrollment Services

The Advisor in Enrollment Services will participate in an integrated, cross-trained team approach in providing strategies to promote student success with an emphasis on student experience and perspective. This position will serve students by meeting individual needs toward educational attainment and act as a guide for in-depth navigation of the enrollment process. This includes but is not limited to admissions, student records, financial aid, academic advising, registration, and other college processes and procedures. The advisor has in-depth knowledge of

requirements and works with students to ensure they are prepared to learn. This position promotes outstanding customer service in order for students to successfully complete every facet of the enrollment process. This position is governed by state and federal laws and agency/institutional policy. The Enrollment Advisor reports directly to the Director of Enrollment Services.

Advisor: Enrollment Services
Provides superior customer service to students via phone, email, appointments and walk-ins in all areas of Enrollment Services at all assigned locations
Understands and maintains extensive knowledge of enrollment process in order to assist students with the following: admissions, records, financial aid, academic advising, registration and setting up payment arrangements
Serves all students including On Campus Concurrent by following applicable procedures Meets with students to discuss academic and/or career goals, semester course recommendations, degree audits, and other education related topics
Schedules and administers New Student Orientations
Maintains Advising and Enrollment Support email box and corresponds with students as needed
Facilitates semester classroom presentations as requested by academic department
Aids in the planning and implementation of student events including support for recruitment and retention efforts through outreach and community involvement
Processes student records as applicable to the student enrollment process
Makes appropriate service and resource referrals including Disability Resource Center, Career Pathways, Veterans Resources, Student Success Center, Counseling and Wellness Center, etc.
Maintains and manages shared personal Success Planner and Outlook calendar of dates available for appointments
Adheres to policies and procedures for Student Services and the department. Maintains policy and procedure manuals and communicates applicable information to other staff members
Maintains a working knowledge of student service resources, including software, equipment, websites, career assessments, transfer information, placement testing, and class schedules

Participates in educational/professional opportunities provided for staff to facilitate continued learning of best practices
Serves as backup to service windows and call center as needed
Performs other duties related to the position as required or directed
Desired Professional Competencies
Bachelor's Degree or equivalent
Preferred experience working in higher education

Figure 8. Job responsibilities and duties for Advisor, Enrollment Services.

Data Collection Technique and Procedures

Case study research was used in this study through the primary technique of formal interviews with participants, aimed at gathering information pertaining to their perceptions of student barriers to the enrollment process as well as data relative to practices conducive to a student's successful completion of the enrollment process as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interview questions were determined to align with the six guiding research questions, using participant responses as input as a major component of the Open Systems Theory of decision-making and recognizing staff as street-level bureaucrats. The specific questions asked were developed to gain fruitful information from the front-line experts relative to perceived student barriers as a result of the pandemic and the college's decision to transition to a remote environment. It was also vital that the researcher was provided information on where front-line staff fit into the college's decision-making process and what input they have in policy and procedure creation. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format based on questions outlined in the interview guide (See appendix A). Interviewees had the opportunity to respond to the open-ended questions freely and openly in a way in which they are comfortable sharing. This format gave participants a prompt to gauge their thoughts in conveying their experiences. These interviews were conducted virtually to facilitate free and confidential speech and to allow for

efficient and high quality recording and transcription. Conversations were held one-on-one with only the interviewee and sole researcher. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Interviews took place during work hours at a prescheduled time when the interviewees were available and only after supervisor approval was granted.

Data Analysis

Narrative analysis was used in the research study derived from personal stories conveyed by participants on their experiences while serving community college students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This form of analysis is widely used in qualitative research to make diverse, rich and informative interpretations by relying on several different elements to draw a conclusion (Allen, 2017). The elements of narrative analysis include the story based on personal experiences of what happened, who the story is about and who is involved, and from whose perspective is the story presented (Holley & Colyar, 2009). A benefit of qualitative case study research and using narrative analysis in the study is the ability provided to come to a conclusion based on diverse experiences within the construct of a common phenomenon and a specific place and time (Ayres et al. 2003). An audit trail can be provided which shows the complete process of data collection and analysis performed by the researcher to strengthen the study's replication by understanding the researcher's logic (Carcarry, 2009). The flowchart below outlines the process taken to more explicitly describe the collection of data and analysis:



Figure 9. Simple flowchart of data collection and analysis process.

Limitations

The researcher, a current administrator at the college within Student Services, interviewed staff that although he does not directly oversee, the participants may not have felt as comfortable being candid with their responses to the questions they are asked.

Another limitation of the research is that students are not a part of this study. To understand the full scope of student services during the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be necessary to interview students in a similar manner that the researcher plans to glean responses from enrollment services staff in this study. What staff perceive to be barriers to the student onboarding process and continuation of service during the pandemic may be different than what students actually experienced. Therefore, it would be interesting to gain their lived experience of receiving enrollment services as part of the onboarding and enrollment processes during the pandemic.

Delimitations

Participants in this study were knowledge experts in student services with the necessary skills and experience demanded by their positions. Participants were those employees that have had firsthand student interaction serving the college as an Enrollment Specialist or Enrollment Advisor during COVID-19 and can share information about the situations they have encountered. Student Services staff members who do not meet this criterion were excluded from the study. This delimitation will allow the study to be replicated in many environments or fields where experiences were analyzed to gather data for a specific purpose. By sharing the informed consent form with all participants before the study takes place, clear expectations were expressed for all involved, outlining the scope of the study. The researcher will also strictly adhere to the interview guide so that all participants are asked the same questions in the same manner. To

maximize the candor of the interview process, the researcher will preface the meeting with a brief overview of the study, reiterating the intent as well as reminding participants about information included in the consent notification form.

Trustworthiness & Ethical Assurances

The collection of data protocol was followed in this study and only took place after approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Arkansas was given. Participants in the study remained anonymous throughout and verbal consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. The researcher shared information with each participant, outlining their participation before interviewing occurred (See Informed Consent Form in Appendix). The names of those interviewed in the study were not used in any circumstance. Confidentiality issues were addressed at three different instances throughout the research study: during data collection, data analysis and in the dissemination of results (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). All documents, transcripts and audio recordings were retained electronically and password protected by the researcher, any hard copy materials were stored in a fire-proof, locked safe only accessible by the researcher including personal field notes taken throughout the study. All documents, both hard copy and electronic, were disposed of after a predetermined period. Audio recordings and transcripts were deleted. Member checking was utilized, giving all participants an opportunity to review transcripts and make changes where necessary before continuation of the study. As an added measure to ensure the credibility and validity of the study, the researcher consulted with an academic dean as a peer for review who did not possess a vested interest in the study other than to be used for information and who could provide feedback to the researcher freely and without bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide the criteria for ensuring the trustworthiness of the study, detailing the following components: credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability. Multiple sources of data were used in the research to develop an understanding of staff perceptions of serving students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The method, known as triangulation, was used to test the validity of the information received from different sources (Patton, 1999). Theory or Perspective Triangulation was used to validate the data since multiple perspectives were shared with the researcher through the interview process (Denzin, 1978). This method allowed the researcher to ensure that the data was rich in content and the study was comprehensive.

Transferability

This study is not only relevant for institutions of higher education, to glean information from and make positive change, but for other non-profits, public service departments and those in private business and industry. COVID-19 has affected every sector in one way or another and by building the experiences of front-line workers into the decision-making process, the organization should have a broader knowledge of how best to meet their clients' or customers' needs through relevant policy and practice. Thick description, or, the interpretive characteristic of description, was used by the researcher to provide an in-depth account of the data collection technique and experiences (Schwandt, 2001). Holloway, (1997) states that thick description strives to provide the reader, a sense of the thoughts, emotions, and perceptions of those participating in the research study.

Confirmability & Dependability

Participant responses were conveyed to the researcher from their own personal experiences and based on their perspective with no influence of bias from the researcher or other external factors. An audit trail shows the complete process of data collection and analysis performed by the researcher, and according to Rice and Ezzy (2000), allows others to realize the significance and logic of the study. Through this method, the researcher was able to assure that the rationale and conclusions drawn were based on participant responses and were expressed accurately by the researcher in the write-up and discussion of results. Inquiry audit could be conducted by an outside individual where they would take an in-depth look into the study to ensure results are consistent and could be repeated by another researcher or in a different environment or setting than the original study.

Summary

This chapter provides the detailed methodology that was used in the qualitative inquiry of staff experience of student services during COVID-19 through case study research. The intent is that the information acquired through the research will identify potential barriers in the student onboarding process as perceived by front-line staff in Enrollment Services. This data, received through semi-structured interviews with Enrollment Specialists and Enrollment Advisors, were analyzed to identify common themes that arise among participants. This data will then be compiled, and a report presented to college leadership with a list of recommendations for policy and procedure revisions. This study provides an opportunity for college administration to collaborate with front-line staff to create a more student-focused experience and onboarding process.

Chapter Four: Findings

Purpose and Research Questions

With the duration of time it takes for a policy to be created or amended or procedures to be vetted at the research site, this exacerbated the inability to move quickly in some college divisions and departments, most specifically, Enrollment Services. COVID-19 has challenged the traditional methods institutions of higher education use to serve students. While face-to-face courses could pivot to online offerings relatively quickly, many administrative units were unprepared to meet the needs of remote students. Therefore, there are gaps in how institutions of higher education provide services to students in ways that are practical and efficient.

The purpose of this study is to understand staff perceptions of serving students during changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic at a singular community college in the Midwestern United States. The focus was on staff perception of the student onboarding experience as students navigate college policies and procedures during the pandemic. “Experiences” are defined as the events, situations or correspondence that Enrollment Specialists and Advisors have been involved in with students while going through the college onboarding process in a remote environment during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

This chapter provides the results of the case study research conducted to answer the overall questions that guided this study.

Research Questions
1. How do staff describe successful student onboarding during COVID-19?
2. How do staff describe the efficacy of the institution’s policy and procedures during COVID-19?
3. How have student services changed since COVID-19?

4. What is the significance of the changes made for the students
5. What is the significance of the changes made for the staff
6. What is the significance of the changes made for the institution
Emerged Themes-Related to the Research Questions
<i>“Eleventh-Hour” Change</i> Forced changed in technology utilization as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic
<i>Mission-Centric, Workplace & Service</i> Getting back to the mission of the community college
<i>Connectedness</i> In this together as a colleague and stronger relationships with students
<i>Perceived Staff Exclusion</i> Front-line staff perception of being “left out” of the decision-making process

Figure 10. Emerged themes relative to the guiding research questions.

Population and Sample

All participants were selected by purposive sampling (Creswell, 2012) employed at the same, singular community college in the Midwestern United States, and held the formal title of either Enrollment Services Advisor or Enrollment Specialist. These staff members were front-line staff who provided onboarding and enrollment services to students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher conducted virtual interviews, privately with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and was recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. The recordings and transcriptions were member-checked by each participant before the research continued.

Findings

Data from the fifteen participants in the form of interview recordings and transcripts were analyzed through thematic analysis as described by Braun & Clarke (2006). Data saturation was reached after eight interviews; however, the remaining seven staff members were interviewed to strengthen and provide additional rich data to the study. The analysis resulted in the following emerged themes:

Theme One: “Eleventh-Hour Change”

This theme provides information on how front-line enrollment services staff utilized technology to meet the demands of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings will further describe the technologies used by staff and the process it took by college leaders to allow for certain technology supported efficiencies. Findings referenced in this study focus on the “just-in-time” purchase and implementation of certain technologies which according to staff, should have been prioritized long before COVID-19.

Theme Two: Mission-Centric, Workplace and Service

COVID-19 forced colleges to be flexible with their employees and students and in essence, re-connect to the mission of the community college. It was important during the pandemic that faculty, staff and students were supported by the institution with everyone’s health and well-being in mind. The ability for staff and students to go remote was a tremendous benefit, but resulted in unplanned challenges that had to be managed.

Theme Three: Connectedness

Connectedness was showcased as a theme not only among staff but also in the student/staff relationship. Staff shared that they were able to connect with their colleagues in a

way that they had never been able to before COVID-19. Staff were also able to foster deeper, more meaningful relationships with students.

Theme Four: Perceived Staff Exclusion

Staff expressed that they felt valued and heard by their direct supervisors and experienced a high level of comfort in sharing their opinions on policies and procedures that directly impact the student on-boarding experience (admissions, financial aid, orientation, advising, and registration). Additionally, staff shared their perspective on the college decision-making process, making special note of how they are not involved in policy creation yet are charged with the implementation of which they had no part in creating.

Theme One: “Eleventh-Hour” Change

Hardware and Software-Staff

Technology access and utilization proved to be essential by front-line staff in being able to serve students during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, most staff had individual office space with a laptop, a docking station and two monitors. The IT department at the college was prepared and responded quickly to the needs of remote work by equipping staff with the necessary equipment and technology to continue serving students. This shift meant setting up a physical workspace from home, being allowed by IT services to take their entire office setup with them remote. Staff were also given access to the college servers through technology licenses known as VPN. This access allowed staff to remote into the college’s Student Information System (SIS) as well as the learning management system (LMS). Staff were also outfitted with office phones, loaded onto their college provided computers. This technology, known as a “softphone”, allowed staff to keep their office phone number, receive phone calls and make outbound calls to students. Microsoft Teams, the video-conferencing and meeting

platform, also gave staff the opportunity to stay connected with peers during the workday and collaborate in providing answers to student questions and troubleshooting student onboarding issues. Microsoft Teams also allowed for meetings to be conducted virtually among departments, divisions and one-on-one appointments with students and community members.

Participants in the study expressed their gratitude to college leadership for their quick response to the need for staff to work from home. They were appreciative of the fact that budget accommodations were accepted through the business office process to allow for the purchase of additional equipment and software very quickly. Some of the comments stated were:

- “I had all of the technology needed at home that I had in my office.”
- “Technology solutions made it so much easier to do things that we need to get done for our students.”
- “I wish we would have had some of the capabilities years ago, but happy it happened now.”
- “We had readily available access to technology at all times.”

The IT department at the college was highly involved in the contingency plan development very early on in the pandemic, with an emphasis on academic support. IT staff had more time to prepare and research, providing different options to meet the needs of students. Moreover, IT focused on ways to continue to provide a high-quality learning environment in a mostly remote setting, in the middle of an academic semester. In fact, every classroom on campus was outfitted with a camera system capable of live streaming a course. The instructor could be in the classroom lecturing while students were safely remote in their homes or an off-site location. These courses were designed to be remote-synchronous, meaning that they took place at a scheduled time and were live streamed, bringing the whole class together to mimic a face-to-face offering.

COVID-Forced Technology Implementation

Adobe Sign

Students could not have continued to be served during COVID-19 without technology services, products and access provided to remote staff and students. The campus was closed to students and the public, but the need was still present for students to apply for admission, take placement exams, submit required documents for admission and financial aid, complete orientation, meet with an advisor and register for courses, all of which is a part of the new student onboarding process.

One of the most difficult challenges to serving students at the beginning of COVID-19 was that the college did not have an electronic signature provider. Additionally, there was not an electronic signature policy in place to allow for these types of signatures, therefore, a provider could not be purchased or a subscription service initiated until the policy was drafted and approved by the various college entities. For several years leading up to spring of 2020, several departments on campus had tried to advocate for means for students to submit signatures electronically but it had never been a priority by IT or college leadership. In addition, enrollment services staff were not permitted to accept student documents through college email because of securities around PII, or Personal Identifiable Information. This led to the creation of a drop-box where students and third party groups could upload official documents in a secure manner for predominately admissions and records processing and financial aid. This plan was put into motion a couple of semesters before COVID-19, but students were required to print a required document, then sign, scan and upload it via the secure drop-box. This process was always deemed cumbersome by staff and students but was the only option until six months into the pandemic and remote work. At that point the college approved an electronic signature policy

and purchased Adobe Sign, an electronic signature provider which allows the user to sign documents electronically and upload directly into the institution's system using email verifiers and a workflow. The following statements emphasized the full support by staff of the electronic signature policy and newly purchased provider, Adobe Sign:

- “The drop-box, Adobe Sign, those conversations were really tough before COVID, but the pandemic forced us to do things that we should have been doing all along.”
- “We did a great job of getting most of the forms into Adobe Sign, which saved a lot of students in getting their paperwork submitted to the college.”
- “I remember way before 2020 when we were talking about the need for students to submit electronic signatures, and it always ended up that students had to send documents in postal-mail.”
- “Adobe Sign allowed us to make things better for our students, and better for ourselves.”
- “A huge win for the college was the purchase of Adobe Sign. I am just so proud of that. We are going digital and making things more accessible for our students.”
- “With students having to fill out paperwork and not having Adobe Sign, it was hard. It was really hard for students.”
- “One of the biggest changes we made through COVID-19, was the purchase of Adobe Sign.”

According to front-line staff, the passing of the electronic signature policy and the purchase of Adobe Sign have been a game changer and for removing barriers for students in the submission of documents. Before the pandemic, students were required to physically come to campus to drop off documents and provide a “wet signature” often in front of college staff as a witness. The purchase of Adobe Sign is an example of something that the college should have invested in years ago, providing efficiencies for document submission by students and record processing by staff.

QLess

In 2018, the college's Director of Enrollment Services attended a conference at a four-year university and while she was there, toured a one-stop shop model at a neighboring institution. The institution had implemented a queue or "line" management system the year prior and had seen great success with it. They used the management system to schedule all appointments in their one-stop-shop model for all things from front-line service to pre-scheduled advising appointments. The system has a built in SMS function (text) that sends automated communication to the student once the service is accessed either through the college app, website or direct text-in feature. As the time approaches closer to the students scheduled appointment, automated messages are sent to the student which allows for reschedule options, cancellation, or questions through the SMS feature. QLess also allows for an "On-Demand" option which takes the place of a "Walk-In" appointment on campus. Often, students would physically come to the Enrollment Support Center in hopes of scheduling a same-day appointment with an advisor, only to wait at times, a couple of hours until it was their turn. QLess allows for direct access to an "On-Call" advisor in that they essentially take a number, first-come, first-served "queue" and are given a call back when it is their turn in line. This allows for students to go about their day with no long waits either in person or on the phone and receive a call from a professional campus advisor when the time is convenient. The director had read an article on the system purchased by the institution and was interested in its capability. QLess was bought for the institution of focus for this study in the summer of 2019 with full implementation in the fall the same year. Not knowing what the spring of 2020 would hold, the QLess, Queue Management System proved to be an invaluable piece of technology to continue to serve students in a remote environment.

Participants praised Enrollment Services leadership for their creativity and spoke to the value of the product:

- “The QLess On-Demand Line was a game-changer!”
- “QLess provided organization for student scheduling that we had never had before.”
- “QLess has given us the opportunity to train students to think differently and connect with us in ways that they never knew existed before COVID-19.”
- “The QLess On-Demand line was really popular for students needing to connect with us in a timely manner.”

The QLess system has been a fantastic purchase for the college. It is a cost-effective way for the college to connect with students using methods that they are used to communicating and it set the college apart from other institutions. Life during COVID-19 would have been much more difficult for staff and students. QLess is a technology that the college plans to continue post-pandemic to provide an easy connection point for students and staff.

Texting

The college has historically struggled with students checking their college-provided email, which is common in most college or university settings. SMS or text messaging services had been put in place at many colleges to increase communications with students. Enrollment Services had experimented with some text messaging but only purchased a formal subscription to a provider in the fall of 2019, approximately the same time that QLess was implemented. Soon after the college shifted to a remote work schedule, “TextUs,” the college SMS provider, was in full use. Enrollment Services used texting as a way to communicate informally with students, reminding them of important events and deadlines as well as using the platform to direct students to their email accounts containing more personal information than what should be shared via text. Students were also able to text the main Enrollment Services line with both general

questions and account specifics inquiries. This line was posted at the very top information bar on the college website. This newly available option had a direct impact on the amount of calls made to the Enrollment Services Call Center, drastically decreasing overall incoming calls and wait times for students. Participants shared the following comments on the benefits of having text capabilities available for student communication:

- “Simple text campaigns made a huge difference in providing students with up-to-date information in a short amount of time.”
- “We mitigated the fear of college through a simple text to students, opening a door for easy communication and connection.”
- “The texting line worked really well. It allowed us to reach students quickly and share useful information.”
- “Texting allowed us as advisors to send screenshots of student account errors or missing requirements directly to a student’s phone which allowed for quick turn-around time in getting documents turned in.”
- “We saw great success with texting students during COVID. It really simplified communication for us.”

Enrollment Services will continue to connect with students through the use of text messaging. The subscription is a relatively low cost option for the value that staff and students receive through the easy connection point. As one participant stated, “It was important that we connected with students in the way that they communicate and at a time that they needed help the most.” Since Enrollment Services began texting students, every academic division at the college now has their own texting line through “TextUs” to connect with their individual population of students. Although QLess is being used to train students to connect for service in a more efficient and full manner, having the ability to text students reaches out in ways that students are familiar and provides “just in time” communication that is so important in the student/advisor relationship.

Mainstay Chatbot

A chatbot is an automated communication tool that allows customers, or in the case of the college, students, to ask questions and connect via a staff and provider built “library” of frequently asked questions or commonalities that the typical college student or other stakeholder might ask. Prior to COVID-19, Enrollment Services had tested several chatbot providers but never committed to a formal partnership. Most recently, the college purchased the “Mainstay” chatbot and has been using the technology to connect with current and prospective students through mass campaigns and surveys through the chatbot’s built in text messaging tool. This tool, unlike the “TextUs” texting provider, is used for reaching out to all student types for recruitment initiatives, direct staff to student communication and as previously stated, surveys. Enrollment Services staff used the chatbot function to send a mass survey out to individuals that had applied to the college but never enrolled, asking them specific questions about their experience and why they chose not to attend the semester in which they had applied. This has been especially useful in planning course modality scheduling and in troubleshooting ways to increase the applicant to student yield rate for enrollment projection. Since the chatbot’s responses are built by humans based on college policy, procedures and important dates, staff can ensure that the appropriate responses are given consistently. If for some reason the bot does not know the answer or the student asks in a way that is unclear what they are looking for, the bot can trigger a human response to outreach to the student by text from the chatbot portal. This is an important feature because it allows for efficiencies but more importantly, accuracy in the information provided. Another feature of the bot is the built-in safety feature. If a student responds to the chatbot with something that is a potential concern for their safety or the safety of others, or shares something that might be inappropriate for the setting, an automated response

will be sent to the local chatbot administrator in Enrollment Services and also DPS (Department of Public Safety) for an outreach and individual communication on the questionable information that was shared.

The next step in the chatbot utilization is to have the bot visible on the college website that will activate when a user visits the main college website. The user will then be able to ask questions relative to the onboarding process including admissions, financial aid, scholarship opportunities and other frequently asked questions as determined by enrollment staff and the provider. Participants shared their favor of the chatbot and were excited for the next phase of implementation:

- “The chatbot has shown to be a great tool for surveying prospective students for recruitment and planning.”
- “The chatbot is going to make a big difference in how students receive information. I’m so glad we finally made this happen.”
- “I’m excited about the chatbot being placed on the website. It will be great for students to be able to gain a quick response to common questions without having to call the college and wait on hold.”
- “I think the Distance Learning Department was about to give up on us using a chatbot since we have talked about it for quite some time before COVID.”
- “I think the bot will be popular with students because they don’t have to do anything but ask their question and move on.”

The chatbot feature is an exciting tool for the Enrollment Services Department and one that was put into practice as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a feature that could potentially eliminate a bottleneck in triggered communication from a student to staff member, allowing for phone conversations and face-to-face appointments that would not be remedied by the chatbot solution.

Theme Two: Mission-Centric, Workplace and Service

Staff

Flexibility for employees as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic was vital for the safety and well-being of staff and their families and in continuing to be able to serve students in ways that met their needs of service during this time. As previously stated, staff were outfitted with the appropriate technology needed to perform their daily tasks while working from home instead of their usual office space. Although staff were given the physical tools needed to continue to conduct school business, the mental shift that it took along with the challenge of the new work/life balance proved difficult at times. Staff were faced with the reality of balancing home obligations while trying to work in the same setting, often with small children or other family members requiring attention and support.

Staff were given the flexibility by college leadership and direct supervisors to flex hours at times, often working before or after the regular college work hours of 8:00a.m. to 4:30p.m. in order to free up time demanded by the family. Since all events and appointments had shifted to a virtual environment, staff were connected to their students and each other virtually, which had its challenges but also positive outcomes. Participants in the study spoke highly of college leadership and their decision to shift to a remote work environment so quickly as a result of the pandemic:

- “There is no undoing the flexibility that we were afforded as employees during the COVID-19 pandemic and I would say that would be the one word I would use to help describe the past two years.”
- “COVID-19 showed us that we had to provide flexibility for our students because we needed flexibility as well.”
- “I’m so thankful that our college took our health and safety to heart and quickly sent us home. We were allowed to keep our jobs and continue to serve students while other people in business and industry fields were losing their jobs. We

were given so much flexibility because my supervisor knew I would get my job done.”

- “There were times during COVID that I had to drop everything to take care of my kid’s needs but I was able to work later into the evening a few times a week to take care of work-related tasks and send student emails.”
- “COVID allowed me to have a work/life balance that I had never had before. I realized that I was much more efficient at home and I am thankful I have continued to be given that opportunity.”

The flexibility that was provided to staff was much appreciated by college employees.

The shift to remote allowed staff to take care of themselves and their families both physically and mentally while continuing to do the job that they were hired to do prior to COVID-19. Many shared that going remote allowed them to self-reflect on how they worked best to help students. One participant shared, “Now I recognize that there are times where we do need to meet physically with students, but I am thankful we were given the freedom to balance things with our lives. I know a better version of me has come to work over the past year because I've had that, and when I'm a better person at work, things are tenfold better for my colleagues and students.”

Perceived Flexibility for Students

Flexibility was incredibly important for students during COVID-19, with student well-being and success continuing to be of concern for college administration. When the college made the decision to go virtual, students had no other choice but to continue their courses online either one hundred percent asynchronously or by attending a remote synchronous course. Many students experienced anxiety as a result of their face-to-face courses being made virtual, with some never having enrolled in an online course by their own free-will. More students than the college expected did not have access to a computer or reliable internet. The college did what they could to quickly purchase laptops, headphones, hotspots for internet access and other technology needs for student use. The IT department also added more internet connectivity points on campus

where students could remain safely in their cars in the college parking lot to attend class or submit coursework.

Since students could no longer physically come to campus to submit documents, Enrollment Services developed an online drop-box for students to electronically submit their paperwork. Physical drop-off bins were also installed at campus locations for students to submit hardcopy documents as well as tuition payments. Other accommodations were made for students including remote placement testing, virtual advising, virtual financial aid counseling and guidance and the ability to attend new student orientation online.

Before COVID-19, students would complete a brief online component of new student orientation before the required on-campus component. Out-of-state students and those taking only online courses were not required to attend the on-campus component of orientation, thus having a more advanced online orientation. However, during the pandemic, all new students were required to complete the advanced online orientation. Traditionally, students would come to campus as part of orientation to meet with an advisor and be provided courses recommendations for at-home registration. Staff would also be available to visit with students and parents on financial aid and scholarship matters. Staff were accessible for admissions completion and general questions pertaining to the new student onboarding process.

During COVID-19, students had the option to attend live virtual sessions with professional college staff to have their general questions answered and to fully prepare for their first day of class. If students had more specific account questions or sensitive topics to discuss, “break-out” rooms were available in the Zoom and Microsoft Teams portal to allow for more intimate discussions with staff. This proved to be of tremendous value for both students and staff because staff could devote more one-on-one time with students instead of the few days that were

historically set aside for these conversations. Several of these online Q&A onboarding sessions were provided throughout the week and at different times throughout the day to allow students to self-select into the day and time that worked best for their schedule.

After the students had completed the admissions and financial aid processes and were successful in fulfilling their orientation requirements, advising staff would send course recommendations to students by email within 24-48 hours after the students had completed their tasks and were marked ready for registration. Advisors were able to accurately provide course recommendations because of questions asked by enrollment services staff through the student online intake survey. This survey assessed student individual barriers and asked questions to help guide the student toward major declaration. The survey also asked questions pertaining to scheduling preferences as well as how they preferred to take their courses. Once the student narrowed down their interests and chose a clear path for their end goal credential (Certificate of Proficiency, Technical Certificate or Associate Degree) the advisor would pair the assessment results with placement scores to supply students with an individual set of courses to complete their enrollment for the upcoming semester. Participants interviewed recognized the flexibility that was given to students and the positive difference it made in their educational journey during this time:

- “I’m very thankful that we had these remote services, particularly with a lot of our non-traditional students who are maybe preferring night or evening services not having access or not needing to leave a place of work so that they can have access to connect with us”
- “Face-to-face left, we moved completely to remote needs. We were now working with students remotely in almost every single facet of the on-boarding process.”
- “Most of my students that came through were very thankful with the different ways that they could now connect with us remotely”

- “We tried to be as flexible as possible by offering services in multiple ways so I hope we can continue that long after COVID is over.”
- “Having the online orientation and not having it be a scheduled day scheduled date that they [students] had to take off work or make arrangements to get to campus, deal with the traffic. Having it available when you're ready, here's the website, complete next steps and we will reach out in two or three days.”
- “We realized by how students responded to virtual offerings, that we should have made advising and general guidance available virtually years ago. It used to be just something out of the norm that we did for students when they asked, but now, it is expected.”
- “Because of what has happened with COVID, students no longer have to take off work, find a sitter for their kids and fight traffic to get to campus. They simply click a link, and there we are, ready to serve.”

Flexibility for students has always been a priority for college administration, but a time that forced everyone outside of their comfort zone with very little control showed just how flexible and accommodating we can be and still maintain the mission of serving all students on their individual, educational journey.

Theme Three: Connectedness

Connectedness with Colleagues

Being connected with colleagues and work mates was never a problem before COVID-19. All meetings were conducted face-to-face and workspace was often shared among several staff members. As a result of the remote shift, many would think that being connected with co-workers would be a challenge, however nothing was farther from the truth when interviewing participants. Probably the most beneficial tool for keeping staff connected to each other during this time was the use of Microsoft Teams. The Enrollment Services and Advising Team created a virtual thread comprised of over fifty staff members. Staff could access the thread and ask questions on student policies and procedures as well as ask very specific questions relative to a student interaction or account discrepancy. The Teams thread was so beneficial that staff asked

why it took COVID-19 to make them realize what a valuable tool it was for asking questions and creating consistency among staff, especially in interactions with students. Although all staff were connected to the online thread from the safety of their homes, having peers to directly communicate with at any time throughout the day was a luxury that they had never been afforded before. Additionally, enrollment services staff came together each morning to talk about what their day looked like, any foreseen challenges or concerns as well a time set aside to ask questions and all get on the same page for service expectations. Participants were happy to share their thoughts on being connected to their peers during this time and the positive outcomes that came from working remote:

- “I became so much closer to my colleagues by being able to connect with them virtually each day.”
- “The morning standup meetings provided a great time for us all to come together and share with one-another.”
- “The college lost a lot of staff as a result of COVID so it was even more important that we stayed together to continue to provide great service to our students.”
- “We were able to stay together on a virtual chat all day. We would tell jokes, share pictures of our family and pets and stay connect on all things related to student issues.”

At a time where you would think that the feeling of connectedness should be at its worst, college staff never felt better about their relationships and the pulling together to accomplish shared goals than they did during the pandemic.

Connectedness with Students

Staff also expressed that they felt closer to their students than they ever have before. They realized that students needed so much more during this time. They looked to the enrollment services team for assistance and guidance, not only for educational help but also for personal

resources and support. Many students lost jobs because of COVID-19 and therefore had trouble fulfilling payment plan obligations. There were some with food insecurities and many with mental health needs that had never been experienced prior to COVID-19. Students had numerous ways of connecting with college staff during this time and staff saw students opening up more via virtual means than when meeting face-to-face. During COVID, students reached out sometimes to ask a small college question but ended up having a longer conversation, providing informal personal counseling. One interview participant shared, “I even taught a young lady how to knit at the end of our advising appointment. She opened up and told me she was experiencing a lot of anxiety in her coursework so I shared how knitting was a stress reliever for me and she became interested!” The consensus among study participants was that people were alone for so long that anytime they had an opportunity to interact with someone outside of their household, they latched on if just for a moment of normalcy. What started as a brief professional advising appointment often turned in to something more unexpected, which at times proved to be just as beneficial for the staff member as the student. Some of the comments expressed by staff included:

- “COVID gave us a chance to grow much closer to humans as humans rather than just our students.”
- “COVID reminded me that we are all just humans living in the same world. I had students calling me freaking out and all I could tell them was that I was freaking out too!”
- “There are a lot of students who lost family members and had to take on the bulk of responsibilities or their wages got cut at work and had to figure out how they were going to afford their tuition.”
- “Being in a position where we didn't feel forced to say, there's a payment plan, here's how we can make it work, but instead just affirm and validate to the student that it's okay and their education is always here and come back when they're ready. I've had some [students] reach out since then, saying, hey, I'm actually in a better space now that I can do this.”

- “I think we had a moment where we grew closer to our students and it reminded us that they're not numbers, they're not their student ID numbers, they have names and they are here for us to help them.”

As cliché and overused as the phrase has been over the past almost two years, there is no phrase that describes what everyone has gone through other than, “We are all in this together.” Hearing the comments from the participants, it is clear how much they care about the work that they do and the power of being connected with students and peers. As participants reflected on this time, it was evident that putting the “human” within serving students was at the forefront of their minds throughout.

Theme Four: Perceived Staff Exclusion

When participants were questioned about their involvement in policies and procedures related to the student onboarding process, staff consistently answered that their role is to implement what has been set forth by division and college leadership. Additionally, staff felt that they could go to their supervisor at any time to share their perspective on what they experience while serving students and how students are impacted both positively and negatively. Interestingly, most felt compelled to share that their primary role was to implement policy and procedures, not share information on their direct involvement or lack thereof with policy and procedure creation. Their immediate response focused on the work to serve students and the direct effects of that service on a student's success in the enrollment process.

When enrollment services staff were asked if they saw a path toward decision-making, all said, “Yes, I did.” Varied responses were given however, when probed for more granular answers. Again, the consensus was that front-line staff needed to be listened to by upper-level leadership because they are the ones charged with the implementation of the policies and procedures that they had no part in directly creating. It was reiterated that they felt heard and

valued by their direct supervisors, but were not involved at all once they shared that information one level up. Responses were positive but “matter of fact” that their involvement in larger discussions was non-existent and they were simply the “doers of the decisions made.” Since all of the enrollment services staff are front-line workers, they see how decisions made directly impact their work and how students are impacted. They also shared that sometimes they must have faith that the information or concerns shared make it to the appropriate people who can make the requested change, others felt that although listened to; their inputs were not taken seriously enough to make it up the chain to the appropriate parties. Although the opportunity for staff to share with their direct support was a common theme in participants’ responses, specific comments varied:

- “I feel like our leadership is always open to conversations and that's something that I'm thankful for.”
- “Those of us that are in frontline roles should be included in the decision-making, or at least in policy review before it is implemented.”
- “I don’t think any student policy should be edited or updated without the Enrollment Services Department being involved. We are the ones that see how those changes affect a student and if it is a good change or a bad change.”
- “My role only comes in to play once a policy has been created. It is my job to put into practice what leadership has decided.”
- “I wish that I could share with administration what I see every day and how the things that they put into motion make our students feel, say and do.”
- “My job is just to make sure students understand what is expected of them. I don’t involve myself with policy making. I just do my part to make things as clear for students as possible.”
- “I suppose I have a voice if I’m asked for my opinion. If I have an opinion I feel like I can share it but someone has to be there to listen to it, you know?”
- “I could give a lot of feedback on how I see financial aid procedures impact our students but there really isn’t a place for that other than telling my director.”

- “I’m always happy to share my opinions on ways I think we can better serve students. I just know that when I have shared concerns in the past, they never get very far.”

Drop for Non-Payment Policy

Some notable comments referenced the college’s policy to drop students for non-payment if payment was not secured or financial aid not awarded by a specific, Business Services-decided date. Staff shared that they had no input in choosing this date, yet they were the ones who had to relay, often times, bad news to students on missing important deadlines. They shared strong disdain for this policy; a policy that many feel blatantly goes against the mission of the community college. This policy was one that was highlighted as a result of COVID-19 because in the midst of the global pandemic, a student’s local community college was still dropping students who could not make their down payment or commit to a monthly payment plan because of wages lost, family obligations and other factors outside of their control. The deposit percentage that a student had to make was also a point of confusion as strengthened by COVID-19. Business Services still set the same deposit percentages that they had always required for a student to remain in their courses by setting up payment plans, despite many students vocalizing the barrier to Enrollment Services and Treasurer staff.

- “I remember several students sharing with me, “It [COVID] hit my family, I have no money, we lost our jobs so we can't make the payment plans for school.”
- “Finances have been the number one barrier to students during COVID, especially since our school drops students for non-payment.”
- “Having a drop for non-payment impacts our enrollment and we spend all these months working on enrollment and then come in one day and just drop all these students. So we not only have to make all that up but we also have to keep trying to get more students enrolled.”
- “I wish we had some different options for payment plans because I think assuming that everyone can put down quite a bit, you know 33% or even 25% of their tuition is false, especially during COVID.”

- “Sometimes we are asking our students to pay a car payment’s worth of tuition up front.”
- “The treasurer and business services are not the ones that are having the hard conversations with students on paying their bill and staying in school, that’s me, and a lot of times, I have no idea what to say or do because I don’t agree with what I’m telling the student. It’s a hard spot to be put in and we have told folks this for years.”

It is important to call out the drop for non-payment policy that has been institutionalized for quite some time as it quickly emerged as a theme among study participants as they saw its effects grow through the pandemic. This policy was included being excluded in direct policy-making outside of sharing their input with their direct supervisor.

Financial-Aid Procedures

Staff also shared their concerns with financial aid and mentioned that students seem to struggle most in applying and receiving financial aid, primarily because of complicated higher education and finance jargon and poor communication coupled with the stress of a cumbersome and confusing process. Participants felt strongly that the college’s financial aid department processes were too strenuous for students in areas that the Department of Education allowed more freedom. Staff had concerns that there were not enough front-line staff privy to in-depth financial aid knowledge and therefore, were not armed with the appropriate information necessary to serve a student in full capacity. Staff spoke of instances where they perceived there to be flexibility in financial aid processes, just to be shut down when researched further. At times, they felt like their hands were tied when trying to provide quality service, merely because they did not agree with the process they were asking students to go through to receive federal aid that they were eligible for. Not having input into the foundational build of local financial aid processes made things difficult for staff and created stress in the workplace.

- “I know that the Department of Education sets federal regulation on financial aid but I know we have some local control, I’m just not involved in that.”
- “It’s hard when enrollment service staff don’t have the behind the scenes financial aid knowledge to fully help students when they come to us. I feel like they [students] think that we are keeping some big secret.”
- “I would definitely say one of the biggest obstacles through COVID, but this is also one of our biggest obstacles in general, would be financial aid. It’s a difficult process, and it’s hard when you can’t be there step by step with them completing that process with them and letting them know the documents that they need. We weren’t able to really talk with them one on one and go through the FAFSA like we had done every semester before COVID.”
- “We really have no idea about Financial Aid Policy. I mean, I don’t know how it’s created, all I know is that I have to share the information with students that I usually disagree with.”
- “Anytime I have asked questions about financial aid policy, I get shut down. They [Financial Aid] act like it is not my place to know those things but I can’t serve students without all the information.”
- “I have seen staff cry over financial aid procedures and in trying to offer solutions to students. It should not be this hard to help a student receive financial help that they are entitled to.”

Financial aid policies and procedures were also brought to light by COVID-19 as staff perceived there to be a continuation of barriers associated with the process. One staff member interviewed stated that, “The college financial aid process has always been cumbersome but through COVID, we realized how crazy some of the things were that we were asking students to do just to receive money that they were eligible for and entitled to.” Staff struggled with the fact that most of their job in enrollment services was to convey information that they had no hand in creating, but their role required they support the decisions based on the regulation and practices put in place.

Summary

In interviewing Enrollment Specialists and Enrollment Advisors from within the Enrollment Services Department at the institution, their perceived experiences expounded upon their vast knowledge of the student onboarding process. Additionally, staff were able to share their lived experience of serving students in a remote environment due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the “rushed” changes that had to be implemented to successfully do so. Staff spoke of their perceptions in how they are not involved in the policy and procedure decisions at the college but are charged with providing service to students based on those mandates. The emerged themes were directly connected to the guiding research questions and when paired with the interview guide, prompted a rich and fruitful conversation with the participants.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications & Conclusions

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore how enrollment services staff at one community college in the Midwestern United States navigated and adapted internal processes and policies to support student onboarding during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Specifically, the study investigated staff perceptions of how students were impacted by the college's decision to shift to remote services and how the student onboarding process was affected. This study will provide valuable information to college leaders designing and implementing student-focused policies and procedures that are logical and efficient for students, specifically when offering services in a remote environment.

Another goal of the study was to address the notion that college and university processes pre-pandemic were not flexible and easy to change, and that staff had difficulties in serving students once institutions transitioned to working in a remote environment. Administration at the research site had not prioritized the ability for staff to connect with students via virtual means, until they were forced to do so as a result of the remote shift due to COVID-19. The ability for students to sign and submit documents electronically was not an option until staff had been working remote for several months into the pandemic. Additionally, staff felt empowered to share with their direct supervisor concerns in serving students and potential barriers they encounter through the enrollment and onboarding process, but were not involved in the policy and procedure decision-making process.

This chapter will provide a summary of emerged themes from the study and how they are supported in the literature and theoretical framework. There will also be a discussion of the results and the implications for practice, the institution, other colleges, student services, adult

education and administration. A recommendation for future research will also be discussed, as well as a section on what the researcher learned through the research process. Finally, a conclusion was provided that is all-encompassing of the research study.

Summary of Themes

Four overarching themes emerged from the research study and were directly correlated with the six guiding research questions:

1. How do staff describe successful student onboarding during COVID-19?
2. How do staff describe the efficacy of the institution's policy and procedures during COVID-19?
3. How have student services changed since COVID-19?
4. What is the significance of the changes made for the students?
5. What is the significance of the changes made for the staff?
6. What is the significance of the changes made for the institution?

The themes identified were analyzed and based on the responses given by the fifteen participants interviewed in the study:

“Eleventh-Hour” Change

- Forced changed in technology utilization as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

Mission-Centric, Workplace and Service

- Getting back to the mission of the community college

Connectedness

- “In this together” as colleagues and stronger relationships with students

Perceived Staff Exclusion

- Front-line staff perception of being “left out” of the decision-making process

“Eleventh-Hour” Change

As previously stated, there were pieces of technology that had been part of discussions for years before the world was hard hit by COVID-19 but they were never prioritized by the college IT department or administration. It was not until a week before the college made the decision to shut its doors and send faculty and staff remote to continue to serve students in a virtual environment that rapid change was initiated. In working with the IT department, the academic division began purchasing technology items needed to live stream courses from their home or empty classroom to students safely in their homes. This was a tremendous task completed by a only few people, which had a large impact on the continuation of student learning in the middle of the spring academic semester. Since the focus was so heavy on academics, the Student Services division was left scrambling to try and piece together technology to continue to be able to connect with students. IT staff provided great service by supplying essential hardware to staff, but the software components that were needed to adequately connect with students in a remote environment were left to individual departments. Students were able to connect with advisors via phone and email but it was not until several months into remote work that students were able to have advising appointments via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Students were also able to connect with staff for admissions and financial aid guidance but could only submit paperwork via electronic means with an electronic signature six months into the new remote work environment.

What Took So Long?

The ability for students to submit documents via electronic means and sign required documents electronically has been a priority for the Enrollment Services Department, Financial Aid and Student Records for years, but it never went farther than brainstorm conversations, even

with the right players at the table, which included directors of the various departments and IT staff. The budget “ask” for an electronic signature provider was not necessarily the problem, but it was the lack of an electronic signature policy that stopped the purchase that would have allowed students and staff this capability. Again, this was not a priority, so students continued to have to provide a “wet signature,” by printing the document, signing, scanning and then uploading it to the newly created electronic drop-box. Students could also hand deliver the document or mail it to the appropriate department.

This was an example that came up in interviews time and time again and related to all six research questions. First, the college needed new and improved capabilities to serve students virtually that they did not have and were unable to receive. Second, this had a direct negative impact and proved to be a barrier for students in the onboarding process during COVID-19. Lastly, front-line staff were excluded in the decision not to offer this form of technology for staff and student use, yet were the ones having to make accommodations in service and implementation to make things work.

Mission-Centric, Workplace & Service

Staff

Embracing the roots and re-connecting with the community college's mission as described in the literature review quickly emerged through the study. At the most basic and foundational level, the mission of the community college is to meet the educational needs of the community, embracing the individualism of all stakeholders, of which includes staff and obviously, the entire student body. The mission-centric theme revolved around flexibility, the flexibility of staff needs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and truly meeting students where they are in ways that they wanted to be served and as the pandemic demanded they be served.

Staff were sent remote to do their jobs with most everything physical they needed to do continue to fulfil their college role. However, the work/life balance the came with the global pandemic was too much for anyone to prepare for. The goal of college administration was to send faculty, staff and students remote for two weeks, evaluate after and either bring everyone back to campus in a “business as usual” setting or continue the remote work plan. As the pandemic worsened and the country began to shut down in all sectors, life got more and more complicated. This is turn required that college leaders were compassionate, caring and understanding with staff as everyone continued to work remotely.

The pandemic led to the in-depth analysis of the college’s remote work policy, which until the pandemic, had never been used by an employee. Although staff were not allowed to come to campus during the height of the pandemic, they were still encouraged to complete the remote work agreement and to have the formal document on file in the Human Resources Office. Supervisors continued to be flexible with staff, allowing some to work earlier or later in the day primarily because of home obligations. This also proved to be of great benefit because staff were available at times that students facing the same “happenings of life” were dealing with. While many employees in other sectors of work were losing their jobs, being forced to work in the public environment, or have their hours cut, college staff jobs were protected with not one employee losing their job or having their wages decreased because of the remote shift as a result of the pandemic. Staff expressed their appreciation of that fact.

Students

Students were also provided with great flexibility, keeping their health and safety from COVID-19 in mind. Although ninety percent of courses shifted to remote modalities during the pandemic, there were still a few that had to meet in-person, health professions students for

example, for “clock hour requirements”, to meet accreditation requirements, or simply because the content could not be delivered without practical application. Students were provided with ample information throughout the pandemic and were communicated with regularly so that they had the most up-to-date information pertaining to COVID-19 regulations, mandates and guidance.

Having the means for students to continue their education during the pandemic was a great point of pride for the research study participants, but the ideal that we should have been doing some of this all along very quickly became apparent. Comments like, “We are a community college, we should be doing this,” were common expressions or tones when responses to questions were provided. As cited in the literature review, having the ability to connect with students in ways that do not act as roadblock to their success is aligned with the open access philosophy of the community college.

Previous research studies spoke of the most common barriers a student encounters that prohibit the successful completion of college. Of the factors disclosed, students struggled the most with barriers brought on by work and family obligations, followed by the ability to pay for their education due to financial strains (Smith, 2019). Just looking at this statement from a research study from 2019, COVID-19 had not yet affected the world yet. If the same study was conducted during 2020 or 2021, the same two hindrance factors would remain family obligations and financial hardships. As supported by this research study, front-line staff responses proved that students continued to struggle with the aforementioned barriers, although because of COVID-19, on an immeasurable and unpredictable scale. Every obstacle to student success in the onboarding process and ultimately, degree completion, was exacerbated by COVID-19. Enrollment Services front-line staff continued to do their part in mitigating these realities just as

they would during any other time of service. However, since everyone was experiencing the “new normal” together, a heightened and more personal level of guidance and support was needed for all.

Connectedness

Staff who were interviewed shared that they had never felt more connected to their colleagues and students than they did during the pandemic. This was especially eye-opening since isolation and loneliness seemed to be synonymous with the pandemic. Staff had more time together virtually than they ever had on-campus. They were constantly connected via a Microsoft Teams chat and were no longer in face-to-face meetings, pulling them away from time spent on work and with peers. The phrase “People need people” was expressed in the conversations had through the interview process, with staff saying that students would often reach out at times just to say, “hello” or ask a common question, get the answer, and remain on the line to chat for a bit. At times, staff expressed that the pandemic gave them time to just “be” and take time to think, something that they rarely had time to do before COVID-19. Although the pandemic has been terrible, there has been a lot of good that has come from it. One participant relayed that she felt that the pandemic “level set” people as humans and that true humanity was seen because so much was out of our individual control.

The theme of connectedness shed light on the importance of professional staff and the role that community college front-line staff play in changing student’s lives through adequate support, guidance and often times encouragement to keep going. As pointed on in the literature, students often choose to attend a community college for a myriad of different reasons, but maybe none more important than the one-on-one attention they receive in the small class sizes and individualized support they receive through wrap-around resources and staff that truly care.

Perceived Staff Exclusion

Although when interviewed staff agreed unanimously that they felt comfortable sharing concerns experienced in student service to their immediate supervisor, they did not feel like they were involved in the overall decision-making processes in policy and procedure creation that have a direct impact on students, of which front-line staff are administering. When asked about staff role in policy and procedures as they relate to the onboarding process, they stated that their role was to follow the procedures in line with the policy to serve students. They made it clear that although they have a voice to share their input; it is often not heard by the appropriate people directly or never gets to them by way of the institutional hierarchy. At times in the conversation, staff almost felt bitter that they were not asked to be involved or share their front-line student experience with those who are making the decisions.

Since the college implemented the “one-stop-shop” model several years ago, staff are charged with conveying quality service to students by phone, email, text and face-to-face. Staff provide guidance to student in this “shop” from all things, admissions, financial aid, course registration, advising and orientation. Often, information is shared that not even staff fully understand, either because they disagree with what they are asking students to do, most commonly in reference to financial aid and general treasurer services, or they do not know how college leadership came to the decisions that they are now being asked to carry out.

Connection to the Literature

Results from this study confirmed what was demonstrated in the review of literature. Specifically, findings aligned, highlighting ongoing barriers to student success and the obstacles faced in the onboarding process. This fact, paired with the global pandemic and lack of preparedness in some areas, added to the challenges front-line staff faced in providing adequate

services to students in a remote environment. The study also fortified that front-line staff perspectives are not typically built into the formal cycle of decision-making at institutions of higher education. However, as employees, staff felt valued in their front-line role of fulfilling the community college mission in line with the history of the community college.

Results Relative to the Conceptual Framework

Open System Theory suggests that for the cycle of decision-making to function as intended toward continuous improvement, inclusive and appropriate input and feedback from stakeholders is essential. Results from the study show that staff do not feel that they are involved in the decision-making process at the institution. Additionally, it is not only that staff should be involved, but the front-line staff want to be asked and want to be a part of these important, often overlooked processes. Open institutional systems are made of five core elements: inputs, the transformation process, outputs, feedback and the environment (Lunenberg, 2010). For this study, the research focused on the core element of input and how front-line staff are utilized in the decision-making cycle and according to this study, they are not at this particular institution. Input should come from the people that have the most relevant, up-to-date information yet because of the hierarchical structure of higher education institutions, are often left out.

Implications for Decision-Making

In visiting with these staff members, they provide input to their supervisor, who shares with their supervisor, so on and so forth, in hopes that the message of concern or general input makes its way to the top for consideration or at very least, a conversation at a higher level. Of course, as the message makes its way up the ladder of authority, the input gets more and more “watered down” and less and less urgent and important. Front-line staff are the employees that have direct interface with students. They hear their struggles, they see their expressions, they

experience their barriers and they celebrate their victories and successes. They witness first-hand how all policies and procedures affect students yet never get the chance to share that very important, front-line experience with those that have the power to make positive change. If front-line staff are not included in the cycle of institutional decision-making for policies and practices that directly affect the student, the college will continue to gain input from somewhere; input that will be incomplete, not in the best interest of the faculty, staff and students, irrelevant or outright false.

The broken cycle of decision-making, implemented by college leadership, freely welcomes the “street level bureaucrat” to go to work. These front-line staff, or street-level bureaucrats, use discretion when serving students and because of this often make quick decisions for the good of the customer at hand and with the knowledge they know at the time (Lipsky, 1983). These staff often end up setting the tone and culture of not only front-facing service but for the institution as a whole. The front-line staff often make these decisions based on a lack of understanding of the guiding policy or procedures because they have not been involved in its creation, yet are the college staff that must turn the “law” into positive customer service interactions.

Implications for Staff and Leadership

This study, including data from participants, is vitally important because community colleges are in the business of serving people. When a student seeks out enrollment and onboarding assistance, it is because they do not have the answers or the knowledge to take the next step alone. Enrollment services front-line staff must be equipped with the appropriate technology, information, customer service training, and expectations to successfully serve students in effective and efficient ways both face-to-face and in a virtual environment. Staff must

also understand and have confidence that the policies and procedures they are being asked to abide by and implement were created and put into practice based on what is best for the student.

In order for policies and procedures to be student-centric, college leaders must include the appropriate staff who have the knowledge necessary to provide input toward positive change through the formal process of policy and procedure development. This input, derived from the front-line experience of staff, is essential knowledge to share, especially with college administration who are disconnected and far removed from the reality experienced by staff and students. College administrators often bring in their polished, well-spoken direct reports to meetings with college leadership or the Board, but as previously mentioned, the message or reality of practice often loses the essence of what was intended to be conveyed by the front-line worker. Because of the knowledge and first-hand experience that these essential staff members have, college leaders should invite their input in a public setting to show their value and willingness to engage with all staff toward common goals in line with the mission and vision of the institution. This strategic task would complete the circle of the Open-System Theory to provide a stronger, more holistic decision-making process.

Once the decision-making model is fully established by administration and input from front-line staff is sought, staff should feel an obligation to openly and honestly share their experiences so that a fuller picture could take shape. Since historically inputs have not been sought of front-line staff in important decision-making, staff must be formally built into the cycle, otherwise they may still feel that their input is unwanted or unvalued because of the past circumstances of not being willing to freely share their knowledge. Front-line staff should be made to feel empowered and that their input would be taken as truth and value added into the process. The process of decision-making must be formalized to include whomever the front-line

knowledge expert may be and paired with the institutional, state and federal knowledge of administration, will complete the cycle, with the goal of providing a better, more encompassing experience for both staff and students.

Implications for Adult Education

Adult Education and the continuation of professional development by acquiring new skills and learning is critical in being a part of an institutional decision-making body and in line with this study, providing the best possible service to community college students. As technologies change and student needs change, it is vital that adults adapt to meet those demands of serving and learning. This study sought to understand the knowledge staff acquired through their experiences and how they can share those experiences to make positive change. Change is unattainable if adults do not stay relevant and fully understand the needs for change either in policy and procedure creation for serving students in the college setting or in daily living. Community colleges cannot be complacent with the status quo; it takes innovation, drive, and the willingness to learn new things and be a catalyst for change in the lives of others.

It is also important to note that adult education can be formal or informal. The recommendation from this study is that front-line staff embrace the new role within the formal decision-making process and take it upon themselves to be involved in positive change at the institution. If college leadership does their part and extends the invitation for front-line staff to provide input, then staff must take the opportunity as a challenge and get involved. Although informal in professional development and adult learning, this pathway is crucial for the development of self and in further expansion of one's emotional intelligence and self-awareness. These opportunities provided in the workplace, coupled with one's own ambition to succeed and

make a difference, are a formula for best practice in front-line service to students and being an integral part of the institution's policy and procedures creation.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several recommendations for future research that can be derived from this study. The first recommendation, based on one of the limitations of the study, would be to conduct a follow-up study involving community college students since their lived experiences were not included in this study. Looking into the perspective of front-line staff in their experience of service to students during the COVID-19 pandemic and how those experiences translate into input as part of the decision-making process for policy and procedure creation were the key components. However, gaining students' first-hand experiences would be valuable in providing a more holistic view of the barriers that they experienced through certain college policies and practices as made clearer through COVID-19. The front-line staff, coupled with institutional leadership, could also create a student focus group to help gain important insight into experiences and formally build student input into the decision-making cycle as a critical piece of the Open-Systems Theory much like this study sought to accomplish and refine.

A mixed-methods, qualitative/quantitative study could also be conducted to collect data on the number of students who were unsuccessful in the enrollment and onboarding process. Data could be captured via a survey to analyze the percentage of students who stopped out of the process due to barriers within the college purview, most specifically in college policies and procedures that negatively affected the student onboarding experience. Demographic information and a perceived barrier self-assessment could also be collected to identify student resources and services that students could be connected to earlier in the onboarding and enrollment processes.

A quantitative study could be conducted to collect and analyze data based on student outcomes. A study of this nature would seek to determine if the purchase, implementation and utilization of new technologies as a result of forced change from the pandemic, had a positive or negative outcome on overall students success, specifically taking a deep dive into persistence, retention and completion rates for the institution. The study could also analyze other factors including changes in institutional procedures and policy because of changes caused by the pandemic.

Finally, this study could also be replicated at other community colleges to explore how other front-line service staff perceived the continuation of serving students in a remote environment as a result of COVID-19 and compare those results with how certain populations are included in the institution's decision-making cycle. Having multi-institution case studies would strengthen the study's credibility with successful replication adding to the transferability of the study. It would be interesting to see how other schools with one-stop-shop centers would respond to the interview questions compared to those with independent service offices, for example, those with separate financial aid offices, admissions and advising centers.

Researcher Reflections

As a leader in Student Services for over 14 years now, the researcher was especially interested in the perceptions of front-line staff in their interactions with students and how college leaders are informed about that very important front-facing service. These staff members are often some of the lowest paid at the college, yet have the most student interaction and influence over the student experience and often endure the most frustration. It is unfair and unrealistic to expect them to know so much about the different aspects of the student onboarding and enrollment process as part of the one-stop-shop model and not ask for their input when creating

policies and procedures that they see the results of each day with students. It was important to perform this work in creating positive change for students, while increasing staff morale for the greater good of the institution. It was also vital to point out the college's hierarchy and draw attention to the often times antiquated process of the transmission and dissemination of information. As previously discussed, front-line staff have open lines of communication with their supervisor, but their input for change usually stops there, supposing the message is shared vertically at all. In that case, it is often misconstrued or put to the side of an administrator's list of priorities, usually forgotten and never discussed with those with the authority and the responsibility of positive change.

It is important that those in leadership positions know the facts before making decisions based on hearsay or interactions that do not fully tell the story of a student or front-line staffer's reality. It is common to hear that there becomes a time in a supervisor's career where they become too distanced from the front-line to adequately know what the student's experience is like. They also may not fully understand the potential barriers that are within the college's responsibility that negatively impact the student experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is absolutely critical that the voices of front-line staff are heard and recognized for their words that are shared and the experiences that are lived. Their input should be used for potential technology needs in hardware and software to best serve students and they should be a foundational "cog in the wheel" of institutional decision-making. They should be asked how they feel a decision or change would affect front-line service and most importantly, the student experience in their journey toward credential attainment. It is time for community colleges to get back to their founding mission of meeting the needs of students by offering

quality courses and training toward their desired career as well as individualized service in ways that are practical and efficient for them.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced change that for many in enrollment services, was a long time coming but because of budget implications, individual agendas and lack of prioritization, never gained momentum until it was almost too late. It is essential that college administrators heed the warning for the need to involve those closest to the student experience. In times of national community college enrollment decline and budget cuts, the times has never been direr than almost two years into a global pandemic. There are no other college employees who better understand what students have gone through during COVID-19 than those faculty and front-line staff who maintained student interaction. Although college administrators have the formal education, institutional experience, and wisdom, it would behoove them and the institution to bring in all stakeholders to make policy and procedures that will increase enrollment, increase student satisfaction and increase student retention, persistence and completion rates. In order to make those things happen, the appropriate people must be invited to the table, have the expectation to share with one another, and to collaborate on best practices to continue to meet the needs of students and provide a quality, accessible, education for all by striving to fulfill the mission and vision of the institution.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview with Enrollment Services Staff

1. Tell me about your overall experience in serving students during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
2. How did the onboarding process change during COVID?
3. In your experience, tell me the things related to onboarding that inhibit students from successfully completing the onboarding process.
4. What practices do you perceive to be conducive to the student onboarding process?
5. What difficulties do you have in providing services to students during the pandemic?
6. What is your role in student onboarding policy and procedures?
7. What changes would you recommend be institutionalized post pandemic?
8. Do you perceive a pathway to inform decision-making?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share with me on this topic?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Recalibrating Student Services: Examining Staff Perceptions of Services During COVID-19

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Justin White
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kit Kacirek

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

You are invited to participate in a research study about your experience in serving students during the COVID-19 Pandemic. You are being asked to participate in this study because you hold the formal, front-line position of Enrollment Specialist or Enrollment Advisor at your college. Your response to questions involved in this study will inform college leadership on the policies, procedures and practices that you perceive to be barriers to students successfully completing the onboarding and enrollment process. Your Responses will also highlight policies, procedures and practices that are conducive to a student's successful completion of the onboarding and enrollment process.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY

Who is the Principal Researcher?

Justin White
Email: jdw025@uark.edu

Who is the Faculty Advisor?

Dr. Kit Kacirek
Office: 479-575-4875
Email: kitk@uark.edu

What is the purpose of this research study?

The purpose of this study is to understand staff perceptions of serving students during changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic at one community college in the mid-western United States. This study will provide valuable information to college leaders in designing and implementing student-focused policies and procedures that are logical and efficient for students. The focus will be on staff perception of the student onboarding experience as students navigate college policies and procedures during the pandemic. The goal is to uncover potential barriers to students while highlighting the practices that are student-centric and contribute to a positive onboarding experience. "Experiences" are defined as the events, situations or correspondence that Enrollment Specialists and Advisors have been involved in with students while going through the college onboarding process in a remote environment during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Who will participate in this study?

A minimum of 12 and maximum of 16, Enrollment Specialists or Enrollment Advisors currently employed at the community college where the study is taking place.

What am I being asked to do?

Your participation will require a maximum one-hour virtual meeting with primary researcher where you will be asked questions pertaining to your experience in serving students during the pandemic.

What are the possible risks or discomforts?

There are no anticipated risks in participating in this study.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

There are no anticipated benefits to the participant in this study.

How long will the study last?

One, one-hour long virtual meeting will be expected for participation in this study.

Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?

There will be no compensation provided to you for your participation.

Will I have to pay for anything?

No, there will be no cost associated with your participation.

What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. Your job and responsibilities will not be affected in any way if you refuse to participate.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

- All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law.
- Your name will not be added to the interview transcripts but simply be cited as “Interview 1, Interview 2, etc.” There will be no personal identifiable information tied to interview responses.
- The recording of the interview session via Microsoft Teams will only be viewable by the participant and primary researcher and will be stored electronically; password protected, as will all other electronic materials.
- Hard copy materials will be stored in a locked, fireproof safe only accessible by the researcher.
- Participants will have the opportunity to review their own interview recording and transcript to make any changes before the study proceeds.

Will I know the results of the study?

At the conclusion of the study, you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Kit Kacirek by email at kitk@uark.edu or Principal Researcher, Justin White by email at jdww025@uark.edu. You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

What do I do if I have questions about the research study?

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Principal Researcher

Justin White

Email: jdww025@uark.edu

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Kit Kacirek

Office: 479-575-4875

Email: kitk@uark.edu

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP
Institutional Review Board Coordinator
Research Compliance
University of Arkansas
109 MLKG Building
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201
479-575-2208
irb@uark.edu

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing the consent form. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

Appendix C: IRB Approval Letter



To: Justin D. White
From: Justin R Chimka, Chair
IRB Expedited Review
Date: 10/26/2021
Action: **Exemption Granted**
Action Date: 10/26/2021
Protocol #: 2109356871
Study Title: Recalibrating Student Services: Examining Staff Perceptions of Services During COVID-19

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Kit Kacirek, Investigator