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When Data Matter: Evaluating Data Prioritization for Department-Level Decision-Making in Higher Education

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Learning on Demand, the 2010 edition of an annual report on online education trends in the U.S., showed that online course enrollment from degree-granting higher education institutions increased from 9.6% in 2002 to 25.3% in 2008 (Allen & Seaman, 2010). In a U.S. Department of Education report, *The Condition of Education 2017*, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 26% (769,900) of the 1.4 million post baccalaureate students in the United States were enrolled in a fully online degree program (National Center for Education Sciences, 2017). Critics of online learning argue that there has been "nothing done of pedagogical value as courses have moved online" (Shearer et al., 2020) and that universities' decisions to move into the online learning space has been one driven entirely by academic capitalist motivations to provide an additional revenue stream (Gagnon, 2021; Giroux, 2021; Kezar, 2008; Moore et al., 2021). Some scholars even go so far as to say that the urgent shift to online learning during the pandemic was a form of "opportunistic disaster capitalism" (Moore, et al., 2021, p. 3) where educational technology (edtech) companies were able to seize the market share they had long been pursuing when institutions finally, in desperation, became willing partners. Despite the institutional motivations or controversy over pedagogical merit, for the estimated 38% of adult students who attend school while juggling full-time jobs and family commitments, the flexibility and convenience that comes with online learning provides a pathway to better pay and a better life (Landrum et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2021)

There are inherent complexities with online learning that simply do not exist in traditional face-to-face (FtF) courses. Lack of connection with the learning community, which manifests in feelings of isolation, is top among the complexities that directly affect students' online learning experience (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). Students who feel isolated during the learning process suffer from decreased motivation, lack of accountability, and reduced confidence (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2020). The forced massive global shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these issues and brought them to the fore at an unprecedented scale (Giroux, 2021). As a result, the last two years have brought a significant volume of research in online learning (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021). The financial, technical, and human resources that were allocated to address these issues multiplied practically overnight as institutions scrambled to deliver online learning experiences that mirrored their FtF counterparts (Gagnon, 2021). For institutions already established with fully or partially online degree programs, the movement within higher education toward offering courses in a diverse array of modalities, including online, hybrid, and hyflex, brought a wholly different issue – competition (Landrum et al., 2021).

The shift to offering courses through online modalities was not embraced warmly by most faculty and higher education administrators, yet the tremendous surge in upskilling and forced adoption in the online education space provided more choices for students (Landrum et al., 2021). This changed the competitive landscape at a time when many institutions were already experiencing enrollment concerns. Those institutions or academic units already engaged in online teaching and learning understood this modality was not without limitations. Although these factors were known prior to the pandemic, the sheer number of people experiencing these issues amplified the complaints and created more urgency around solving these problems (Gagnon, 2021;

Plante et al., 2022). Widespread student complaints amid an already established enrollment decline created what some considered a national higher education crisis (Maitra & Robinson, 2020). In times like these, understanding students' learning experiences is more important than ever before (Grawe, 2021).

Despite all the recent advancements to improve online education, how we evaluate students' learning experiences has not changed since the 1970s. During this era, schools started distributing surveys to students at the end of the term to solicit assessment of the course and instructors' teaching practices (Kogan et al., 2022). An abundance of research has shown that student evaluations of teaching effectiveness (SET), also called course evaluations, tend to produce biased, conflicting, and problematic views of students' course experiences (Heffernan, 2022; Kogan et al., 2022; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2022; Plante et al., 2022). Even with the predominance of research indicating SET data are flawed in providing an accurate depiction of the factors that affect teaching and learning effectiveness, end-of-the-term evaluation surveys persist as the primary way that institutions collect data about students' experiences.

Statement of the Problem

The school of professional education (SPE) at Mountain University (MU), a private research institution in the Mountain West region, has been delivering courses online since the 1980s. Within SPE there are thirteen academic programs, twelve applied master's degree programs and one bachelor of arts completion program. The Communication (COMM) program is currently the third-largest program of the twelve graduate programs with an average of 250 to 350 course enrollments per quarter. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, every course in the COMM program was offered online at least once per year. The massive migration to online course delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic did not structurally impact the COMM program. Interestingly, even though

the pandemic changed little about the established curriculum and online course delivery for the COMM program, as the director of the program, I have observed shifts in students' learning preferences and the way they engage with their learning experience during the past two years.

SPE has robust data systems in place to track student enrollment and engagement, instructor activity and engagement, and staff/faculty workflows. These data systems were initially rolled out in a phased approach with programs starting in 2018. When I started in my role, in 2019, SPE had recently started to compile programmatic data in a more systematized way. Data about students was aggregated into an Excel spreadsheet. The COMM program was the second program at SPE to start using this spreadsheet to keep track of student data. Using a code system, the spreadsheet classifies students' status with a particular focus with where they are in the enrollment cycle: started an application but not submitted, submitted an application but pending review, admitted by SPE but had not accepted the offer, accepted offer but has not enrolled, accepted offer by deferred admission to another term, active student, stop-out (which refers to a student who has been inactive but for one year), and graduated. Also included in this spreadsheet are data showing student ID number, gender, international and veteran status, preferred name, where they reside, if they are affiliated with a third-party education partner, program and concentration of study, if they have received initial outreach from an academic director (AD), if they have received outreach by an academic advisor, and any pertinent notes about the students' status. The notes section of this spreadsheet contains comments that relate to enrollment. As an example, if a student has indicated to an advisor that they are taking a quarter off but plan to re-enroll, those comments are often recorded in the notes section of this spreadsheet. In 2020 the FreshDesk platform was incorporated into our data ecosystem to create clearer process

flows and to track support requests related to myriad course, program, and instructor changes. SPE uses Tableau and through that platform administrators, staff, and faculty have permission-based access to a wide variety of dashboards showing data on instructor activity and engagement, student enrollment and performance, course history, and internal staff/administrator communication and support requests.

SET data are currently the primary source for understanding the COMM students' experience. As such, SET data are used not just for making course-level decisions but also for larger programmatic and course delivery decisions. There are myriad sources of richer qualitative data representing students' experiences in the program, but there is not a systematized process to factor these data into decision-making. To illustrate the potential impact of considering these data into the overall data mix, I will provide three examples of qualitative data sources that are not currently being formally captured for use. First, as a part of the application process for all SPE academic programs, applicants are required to submit a personal statement. Applicants are asked for the following in their personal statement:

- A statement that is two-pages double-spaced, 450-500 words.
- Explain how your chosen program aligns with your personal goals and motivations.
- Address how your education and professional experiences have shaped your desire to pursue your degree.

The academic director (AD) is the primary person who reads and evaluates the applicants' personal statements. Personal statements typically chronicle an applicant's personal and professional successes, challenges, growth, and movement toward career goals. Applicants typically mention their upbringing and any barriers to learning that they have struggled with or overcome along their academic journey. Second, as a part of the

SPE “high touch” advising model advisors communicate directly with most of the students in the program every quarter. During those meetings or email exchanges, anecdotal stories are often shared with advisors about instructors, course content, and learning preferences. Currently, those data might be recorded into Banner, the student management software used by MU, as a comment in the student’s profile. More commonly, however, the information from the advisor-student communications is not documented in a way that is usable for program-level or curricular decision-making. Finally, there is a treasure trove of data available through the portfolio process that all students are required to participate in. The culminating course in the master’s degree program is the Portfolio Capstone course. Preparing for this course starts at the beginning of the student’s academic journey immediately after they enroll in their first course. At the start of the program is a requirement for students to complete a non-credit knowledge check that guides them through setting up their e-portfolio and provides an overview of the importance of this process for their overall learning. One of the knowledge checks asks students to articulate their learning goals. At the end of their program when students take the Portfolio Capstone course, there are discussion prompts and a reflections assignment that specifically asks students to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of their experience. Again, those data are not extracted such that decisions can be made based on themes related to students’ goals and expectations. All three of these examples represent rich qualitative data about students’ experiences in the program that are currently not being factored into decision-making.

The SPE leadership prioritizes, above all else, delivering an exceptional student experience. It is not uncommon to hear statements from the leadership about how the “north star” at SPE is delivering an exceptional student experience. As the AD of the program, I am the primary person accountable for ensuring the COMM students have an

exceptional experience in the program. Although, it is not clear exactly how the leadership at SPE defines “exceptional student experience” or what data are informing whether we are executing on that goal. I often wonder, how would I know if the students were having an exceptional experience? Further, I do not have a sense of what students, or the leadership, would identify as contributing factors to an exceptional experience. We have access to a tremendous amount of data at SPE. However, I am not privy to how data are prioritized and when certain data are considered relevant to the decision-making process when assessing and making decisions about student experience. After teaching the Portfolio Capstone course for the last two academic years and after having read hundreds of personal statements in applications, there is tremendous value in the qualitative data available through the stories told by current and prospective students that could shape how we define and execute on the concept of “exceptional student experience.”

Definition of Terms

Adult Learners - Students who are over or under the age 25, do not rely on others for financing their education, and typically attend school part-time while maintaining a work and busy family life are considered adult learners. Adult learners are also commonly referred to as post-traditional or non-traditional students (Huang, 2002; Singh et al., 2021; Urban & Jirsáková, 2021).

Banner - Banner is an enterprise resource planning (ERP) software developed by Ellucian, a company that provides technology solutions to higher education institutions. Banner was designed to support various administrative functions, including student information management, finance, human resources, and advancement (Ellucian, n.d.).

Canvas Learning Management System - Canvas is a cloud-based learning management system (LMS) designed to provide a platform for educational institutions to deliver and manage online courses, assignments, and assessments. Canvas includes features such as course content management, grade book, messaging, and collaboration tools to facilitate online teaching and learning (Instructure Community, n.d.).

Course Evaluations - MU automatically sends course evaluation surveys to students actively enrolled in a course at the end of each academic quarter. Academic units have control over what questions are asked of students and how those questions are worded. The SPE course evaluation survey consists of twenty-three questions decided into two parts. The first is a series of quantitative questions asking students to submit Likert scale responses about course-related items, assignments and activities, and the instructor performance and effectiveness. The second section consists of two qualitative questions where students type in responses to open-ended questions about strengths and opportunities for the instructor and the course.

EMSI - EMSI (Economic Modeling Specialists International) is a labor market data and analysis arm of the parent company, Lightcast. EMSI merged with BurningGlass, another labor market data company, and together the EMSI BurningGlass data provide information on workforce and economic trends to businesses, workforce development organizations, and government agencies. Lightcast offers a range of data products and services, including labor market data, economic impact analysis, and workforce planning tools (Lightcast, 2021).

FreshDesk - Freshdesk is a cloud-based customer support software that enables organizations to manage customer inquiries, complaints, and support tickets from various channels, such as email, phone, social media, and chat. Freshdesk

includes features such as ticket management, knowledge base, automation, and reporting to streamline customer support operations and improve customer satisfaction (Freshworks, n.d.).

Online Learning - Courses that are delivered digitally over the internet, typically through a Learning Management System, where students' engagement with the course is not in person with the instructor or other students are often referred to as online courses. There is a wide variance for how online courses are delivered including many hybrid modalities that include synchronous and asynchronous options. The term "online learning" is often used interchangeably with the terms distance learning, e-learning, distributed learning, computer-aided learning, and virtual learning – to name a few (Ally, 2008).

Student-Generated Data - Student-generated qualitative data is data collected through qualitative research methods that involve students as active participants in generating data about their own experiences or perspectives.

Tableau - Tableau is a data visualization software that allows users to connect, visualize, and share data in an interactive and intuitive way. Tableau allows users to create a variety of visualizations, including charts, graphs, maps, and dashboards, to help understand and analyze complex data sets (Tableau, n.d.).

Purpose of the Program Evaluation

The primary purpose of this program evaluation is to better understand the leadership team's decision-making process and, within that process, when data are used to inform decisions related to SPE's mission to deliver an exceptional student experience. The guiding evaluation question is: What are the operating assumptions that inform when data are prioritized in the SPE leadership's decision-making process around issues that affect student experience? Secondarily, this study will explore what

organizational conditions need to be present for unused student-generated qualitative data to be considered relevant in the leadership's decision-making process about issues related to student experience?

This study was focused on the SPE leadership team, the Dean Team, which consists of the SPE dean and four associate deans. The Dean Team was chosen because they are the ultimate decision-makers for each department within the academic unit. Each of the associate deans oversee large teams that all contribute directly or indirectly to the COMM students' overall experience whether that be through the initial marketing exposure, the application process, the new student onboarding, the quarterly advising, or the course content and delivery. SET data appears to be the single source of data currently used for decision-making among all these teams, but it is possible that other data are getting factored in. This evaluation study will collect qualitative data through one-on-one interviews with each member of the Dean Team to better understand the attitudes, beliefs, and values attributed to different data sources and how those lead to operating assumptions that inform when data are prioritized in the decision-making process at the leadership level. The ability to factor in more student-generated data about students' experience in the program would be tremendously valuable; whether that data point to expectations about the experience the students anticipate having in the program, stories about their experience during the program, or reflections on the experience they had after graduating. SPE is in a unique position to be a leader at Mountain University with how we use the data available to us. Thanks to our internal data and operations team and our learning experience design team, we can be highly responsive with our data analysis. The findings and recommendations from this program evaluation are likely to be applied to how data are used to inform decisions that affect other programs and departments within SPE.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The increased data use in higher education is inextricably linked with the rise in technology and learning through online formats (Webber & Zheng, 2020). This study was focused on evaluating the operating assumptions around when data are relevant to the decision-making process and what conditions are needed for qualitative data to be prioritized when making decisions about issues that affect the student experience. Recognizing there are many approaches I could have taken to presenting the literature around this topic, this review of literature is structured to provide background on why we need to understand students' experiences with online learning, what data are currently used to do this, why are these data a problem, what challenges exists with moving beyond the current system, and, finally, examples of how other data have been used within higher education.

For clarification purposes, it is important to note that, while there are subtle nuances between the terms remote learning, distance learning, virtual learning, e-learning, and online learning, the nuances are not significant enough to impact what is relayed related to best practices; therefore, this literature review uses the term online learning as a catchall term instead of distinguishing between those terms. Additionally, adult learners are also referred to as post-traditional and non-traditional learners in the research. Again, for ease and consistency, this literature review uses the terms adult learner or adult learning only.

Why We Need to Understand Adult Students' Experiences in Online Settings

Online learning gained early popularity as a pathway to provide more flexible and accessible learning opportunities, particularly for adult learners (Rickard, 2010). With the focus on adult learners, it was a natural and justifiable expectation that learning would be self-directed and that learners would understand the requirement to be able to function autonomously and be intrinsically motivated (Huang, 2002). Early educational psychology theorists, Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner held a constructivist view that adult learning was uniquely different in that adult learning leveraged past experiences and prior knowledge (Huang, 2002). This thinking further supported the rationale that adult learners, when given proper guidance by instructors toward "discovery" (Huang, 2002, p. 29), can solve their own problems. Knowles's theory of Andragogy drew on the constructivists view when building out six principles of andragogy. For Knowles, the six principles that are requisite for learning include that the learner knows how and what they will learn, has prior knowledge upon which to build, learner's prior experiences afford them resources and self-identity, learner is ready to learn, learner is self-directed, and that the learner is motivated to learn (Huang, 2002). These early assumptions around the adult learner's ability to do much of the heavy lifting when learning in an online setting are the basis of many of the pedagogical choices and learning expectations that exist today (Chakraborty & Muyia Nafukho, 2014).

Learning on Demand, the 2010 edition of an annual report on online education trends in the U.S., showed that online course enrollment from degree-granting higher education institutions had gone up from 9.6% in 2002 to 25.3% in 2008 (Allen & Seaman, 2010). While online learning was surging to over 6 million enrollments nationally, many studies were estimating that the dropout rates for students enrolled in

online courses was close to double that of students enrolled in FtF learning (Levy, 2007). Certainly, there are a wide range of factors that contribute to the success or failure of the online learning experience. By 2018 two new factors had emerged as critical to student satisfaction with online learning: self-efficacy and interaction. Alqurashi (2018, p. 134) defines self-efficacy as “the level of confidence that someone has to perform a particular task, activity, action or challenge.” Alqurashi found that “if students believe that they cannot achieve results, they will not make any effort to take the necessary steps to achieve” (2018, p. 134).

Kara et al. acknowledged through their review of literature on adult online learning challenges that much of the prior research has focused on “what to do to improve quality and adult learners’ performance” (Kara et al., 2019, p. 7). Offering a counter perspective, Kara et al.’s work centered challenges identified by adult learners about their experiences in online settings. They reviewed thirty-six studies published from 2002 to 2018. They were able to sort the challenges by the themes related to internal, external, and program related challenges (Kara et al., 2019). Predictably, top internal challenges pointed to work/life balance and time management. This is consistent with historically pervasive issues with adult learners. Top external challenges were around technical issues, having an appropriate environment to study, and lack of family support (Kara et al., 2019). Finally, the top program-related challenges were lack of interaction with instructors and peers, and lack of institutional support (Kara et al., 2019). Notably, Kara et al. reported sub-themes around “feelings of isolation” (2019, p. 17) and a “belief that establishing a social relationship was difficult at a distance” (2019, p. 16).

This notion that relationship building is a challenge in the online space but vital to the learning experience is supported by the work of Chatterjee and Correia (2019). In

their quantitative study aimed at better understanding the correlation between sense of community and students' attitude toward collaborative learning, Chatterjee and Correia (2019) found a positive correlation between students' "feeling of connectedness" and satisfaction with online learning (p. 62). Their study concludes that "it would be of great interest to the research community to investigate more the kinds of collaborative activities, their efficacies and how they impact student's sense of community in online learning environments" (Chatterjee & Correia, 2019, p. 62).

Within the FtF learning structure, rapport and relationship-building presumably happen naturally, hence being often overlooked as pedagogical approaches are adapted for online learning. As online learning has grown in popularity, it has been posited by scholars that not enough attention has been given to research and approaches that are specifically focused on the online learning experience (i.e., the student's experience with online learning) (Shearer et al., 2019). Shearer et al. argue that through the history of online learning we have moved away from personalization and toward a "mass education model, one that is more teacher centered than student centered" (2019, p. 39). Shearer et al. ask, "why are we talking about pedagogical paradigms, but are still not able to provide a fully personalized, customized, collaborative and constructive online learning experience?" (2019, p. 39). Through their research, Shearer et al. developed a model for a Vision for Future of Online Learning Experience which represented what they felt was "ideal" (2019, p. 48). The model put a strong emphasis on collaborative and co-constructed learning, and shared ownership in meaning-making. Additionally, they felt the online learning environment needed to be "psychologically safe and engaging in productive failure in this experience are essential" (2019, p. 47).

By the start of 2020 it was a commonly held belief that students enrolled in online learning were challenged by feelings of isolation, loneliness, and lack of community. As a matter of fact, Kaufmann and Vallade call this trend a “crisis of connection” and a “loneliness epidemic” (2020, p. 1) and that was before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the COVID-19 was declared an international pandemic in early 2020, 185 countries moved FtF instruction to online modalities (Singh et al., 2021). This pivot to fully online instruction, while highly disruptive for many higher education institutions, resulted in an unprecedented amount of scholarly work on nearly every aspect of online teaching and learning. While some institutions saw this merely as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) with the idea that all instruction would go back to normal at some point, others embraced this time as an “opportunity for rethinking assumptions about education in general and higher education in particular” (Rapanta et al., 2021, p. 716).

Rapanta et al. (2021) investigated what learnings from the rapid move to online learning could inform future online teaching and learning. Through a series of interviews with experts in the field, Rapanta et al. identified that flexibility and empowerment were of critical importance for students’ success with online learning. Specifically related to flexibility they stated, “students need to have a say in their own learning process” and “increased personalization implied a greater flexibility, as the instructional methods must be continually adjusted to learners’ level, interest and needs” (Rapanta et al., 2021, p. 734). Empowerment, according to Rapanta et al. (2021), also contributed to students feeling more ownership over their learning experience which translates to increased motivation.

The literature on online learning and the online student experience spanning the last fifteen years points to a pedagogy that brings increased personalization and

collaboration though, increasingly, each new online learning development pushes deeper into uncharted territory. For better or worse, data is the key to helping faculty and administrators have the necessary insights to make pedagogical shifts for the ever-growing population of online learners. Arguably, student experience and student learning are distinctly different but interconnected. In addition to informing pedagogical choices, data can help illuminate the interconnectivity such that student learning and student experience support one another.

What Data Are Prioritized to Understand Students' Experiences

The surge to online learning has reinvigorated the debate over whether online learning can deliver the same level of quality and academic rigor as FtF learning (Ojha & Rahman, 2021). The most ubiquitous instrument for assessment of student learning and course value within academia has been student course evaluation surveys (Gibson et al., 2022; Kogan et al., 2022; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021). Commonly termed Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET), these surveys are often both qualitative and quantitative and administered digitally for students to complete anonymously at the end of each term. They generally consist of a series of Likert-scale survey questions covering both instructor performance and course effectiveness as well as more open-ended qualitative questions (Jones, 2012). Research about the effectiveness and validity of SET data reveals a wide variety of perspectives both supporting and opposing this instrument as the primary indicator of the value of online course content and instruction (Gibson et al., 2022; Jones, 2012).

The Myriad Problems with SET Data

Volumes of research point to SET data being biased (DeFrain, 2016). Although most researchers admit that there is some utility to SET data for gathering students'

perceptions about their learning experiences, using these data more broadly is cautioned due to how student biases skew the results (Heffernan, 2021). There is overwhelming research showing that white women and people of color across all genders fare considerably worse than white men in SET data (Heffernan, 2021; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021). The literature that Heffernan (2021) reviewed showed that instructors who were perceived as being women (regardless of race or ethnicity), even if that gender perception was incorrect, produced SET scores up to 37 percentage points lower than their colleagues who were perceived as men. The bias against women is even more pronounced for women who are not white with the most extreme bias being toward non-white women who do not speak the dominant language spoken at the university where they teach. Where this bias comes into sharp relief is in the anonymous open-ended comments that are often included in SET surveys. Several studies (Gibson et al., 2022; Heffernan, 2021) point to how the anonymity of the SET process is leading to psychological harm to faculty, particularly women "from ethnically diverse backgrounds" (Heffernan, 2021, p. 149). Abusive comments directed at women faculty are becoming increasingly common and resulting in anxiety and distress (Gibson et al., 2022). Even when the comments are overtly sexist, racist, or homophobic, due to the anonymity of the comment legal action or other means of administrative recourse are unlikely to be taken (Heffernan, 2021). Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman (2021) go as far as to recommend that qualitative open-ended comments be either restricted or removed completely from SET surveys to reduce bias toward women and faculty of color.

As data analytic software becomes more sophisticated, researchers are gaining a deeper understanding about the dangers of "free-text responses" (Gibson et al., 2022, p. 36) commonly used in SET surveys. Using automated methods trained to recognize

language that had been identified as self-harm, cyberbullying, and cyberthreat, Gibson et al. (2022) screened 50,000 responses. About 48.4% of the comments were flagged as problematic. Of those, 96% were considered cyberbullying and were incidents where students used the anonymous survey as if it was a “complaint form” which lacked any “constructive criticism and tended to exclusively blame the teacher for their negative learning experience” (Gibson et al., 2022, p. 42). Heffernan (2022) and Gibson et al. (2022) don’t feel quite as strongly as Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman (2021), but they all encourage university administrators to consider “legal implications” (Heffernan, 2022, p. 149) of the damage that can be done through qualitative SET comments.

SET data has been shown to be a poor indicator of course quality (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021). Course characteristics such as class size, workload, discipline, and delivery format of the content all have been shown to impact the SET data for overall course value and teaching effectiveness even though they are not related (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021). This is a form of measurement bias and controlling for these potential factors within the SET survey or analysis of the data is nearly impossible. In fact, Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman (2021) note that even the presence of food during the class sessions can affect SET scores. These factors are unrelated to the instructor’s effectiveness or pedagogical choices yet can skew scores.

Rather than the quality of course content being an influential factor, research points to grade satisfaction as being more strongly correlated with SET scores (Heffernan, 2021; Kogan et al., 2022; Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021). Building off earlier research, Kogan et al. (2022) reviewed over 19,000 evaluations and found a direct correlation between course grades and evaluation score. Further, using several methodologies to control for different factors, Kogan et al. looked to identify if the

correlation between grades and evaluation scores could be attributed to teaching quality or the “leniency hypothesis” (p. 2), which posits that students reward easy classes with higher evaluation scores. They found that neither element was a factor. Instead, their findings indicated that instructors were more inclined to inflate grades when course evaluations were a critical factor to employment status, promotion, or tenure (Kogan et al., 2022). Kogan et al. (2022) conclude their study with caution about how the push to receive a certain score “may lead to pedagogically unsound practices” (p. 17) like modifying course content or assessments to reduce rigor while increasing the odds of receiving a higher grade.

The impact of non-response bias is also worth factoring into the SET validity debate (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021; Plante et al., 2022). Research shows that students most likely to complete a SET survey were either those students who have cause to be highly complementary or highly critical of a course (Plante et al., 2022). Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman (2021) referenced how a low response rate alters the data. With only the extreme polar ends of the spectrum included, the data will not be representative of the whole group (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021). Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman (2021) state, “The mean of a skewed distribution is more influenced by outliers, especially in smaller samples” (p. 79). SPE has a maximum enrollment of 20 students in online courses. Many courses run with less than 15 students enrolled and it is not uncommon for the SET response rate to be 40% to 60%. Given that we assess instructors based on the SET averages without much consideration of how many students completed the survey, the extent to which the data might be skewed could have a big impact on whether an instructor is chosen to teach in future terms.

Even prior to the pandemic, most institutions distributed SETs digitally to students regardless of whether the course was delivered online or FtF (Plante et al., 2022). Related to whether SET data differed between online course delivery and FtF course delivery, there is evidence that response rate is lower for online courses versus FtF courses but there is conflicting data on whether the quality of the response is different based on modality (Plante et al., 2022). Regardless of the course modality, each of the issues of bias and prejudice that have been shown to skew data of SETs is concerning for the implications on faculty hiring and promotion. However, in aggregate, the data are indicative of larger systemic issues in higher education, namely the effects of consumerism.

How Academic Capitalism Influences the Current System

Academic capitalism is a term coined by Slaughter and Leslie (2001) to describe the influence of economic policy on higher education resulting in "market-like behaviors" (p. 154) for faculty and administrators as schools and students compete for resources. Academic capitalism is visible through the increasing number of industry partnerships, royalty and licensing agreements, and for-profit activities within academe (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) argued that academic capitalism has led to an educational pivot from having an exchange-value to having a use-value. This change, according to Kezar (2008), is the result of a fundamental shift in higher education policy and practice away from people and the public good.

When looking at how academic capitalism plays out within student services departments, Slaughter and Leslie (2001) point to the increase in marketing budgets, the use of branding strategies, and the development of separate departments to sell higher education as a product. As this shift has evolved, student services departments have

“moved away from its traditional emphasis on student moral development toward ‘bottom line’ revenue considerations” (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001, p. 157). Faculty and students are impacted as universities move further into an academic capitalist stance.

Mendoza (2012) points out that academic capitalism has one positive implication for students. Increased industry relationships with academic units and faculty results in better exposure to industry professionals and future employment potential for students. At SPE, the fact that our instructors are industry experts working in the field they are teaching in is positioned as a strong selling point. It is an important part of the program for both maintaining relevant content and for the benefits these relationships offer our students. From the faculty perspective, academic capitalism leads to a shift from the traditional focus on serving the public good through research agendas. Instead, universities put more emphasis on funding industry-focused research which has resulted in transforming “faculty members into managed professionals who labor for the knowledge economy” (Gonzales et al., 2013, p. 1111).

In Kezar’s (2008) analysis of Bok (2003), Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), and Zemsky et al. (2005), Kezar laments the futility of creating recommendations meant to make changes at an institutional level when consumerism and commodification are prevailing in society and in the marketplace. Kezar (2008) asserts that working within the system is the only way to bring about change. To effect a change from within the higher education systems and structures we need to start with taking a good look at a hallmark of AC; the commercialism of higher education which positions education as a service and students as a customer.

Student-as-Consumer Mentality

There is no denying that even before the pandemic enrollment numbers had been a top priority for higher education institutions and student (customer) satisfaction matters (Heffernan, 2021). Giroux (2021) wrote that the "COVID-19 pandemic has further intensified the corporatization of the neoliberal university" (p. 5). One of the ways this is evident is through the student as consumer (SAC) mentality so prevalent in higher education today. When higher education is treated like a commodity versus a service, both by institutions and by students, it often results in "negative and unintended consequences for student learning" (Naidoo et al., 2011, p. 1150). While problematizing the increasing shift toward student consumerism, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) explain how students viewing "the act of learning as a commercial transaction" (p. 272) is a natural response. This dynamic is particularly detrimental to learning because of how it situates the student "outside the intellectual community" and the result is students "perceive themselves as passive consumers of education" (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 272; Nash & Winstone, 2017). There is a body of literature on how the SAC model prioritizes students' desires over academic rigor (Gillespie Finney & Finney, 2010). Critics of the SAC model refer to how these practices tend to result in passive participation in the learning process (Gillespie Finney & Finney, 2010). However, proponents of the SAC model value centering students' voices to influence curriculum, individual course, and instructor decisions (Gillespie Finney & Finney, 2010).

The adoption of the SAC mentality has led to a movement toward adjusting curricula to be more directly aligned with industry needs (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Although some see this as a positive step toward ensuring degree completion that might equate to employment, Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) reference flaws in that logic.

Modifying curricula such that students can jump into application before acquiring the conceptual foundation reduces the chance that the student will gain the necessary building blocks to expand on that knowledge later in life. As such, this approach results in a less adaptable worker which is counter-productive in the long-run for both the student and the end-of-the-line employer (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Naidoo et al., 2011). Their work also points to how this approach is likely to impact more vulnerable student populations. Racially minoritized and low-income students are more affected by this hyper-focused approach on leveraging the "knowledge economy" (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 276) because this type of education is "reduced to narrowly defined core competencies" (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005, p. 277) rather than teaching students how to learn.

Student-consumers, or students who act and are treated as consumers, are more likely to take an entitled approach to their educational experience (Gillespie Finney & Finney, 2010; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Webb, 2018). Gillespie Finney and Finney (2010) defined entitled students as ones that tend to feel they are owed higher grades, that complaining about dissatisfaction with the experience should produce changes, and that participation in their learning should be minimal. Issues with SET scores and grade inflation are directly tied to entitled student-consumers who are much more likely to be focused on the extrinsic reward of a good grade than the gain that comes with fully engaging in the learning experience (Webb, 2018). Moreover, the less involved students are with their learning, the more dissatisfied they are likely to be with the experience (Gillespie Finney & Finney, 2010).

Moving Toward Alternative Data Sources

The push for accountability that is a byproduct of academic capitalism, and the commodification of higher education has inspired some interesting research on how to better engage students in their learning experiences and assessment of those experiences (Hart & Robinson, 2019). In an effort to understand how to more effectively engage students in feedback they had received on written assignments, Carless's (2018) study on feedback loops talks about the importance of the student and instructor working as partners. However, modularized online courses are often not structured to where this partnership can manifest in a way that positively impacts learner development (Carless, 2018). Carless explored a double-loop feedback process (or feedback spirals) which created more opportunity for students to actively engage with the feedback and reflection process at multiple intervals throughout the course. Carless suggested that the feedback spirals used in his study could be applied to program assessment.

Hart and Robinson (2019) acknowledged that the current academic effectiveness assessment measures in place within higher education institutions simply do not tell the whole story. Quantifiably showing that students have learned what they were supposed to learn is not straightforward or easy. Hart and Robinson (2019) suggested that the best approach might be to triangulate current data with student self-reflection when assessing how real learning matches articulated learning objectives. In their study they employed a model that brought in external stakeholders to hear students talk through a reflection of their learning (Hart & Robinson, 2019). The external stakeholders were then able to ask students questions and give feedback to further solidify critical thinking around what they have learned. The external leadership team consisted of alumni, industry professionals, faculty outside the student's unit, and higher-level administrators. This model did more

than allow students to share their academic story in a way that further instilled their learning. It also gave them actionable feedback while establishing program credibility and building community around the goals of the program (Hart & Robinson, 2019).

Summary

The research suggests that online education is moving toward a co-constructed model of learning that is heavily reliant on student-instructor collaboration (Gagnon, 2021). Collaboration in online spaces requires, at minimum, trust and open communication about the learning experience (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Singh, et al., 2022); two characteristics that SET surveys undermine by pitting student against instructor (Kreitzer & Sweet-Cushman, 2021). It has been shown that for assessing certain measures related to individual course content and structural effectiveness, SET data has some merit (Heffernan, 2021). When it comes to understanding students' learning experiences or instructor effectiveness, there is overwhelming data indicating SET data are not a reliable source (DeFrain, 2016). The literature leaves no doubt in my mind, to adequately address the dynamic landscape of online education, a different approach to what data are used in decision-making related to factors that impact student experience must be embraced.

There is adequate literature showing how researchers are using different approaches and methods of data analysis and data analysis software to better understand qualitative SET data (Gibson et al., 2022). However, missing from the literature is how similar methods can be used to collect and analyze data from reflection assignments and e-Portfolios. Reflective work is common in higher education so contributing to the literature on different approaches to using that data to make larger programmatic decisions will be an important part of this study. Similarly, using e-

portfolios as a form of assessment in higher education is a practice that has been gaining in popularity over the last decade (Mooring, 2022). I believe both reflection assignment data and e-portfolios can be mined for themes related to student experience. These are both areas, which I hope to shed some light on as I go through my evaluation process.

The extant literature is also lacking research into the understanding of what rationale lies beneath higher education decision-makers' choices to continue relying so heavily on a system that has been proven to be flawed. At SPE we pride ourselves on being highly sophisticated with data and having a data-driven culture. Yet, there is a disconnect between our claim to deliver an exceptional student experience and how we use data to back up our understanding of the experience students are having. When data that intimately describes students' experiences in the program is readily available to mine, what barriers exist in the leadership team to using those data? This program evaluation will delve into understanding what operating assumptions held by SPE leadership inform the data prioritization related to factors that affect student experience. As the amount of data available is ever-increasing, what was uncovered in this evaluation helps to inform how decisions are made at the SPE leadership level and how data factor into those decisions. This evaluation will also contribute to the awareness at SPE of the influence of academic capitalism as we seek to better understand and address students' learning experiences through data. As the online learning landscape shifts toward a more personalized, co-constructed model, how the underpinnings of academic capitalism influence factors related to student experience and student-instructor interaction will be important to understand.

Theoretical Framework

As mentioned earlier in the literature review, academic capitalism is the development of academic programs, interstitials, and ventures with a focus on the economic gain to the university. At its core, academic capitalism is seen as contrasting with academic endeavors focused on the public good. Academic ventures that focus more on economic gain cannot operate in tandem with those for the public good – they are always in opposition to one another (Terziev & Bogdanova, 2020). Although academic capitalism is often thought of and referred to within the context of the ways in which institutions commodify faculty endeavors and academic research, this is not the only form of academic capitalism (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005). Academic capitalism can also be seen in programs or departments that are created specifically to expand educational access. This is often done through the development of online programs that have less rigorous admission criteria. These online programs often are allocated robust marketing and recruitment budgets by the university and large student support teams to ensure matriculation and retention (Naidoo et al., 2011). Like SPE, programs built with an academic capitalistic motivation extend access to the university to a broader range of students. These students are often students who otherwise might not be able to get admitted to the university. The students who enroll in these programs are often post-traditional students, meaning they are adults between the ages of 25 and 45, they work full time while attending classes, they are often caregiving for children or elderly parents, and they tend to be personally responsible for paying for their education (versus a parent). This perfectly describes SPE as an academic unit and the population that we serve.

I struggle with the notion that expanded access to education serves purely to feed the financial gain of the institution. As a society, we cannot divorce ourselves from the capitalistic world that we live in. As inequities related to job, food, and housing security expand, intergenerational mobility, or the likelihood that children will be able to afford better lives than their parents, is declining in the United States (Reber & Sinclair, 2020). SPE provides access to skills-based, career-focused graduate education that helps students advance their station in life. But when does an institution assert what is pedagogically or academically right for the student even if that means lower enrollment? When does the focus shift to keeping students enrolled by any means necessary? This is where the research on student-as-consumer (SAC) as a subset of academic capitalist thinking becomes critical to my work. Through the lens of academic capitalism, I hope to better understand the tipping point when fostering the SAC mentality by the institution is working against the aim of supporting the public good. For this reason, as I went through the iterative process of participant interviews and consensus-building feedback conversations, I was looking for how the Dean Team's assumptions and decision-making processes were influenced by the academic capitalist underpinnings of SPE. I also explored how these assumptions might inadvertently perpetuate the SAC thinking in a way that is counter to the work we are trying to do to support the students academically. Through looking at how academic capitalist theory has been applied in other research settings, I gained more depth and a more critical vantage point that added color to my findings and informed my recommendation

Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

As an AD at SPE, I am very aware of the internal data systems and processes in place, but I have not always had a clear view of why decisions are made and what factors inform those decisions. Like most of my academic director peers, I did not come to this role from another academic position; I came from an industry background. From the first day on the job, I could tell that there was a wide diversity of professional backgrounds and experiences among the people I worked with. Because of this, we also had very different perspectives on how to manage our programs. As I started learning more about the other departments within SPE, this range of perspectives based on vastly diverse professional backgrounds held consistent. Although it is natural for me to be interested in what motivates people to do the things they do, working closely with a group of people with such divergent approaches to their work not only motivated this program evaluation but also strongly contributed to the philosophical stance I took while engaging in this program evaluation. I set out with this study to do more than just understand the decision-making process; I also wanted to better understand the people behind the decisions.

At first consideration, I felt a strong pull towards qualitative inquiry and, though mixed methods and quantitative data collection can be used, qualitative is the most common method used for program evaluations (Brands & Sam, 2020). A qualitative study would be the best way for me to get the depth and personal detail I was looking for

from my participants. A quantitative approach would not have allowed me to explore their experiences in rich detail. I also felt the participants might not have specific answers to some of my questions but by engaging them in conversation, I would learn more about the assumptions and perceptions that inform their thinking. Qualitative research is strongly influenced by the researcher's positionality, biases, and world views (Jones et al., 2014). It is considered best practice for qualitative researchers to engage in reflexivity; to make explicit the paradigm that informs their reality (Mertens & Wilson, 2019) or what they know to exist in the world (ontology) (Jones et al., 2014) and how they believe what they know to be true (epistemology) (Jones et al., 2014). Given how close I was to the work of this program evaluation and the participants involved in it, a clear articulation of my ways of being and knowing were especially important. My ontological and epistemological stance shaped my early decisions around my methodological approach which became the guiding force behind the methods used in this program evaluation.

Evaluation Paradigm

There are important distinctions that frame the overlap and the differences between research and evaluation. The principal differences are that program evaluations collect data to determine value for the purpose of improvement with a focus on a specific program, not a population (Ah Sam & Brandon, 2020). Therefore, the findings are not generalizable, and the evaluation is designed to impact programs' systems and processes in real time (Ah Sam & Brandon, 2020). However, as data are being collected, there is often an interconnectivity between the evaluator and the evaluand or what is being evaluated (Ah Sam & Brandon, 2020). Like researchers, evaluators employ theories to guide their work. Mertens and Wilson (2019) argued that it is more

appropriate to frame the primary theories used in evaluations as “models or approaches” (p. 40) due to the more prescriptive nature of how they are used by evaluators to inform their work. Rooted in earlier research by Alkin and Christie (2018), Mertens and Wilson (2019) have identified four major categories that evaluation approaches fall into: methods, use, values, and social justice. The evaluator’s choice of approach should align with the evaluators’ worldview and philosophical constructs about the acquisition of knowledge as they engage in the evaluative process. Together, these elements make up the evaluation paradigm.

Mertens and Wilson (2019) described the Values approach to program evaluation as one where the evaluator “puts aside the importance of predetermined outcomes but focuses on the stakeholders as your primary evaluation partners, whom you respect and open up to you” (p. 129). This approach perfectly described my intent coming into the evaluation. The participants, or stakeholders, were my coworkers and my direct supervisor. The paradigm that aligns most closely with the Values approach is constructivism because of the focus on “understand[ing] a research problem from the participants’ perspectives” (Mertens & Wilson, 2019, p. 130). The four components that make up this paradigm, axiology or ethics, ontology, epistemology, and methodology, all draw on constructivist philosophy (Mertens & Wilson, 2019).

A constructivist’s axiology demands researchers maintain constant awareness of how their own values influence their work and cannot be treated as separate from the outcomes (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). Evidence of how I kept sharp focus on my values and beliefs is articulated later in this chapter as I discuss the importance of journaling to my work. Mertens and Wilson (2019) referenced that Guba and Lincoln (2005) suggest the researcher explicitly “align their beliefs with a critical theory” (p. 131) to provide a framework for acknowledging the researcher’s belief structures and the influence of that

on their work. This was a primary motivator for my inclusion of the theory of academic capitalism as a part of my analysis. A constructivist's ontological assumptions center around the notion that there is not one true reality; reality is socially constructed (Mertens & Wilson, 2019), "value-laden" (Moses & Knutsen, 2020, p. 10), and heavily biased due to how the "truth lies in the eyes of the observer" (Moses & Knutsen, 2020, p. 10). The goal of the constructivist is to "interpret and understand" (Moses & Knutsen, 2020, p. 10) through relevant data. The constructivist epistemological approach requires a series of dialectical exchanges and reflective dialogue over an extended period of time (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). Finally, a constructivist's methodology is centered on systematic inquiry with active involvement with participants to "uncover hidden meanings" (Mertens & Wilson, 2019, p. 132). Common methods used with constructivist methodology are interviews, document review, observation, and "hermeneutical dialogue" (Mertens & Wilson, 2019, p. 132).

The constructivist paradigm was central to my work on this program evaluation. It properly fits my own vision of the world and how I make meaning of things around me, but it also provides a validated structure for me to explore, in a thoughtful, reflective, and collaborative way, how the Dean Team's operating assumptions inform when data are prioritized in the decision-making process. Through the lens of academic capitalism, I will also investigate what organizational conditions need to be present for unused student-generated qualitative data to be prioritized in the leadership's decision-making process. Using the constructivist paradigm as my guide, the next two sections describe the methodological framework and the methods I used to gather data and analyze the findings for this program evaluation.

Methodological Approach

Although researchers sometimes conflate or use interchangeably the terms methodology and methods, I adopted Moses and Knutsen's (2012) distinction between the two. Moses and Knutsen (2012) suggest that researchers "think of methods as tools, and methodologies as well-equipped toolboxes" (p. 3). With that frame, I allowed my philosophical approach to help define my methodological approach, and then my tactics, or methods, naturally fell in line. Informed by my constructivist paradigm, I used a feedback-loop approach for gathering qualitative data on internal stakeholders' perspectives on the use of data in the decision-making process. This program evaluation started with an environmental scan of data sources available at SPE, then through interviews with the Dean Team at SPE and sessions to collaboratively develop a logic model, this program evaluation aimed to uncover the attitudes, beliefs, and values that contributed to the data being used in the decision-making process at the leadership level and the implications that had on perceptions of the COMM student experience.

With this program evaluation, I wanted to better understand the decision-making process used by the Dean Team and when data was prioritized in that process. A Process Evaluation "monitors, documents, and assesses program activities" (Mertens & Wilson, 2019, p. 101). Mertens and Wilson (2019) aligned the Process Evaluation methodology with the Use approach and the pragmatic paradigm. Mertens and Wildon (2019) felt that process evaluations are more focused on one primary truth about the value or effectiveness of a process. Since I was equally focused on the people (the Dean Team) and their perceptions around data use in their process of decision-making, the Use approach and the pragmatic paradigm did not fit for my work. I chose a Process Evaluation methodological approach with a constructivist paradigm for the following reasons:

- A Process Evaluation with a constructivist paradigm helped to collaborate with the stakeholders to better understand directly from them, based on their own reality, the process currently in place to make decisions and when data was being factored into decisions that affect student experience.
- A Process Evaluation conducted with constructivist methods allowed me to observe conversations among stakeholders to record the perceptions, values, beliefs, and challenges that contributed to the operational assumptions around when data was prioritized when making decisions about factors that affect student experience.
- A Process Evaluation conducted with constructivist methods allowed me to collaborate directly with stakeholders to better understand the barriers to data use, which gave me valuable insights into what conditions needed to be present for unused data sources to be considered in the decision-making process.

The objectives of this Process Evaluation were threefold. First, to better understand the decision-making process currently in place and when data was used in that process. The next objective was to assess the operating assumptions that informed when data were considered relevant to that decision-making process. Finally, through assessment of the operational assumptions that informed the data considered relevant to the current process, the third objective for this Process Evaluation was to provide recommendations and considerations for incorporating unused data sources into the decision-making process.

Methods

The program evaluation consisted of three phases as depicted below in Figure 2. The evaluation started with an environmental scan of what data was available to be used in decision-making processes at the leadership level. The next step was to engage the SPE Dean Team in one-on-one interviews to understand what operational assumptions existed around the data being used, the unused data available for use, and what barriers might prohibit the use of currently unused data. It was important to note that the sources of data were reviewed, not the actual data. Although it was likely that themes around students' preferences around their learning experience might have been uncovered during the evaluation, the critical focus was on understanding the process by which decisions were made, how data informed that process, and what operating assumptions existed around the use of certain types of data. The next phase was a series of sessions where the team collaboratively developed a logic model for incorporating currently unused qualitative student-generated data to address an issue identified as a need by the Dean Team. Together they mapped out data resources available to use, assumptions of the group about data project, and defined outputs and outcomes of using different data. The final phase included recommendations for the pilot of a process that would include different student-generated data sources. To aid in the currently proposed pilot and future pilots that include data and would require adoption of new systems and corresponding culture change, the final deliverable was an Implementation Considerations Map, which synthesized the data findings with outside research to provide a checklist to inform the Dean Team’s decision-making processes.

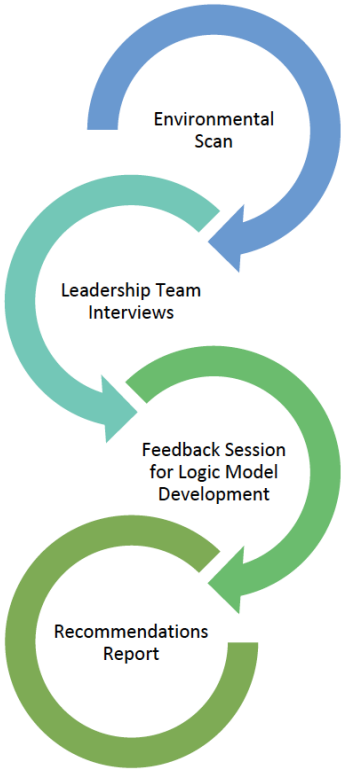

Figure 1: Four Phases of this Evaluation

The methods used in this process evaluation were strategically selected to gather information at each phase to inform the next steps in later phases:

- Environmental scan – This was used to understand the data sources available for use. The result of the scan was a data source map.
- Dean Team interviews – One on one Interviews were conducted with SPE Dean Team to gather data about assumptions that inform that data considered relevant in their decision-making process.
- Feedback sessions to develop a logic model – Using the Hermeneutic Dialectic Circle (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) approach (described below), I conducted feedback sessions with the SPE Dean Team to develop a logic model as a way of getting visibility and raising their awareness to their

decision-making process. The secondary goal of this exercise was to bring awareness to perceptions and assumptions the team had about the data available to inform the decision-making process related to the factors that affect student experience.

- Recommendations report – The final deliverable was a recommendations report that outlined findings from the process evaluation, described the logic model process, included the logic model, and provided implementation recommendations for incorporating unused data sources that affect factors related to the student experience into the decision-making process at the leadership level.

Focus of the Program Evaluation

The site for this program evaluation is the Communication (COMM) program, which is one of fourteen graduate programs offered at Mountain University's school of professional education, SPE. This site was chosen because of my proximity to the data, my knowledge of how unused data could inform decisions being made at the leadership level, and my access to the Dean Team who are the ultimate decision makers on decisions that affect factors related to student experience. The evaluand is the data being used to inform decisions at the leadership level. The COMM program is currently the third-largest program with an average of 250 to 350 course enrollments per quarter. The SPE application collects demographic and geographic data from applicants including their birthdate, sex (male or female), birthplace, current permanent address, Hispanic (Yes or No), race (American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, White, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific), gender (male, female, non-binary, or no response), and pronoun preference. Current students in the COMM program are 61% female, 20% non-white, 12% Hispanic, are an average age of 32 years old, and

43% Colorado residents. It is critical to the constructivist paradigm that lived experiences of stakeholders were strongly factored in throughout the study. It is expected that the evaluation might take twists and turns as new realities are revealed from this group (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). As such, the stakeholder group was central to the work I will be doing. The stakeholder group for this evaluation was the SPE Dean Team which consists of the following people:

- The Dean of SPE – The Dean supervises all the ADs and the associate deans. Over the past four years, the Dean has been pushing individual teams to figure out what students want most from their learning experience. This push tends to prompt the formation of committees to explore the myriad factors within the control of internal departments and teams. The committees, historically, have focused on developing models, workshops, and Canvas tutorials on various aspects of enhancing teaching presence and student support. The data informing all these efforts has been a mixture of alumni exit survey data, anecdotal data from students, course evaluation data, and best practices.
- The Associate Dean of Academic Operations and Affairs (ADAOA) - The ADAOA at SPE oversees a team of approximately eighteen people who maintain the academic quality, data, learning experience, and instructional design for SPE (University College, 2022a). Many of the programmatic decisions at SPE are currently made based on process efficiencies as determined by the Academic Operations team. Since the ADAOA has significant influence over the data systems and processes that get implemented, it was important to get clarity on what they think they know

about the factors that affect the student experience and how that informs the data used in their decision-making process.

- The Associate Dean of Enrollment, Management, Marketing, and Partnerships (ADEMM) - The ADEMM manages the enrollment management (EM) team which consists of approximately nineteen. Ultimately, the ADEMM is responsible for the processes in place for SPE communication, advising, and management of current students. The ADEMM plays a critical role in steering decisions related to how information is gathered about the experiences students are having in the program. Also reporting up to the Associate Dean of Enrollment, Management, Marketing, and Partnerships is the marketing team. SPE has their own marketing team outside the central marketing department at MU. The ADEMM is involved in decisions about data that gets collected through marketing channels from potential, current, and past SPE students.
- The Associate Dean of Admissions and Student Services (ADASS) - The ADASS oversees a large department of approximately 20 people divided between admissions and student support. The ADASS is responsible for the quality assurance of the student experience from an administrative and logistical standpoint. They oversee safeguarding the administrative experience.
- The Associate Dean of Business and Operations (ADBO) – The ADBO oversees a team that consists of approximately 14 people. The ADBO is responsible for ensuring financial resources are in place for students and faculty to have a positive experience at SPE.

Data Collection

The aim of this study was to understand the operating assumptions that inform when data are prioritized in the SPE Dean Team's decision-making process around issues that affect student experience. Secondly, this study aimed to explore what organizational conditions need to be present for unused student-generated data to be considered relevant. As the director of the program, I was not only a primary stakeholder but also had a close working relationship with the Dean Team. These relationships, as well as my own relationship to the evaluation, needed to be negotiated carefully throughout the study. To keep my awareness heightened to any biases that developed before, during, or after data collection, I kept a journal of my reflections. To ensure success, the recommendations that resulted from this evaluation had to be received as feasible, actionable, and agreeable to the Dean Team. This was only possible through close consensus-building communication with the Dean Team as the evaluation process was ongoing.

Environmental Scan

I started with an environmental scan of what data sources are currently available to inform decisions that affect factors related to the student experience. Through the environmental scan of the qualitative data available for use, I identified the COMM programs that these data might affect and how that data might be used for decision-making. This first phase resulted in a data source map with descriptions of the data source, relevance to decision-making related to factors that affect student experience, and implications of use at the departmental level. The data sources were mapped to different potential uses and programmatic impacts. This work helped me to formulate questions for the following interviews and the ability to approach the interviews from a more informed place.

Interviews

In the second phase, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each of the five members of the Dean Team at SPE: Dean; Associate Dean of Academic Operations and Affairs; Associate Dean of Enrollment, Management, Marketing, and Partnerships; Associate Dean of Admissions and Student Services; Associate Dean of Business and Operations. These one-on-one interviews were one hour in length and were done via the videoconferencing platform Zoom. The one-on-one interviews were transcribed only using the transcription function in Zoom. The interviews were not recorded because the participants expressed a preference that they were just transcribed. Appendix C represents the email communication sent to each participant prior to the one-on-one interview.

Participants

These five participants were chosen for their influence on the decision-making process for each of the departments within SPE. None of the participants were minors. They were all employed by Mountain University and considered healthy participants who did not identify as being in any of the vulnerable population groups. All five participants lived in the Denver, Colorado greater metropolitan area. They were all English-speaking white people who identified as either a man or a woman. They were between the ages of 40 to 60 years old.

Participant Recruitment

The participants were invited to participate in the study through an introductory email describing the purpose of this program evaluation work and what their involvement would entail. They were asked to acknowledge their willingness to participate in the study by responding to the study invitation email (Appendix A).

Participant Communication

All communication with participants about the program evaluation was through email. The participants were aware of each other so at times I communicated with the group in one email and, when the communication pertained to just one participant, I communicated with each person individually.

Informed Consent

Appendix A shows the email that was sent to participants which included a section on consent.

Risks and Harms

There was no risk of physical harm and minimal risk of psychological harm to any participants during this study. This study did not involve any invasion of personal privacy.

Confidentiality

Participants were not identified by name throughout the study. The institution and school names have been masked to preserve the participants' confidentiality. Participants were provided with a statement about how this study would be used and the intent for it to be published through ProQuest. One participant requested more clarification in the language. Appendix B shows the modifications I made and emailed to the group as a result of this feedback.

Logic Model Development and Feedback Sessions

The third phase of data collection was a series of feedback sessions with the purpose of developing a logic model to identify how currently unused data could be used to inform a decision-making process that affects student experience. There are a few different approaches that could be used to better understand SPE leadership’s decision-making process. I chose to develop a logic model with the Dean Team for several reasons. First, building a logic model with the Dean Team served to, as a natural part of

the process, “build shared understanding and expectations among program staff” (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2010, p. 62). Second, logic models have been shown to be a productive tool for revealing assumptions about a program (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2010). Finally, exploring the elements of the logic model (resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes) together as a group provided a framework for the Dean Team to use for future decision-making.

To develop the logic model with the Dean Team, I used the Hermeneutic Dialectic Circle model, an iterative process developed by Guba and Lincoln (1989) which has roots in the constructivist approach. The process outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1989) generally consists of understanding stakeholders’ “insider’s view” (p. 72) on the evaluand, constructing shared meaning about evaluand issues among the stakeholder group, and negotiating items when consensus cannot be reached. This work with the Dean Team was ongoing during the logic model development. The symbiotic relationship between the feedback sessions and the importance of iterative communication to develop the logic model in collaboration with the Dean Team is depicted in Figure 2 below. As information is collected and applied from feedback sessions it is added to what is already known to construct new meaning of the issue and applied to the logic model. Ideally, the Hermeneutic Dialectic process, as articulated by Guba and Lincoln (1989), continues until consensus with stakeholders is reached. Since this was primarily done through the three logic model building sessions, it was articulated up front that the goal would be to have consensus by the end of the final session.

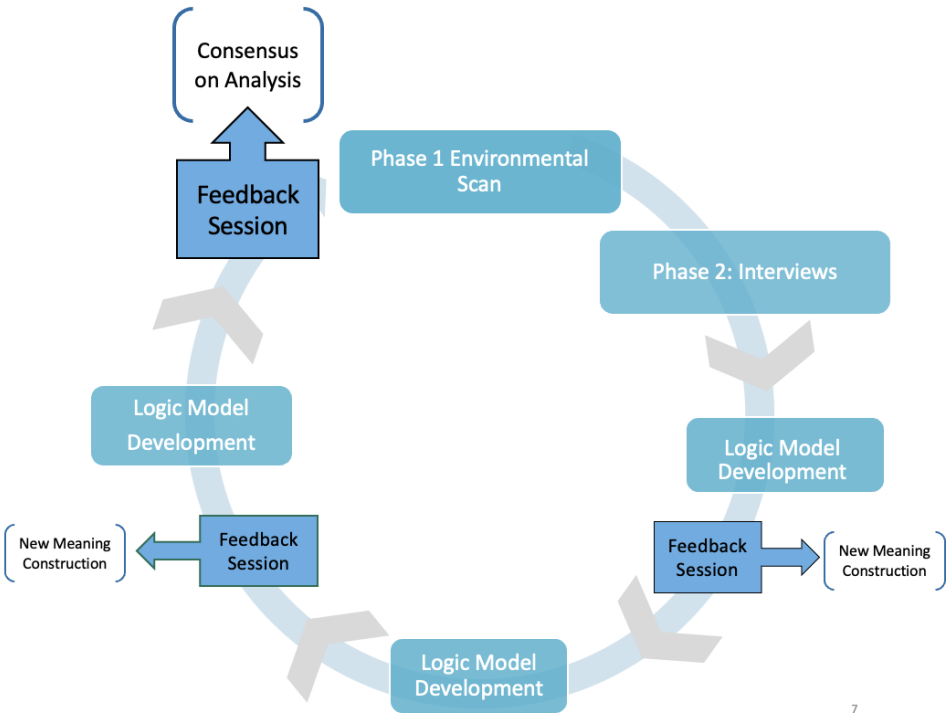

Figure 2: Program Evaluation Feedback Loop Process

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts will be mined for themes and coded using data analysis software readily available through the institution, NVivo. Using NVivo I analyzed the transcripts from each interview looking specifically for assumptions related to data use, barriers to incorporating different types of data into decision-making processes, themes related to articulated goals for data use, and how data informs leadership's definition of and meaning making around student experience.

The final analysis of the data collected from this evaluation is articulated as a process recommendations report. The report provides a summary of what was uncovered through each iteration of the logic model process and the "joint construction that emerge[d] as a result" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 180). Since consensus is paramount to the constructivist methodology, showing how consensus was gained and

the path the study took to get there is critical to the evaluation results (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). “The report cannot simply be about the evaluand and its context but must enable readers to see how the constructors make sense of it, and why” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 223).

Data Management

Knowing what comments came from which department leader was important context for the study as each department uses data differently for decision-making. Transcripts from interviews will be deleted within six months after the study has concluded. The six-month timeframe is to ensure the program evaluation is complete and no further reference to the data will be needed. The feedback sessions were not recorded or transcribed. Extensive notes were taken during and following the feedback sessions. The notes will be deleted within one year of completion of the study. The one-year timeframe is to allow time for any researcher reflection should there be potential for additional publication of this process and findings. All data will be stored on a secure laptop computer through OneDrive.

Ethical Considerations

As the evaluator and the director of the program being evaluated, there are ethical considerations that need to be mitigated. My current relationship with stakeholders leads me to believe that they will be candid with me about their perceptions around student-generated data use and will not downplay their responses because I am the director. As referenced in an earlier section, my approach to maintaining ethics during this evaluation was heavily reliant on my reflective journaling. My reflections from my journal are featured in the narrative about the three logic model sessions. It was intentional to provide the level of detail that I did as to establish some transparency

around my biases and how I managed those. My Primary Evaluation Partner (PEP) was also a tremendous source of critical feedback for me.

Delimitations

This section points out a few choices that, as the evaluator, I made to establish some boundaries around the study. First, this study is focused on the qualitative data at SPE so data that comes from quantitative sources will not be considered. Second, participants for this evaluation were chosen for their influence over the decision-making at the SPE leadership level. I chose to interview the heads of each major department at SPE rather than the individual members of the teams because I wanted to understand how the leaders at the dean level are making meaning of the qualitative data and thus prioritizing the data that is available to them. Interviewees for this evaluation did not include students or alumni since their awareness of data collection is limited. Finally, this evaluation is not concerned with learning about students' perceptions or complaints about individual instructors or courses.

Trustworthiness

Acknowledging that my analysis approach relied heavily on consensus of meaning-making through my interpretation of the information gathered, ensuring efforts were taken to establish trustworthiness was important to the credibility of the evaluation. I did this through member checking, peer-debriefing, and through delivering a final report of my findings. Member checking provided a process for accountability in how the evaluator records the interviewee's experiences by allowing the interviewees an opportunity to approve and/or correct errors (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This extra step ensured accuracy and removed the chance of misinterpretation. Since it was inevitable that my proximity to and insider perceptions about the processes used to collect and use student-generated data within the COMM program might make this process challenging

at times, I engage in what Guba and Lincoln call “peer debriefing” (1989, p. 237) with a peer who is not involved in this evaluation. The idea behind this process is, “the disinterested peer poses searching questions in order to help the evaluator understand [their] own posture and values and their role in the inquiry” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 237). I chose a doctoral student peer who I had a close working relationship with for this role. I often shared aspects of my journal entries with my peer-debriefer so that we could discuss my interpretation of the information I was gathering. Finally, the assertions made in my implications and recommendations were directly tied to the data from which they were derived. That information was presented to the Dean Team in a final report. As such, the dependability of this evaluation should be evident in the final evaluation report (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Related to the trustworthiness of this evaluation, the following considerations arose requiring mitigation during this evaluation:

Bandwidth

The cyclical nature of the constructivist approach presented a limitation to this evaluation. To adequately meet both the expectations of the stakeholders and the timeline for this evaluation study, I needed to set clear parameters around how many loops through the hermeneutic dialectic process I would engage in. I decided in advance that I would conduct three logic model sessions using the hermeneutic dialectic process. By the end of the third session, although there were some extenuating circumstances related to my getting Covid-19 prior to the final group session, I felt the Dean Team was ready to be finished with the process. Generally, there was consensus on the established next steps, but it was necessary to bring the sessions to closure regardless.

Insider-Outsider Complexities

At the beginning of this process, I engaged one of my participants as my Primary Evaluation Partner (PEP) as a way to have one main contact person among the Dean Team and to have somebody to serve as an internal feedback partner during the evaluation. Early in the process, I had a very candid conversation with my PEP about how I needed to make clear my intention to serve as an internal advocate among the ADs for anything that the group decided to pilot. This was especially important because my positionality was critical to this work. As an AD, I am among a group of people who, from my perception, can appear to be resistant to change and new process implementation. I feel the AD group, at times, can be a barrier to getting things done. I have experienced times when it seems the organization is held back because of how the AD group approaches change and this new culture of data. Acknowledging this dynamic was important for my participation in the overall process with the Dean Team.

Biases

It occurred to me after some reflection on a conversation with my PEP, while they are a critical evaluation partner and champion for/with me, they also have biases that I will need to attend to. My PEP is highly invested and passionate about this work. Journaling was a vital way for me to be sure I was keeping my awareness attuned to not only my own biases stemming from my role as an AD and the relationships that I have with this project and the people involved but also for being mindful of the biases of my PEP. Although I relied on my PEP to be a thought partner, I also made sure that I was mindful of maintaining the rigor and integrity of the evaluation process. This is where my journaling and my reflection on my journaling with my peer debriefer was critical for constantly managing both my biases and my PEP's biases.

Power and Privilege

When I first started talking with the participants about this program evaluation, I received very mixed responses. Some were excited and enthusiastic to engage in the process, others were skeptical and hesitant. I made some slight modifications to my approach and my methods based on my perception of how the participants responded to me. The fact that I am directly supervised by the dean and the dean was supportive of this work created a power dynamic where some of the others likely felt like they could not opt out of being a participant. They had the option to assign another member of their leadership team to engage in the work on their behalf, but I am sure that would be perceived as "poor form." I believe that this power dynamic led to the last session being somewhat lackluster; those who thought it was an obligation to participate felt they had done their job. Similarly, because of my role as AD, I was in a privileged position to be able to do this work which gave me unique insights into the Dean Team that none of my peers have. The privilege that I bring to this work is the biggest factor in its success. I would never have been able to even dream of this project had I not been in the position that I am in.

Researcher Positionality

With research of any kind, an overwhelming number of choices are to be made by the researcher. The decisions a researcher makes about how to approach and engage with their research are surprisingly personal. How one makes sense of all the options available often lies in how the researcher enters this work based on background, upbringing, personal and professional experiences. I made two primary choices in this study that provided an overarching framework for my approach. I chose to do a qualitative study within the constructivist paradigm, and I am analyzing my work through

the lens of the theory of academic capitalism. This positionality statement explains the rationale for these decisions and how they were rooted in my life's journey so far.

For me, the choice to do a qualitative study was a given. My use of data has never been about numbers. Collecting data has always been a way to amplify the experiences of the people the numbers represent. Coming into academia from a 20-year career in digital marketing, I have a long history of making data-driven decisions. I started in digital marketing in 1999, at the peak of an era now referred to as the Dot-Com Boom. In 2005 I spearheaded the launch into social media for a large non-profit organization with a national presence. I remember a primary concern of this organization was that people would publicly express negative sentiments about the brand. My response to them was, "Do you think if you cannot 'hear' your audience they are not talking? Wouldn't you rather know what they are saying so you can engage or respond?" I would pose the same questions to any institution that has alternate means of collecting high-value qualitative data about students' experience but does not have a process in place to do so.

Compared to the overwhelming data available today, marketing analytics were primitive sources of data in the early 2000s. Yet, even then, I looked at each number in the data as a representation of a real person that either valued or aborted their online experience. Perhaps I owe my approach to data to my upbringing. Gender norms based on cisheteropatriarchy were particularly important to my parents. I say "important" because my family's commitment to these norms dictated what was acceptable and expected of me. Simply put, girls were not good at math, and I did a respectable job of reinforcing that gender stereotype. Excel spreadsheets full of numbers intimidate me but if I can bring my data sources together to tell a story I am practically unstoppable. I am always looking for the story data tells about a person; what they want, how they perceive

relevance, and how they assign value to a product, good, or service. After more than 20 years in digital marketing, using data to tell stories about people's experiences is in my DNA. In digital marketing, you build out the full story through the combination of quantitative data, like deep user-behavior data from Google Analytics, and qualitative data that often comes from a practice called social listening where you monitor conversations in social media channels. It was through this data cocktail that I was able to successfully defend the marketing decisions that the agency was making to our clients. I bring these experiences into my role as AD and now to my role as a researcher and program evaluator.

My investment in understanding the experiences of the COMM students goes beyond my commitment to my role as director of the program. The COMM students are particularly interesting to me because I was one. In many ways, I represented a very common post-traditional student profile. I was not the best student in high school. My formative years were consumed with challenging all the things my parents felt a girl would not, could not, and should not do. When my older brother died the first semester of my freshman year in college, my ability to apply myself to my undergraduate work was derailed. Over the next three years I spent more time trying to understand death than trying to understand subjects like French, sociology, and media communications law. I graduated with a bachelor's degree but an embarrassingly low grade point average (GPA). It took 18 years to build up the courage to consider getting my master's degree due to a variety of perceived obstacles. First, I thought my low GPA might be prohibitive. Second, the idea of taking the Graduate Records Exam (GRE) was a huge barrier for me. A low score on the GRE would be a clear indication that one of my biggest fears was true; that I was not smart enough for graduate school. When I learned that SPE did not require a GRE and that I could be admitted under a conditional status until I proved

success academically, I started feeling that I might have a chance at earning a master's degree. The final obstacle was my fear of being exposed for what I did not know. Throughout my time in graduate school, online learning proved to be a gamechanger for me because I could take my time figuring out my thoughts without the fear of being "put on the spot."

In my AD role, I am the primary reviewer of new student applications. When I read personal statements in new application documents, I feel the emotions, the anxiety, the drive, and the struggles of the incoming COMM students. They want to achieve, in the most efficient way possible, their goals of professional advancement and the financial reward associated with that. Since coming into the role of AD, I have developed conflicting feelings about the academic capitalist underpinnings of SPE's approach to the post-traditional graduate experience. I acknowledge that many online graduate programs, like the one I manage, perpetuate neoliberal attitudes through the ways that we foster a student-as-consumer (SAC) mindset. I agree with critical higher education scholars who claim there are inherent limitations and disadvantages to this approach (Saunders, 2014). However, I cannot deny that I am a recipient of the benefits of this approach, like increased access and flexible learning options. I live with knowing that the detachment that often comes with a SAC mentality toward learning is, at a minimum, not as fulfilling for faculty and students. Worse, as we ascribe to the SAC ethos, we are stuck between feeling obligated to respond to students' wants while also maintaining academic integrity around what students need. My choice to look at the decision-making process through the lens of academic capitalism is simultaneously a way to acknowledge and interrogate the different layers of privilege that the Dean Team and I bring to our work in this academic space. The theory of academic capitalism, with its roots in neoliberalism, helped me to take a unique perspective to understanding the

decision-making process around what student-generated data gets prioritized and how that is influenced by our own assumptions.

My positionality was inevitably shaped by my many roles coming into this study: alumna, instructor, AD, and evaluator. These multiple roles gave me intimate understanding of the inner workings of the program and privileged insider information about my stakeholders. I also held unique perspectives based on my experiences as a student and an instructor. For all these reasons, my insider position with this program evaluation made this work highly dynamic and personal. The stakeholder group that I collected data from is the Dean Team at SPE. The constructivist paradigm fit with my ontology and desire to acknowledge the individual realities and what shaped those realities. But constructivism is also an important framework for me to make sure was adequately honoring the voices of my stakeholder group. This was a tricky space to navigate since I was questioning their perceptions about what they thought they knew about our students' experiences. Not because I thought their perceptions were necessarily wrong but because our current process does not use data to reveal those stories. The collaboration and consensus-building that came with the constructivist paradigm was critical for the success of this program evaluation.

Ultimately, I was driven to use my knowledge of how to extract stories from less obvious or easy to obtain qualitative data to amplify the experiences of students in the program. I feel passionate about online learning as a pathway to helping people realize potential that is buried or hidden in plain sight. The learning experiences our students have and the credentials they receive are incredibly meaningful for them. But regardless of what the data tells us when we uncover it, these stories are important to factor in. As an institution and an academic unit, we must be willing to face the gap that might exist between the experiences we believe students are having and the reality. The reality that

can only be revealed through a better understanding of the operating assumptions around the data that informs SPE leadership's decision-making process related to the factors that affect student experience.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present findings from each phase of my data collection: the environmental scan, the semi-structured individual interviews, and the group feedback sessions with logic model development. The findings in this chapter are divided into three phases. Phase One consisted of the findings from the environmental scan of all the possible qualitative data sources available to better understand the SPE student experience. The analysis in Phase Two and Phase Three consists of a combination of participant quotes and researcher comments for the purpose of showing evidence that the interpretations of the findings were rooted in data from the interview narratives. Where the quotes include a series of dots (…), this was for the purpose of removing any identifying data or to indicate where irrelevant information had been removed from the quote. I also include graphic visualizations from the analysis of data from the one-on-one interviews with each of the five members of the Dean Team. I have included visualizations when I thought it simplified the data that was captured or enhanced my analysis of that data. Phase Three consists of a visual representation of the logic model we developed along with my reactions and reflections from this phase which included three group sessions to come to a consensus on an area of impact and develop a logic model for a process to collect student-generated qualitative data around the identified area of impact. It is worth noting that, true to my constructivist approach, each phase of this evaluation is not distinct. Quite to the contrary, each phase was

informed and influenced by knowledge gained from and my subsequent reflections on earlier phases.

If I had to summarize my findings in one sentence, I would say that gaining true adoption for a culture of data is incredibly complex. There were so many layers and, like an onion skin, as each layer peeled away more were revealed. I was expecting to be able to focus on the data collection and the assumptions around that data. What happened instead was a realization at how critically important the culture is around the approach to data, and, within that, the assumptions made about that culture and the perceived adoption of data systems and processes. It was refreshing how candid most of my participants were about the fact that they had not really considered many of the things I was asking about until that moment (of the interview or in prepping for the interview). They were all making different assumptions about the team and what everyone was bringing to the table related to data. So, I found myself learning more about each individual's assumptions around the culture that they were working in related to decision making with data than the actual assumptions around the data use. I did end up uncovering some assumptions around how data contributed to trusting one's instincts in the decision-making process. I also learned a lot about trust within decision-making teams which sent me down a different path in my exploration and analysis.

Phase One: Environmental Scan Findings

Below is a visual representation (Figure 3) of the full spectrum of qualitative student-generated data sources I identified through my environmental scan. This visualization can also be viewed online through this link. In this section I will describe each layer moving out from the yellow center, starting with the inner ring. The first ring shows the major areas where the data are generated: Marketing, Enrollment Management, Canvas Courses, and Immediate Needs. It is important to point out up

front, the visualization shown is the final iteration of this visualization. I showed this visualization in every one-on-one interview, about midway through the interview, to see what comments and reactions were generated. With each interview I gained new knowledge that allowed me to make refinements to this visualization. Starting at the yellow circle in the center, the first ring identifies the primary areas where the student-generated qualitative data are generated. The next ring shows where that data exists. The ring furthest out shows the actual data source that either is or potentially could be mined for insights into the student experience. To follow I will discuss each area starting with a description of the primary area for context, then explaining the identified data source(s) within that primary area, and finally explaining the actual data within that data source along with if and how that data are being accessed or how they could be.

Figure 3: Data Sources Identified Through Environmental Scan

Data Source 1: Immediate Needs

I had initially identified the primary areas where we might find student-generated data about their experiences as Marketing, Enrollment Management, and Canvas Course Containers. After my first interview I added the Immediate Needs area, represented by the orange color. Immediate Needs refers to more urgent issues, requiring quick action because they are significantly affecting the student experience. These issues arise from comments or complaints from students, staff, or faculty through

a variety of different communication channels – emails, phone calls, course evaluations, and FreshDesk Tickets. At times, these Immediate Needs are uncovered as courses are being prepared for an upcoming term, going through the redevelopment process, or through regular advising sessions and are not seen as an urgent problem by the student, faculty, or staff but because of the broader implications of the issue it becomes an immediate need to address. Because of the variability in both incoming channel and response, this Immediate Needs area overlaps with many other areas because of how research needs to be done to make sense of or get the full picture of the issue and the implications.

Data Source 2: Within Canvas

The Course area, in the blue color, includes all the student-generated data that could potentially be accessed through Canvas. This area is divided into six areas where student-generated qualitative data might exist within Canvas: Student Success course, Portfolio Foundations course, course assessments, instructor communications with students, Portfolio Capstone course, and Dropout Detective. Within each of those six areas where qualitative data exists within Canvas, I have described the data sources I identified below.

Student Success Course

In 2019 SPE launched a Student Success Course as a way to help new students onboard into their academic experience. It is set up as a non-credit course that new students are automatically registered for before the start of their first quarter of enrollment. The primary objectives of the Student Success Course are to equip students with resources to help them better navigate their graduate experience. The course is divided into six knowledge areas. In each the students are asked to address anticipated challenges, as identified by SPE, that might exist during their academic journey: Time

management, academic writing and formatting, the online learning format, managing finances, finding a community, and networking, and career planning. At the end they are asked to submit final goals and a reflection assignment. The data from the Student Success Course is gathered through a Qualtrics survey. The Student Success Course has facilitators who review students' responses but otherwise the data submitted from the students is not analyzed or used to guide other parts of the student experience.

Portfolio Foundations Course

In addition to the Student Success Course, students who are enrolled in programs that have the Portfolio Capstone as the culminating course in the program are required to complete a second non-credit course, Portfolio Foundations, at the start of the program. The Portfolio Foundations course consists of four knowledge checks that explain the portfolio process and guide them through setting up their portfolio. As a part of the knowledge checks in the Portfolio Foundations course, students are required to articulate learning goals and put those into their Portfolio page. The Portfolio Foundations course does not have a facilitator. In the Portfolio Capstone course, students are asked to reflect on their articulated learning goals to assess if they were clear, how they would change them now knowing what they know after going through the program, and if the articulated goals were met. At the time when the student writes these learning objectives, these data are not reviewed, analyzed, or used by faculty or administrators to guide future student experience decisions.

Individual Course Assessments

Several courses in the COMM program ask students to reflect on their work, either through assignments or in discussion posts. While generally that reflection is course-specific, there are times where the prompt is asking student to make connections between courses or concepts learned throughout the work they have done in the

program. These data are reviewed by course instructors but not mined or analyzed for insights that might be used to inform student experience decisions.

Instructor Communication within Canvas

Naturally, instructors engage with students for a variety of reasons throughout the quarter. Faculty, even the adjunct faculty who predominantly teach the courses offered at SPE, often wear more hats than that of Instructor. Faculty serve as career coaches, professional advisors, and even at times life coaches. Given that many of our courses are only offered through an online modality, this advising and coaching happens through phone calls, Zoom calls, email, or Canvas inbox messages. Recognizing that documenting those communications would be challenging, they are nevertheless sources of qualitative data about student experience that might hold value to the decision-making process and therefore worth being noted.

Portfolio Capstone Course

As mentioned earlier, the culminating course is several SPE master's programs is the Portfolio Capstone course. Students have the option to choose a seminar course instead if they prefer to write a thesis-style academic paper, but the Portfolio Capstone course is the default course for the COMM course and a couple other SPE programs. In addition to the broader course assessments that are referenced previously, the Portfolio Capstone course specifically asks the students to reflect on their overall time in the program through both discussion posts, video presentations, and a dedicated reflective assignment. Instructors are privy to the rich qualitative data that comes from the work in this course, but it is not formally mined and analyzed for insights about the student experience.

Dropout Detective Canvas Tool

Dropout Detective, which is built into the Canvas LMS platform, allows us to see student engagement on a quantitative level within the course they are enrolled in. Dropout Detective displays data through a dashboard that calculates a Risk Index based on frequency of logins, participation, and assignment submissions by the students for a given course in Canvas (Fig. 4). Instructors have access to the Dropout Detective dashboard and through that dashboard they can makes notes about a student based on communication they have had, or they can send an Advisor Alert which prompts the advisor to reach out to the student to better assess the student's needs and what supports might need to be put into place. While Dropout Detective is monitored by instructors, advisors, and administrators, data that results from instructor or advisor communication that is prompted by a high Risk Index is not formally documented.

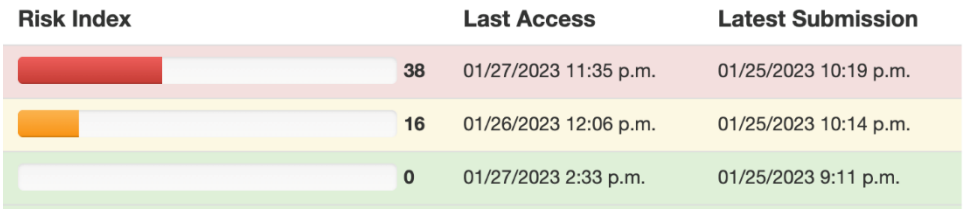

Figure 4: Image of Canvas Dropout Detective Dashboard

Data Source 3: Marketing

Within the marketing area, I identified two potential sources of student generated qualitative data: surveys and online user-generated content (i.e., through social media platforms or review sites). I was hoping through the interviews to better understand how marketing was leveraging either of these two potential data sources to better understand the student experience. I did not uncover much at all for the online user-generated content source. For surveys, I learned that there is a survey that goes out to students

who applied for the program but did not enroll. I also learned that there is a survey that is distributed to alumni, though I did not learn who collects that data and how it is used.

Data Source 4: Enrollment Management

Enrollment Management involves several different teams and touchpoints so I will describe those for context before delving into the data sources I identified. The Student Support team is a first point of contact when a potential applicant calls the general inquiry line. If the inquiry is from a prospective student who has not yet applied, then they are routed to a recruiter. The recruiters are also listed on the website for each program, so it is possible for prospective students to self-route directly to a recruiter to discuss the program and application process. Once an application has been submitted by a prospective student, it is solely the responsibility of the AD to review the application materials and either approve or reject the application. It is at this point where nurturing the student relationship moved from being the responsibility of the recruiter to being the responsibility of an academic advisor, even if the student's application has been approved but they have not yet accepted the offer or enrolled in courses. The following touchpoints are potential opportunities to collect qualitative data from students:

Student Support Communication

The Student Support team also receives a variety of current student inquiries if they do not reach out directly to their dedicated advisor and instead either call or email the general support team. Student Support will either answer potential or current student inquiries or they will route them to the appropriate person for a more detailed conversation. The Student Support team does not document their communication with prospective students beyond communicating any direct action and context that needs to be taken via either an email to the recruiter or advisor or a verbal conversation. There is

a FreshDesk ticketing system established to capture these data though adoption of this system is still in process.

Recruiting Communication

Regardless of where the prospective student's inquiry starts, they are all routed to a recruiter early in the process. The recruiters are expected to call and/or email students within 24 hours of initial inquiry. The recruiters are strongly encouraged to set up phone calls with prospective students. Recruiters document relevant information gathered from communications with prospective students through comments in an Excel spreadsheet, which has fondly been named "Unicorn."

Academic Advisor Communication

As mentioned previously, once the prospective student has applied to SPE they are connected with an academic advisor. It is the academic advisor's role to make sure they have the resources needed to make their final decision about accepting the offer to attend. The academic advisor is responsible for building degree plans with each new student. This is generally done in collaboration with the student. These advising conversations, particularly at the beginning of their academic journey, serve several purposes. First, they are vital for establishing a trusting relationship between the academic advisor and the student. Second, these conversations provide the advisor with insight into students' personal and professional goals and challenges. Finally, when they happen at critical points in the academic journey, these conversations provide a safe space where students can share their experiences in the program. Academic advisors are increasingly using the comments area in Unicorn to document relevant information about the students' wants and needs, particularly if it affects the likelihood that they will register for a future quarter. However, unless that data equates to an Immediate Need issue requiring urgent response, those experiences, particularly positive ones, are likely

going unnoticed. Often, information that is important but does not fall into the Immediate Needs category is communicated between ADs and academic advisors verbally in team meetings.

New Student Application Personal Statements

New student applications are not accepted without transcripts and personal statements. Personal statements often reflect background experiences, motivations for pursuing a graduate degree, and career goals. Personal statements included in application materials are reviewed briefly by a member of the Student Services teams for minimum qualifications (stated goals, relevant experience) but it is primarily up to the ADs to assess the value and relevancy of what is articulated in the personal statements for indicators of success in the master's degree program. Slate is the platform used to process the new student applications. Occasionally, ADs will put comments into a designated text box in Slate indicating requests for academic advisors to follow creating degree plans for new students. The comments in Slate pull into Unicorn and are accessible to academic advisors as they work with students. The Slate comments area is used in a limited way by only a few ADs. Largely, the information available in the personal statements goes unused as a source of data to guide a student's academic experience.

AD New Student Calls

ADs are expected to call all students who have been admitted to their program but have not yet accepted the offer. Those calls are typically welcoming in nature but also an opportunity to field any lingering questions and gather information about the likelihood that the student will register and what support they might need when they do.

Environmental Scan Summary

My environmental scan resulted in a visual representation of qualitative student-generated data sources identified available at SPE. The visualization of student-generated data sources included where the data was generated, what department or areas within SPE the data currently exists, and the actual data source. I presented this visualization during the one-on-one interviews for the purpose of examining with the participants the context they have for the data source, how and when they use the identified data source(s), and if there is additional data that is not considered in this visualization. The initial environmental scan of data sources did not include the Immediate Needs area. This part of the graphic was generated during the first one-on-one interview as I learned about how urgent issues affecting the student experience are captured. Other data sources identified included data within Canvas, divided into six areas where qualitative data can be accessed. These areas include Student Success, Portfolio Foundations, course assessments, instructor communications with students, Portfolio Capstone course, and Dropout Detective. The following touchpoints were identified as potential opportunities to collect qualitative data from students: Student support communication, recruiting communication, and AD calls with prospective and current students. The Student Support team does not formally document their communication with prospective students beyond communicating any direct action and context that needs to be taken. New student applications must include personal statements that reflect background experiences, motivations, and career goals. Personal statements from applicants are reviewed by Student Services teams for minimum qualifications but are primarily left to ADs to assess their value and relevancy. Slate is the platform used to process new student applications, but the personal statements go unused as a source of data. ADs are expected to call all admitted students who have not

accepted the offer. Ultimately, the environmental scan identified a wide range of data sources where student generated data could be found but concluded that it was unlikely that data submitted from the students through these sources is reviewed, analyzed, or used to guide future student experience decisions.

Phase Two: One-on-One Interview Findings

This being a constructivist process, my interviews incorporated what was learned from the interview prior as I went from participant to participant. I purposely scheduled the interviews all within two weeks of each other but with several days at least in between each one. This was a strategic decision which allowed me to have the time in between each interview to process the interview, check any biases and assumptions I had made, but still have a good memory of each previous conversation. Even though I circulated questions in advance to my participants, the conversations varied quite a bit. If we veered off topic, I did not try to force the conversation back to where I thought or anticipated it going. I felt it was of value to allow each participant to talk about what was on their mind and hear what they wanted to share within the overarching topic. I stayed mindful of where I wanted the conversation to end up and my overall goals for each interview but allowed for a certain amount of organic conversation to develop.

Through the one-on-one interviews I asked specific questions to learn about how each member of the Dean Team thinks about data, decision-making, and student experience. My interviews were hoping to shine a light on how each person is different or similar regarding their approach to using qualitative data to make decisions on issues that affect student experience. I learned a lot about what data sources were used, what data sources were available but not used, what data sources were not available but might be used if they were. I learned a lot about each person's attitude toward data, how they prioritized its use, and how they were adopting systems that have been put into

place to better access and use the data available to them. As all of this was being discussed, some themes started popping out that I simply was not expecting related to the team culture, the importance of trust within the team culture, and how the team members work together to make meaning of each new issue that comes their way recognizing that they all had vastly different perspectives. These themes/issues actually took the forefront in almost all the conversations I had, which shocked me at first. But after recognizing this theme in the first two interviews, I modified some of my questions to dig deeper into this with the remaining interviews. What I learned truly reshaped how I was thinking about this program evaluation.

Since so much of the conversation with each participant quickly shifted from talking about data and how data are used to talking about what I would call the “culture of data,” my analysis of my findings is heavily influenced by this. I have spent a lot of time thinking about how this team’s decision-making process is shaped by team culture and how the team culture has been affected by the use and influence of the data now more readily available to them. In many of the interviews, I heard them talk almost as if the team and the culture has been changing right in front of them, in a good way, because of the availability of data. Yet, their realities are still vastly different and their willingness to change their own department’s systems and processes differ wildly based on their bandwidth and their comfort level with change. Despite all this, they trust each other tremendously and through that trust comes collaboration that allows them to be very efficient and effective as a team. As discussed in the findings of the previous section, the data simply helps to support them in being thorough, thoughtful, equitable, and confident. Below in Table 1, I provide a quick reference guide to the participants in the study. I have included what department they manage, the area deemed through the interviews as their primary focus within the student experience journey, and the

qualitative data sources that the interview data suggested were most prominently used in their decision-making processes.

Table 1: Participant Overview

Participant	Internal Teams Managed	Student Experience Journey Focus Area	Qualitative Data Sources Most Prominent in Interview
Participant A	Student Support	Anticipating needs	Anecdotal conversations, best practices, internal policies
Participant B	Enrollment Management & Marketing	Setting expectations	Anecdotal conversations, best practices
Participant C	Data and Academic Operations	Immediate needs	FreshDesk Tickets, course evaluations, anecdotal conversations
Participant D	Business Operations	Resources	Best practices
Participant E	Associate Deans & ADs	Vision	Course evaluations, best practices.

Finding One: Multiple Realities Exist Around the Meaning of "Exceptional Student Experience"

When it comes to defining exceptional student experience, whether we were talking about the factors that contribute to student experience, the use of data, or the approach to adopting the systems and fostering a culture of data within a team, there are as many different realities as there are members of the Dean Team. As I was designing this research project, I was originally drawn to constructivism because I thought it fit my approach. The more I reflect on the interviews, the different personalities and perspectives of the members of the Dean Team, and the nuances of the culture of data at SPE, the more I realize how critical a constructivist approach was in order to truly explore the decision-making process of this team.

One of the most consistent elements among all the interviews was that I started every interview with the question, “What does exceptional student experience mean to you?” This was very important for laying the foundation of the later questions around what data might inform how we determine and assess the factors that contribute to exceptional student experience. I found that most participants really wanted to talk about this in detail. Most of them articulated that they had never actually defined what this meant to them in specific terms and seemed to enjoy the thought exercise that this question prompted for them. Some of the participants answered the question more directly and others answered it in a more roundabout way through anecdotes.

Regardless of how they came to their definition, with each interview it became clearer how unique each member of the Dean Team’s perspective was based on what part of the student journey was their department’s area of influence or focus. There really is a stark contrast in perception and approach based on where the participant falls in the student journey. Below is a synopsis of how I interpreted the realities for each participant based on what I heard in the interviews.

Participant A

This participant, who oversees the Student Support team and Admissions team, is very focused on anticipating the needs of incoming students so that they can be sure to provide resources and communication that will make that process as smooth as possible.

- “… a seamless student experience”
- “Anticipating what they might need… and providing that information to the students, even if they might not know they need it”

This participant leans very heavily on best practices to inform what students need to know and how they might best need to receive that information taking great care that the process does not feel overwhelming or “pushy.”

- “We don't ever want to be pushy. We wanna make sure it's a great fit those are that information that we get from those students.”

There is also a real culture of care within the Student Support department. They really want to listen to the students and understand the students’ needs. There is a sincere interest in humanizing the experience so that students, from the very start and at every touchpoint with this department, feel they are more than a number. From a qualitative data standpoint, that means that the Student Support team is privy to a tremendous amount of qualitative data about the student experience throughout their journey. Unfortunately, this department has been the slowest to adopt the FreshDesk ticketing system, so these data are largely not being recorded for other teams down the line to benefit from. Regardless, I still got the sense that the data they are using helps them nurture the student experience in a significant way. It just is not transferable at any scale, and because the data is being shared mostly anecdotally in casual conversations and in team meetings, it is difficult to control for biases and misinterpretations.

Participant B

This participant oversees Enrollment Management which includes advising and recruiting. This participant was clear in being focused on delivering what industry best practices have deemed students want or need through the sales process. Although this participant articulated wanting students to feel like the process was transformative, not transactional, the emphasis on “speed to lead” that guides the approach to the student experience in this department feels more transactional. Having said that, the people really make the difference. So, the initial approach is transactional, but the advising is

very personal and hands-on which eventually contributes to creating that more transformational experience.

This participant chose to offer a different reframing altogether and put a very strong emphasis on the outbound part of the experience, the delivery, which this person felt was more within our control:

- “I frame it [exceptional student experience] as ‘delivering an exceptional student experience’ because delivering an exceptional student experience is something we, ostensibly, can control”

There was also an aspirational part that came later in the conversation with this participant:

- “To deliver a transformational experience versus transactional”
- “…they [students] will say… this [experience] has changed my life”

From a data use and collection perspective, I realized through the interviews that this department is not responsible for problem-solving. They are mostly managing and mitigating students' concerns, issues, and requests. Like the Student Support team, Enrollment Management team is exposed to a lot of qualitative data from students, but they only capture it when it requires action from somebody outside of their team (ADs, learning experience team, operations team, etc). Therefore, gathering the student data in a way that was transferable and usable for other teams or individuals did not seem particularly important to this participant.

Participant C

This participant oversees the operations team so is the primary person ultimately responsible for “putting out fires” and trying to anticipate all the trickle-down effect of those issues to keep students enrolled and give them the best experience possible. The part of the journey that lies within this participants purview is very circular, and this

participant brings in tons of data from all over the academic unit to make that happen. Part of why qualitative data are not being used as much seems to be because this participant does not have a way to capture it due to the lack of data reporting and documentation in the two departments managed by Participant One and Participant Two. Participant One and Participant Two both manage the teams that are on the front lines with the qualitative student data.

This participant took a more comparative approach, framing “exceptional student experience” as something that is different from previous educational experiences and within that contrast the University College experience, hopefully, rises to the top:

- “It's different from an experience that they would have at another peer institution.”

There was also an aspirational piece to this participant’s response. This participant has earned five academic credentials and has done academic work online, in person, and at many different types of institutions. Their response was influenced by their own academic experiences over the years, some of which were excellent and some very poor. So, given that this is a graduate program all our students have at least one a point of comparison, often more than that. When comparing institutions, this participant felt that SPE should rise to the top.

- “The student would define it as amazing”

Participant D

This participant oversees the business operations and is heavily focused on ensuring the resources are in place to support the decisions that are made to be responsive to students’ needs and to enhance the student experience. Participant D also teaches as an adjunct instructor for SPE. Their perceptions about the student experience are strongly shaped by what is learned about the students’ wants and needs

through the “classroom” experiences. Because of that, this participant understands that each of our students comes to the program with different needs and our discussion was centered on how to address those needs while maintaining an equitable experience for all students. Ultimately, this participant’s response to the question about exceptional student experience was:

- “Are we able to meet students where they are?”

Participant E

This participant has overarching quality control and vision for SPE. This participant also articulated that they felt it was a primary function of their role manage biases and perceptions of the other four members of the Dean Team.

This participant included a very aspirational vision for the meaning of an exceptional student experience as seen through a more macro lens:

- “... we need to do three things for our students to make sure they're getting an exceptional experience, we need to engage them, we need to challenge them, and we need to energize them”

SPE, as is true for many schools of continuing and professional education and particularly those that offer a strong online learning component, is recognized as a profit center for the university. Even at the very start of each interview, with this opening question, you can see the influence of academic capitalist thinking in the responses:

- “We have a moral and ethical obligation, to make sure we are doing our best by them because they are spending their money and their time away from family, friends, other responsibilities, to get the education that that we promise them and that we should be delivering... so, for me, it really is about exceeding students' expectations, not only in our content and in our classroom, but every interaction that they have with us.”

There was also a practical element to some of the responses and in the practicality there's evidence of the SAC mentality that so often goes hand in hand with academic capitalist thinking. Responses like the following one show evidence of how the burden is on the institution and the administrators and faculty to make this experience smooth, relevant, and valuable for the student:

- "They should go away with every interaction feeling like it was a valuable experience, and that it was not a waste of their time"

Each member of the Dean Team holds a different area of accountability within SPE. What aspect of the academic student journey they are primarily responsible for seemed to shape how they defined an exceptional student experience. Using this information as a starting point, next I looked to understand what specific factors each Dean Team member used as indicators of an exceptional student experience.

Finding Two: Factors That Contribute to an Exceptional Student Experience Are Shaped by Area of Influence Within the Academic Journey

My follow up question to the initial one asking the participants to describe an exceptional student experience was to ask about the factors that contributed to their definition of an exceptional student experience. In other words, I asked them how they knew or what evidence they saw as proof of an exceptional student experience. Because many of the participants told anecdotal stories by way of describing their definition of exceptional student experience, I was able to extract this information from the data without explicitly asking them to point to the factors. Within this dataset I identified six sub-themes:

Response Time

How quickly prospective and current students get a response was referenced by almost all participants when describing what factors contribute to an exceptional student

experience. This was mentioned in the context of every phase of the student's academic journey from how quickly we respond to their application or inquiry to how fast instructors respond to students during a course.

- "...did [they] get the communication [they] needed at the right time" - participant C
- "...how quickly instructors respond to student questions and feedback" - participant C

One participant used the term "Speed to Lead" when talking about the critical importance of students receiving a fast response particularly at the front end of the student journey.

- "So, Speed to Lead, I mean we're calling our students … who inquire within a couple of hours." - participant B
- This same participant felt as though the speed with which we responded to students was a clear indicator of how much we value them as students.
- "...throughout the full student lifecycle... Speed to Lead. I mean, it's important that we execute on Speed to Lead so students know that we value them and they're important to us." - participant B

Substantive Feedback

The quality of the feedback students received, whether that was from SPE administrators, student support staff, or instructors during a course, was also mentioned by several participants.

- "...were [they] able to make the decisions that [they] needed to make based on that and did [they] get feedback?" - participant C

- “We know instructor engagement probably is the driver of student satisfaction with respect to their education. Part of that is comments on deliverables and substantive feedback.” - participant B

Industry Knowledge and Career Advice

Students rely on their academic advisors to be a trusted source of industry information. Advisors are expected to be able to knowledgably answer students' questions about how they can meet their career goals. The advisors receive training to equip them to provide “basic career questions” but beyond that advisors must take it upon themselves to build their own personal knowledge base about an industry and specific job roles within that industry.

- “Now around career, career conversations, [academic advisors] are not career advisors, they're not career counselors, but they need to be able to speak to basic career questions, know what's going on in the industry, be able to speak confidently, and authoritatively, to that because students look to us, I think, in many cases, for that information, and we need to honor that confidence in us, and the trust that they place in us, with providing that information.” - participant B

Anticipating Needs

The notion of being able to anticipate students’ needs as a differentiator for what makes an exceptional student experience was a significant discussion point for one participant. This was predicated by the idea that, as one participant stated, “they don’t know what they don’t know.”

- “The other piece of that exceptional student experience, that I think we embody at [SPE] whether it's and helping [the student] and the decision-making through their experience... anticipating what they might need,

whether it's a process or what they might need for their work” - participant A

- “Obviously, they're here to learn whether it's going through the process of applying or using all the tools that are available... just anticipating what they might need and providing that, to me that’s exceptional student experience.” - participant A

The interpretation of the interview data seemed to indicate that the more the support staff can listen carefully for those gaps and anticipate needs, the more likely they can move them toward having a more personalized, humanized, and transformative experience.

- “On my team, and even in general, sometimes things... become issues and having those conversations where we do more listening, and asking questions, than, you know, I gather [info] just trying to understand where [the students] are... and you can learn a lot by that listening” - participant A

Consistency

The interview data showed that consistency was seen as a strong factor affecting student experience. Not just consistency within SPE teams but also the consistency of the experience students and prospective students had across their communication with different departments at [MU].

- “Regardless of who they might be speaking with, who the student might be speaking with they're gonna get the same, feel the same, answers the same support regardless of who [they speak with] on the team.” - participant A

- “It's gonna feel the same. It's gonna be just as welcoming and the information is gonna be timely and accurate, and helpful.” - participant A

There was also some sensitivity to how historically SPE has operated somewhat differently from other units on campus and that seemed to be an identified source of frustration in the past for students.

- “So, we're working with the other units on campus to create consistency in our processes, clarity, and whenever possible... to be on the same page with the Office of Graduate Education. I don't always want to be like, over at University College, we do everything different. That's not who we are... maintaining both that exceptional student experience and upholding academic integrity is the forefront of what I'm doing.” - participant A

The Dean Team members identified factors around response time, feedback, ability to provide career advice, being able to anticipate student needs, and overall consistency of the students’ experience at SPE as the primary factors that were indicators that the experience had been exceptional. While they were describing these factors, I tried to draw out of them what data sources helped them to identify these factors. Through these conversations I learned that many of the Dean Team members were not making use of the data reporting systems that were in place which pointed to a larger issue around data adoption.

Finding Three: Qualitative Data Sources Identified in the Interviews Point to Challenges Around Adoption of Data

My original plan was to ask each participant about what data sources they had available to them and are used to better understand the student experience. That approach worked fine in the first interview because it was with an associate dean who is particularly sophisticated with data and has developed most, if not all, the data tools that

we use at SPE. By the second interview, that question prompted more of a discussion around how and when data was used. I learned that by allowing the space for my participants to describe different scenarios and listening for when they referenced using data seemed to be more a more natural and approachable way for them to describe the data sources they leaned most heavily on. If they were talking through how they approached or solved a specific student scenario and did not mention a data source, I just probed a bit more on what informed that decision. After all the interviews were over, I went through and coded the data for themes related to different data sources mentioned. My analysis of the data for this particular topic we focused on frequency and prevalence of the data source versus how it was used. Because I was looking for data sources that they had access to and were prone to using, I felt if they mentioned the data source that was an indicator of their likelihood to use that source when making decisions.

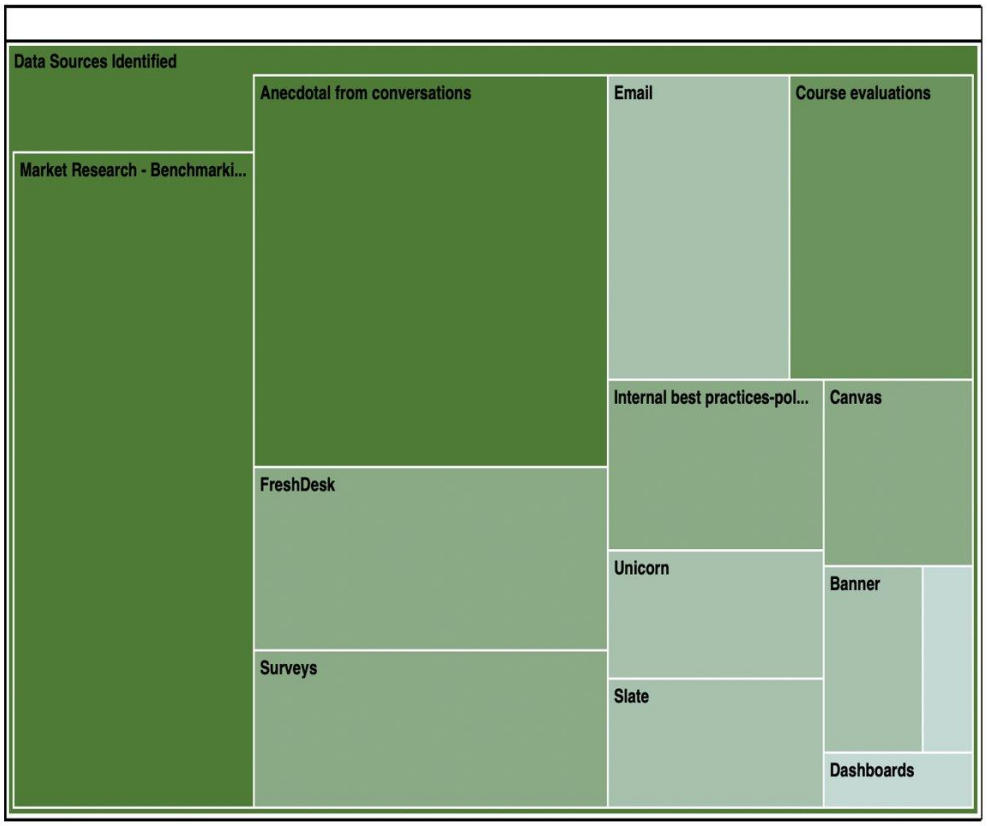

Figure 5: Data Visualization of Data Sources Identified in Interviews

The data visualization in figure 5 shows which data sources were mentioned and the frequency that a particular data source came up in all five one-on-one interviews. The depth of the cell indicates the number of mentions for that data source by all the participants. At the top, the first cell is for a few references to data sources more generally. From there we see the data sources in the following order of frequency of mention:

Data from Market Research and Benchmarking

The Dean Team members lean on each other to be the experts in their departments. This involves each of them staying abreast of relevant sources of market research and bringing that data to the meetings to provide a more holistic perspective.

- "... he spends a lot of time reading higher education and some of the other publications... so he does a great job of also bringing the student perspective, and say, oh, and this might be driving that or the EMSI data is showing this." - participant A
- "So the EMSI data is brought in as quantitative. But when we when I think about it, it starts the qualitative discussion that impact so many of these different things." - participant C
- "We do almost nothing about student experience without looking at EMSI data, because [EMSI] does a damn good job of collecting what does industry think about these things." - participant C

One participant talked a lot about how market research is used for role-playing to explore how different benchmarking scenarios might play out or how our environment might react differently than competitors.

- "The other thing we do a lot of, and I didn't think about this when you first asked it, but then I was picturing it in my mind, is we do a lot of role playing... so he'll walk us through the different scenarios... [he] will also throw out there whatever he sees institutions are doing... so we'll brainstorm for a while, and he'll say oh, so and this institution is doing that or this institution is doing that or […] most often will say we tried that 7 years ago, and this is what happened. So, she gives a lot of legacy information." - participant C

Data from Anecdotal Conversations

As the conversation shifted to talking more about internal data sources, particularly qualitative data sources, it became clear that the primary source of data was stored and shared through anecdotal conversations.

- “You know, enrollment managers have a pretty significant library of knowledge about the program, about the instructors, and enrollment. I mean it is information that we collect. Is it hard data? Not necessarily, but it's nonetheless information that informs action.” - participant B
- “There's a lot of anecdotal information that comes from advisors” - participant C
- “... we meet weekly as a team, but the stories are shared, I mean, because we're in an open office. If we get information, and we do, the students support team will get phone calls and emails, and then that gets shared out with to the Advisor or it'll get shared to me like if it's something that happened.” - participant A
- “... because good information does come up... information that we're then acting on, you know, that's requiring next steps is generally going to come from, you know, through those conversations with students with the advisor.” - participant B

Data from Course Evaluations

It was an assumption going into this research that course evaluations were relied upon heavily as a source of qualitative data. That assumption was confirmed through my one-on-one interviews. Following references to the exchange of qualitative information from and about students through conversations, course evaluations were mentioned most frequently when discussing qualitative data. Course evaluations are used in conjunction with evidence-based research from the learning experience design team to support the thinking around what the optimal student experience is. Through the interviews it was articulated that different forms of qualitative data from students through

the enrollment teams are also important, but these data are less accessible than course evaluation data.

- “Course evaluations are the largest” - participant C
- “Obviously the course evals” - participant B
- “We definitely have course evaluations that we can point to. We all know the pros and cons to that data, I mean, it's one piece of that and I think the other piece of that is evidence based, you know, teaching outcomes, so the work that, like comes out of the learning experience design team... they have evidence-based research that supports what the optimal type of student experience is. How that marries with, you know, the qualitative feedback we get from the students, is the evaluation that that we have to make or that you all make with your programs, right, and understanding what that looks like. And … I have less of that available to me, right, like I can see the course of evaluations.” - participant D

Data Generated through FreshDesk Ticketing System

In 2020 SPE started using the FreshDesk platform to manage various processes and requests across the academic unit. Through FreshDesk adjuncts, staff, faculty, and administrators can submit online tickets for scheduling changes to syllabi, courses, and instructors as well as issues that arise within course content, student concerns, etc. Once a ticket gets submitted a member of the Academic Operations team routes the ticket to the appropriate person to be managed. The ticketing system has a number of prompts that gather deeper information about issues that are submitted which go into a database. The FreshDesk system is still in the adoption phase across SPE with varying levels of use from team to team. Ultimately, the hope is to get more of the data related to

these issues and requests out of individual email boxes and into FreshDesk where they can be tracked.

- "... that is a big difference that it used to be captured just in emails. And now, it's captured in FreshDesk, through tickets. And that is data that is huge qualitative data..." - participant C

Data from Surveys

Many of the participants mentioned surveys as being a generative source of data that is mostly underutilized. There have been efforts in the past, and even currently, to use surveys to better understand the SPE student population though with mixed results.

- **"...**the university does a longitudinal survey of Alumni. Oh, it's been very episodic, so, I don't know that I have a lot of necessarily confidence in all aspects of it, but they did start it about 8 years ago, surveying students like 3, 5, 10 years after they graduated and we've sometimes gotten that data and then other times, not, so it hasn't been real consistent but I do think that that is a is a data set that I think you could get more consistent on collecting that and interpreting that that would be really helpful..." - participant E
- "...now, we have a mid-credential survey that we do which is the probably the most recent new qualitative information that we have." - participant C
- "I mean, we have the survey when they graduate, obviously the course evals, but that's not holistic. I think comprehensive student survey that active registered students would take … I wanted to get that going and...we met a lot and had it close to ready, and then the pandemic hit and everything fell apart, you know, there's been some Interest in getting that going again, and I think that would be very helpful in marketing the

overall experience with the enrollment management team with student support, with the obviously on the academic side of the house, you know, because the graduation survey is nice, but that's backward looking, I mean, if you know these are things that are with our current students, if we can execute on some adjustments, quickly, that will improve their experience. So, I I think I think it's a rich area of possibility for us." - participant B

Data from Internal Best Practices and Policies

For some of the participants internal policies and best practices serve as qualitative data that helps to guide their decision-making process. Often, it seems, data are collected about particular issues from a variety of sources in conjunction with looking at emerging data that has informed policies and precedents both internally and across the [MU] campus before decisions are made. This is particularly true for academic exceptions cases and issues impacting financials.

- **"**We have policies... I have, you know, policies and guidelines and procedures that we have that I follow" - participant A
- "...when there needs to be...an academic exception to a situation, or something... I do have other resources. I can reach out to the Registrar's office, or to the Office of Graduate Education, to the Vice Provost, and say 'what have we done, what have you seen in this situation, you know, what's the best way... other than what am I not thinking... what options?'" - participant A
- "I mean, I'm having a lot of conversations with the Office of Graduate, Education and the different committees that I'm on campus and that's

going to inform the information I'm able to bring to the team and how we might think about that" - participant A

Data from Personal Statements in Applications

ADs are solely responsible for reviewing applicants' personal statements in detail. Our CRM system for managing new applications, Slate, has a comment area where ADs can provide input about an applicant. These comments from Slate get pulled into Unicorn, our Excel spreadsheet that contains volumes of information about students.

I was aware of this functionality but, through the interviews, I learned ways the comment feature in Slate has been primarily underused and how ADs comments in Slate could be much more useful to the EM team.

- **"**And what I find really interesting about that piece [comments in Slate] is that... the directors... notice something in those personal statements that this student has maybe disclosed. They have a learning disability or something else. And then you can use the the [Unicorn] to make sure that the advisor works with the student to get in touch with disability services. So, yeah, I see that [personal statements] as that one of those really important qualitative data points." - participant A

Data within the Canvas LMS Platform

At SPE, particularly for the COMM program with courses being delivered almost exclusively online, nearly every bit of interaction between the students, the students and the course content, and the students and the instructors, happens within Canvas. That data are mostly used on a case-by-case basis when there are issues with students or instructors.

- “We look in the Canvas Container, do we see something that would support what the student is saying, do we need to have a conversation.” - participant E
- “... we have all of the engagement data in the Canvas analytics and the Canvas interaction that, of course, anytime anything comes in through an immediate need and just in general, we look at what is that student’s experience what can we glean about that student’s experience in the classroom...” - participant C

The data gathered through the interviews suggested that the Dean Team members leaned most heavily on qualitative data from anecdotal conversations with students, course evaluations, and the FreshDesk ticketing system. Surveys and applicant personal statements were qualitative data sources that were identified as underutilized with an interest in exploring more. Also mentioned consistently were the use of data through industry sources and internal sources that helped the Dean Team with benchmarking and understanding best practices across peer and competitor institutions. Given the wide spectrum of data courses mentioned by the different members, it was worth trying to understand better how these different data sources factored into their decision-making process.

Finding Four: How Identified Data Sources Contribute to the Decision-Making Process – Looking Back More Than Looking Forward

One focus of my original interview questions was exploring how data played a role in each person’s decision-making process as it related to student experience issues. In my interview data analysis, I coded the transcripts for subthemes pointing to how the participants articulated how data was used to make decisions. It is worth noting that some participants spoke more to decisions they, personally, made, some spoke more

about decisions that are made among the Dean Team and how data factors into those decisions, and some spoke about both team decisions and individual decisions. This distinction becomes more pronounced as I discuss the overarching theme about the importance of the team in the next section but, suffice it to say, in some cases the response to the questions on this topic and the ensuing conversation was more indicative of how some members of the team didn't use data as much as they relied heavily on other members of the team who they felt were bringing trust-worthy, data-informed perspectives.

Although the number of data sources referenced in the interviews was somewhat extensive, how those data sources are used could be distilled down to four major categories: To ensure equity; to confirm gut instincts, to better understand the issue at hand, and to have more confidence in decisions that were either made in the past or needed to be made. Many participants spoke about using data retroactively versus proactively. Two participants mentioned using data to build credibility. They discussed referencing the use of data to build credibility for the academic unit both internally at SPE, more broadly in committees across campus at MU, and even in advisory roles outside of academia. Finally, just one participant referenced that they used data to support our educational model.

Figure 6: Data Visualization of How the Dean Team Uses Data

Figure 6 is the same type of data visualization as in the previous section where the depth of the column is representative of the number of mentions for a way that data referenced being used in the interviews. Below I describe each of the areas in figure 6 in detail. The two columns on the lower right corner where the text gets cut off were, ”to support our educational model” and ”to build credibility.”

To Ensure Equity

As mentioned previously, many of the participants illustrated their points through anecdotes. This was especially true as the participants talked about how they use data. The Dean Team members make many decisions as a team and so as they talked about

different scenarios where they needed to make decisions and used data to do that, I heard many references to ensuring decisions were being made equitably. There is a lot of role-playing to try to get into the different student populations or to understand where students are at different points in their academic journey to be sure that all students are being considered and that the decisions being made are not going to inadvertently impact other students, now or in the future, in an inequitable way.

To Confirm Gut Instinct

Many of the participants demonstrated through their anecdotal stories how data has been used to confirm and build confidence around past decisions that were made more from an instinctual place when data was less available to the team.

- **"**I would say that most of them [data] are... more confirmative of things that I think we have a sense is happening. And then we can look at the data and that can support that." - participant D
- "Because you know what comes in in the absence of that is like a gut decision, and sometimes you have to make those, and sometimes it's okay. But this is a much better place to be than just saying, 'Yeah, I think this is right, because I've heard this, and I've heard that.'" - participant D

There is evidence from the interviews that now that the data are more readily available, they help the team make more informed decisions, rather than relying on gut feelings. And as the organizational culture moves toward greater adoption of using the available data so does the propensity to use data more proactively.

To Better Understand an Issue

Being able to have a more well-rounded view of a situation was articulated as a clear benefit of increased access to data around student experience. Some participants articulated how, even though it is often not formally documented, the qualitative input

from certain teams helps the Dean Team to be able to answer questions in a deeper or more thorough way than before, allowing them to rely less on their own intuition and biases.

- “We can answer questions now that we just couldn't answer... and allows us to not necessarily have to rely as much on our own intuitive right decision-making which, as we talked about earlier, brings its own biases into the situation... so I think that is definitely something that is a lot different now.” - participant E
- “I can ask for data... from, you know, the Enrollment Management team if I need qualitative input, on certain things. Usually, I seek out that information when I need to tell more of the story around what the hard data is telling me.” - participant D

The increase in contextual information from the qualitative data ultimately leads to great confidence in the decisions being made by the Dean Team.

Increased Confidence in Decisions

The increase in data now available helps the Dean Team to provide the resources to support the factors that the Dean Team have identified as contributing to an exceptional student experience. This increased their confidence in the decisions they make related to their ability to support tangible outcomes for the students.

- “And now, we have data to support what we need to provide an exceptional student experience. So, it's very different. I mean, there was a lot of ‘Hey, what do you think?’... and ‘Yeah, this seems like the right approach’ when I first started. And now, you know, there's just a lot more data available to us to kind of support the tangible outcome for the student, if that makes sense.” - participant D

To Support our Educational Model

SPE is widely known as the “access arm” to the university. Because of the lower admissions policies, longstanding history with offering online learning options, and the predominance of adjunct faculty teaching the courses at SPE, the faculty and leadership at SPE have often felt some need to defend the rigor of the academics. It was discussed in one of the interviews that the participant felt that having more data helped to justify and support the quality of the learning and effectiveness of the instruction. Although this was not something mentioned by any other participants, I do think it is a relevant finding as we later explore how a culture of data interacts with the SAC mentality in higher education. Similar to the point made above, two participants talked about how SPE’s use of data has been leveraged in cross-campus committees and even outside advisory board work to build credibility for the college. Again, I think this has relevance as we think about the direction higher education, broadly speaking, is going and how that is bringing greater emphasis on data teams and data usage to both qualify and quantify the value and integrity of the systems.

As the Dean Team members spoke of the ways data helps them to make decisions, it became very clear how much they rely on each other to fill the gaps in what they do not individually understand or have access to content for or full information on. As they each referenced the dynamics and synergies that existed among the team, the importance of trust started to come to the forefront of our conversations.

Finding Five: Trust is Essential for the Team

One of the most important and unexpected findings from my one-on-one interviews, which prompted deeper thinking about the necessary elements for creating a culture of data, was the trust level that exists within the Dean Team. This high degree of trust in each other allows them to question each other’s assumptions around data and

certain student experience scenarios and then have candid conversations without the risk of being offended. Through many of my one-on-one interviews I heard about how critical trust is for this leadership team to make decisions and make them in an efficient and effective way. The trust level among the group allows them to say "Hey, that doesn't feel right" without being second-guessed. Through the interviews, there was discussion about the best meetings they have had, where they feel energized after the hard questions are asked and they ultimately come to an agreement. Qualitative data often requires context and interpretation. The further away from the source of the data, the more the Dean Team members seemed to rely on others on the team to help with their meaning-making. Thus, having a high level of trust in each person's perception and their ability to share the context accurately becomes critical for the team.

- "We all have a very high trust level in each other. So, when you were talking, I was thinking, there have been plenty of places I've been at where I'm like "Oh, my God! Can I just see the raw data myself?" type of thing. - participant C
- "So, it [the team] works really. Well, oh, and it's just a safe place." - participant A
- "But I do think there's a high level of trust within this group [the Dean Team] and I think that leads us to be able to be very candid with each other without the risk of anyone being offended." - participant D
- "Oh, it [trust] is so critical, and I've had the experience working in an environment in the past where trust wasn't there and what happens is decisions don't get made; they get derailed. You second guess things, you spin and spin on things, or you clam up and you don't talk about

things. You just don't even put things on the table, because there's a lack of trust.” - participant D

- “I would say it's [trust] gotta be one of the most common critical things for for a team, for a leadership team to have to be able to make decisions, and to be able to make them in an efficient way, right, because if you’re second guessing things all the time, man, but the other thing is when you have a high degree of trust is you're allowed to say ‘Hey, that doesn't feel right? That doesn't sound right. Can we talk about that a little bit more?’” - participant D
- “You can question someone and not have it taken, you know, it's not taken personally, and I can tell you... we have a high degree of trust on the team. And there are times when someone will say, ‘Hey, wait, wait a minute. Let's talk about that.’ We, you know, dig into that a little bit more, and the end result is one of us will say, ‘You know what, you're exactly right’... like there is something flawed with that or whatever it is and if you don't have trust, you can't do that, right? Because there's just too much other negative stuff attached to it if you don't have that space to be able to do it.” - participant D
- “Some of the best meetings we've had have been, you know, intense and the kind of [meeting], you know, at the end you're exhausted, but you feel so good because we worked through it, powered through it. We figured it out. We asked the hard questions, and we did it together, and you know it's like everybody feels oddly energized after that. It's not easy to go through, but we trust each other enough to go through it.” - participant D

My interpretation of the data indicated that trust not only provided the space for each member of the Dean Team to bring their unique perspective but almost made it requisite for the dynamics of the group:

- “I trust them all to the Nth degree. However, I do know that they all come from different perspectives in the organization.” - participant E
- **“**[He] really relies on us to be subject matter experts of our own domains and bring those together.” - participant C

This high level of trust the team members had with one another seemed to allow them to work together very collaboratively.

Finding Six: Trust Leads to Greater Collaboration

Another theme that emerged was the high level of collaboration among the Dean Team, which seemed to be the result of the high level of trust they feel in one another. The Dean Team members feel together they have a diverse set of skills and backgrounds, and they rely on team collaboration to make decisions. It is rare for any one of them to make the final decision. Instead, the team works together to gather information and make a more informed decision, which reflects the team's trust in each individual’s competency. The team also feels that the decisions they make as a collaborative group are the best decisions, they can make with the information they have in the moment. Through their collaborative decision-making process, they feel their decisions are thoughtful and equitable.

- **“...**those ops meetings are really critical for us... there's always there's this idea of what we think... where the market is heading... there's an idea of how we think we're doing in our student experience, from internal data that we're getting from these different sources. None of that means shit, if we don't talk openly about it.” - participant C

- “It's very rare that any one of us ever says ‘here's the decision. This is what I've decided, I'm going with it.’ It’s a very collaborative and supportive approach and we're all, not that we can't put on the same glasses that each other are wearing, but our strengths are in different ways, in different areas, and so it's, it's really a very effective and supportive way to make decisions and in a way that I feel like when we are making decisions, that we're not overseeing something that's really important.” - participant A
- “...I think that's some of the beauty of having a team with a very diverse set of skills and backgrounds is... it helps to provide, you know, a full picture. It is a rare situation that someone comes to me with, unless it's a no-brainer, but like a a problem or a situation and I go, ‘okay, this is what we need to do.’ I'm gonna pause, I'm gonna talk, you know, with who I need to talk to we're going to gather the information and [together] make a more informed decision.” - participant D
- “So, whenever we look at things and it is truly, it's a reflection of the team. We all have very high levels of competency, looking at these things.” - participant D
- “I feel like the decisions that we make are the best decisions with the information that we've had at that moment, and they're very thoughtful. And, yeah, rarely, are we just don't like oh, yeah, let's go this way and see, you know, where the chips fall.” - participant A

As mentioned earlier, each member of the Dean Team is focused on their specific area of accountability. That focus allowed them to be true experts in their respective areas but left some blind spots particularly when it came to using data to

make decisions. These blind spots were almost imperceptible to them until we started talking about it in the interviews. Through the conversations it became clearer and clearer how much their trust led to greater collaboration which led to a collective deeper understanding of situations and issues that required their attention. Working together, they felt they were more efficiently and effectively able to have the information needed to make decisions.

Finding Seven: Trust and Collaboration Support Meaning-Making and Shaping Perspectives

Right away as I started the one-on-one interviews, I could see how the Dean Team members relied on other members of the team to fill in the areas where they were deficient or lacking in information. As some of the participants were articulating their responses to me, in that moment they became more aware of how the team benefits them and helps them to better understand a problem or helps to shape their perspective.

- “[She] and I have gotten in some heated conversations over the years where she'll be like ‘I want to see. I want to look at this [data]’ as if you've never analyzed it [the data], and I'll be like ‘I think that's offensive, but okay’ and we'll walk through that. We've done that several times. Not to the point where it was offensive, but there have been some differences of opinions, of how we think things will land.” - participant C
- “I rely on the team to help make sense of what I'm either seeing or hearing. Or the situation. And they come to it from different perspectives, which is super helpful.” - participant A
- “They [the Dean Team] all have their own filters and their own leanings, right, and so I think part of my role is to be a synthesizer in that group, and to understand when something is being discussed, and it might be

being brought by one individual... and we're discussing it just like any kind of a decision but that it is a major decision in the organization, I really want to look at it from as many perspectives as I can before we decide to go in a certain direction." - participant E

Finding Eight: Concerns with Data

Through the one-on-one interviews several concerns emerged related to using qualitative data. These concerns are common concerns within organizational culture of data (Coburn & Turner, 2011) and center on three issues: bandwidth, prioritizing, and validity. These came out through stories that the participants told and so I do not have direct quotes but there was a theme that emerged around concerns related to data use. The first issue, bandwidth, is an important factor in using qualitative data, since having the necessary staff and time to sift through the data can be a challenge particularly for organizations that run on a lean staffing model. Prioritizing the data is also important, as it is necessary to ensure that the most valuable information is gathered from the data in order to help inform decision-making. Understanding how to analyze the data to prioritize what data are most relevant for a particular issue requires training and skill. This closely ties in with the initial bandwidth issue particularly when faced with the question of what the primary function of a person's job is. For example, as the Enrollment Management team gets trained in data use their primary job continues to be to focus on meeting students' needs, not analyzing the data about students' needs. Finally, that last issue raised is more of a common philosophical question around validity and accuracy of qualitative data. This must be addressed for people to feel they can trust that qualitative data are a reliable source of information. Like data prioritization, accurately assessing the validity and accuracy of qualitative data requires skill, experience, and a well-rounded understanding of the context in which it was collected.

Although these concerns did not dominate the conversations, they are significant as they relate to data use and the decision-making process. Many of these concerns seemed to serve as a justification for why the participant did not encourage more data adoption and use among the participant's respective team. The participants' concerns around data ultimately affected the larger Dean Team's ability to factor data into their process more effectively.

Finding Nine: The Decision-Making Process is Rooted in Collaboration

When asked about the process used to better understand the student experience, none of the participants were able to articulate any kind of formal process. Their first response was to think about the question in relation to a student issue and from there they were able to talk through how they would go about collecting the information needed to make a decision. I was never able to discern a specific process, per se, but everything that they each described involved a fair amount of collaboration with others in order to thoroughly investigate the issue from every angle possible. They tend to ask a lot of questions first with anybody who might have insights to add: advisors, students, ADs, instructors, etc. Then, they look to data to either support, qualify, or enrich what they already know (course evaluations, Canvas insights data, FreshDesk ticket data) or to provide guidance on next steps (benchmarking, best practices, policies). The last step in the process, often but not always and for issues that are larger and impact a variety of areas, is to bring the issue to the Dean Team to discuss. At this point, there is a fair amount of role-playing. The focus of the role-playing really seems to be to ensure the decisions are fair, equitable, and are not setting a precedent that will have unintended consequences in the future.

Data Findings Summary

My interpretation of the data from the one-on-one interviews prompted me to start thinking of how each member of the Dean Team seems to be approaching the notion of exceptional student experience relative to their unique perspective, which is based on how their area of purview, intersects with different phases of the students' academic journey. The data seemed to point to three distinct phases:

- Early Phase of Academic Journey: During this phase the EM team and Student Services team are primarily responsible for establishing expectations upfront for the experience a student is going to have.
- Mid Phase of Academic Journey: This phase is marked by how consistently EM staff, ADs, instructors, higher-level administrators can anticipate students' needs and follow through on the expectation set up front. In other words, how we deliver on promises, implied or explicit, of the education SPE will provide determines partially how exceptional the student experience is.
- Late Phase of Academic Journey: At every phase of their academic journey with SPE students should feel the experience, at a minimum, was worth their time and money and, ideally, was a transformational experience. This, however, becomes most pronounced when they start reflecting on the experience toward the end of their academic journey, as they face the realities of a job market they expect to be prepared to excel in, or as they look back as alumni.

Through my analysis I was able to align different data sources with each of these phases, and the teams most likely to engage with these data, based on how participants expressed how they were used in the interviews. Finally, over each phase I overlayed

the more aspirational ideas of engaging, challenging, and energizing the student based on my interpretation of the data around what our students need most from SPE in order to leave their journey feeling like this was an exceptional student experience. Figure 7 shows a visual depiction of the student journey within a culture of data as I have just described.

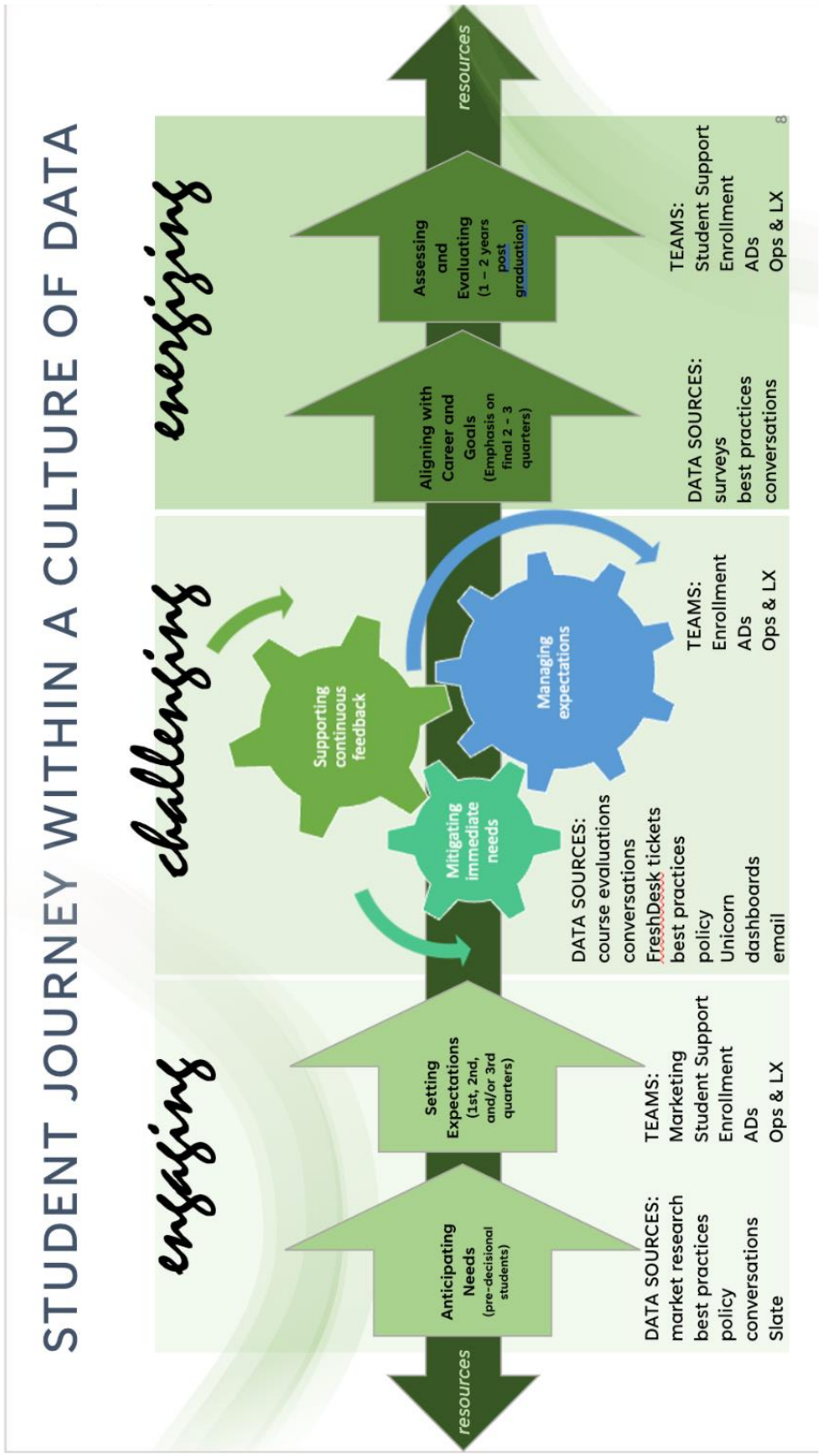

Figure 7: Visual Summary of SPE Student Journey within a Culture of Data

I developed the graphic depicted in Figure 7 as a starting point for the group discussions in phase three of this work, discussed in the next section. I felt it was valuable, both for me and for the Dean Team, for me to distill my interpretation of the data from the one-on-one interviews into a visual depiction so that each of them could see where their focus lies in relation to others on the team and how the student experience might be affected by different touchpoints through each phase. Also, I wanted them to see what data sources were being used, and what was not being used, at these distinct phases to gather more information about the student experience so that together we might think more expansively about the possibilities. With this graphic in the foreground, below is a highlight of my take-aways from my data analysis.

Data Findings Analysis

Over the last 3 – 5 years, tremendous efforts have gone into putting systems into place to collect data to better inform our internal processes and improve the course experience for students. The infrastructure included the Unicorn spreadsheet, which is unique to each academic program and is an exhaustive repository of student data, FreshDesk ticketing system, and a wide variety of dashboards that show course, instructor, and student data. Although some of these systems are being used to their fullest extent by a few people, many of them either are not being used at all or are not being used to maximize efficiencies and student experience effectiveness. As a college we often resort to many of our old practices. We rely on best practices and lessons learned from peer institutions to guide what we think is best for our students until we learn otherwise through a problem or a complaint. We are not using the full spectrum of data sources available to us to be predictive about students' needs. We are not capturing data along the students' academic journey to inform future decisions. The

following take-aways represent some overarching opportunities to take what we know or the data we have and use it for greater impact.

Curating the "Book Ends"

Both participant A and participant B spoke in the interviews about the importance of what they called the “book ends.” I learned in the interview that higher education research has indicated that if students have a valuable experience in their first and/or second course in a program they are more likely to persist through the rest of the courses in the outlined academic plan. Further, if they find value in the experiences they have in their last two courses or so they are likely to be more engaged alumni, become donors, and be word-of-mouth advocates for the school. Additionally, our internal data on student dropout rates shows they are more likely to drop from the program and not come back if their experience in their first couple classes is subpar.

- “You know this, from persistence, retention, as well as in some cases, alumni giving, it is incredibly important that is student has an especially outstanding experience the first part of their program, first course or two, and at the end. Bookend, right? We know that, and so we to the extent that we can, we try to funnel new students into courses who are taught by our best faculty. Now, yeah, you know, how do you define best? Well, our enrollment managers I think over time have again that library of knowledge.” - participant B

Identifying Strategic Touchpoints

I heard about surveys from almost every participant in their one-on-one interviews. Not as much about how we are using surveys, a little on that, but more about how we could be using surveys. In every conversation it was mentioned that the survey instrument is flawed and can certainly produce biased data but could still provide a way

to learn more about the experiences our students are having through their academic journey and not just at the end of each course. The idea of surveying them at strategic times in their program almost as a check-in came up in several interviews. As we think about this, backed up against the notion of curating the bookends of the student experience, identifying strategic touchpoints where we might be able to learn from students with enough time to course correct before they drop seemed like an idea worth more attention.

Alignment of Best Practices with Real Experiences

The interview data suggested that the Dean Team relies heavily on higher education best practices data to guide decisions related to student experience. What I did not hear very much about was internal research or data that shows alignment between what we learn from best practices data and the experiences our unique population of students want to have. I believe that within the continuing and professional education space, and if you drill down further to thinking about online learning for this population, a student body's wants and needs start to get very nuanced. It is possible that our students' needs align perfectly with the best practice data that is coming out of groups like UPCEA, a national association for professional, continuing, and online education. But what if it does not? How do we know? To build off the idea of gathering data at strategic touchpoints to learn more about our students' experiences in the program, this would give us the chance to make sure we are aligning best practices with our specific students' real-life experiences.

Data for Future-Forward Thinking

Continuing the build on these ideas about curating the bookends, surveying students at strategic touchpoints to understand how our students' experiences back up to the experiences of adult learners on a national scale, with both the internal data and

best practice data combined I feel we would be in a place to make more predictive versus reactive decisions about student experience. We are using our internal data and getting more sophisticated about how we do that every day, but we are currently more inclined to do that in response to a problem rather than to envision the programs and support that our students might want and need in the future based on current internal student data.

Phase Two Summary

Phase Two consisted of one-on-one interviews in which participants were interviewed within two weeks of each other. Questions were asked to learn about how each member of the Dean Team thinks about data, decision-making, and student experience. In keeping with the constructivist approach, the conversations varied a bit with the goal to allow for organic conversation to develop. The interviews revealed that each person is different in their approach to using qualitative data to make decisions on issues that affect student experience. Also discussed was the importance of trust within the team culture, how the team members work together to make meaning of each new issue, and how they prioritize data use.

These themes changed the way I thought about the program evaluation, in particular, how the Dean Team's decision-making process was shaped by team culture and how the team culture has been affected by the use and influence of the data now more readily available to them. Additionally, multiple realities exist around the meaning of exceptional student experience, such as factors that contribute to student experience, the use of data, and the approach to adopting systems and fostering a culture of data within a team. Ultimately, I learned that each member of the Dean Team's perspective was based on their department's area of influence or focus.

Through the data, I identified six sub-themes within the dataset, including factors that contribute to an exceptional student experience, qualitative data sources identified in the interviews, and challenges around adoption of data. The dynamics among the Dean Team were an especially interesting finding. The Dean Team has a high degree of trust in each other, allowing them to question each other's assumptions and have candid conversations without being second-guessed. This trust leads to greater collaboration, which is supported by the team's trust in each individual's competency. Through their collaborative decision-making process, they felt their decisions were thoughtful and equitable.

The data from the one-on-one interviews revealed that the process used to better understand the student experience involves collaboration with other stakeholders, looking to data to either support, qualify, or enrich what they already know, and role-playing to ensure decisions are fair, equitable, and not setting a precedent. Overall, the Unicorn spreadsheet, FreshDesk ticketing system, and a wide variety of dashboards have been put in place to collect data to improve the course experience for students. However, many of these systems are not being used to maximize efficiencies and student experience effectiveness.

These findings brought me to a few overall takeaways. First, the importance for students to have an outstanding experience during the first part of their program, first course or two, and at the end. Additionally, it is important to identify strategic touchpoints where we can learn from students with enough time to pivot before they drop. Finally, the alignment of best practices with real experiences is important. The interview data suggested that the Dean Team relies heavily on higher education best practices data to guide decisions related to student experience. However, there is no internal research or data that shows alignment between what we learn from best practices data and the

experiences our unique population of students wants to have. To build on the idea of gathering data at strategic touchpoints to learn more about our students' experiences in the program, this would give us the chance to make sure we are aligning best practices with our specific students' real-life experiences. These takeaways served as overarching themes under which I identified nine opportunities that will be discussed in more detail in Phase Three where I shift to Group Sessions with the Dean Team.

Phase Three: Group Session Findings

The following section provides a detailed narrative of the three groups sessions that I had with the Dean Team members. To start I provided an overview of my approach to the three group sessions. Then, I go into a full description of each individual session including my goals for each session, an overview of each session, details about what was discussed among the participants during the session, insights that I gained from watching the Dean Team's process during these sessions, outcomes of the session, and, finally, a summary of my reflections following the session.

Group Session Overview

In Group Session One, I shared my findings from the one-on-one interviews with the group and suggested nine potential focus areas based on opportunities I had identified through my analysis of the one-on-one interviews. In Group Session Two, I presented and received feedback from the group on a draft of a logic model I had created based onone of the opportunities I had identified in Group Session One that seemed to resonate as the most actionable, scalable, and impactful with the group. By Group Session Three, I had incorporated feedback from Group Session Two into the logic model which resulted in refinement, clarification, and expansion of various parts of the first half (anticipated work) part of the logic model. We reviewed the revisions and then moved on to discuss the outputs, outcomes, and impact areas of the logic model.

The goal of the final group session was to frame the action items to pilot the identified solution and determine how this effort would be measured.

Prior to each group session, I provided a preview of what would be covered so that the members of the Dean Team were able to review in advance, if they wanted. I had check-ins prior to each session and debriefs after each session with Participant C, who was heavily invested in the outcome of this work and served as my closest program evaluation partner. The group sessions were scheduled two-weeks apart to allow adequate time for me to reflect on what was discussed and incorporate new learnings into the process and/or adapt the logic model. For each session I provided some background information, either providing some grounding information about the process or recapping what was discussed in the last session and what changes I had made to the logic model in response to the discussions.

There were two primary overarching goals for these three group sessions. First and foremost, to see their decision-making process in action. As mentioned in the earlier section, I asked about their process in the one-on-one interviews but did not expect the participants to be able to articulate a formal process. I asked the question because it was worthwhile to hear how they thought about their decision-making process as a baseline point of information, but the logic model exercise was built into the process from the beginning because I anticipated that in order to better understand their process, I would need to experience it in action. The second goal was to see if the group could/would be able to identify a source of student-generated qualitative data that could be used to better inform the student experience and how they would work together to build out a logic model for piloting the use of that data source.

These three sessions were not recorded or transcribed. I chose not to record them to avoid putting the participants in a situation where they might feel guarded or the

need to filter what was discussed. The Dean Team has a standing Ops meeting and these group sessions were tacked on to that standing meeting. My hope was to set up the scenario and then be able to watch their process as they made decisions related to the impact on student experience. I felt that my ability to be “a fly on the wall” as they discussed issues would be impeded if I was recording the sessions. My intention was to participate in each of these in person. Unfortunately, I tested positive for Covid-19 right before the third group session, so I had to participate on Zoom while all the members of the Dean Team were together in a conference room. My data collection from each of these three sessions consisted of notetaking during the meetings, debriefing with my primary program evaluation partner afterwards, journaling about my reflections and reactions to each session following the meeting, and the logic model that I was building along the way.

To provide some structure and consistency to my findings summary for each session I have organized them into the following sections: Goals, Session Overview, Participant Discussion, Process Insights, Outcomes, Reflection. The goals listed represent my articulated goals at the beginning of each session. For the first two sessions, these goals were created with my Primary Evaluation Partner (PEP), who is also a participant. Session Overview is simply a synopsis of what I had planned for the session. The Participant Discussion sections represent my articulation of the group discussion that ensued after I presented the primary focus of the session. In each session I deliberately tried to find a way to generate an issue or topic that the group could discuss so that I could stop facilitating and just listen to their process. I have tried to capture what was discussed during these times as a way to provide context for the next session – Process Insights. In the Process Insights section, I highlight new information I was able to gather in each session about how the team used data in their

decision-making process. The Outcomes section is where I summarize the next steps with the identified issue and the logic model. Finally, I provide a summary of my reflections from each session. These reflections are relevant because they show my development and growth as I go through the program evaluation and facilitating these meetings.

Group Session One

The first group session was a one-hour session with all members in person gathered around a conference table. For this first session, I articulated two primary goals. 1) To gain consensus around an opportunity the Dean Team identified as valuable, actionable, and scalable. 2) Ultimately to serve as the AD Pilot Champion for this opportunity.

Session Overview

I began the first session with a clear articulation of how to come into this work. I talked about how I viewed my role as threefold; an info-gatherer, a meaning-maker, and a collaborator. I described my goals (above) and explained the process for the group sessions. Figure 8 shows a graphic I shared with the group to be sure they were clear on my process

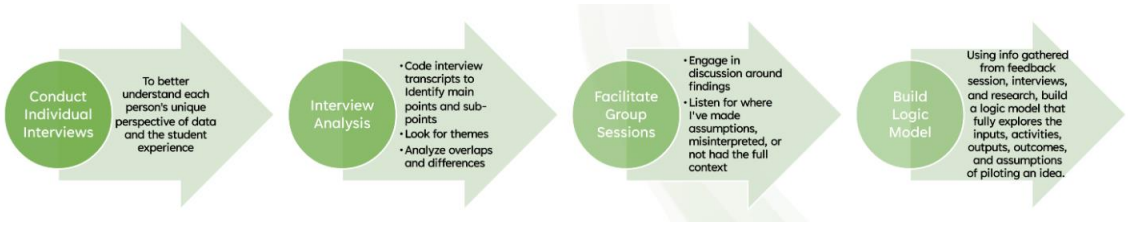

Figure 8: Phases and Descriptions of the Evaluation Process Presented to Dean Team

I described the themes I interpreted from the one-on-one interviews. I shared the data gathered in response to the questions about defining exceptional student experience, the factors that contribute to exceptional student experience, the data

sources they identified in the interviews, and how those data sources aiding in their decision-making. I presented the ”Student Journey within a Culture of Data” graphic as a way of showing them how I distilled much of the data and my interpretation of that data into the student journey and how they all engage with that student journey, what data informs each phase, and what teams are impacted by the data collection as they engage with students during these phases of the life cycle. I discussed the concerns with data use that came up in the interviews. Finally, I discussed my biggest take-ways from the one-on-one interview data analysis and how those led me to nine potential opportunities to consider as we think about building out a logic model.

Opportunities presented for logic model consideration:

A. AD comments in Slate guiding student initial experiences in the program
B. Better incorporation of data from Portfolio Foundations and/or Student Success Course
C. Data capture of reflection assignments/discussions in Capstone courses.
D. Cohorting students or sequencing the courses at the beginning and the end of the program.
E. Surveying the students at critical points through the program.
F. Having the advisors focus more on outreach and direct conversations at critical points in the program rather than spend their time enrolling students.
G. Having more career and industry resources for students to help them make sure they are headed in the right direction.
H. Surveying students a year or two out from graduation to get a solid reflection of their experience with a direct ask about industry relevance and areas for improvement.
I. Asking instructors to complete a survey that asks direct questions about what they have learned about their students (wants/needs) and how the course is meeting or not meeting expectations or industry/skill requirements at the end of each quarter they teach.

Participant Discussion

The Dean Team asked a few questions about my data findings but did not spend too much time deliberating on the data. They did not seem surprised by any of the findings. The discussion quickly shifted to the opportunities I had presented and, related to those opportunities, what was feasible, desirable, scalable, and most impactful. They

were somewhat quickly able to narrow in on three opportunities that were most interesting to explore: Opportunity A, Opportunity E, and Opportunity G. Opportunity A had early and widespread support by the group because the infrastructure for that already existed and was being underutilized. There are also more widespread implications for implementing that one because gaining greater adoption of the Unicorn spreadsheet as a primary source of student data collection would be a likely natural byproduct of Opportunity A. Not surprisingly, Opportunity E was of interest to the group because all five Dean Team members had expressed interest in the need to use surveys more as a way to capture information about the student experience through their academic journey (outside of course specific input reported in course evaluations). Opportunity G was discussed near the end of the session as something that they felt could really benefit students but operationalizing that process could be a challenge.

Participant C spoke up first advocating for the value of Opportunity A. Participant C is my PEP so we had discussed the opportunities I had identified prior to the group session. I knew that the idea of making better use of Unicorn across the teams by encouraging ADs to add more detailed comments in Slate, which would pull into the Unicorn data to be used by the EM team when advising students on courses, held strong appeal to this participant. As mentioned, the infrastructure is in place to do this, but the different team members are largely underutilizing this data source. This has been a point of frustration for Participant C so there is interest in seeing if a change could be made in this area. Participant E pointed out that just because the infrastructure was in place does not mean that it had been adopted, which is something that Participant C and I had already had a somewhat heated discussion about.

Participant B chimed in with accolades about the graphic I had created about the student journey within a culture of data and articulated an interest in exploring how the

three phases of engaging, challenging, and energizing could be applied more broadly to our internal processes. That led to a discussion about surveying students at critical points in their program (Opportunity E). There was a discussion about using the student journey to think through what marks a “critical point” where we can gather data through surveys to assess student experience and pivot when necessary.

Participant A mentioned feeling there was “low hanging fruit” related to focusing more on career development and professional resources (Opportunity G). This participant felt as though that was something that student services could support, particularly with input from ADs based on application data.

When asked to share thoughts, Participant D mentioned that their thinking was centered on what would have the greatest impact.

Process Insights

I definitely got a glimpse into how the team bats around different ideas, weighing the pros and cons. They very quickly homed in on which ideas were most feasible from a human capital and resource perspective. They kept their discussion at a high level and were focused on the big picture, not the granular details, at this point. This was notable to me because, from my experience, people often move too quickly to working out the details before the initial concept has fully gelled.

Consistent with what I heard in the one-on-one interviews, I got a good sense of the trust and comfort level they had with each other as well as how their perspectives and team dynamics are grounded in their own reality. They spoke candidly with one another, sharing concerns about what might require a lot of effort or big structural or cultural change. Participant D’s focus on the impact and the outcomes of the effort. Consistent with what was discussed in the interview, this participant's role is centered on what is going to get SPE the most bang for the buck, so to speak. Participant C, a real

systems thinker and process-oriented person, was thinking about what tools or systems that have already been created could be better utilized. Participant E seemed to be thinking about ways to engage the greatest number of internal people in the process in ways that they have not been engaged previously, or perhaps have been resistant to the processes in the past. Again, consistent with the interviews, I appreciated that Participant A was looking at what more can be done within the teams under their management. The approach at this point was very thoughtful as they each thought through the implications of the opportunities being discussed.

Outcomes

By the end of the first group session, we had achieved consensus around building out the logic model around Opportunity A. I will keep the other two identified opportunities in mind for if they could be woven into the logic model for Opportunity A or needed to be built out separately.

Reflection

I met with Participant C, my PEP, to review my slide deck prior to the first group session. They had quite a bit of constructive, and somewhat critical, feedback about the way I had positioned some of the data findings and what I was choosing to focus on. This was a hard conversation but very beneficial to my growth through this process. My PEP brought to the forefront two aspects that needed consideration; my insider status as an AD and the implications of that on my work with the Dean Team and my biases toward how data are valued by the Deam Team.

Firstly, they brought my awareness back to the fact that, as an AD, I am a part of a group of people who have largely been resistant to many of the processes that have been put into place to create some efficiencies and use data more effectively. This was not new information for me but because I saw myself as an early adopter and not among

the resistance group, I was forgetting that in this scenario, I was an acting representative of that group. I was not just representing myself. As such, I needed to be extremely overt about my intentions to be an internal champion of the opportunity we chose to explore. I needed to be clear that I was a trusted, valuable partner in this process as we moved toward the pilot phase, assuming that we could get to that point.

Second, they pointed out that my slides came across as focused on the negative aspects – what was missing or what was not being done. I feel like this program evaluation process was purposely looking for gaps that could be addressed but, nevertheless, I did a bit of reflecting on that and ultimately decided that some of my biases and preconceived notions about what was and was not being done were coming into play. I ended up making some substantive changes to how I had information positioned in my slides as a result of this feedback. I deeply appreciated being able to have this very candid conversation with my PEP and left that exchange thankful for the professional relationship I have with this person.

I felt like the group session went very well, and I felt like the Dean Team received my presentation of the data findings and my analysis of that data was very positive. They said that they felt energized and invigorated by the conversation. They appreciated the work that had been done and thought that it generated good conversation. I left the meeting very hopeful that my development of the logic model would help us to continue to explore these ideas and that we might find a way to use the student data from personal statements in the application materials to better guide their academic journey.

Both Participant C and Participant E came to talk to me after the group session. Both were happy with how it went and encouraged by the conversation. They shared that they would like to focus on Opportunity E, critical point surveys with students, and Opportunity A, Slate comments from ADs leveraging info gathered from personal

statements in applications, for the build out of the logic models. This feedback just confirmed my current thinking on how I needed to build out the logic model. It seemed that we were all aligned that Opportunity A could potentially have a positive effect on the front of the bookends of the students' academic journey. Additionally, the critical point surveys would give us insights along the way about students' experiences so that we can better align best practices with reality and to perhaps allow us to focus on being more predictive rather than reactive.

After working through the details of the logic model, I ended up focusing on "Leveraging Data from Application Materials to Personalize the Front-End of Students Academic Experience" and the critical point surveys became an assessment activity within that logic model. My thinking was that it made more sense than building out a fully separate logic model. Weaving the surveys as an assessment activity within the other logic model gave the surveys more purpose and context. They became a way to gather data from the students rather than as a one-off activity done in isolation from the idea that would be the focus of the pilot.

Group Session Two

Group session two was a one-hour session held in person in the same conference room as the first session. All five participants were present. My primary goal for the second group session was to review and refine the logic model I had built for the identified need (Opportunity A). I reiterated the overarching goal that I would serve as the AD Pilot Champion for this opportunity as we moved toward implementation.

Session Overview

Prior to the group session I shared some information about logic models with the Dean Team along with my draft of the logic model for them to review. I shared information about logic models because I felt it was important to be sure they understood

my rationale for building out a logic model and why I thought this would be valuable to this process (and might also be a useful tool for them as they made decisions in the future). I shared a draft of the logic model so that they could familiarize themselves with it prior to our discussion.

I began the session reviewing the slides I had sent them in advance of the meeting. I recapped our last meeting by talking through the Student Journey Within a Culture of Data slide as a way of jogging their memory of what was discussed in the meeting. Then, as a way of reminding them of where we landed at the end of the meeting, I recapped the identified issues to focus on to address through the logic model for Opportunity A: 1) Reduce the number of early-program stop-outs related to course relevancy and lack of alignment with students' goals and expectations; 2) Offer "next level" service through personalization and curation of academic experience through the whole student journey. I also provided a guiding question that I used while I was thinking through each area of the logic model. This guiding question helped me to center the student experience as the area of impact.

Guiding Question: Can we positively influence students' early program experience to engage them more deeply in their learning, increase their overall satisfaction, and increase their likelihood of completion through a more personalized, guided approach to their coursework?

Next, I presented the first part of the logic model that we would focus on for this group session which is depicted below in figure 9.

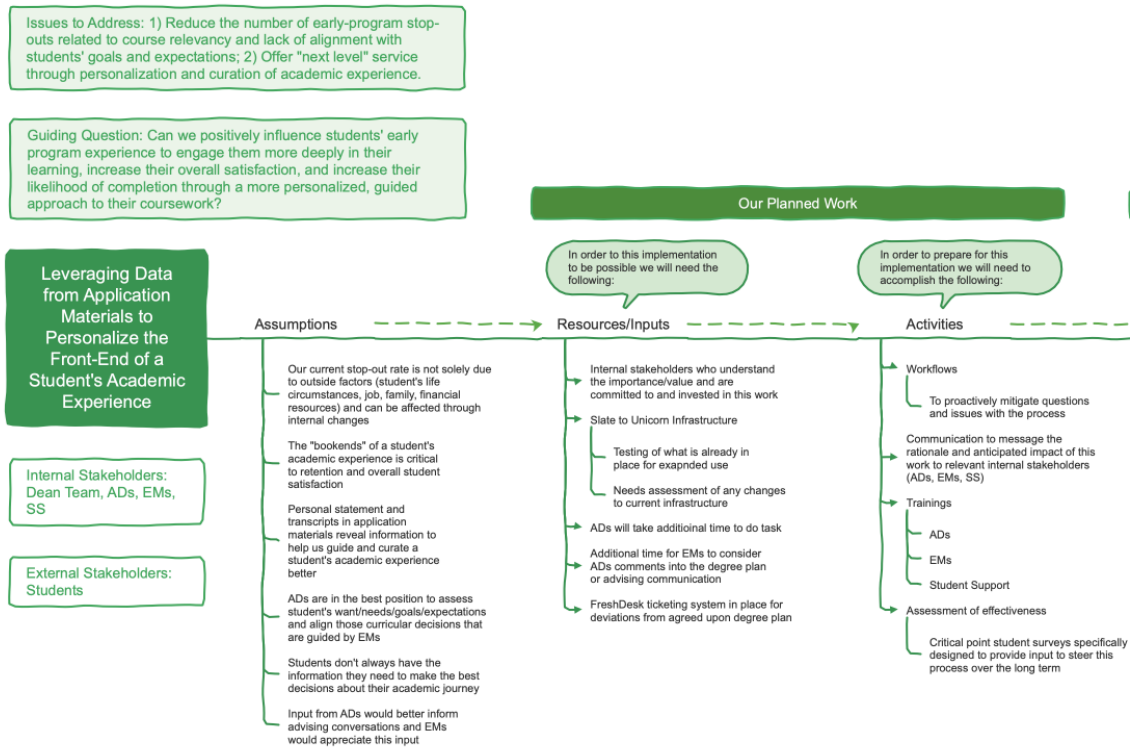

Figure 9: Logic Model Part One

Participant Discussion

There was a vigorous discussion about what was presented in the logic model, particularly the assumptions. I had anticipated that the group would spend a big portion of our time together discussing the assumptions, and I was not wrong. The Dean Team really picked those assumptions apart to justify their validity and refine them to be most accurate. What I had not anticipated is that they would want to incorporate the assumptions into the pilot to make some very overt points about the expectations and motivations for this work. I had expected that this would be a useful exercise for this group, but they found utility for articulating assumptions more broadly with the stakeholders who would be involved in this process. Once they made that determination, which was initially brought up by one participant and then almost immediately got buy-in from the others, the assumptions took on a whole different level of importance and

prominence in this process. Figure 10 shows a before and after screenshot of the assumptions for comparison.

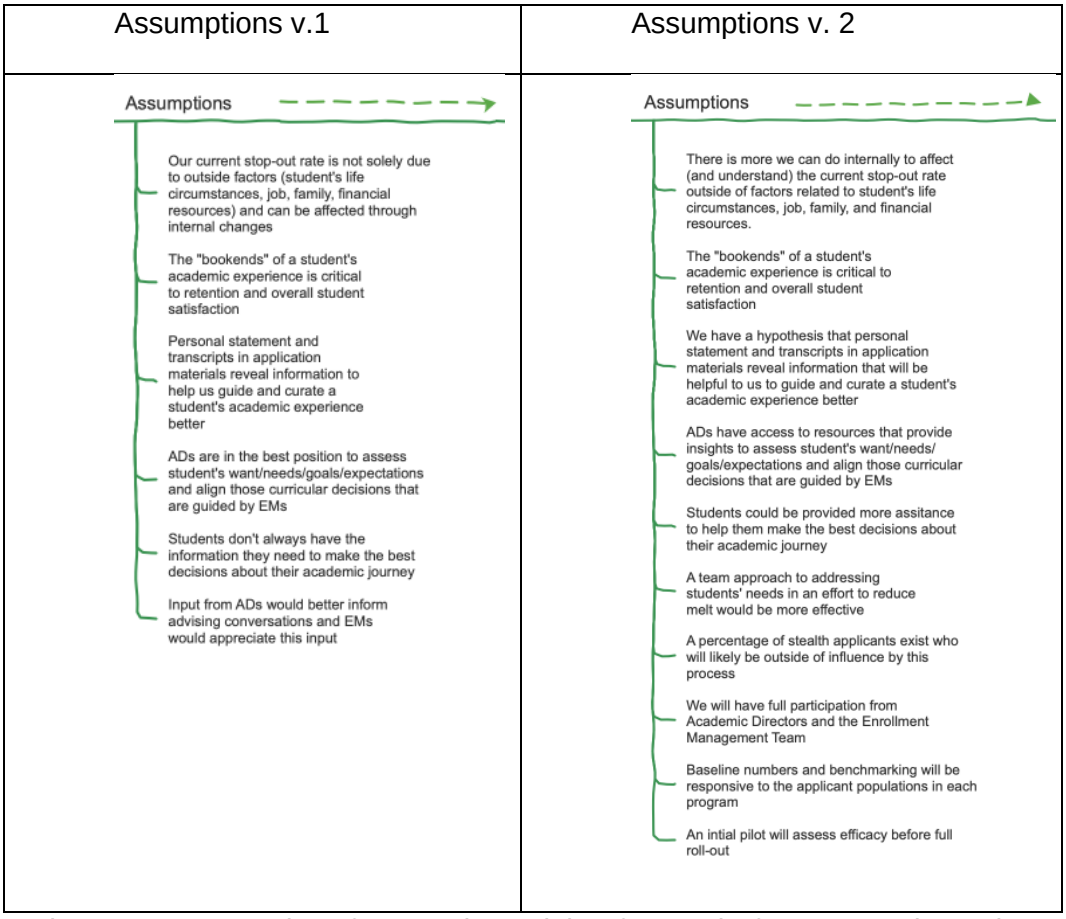

Figure 10: Assumptions from Logic Model Before and After Group Discussion

Participant B spoke up early in this session to ask where I came up with the assumptions. I responded that the assumptions were derived almost entirely from the information I gathered during the one-on-one interviews. I went on to point out specifically what information had led me to each assumption. Participants E and C talked about how many of these assumptions addressed some of the cultural issues that were viewed as impeding adoption to the systems in place to more effectively collect and use data about student experience. There was an interesting discussion about the assumption around ADs “being in the best position to assess student’s

wants/needs/goals/expectations..." with the result being to alter that assumption to "ADs have access to resources that provide insights to assess student's wants/needs/goals/expectations..." That discussion led to another discussion about how a team approach toward guiding the student's academic journey versus one that was primarily led by the academic advisor might be worth exploring. The result of that discussion was the inclusion of the assumption that states, "A team approach to addressing students' needs in an effort to reduce melt would be more effective."

The lively discussion about assumptions led right into a discussion about what benchmarks would be used to assess effectiveness. Since reducing melt, or when students enroll for a course or a program and then don't complete, was our primary outcome focus and we would be testing if using personal statements to better understand what students wanted/needed from their academic work to then work as a team to guide their journey, fully understanding our current baseline data around different melt points was critical. Watching the Dean Team in action as they sorted through what those melt points were and whether we could extract that data to show a baseline for benchmarking was fascinating. The team was really firing on all cylinders for this part of the discussion. This resulted in some significant additions to the activities part of the logic model. Figure 11 shows a comparison of the draft I had presented and changes as a result of the group conversation.

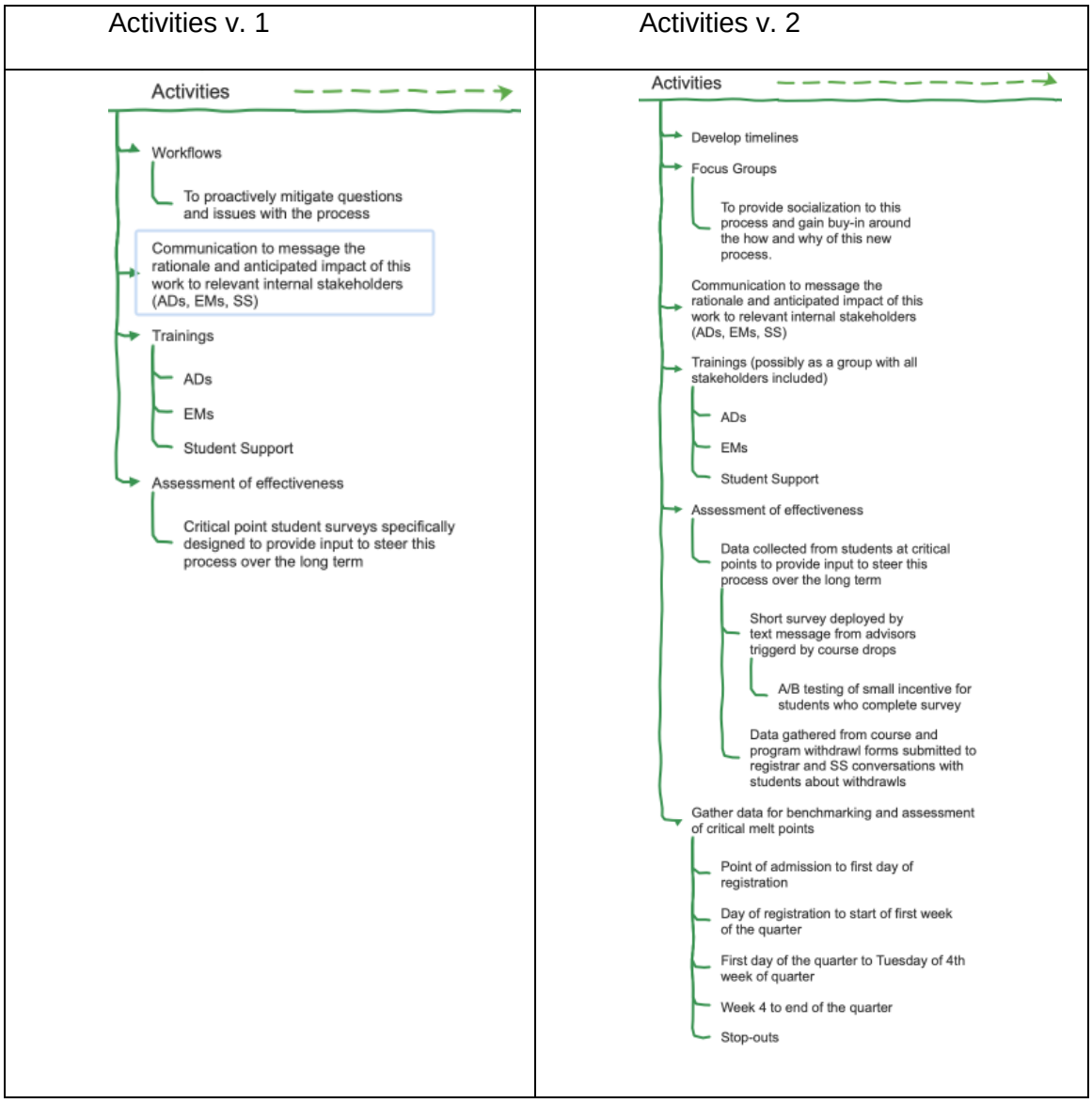

Figure 11: Activities from Logic Model Before and After Group Discussion

Also evident in v. 2 of the activities part of the logic model is how the Dean Team built upon the idea of distributing surveys to students to collect more data on if their experience was motivating them to drop from a course or a program or if this was led by outside factors (life challenges, finances, family commitments, jobs, etc.). The team decided that they could use a course drop to trigger a short text survey that deployed from the academic advisor to ask students to provide some insights as to why they had dropped a class. Through discussion they also realized that they could be more

proactive about getting data from the registrar when students withdraw from the program. Apparently, there is a form they must complete to officially withdraw but that data has not been historically gathered. With the pilot of this logic model plan there is renewed interest in trying to get that data from the registrar.

The last piece that brought about some discussion, but to a lesser degree, was the inputs/resources part of the logic model. The discussion for this part was mostly around how the Unicorn spreadsheet will be used by EMs and ways to streamline that process. I had originally thought this might be done through the FreshDesk ticketing system but, after some back and forth around what would be most efficient and what the desired outcome was of this part of the effort, the Dean Team decided that codes could be created to align with already established taxonomy to make the documentation of conversations between academic advisors and students more efficient and usable, therefore increasing the use of this data platform. Figure 12 shows the changes as a result of this discussion.

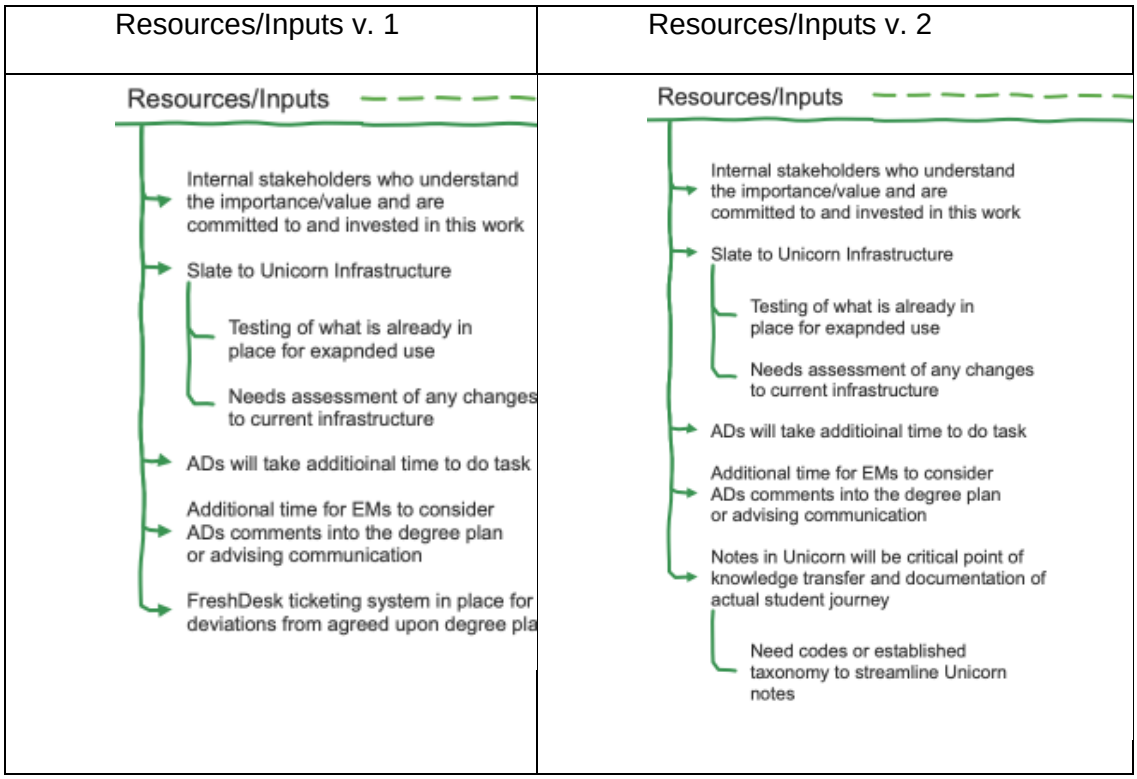

Figure 12: Resources from Logic Model Before and After Group Discussion

Process Insights

From a process standpoint, I got to witness how the Dean Team uses benchmarking and best practice to inform their approach. I also had the opportunity to see them really think through what data they would need to assess the effectiveness of this new pilot and how they could access these data. They really got into the details of executing this pilot in this group discussion. They seemed excited by the possibility of learning more about what motivates students to drop courses, specifically, so that they can narrow in on whether it is possible to have an effect on these data.

Outcomes

In addition to the changes described above in the Group Discussion section, another outcome was for me to work with a member of the data and operations team to pull together the bench marking data for each of the five melt buckets the group had

identified. That data was quite illuminating and really underscored the need to test any ideas that might influence the number of students who drop at different points in the quarter after registering or simply take a course and then do not re-enroll.

Reflection

I was extremely encouraged by the energy and momentum generated around this pilot idea in this group session. Each participant was very engaged in the process. I walked away from this meeting excited for the next steps and working toward pilot implementation.

Group Session Three

The final group session was held in a hybrid format. I was on Zoom due to testing positive for Covid-19 the morning before the session. The rest of the participants were in person in the conference room where the previous two sessions had been held. All five participants were present. The goal for this final group session was to review the remaining parts of the logic model, the Intended Results, and outline a plan for implementing the pilot.

Session Overview

I shared the updated logic model with each member of the Dean Team prior to the session. At the start of the session, I provided a summary of what was discussed in the last meeting and discussed the updates to the logic model. I then shifted the focus to the Intended Results section of the logic model (Fig. 13) which is focused on Outputs, Outcomes, and Impact.

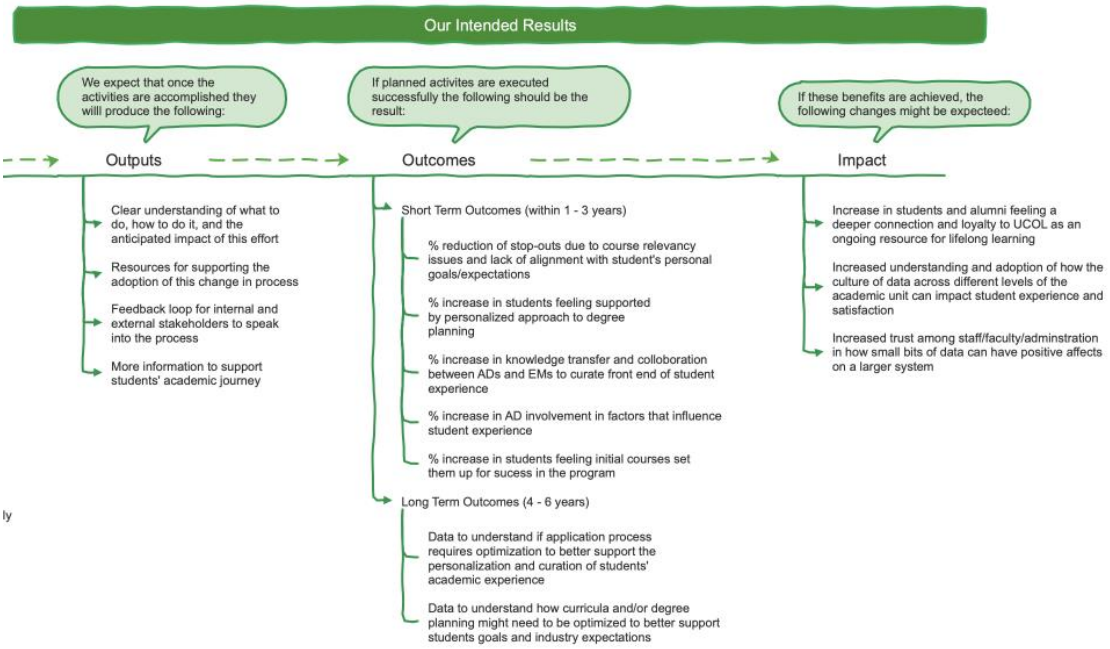

Figure 13: Intended Results from Logic Model

Participant Discussion

The discussion was almost entirely focused on the outcomes which I seemed to have missed the mark within my initial draft. This was not a huge shock to me since I went into this discussion feeling like the outcomes I had identified could be hard to measure, but I was having a challenging time identifying what would be measurable. What I learned through the discussion is that really the only short-term outcomes that we could use were around the different melt points that we had identified and were having data pulled to set those benchmarks. The other measurable data point identified was related to the comments that ADs would be putting into Slate. Since those comments will get pulled into the Unicorn spreadsheet the character count and instances of accesses the Unicorn could be measured. It was discussed that this would be a very loose but the only way to assess the effectiveness of this pilot is if the increase in Unicorn comments and use aligned with a decrease in melt percentages, a causal connection might exist.

This prompted Participant B to comment that this effort seemed like a lot of work for a negligible impact, at best. To this Participant C commented that “everything but the kitchen sink had been thrown at trying to reduce melt numbers with zero result.” Participant C went on to strongly advocate for this pilot for the simple reason that if there was even the most minuscule change that would be valuable information that could be delved further into. Participant E also seemed to feel that any information that could be gleaned from this pilot would be highly valuable.

The other main point of discussion was around the pilot – primarily, which programs we would pilot with and how the activities would be rolled out. We decided to pilot this program with the Communication Management program, which I manage, and the Organizational Leadership program, managed by one of my AD peers. The Organizational Leadership program was chosen because of its size, and because the AD does a very thorough review of applicants but does not currently engage with the Unicorn spreadsheet or use the commenting feature in Slate. A four-quarter timeline for the pilot was discussed. This would allow adequate data collection and in the following four quarters we would assess if there had been any decrease in any of the melt buckets. If yes, then an analysis of Slate comments entered and how those comments were used in the Unicorn spreadsheet would occur. If a causal relationship can be established, a full rollout to more academic programs would be launched.

Participant D left the meeting early before much of the substantive discussion. Participant A seemed on board with the direction but otherwise did not have much comment other than in support of the other academic program that had been discussed for the pilot.

Process Insights

I got the sense that some members of the Dean Team felt less engaged in this part of the process. Perhaps they felt most of the collaborative work had been accomplished in the last group session and that since this session was focused on the implementation of the pilot, which did not affect the whole group, there was not as much to contribute. It was notable to me that the participants that are most involved with the data and most committed to fostering the culture of data, based on my interpretation of the interviews, were very interested in even small learnings from this pilot while those who demonstrated less interest and investment in the internal culture of data were only interested if the result showed “big wins.”

Outcomes

Primary outcome from this group discussion were the revisions to the outcomes section of the logic model shown in figure 14. Figure 15 shows the breakdown of the Melt Buckets as determined by the Dean Team.

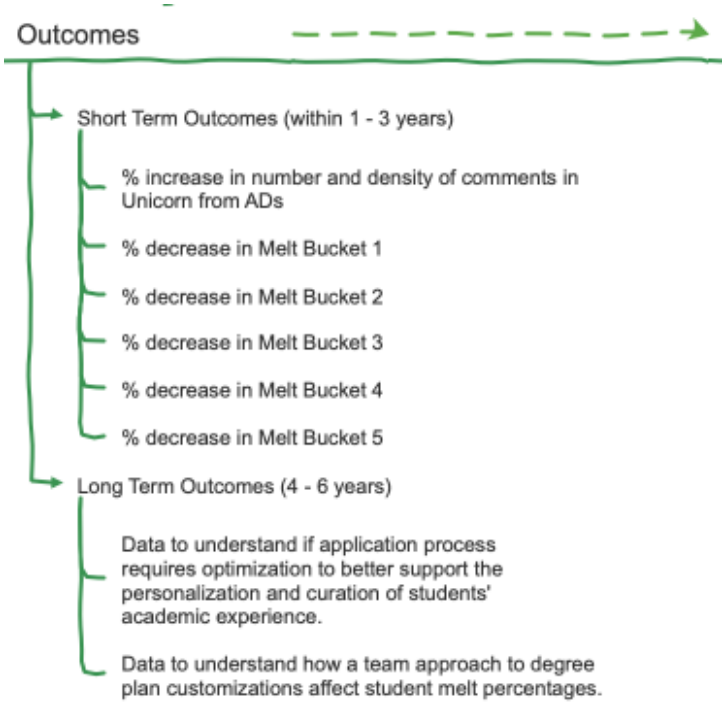

Figure 14: Outcomes from Logic Model Development

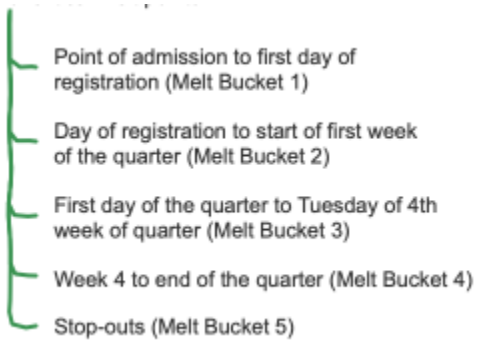

Figure 15: Breakdown of the Identified Melt Buckets

Reflection

This session was more challenging than the others for several reasons. First, as previously mentioned, I was participating via Zoom due to having tested positive for Covid-19 the morning before the group session. I wanted to be respectful of the time they had allocated for this last group session, so I opted to continue with the session even though not being with them in person created an awkward dynamic. The energy

was different this time. I could not ascertain if the vibe felt different because I was not in the room with them or for some other reason. Since I could not see all their faces, it was extremely hard for me to read their expressions and body language through the laptop computer that was being used to allow me to participate.

I followed up with my PEP for a debrief following this group session. They confirmed that the Dean Team is particularly difficult to engage with over Zoom. So, whether the difference in the energy level and engagement was entirely the result of me being on Zoom is impossible to know. I do feel that their energy for the project might have just started to wane by this meeting. Regardless, I learned in our debrief and my PEP was still feeling very motivated to see this come to fruition. In fact, they explicitly asked if I would continue to be committed to partnering to see this through even after my program evaluation was completed. Of course, I am committed to this work beyond the scope of what needs to be done to complete my dissertation.

Phase Three Summary

Phase Three consisted of three group sessions. In the first group session, nine potential opportunities to explore for building out the logic model were suggested while also sharing data from the one-on-one interviews with the group. Group Session Two presented a draft of a logic model based on one of the possibilities identified in Group Session One and solicited input from the group. As a result of incorporation of the feedback from Group Session Two, the logic model's first half (the anticipated task) was improved, clarified, and expanded in many ways. The final group meeting's purpose was to frame the action items for testing the chosen solution and decide how this effort would be evaluated. The three group meetings' main objectives were to see the Dean Team's decision-making process in action and apply that to identify and create a plan to use a

source of qualitative data generated by students that might enhance the student experience.

Of the nine opportunities presented in the first session, Opportunity A, Opportunity E, and Opportunity G were the three opportunities that piqued the Dean Team's curiosity the most. Due to the preexisting and unused infrastructure, Opportunity A received early and widespread support. Since all five members of the Dean Team had indicated interest in the need to use surveys more as a means of gathering data regarding the student experience, Opportunity E piqued their interest. Near the end of the session, it was mentioned that Opportunity G may significantly help students, but that making that process practical might be difficult.

The second group session was focused on analyzing the first half of the logic model. This group session started with a review of the Student Journey Within a Culture of Data slide and then moved into a discussion of the logic model for Opportunity A. The aim of the logic model was to give "next level" service by minimizing the number of early program dropouts (i.e., melt) through personalizing and curating the academic experience. After a lengthy discussion about the assumptions informing the logic model, the Dean Team opted to include the assumptions articulated in the logic model in the pilot to make some overt statements about the expectations and motivations for this effort. One motivation for this choice was to influence the culture of data as it related to adoption and resistance among the internal stakeholders.

It became clearer through each group session that the Dean Team's approach to the logic model development was clearly informed by benchmarking and best practices. As such, the objective of this last group session was to discuss benchmark data that would inform the remaining components of the logic model, the intended results, and lay out a strategy for carrying out the pilot. As a result, the group decided I should work with

a member of the data and operations team to compile the benchmarking data for each of the five melt buckets they had chosen. The idea was to test any theories that would have an impact on how many students drop after enrolling at various stages during the quarter or only take a course and decide not to re-enroll. Much of the third session's conversation centered on the pilot's results, which were challenging to quantify. The different melt spots that were found and the comments that ADs would be posting to Slate were the only immediate results that could be used. One participant expressed concerns that this would be a lot of labor for a negligible impact because the only way to determine whether the pilot was beneficial was through a causal relationship between the increase in Unicorn comments coinciding with a decrease in melt percentages. Alternatively, another participant argued vehemently in favor of this pilot study, for the straightforward reason that even the smallest change in melt data would provide important data that might be explored further. The pilot, the applications we would use for the pilot, and the rollout of the activities were the key topics of discussion. The third group session ended with the PEP enthusiastic and committed to the next stages and working toward pilot deployment. The final version of the full logic model can be viewed through this link.

Chapter 5: Implications and Recommendations

My initial motivations for doing this work were to better understand what the phrase “exceptional student experience” meant to the deans at SPE, how they were using data to make decisions that affected this notion of exceptional student experience, and to see if it was possible to identify a process to use one or more qualitative student-generated data sources in a way that would impact student experience. I had some assumptions going into this project. My assumptions were 1) that the Dean Team shared the same definition or perception around the idea of exceptional student experience, 2) the only formally collected qualitative data source that was informing the perception around student experience was from end-of-term course evaluations, and 3) the Dean Team were unified on the value of using the data infrastructures that had been put in place, had fully adopted the “culture of data” mindset and were actively working on gaining adoption with their respective teams. I truly did not know if they would get confirmed or debunked through the process. Interestingly, and in true constructivist form, as I set the stage to get the answers to my questions around data, student experience, and decision-making processes, in every instance, as I gained context to better understand the situation, I learned so much more about how this group makes decisions together and how they really lean on each other's expertise. My analysis led me to think how those learnings might apply to the AD group and the decision-making processes that we engage in. To follow, I divided this chapter into three main sections.

The first section is an exploration into the implication of these findings grounded in and informed by current research on the topics of organizational culture change, the importance of trust within higher education cultures, the dynamics of data cultures and data driven decision making within educational environments. To take my learnings

beyond the theoretical realm and into direct application, for each of these three topics of organizational culture change, trust within higher education cultures and data culture dynamics, I have identified conceptual models that are based on the literature and best practices. I have used the models to show how best practices and recommendations can be applied to enhance what is already going well in these areas or, in areas where my data showed gaps or opportunities for growth, the areas can be enhanced. For the second section I have provided an overview of a pilot idea that came out of my findings presentation and the group discussions with the Dean Team. As I was building out the implementation steps for this pilot, I started thinking that providing a way for the Dean Team to incorporate best practices from the literature, theories, and models explored discussed in the first section into their decision-making process, more broadly, might be more helpful than providing a pilot plan that was hyper-detailed. As such, the most substantive part of the second section includes an Implementation Considerations Map that serves as a checklist or roadmap for establishing and fostering a culture of trust around systemic changes requiring data adoption. The last section provides an analysis of how academic capitalism interplays and influences the Dean Team's assumptions and thus affects when data are used in the decision-making process. Leaning into my academic capitalist theoretical framework and the literature on the student-as-consumer mindset in higher education, I share how the SAC mindset and the increased need for data creates a vicious cycle that leads to a more transactional approach to students.

Section One: Applying Three Conceptual Models on Culture Change, Trust, And Data Use

Within minutes of the first one-on-one interview, I knew that a big focus of my findings was not going to directly relate to student experience at all. As soon as the conversation shifted to talking about the Dean Team and how that group of people works

together to think about and address issues related to students, I knew that the organizational culture was going to quickly shift to the fore. By the second interview I had a keen sense that the complexities of creating a culture of data surpass anything that I had previously considered when thinking about this work. As I got a clearer picture of how the Dean Team collaborates, I was taken with the synergy and inspired to find ways to extrapolate some of the team characteristics to other internal teams and groups that I work with. But first, I needed to better understand what is known about these topics starting with how culture change takes place within higher education.

Culture Change and Transformation in Higher Education

Although there is no lack of research on culture change, I was specifically looking for articles within higher education that were focused on internal change at the departmental level versus the institutional level. Since SPE is an applied program and all my AD peers approach their work from a practitioner mindset, I needed an article that offered ideas to put into practice and not just theory. Additionally, the use of data as an impetus for change within higher education is a rapidly evolving topic, I wanted an article that considered data heavily in the analysis and was published in the recent past. The model and six principles outlined by Quan et al. (2019) provided the perfect structure for me to think about the change happening at SPE and how we might be able to address some systemic gaps on the path toward growth in our own transformation. The six principles articulated by Quan et al. (2019) were developed through deep work with departmental action teams (DATs) which included a small number of faculty, staff, and/or students working together on a larger departmental issue. The value Quan et al (2019) found in this cross-functional team approach, bringing in a diversity of perspectives on a larger issue requiring organizational change, is one that has applicability to the SPE environment.

Figure 16 shows my adaptation of their model with the six principles they developed highlighted in the dark blue boxes. The items listed below each box show connections between the different principles with the number in the parentheses the principle that the item was aligned with in the model developed by Quam et al. (2019). Before I get into a direct comparison and analysis, there are a few things I want to mention that were compelling to me about this model as it relates to my data analysis. First, if we think back to my literature review and the relevant research about how we move toward being less transactional and provide more meaningful engagement between departments, students, and instructors, we know that partnering with students to co-construct the process is important. To me, it is very compelling that even though this article is about institutional and departmental change, the first principle is about bringing students into the process. Although I see many positive correlations between these principles and the SPE environment, this immediately jumps out as an area that we need to think strategically about as a department. Second, the continuous improvement mindset is a core value at SPE that is very much front and center to all of our work at every level. Finally, our DEI work is a tremendous focus, and we are actively weaving DEI into every facet of our culture.

Figure 16: Institutional Change Model Adapted from Quam et al. (2019). Adapted from "Designing for institutional transformation: Six principles for department-level interventions," by Quan, G.M., Corbo, J.C., Finkelstein, N.D., Pawlak, A., Falkenberg, K., Geanious, C., Ngai, C., Smith, C., Wise, S., Pilgrim, M.E. and Reinholz, D.L., (2019). Copyright American Physical Society.

In the following chart (see Table 2), I compare each best practice from the six principles and connections developed by Quam et al. (2019) that I feel are most relevant with learnings from my data collection and recommendations for how we can apply this toward growth for the ADs.

Table 2*:* Analysis of Factors in Institutional Change Model Related to SPE Work

Principle	Connection	Analysis	Recommendation
(1) Students as partners in the process.	(3) Student perspectives can disrupt pre-existing assumptions that can lead to bias in data analysis.	My interpretation of the data indicates that there is a lot of room for growth in this area. Administrators listen closely to students when there are complaints or immediate needs, particularly if they have broader implications, but we do not actively include students as "partners in our process" when we look to make organizational change. The data indicated that we base much of our analysis on assumptions so more focus on how that leads to bias would be valuable.	Critical point surveys with students would be a great first step. Occasional focus groups or more in-depth qualitative data collection from different student populations would provide more fruitful and meaningful partnerships with students.
(2) Work focuses on achieving collective positive outcomes.	(3) Data should be used to assess progress toward outcomes.	The environmental scan and interview data shows that we use data to assess outcomes on a course and curricular level. I do not believe we use data to assess progress toward student experience outcomes. To my knowledge, we do not have outcomes specific to student experience defined.	There is transparency around budget and enrollment outcomes and how data are used to progress in a positive direction toward outcomes. Clear outcomes related to indicators of positive student experience and engagement (not just instructors but everyone who is student-facing) should be established and articulated.
(3) Data collection, analysis, and interpretation inform decision-making.	(4) Productive group norms can address how evidence is used in decision-making.	Data collected during the interviews and groups sessions indicate that the Dean Team has established some group norms (even if not explicitly articulated) and that evidence is available for how data are used in decision-making. I do not think this extends out to other internal groups/teams.	Establishing norms around the expectation to show evidence of data informed decision-making would bring more accountability to other internal groups/teams. I believe in this area we lean too heavily on anecdotal data and course evaluation data which should not be extrapolated for programmatic and departmental applications.

Principle	Connection	Analysis	Recommendation
(4) Collaboration between group members is enjoyable, productive, and rewarding.	(5) A group can use iteration to continually reflect on and improve its functioning.	I saw this very clearly in the collaboration between the Dean Team. There are characteristics that the Dean Team use that can be isolated and applied to other groups/teams. SPE supports many opportunities for team and community building.	I see a lot of opportunity in establishing and articulating norms around constructive disagreement and work equity with the AD group.
(5) Continuous improvement is an upheld practice.	(6) A shared vision can help to ground a collective understandin g of what it means to "improve."	Although we have a culture of continuous improvement, the data indicated that what this means or how it is applied is influenced by the multiple realities that each department head holds about student experience and the factors that contribute to that.	Because of the multiple realities that exist in each department, I believe the idea of a shared vision should be explored as it relates to student experience. Benchmarks should be set so that we can build a collective understanding of the notion of improvement.
(6) Work is grounded in a commitment to equity, inclusion, and social justice.	(1) Change efforts need to consider differential impacts on student populations, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, to avoid reproducing inequity.	I heard a lot about this in the group sessions and feel this work is happening in different committees focused on DEI work. I think more could be done in this area when thinking about the future and the impact decisions have on student experience.	Again, hearing directly from students rather than basing assessments and decision-making on industry best practices and higher education benchmarks would be valuable.

Through my research on organizational culture change, I became particularly inspired by an article authored by Russel Lowery-Hart, president of Amarillo College. At a time when Amarillo College was experiencing debilitating budget cuts, Amarillo College implemented a radical college-wide transformation effort built around one core principle – love. With bell hooks's (2001) work, *all about love,* as a guiding force Amarillo College set out to build a new foundation through a redefining of their values, shifting

how they communicated as an institution, listening to students, and supporting faculty and staff with professional development. All their efforts were driven by a “data democratization” (Lowery-Hart, 2022, p. 8) whereby all employees could view data and respond with innovative ideas, questions, etc. By bringing everyone, employees and students, into the conversation Amarillo College was able to successfully adopt a culture of care that translated into higher enrollments and increased employee satisfaction (Lowery-Hart, 2022).

Trust and Culture

The landscape in higher education is getting increasingly competitive. As enrollments decline and institutions move toward a more consumerist mindset, there is a stronger emphasis on building trust and loyalty; not just with students and faculty but also internally between staff, administrators, and leadership (Dzimińska et al., 2018). I was surprised in the first one-on-one interview how much trust among the Dean Team came up. I decided to explore this more as I engaged in the next four interviews and learned that, in fact, trust is seen as a critical and essential component to the successful collaboration of the Dean Team. Further research on the topic of trust within higher education settings led me to think about all the implications of the presence of trust or the lack of trust. An analysis of a variety of definitions of trust led Dzimińska et al. (2018) to assign the following requisite attributes to trust as it relates to building a “quality culture” (Dzimińska et al., 2018, p. 2) within higher education institutions:

- Trust can only be earned, not sold, bought or transferred;
- Trust as a relation is very fragile, it takes a long time to build and is destroyed very easily;

- Trust includes the expectation that an organisation [sic] will not behave in opportunistic manner and that it will deliver its products at the quality expected by the consumer;
- Trust involves the belief of the engaged parties that the organisation [sic] will act with integrity and that it will be reliable (Dzimińska et al., 2018, p. 4).

Dzimińska et al. (2018) analyzed trust in the context of its relationship between faculty and students, students and institutions, and faculty and institutions, looking at how trust affects the development of a “quality culture.” According to Dzimińska et al. (2018), “Quality in higher education is declining, and colleges and universities are not adequately preparing students for life in a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive world” (p. 2). They saw trust as core to the development of a quality culture. As a solution they proposed a Trust-Based Quality Culture model as a framework for HEIs to apply to different scenarios.

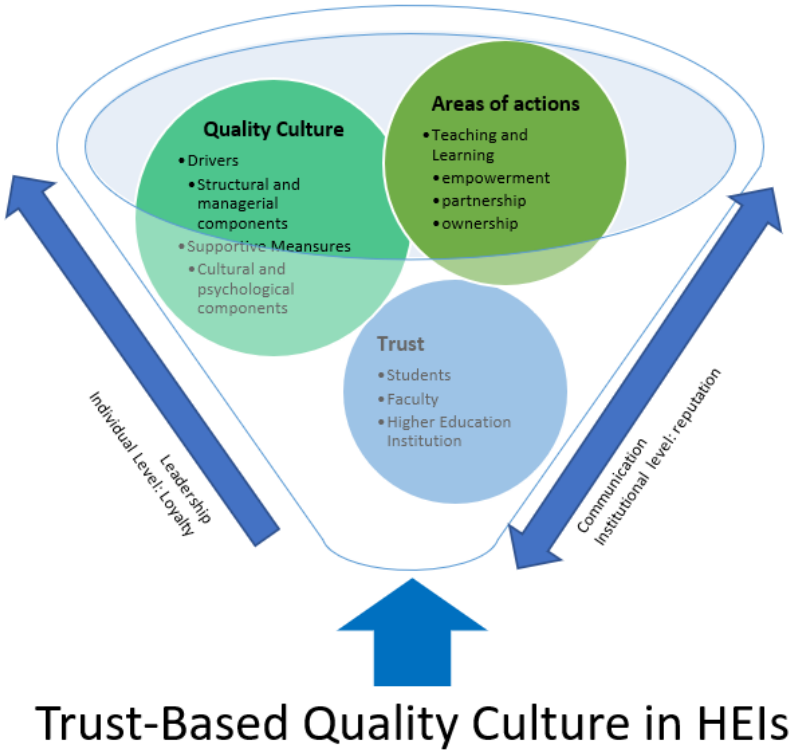

Figure 17: Trust-based quality culture model.
Adapted from " Trust-Based Quality Culture Conceptual Model for Higher Education Institutions," by M. Dziminska, J. Fijalkowska, and L. Sulkowski, 2018. Copyright MDPI.

There were a few aspects of this model that I found especially compelling for application in the SPE setting. Since I found trust to be a foundational element leading to greater collaboration, candor, and productivity for the Dean Team, I liked that this model had trust as the foundation for building a culture that would result in empowerment, partnership, and ownership around teaching in learning. As I focus on the AD group, my area of influence, I felt that there was not a foundation of trust within that group. I was interested to look more closely at what I learned from the Dean Team related to trust and thinking more expansively about how this could apply to the AD group. Further, one of my secondary hypotheses was grounded in students taking more ownership over their learning as a vehicle to greater satisfaction around their experience. I was interested in the suggestion by the authors that the pathway to greater student engagement is

through creating a quality culture based on trust. Since I was looking at this as a way to apply what I learned about the value of trust among the Dean Team to the AD group, looking at this as a way to understand if the internal trust might then translate to a culture that seeps out into the student learning environment and has an impact on student experience that translates to great loyalty is interesting. As a communications professional, I appreciate that communication with different stakeholder groups was an important feature of the trust-based model. I would also posit that communication around our data systems and processes along the way had been lacking so shining a light on that aspect through this model was intentional. The “drivers of change” part of this model was where I felt there was the greatest room for impact with the AD group when thinking about the data gathered from the Dean Team. Table 3 shows my analysis of the SPE environment aligned with the best practices identified by Dzimińska et al. (2018) as informed by their review of literature.

Table 3: Analysis of Elements of Trust-Based Quality Culture Model

Element	Components	Analysis
Trust as Foundation	"Relationships should be facilitated and supported, i.e., through establishing appropriate channels of communication for each type of relation and a common goal that unites various stakeholders in joint efforts." (Dzimińska et al., 2018, p. 12)	The Dean Team's trust was supported by an open and regular line of candid communication. I believe that communication around the roll-out of different initiatives, particularly related to implementing data systems and processes could be improved through the DAT concept to get more stakeholders involved. We also need to be sure organizational goals are commonly shared goals that are clearly articulated.
Supportive Measures of Change	- common value system developed and adopted collaboratively and then respected by the academic community; - understanding and acceptance of the fact that quality improvement is a continuous process; - commitment and an openness attitude to change; - cooperation in teams for improvement projects.	When I looked at the lessons learned through my analysis of the data from the Dean Team and what I know of the AD group, this was the area where I saw the most potential for growth. Like the Dean Team, the AD group also has multiple realities based on their programmatic perspective. We have established SPE core values but a review of those through the lens of these multiple realities might be worthwhile. I do not believe we have a commitment to change or an open attitude around data, particularly among the AD group. My experience with the AD group has been that cooperation around improvement initiatives is limited.

Dzimińska et al. (2018) stated that "Engaging students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century" (p. 13). Adopting that statement as a core tenet for the recommendations that follow, I will look to apply the authors' suggestions, based on

their review of literature on areas of action, to the culture within the AD group. These recommendations were based on leveraging my interpretation of the interview data and group session data, overlaid with the best practices around building organizational trust that translates to an improved teaching and learning experience.

The authors maintain that for “quality culture” to flourish in teaching and learning, educational processes must include three things: Partnership, empowerment, and ownership (Dzimińska et al., 2018). A partnership method demands belief that all educational process participants are equal contributors. Partnership-building efforts included promoting cooperation by creating multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder teams. One example provided by Dzimińska et al. (2018) is Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Finland. Laurea University created an educational paradigm called Learning by Developing (LbD). With the LbD framework, the teacher's job shifted from lecturing to leading multidimensional-networked activities. Laurea treated students as junior coworkers who work to co-produce competencies through “networked collaboration” (Dzimińska et al., 2018, p. 13). Although the LbD framework would be challenging to implement in the SPE environment where nearly all courses are taught by adjunct faculty, it was an interesting framework to think about in the context of collaboration and co-produced competencies between ADs, our LX team, and instructors. Certainly, efforts like this could translate to greater trust through partnership which might have a trickle-down effect with students. The second requisite factor to “quality culture” was ownership. According to the authors, stakeholders need to feel they can alter the teaching and learning environment to better meet the educational objectives. One point the authors make that I saw as relevant and applicable to the environment at SPE was having all stakeholders view teaching and learning as a collaboration. We have already been trying to implement this change through a move towards a specialty model in the LXD team

and encouraging more individual collaboration with instructors. But this change has not come easily. The FreshDesk ticketing system was perceived as being bureaucratic and impersonal, precisely the opposite of the goal which was to give instructors more ability to make changes in their courses while also being able to track those changes to maintain academic quality, effective pedagogy, and rigor. As the authors suggest, empowerment is essential. Both ADs and instructors must feel they have some room to make decisions within their areas of competency.

To build a culture that fosters empowerment, partnership, and ownership over teaching and learning processes, incentives and support are necessary. Empowerment, participation, and ownership should be evident in bottom-up quality culture-enhancement activities and projects. According to EUA's Quality Culture Project, "centralised [sic] strategies ensure the uniformity of efforts and their compatibility with the institutional mission yet are less inclined to generate ownership for quality processes on any other level than the management's" (Dzimińska et al., 2018, p. 14). The authors stressed that over-formalizing support structures was risky. I believe this was where our data processes went awry. They were implemented to streamline processes, but they undermined the culture of trust because they were perceived as removing autonomy and ownership thus creating a feeling that both ADs and instructors were being disempowered through the implementation. My interpretation of the data from the one-on-one interviews with the Dean Team showed signs of gaps in adoption which, even on the smaller scale of just those five people, was indicative of the inconsistency in the adoption of these processes among the AD group.

The final piece to this model related to communication and leadership. The authors suggested that adopting this model was likely to “trigger the need for increased communication in universities and engaged, professional leadership in the process of

introducing quality-oriented changes" (Dzimińska et al., 2018, p. 14). Competent leadership and excellent communication create and sustain quality culture. The leadership at SPE is competent but communication as data systems and processes have been implemented has been lacking. As the authors explain, quality-oriented improvements need continual communication to calm people's worries, explain reasoning, and defend actions. Further, transparency helps stakeholders understand and trust these decisions being made. The communication recommendations were to start with persuading stakeholders who benefited from the changes, communicate with a focus on unifying those who were likely to oppose or resist, and lead by example as a way of increasing credibility and acceptance of change. Informal and low-threshold communication were also beneficial practices. Communication about initiatives should be respectful, open to constructive feedback, and willing to acknowledge errors (Dzimińska et al., 2018).

Data Use

The model I chose as a way to better understand what I learned about the Dean Team's use of data and how we can look at opportunities for growth in this area stemmed from research done in the K-12 education space. There were surprising lessons to learn from the recent research on how data were used in other areas of education, particularly around how and when data use was valuable to the outcomes. Data use inherently implies "a number of processes, conditions, and contexts" (Coburn & Turner, 2011, p. 174) as well as "requires that the user interpret the data and construct implications for next steps" (Coburn & Turner, 2011, p. 174) and involves "power and politics" (Coburn & Turner, 2011, p. 174). The consideration of all these elements in the development of a model meant to "show how data use interventions interact with... data use processes in ways that have consequences for student learning" (Coburn & Turner,

2011, p. 174) seemed relevant to this evaluation given my findings around the depth of data that is available but underused.

With the “process of data use” central to their research, Coburn and Turner (2011) defined this data use process as “what actually happens when individuals interact with assessments, test scores, and other forms of data in the course of their ongoing work” (p. 175). At SPE, our data exists in the “other forms” part of that definition but for the purpose of this analysis, I still found that definition relevant with the emphasis on what the user does with the data they engage with in doing their jobs on a day-to-day basis. With the current data systems in place at SPE, there is an expectation for ADs to use data as a part of their everyday jobs. Coburn and Turner reference cognitive and social psychology research when highlighting that at its core, data use is predicated on the acknowledgement that data exists in order for it to be used. In other words, people must recognize the data before they can start to make meaning from it. In their research, Coburn and Turner looked at the full spectrum of data users to understand how people with varying levels of comfort with data interacted with the data they had access to. They also looked at the interconnectivity between power relations and data use, which is relevant to my analysis of how data are or are not being used in decision-making processes. To follow I provide a summary and discussion for each part of the model.

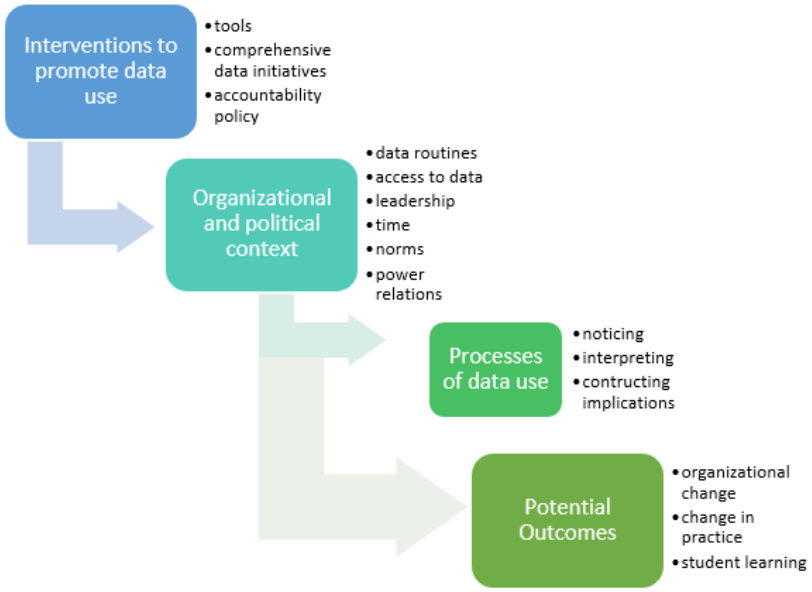

Figure 18: Framework of Data Use.
Adapted from "Research on Data Use: A Framework and Analysis," by C. E. Coburn and E.O. Turner, 2011. Copyright Taylor and Francis Group.

Processes of Data Use

Coburn and Turner (2011) stated that interpretation is crucial to data usage, affecting how people recognize data, make sense of it, and grasp its consequences for action. They argued that data use and interpretation was very personal and social. “Interpretive processes—noticing, interpreting, and constructing implications for action—are shaped by individual beliefs, knowledge, and motivation and are influenced by the nature and patterns of social interaction” (Coburn & Turner, 2011, p. 177). According to cognitive psychologists, people are more likely to integrate new data into already established beliefs; they look for data to confirm what they think they already know (Coburn & Turner, 2011). “This self-affirmation bias may lead to a tendency to discount evidence that raises questions about the efficacy of past practices or performance” (Coburn & Turner, 2011, p. 179).

The authors' findings around the impact of social interaction and how those social interactions affect how people think about, use, and interpret data were especially relevant to my findings from the interviews and group sessions. I found that with the Dean Team, the deliberation around data while role-playing different scenarios allowed those who were less knowledgeable or comfortable with the data to engage in the data use process. Based on the one-on-one interviews, I did not see evidence that some of the Dean Team members would be using or thinking about data in the same way if these small group interactions among the Dean Team did not exist. The AD group tends to talk about the data processes, or the impact of these processes on their work, but, from my experience, does not talk about the actual data and how it is being used.

Organizational and Political Context

Coburn and Turner (2011) maintained that data use is influenced by organizational factors that are, or could be, shaped by the leadership's approach to "organizational routines" (p. 180) and norms around data use. Data routines are critical to data use because they bring "a particular configuration of people together around a particular set of data and structure their interactions in specific ways" (Coburn & Turner, 2011, p. 181). Regardless of whether the data routines are structured in formal or informal ways, the regular contextualization of data within a group setting is important for meaning making and knowledge sharing which has been shown to impact data use and "negotiations... over the implications of the data for action" (Coburn & Turner, 2011, p. 181). Although I do not think the Dean Team was thinking about their bi-weekly Ops Meetings as a data routine, it absolutely served that purpose. I believe they were thinking of Ops meetings as problem solving and troubleshooting but in every way what I experienced in these meetings fits Coburn and Turners definition of the purpose, value, and structure of a data routine. Based on the authors' research and recommendations

through their model, which could have significant implications as I look toward applying this to the AD group, establishing organizational norms around the data routines was crucial (Coburn & Turner, 2011). This is where leadership, power, and authority come into play. Norms around data use and data routines need to be established as an expectation but, as my interview data showed, that brought up considerations around time and resources. Interestingly, to weave in findings from the earlier section on culture and trust, the authors pointed to the importance of creating a “climate of trust and risk-taking" (Coburn & Turner, 2011, p. 184) when engaging in this work.

Interventions to Promote Data Use

Within the context of the K-12 school system, Coburn and Turner (2011) talked about interventions that span from tools meant to encourage data use to protocols for interaction around data use to accountability policies which could include rewards and consequences for data use, and, finally, professional development. At SPE, we have a team dedicated to building tools and dashboards as interventions to support data use. However, the authors pointed out the negative unintended consequences when technological tools for data use are created but users do not know how to use them or do not find them useful. In essence they have the opposite effect (Coburn & Turner, 2011). When this situation arises, as it seemed to have at SPE, protocols and norms for data use and knowledgeable people to facilitate the interaction with the data use groups as data routines are established is essential. Professional development opportunities to support data use are recommended. Recently, the data team at SPE started hosting regular meetings called Data Dine and Dash(Board) where the team picks a data dashboard (i.e. one of SPE’s primary data use tools) to explain and engage in discussion over the lunchtime hour. These sessions are open to anybody at SPE and allow for better understanding about the data that is available and how it can be useful. I

see innovative ideas like this as providing both some semblance of a data routine, albeit on a larger organizational scale, while also establishing some protocols, norms, building awareness and familiarity, and engaging in some professional development. Unfortunately, as is often the case, those who need it most might not attend as these are optional sessions. How these sessions are promoted and assigned value from the leadership in each department within SPE might affect participation just as it does the overall data use and adoption.

Potential Outcomes

Coburn and Turner (2011) focused on how the implications of data use affect outcomes within the areas of organizational change, change in practice, and student learning. Within the outcomes identified related to organizational change, it was relevant to this program evaluation to think about the authors' findings around the transformative potential of data routines.

> These routines, and the degree to which they focused on data that showed what was actually happening rather than impressions, fostered norms of self-reflection and openness to data. Iterative data use routines also provided information that enabled continued adaptation of their efforts, leading to substantial organizational change over the long term. (Coburn & Turner, 2011, p. 193)

The outcome related to "change in practice" shed some light on how the implications of applying elements of this model to the AD group might bring about positive change. The authors pointed to research that shows that data use routines foster deeper relationships between administrators and can have "important consequences for teacher practice" (Coburn & Turner, 2011, p. 194). Although, teacher practice in a K-12 education setting is quite different from the adjunct instructor practice in the higher education setting, I believe the implications of structured conversations around data use within the AD group could lead to similar positive outcomes with adjunct

instructors as the collective sophistication with data interpretation about students' learning experiences increases.

Implications Models Summary

I set out initially to better understand what "extraordinary student experience" meant to SPE deans, how they were using data to make decisions that affected this notion, and how to use one or more qualitative student-generated data sources to effect student experience. As I gathered context, I saw how this group makes decisions collectively and relies on each other's expertise. I wondered how what I learned about this group's process could be applied to the AD group and our decision-making procedures.

Through an exploration into conceptual models for addressing organizational culture change, trust in higher education environments, and data use, I looked for how best practices and recommendations can improve these areas for SPE. The model and principles presented by Quan, et al. (2019) provided a framework for me to think about SPE's development and how to solve systemic shortcomings that I have seen within the AD group. I found alignment with research provided in my literature review and the Quam, et al. (2019) focus promotes co-construction and putting students center in this work. The concepts presented in the model and SPE's continuous improvement ethos match. More work should be done to engage students as partners in the process because the research showed this can disrupt pre-existing beliefs that can lead to bias in data analysis.

The Dean Team's success depends on trust, and Dzimińska et al. (2018) identified the traits that build trust and are needed to develop a "quality culture" in higher education institutions. Dzimińska et al. (2018) developed a Trust-Based Quality Culture

model which emphasizes stakeholder communication and includes setting up channels of communication for each relationship and a shared aim to unite stakeholders. Dzimińska et al. (2018) believes that engaging students and staff as partners in learning and teaching is one of the most pressing concerns in higher education today. Collaboration, empowerment, and ownership are essential for quality education.

The data use model by Coburn and Turner (2011) was used to understand the Dean Team's data use and identify development potential. Data use, defined by Coburn and Turner (2011) as "what actually happens when individuals interact with assessments, test results, and other forms of data in the course of their continuing work," (p. 175) is crucial to this study given the depth of available but unused data. Coburn and Turner study how people with different data comfort levels use the data they have. Centralized strategies ensure uniformity and conformity with the institutional mission but do not foster excellent process ownership. Data procedures streamlined operations but damaged trust, disempowering ADs and instructors.

Data use could affect organizational change, a change in practice, and alter student development, according to Coburn and Turner (2011). Data use routines promote self-reflection and data transparency and provide knowledge that aids in adoption of new systems and processes. This shows that structured AD group data use conversations may be beneficial.

Section Two: Pilot Implementation

The purpose of the three group sessions with the Dean Team was to develop a logic model for a pilot project that would address one of the issues identified and serve as a potential solution to an issue that came up in the one in one-on-one interviews as a need that would benefit from qualitative student generated data. I had originally proposed nine possible opportunities to explore with the Dean Team for this pilot. The

opportunity that we were able to build consensus around involved the process the ADs engage in when reviewing new application materials. Applicants submit personal statements as written documents that go into our CRM system, Slate. Personal statements are reviewed by ADs, but the information contained in the personal statements is not shared with the team or used to guide the students' academic experience. Slate contains a commenting area where ADs can include notes when accepting or denying admission to applicants. Data systems are already set up for the comments that get put into Slate to pull over into an Excel spreadsheet that serves as a warehouse of information about all our students. We call that Excel spreadsheet the Unicorn. Ideally, the Unicorn is used by ADs and EMs to share information about interactions with students and to track students' history and future plans in the program. The one-on-one interviews revealed insights on how Slate could be used more effectively, through the commenting area, to shape students' experiences based on goals, motivations, and barriers articulated in their personal statements. In the group sessions, the Dean Team found this idea most appealing for the pilot because it involved systems that were already in place and being underutilized. If this pilot were successful, full implementation of this new process across all the academic programs would ultimately involve two groups of people, ADs and EMs, that have had sporadic adoption of the data systems. The implications of this pilot could influence not just how the qualitative student data in the application materials informs their academic journey, but also could have positive effects on the organizational culture around data use.

Pilot Overview

Through the process of building the logic model the Dean Team created an exhaustive list of assumptions to guide the pilot. The assumptions (Fig. 10) serve several purposes. First, the assumptions address the rationale for the pilot. The

assumptions also lay the foundation for a set of expectations and norms for this pilot, which is important when thinking about full roll-out to all the academic programs. The Dean Team discussed that they would want these assumptions to be clear as this was presented to ADs and EMs, during both the pilot and the full roll-out stage, should we get to that.

After defining the assumptions related to the pilot the group identified resources (Fig. 12), most of which were already in place. A substantial portion of group session two was focused on how this pilot's effectiveness would be assessed. That conversation inspired the idea to gather data around the different points when students drop either the course(s) they are registered for or drop from the program completely. We call this action, where students drop from courses or the program, “melt.” The Dean Team identified five points, Melt Points, where data could be gathered to determine starting benchmarks prior to the launch of the pilot and then serve as five points of assessment for if the ADs comments in Slate were influencing student experience. The Dean Team’s thought process was that if students were given more personalized guidance on their academic path through the program, they would be more likely to persist until graduation. In the case where personal statements reveal potential barriers to learning, ADs could provide comments to EMs to help students take courses that might set them up for success later in the program. For example, career-switchers are new to the field of study and might benefit from more foundational core courses before taking concentration courses that assume some work experience. With more guidance these students might feel more prepared, less overwhelmed, and be less likely to drop. With data benchmarks identified for the five different Melt Points, we were ready to move toward the pilot.

There were other assessment points discussed among the Dean Team and how that information could be gathered. The Dean Team decided to incorporate text (SMS)

surveys when students drop a course that would come from their advisor to gather data on their reason for dropping. They also decided to try two different messaging options, known as A/B testing, one with an incentive for responding and one without. This allows them to test the difference in response rate to see if an incentive to respond to the SME survey had an effect on the response rate. Finally, they realized through the discussion that students are asked to provide a reason on the withdrawal form when they drop out of the program completely. The registrar's office has confirmed that we can get access to that data so that data will inform the benchmark data for Melt Point 5.

With the logic model complete, the primary focus for the next phase was developing a plan to implement the pilot based on the activities that were identified. The implementation plan needed to incorporate learnings from the data analysis and best practices from the models explored in the implementation section. The goal of the pilot, as articulated by the Dean Team, was to see if any change in melt percentage results from the efforts to guide the students' academic experiences more based on information presented in their personal statements.

Implementation Considerations Map

The Implementation Considerations Map is a visual that I developed to synthesize what I learned from each of the three models discussed in the previous section and to serve as a checklist of things to consider from a trust, culture, and data use perspective when piloting or launching a new project. I wanted to go beyond this pilot's specifics to create something that incorporated all I have learned along the way for application to projects that will be implemented in the future. The purpose of the Implementation Considerations Map is to provide a useable, research-based framework to consider key aspects of trust-building, culture change, data use, and assessment protocols that will aid in the adoption of new implementation initiatives. There are four

quadrants included on the map. Each quadrant represents my interpretation of the necessary considerations from the three models (trust, culture, data use) plus an assessment protocols component that, through the group sessions building a logic model with the Dean Team, was identified as a priority for any new initiatives.

My intention was for the Implementation Considerations Map to have broad application beyond the pilot. But to show its use in action, I have taken the next step in the process to show how the map would be used to identify gaps that need to be addressed for the proposed pilot. Click here to view the full map for the pilot project. The outer layer shows responses specific to the pilot project. The grey boxes show how these considerations have been addressed and where there are gaps or opportunities to factor in the recommended considerations from each model. The grey boxes serve to provide the framework for the Pilot Plan.

The Implementation Considerations Map has been shared with my PEP and excitement around how this has been used has already been expressed. My hope is that this map will be used by the Dean Team, and possible their department leaders, to help lay a foundation of trust, collaboration, inclusive culture, and data protocols at the onset of new projects that involve data to improve adoption and use of these initiatives.

Analysis of Assumptions

I have learned so much from this process of collecting data, analyzing the data, exploring models and best practices to help me understand and apply my findings on a deeper level, and by working with my PEP, a leader who is passionate about data and addressing issues related to cultural change. As I conclude this chapter on the implications of my work, to follow is an analysis of the operating assumptions that I believe are affecting the Dean Team's prioritization of data and my recommendations based on my interpretation of the data and my evaluation of the implications.

Industry Best Practices Apply Broadly to Our Student Population

The Dean Team's decisions were heavily based on best practices from a variety of various sources. They also leveraged data to guide or support their decisions. However, I did not see as much evidence of them using best practices and data together to where one was validating or challenging the other. There seemed to be an assumption that best practices would apply to our population of students and decisions were made based on that assumption until proven otherwise. The data in many cases was used in retrospect to confirm or reject decisions that were made based on best practices. I saw evidence that when best practices did not prove to be the answer data was factored in to understand why. Data played a part in the decision-making process, but I did not see it as interwoven with the decision-making but more adjacent to the decision-making process. Bringing data into the process earlier, and by considering different data sources that might tell more of the story behind a given scenario, the Dean Team could start to implement best practices that are designed to match the experiences our students have or want to have through their academic journey.

Informal Anecdotal Data Does Not Warrant a Process

The amount of information that exists in conversations that are had between students and different members of the enrollment management team is extensive. SPE operates on a "high touch" advising model which means students are strongly encouraged to have a conversation with their advisor prior to registering for the upcoming quarter. The academic advisor is also considered to be the students' first point of contact if they run into any issues with their course, instructor, assignments, etc. In essence, academic advisors serve as the default career counselors, life coaches, and academic experience managers throughout each term. Advisors hear more about students' experiences in the program than anybody else at SPE. If issues that arise

cannot be resolved relatively easily with the instructors or advisors, then they get elevated to the AD or even sometimes directly to the associate deans or dean. The EM team has been trained up on how to use the Unicorn as a knowledge sharing and archiving tool for information about students but much of the student experience data does not get captured unless it becomes a bigger issue at which time the details might get submitted via FreshDesk. Several of the participants mentioned in the interviews that they felt the information they needed to make decisions was adequately relayed through team meetings and other conversations around the office. Participants pointed to bandwidth issues as the reason these data are not captured more formally. The assumption exists that the EM team members' contextualization of students' experiences is valid enough to use for decision-making purposes. I did not hear much consideration for how an individual's contextualization of these stories might create bias and misrepresentation of the experience students are having. There also seems to be an assumption that individual stories can be turned into generalizable data affecting the decision-making process related to student experience. In the second group session with the Dean Team, this exact issue was discussed. One solution that came up was to assign codes for a list of the most commonly used comments related to student experience. That way, instead of having to write it all out, the EM member could use codes to summarize data they received from students that might be informative to capture.

Data Infrastructure Implies Adoption

As I have already described, over the last five years SPE has undergone a tremendous effort to put robust data infrastructures and data integration processes for different departments to make use of the data. An assumption that came into sharp focus during the group sessions was around how just because the infrastructure is in

place to use the data does not mean the people will use the data or adopt the processes put in place for that purpose. At one point it was mentioned that the data infrastructures had been built specifically to address articulated needs by certain departments, yet the systems were not being used. It was in that moment that I realized how much more must be factored into the equation to make a data culture work successfully and effectively. This discovery led me to more analysis and through deeper exploration into the model of cultural transformation I learned that for adoption to happen there needs to be increased efforts put toward trust-building and ongoing supportive and transparent communication. It is a lengthy process to build a culture where people have the knowledge to use the data in a meaningful way.

Small Wins Are Not Worth the Effort

In the last group session as the Dean Team was discussing potential outcomes of the pilot a comment was made about how this was going to be a lot of work for a potentially minor change. That comment inspired an interesting discussion among the group about the importance of acknowledging small wins through data. When data are being used to understand the value of making a bigger scale change, a small shift can show there is potential and, therefore, justification to explore further. My interpretation of the discussion was that the bigger the issue, the harder it has been to affect a change, the more the slightest shift in the data could be indicative of a new direction to explore. There seemed to be an assumption among several members of the group that if the effort was not going to produce a large quantitative or financial change then it was not worth engaging in. This assumption could have a significant impact on how a team approaches their work related to data and the support they have from leadership.

Data Has Context in a Silo

Recognizing that many of SPE's data infrastructures were put into place during the COVID-19 pandemic when all employees were working remotely, it is not surprising that adequate attention was not given to creating spaces where people could share about their experiences with the data systems and processes in a collaborative way. The models that I explored brought to the forefront that data adoption is personal and heavily influenced by one's social environment. Perceptions of data use and adoption are critical and those are shaped by the community. Establishing data routines that weave data into people's work and allow people to reflect and share their experiences is an important part of the process. At SPE many people did not understand what they were supposed to do with the data and how it could help them do their jobs. It was perceived as just one more thing they needed to do without an understanding of why and what the benefits were. There was an assumption that people would understand the value of and make meaning with the data but without the community in place to express concerns, challenges, fear, and even successes, the data did not have context for many people.

Section Three: How Academic Capitalism Influences Assumptions

Academic capitalism (AC) is rooted in the idea that universities should function more like businesses, with an emphasis on efficiency, productivity, and profitability. This shift in thinking has been driven by a number of factors including declining public funding for higher education and the growing importance of rankings and reputation in a highly competitive marketplace (Chow & Leung, 2016). SPE has increasingly used data tools to identify at-risk students, predict enrollment trends, and optimize resource allocation but, with AC as my theoretical framework, I sought to understand how AC influences the Dean Team's assumptions around data and their decision-making process. Through the AC lens I will analyze the tension between the increase in efficiencies and productivity a

data-driven approach is thought to provide with concerns present in the literature about how the commodification of students reduces education to a purely transactional relationship.

Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) synthesized scholarly work from Slaughter and Leslie (1997), Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), Slaughter and Cantwell (2012), and Cantwell and Kauppinen (2014) to bring the key concepts of the theory of academic capitalism into a framework that I found useful for my analysis. Sigahi and Saltorato (2020) identified five key concepts that are core to AC: New circuits of knowledge, new funding streams, intermediating organizations, interstitial organizations, and extended managerial capacity. Figure 19 shows each of these five conceptual aspects of AC and the connection with academic products, departments, and services within the context of the environment at SPE. My analysis focuses on the Extended Managerial Capacity aspect of the framework, which is depicted in green in my graphic. In the Theory of Academic Capitalism framework identified by Sigahi and Saltorato (2020), the notion of extended managerial capacity is positioned as external vendors and partner relationships outside of the university environment. Because SPE as an academic unit essentially functions as an AC interstitial for the Mountain University, I have adapted the framework to be focused on the internal departments and related activities that support the extended managerial capacity aspect of this framework.

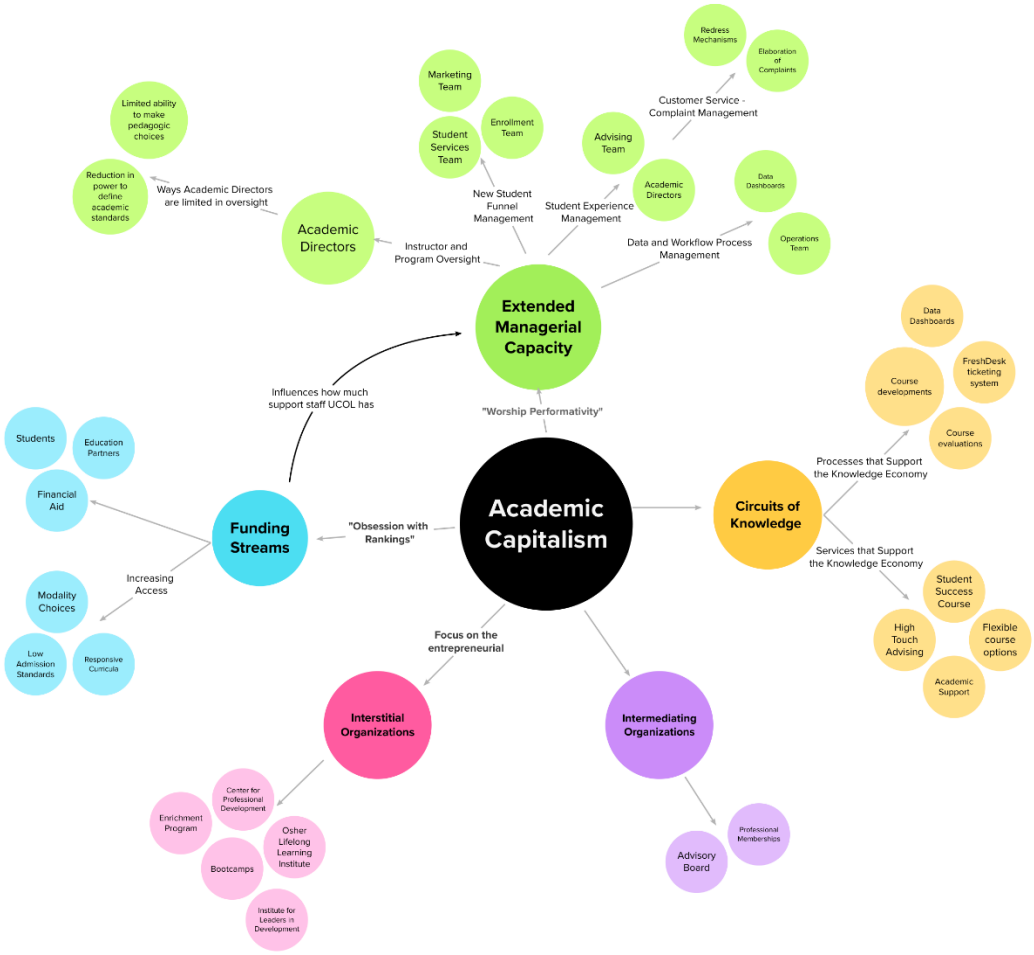

Figure 19: Key Academic Capitalism Concepts in the Context of the SPE Environment

Through my analysis I explore the assumptions that contribute to when the Dean Team prioritizes data into their decision-making process and the influence of AC. For quick reference the chart below shows a summary of how the assumptions I have identified from the Dean Team are connected to the different aspects of the “extended managerial capacity” as I have identified it for SPE and how I see this the use of these data influenced by AC. I have also aligned these with conditions that might affect how these data are used based on the models of trust, culture-building, and data use that I explored in the implications section. Following the summary chart below, I have included a full articulation of my rationale based on the literature on AC.

Table 4: Analysis of Academic Capitalism Factors, Assumptions, Process, and Organizational Conditions

Extended Managerial Capacity	Assumption Around Data Use	When Data are Factored into Academic Journey (see Fig. 7)	How Process is Influenced by AC	What Conditions Might Affect This
New Student Funnel Management	Industry best practices apply broadly to our student population	Anticipating needs. Setting expectations.	High-touch enrollment management Access to education	Getting student voice into the process.
Student Experience Management	Decisions can be based on informal meaning-making from anecdotal data	Managing immediate needs. Managing expectations.	Expanded pathways to support and respond to student complaints	Increased data routines to foster a culture that places importance on capturing more data from conversations between students and advisors.
Data & Workflow Process Management	Data infrastructure implies adoption	Supporting continuous feedback and improvement.	Surveillance culture	As above, data routines seem like the answer to increasing data literacy, adoption of data tools, and overall trust with the data processes.
Program Management	Small wins are not worth the effort.	Managing immediate needs. Assessing and evaluating.	Role of AD as administrators not academics Loss of AD control over pedagogical oversight	A culture of trust. Co-created outcomes. Establishing norms for how to handle disagreements.

New Student Funnel Management

Terziev and Bogdanova (2020) focused on the idea of entrepreneurialism within universities and the "university business model." The article starts with defining AC as an oxymoron; Academic being associated with "freedom of choice" (Terziev & Bogdanova,

2020, p. 287) and capitalism meaning "to bring profit" (Terziev & Bogdanova, 2020, p. 287). So, there is latitude only as long as it is within the limits of market demand. To that end, Terziev and Bogdanova (2020) explain how AC causes restructuring of institutions to focus more on internal resource allocation. There is evidence throughout my data findings showing how SPE operates like a business within the university. Financial goals and enrollment numbers are discussed in all meetings with senior leadership. ADs get daily reports showing enrollment numbers and weekly reports with a breakdown of how we are doing against goal. The AC paradox at SPE is very real. While we pride ourselves on a high-touch, personalized teaching and advising model, our students function as consumers with learning the product and SPE a supplier. We have lower admission policies to provide greater access to students who might otherwise run into barriers around GPA, test scores, and reference letters.

The way the Dean Team approaches data is influenced by a business mindset through the prioritization of benchmarking data and the reliance on industry best practices to set the parameters around how we approach the new student recruiting funnel (Hanley, 2005). Just looking at the terminology that we use, it is heavily borrowed from business sales strategies and processes and financial statements. SPE sends a survey to students who apply to a program but do not enroll. I am not privy to what questions are on that survey and to what extent feedback is gathered about how students' needs are being met through that process. When we think about this aligning with the “anticipating needs” part of the student journey, being able to bring the students’ voice into that process rather than relying on best practices from institutions that may or may not mirror our student population might be illuminating.

Student Experience Management

Gillespie Finney and Finney (2010) used the exchange theory in an empirical study that looked at students' attitudes and beliefs when they see themselves as customers of the university. Their findings showed that student-consumers are more likely to complain and feel entitled to positive outcomes and are less likely to be involved in their learning (Gillespie Finney & Finney, 2010). Additionally, they found that universities that implement "customer-service initiatives" (Gillespie Finney & Finney, 2010, p. 287) might attract students who are less inclined to work hard. My data findings show all the support systems SPE has in place to catch and respond to student issues and complaints. I feel as though when we talk about delivering an exceptional student experience what we are actually saying is that we respond when students complain.

Gillespie Finney and Finney (2010) posit that it could be more productive for institutions to focus on understanding the frustrations of students who are most involved in their learning versus focusing on the complaints of students who are less involved. This seems as if it would be difficult to isolate those more engaged students for feedback. However, our best chance at getting this type of insight would be through the conversations advisors have with students. As reported in my data findings and further explored in the implications section, those conversations are happening but not being documented in a way to where the data can be analyzed in an unbiased manner. When thinking about the Dean Team's approach to immediate needs, my interview data findings show that the data gathered on these immediate needs issues is being analyzed for broader impacts so that proactive mitigation of these issues can be done.

Data and Workflow Process Management

The reliance on data has led to the emergence of a new team at SPE – the data and operations team. This team is responsible for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting

data, and they are given a great deal of influence over university operations and decision-making. This further extends concerns about the growing influence of corporate interests within higher education, as universities become more focused on metrics and outcomes rather than the traditional goals of education. To be sure, data plays a critical role in online education, as it allows universities to track student progress and performance and identify areas where improvements can be made (Webber & Zheng, 2020). Gonzales, et al. (2014) focuses on how academic capitalism affects faculty in what the authors call a "striving university" (p. 1098) which they get originally from O'Meara (2007) and define as "prestige" seeking (p. 1099). They use the theory of academic capitalism to look at the convergence of political, economic, and neoliberal ideology as it relates to the work and experiences of faculty. They draw a direct connection between the use of technology and online courses as a feature of academic capitalism. Related to our work at SPE, I see similarities in the findings from Gonzales, et al. with faculty and how we coach our adjuncts to work more efficiently. Also mentioned by Gonzales, et al, is the connection between data use in higher education and the idea of surveillance. When the data dashboards at SPE were first introduced it brought about some negative responses related to both staff, administrators, and instructors feeling surveilled. I see this as relating to culture issues and trust.

Program Management

McClure (2016) focused on the critical importance of university leadership in advancing the academic capitalist regime and the impacts that it has on the university. McClure (2016) described the growth in conflicting relationships between high level administrators and corporate partnerships and ventures. This often results in more funds being allocated for technology and less for instruction. This article really describes the culture and current ethos at SPE, particularly around some of the educational partners.

With the only appointed faculty at SPE being ADs, who are heavily administrative, the SPE model is set up to keep the academic capitalist regime alive without much threat from faculty. Naidoo and Jamieson (2005) show evidence that AC results in greater pressure to make curricula more responsive to external demands by reducing the faculty or administrators' power to define academic standards and pedagogic strategies.

In my role as an AD, I have seen how this has played out over the past few years as there has been a need to better control what instructors can edit and change in the Canvas courses containers. This was prompted by complaints by students that their learning experience was not consistent from course to course. First, SPE moved toward templated syllabi that are managed through Simple Syllabus software. The different content areas are locked and if an instructor would like to make changes to the syllabus, they must submit a ticket request through FreshDesk. Being able to track the changes to assignments and point allocations that instructors would like to make in the courses has been helpful. However, there have been instances where, in order to accommodate the parameters of Simple Syllabus, we have had to modify course structure and pedagogical decisions. This seems a bit like the “tail wagging the dog.” Second, as instructors want to make changes to course content and assignments, those changes come through FreshDesk tickets also. Again, many times in the past those changes were being made without communication with the AD, so we were experiencing what we call “drift” where the course moves away from alignment with the articulated learning objectives. The visibility into the changes the instructor would like to make was helpful but initially as the tickets came through to the LX team, the changes were being made without a communication with the AD. This gets into a program oversight issue and certainly speaks to devaluing the role of the AD and the programmatic vision ADs have for teaching and learning.

Influence of Academic Capitalism Summary

Much of the literature on AC is about the increasing push in academia to monetize and commodify research related activities. When thinking about AC in the context of a unit that openly and outwardly serves as a profit center and an access arm for the university, where AC is core to our function withing the university ecosphere, a discussion of the influence of AC almost begs the question, “so what?” Through this section I tried to answer that question by showing how, even though AC is central to our work, raising awareness to the ways decision-making processes and the use of data prioritize an AC agenda. My goal was to draw connections between assumptions, activities, and data use to ultimately show how bringing people to the forefront of this work by focusing on building culture and trust can help to offset the influence of AC.

Conclusion

I have learned a tremendous amount during this program evaluation, but the biggest takeaway is that data and culture must work in tandem. You can have access to all the data in the world, but if the organizational culture is not there to recognize the data, analyze and interpret the data, and apply what is learned to create meaningful change, the data are practically pointless. My initial question was around what data mattered, with the emphasis on “what,” because it was my sense that there was a greater emphasis on quantitative data that was easily accessible through course evaluations. While that assumption was not entirely incorrect, I learned through my research that there is a significant amount of qualitative data being used, albeit informally, around the different SPE departments. And more often than not the systems were in place to collect that data for analysis. However, the culture was not in place to make best use of these systems and processes. Consequently, valuable data are being used in anecdotal ways locally within departments. This informal use of student-

generated data not only diminishes the impact that data could have globally within the programs and even around the academic unit, but by doing it this way the data are subject to bias and misinterpretation. As a result, my work on this program evaluation left me thinking less about what kinds of data matter and more about when data matter? In other words, what conditions must exist within an organization for data to be prioritized as meaningful to individual's work and the decision-making process?

Through this program evaluation of SPE, I gained deep knowledge of and exposure to the data systems and processes in place. I got a behind-the-scenes view of how the Dean Team leverages each other's areas of expertise and unique perspectives to create synergy and effectiveness in their decision making. I learned that, even though there was not a formal process in place, the Dean Team was very efficient and effective in their collective decision-making, and they were being very responsive to students' needs as they were aware of them. However, the factors that made the Dean Team so effective were not necessarily trickling down throughout their departmental teams. The reason for that was in part due to the assumptions that informed the way each individual Dean Team member thought about data use and what data they found relevant. When working together as a system, they were on the same page with their prioritization of data when they were able to make-meaning together and gain perspective through context shared in their operations meetings. Because of this insight from my data findings and analysis, I was led to explore areas that I needed to understand better, data use, trust within organizations, and cultural transformation, in order to feel confident articulating my implications and recommendations to the Dean Team.

Through my analysis of models on data use, organizational trust, and cultural transformation, I learned that putting the systems in place to access the qualitative student-generated data is really just the tip of the iceberg. What lies underneath the

surface is the cultural transformation that comes with the increased access to data. With more data comes extra work, to be sure. Healthy data cultures require a foundation of trust. Healthy data cultures require a personal investment of time and resources allocated to the data initiatives. Healthy data cultures require more communication. Healthy data cultures require leadership at all levels within an organization that are fully supportive of their teams' commitment to data use. With data comes increased responsibility and accountability that to some might feel overwhelming, to others might feel exhilarating, and to yet others might feel like simply a means of surveillance. Data cultures are constructivist in nature, to be effective they rely on socially created meaning of the use value of data (Coburn & Turner, 2011). Consistent effort must be made to engage people in data conversations to normalize the processes and help people find their own meaning within the data available. Finally, creating healthy data cultures is an endurance race rather than a sprint. It takes time for people and cultures to change. This program evaluation was a circuitous journey for me but one that resulted in the development of the Implementation Considerations Map. If all the areas on the map are considered, I believe it can serve as a guide to ensure future success around data adoption for a wide spectrum of data-oriented projects at SPE.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Dear [Participant],

As I believe you know, I have gotten approval to start working on my Dissertation in Practice at the Morgridge College of Education. I am doing a program evaluation and as a part of my study I would like to have the involvement of the Dean and four Associate Deans. Below I've provided some information about the study:

Description of the study and study procedures
I am conducting a program evaluation to better understand how the SPE dean team thinks about and uses data in decision-making processes that relate to the student experience.

The name of the study is *When Data Matter: Evaluating Data Prioritization for SPE Decision-Making*. This study has not been designated as research by the IRB and I have received an exemption for formal filing with IRB. I'm happy to provide this documentation, if you would like. For reference, my advisor for this study is D-L Stewart, PhD, who is also the Chair of the Higher Education department at MCE.

If you agree to participate, you will be invited to 1 one-on-one interview and 3 group feedback sessions. The one-on-one interview will be 1 hour long and will take place via Zoom. It will NOT be recorded but will be transcribed in text. You will have an opportunity to check the transcription for accuracy. The three group feedback sessions will be 45 minutes long and will include the Dean and the four Associate Deans. The feedback sessions will be conducted in person, if possible.

Your Rights as a Participant
Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You can withdraw at any time. During the group interview, I will not be able to guarantee confidentiality because we will be discussing information as a group. Therefore, if you feel uncomfortable with any of your statements being shared with others in or outside the group, please do not share them during the process.

Risks
Your participation in this study does not involve any physical or emotional risk to you beyond that of everyday life.

Benefits
It is my sincere hope and intention that taking part in this study will help illuminate parts of the decision-making process that can be enhanced or refined to include data in different ways. Upon conclusion of my program evaluation, I will provide a report summarizing findings, implications, and recommendations to the participant group.

Financial Information
Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study.

Confidentiality
Study records will identify you by title only. If you are not comfortable with this, please let me know and I will find an alternative solution. I will be the only person who has access to the records from interviews and feedback sessions. There will not be audio or video from the sessions, just a text transcript which I will share with you to review. I will not discuss the details or findings from the interviews or feedback sessions with other parties beyond the participant group, while the study is ongoing. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

Whom to contact with questions
If you have any questions or problems during your time on this study, you should contact my advisor, Dr. D-L Stewart at Darin.Stewart@du.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the Mountain University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office at (303) 871-2121.

Consent
Please respond to this email to let me know if you are willing to participate. If so, the next steps will be a meeting request for the one-on-one interview. I hope to complete the one-on-one interviews by the end of the calendar year.

Thank you very much!
Cindy

Appendix B

Dear [Participant]

Thank you all for agreeing to participate in my program evaluation for my dissertation in practice (DiP). I have had some good conversations with a few of you in prep for the one-on-one interviews and the feedback sessions that follow. Those conversations have spurred some thoughts on my end. First, I'd like to acknowledge the unique nuances of doing a study on and within my place of work. I am intimately aware of the complex dynamics of interviewing and working with you all while also engaging daily with people who report to you and might be impacted by the work we do together and conversations we have. As such, below I've provided a revised confidentiality statement where I make more explicit (in bold) my commitment to keeping our conversations confidential. In addition to what is stated below, I will use the utmost discretion when talking more generally about my study with others, internally and externally. I also recognize that I didn't say upfront how findings would be shared out at the end (it is in my proposal, but I neglected to share that with each of you). Please know that you are more than welcome to have a copy of my dissertation manuscript but below I've also included amended language (in bold) around what you can expect from me at the end of my study.

Benefits
It is my sincere hope and intention that taking part in this study will help illuminate parts of the decision-making process that can be enhanced or refined to include data in different ways. ***Upon conclusion of my program evaluation, I will provide a report summarizing findings, implications, and recommendations to the participant group.***

Confidentiality
*Study records will identify you by title only. If you are not comfortable with this, please let me know and I will find an alternative solution. I will be the only person who has access to the records from interviews and feedback sessions. There will not be audio or video from the sessions, just a text transcript which I will share with you to review****. I will not discuss the details or findings from the interviews or feedback sessions with other parties beyond the participant group while the study is ongoing.*** *The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.*

Additionally, in keeping with the collaborative spirit of this study, I will provide the following as we move through the stages of this process:

- Interview questions prior to the one-on-one interviews
- A copy of the transcript from your individual interview (your interview transcript will not be shared with others in the participant group)
- A summary of themes that came out of one-on-one interviews and a plan for our first feedback session
- Summaries of our feedback sessions following each session and a plan for the next session

Please don’t hesitate to follow up directly with me about any questions or concerns about this process at any point.

Thank you again! I really appreciate your partnership and look forward to our upcoming conversations.

Cindy

Appendix C

Hi [Participant] -

Considering that this is a semi-structured interview and I'd really like it to be conversational, the following questions will be used to guide the first part:

- What does "exceptional student experience" mean to you?
- How do you go about making decisions on issues related to student experience?
- What data helps you to know if a student is having an exceptional experience?
- What sources of qualitative data relating to student experience do you have available to you?
- How do the available data help to inform your perception of the student experience?
- What kinds of data that you know exists (from current, prospective, or past students) but don't have access to might be interesting for you to factor into your decision making?

After the above questions, I'm going to show you a visual of the spectrum of qualitative student generated data that I have identified. We will talk about if that visual brings up different ideas for you, if there are things missing from my list, and engage in further conversation about what data might be useful if you had access to it.

Looking forward to the time we have together! Please reach out with questions.

Thank you!

Cindy