

6-10-2008

An Exploration of the Sensemaking Process During the Implementation of Academic Tracking Systems at Three Public Universities

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An Exploration of the Sensemaking Process During the Implementation of Academic
Tracking Systems at Three Public Universities

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
Department of Adult, Career, Higher Education
College of Education
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Date of Approval
June 10, 2008

Keywords: streetlevel bureaucrats, policy implementation, academic tracking, advising

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Dedication

“Do something good and accept no credit. Expect nothing in return. When you can do that, you have arrived.” Over the years, my father’s words have inspired me, but I dare say I have ever been altruistic enough to master this challenge. This dissertation is an opportunity to follow his sage advice.

Thanks to my mother for her love and wisdom. Your words gave me perspective and brought me hope. Thanks to my sisters, Kathy and Marianne, for their listening ears, caring hearts, and thoughtful prayers. Your support brought me peace of mind. Thank you, Michael, for being so giving of your time and energy. Your strength brought me comfort. Thanks to my friend Laurie for correcting me. When I would say, “*if I graduate*”, you would retort, “*when you graduate.*” Your encouragement bolstered my faith. Thanks to my brothers, Jim and Kevin, for celebrating a long-awaited day. Thank you, Dr. Mills for sharing your insight and pressing me to think. Finally, thanks to my incredible children, Alise and Alec, for your love. Your confidence in me and your patience were truly appreciated. It was because of you that I did not give up. Lastly, to someone who met the challenge posed by my father each day of this process. Thank you, Kirk. You never said a word that was less than supportive, never showed a sign of anything but faith, and never asked for anything in return for countless hours of toil. It was your unwavering devotion and selflessness that allowed me to complete the journey. I dedicate this to all of you for doing something good in my life and asking for nothing in return. Together, we have arrived.

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ABSTRACT

Policy tends to be formulated at the upper level of an organization and handed down to policy actors on the frontline for enactment. Since policy can be vague, ambiguous, or send conflicting messages, it can create uncertainty about its meaning. Moreover, policy is rarely accompanied by explicit instructions for implementation. Therefore, when frontline workers, or streetlevel bureaucrats, are pressed to make sense of policy's meaning in realistic terms, they engage in what Weick describes as sensemaking (1995). Sensemaking is a cognitive process entered into during times of uncertainty or change. Streetlevel bureaucrats engage in sensemaking by drawing on cues in their environment, their prior experience, professional identity, and social interactions to understand and interpret policy. They rely upon their understanding to exercise professional discretion while incorporating the new policy into their daily work. It is their use of discretion that accounts for variations in policy implementation and outcomes (Lipsky, 1980, Mills, 1998, Spillane, 2004). This study explored how streetlevel bureaucrats in higher education institutions engaged in sensemaking during policy implementation. For this study, academic tracking initiatives were regarded as policy that academic advisors (streetlevel bureaucrats) were tasked with enacting. Historically, academic advisors have been identified as advocates for holistic student development while academic tracking has been defined as a prescriptive approach to advising aimed at accountability and efficiency. This qualitative study presents the findings from interviews with 16 academic advisors from three public institutions involved in the implementation

of tracking. The study's findings suggest recommendations that may be helpful to leaders seeking to close the gap between policy and practice. Implications for practice include developing a strategic approach to implementation in which upper level administrators guide change by acting as sensegivers. As such, administrators would serve as filters for the messages received by streetlevel bureaucrats. Additionally, findings suggest the inclusion of frontline workers in decision making and the provision of planned learning opportunities for collective sensemaking during the implementation process. This study seeks to inform leaders involved in policy change about the critical role of sensemaking in initiating, guiding, and sustaining organizational change.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Since 1986, state legislatures, governing bodies, and the market-minded public have expressed great concern regarding issues involving higher education. In a time of economic recession and increased accountability, policy makers and institutional leaders have deliberated and debated over how higher education can attend to states' needs. State legislators are pressing higher education to adopt policies that will increase the number of college graduates and stimulate the economy, while governing bodies contemplate policy issues involving access and equity. Meanwhile, students and parents grow disillusioned with the rising cost of a quality education and advocate that policy be implemented to limit higher education's authority to increase tuition (Hendel, Burton, Rishey, & Goldfine, 2004). These dilemmas and other significant issues have prompted organizational change by way of policy implementation.

Evidence of change can be seen in the adoption of new policies and processes, the restructuring of departments, and strategic planning that embraces efficiency. While leaders in higher education formulate policies to evoke change, those at lower levels of the institution are often tasked with their implementation. These frontline workers often perform their role amidst the confusion of ambiguous policies, the constraints of limited resources, and the pressure of increased enrollment. These factors create uncertainty, often leading to resistance to change. To lessen the ambiguity and find ways to best implement new policy, individuals within the organization engage in the complex process of *sensemaking* (Hong & Hatch, 2003, Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking is a cognitive process that allows people to understand unexpected events, interpret their significance, and adjust their thinking to cope with change in the environment (Eddy, 2003). **Research** on sensemaking during policy implementation suggests that how people come to understand a policy or initiative impacts enactment and outcomes (Spillane, Reiser & Reiner, 2002, Spillane, 2004). March (1981) noted that there is a need for researchers and practitioners to uncover not only the overarching causes of change in organizations, but the role of the less dramatic agents of change such as the frontline worker. Weick (1993) supports this call to action by identifying the discretionary function of policy actors at all organization levels, especially those implementing policy on the frontline. Furthermore, contemporary studies in policy research call researchers to consider the interplay between macro and micro perspectives to construct a complete picture of the implementation process. Thus, the process of sensemaking can be regarded as more than simply a conduit to implementation—it is a determining force in the process of organizational change.

Changing the Policy Environment

To follow March's suggestion and begin uncovering the macro forces impacting higher education today, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the state and institutions of higher education. Historically, the state has been a formidable force in the policy environment surrounding higher education. "The goal of state policy is to exercise state authority to achieve public priorities by balancing within and across complex policy levels, the influence of academic institutions and the influence of the market broadly defined" (Richardson, Bracco, Callan, and Finney, 1998, p.1). Among the priorities of state policy makers, the issue of economic growth remains increasingly

critical to constituents in a time of globalization and outsourcing. State legislators and higher education leaders declare, “The driving force behind the 21st century economy is knowledge” (Carnevale & Fry, 2001, p. 5). Therefore, states have identified higher education as a vehicle for meeting economic objectives through workforce development.

States are increasingly exerting their influence and authority over higher education by impacting the political arena. Hence, challenges to higher education now include numerous daunting tasks proposed by the state. Often it is the case that these new tasks are set forth by the state, but are not accompanied by additional funding. Typically, when a state legislature assesses the value and cost of state supported services, health care and k-12 education take precedence over postsecondary education. Legislators often regard higher education as capable of sustaining itself by generating a portion of its revenue through grants, tuition, and fees (Hovey, 1999). When the state reviews appropriations for higher education, generally the result is a recommendation for the implementation of outcome measures, policy initiatives, and funding schemes aimed at increasing accountability and efficiency. This has been the case in the state of Florida.

Focus on Florida

The impact of state needs on higher education is intensified in several states. Florida, for instance, is one state that faces increased demand for baccalaureate credentials in the workforce, increased enrollment of nontraditional students, and a dwindling state budget. These forces are converging on Florida’s public higher education and are shaping institutional policy (Wellman, 2002). Florida’s state policy makers sent a clear message to public institutions in a press release issued by The Florida Department

of Education when Chancellor Austin declared, “Our universities are focused on productivity” (2004).

Economic and demographic trends have prompted policy actors inside and outside Florida’s higher education institutions to identify ways to surmount unprecedented challenges. “Both state and higher education policy leaders face critical decisions about how public colleges and universities should respond to increased accountability pressures” (Hendel, 2004, p. 4). One strategy for generating movement from institutional leaders toward productivity was to propose that state funding be tied to outcome measures. In 2001, Florida’s legislature established an accountability plan that would determine 10% of an institution’s state appropriations based upon outcome measures such as graduation rates. The proposed performance funding plan made it readily apparent that efficient production of graduates in the name of workforce development represented a major policy issue in the state. Consequently, institutional leaders identified ways their institutions could secure a significant portion of their financial revenue by graduating students in a timely fashion.

The Board of Governors (BOG) and the state legislature in Florida spent time formulating and assessing various policies to encourage full time study and graduation within four years. Initiatives such as transfer articulation agreements for “in-state” transfers appear to have produced a more seamless transition for students moving between institutions in the state and thus, have facilitated degree completion. In addition, developing a common course numbering system, considering block tuition charges, and limiting the number of credit hours required for each program, are policies that increase efficiency and accountability in public institutions.

Academic Tracking Systems Employed

While a variety of policies and initiatives have been developed and employed in the state, this study focuses on academic tracking. The presence of academic tracking systems and/or programs emerged in response to the state's call for increasing four year graduation rates. Academic tracking can be defined as a set of policies and practices enacted primarily by academic advisors to monitor the progress of students on a semester-by-semester basis. The purpose of tracking is to increase timely graduation, increase retention, decrease excess credit hours, and structure the advising process to promote efficient academic planning. To accomplish the goals of tracking, students must select a major upon admission, register for the appropriate courses, complete courses successfully in the correct sequence, and enroll full time to achieve degree completion within four years.

Initially, the tracking system was launched as University of Florida's (UF) response to student surveys which demanded that academic advising be improved. Under the leadership of President Lombardi, UF implemented a comprehensive academic tracking system which dramatically changed the effectiveness of advising. Known as "Universal Tracking," the initiative includes a fully computerized system that monitors the progress of students as they move through their undergraduate degree. "The specially designed software system analyzes student transcripts each semester, identifies students who are off-track either through academic difficulty or by failing to take the appropriate courses in their majors, and flags their record for the attention of an advisor" (University of Florida's Measuring University Performance Series, 1998).

UF's academic tracking initiative received praise from the BOG and gained attention from peer institutions. Although the UF system was touted for increasing graduation rates and decreasing excess credit hours, it prompted discourse among academic advisors at other state institutions. Some advisors saw it as a trend toward efficiency and away from the individualized attention and a truly liberal education. Others feared it would hinder students from taking a course out of interest or to enhance their knowledge in a discipline. Many talked about how tracking did not account for differences among institutions in terms of enrollment and culture. For all these reasons and more, the adoption of academic tracking at three other public universities raised practical concerns among advisors tasked with its implementation. Academic tracking meant more than simply creating checklists and spreadsheets to aid in advising. How this change would impact their daily work and role was of great debate.

Issues with Implementing Tracking

Tracking at UF involved using new technology, establishing academic policies, restructuring academic advising departments, offering professional development and training for advisors, and reevaluating the current "best practices" in advising. However, even with UF's plan laid out before them, leaders at other institutions had factors to consider that might impact successful implementation. Organizational diversity and identity, the uniqueness of student development, and the discretion of academic advisors are all variables in how tracking would be implemented.

Institutional Diversity Creates Concern

One of the issues that could influence the implementation of academic tracking is institutional diversity within the state's system. The state university system of Florida

consists of 11 public universities ranging from Research Extensive to Baccalaureate College. Within the system, there is noticeable diversity in terms of institutional mission, tradition and history, and student characteristics. One indicator of diversity is the variation of student characteristics among institutions. Table 1 displays enrollment data of **four** different institutions noted in their 2004-2005 Factbooks and graduation data found in Florida Department of Education reporting for the State University System for the 1996-1997 cohorts of first-time-in-college freshmen.

Table 1. Enrollment Data for Select Florida Public Universities for 2004-2005

Institution	Total enrollment	Full time enrollment (FTE)	Part time enrollment	% of minority students	4-year graduation Rate	6-year Graduation Rate
A	37,065	31,559	13,297	32	26%	50%
B	35,767	27,786	14,874	34	24%	49%
C	35,561	32,481	6,665	29	40%	63%
D	19,688	13,393	12,252	42	15%	38%

Data displayed in Table 1 and information provided in a report from the University of South Florida's Enrollment Management Action Team on Students Academic Progress and Achievement Group (May, 2004) supports previous research which finds that student characteristics such as attendance patterns, ethnicity, selectivity of admission criteria, whether students are employed, gender, and age have a significant impact on graduation rates (Carey, 2004). Considering the relationship of student characteristics and graduation rates, it stands to reason that a funding plan that uses

graduation rates as a measure of efficiency would cause alarm for some institutions (Leveille, 2005, Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999).

Organizational Culture Impacts Implementation

Differences in organizational culture can also pose questions for those inside higher education responsible for implementing an academic tracking system. According to Schein (1985), organizational culture envelopes the values, beliefs, tradition, and history symbolized by the institution's mission.

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the organization learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

(Schein, 1985, p. 373-374)

The culture becomes experienced, interpreted; and expressed as an identity that resonates within students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Morgan (1997) views organizational culture and identity as a social construction of reality. Therefore, each construction of reality exists among the individuals in the organization and frames how they view their organization and their consequential roles. Thus, how individuals define change in their organization depends upon their abilities to create congruence between the organization's existing culture and what they believe about the new policies or processes. Organizational culture can become a modifying force in the sensemaking process by situating sensemaking within a context for interpretation during the implementation of policy.

Student Development Issues Impact Implementation

Academic tracking requires an approach to serving students that challenges the developmental perspective, which has been fundamental to the philosophy of professional advisors. Socialized by their education and experiences with students, advisors come to see students as moving through a critical transition upon entering college. The period in which a student graduates from high school and enters college marks a significant life transition filled with confusions and uncertainty. As a result, the majority of students have great difficulty when faced with having to identify their major and career. An estimated 22% to 50% of incoming freshman start college without clearly declaring a major (Gordon, 1981). In fact, research on undeclared and undecided students indicates that students will change majors several times before settling on a final path (Gordon, 1994). Advisors recognize that students are in a state of profound development; socially, emotionally, and intellectually, when they seek advising services. They also realize that a student's development is subject to personal and environmental variables. Personal variables include a student's ability, skills, interests, and expectation. Environmental variables include the institution's culture, its attitude towards achievement, supportive services available to students for academic planning, and the varying degree options offered to the student. These factors can mitigate the rate at which they progress toward earning a degree (O'Bannion, 1994). The issue of student development presents obstacles for effectively assisting and tracking students with a "one-size-fits-all" system. Advisors who are faced with the dilemma of implementing policy that appears inconsistent with existing philosophy and practices has to find some way of meshing institutional goals within the context of their professional role.

For professionals working in the field of student development, career development, and advising, research and practice suggests a developmental approach is favorable for promoting student retention and success (O'Bannion, 1994, Raushi, 1993). A developmental approach considers various aspects of development including a student's emotional state, financial standing, skill and ability levels, academic preparedness, and experience in decision-making (Crookson, 1972). The role of a developmental advisor would typically include career exploration, building healthy relationships, and teaching the skills of negotiating decision making. In a prescriptive approach, advisors tend to limit their role to sharing information, course scheduling, major declaration, and registration. A prescriptive approach to advising is structured, sequential, and fairly inflexible.

Although developmental advising continues to dominate the perspective of those within the student affairs profession across college campuses, times are changing (Lowenstein, 1999). Academic tracking requires the use of policies and practices that are more prescriptive and have caused concern among advisors. It may be that the advisor's perception of the tracking system presents more than just the need to change superficial processes during the work day. Tracking may be viewed as a challenge to an advisor's professional identity. An advisor's identity, developmental or prescriptive, can impact interpretation and meanings during the sensemaking of policy and affect the tracking system's perceived value and outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

The implementation of an academic tracking system will require change in academic policies and practices. Since academic advisors communicate their

understanding of academic policies and procedures to assist students, how advisors interpret policies and processes involved in academic tracking becomes critical to its success. Research in policy implementation currently offers a framework for considering the discretionary function of organizational actors closest to where policy meets practice.

Lipsky (1980) proposed an alternative approach to traditional top-down policy implementation research that suggested frontline workers, or “streetlevel bureaucrats”, act as filters and active agents in the implementation process. By interpreting policy and negotiating their environments, these actors actually create policy of their own. Lipsky’s (1980) contribution of the concept of streetlevel bureaucracy inspired a wave of policy research that offered a new vantage point from which to study the gap between policy and practice. Adopting a bottom-up approach uncovered the importance of the discretionary role of streetlevel policy actors during enactment.

The discretionary function of frontline policy actors is preceded by a process known as *sensemaking*. Sensemaking, according to Weick (1995) is a cognitive process whereby individuals create meanings, both individually and collectively, predicated on their values and beliefs about cues in their environments. The sensemaking process is inevitably mitigated by the individuals’ selectivity in attending to environmental cues, their identities within the organization, and their social interactions within the organizational context (Spillane, Reiser, & Reiner, 2002).

Drawing on elements of Lipsky’s theory about streetlevel bureaucrats and Weick’s concept of sensemaking, it is fair to say that a number of variables can impact the sensemaking process of lower level policy actors. The attention they pay to certain events in the environment, their professional identity, and the social learning experiences

they have within their organization will all impact their sensemaking of a policy. Thus, the sensemaking of policy actors tends to be diverse and can ultimately affect the meaning ascribed to a policy, its enactment, and its outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

In Florida, higher education is responding to the call for increased accountability and efficiency amidst the state's changing political environment. Institutional leaders face difficulties in implementing policies and practices when they are incongruent with other institutional policies, put a strain on resources, and remain open for interpretation. While academic tracking may be producing desirable outcomes for selected institutions in Florida, research in policy implementation warns practitioners that all too often well-intended policies do not deliver their intended outcomes, especially when actors and context change (Mills, 1998, Spillane, 1998, Hill, 2003, McLaughlin, 1987).

One of the factors in policy implementation process linked to variability in outcomes is the interpretation of policy by frontline workers assigned to enact it (Lipsky, 1980, Spillane, 1998, Spillane, 2000, Spillane, 2004). Consequently, policy implementation research, which historically employed a rational, authoritative approach, has been influenced by a body of research that shifts the analytic viewpoint to the streetlevel bureaucrat (Mills, 1998, Spillane, 1998, Spillane, 2000, Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita & Zoltners, 2002, Hill, 2003, Coburn, 2005). However, much of the research drawing upon Lipsky's theory is set in the context of public policy implementation agencies; and only identifies social service workers, teachers, or principals as the sensemakers of reform.

Teachers are certainly not alone in trying to serve an increasingly diverse student population with limited resources and an infinite demand for assistance. Academic advisors in higher education work in a similar setting. Furthermore, advisors are experiencing a change in their level of responsibility since state initiatives are emphasizing accountability and productivity in the university environment. A conflict may exist for academic advisors who are educated and socialized toward a developmental perspective in an environment impacted by outcome measures. The emerging policy environment of the state undoubtedly will press some advisors to make sense of new policies and practices such as those connected with academic tracking in to perform their work in a new day. By engaging in sensemaking, they can begin to evaluate their professional role and daily practices to understand how to effectively incorporate the policy's message during implementation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the sensemaking of lower level policy actors (advisors), in this case advisors, during the implementation of policy and practices involved with academic tracking.

Research Questions

To address the purpose of the study, the following questions were asked and answered:

1. What cues in the environment gained the attention of advisors that initiated their sensemaking process?
2. What experiences provided opportunities for learning about the need and nature of an academic tracking system?

3. How have advisors integrated the new system and accompanying policies into their daily work?
4. What messages regarding the role of advising were attributed to the implementation of the system?

Significance of the Study

Higher education institutions are responding to a rapidly changing policy environment of data driven funding structures, market-minded students, and increasingly intrusive state policy makers. Therefore, this study is significant as it explores how those inside higher education are making sense of multiple, conflicting demands in an effort to respond to statewide expectations.

A review of literature addressing theories and research on policy implementation, policy coherence, organizational learning and change, and leadership in education suggests there is a significant need for continued research with a cognitive approach to policy implementation (Spillane, 1988, Hill, 2000, Yanow, 1996). Scholars have noted that practitioners subscribing to a strictly top-down approach to understanding how policy becomes enacted, are missing a vital piece of the puzzle. Studying policy through the experiences of the street level bureaucrat will provide a more comprehensive view of what really occurs during implementation (Hendel, Burton, Rishey & Goldfine, 2004). The street level bureaucrat uses discretion during implementation that stems from their interpretations of the policy. Being that interpretations are a product of the sensemaking process, a study such as this aids practitioners attempting to successfully implement policy by exploring a mitigating variable in the process.

The cognitive perspective guiding this study is viewed as a supplement to the traditional approach to implementation research. It sought to enhance an emerging body of literature and to stimulate scholarly discussion and further research about the significance of the discretionary role of frontline workers as those enacting policy in highly bureaucratic academic institutions.

Scope of the Study

To explore the process of sensemaking during implementation, interviews were conducted with academic advisors from three selected sites. All three public universities selected for this study have reported implementing a version of the academic tracking system first established at UF. Data were collected during the spring of 2007 and analysis was completed by the fall of 2007.

Limitations

Limitations of this study emanate from its scope, methodology, and limited resources. Intentionally identifying academic advisors as the participants reduced the scope of the study. Other groups such as upper level administrators, students, and faculty could certainly add to the findings, but will have to be considered in other studies. Additionally, the primary method of data collection relied upon semi-structured interviews, leaving out other meaningful data sources such as observation and document analysis. Since the qualitative strategy employed a case study, resources were best applied by limiting data collection to three sites over one semester to increase depth of data gathering and interpretation.

It is understood that the generalizability of any case study cannot reach beyond the cases selected (Yin, 1981, Stake, 1978, Herrott & Firestone, 1983). Stake (1978)

contends that generalizations do not always lead people to see a phenomenon more fully; rather it lends to oversimplification of a situation. In contrast, a case study offers rich detail. The attention paid to description and detail in the responses of participants allows the reader to appreciate a more explicit view of the process being explored.

The strength of this study is that it explores the sensemaking process which is often a veiled variable in policy implementation. Additionally, it shares the policy experience from the perspective of the street level bureaucrat. In this way, it offers a closer investigation into the complexities accompanying organizational change through the enactment of policy. Therefore, despite the stated limitations of this study, it can be a valuable contribution for its intended audience.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Setting the Stage for Change

Higher education has historically existed in a policy environment created by what Bracco, Richardson, Callan, & Finney (1998) refer to as *The Triangle of Tensions*. The triangle can be conceived of as involving several entities, each with its own purpose and priorities. The forces identified in their model are the market, the state, and the institution. The market is broadly defined to include factors such as the economic state of affairs, demand for postsecondary education, public opinion, competition in the field, and costs. The state becomes another recognizable force in the policy environment surrounding higher education. The state involves leadership, politics, resources, demographics, and history. Each force has its own priorities, yet they are interdependent. Their individual priorities tend to conflict with one another and create tension and competition within the relationship. As the forces are in constant flux, there is no formula for creating a permanent balance among them. Any temporal balance of state and institutional priorities emerges from ongoing negotiation between state policy makers, specifically those focused on accountability and performance outcomes and the institutional leaders' need for resources and legitimacy (Zumeta, 1998, Sabloff, 1997, Hendel, Burton, Risbey, & Goldfine, 2004). The struggle between political leaders in the state and leaders in the academic arena has a long history. What is changing in this historical relationship is the level of influence the state has on higher education. A growing body of literature suggests that the state is becoming increasingly involved in the governing of higher education and more explicit in its expectations.

States Identify Priorities

Among the market forces shaping the future of higher education, state legislators are joined by the public in expressing their concern with current practices in higher education. Recently, the rising cost of tuition and fees has alarmed students and their families. When reports such as *Measuring Up 2002 (2003)* graded institutions on specific indicators, policymakers were prompted to inspect what taxpayers were receiving for their investment. Political leaders who had historically understood higher education's slowness to respond were taking action in addressing issues of efficiency, effectiveness, and outcomes of higher education. Areas that were once the protected domain of the academic world such as program development, transfer rates, measures of student performance, and four year graduation rates, were being addressed by policy makers outside higher education.

In the evolving policy environment, reports such as *Challenges and Opportunities Facing Higher Education* (Jones, Ewell, McGuiness, 1998) from The National Center for Public Policy and *Trading Public Good in the Higher Education Market* (Newman & Couturier, 2002) established a clear agenda for policy research based on nationwide trends. Both reports and numerous representatives from policy thinktanks have heralded the changing needs of individuals and society which have impacted higher education. Technological advances continue to transform the skills and competencies needed by college graduates to be viable in the marketplace. These advances, in conjunction with globalization and outsourcing, have caused concern over curriculum, methods of instruction, and modes of delivery. Adding to the list of concerns, higher education faced projections of increased enrollment due to booming high school graduation rates. State

policy makers ponder how traditional higher education providers will respond to the influx of a more diverse student population Workforce development remains another item on the state policy agendas that focuses on holding higher education accountable for the use of state revenue (Layzell, 1998, Zumeta, 2000). Finally, alternative providers of postsecondary education are threatening the sacred role played by traditional institutions of higher education. The changing policy environment has positioned state policy makers to reshape higher education by articulating priorities with vigor and specificity.

Universities as Organizations: Responding to External Forces

In this study, three state universities in Florida were selected as organizations that have engaged in implementing policies and practices in response to expectations from state legislature. To understand the impact an external stakeholder, such as the state legislature, has on a public institution, two theoretical perspectives provide a useful framework. Resource dependency and isomorphism address the nature of organizational change predicated by external forces. Resource dependency, as explained by Pfeiffer & Salanick (1978), is the tendency for organizations to take action when they perceive a new initiative may garner financial support. In essence, they are aware that they are dependent upon other entities for their financial stability. Resource dependency contends that due to their dependency, the organization will attempt to increase its power by decreasing its dependency upon another entity or by increasing another organization's reliance. There are some basic assumptions to this theory:

1. Organizations exist as a complex system of internal and external coalitions. These coalitions are formed through social interactions that

develop into interdependent relationships that serve to modify behaviors of the organization.

2. The external environment is the source of resources. Therefore, the environment and organization within it can be perceived as influential, problematic, or coercive forces in times of scarce resources or uncertainty.
3. Organizations are motivated toward two ends: obtaining more resources to reduce dependency on other organizations or securing a position of power over other organizations who possess less resources. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) posit that organizations cannot escape the constraints of their own dependence on their environment.

Using this framework to view the situation in Florida, note that public institutions in the state have three main sources of revenue. Two of the sources, general state revenue and lottery allocations, are directly appropriated by the legislature. The third revenue source, student tuition, is generated by the institutions. Additional revenue exists as grants, fees, and auxiliaries earmarked for specific purposes. According to resource dependency theory, differences among state institutions in their reliance upon state revenue determine whether an institution could be forced to exercise compliance toward state policy and priorities. Additionally, institutional sensitivity to state objectives would perhaps magnify with a suffering economy and with competitive alternative providers.

Isomorphism is another organizational theory that addresses organizational response to forces in the external environment. It suggests that over time institutions within a particular field become more homogeneous as they tend to establish process and policy in a similar fashion as peer organizations within the environment (Myer & Rowan,

1977, DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This is especially true for organizations possessing specific technologies and production processes like higher education. Through the establishment of institutions, patterns of behavior become set and institutional ways of being become conventional, normal, and routine. Alternative ways of acting may not even be considered. There are three mechanisms for the advancement of isomorphism. Forces that breed similarity in organizational fields can be coercive, mimetic, or normative in nature.

Coercive isomorphism occurs when institutions are invited to collaborate, are persuaded to conform, or are forced to adopt rules or structures. The external environment may impose rules on organizations by setting standards, guidelines, or laws that govern organizational behavior. When organizations rely heavily on other organizations for their resources, they may try to use the government, such as statewide systems of policies and regulations, to secure their standings and decrease interdependence and ambiguity. However, this creates a scenario where power and position become a major factor in a politically charged system. Political systems, according to Pfeffer and Salanick (1978), are headed by leaders that do not always see the consequences of their decisions. Moreover, a “one size fits all” approach tends to be applied to setting policy. This approach does not allow for diversity or flexibility in how an organization responds to mandates. As this is applied to Florida, the governing structure and performance funding scheme exemplify coercive isomorphism.

Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations copy each other in the presence of ambiguity in the environment. For example, a prestigious or more superior organization such as a flagship university may set a precedent that others follow to secure

legitimacy. Whether the premier organization recognizes or wants to be mimicked is immaterial. The discretion of other less certain organizations copying leading organizations results in similarities in the field. In addition, the movement of individuals from one organization to another can spawn mimetic isomorphism. Ideas, cultures, processes; and policies can be transferred by migration of employees, consultants, professional organizations, and new technologies.

Lastly, normative pressures give rise to isomorphism. These forces exist in the form of credentialing of professionals, professional development, licensure, and formal education. To identify who is included in the circle of professionals, codes of ethics and standards serve as filters that result in less diversity and more homogeneity in organizations.

Both resource dependency theory and institutional theories such as isomorphism recognize organizations as being dependent on the external environment. To add dimension and uncover divergence in these theories, Oliver (1991) suggests that differences appear in the active agency role played by organizations in response to the environment depending upon factors such as capability and motivation. Oliver (1991) developed a typology of organizational strategic response from passivity to manipulation based upon the notion that institutions can do more than simply comply with standards. She contends that they can determine the degree of compliance or resistance in accordance with what they intend to achieve from their choice. The findings of this contemporary study of institutional theory may explain some of the variations found in the response of Florida's higher education institutions as they address state expectations and policy initiatives.

Policy as a Vehicle for Change

As Oliver (1991) suggested, organizations react to external demands in various manners. Realigning resources, restructuring departments, developing a strategic plan, hiring new personnel, or offering training to current employees depict signs of movement and change within an organization. Policy implementation is yet another sign of responsiveness to the environment. For this study, policy implementation will be viewed as a sign of institutional responsiveness to the external environment.

Definitions of policy vary. Some describe policy as written text that sets forth specific objectives. For others, policy can exist in a broad and ambiguous form such as conversations between state policy actors and institutional leaders. For this study, policy will be defined as “a public statement or an objective and the kind of instruments that will be used to achieve it” (Goritzka, 1999). With that frame of reference, consider the policy message from Florida’s legislature and the coordinating board to the leaders of institutions of higher education regarding a proposed performance funding plan. In essence, the proposed performance funding plan determines 10% of an institution’s funding, according to how they score on a variety of indicators. One of the indicators would be the four year graduation rate. Even in the absence of an explicit policy regarding how institutions of higher education must proceed, institutional leaders reacted to the call for efficiency as if it were written policy. It was clear to institutional leaders that to meet state objectives of graduating more students within four years, limiting the number of hours for programs, and reducing the number of excess credit hours per student, policy inside their institution may need to change. Tracking systems were identified as an instrument that could be used to meet objectives valued by the state and

their presence suggests that institutional leaders were attending to a changing political climate.

Policy Implementation Research Evolves

As stated in Chapter 1, the focus of this study explores the sensemaking of streetlevel bureaucrats. Their sensemaking is explored during policy implementation. That being the case, there is a need to discuss the nature of policy and implementation to acquire an understanding of how and why these policy actors are so very important to the process.

The policy process is often conceived as occurring in stages from identification of the problem or issue, formulation of policy, implementation of policy, and finally, evaluation (Sabatier, 1999). While much of the past literature on policy depicts each stage as discrete, the policy process is recognized in contemporary literature on policy as evolving. Thus, an adaptive approach whereby policy is conceived of as being created and recreated is perhaps more realistic (Sabatier & Mazmavian, 1983). Sharing this adaptive approach to policy, it is necessary for the purpose of this study to attempt to define the stage where policy is implemented. Therefore, implementation will be identified as the point when policy becomes enacted.

Literature on policy implementation has been categorized as occurring in waves. Each wave represents a renewed perspective on how policy is enacted. The first wave of policy implementation research rested heavily on a traditional hierarchical premise. With the emphasis on compliance, policy was said to be created at the upper echelons of the organization and handed down as a mandate to those at the lower levels of the organization. This normative, authoritative view of policy implementation only

illuminated the existing gap between the espoused intentions of policy by its creators and the way in which it is implemented. Concepts within the compliance model that did not enable its use in explaining policy coherence were the following:

1. The theory relies upon authoritative measures to implement definitive actions aimed at explicit outcomes. However, policy is vague, ambiguous, and uncertain.
2. The issue of legislative politics impacts policy implementation. From the onset of defining the problem, policy makers are mobilized and isolated into political camps on each side of the issue. In favor of building collaborative solutions, policy makers tend to oversimplify, overstate, and under fund the process in order to find real resolutions.
3. The compliance model did not address the environment or individuals connected with the policy.

Hence, “the task of implementing bureaucracies may be manifestly one of compliance, but functionally the burden is far greater. In the course of converting policy into administrative practices, implementing agencies must in a practical sense, choose among conflicting objectives and specify abstract policy elements” (Brodkin, 2000).

This gap between policy and practice was initially addressed by Pressman and Wildavsky (1984). Their ability to show that even the best made policy would fall short of its anticipated outcomes once it was interpreted and acted on provided a catalyst for a second wave of research and literature. Rather than deem policy as inherently positive or negative, a success or failure; questions about the nature of policy and the process of

policy implementation were raised. Policy by nature tends to be vague and ambiguous. The desired outcomes of policy are rarely ever outlined for policy implementers, let alone the enumeration of all the possible unintended consequence; moreover, it always remains open to interpretation (Spillane, 2004). The routinization of policy into organizational process can not escape differences in organizational context and discretion of policy actors. Thus, policy once enacted is imprinted with symbols of organizational context and discretion of the actors that interpreted its meaning along the way.

In the second wave of policy implementation research, policy is understood to be a socially constructed symbol of priority and direction for the organization. This perspective defines policy as evolving. Thus, researchers began to view policy similar to those who experience and enact it. These policy implementers configure it into what they can recognize and use. After all, “policy does not implement itself” (Barnett and Fudge, 1981, p.9). Before policy can be enacted, it must be understood. The meaning and sense that implementers make of policy is an ongoing cognitive process (Spillane, 2000, Yanow, 1996).

Implementation: The Street Level Bureaucrat Way

In the second generation of policy implementation studies, Michael Lipsky’s book, *Street Level Bureaucracy* (1980) overturned former implementation research by focusing on frontline workers as policy makers. His model of implementation determined that bureaucratic discretion exists as a major factor in inconsistencies and unintended consequences of policy. Lipsky’s new approach to policy implementation contended that lower level policy actors working closest to where policy meets practice actually create policy. By way of interpretation and decision making, these frontline workers, or

“streetlevel bureaucrats”, gathered ambiguous and often conflicting policy mandates and reconfigured them into organizational processes (Brodkin, 2000).

Lipsky’s study of policy implementation focused on large bureaucracies that offered social services, among them, educational institutions. In these environments, he discovered that lower level policy actors were faced with implementing policies using only limited resources and unlimited demand. By analyzing the implementation process from this analytic vantage point, new perspectives and recommendations emerged. Rather than assuming front line workers were delinquent or incompetent in addressing their duties to implement policy, the streetlevel theory suggested that discretion and sensemaking were necessary internal practices that would allow for change within organizational context.

Strategies used by frontline workers to cope with implementing conflicting or vague policies included the development of routines. Routines were aimed at reducing the scope of services offered to clients both in terms of time and resources. Anagnostopoulos (2003) notes that other strategies involve classifying clients in different categories and awarding resources to those who were most deserving. Finally, if organizations did not meet policy objectives, clients tended to be targeted as the reason for poor performance. More specifically, frontline workers such as academic advisors facing increased efficiency standards would be expected to formulate routine practices, reduce goals, allocate resources to a limited population, and site shortcomings within the students as reasons for noncompletion of degree requirements (Anagnostopoulos, 2003). What is perhaps most significant about the theory of streetlevel bureaucracy includes the following issue: questions about whether clients are worthy of receiving services and the

level of service they shall receive become a function of the interpretation that frontline workers make regarding the intent of policy. In *Learning from Experience: Lessons from Policy Implementation* (McLaughlin, p. 174, 1987) readers are reminded that “at each point in the policy process, a policy is transformed as individuals interpret and respond to it. What actually is delivered or provided under the aegis of a policy depends on the individual at the end of the line, or the streetlevel bureaucrat.” A similar finding is revealed by Lipsky (1980)

“The fact that bureaucracies develop routines and simplifications is hardly cause for comment in itself. However, the structure of these routines and simplifications and the structuring of the context in which they take place are worth considerable discussion. Where policy consists of the accretion of many low level decisions, the routines and categories developed for processing those decisions effectively determine policy within the parameters established by authorities. In this sense, as observed earlier, streetlevel bureaucrats “make policy” (p. 84).

This analytic shift presents the lower level worker as pivotal in the implementation and change process.

Following Lipsky’s lead, the concept of backward mapping, cognitive and interpretive perspectives research, and organizational policy learning (Schofield, 2004, Spillane, 1998, McLaughlin, 1987, Elmore, 1980) continued to assert the need to discover alternative analytic frames for exploring the policy implementation process. In *Backward Mapping*, Elmore (1980) asks policy researchers to consider issues of decentralizing control, negotiation of policy actors, and the use of incentives on implementation. Policy learning and cognitive perspective theories focus attention on the

thinking, capabilities, and skills of individuals enacting policies. Implementation resources such as opportunities to observe, discuss, reflect, and learn about how to implement policy are pieces of the implementation puzzle highlighted in learning theories of policy research. Research and literature on policy implementation has developed into identifying policy as an invention of the creativity, thinking, and experiences of the policy actor.

The Craft of Implementing Policy

In the third generation of implementation research, it remains challenging to determine ways of connecting the “macro world of the policy maker with the micro world of the implementer” (McLaughlin, p.171, 1987). This call to action is answered in a publication by Hong and Hatch (2003), *Crafting Coherence: How Schools Strategically Manage Multiple, External Demands*. In the article, a new frame for appreciating the complexities involved in the implementation process faced by higher education institutions draws upon the premise of institutional and organizational development theory, the analytic viewpoint of Lipsky’s model, and the importance of the cognitive element in implementation. Hong and Hatch (2003) assert that researchers and practitioners need to reframe their concept of policy coherence. Policy coherence has typically been defined as the congruity between the espoused meaning in policy and the outcomes of implementation. As has been previously discussed, institutions of higher education are impacted by multiple and often conflicting demands of diverse stakeholders. In an effort to satisfy the myriad demands converging on institutions of higher education, new policies and programs tend to emerge. However, these new initiatives compete for resources and time. Additionally, these sometimes divergent

initiatives can strain systems and befuddle administrators and frontline workers who attempt to make accommodations for their coexistence. Hence, the individuals tasked with enacting policy are faced with making decisions about how to adapt their work process. Thus, if one relies solely on a traditional definition of policy coherence, the opportunity for institutional policy actors to attain coherence remains dismal at best.

Honig and Hatch (2003) offer a remedy for the daunting state of affairs faced by institutional policy actors. They suggest a reconceptualization of policy coherence. The researchers posit that practitioners need to consider that policy coherence requires an ongoing process of negotiation among internal and external stakeholder for the purpose of collaboration and compromise rather anticipating a fixed standard of expected outcomes. Relying on what Honig and Hatch (2003) regard as first-generation and second-generation studies on systemic reform in education is short-sighted. Both waves of research on policy coherence focus how policy is implemented in a linear direction; either outside-in or inside-out. They argue for a reciprocal perspective of what constitutes policy coherence. In their new conceptualization, coherence is said to be crafted by actors inside and outside the organization working to build a bridge between the state's needs and the institutions' goals and performance.

Sensemaking During Implementation

Policy actors tasked with creating coherence within their institution must integrate existing institutional policies and practices with new initiatives. How to effectively implement a policy or initiative begins with the implementer assigning meaning to the policy. In earlier policy implementation research it was assumed that the meaning of policy was agreed upon. Hill (2003) states this is untrue. Meaning and interpretation of

policy occur individually and collectively in organizations through sensemaking. Weick (1995) explains in his seminal work, *Sensemaking in Organizations*, that implementers rely upon a cognitive process known as sensemaking that allows them to comprehend situations in their environment in order to facilitate adaptive thoughts and actions. Sensemaking is the cognitive connection between old ways and new approaches.

Nature of Sensemaking

Sensemaking is reflective and retrospective in that it occurs after action has taken place and produced outcomes. This remains significant because in acts of reflection, details and nuances surrounding the event being recalled may become clouded by the passing of time and emotions. However, people invariably rely on sensemaking to frame their world and make decisions about it. Weick (1995) artfully describes the essence of sensemaking when he stated, “to talk about sensemaking is to talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situation which they find themselves and their creations” (p. 15). In a study conducted by Eddy (2003), presidents on two community college campuses relied on the reflective aspect of sensemaking to allow themselves time to reflect upon changes afoot on their campus and strategize how they would translate events into positive change for their institution. They were able to construct messages about events on campus to create a frame of reference for their faculty and staff. In this way, they influenced the sensemaking process of individuals within the institution.

Understanding the social nature of sensemaking has allowed other organizational leaders to impact sensemaking during policy implementation. For example, Coburn (2005) explores the sociological aspect of sensemaking in a study that addresses the

impact of principals' messages about reading policy on teachers' sensemaking. By principals providing venues for teachers to share their understanding and experiences with implementing the policy, a unified sense of the policy's meaning resulted. Through the process of sensemaking, schemes for assimilating new information are designed, understanding and meaning of cues are formed, interpretations about policies are articulated, and decisions regarding actions are made.

Occasions for Sensemaking

Occasions for sensemaking arise in organizations responding to changing external environments. Weick (1995) suggests the presence of uncertain conditions set the stage for sensemaking. Uncertainty occurs when an unexpected event occurs or an expected event does not occur. In either case, surprise and confusion follow. This state of ambiguity and instability propels an individual to call upon schemes or frames they have used to organize their perspective of the world. Using these schemes, which are steeped in values and beliefs, they are drawn to particular pieces of information or cues in their environments. Then, by attaching meaning to the cues they have noticed, sense and interpretations follow. Especially in a time of change or policy implementation, individuals working within organizations use sensemaking to cope by develop new ways of interacting with their environment.

Properties of Sensemaking

To differentiate sensemaking from other cognitive processes, Weick (1995) provides guidance about its characteristics. Listed and briefly defined are the seven properties inherent in the sensemaking process:

1. Grounded in identity- Sensemaking is self-referential and in that way it is critical to see self as the text in need of interpretation, even more so than environment. By interactions with others, we not only project our desired self into a situation, but also reflect on the identity we have created. Therefore, we might predict that an individual's position and identity within the organization would mitigate how they perceive the impact of a new policy on their work process and necessarily influence their sensemaking of the policy.
2. Retrospective- Sensemaking is said to be a way of seeing the future through reflections of the past. Sense comes from imagining the outcome of a decision and then assigning meaning to them. Thus, an individual's past professional experiences are drawn upon to make sense of a change in practice and determine a course of action.
3. Enactive of Sensible Environments- By way of making sense, we become active agents in the construction of our environments. Therefore, individuals in the policy process who assign blame to others for the ill effects of policy may not fully understand their power in modifying the situation.
4. Sensemaking is Social- Rather than seeing sensemaking as only introspective, it should be noted that it occurs during interacting with others. During meetings and in conversations, what begins as subjective reality becomes part of an organization's social truth and culture. Therefore, organizations that provide opportunities for sharing ideas promote a shared responsibility for and collective agreement about the nature of a policy change.

5. Sensemaking is Ongoing- Just as life is in constant flow, so is the process by which we attempt to freeze specific moments of life to capture its meaning. Individuals prefer to make sense of their reality so they can feel comfortable and in control. Yet, reality is always evolving which requires the continued need for sensemaking.
6. Focus Applied Selectively-Individuals only attend to particular cues in their environment. Therefore, other cues which do not penetrate the subjective filter escape and interpretations about an event are inherently biased.
7. Based on Plausibility rather than Accuracy- Individuals in organizations tend to make decisions about things based on probability and intuition rather than scientific study.

These seven properties of sensemaking allow researchers to recognize its presence in organizational life and to find opportunities for exploring the process. In this study, the sensemaking process of those closest to where policy meets practice, the streetlevel bureaucrat, will be uncovered and investigated to encourage a deeper understanding of the policy implementation process. Spillane (2004) argues through his research that the discretion of lower level policy actors is critical to creating a comprehensive analysis of the policy implementation process. The sensemaking of these individuals involves the implementer's sensitivity to cues in the environment, their belief system, and previous experience. Ultimately, sensemaking is a unique manifestation of the thinking of individual's within their organizational context. Thus, to expose the origin, nuances, and impact of sensemaking, it is appropriate to propose a case study that seeks to unravel the layers of this complex process that so profoundly contributes to policy outcomes.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The problem statement guiding this study revolves around how individuals within an organization use sensemaking during the implementation of institutional policy. The primary question focuses on a human problem: how do individuals begin to interpret and understand a policy or initiative to implement it and make changes to their daily work processes? In doing so, it prompted the researcher to explore the phenomenon of sensemaking in policy implementation in its natural setting. As stated in Chapters 1 and 2, sensemaking is the cognitive process that allows individuals to cope with unexpected situations that arise in their organization. The process results in interpretations about the meaning and significance of changes that eventually guide them to formulate adaptive thinking and behaviors (Weick, 1995). Creswell (1994) contends that a study's design should be guided by the research question. Hence, this chapter will outline the information considered in selecting an appropriate research design. The chapter will include a statement about the philosophical foundation for qualitative design, the methods selected, data collection and analysis procedures, and a discussion about reliability and validity of the data.

Research Design

The decision to use a qualitative design is based upon an adherence to specific key principles outlined in the field of research design. Of primary importance is an acknowledgement that the researcher's worldview is in keeping ontologically, epistemologically, and methodologically with the design of a qualitative study.

Along with the researcher's worldview, the nature of the study prompts the design. This study seeks to explore and explain a process. Creswell (1994) states that

seeking understanding about a process is best supported by a constructivist, interpretive, and inductive perspective aligned with the post positivist paradigm. The post positivist paradigm maintains that the researcher is fully aware and candid about the likelihood of making value judgments when determining the purpose of the study, data collection, and data analysis. The researcher adopted a post positivist approach and did not attempt to present the unequivocal truth. Instead, a socially constructed truth is presented that emerged from interactions and communications with the study's participants (1994). Finally, with the post positivist paradigm acting as the guiding philosophical framework upon which this study rests, it is well suited to a qualitative design.

When considering which qualitative strategy to use for design planning, Yin (2003) suggests three conditions be reviewed: it first revolves around the research questions being asked, the second pertains to the degree of control a researcher maintains over the conditions surrounding the event, and the third addresses the degree of emphasis on either historic or contemporary events. The case study strategy was selected as it appropriately addresses each of the three conditions. The researcher asked a "how" question. These types of questions tend to be asked when seeking to explore and understand. Therefore, the researcher did not insist upon controlling the situation or event; rather, the intention is to experience it through the participant's perspective. In response to Yin's third condition for selecting case study design, case studies are well suited to studying an event in the recent past rather than some period in past history; thus, case studies allowed the researcher to utilize interviews and direct observation as a data collection means.

In the data collection segment, the researcher more fully discusses the reason for using interviews as the primary source of data. Furthermore, Yin (1994) contends that by using the case study strategy, the researcher is able to discover unknown variables during the sensemaking process and develop a rich description of the context of each case. This description is necessary in studying a social phenomenon such as sensemaking during policy implementation.

Research Questions

The research questions were derived from the problem statement, and relate to the sensemaking of academic advisors responsible for implementing an academic tracking system. The questions were then shared with the researcher's committee and tested in two pilot interviews with academic advisors. After considering significant feedback from the committee and the pilot interviews, the questions were revised minimally to increase clarity and remove any language that could skew responses. The questions addressed in this study are the following:

1. What cues in the environment gained the attention of advisors that initiated their sensemaking process?
2. What experiences provided opportunities for learning about the need and nature of an academic tracking system?
3. How have advisors integrated the new system and accompanying policies into their daily work?
4. What messages regarding the role of advising were attributed to the implementation of the system?

For the sake of clarity, the word *cues* in question two refers to an array of

events in the environment that may have signaled change. These exemplify the events:

- Messages from upper level administrators or other stakeholders in the university community advocating timely graduation of students
- Pressure from students about their expectations that advisors would assist them in planning a timely graduation
- Restructuring of advising departments, allocating additional resources for special advising initiatives
- Messages from professional organizations about the changing nature of advising
- Establishing policies and processes for probable advising changes

The propositions of Weick's theory have been used as a framework for the development of the research questions and interview guide.

Sampling

A purposeful sampling scheme is often used in qualitative studies, as typically they are costly in time and resources. Purposeful sampling relies upon the selection of cases or sites that will yield depth and breadth of information (Creswell, 1998). Three institutions were purposefully selected due to their involvement in implementing an academic tracking system to increase retention, support advising endeavors, and promote timely graduation. These institutions will be referred to as University A (UA), University B (UB), and University C (UC).

Scholars studying sensemaking consistently remark that the context in which sensemaking occurs is critical to its process (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989. Resnik, 1991, Spillane, 2004, Weick, 1995). Therefore, sharing an overview of each site selected is necessary to ground the data analysis.

The first institution, University A, is classified as a Research University with High Research Activity; according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2006). According to information shared on the institution's website about the 2006 school year, it is a rather young, large, metropolitan university offering ninety-five various baccalaureate degree options to over 39,000 students (University A Current Facts, 2006). Additional information reported that the majority of its undergraduate students, 77%, are identified as traditional; with their ages being between 18-24. More than 60% are enrolled as full time students who live on or near campus. This university has enjoyed the ability to attract high school graduates with average SAT scores of 1200 and GPAs of 3.68 from high school. The 4-year graduation rate of this institution's 1996-1997 cohort of first-time-in-college students was reported as twenty-six percent (Florida Department of Education, State University System, 2006).

Academic advising at the institution occurs within programs offered under the Student Success Center and individual departments within each college. The Student Success Center, housed within Undergraduate Studies, is comprised of First Year Advising, Student Academic Resource Center, Multicultural Academic Support Services, Transfer and Transition Services, and Academic Success for Student Athletes. Within the First Year Advising Program, undeclared and declared freshman receive advising during their first year. After their freshman year, if students have not declared a major, they are advised within the Sophomore and Second Year Center. This department works with students who have earned 45 hours either through accelerated methods such as dual enrollment, IB, or AP credit, students who are entering the university as transfers, or students who are changing their majors. When students have declared a major, they are

advised within the appropriate department connected to the college where their major is offered.

A new policy instituted in the 2006-2007 school year mandated that all students who have earned 45 credit hours must declare a major. Failure to do so results in a registration hold. To remove the hold, the student must receive advising within a specified office. In addition to the Students Success Programs and major declaration policy, another initiative entitled “Grad on Track”, was developed (Grad on Track at University A, 2006). This voluntary program ensures that students who follow contractual terms will be guaranteed priority registration, a seat in all their mandatory courses, and graduation within four years.

The second institution selected as a site for this study is University B (UB). According to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (2006), UB earns the distinction of being a Research University with High Research Activity. According to facts found on its website about the 2006 school year, it enrolled over 44,000 students, with 5,500 first-time-in-college freshmen (UB Enrollment Profile: Selected Accountability Measures, 2006). Undergraduates can select from seventy-two different baccalaureate degrees (UB, Undergraduate Admissions, 2006). The median SAT is 1140 and the GPAs average 3.30 from high school (UB E-Profiles, 2006). In the past, the university had accepted a sizeable portion of part-time, minority, underprepared, and transfer students.

According to a report by this institution’s Enrollment Management Action Team, groundwork was being laid for systemic changes to address the institution’s 4-year graduation rate of 24%, far below its peer institutions in the state (UB, Enrollment

Management Action Team Report, 2004). In the past few years, the university has restructured its centralized advising system in favor of offering advising services through units within each college. The Center for Academic Advising was once a hub of activity for a diverse population of students needing advisement. The Center's advisors were generalists in the fullest sense as they worked with freshmen to seniors who were undeclared, transfer students, students transitioning between majors, and students not formally admitted to limited access majors. The Center, once located within Student Affairs, was repositioned within Academic Affairs and underwent changes in its purpose, structure, name, and leadership. The Center was renamed The Transitional Advising Center (TRAC) and was to serve a significantly reduced number of undeclared students, those transitioning from another institution or major, and a very small cadre of students heading into majors offered at other regional campuses. Several students once served in The Center were reclassified from undeclared to an intended major, or premajor, and referred to newly formed advising units within the colleges.

Moreover, a major declaration policy was implemented in 2005-2006 that mandated first-time-in-college students earning 36 or more credit hours must declare a major or pre-major. Failure to do so forces a registration hold until the student receives advising to resolve the matter. Transfer students are strongly encouraged to declare a major when they are admitted to the university or they will incur a registration hold at 75 hours.

Tracking the Academic Progress of Students (TAPS) was another initiative that emerged within a similar timeframe of restructuring advisement services and the major declaration policy. TAPS, which involves the use of a computerized tracking system and

the establishment of additional advising positions, was established as a system to allow advisors to track and monitor a student's academic progress toward a timely graduation (UB, Undergraduate Catalog, 2006). It is housed within Undergraduate Studies under the direction of a newly appointed Associate Dean, a highly regarded faculty member in the College of Engineering.

The third institution, University C (UC), is a research, doctoral-granting institution with a long history in the state university system. It is consistently ranked at the top in the nation for its research, service learning, and study abroad opportunities (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2006). According to data reported by UC's Office of Institutional Research (2006), enrollment in 2005 totaled more than 39,000 with the majority of freshmen students as traditional-aged residents living in campus housing. The average SAT was 1100 for incoming students (Business Week Online, 2006). Once admitted, students selected from sixteen different colleges that offer baccalaureate degrees, but are strongly encouraged through policy and practice to declare an intended major during the admission process or have one assigned by the Advising First Office (UC, Academic Programs and Degrees, 2006). This institution held the highest 4-year graduation rate—forty percent—for institutions selected for study. This fact was included in the Florida Department of Education's State University System reports for the 1996-1997 cohort of first-time in-college freshmen.

According to the university's website, it employs a system named Academic Interest Mapping (AIM) to track students' progress toward a four-year graduation date (UC, Academic Interest Mapping, 2006). The institution's Office of Undergraduate Studies houses the Advising First Program. The program's mission aims to retain

students until their graduation from their esteemed university. To accomplish the mission, a cadre of professional advisors is placed within academic units located across campus to offer direct student contact and outreach activities. In addition to Advising First, Undergraduate Studies offers Athletic Academic Advising for Athletes and the Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement, all for first generation students. The Center for Advising Undeclared Students (CAUS), had served freshman and sophomores with face- to-face advising that matched the student's interests and abilities. This center, CAUS, no longer exists and students are no longer categorized as undeclared. Instead, with the introduction of mapping, students must select from four exploratory tracks aligned with selected majors. Their campus has a tracking system that closely replicates the system first introduced by the flagship institution.

Data Collection

The questions explored by this study revolve around the sensemaking of academic advisors during the implement of academic tracking systems. The concept of academic tracking for the purpose of this study was defined as any new initiative, program, or set of processes guided by policy aimed at requiring students to declare a major early and prompting them to take specified courses to progress in an efficient manner toward a timely graduation.

The researcher's goal was to secure eight to ten one-hour interviews at each of the three institutions selected. It was determined that participants would need to be professional advisors having worked in advising prior to the implementation of academic tracking. They were also connected to the tracking initiative in their daily role. It was prudent to consider selecting four to five participants working within a central advising

office serving primarily undeclared, exploratory, and transitioning students as well as four to five advisors housed within a college. The premise for this decision was related to the theory that sensemaking occurs in the context of one's environment. It is likely that advisors in a central office encounter alternate challenges and develop varied perspectives than advisors working within a college department.

By contacting administration at each institution responsible for overseeing advising, the researcher was able to obtain a list of advisors' contact information. The researcher asked that only advisors connected with tracking be included. Additionally, the lists identified whether advisors worked within a college or in a centralized setting. University C was the only institution with enough available advisors to warrant a random selection process. At both UA and UB, once the researcher received notification about those advisors who worked with tracking, it was evident that each advisor would need to be contacted. Each of the identified advisors was sent an email explaining the purpose of the study and a request for his or her participation. This information is included in Appendix A. After one week, if the candidate failed to respond, a second email was sent. Finally, if no response was returned, the researcher contacted the advisor by phone. When an advisor did elect to participate, he or she was sent a confirmation email outlined in Appendix B.

At UA, three of the five advisors responded, identifying themselves as having worked with the implementation of a tracking initiative. They agreed to participate. One worked within a central office and the other two were housed within a college.

At UB, of the six advisors working within each of the colleges specifically for the purposes of implementing the tracking system, the researcher learned that one of the

advisors had not worked in an advising capacity prior to the implementation of tracking and was not a viable participant for the study. Of those remaining, four participated in the study. Within the central office that served primarily exploratory and transitioning students, only three advisors were identified as meeting the selection criteria—all three participated.

Lastly, at UC, when the researcher asked for advisor information, the request produced a list containing contact information for 38 advisors across campus. Of the 38, four were housed in the central advising office working primarily with exploratory and transitioning students, and 34 were located within the colleges. After contacting all of the advisors in the central office, only two advisors agreed to participate. Of the 34 advisors in the colleges, the researcher gained interviews with four of them.

Data collection began in the Spring 2007 semester and concluded by the end of the same semester. The total number of interviews conducted was sixteen. This was roughly 66% of the number proposed. The rate of return may have been impacted by the period in which data was collected—between the Spring and Summer semesters. This may have been a time when advisors took vacations. Moreover, the Summer semester for advising is generally extremely busy with orientations for incoming students. Also, the interviews required approximately one hour of their time. This time frame may have been too much of a commitment for some. Another factor impacting the number of participants may include problems with speaking about a new initiative supported by upper level administration. This may not have been comfortable for some advisors.

The conceptualization of sensemaking impacts the strategy used to collect data. Sensemaking, as defined by Weick (1995), is an ongoing cognitive process resulting in the construction of meaning and understanding. The process of sensemaking is inextricably linked to an individual's thoughts, beliefs, values and reflections; which may or may not be evident in their behavior. Patton (1987) contends that interviews can reveal what cannot be observed. "Interviewing allows the evaluator to enter another person's world, to understand that person's perspective" (Patton, 1987, p. 109). Therefore, interviews are an appropriate source of data for a qualitative study such as this one.

Data from voluntary, semi-structured interviews were recorded and later transcribed. An interview protocol of open-ended question is included as Appendix C. After gaining consent by using the form included as Appendix D, each participant was asked the same questions. However, using a somewhat flexible format allowed the researcher to probe for clarification or deeper meaning when appropriate (Yin, 2003). Each semi-structured interview lasted from 45 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the advisor's office.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is best conceived as a series of steps. The steps included examining, categorizing, tabulating, and testing evidence to address the purpose of the study (Yin, 2003). Examination of the transcribed interviews was guided by a logic known as pattern-matching, which involved the comparison of an empirically based pattern with one predicted by theory (Yin, 2003). Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to pattern theories as explanations that emerge during naturalistic studies or qualitative research. Data reduction methods were used to review, code, and categorize transcribed interviews into

meaningful themes. Essentially, each line of the transcribed interviews was numbered. Initially, the researcher highlighted meaningful units of data and labeled them with a word that reflected its contents. The researcher then grouped the meaning units according to similarity in meaning. From that stage they were organized into several separate groupings. These large groupings of material were again reviewed and any data that seemed less meaningful was set aside. Those units that appeared most meaningful in answering the study's questions became categories, and the categories were synthesized to produce a theme. Explanations of the themes presented in Chapter 4 are based upon the data and related to the theoretical framework guiding the study. .

Validity and Reliability

It is common for qualitative researchers attempting to address concepts of validity and reliability to struggle when imposing traditional concepts, those of accuracy and replication, on qualitative research design. Even among qualitative research there is no single, fixed definition of validity and reliability that is universally accepted (Creswell, 1994). For this study, the concepts of validity and reliability are understood to be synonymous with the credibility of the findings. Therefore, the notions of trustworthiness, honesty, and fairness will be attended to throughout the study rather than in discrete steps at a particular point in the study. Additionally, Maxwell's definition of interpretive validity will serve as a reminder when collecting and analyzing data. Maxwell (1992) explains that description and interpretation of the explored phenomenon should be reported as accounts that would be recognizable by the study participants. This approach to validity and reliability rests squarely on the researcher to be trustworthy

throughout the data collection and analysis phase, and also to continually employ means of verification.

Verification steps were employed to insure credibility and trustworthiness. To verify that the data being collected depicted the understanding of the participants being interviewed, the researcher performed member checking during each interview. Member checking is a process of clarifying what is understood from the participant's response (Licolin & Guba, 1985). During the interviews, the researcher asked if interpretations made from the interviewee's remarks captured the sentiment and intentions of the interviewee before moving forward in the interview. Also, decisions made during the data collection and analysis phase occurred in consultation with the researcher's major professor. The researcher kept documentation in a research journal, which included significant communications, interpretations, and decisions during the analysis process. Finally, the choice to use a multiple case study design increases credibility of findings. Expanding the study by examining more than one case increased the robustness of the findings and allowed the researcher to reveal that similar occurrences within an event are present in more than one context (Tellis, 1997).

To further increase the quality of the study, the researcher attended to aspects of interpretation that need to be addressed during data analysis, according to Yin (1994). They are as follows: attention to all evidence, consideration of rival explanations, focus on the primary purpose of the study, and use of expert knowledge of the events studied. The aspect of attending to all evidence prompted the use of alternate documentation forms to verify information shared during interviews. Documentation forms that were

considered included minutes from meetings, information on university websites, office documents such as brochures and forms, and college catalogs.

The use of these multiple sources of data is an effort to achieve triangulation. Gall, Borg, & Gall (1996) define triangulation as a process of using multiple data collection methods, data sources, analysts, or theories to check the validity of a case study. Triangulation methods attempt to eliminate biases that might result from relying exclusively on one data collection method, source, or theory.

Considering Yin's concept of expert knowledge, it was appropriate to disclose this researcher's professional experience as an academic advisor at a research university, as she had been in the position more than three years. The researcher had certain expectations about the findings stemming from professional experiences and educational background. Working with undecided students, under-prepared, and transfer students represented advising challenges for the researcher at a large, metropolitan research universities, especially when taking into account an educational background in social science education and counselor education. The researcher's preference was to view students in a holistic manner. Therefore, the researcher developed a professional philosophy aligned with a developmental perspective of advising. Developmental advising had been the standard for best practices in advising for some time. However, amidst the changing political and economic climate surrounding higher education, it has become evident that current academic advising practices were soon changing. Efficiency and accountability are now key issues for public institutions.

The researcher's expectation was that professional advisors subscribing to the developmental approach would face challenges in adapting their thinking and behavior to

work effectively within the constraints of an emerging environment trending toward accountability and increased productivity. It was anticipated that the research would reveal advisors' sensemaking of the state's expectations as testimony of their educational and professional experiences, their understanding of messages set forth by campus leaders, and their opportunity to share in the learning and discourse about the new system.

Following the approval of this study, the researcher complied with the standards for conducting research set forth by the University of South Florida's Institutional Review Board.

Generalizability

The intent of this study, as in the case of most qualitative research, is not to attempt to generalize beyond the cases examined. However, meaningful explanations about a phenomenon through the application of theory can emerge when a researcher shares rich description of the context of the process being explored. In doing so, readers may connect this study's findings with their own situations, prompting new insights and understanding.

Chapter 4

Analysis

To accurately present the findings of this study, it is reasonable to consider the study's purpose. This qualitative investigation used a case study design, discussed in Chapter 3, to explore how academic advisors in three public universities used sensemaking to implement an academic tracking system. Sixteen academic advisors participated in semi-structured interviews conducted between March and May of 2007, and by reflecting on their thinking during implementation, their sensemaking process was revealed. Within their sensemaking process, four research questions posed in Chapter 3 were addressed. Research questions were guided by Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory and identified key aspects of how adaptive thinking and behaviors emerge during organizational change. This chapter is comprised of five main sections—the first four provided themes that emerged from the data, and were used to address the four main research questions. The fifth section of this chapter summarizes the data analysis phase of the study.

RQ 1: What cues in the environment gained the attention of advisors that initiated their sensemaking process?

Cues are situations, events, or occurrences in the environment that become the object of attention and focus. According to Weick (1995), conditions prevail for sensemaking when a person's enacted environment is punctuated by an unexpected event that disrupts the status quo. The event, or cue, becomes the focus of attention because it challenges the individual's existing frame of reference about the world. Frames of reference—also known as cognitive frames, models, or stories—are the mental

scaffolding people rely upon to organize and understand their environments. Uncovering the events that signaled the emergence of academic tracking was crucial to exploring sensemaking. While many events in the environment go unnoticed, those that receive attention reflect what is valuable to the sensemaker. In this study, advisors were asked to recall when they first heard that academic tracking would be established at their institutions. Advisors were asked to recall any conversations, meetings, emails, or situations that signaled its arrival. Initially, advisors remembered hearing about tracking as an announcement from administration or conversations among their workplace peers. Messages from administrations and from peers were significant aspects of the environment that led to sensemaking about tracking.

Messages from Administrators

University C advisors, both in a centralized office and within the colleges, recalled an announcement made by upper level administrators. Advisors noted that the announcement was made during a presentation. The following quotes by UC advisors reflect the nature of the announcement:

1. It was a presentation. They already had the program as it was going to be, um, initially, and they were just letting us know how it worked with our program.
2. It was going to be handed to us. Other than what little we did here, the final decision was to be handed down. Not, ‘This is what we *will* be doing. This is what we *are* doing.

During the second statement, the advisor pounded the desk with her fist. The gesture indicated that she received the news as a mandate rather than a topic for debate. All UC

advisors reported hearing a common message from upper level administration about the tracking initiative. It was to be a university-wide initiative involving all advisors across campus. Moreover, advisors perceived that administration had a fairly clear concept of how the tracking initiative would function once implemented.

Like UC, all UA advisors who were interviewed learned of tracking from upper level administration. The cue that gained the attention of UA advisors was received as a directive:

The Provost told us, 'Implement it.' This was gonna happen. He told us in January or February and we had to have it instituted by summer.

At UA, rather than connect all advisors to the tracking initiative, only one advisor working within the centralized advising office was identified by administration to institute the program. The advisor, as newly appointed director, understood there was room for creativity in designing the program. It was not a fixed image handed from administrators to advisors; conversely, the new director was to generate a workable program given institutional objectives, the state's agenda, and the established philosophy of the centralized advising office. The advisor was able to exercise this at his discretion when creating coherency among the existing culture, current policies and practices, and the new tracking initiative.

At UB, the cue that was noted by most advisors was an announcement made at an annual advising conference. The conference was historically a celebration of service, a time for information sharing, and an opportunity to collaborate. Although advisors in the colleges and the centralized office spoke about the same event, they held different

perceptions. College advisors indicated administration allowed for discussion and input as exemplified by the following quote:

It was a presentation, but there was lots of discussion about it... it wasn't completely one-sided. It wasn't that we could really change, but we did give input and did make suggestions especially with the curriculum for the exploratory section. They did make some changes after what we said.

Unlike the previous advisor's statement, this next statement from an advisor in the centralized office was shared as a testimony to the reason she felt directed, rather than involved, in making the new system work was directed toward her office.

The Associate Provost said that it was ridiculous that the university had no way of showing a student a picture of what they would need to take to earn a degree in four years.

In remarks that followed this reflection, the advisor recalled a feeling of being "held responsible" for shortfalls in graduation rates. Two other advisors in the centralized office conveyed a perception of having their role misunderstood. "They (administration) don't understand what we do with students." From this introduction, advisors in the centralized office began constructing meaning about the tracking initiative.

Lastly, one college advisor at UB indicated first hearing about a change in advising from a private meeting with upper level administration:

Well, it was in a meeting with my Associate Dean. He came by and pulled me out to work on developing the tracks for my college's major. This is when I learned it would be something I would be doing.

The advisor indicated that the meeting allowed her to understand tracking and her role in its implementation.

Messages from Peers

One advisor at UB expressed a difference in the initial event that alerted her to change. Instead of initially learning about the new initiative from administration, the quote below indicates that the news came from peers:

If I recall correctly, I think it was mentioned in passing. It was something being thrown around and considered. It would directly affect what we do and the population we serve and how we advise.

For this advisor, rumors about a tracking initiative generated concern and questions.

By initially learning about tracking from colleagues, her level of ambiguity was heightened. She noted that she was reluctant to take any action until she heard more about the system from administration.

RQ 2: What experiences provided opportunities for learning about the need and nature of an academic tracking system?

The second question posed by this study was related to learning opportunities that were offered to advisors during implementation. Interviews with advisors revealed differences in the type, number, and level of participation in learning opportunities. Forums for learning about the need and nature of tracking were categorized as either formal or informal. Professional development workshops, advisory councils, and staff meetings were identified as formal, structured settings. Periodic inquiries addressed to administration, conversations with peers, consultation with other departments, and self-directed learning were labeled as informal. Both types occurred at each institution.

However, advisors at UA and UC expressed ongoing participation in formal, structured learning opportunities. Primarily, UB advisors stated that they learned about the tracking initiative through informal venues. These informal meetings included conversations with other advisors, coordinators, or other administrators. The content of the conversations tended to differ depending on the players involved. Both formal and informal learning opportunities exposed the need for tracking as being tied to retention, timely graduation, and securing funding. The nature of tracking came more from the sensemaking that advisors engaged in after attending meetings or talking with colleagues. When administrators were vague about what tracking would do to an advisor's daily work, how much training would be involved in operating the system, whether or not new advising positions would be created, or how to respond to students during the transition to tracking, advisors developed their understanding of tracking's nature from their prior experiences in advising students.

Formal Opportunities

Professional Development

UC advisors, like the one in the following quote, spoke about participating in a conference hosted by a national professional organization for advisors. The opportunity connected these advisors to others involved in the implementation of tracking throughout the state:

Myself and two other advisors did a presentation at NACADA about taking responsibility and we talked about mapping and how mapping has made students more accountable. We're [the advising profession] starting to go to an *advising is teaching* philosophy. This whole thing [emerging perspective] is that we want the

students to graduate in four years and not hang around in a major. Now we have to teach the student that they need to be on top of it, that they need to learn about their major from day one, and that they need to be responsible for their own career now. I think mapping has kind of moved that in that direction.

Another advisor spoke about attending the conference and being inspired to conduct a study on the tracking initiative at her institution.

Staff Meetings

At UA, monthly meetings were used to collect and disseminate information about the tracking program's progress. The meetings allowed advisors to offer their observations and work collaboratively on resolving issues.

We [college advisors] can tell them [administrators connected to the program] at the meeting if there is anything going on, like any issues we are facing. My director supports our involvement in the tracking program and so we support the policy. We have our meetings once a month to share the information. The colleges tend to provide feedback for us. It's really a battle, not necessarily between us and the colleges, but of how do we get the students to invest in this.

In the latter quote, the comment addressing student involvement was isolated to UA and most likely related to the nature of tracking at their institution. UA students had to volunteer to enter the tracking program and could elect to leave the program's cohort anytime. Advisors at UA noted that meetings initially centered on the tracking program had illuminated some common ground for advisors working outside and within the colleges.

Importance of Formal Learning Opportunities

Formal learning opportunities allowed for planned, continuous communication within and between various levels of the organization. One result is the creation of feedback loops that can signal the need for adjustments during implementation.

They (administration) have moved a little bit. They were too strict at one point and now I think they've been...because, you know, [students say] 'You didn't give me a chance.

Sharing reactions to the policy with administration led to incremental changes according to advisors at each institution. According to Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer (2002), "Calling on the distributed expertise of their communities, local actors can mediate confusing situations by interacting with their colleagues, leveraging their knowledge that is situated within webs of social relationships" (p. 406). Administrative responsiveness to advisor concerns inspired advisors to continue their efforts to work through issues during implementation. Advisors who participated in such learning opportunities articulated a clearer picture of how advising efforts were contributing to meeting organizational goals

Informal Opportunities

Inquiries Posed to Administration

Other venues for learning about the tracking initiative were less structured than monthly meetings or regional conferences. Informal conversations with directors, coordinators, and other advisors instilled new meaning to the tracking initiative and gave advisors insight about their significance in the implementation process.

At UC, all advisors discussed being encouraged to ask questions about the tracking system whenever concerns surfaced. The open invitation extended by administration to advisors for them to discuss issues and share feedback was well received by advisors:

You can call with any question and she [leadership involved in the implementation process] doesn't make you feel like an imbecile. She knows this is a new 'baby' and gives us all the support we need. (UC)

Similarly, at UB, two college advisors spoke about being able to ask questions and offer guidance:

We did give input and did make suggestions especially with the, the curriculum for the exploratory section. I can't speak for any of the other colleges. And they did make some changes after what we said. (UB)

For both UB college advisors, speaking one-on-one with administration allowed them to guide the implementation process in their department by informing coordinators and directors of gaps between policy and practice. They described themselves as players in tracking developing, and this perception became a critical piece in their emerging understanding. They were connected to the process rather than passive observers to their organization's changes. The benefit of being engaged in the process of change, either by acting or speaking out, is that it allows for the thoughtful reflection and enhanced understanding and meaning making of the surrounding world (Weick, 1995).

Consultation with Colleagues

At UC and UA, advisors indicated new lines of communication developed between advising office on campus. For example, when UC advisors working within the

centralized office were tasked with the development of exploratory tracks, they quickly realized they needed the assistance and expertise of the college advisors:

We called over to the department to find out what was needed because of our different experience in working with students. We collaborated. We shared information. (UC)

Similarly, advisors in the colleges at UA indicated that prior to tracking, college advisors rarely consulted with other offices. A UA college advisor talked about being somewhat unfamiliar with the types of services offered to freshmen at their institution. This UA college advisor surmised that a common perception existed about the functions performed by the centralized office:

Well, we [college advisors] figured that the first year advisors did a lot of handholding and by the time students get to us, they should have been taught how to register and plan for the next semester. Now, since talking about tracking, we know that this is not the case. They [students] are being told from day one. (UA)

At UC, an advisor in the central office shared that her understanding of the admissions policy for a limited access program developed by consulting with college advisors:

Well, when I get a student who transfers in with 80 credit hours and wants to go into Business, I contact the coordinator in that college. I have to ask them how they would handle the situation and whether or not the student would ever be admitted. Before, I used to just tell the student to go over there and find out. Now I have to know how to advise the student toward each and every major. (UC)

Advisors at UC and UA noted that consulting with other advising offices was a positive outgrowth of the implementation process. The new connections serve to extend their knowledge while building networks that could strengthen their student services.

Conversations with Peers

Social learning opportunities are said to facilitate sensemaking by offering a venue for the creation of common understanding. However, conflict often accompanies the creation of common understanding. This remains true when multiple perspectives surface about the same issue. Consider these quotes, the first two from UB advisors and the third from a UC advisor:

Maybe I am different than other advisors, but coming from Athletics, this was not very different than what I did over there. I thought tracking was a good idea. (UB)

There were a lot of negative comments about it but I could see the rationale behind it. It's sort of a dichotomy. I have a liberal arts background so I like the exploration, but I also understand if the state is going to pony up three-quarters of your tuition, you ought to maybe produce some results. (UB)

"I hear a lot of colleagues say, Oh, I'm the Dreambuster.' but I don't look at it like that at all" (UC).

These advisors indicated that when casual conversations arose regarding tracking, their views often differed from their coworkers. These differences in perspective prompted them to evaluate their stances. They discovered the origin of their thoughts and paused to consider the values inherent in another point of view.

Social Learning Opportunities Impact Sensemaking

Considering what Walsh and Ungson (1991) say about organizations being reservoirs for socially constructed meaning; social learning opportunities apparently softened initial discontentment and confusion expressed by some advisors about tracking, as represented by the following quotes:

Before I understood it, I was very wary of it. I thought it would be a lot more work bureaucratically and administratively. I know that I would really have to understand it. I mean, this was something new and I was going to have to learn more about it; start studying it. (UC)

I mean, a lot of times people were antimapping. You're just doing it because you have to and not recognizing the full benefits of what it could be until you learn more about it. (UC)

Well I think with anything, with change, it's new and you are not really sure about the logistics behind it. A lot of what you're hearing, you are not really involved directly with the process. I guess it is hearsay and it is passed on mainly as hearsay and there are mixed feelings about it. (UB)

Social learning opportunities gave advisors an outlet for expressing concerns and a forum for building meaning about changes in their work.

There were minimal references made by UB advisors regarding participation in formal and informal social learning opportunities. For advisors at UB who did not share reflections about offering input to administration or participating in meetings, it remains unclear to what extent their sensemaking was delayed or hampered. Their comments indicated they tended to construct their understanding of the tracking system with limited information. McCaskey (1982) contends that in situations where the nature of the issue is unclear and the source of information is questionable; people often become overwhelmed with a barrage of conflicting messages, a lack of reliable information, and varied interpretations. Whether these advisors were isolated by the location of their office, discouraged from sharing feedback, or limited by their own temperament, reducing the

outlet for expression decreased the chances for meaningful reflection. Recalling that sensemaking requires “stepping forward in action” to construct reality, retrospectively; implies that without a place to discuss the initiative, the meaning of sensemaking is thwarted.

Self-Directed Learning

Advisors at each institution reported engaging in self-directed learning to enhance their knowledge of academic policies, procedures, and programs at their institution. In addition, some sought to make connections between the existing literature on retention and achievements and their efforts to implement tracking. In this study, self-directed learning included the review of institutional websites on transfer and articulation policies, researching links between majors and career fields, creating materials to support advising sessions, and reviewing literature pertinent to their profession.

A UC advisor talked about her professional responsibility to become knowledgeable about all the majors:

I feel like I have to know [for] myself. It's number one, becoming very familiar with the majors and the maps. I was in Business before and I know them [the course sequence for Business] to a ‘T,’ but then I came here [to a centralized office] and with tracking, I was like, WOW, I gotta know criminology and I have to know nursing, and I have to know all those majors and how they are related and what majors are going to require calculus and which ones require chem. (UC)

Each advisor at UC reported that due to tracking they needed to increase their knowledge level for each degree program. This need led to reviewing and organizing documents for

easy access during their advising sessions. When one advisor was asked how she had become so conversant with all the material on tracking, she shared the following:

I just did it myself and put the binder together with all the questions that came in with the students. (UC)

Another advisor talked about using information on the web to enhance her sessions and increase the accuracy of the information she was sharing:

This website has become a lifesaver. It has all the majors here and the maps that go with them. (UC)

At UB, an advisor pointed out that being self directed in her learning was necessary due to lack of clear direction:

I think there were initial conversations about, ‘Okay, can we all get together and figure out what we’re [advisors] going to do,’ but that never came to fruition. I am out here in the department creating it as I go. (UB)

At UA, an advisor reviewed studies he had once read regarding retention rates:

I am actually going to do some research on when a student declares a major and when they graduate. I think it will make things more meaningful in terms of how to develop tracking. (UA)

Self-directed learning provided advisors with the specific information they found useful during implementation.

RQ 3: How did advisors integrate the new system and accompanying policies into their daily work?

The third question guiding this study sought to explain how advisors had integrated tracking into their daily work. Their responses indicated that integration

occurred as a process. The process of integration began with reflecting on professional identity and culminated with a focus on how tracking benefits students. The process was less a sequential set of steps, as it was more a process of consideration for each of the following themes:

- Reflecting on their professional identity
- Participating in learning opportunities
- Reclassifying students
- Establishing new processes
- Incorporating academic policies
- Focusing on how tracking was benefiting students

The following sections explain how these issues were viewed as part of the integration process. It is appropriate to note that learning opportunities were a significant part of the sensemaking process, which allowed for integration. However, learning opportunities were previously addressed to maintain the research question format outlined in Chapter Three. Therefore, this section will not address advisors' participation in learning opportunities again.

Reflecting on Identify

Weick (1995) points out the obvious when he says that sensemaking is a creation of the sensemaker. When this relationship is fully appreciated, it provides great insight into the process of sensemaking. The concept of sensemaker, or self, can be understood as the medium in which realities are sculpted, verified, and reinforced. To understand how advisors made sense of changes in advising, researchers must agree that their sense of the situation began with their sense of self. Self, in the context of this study, is understood as

how advisors *perceived* their interactions with the environment. Their interactions with the world included how they chose to *respond* to the tracking initiative.

Weick (1995) speaks of our preference in response to the environment as a reflection of our identity. He suggests that by humans' response to the environment, they proclaim who they are. Therefore, deciding how to engage in implementing tracking was related to how advisors perceived their professional identity. To maintain professional identity amidst organizational change, Erez and Earley (1993) suggest three objectives that guide decision making about future actions. These objectives include the following three areas:

- 1) Better one's self and feel content both intellectually and emotionally
- 2) Promote one's sense of competency and capability to act
- 3) Sense one's world as being coherent and consistent, thus, making it understandable

Analysis of the interviews revealed that advisors were attempting to meet these objectives while deciding how to integrate the new systems into their daily work. The following quote shares a reflection of one of the UB advisors as he considered how to define his role of an advisor.

To talk about identity, it [the implementation of tracking] has made us [advisors] think about our identity. What is our identity? Do we want to be an ally, an advocate, or more of an administrator? (UB)

The reflection suggests that before advisors can decide how to integrate tracking into their work, they must define their professional roles. If they determine they are advocates for students, integration will occur differently than if advisors define themselves as

administrators. Not alone in his attempt to clarify professional identity, another UB advisor explains the difficulty faced with implementing such a system:

As an advisor, from a certain perspective, there's this ability you have to share this information with a student in a way that is similar to a counseling approach. Maybe if things are too regimented [with the implementation of tracking], you're just another 'talking head.' You're more an administrator than an advisor. (UB)

Additionally, a UC advisor stresses concern that performing administrative tasks associated with tracking may compromise her relationship with the student:

[With tracking] I am more of a faceless administrator who makes a few phone calls and types in a few numbers. Lift the hold and then just places them [students] in the major. I haven't advised them based on classes or their goals. I have just taken care of administrative tasks that need to be accomplished. Then, they [students] don't usually talk to you again. That [administrative tasks] is part of my role, but I also need to talk to students. (UC)

Both previously quoted advisors suggest that their roles were to act as advocates for students. Lipsky (1986) warns of the inherent conflict faced by frontline workers who see themselves as client advocates when implementing institutional policies: "The helping orientation of street-level bureaucrats is incompatible with their need to juggle and control clients for bureaucratic purposes" (p. 73). When trying to advocate for the specialized treatment of students, advisors are arguing against common organizational principles that seek uniformity and finite responses to situations. As noted earlier in this chapter, individuals seek to interact with their environments in a manner consistent and coherent with their identities. Initially, during the sensemaking process used to integrate

tracking, advisors tended to disassociate with practices they perceived as inflexible or indifferent to variations in the student population; this reveals an attempt to preserve their professional identities as student advocates.

In addition to tracking being perceived as administrative, it was also viewed as prescriptive. Advisors noted their interactions with students tend to be guided by developmental philosophy. This discrepancy caused advisors to struggle with integrating a system identified as a “one-size-fits-all” approach to assisting students. The following quote from a UC advisor represents the advisor’s reflections from each institution: “It’s [tracking] more prescriptive and a lot of us in advising go into advising to assist students with their overall development. That’s the most frustrating part” (UC).

In the next quote, a UB advisor determines her developmental approach to serving students is a product of personal experiences with students and educational background:

My background, I think my background in student affairs and student development and my previous advising background with the students [has led to a developmental perspective]. I read how students’ transition from high school to college and the challenges they face in that development period. For me, it wasn’t about the dollar, [For administrators] This is about the number of students in classes. [For me] This is about getting students where they need to be developmentally and addressing them on their developmental level, making sure that they are progressing. (UB)

She interpreted the actions of administrators as emanating from a focus on funding and enrollment. In this next quote, a UB advisor highlights the conflict he faces between being responsible to the student and attending to institutional initiatives:

We hear so much about retention and my own personal philosophy, I don't care so much. I just want the students to do what is best for the student. If I lose a student, because they have to switch to another major, then that's fine. But if I can talk them through the issue, than that's even better for me. (UB)

Some advisors desired consistencies between their professional identities and their organizational identities. Dutton and Dukerick's (1991) study found that one's organizational image was protected by consistently taking actions that would enhance it. Therefore, agreeing with administrative decision-making about tracking allowed advisors to strengthen their organizational images as team players. This quote from a UB advisor exemplifies the point made by Dutton and Dukerick's (1991):

I don't like placing people in a box. Now you talk about thinking outside the box? Like I said, I saw some people in a box. When you try to categorize everything, everything becomes stiff and you lose track of people. That's why I say, you look at the person and then how does the policy apply. Not just looking at the policy and then just fitting the person in the box. Of course, I want to follow the rules, but I still want to follow the rules in regard to what is best for the person. (UB)

Following the rules would enhance this advisor's organizational image, but conflicted with a philosophy that guided his advising practices. For one UC advisor, longevity in large organizations molded her sensemaking about how to integrate tracking:

See, my background has been in the classroom. I was told this is what you will do. I just accepted it [changes in practice or policy]. I have always been trained to accept the upper fold decision. You know, for whatever reason, they see things I

don't. I don't have the privy to be able to know. I was not taught to challenge.
(UC)

Finally, one UC advisor expressed a strong conviction that integrating the policy would not be a statement of her identity or role. For this advisor, professional identity was not defined by a new policy, but rather how she chooses to respond to the change. She decided rather than understanding tracking as prescriptive and limiting, it could be used as a vehicle in meet her advising responsibility:

For me, mapping doesn't define a student or an advisor. As an advisor, I see my role as helping you get to your career, your vocation, faster. I want you to find your path. (UC)

Throughout the interview, this particular advisor expressed a truly deep sense of self grounded in a personal philosophy she strived to model each day, despite new policies and practices. In a similar fashion, this UA advisor shared his enthusiasm:

Our office is responsible for the successful transition of the first year student from high school to college. Bingo! We do that and that's the whole philosophy of why we're here. (UA)

It's significant to note that this UA advisor quoted revealed more discretion about how the system would be designed—he draws on the mission and philosophy of his department. The creation of the tracking program presents an opportunity to enhance his perception of professional identify by constructing a program that will satisfy the Provost's mandate, the state's needs, and the students served by his department.

Of all the advisors interviewed, UA college advisors did not indicate they had engaged in examinations of their professional identities. This may have been

unnecessary as their role in implementing tracking was quite minimal. The tracking program required no additional workload and almost no discernable difference in their daily work. For college advisors at UA, the integration of tracking required minimal adjustments that were technical rather than philosophical in nature.

Reclassification of Students

Another aspect to integrating tracking involved the reclassification of students and the use of new terminology to identify groups of students. At all three institutions, decisions were made to group students according to their areas of interest. The categorizing of clients is a standard means of allocating services, according to Lipsky (1980). He contends that by classifying clients, frontline workers are able to distribute scarce resources to those who are in dire need. Contrary to advisors in centralized departments who provide unlimited service for masses of transient students identified as “undeclared/undecided”, at both UB and UC, students were required to choose an exploratory track. Exploratory tracks, or course sequence guides, promoted a student’s focused exploration of a particular discipline. For instance, a student who enjoyed history and psychology courses in high school might identify with the exploratory social science track, and eventually be prepared to declare a major in interdisciplinary social sciences. Similarly, students proficient in math and science might be best suited to the natural science/technology track to prepare for admission in biomedical sciences or geology. Advisors used the exploratory tracks to guide their work with students. At each institution, advisors suggested that reclassifying students into exploratory groups was aligned with student development theories; this suggests that a student’s crystallization of

a degree and career path begins with exploration of their educational options (Gordon, 1981). This quote from a UB advisor is representative of advisors at UB and UC:

It seems to me [there was] a good deal of exploration going on...or coasting, you might say, more than exploration. You know, the exploration implies a more purposeful, 'Oh, I think I'm gonna try Business because I think I might be going business' as opposed to 'Oh, I need a course'. Seems to me, and this is just my bias but there was a little bit more of 'Oh, I need full time cause I need to get my loans going on. (UB)

This advisor contended that students were simply fulfilling financial aid requirements and choosing courses with no academic plan in mind. The observation made by this advisor was representative of other UB and UC advisors who spoke of students "running around in circles" or "just hanging out in a major" until they decided what to do. The majority of advisors felt that exploratory tracks would diminish the aimless wandering that plagued too many of their students.

Advisors in this study perceived that reclassifying students into exploratory groupings gave students senses of focus, chances to express their interests, and tests their abilities in a particular field of study. Moreover, it confirmed what courses a student should take that would move them efficiently into a major. Furthermore, moving from the term "undeclared/undecided" to "exploratory" indicated a proactive posture on behalf of the student toward academic planning.

At both UB and UC, advisors stated that before tracking it appeared that students were aimlessly taking classes, self-advising, and hiding behind impressive major classifications without any sign of progressing toward a degree. At UC, the tracking

program clearly identified a semester-by-semester guide for each major; thus, advisors had become accustomed to referring to students as “term 1” or “term 2.” This new vocabulary indicated exactly where the student was in the progression of achieving critical courses or “milestones.” Technology, specifically designed to arrest a student’s progress when they fell “off track” and missed too many milestones, was created to assist advisors in their work. Advisors referred to this pattern of registration blocks and mandatory advising as “map stops.” Adjusting students’ progression and allowing them to complete milestone requirements during the summer, to get “back on track,” was referred to as “rolling back”. These administrative types of decisions required a review of the students’ academic records, knowledge of the degree tracks, and a working understanding of technology behind tracking.

The language being spoken by advisors at UC was varied considerably than at either UA or UB; it was a new language that indicated tracking had served to reshape advising. By labeling students “term 1” and “term 2,” advisors were clearly categorizing students’ achievements. Lipsky (1980) discussed how frontline workers use categories to develop identities for their clients. These subjective labels allow frontline workers to build processes around each identifiable group. He contends that during policy implementation, new language and new practices are established as a means of training clients. Clients, in this case, the students, must be taught where they fit in the institutional hierarchy. First they are categorized and labeled, and then they are processed according to institutional outcomes and objectives.

Establishing New Processes

Advisors understood that with the implementation of tracking, they would be held accountable for monitoring a student's progress from admission, orientation, declaration of a major until graduation. The integration of tracking, according to all but one UA advisor, required increased monitoring, reporting, and documentation. Advisors developed new processes that would allow them to gather and organize important data. Each semester there were particular processes they engaged in to insure students were progressing. A UB advisor talked about a new routine since tracking:

Here in the college, we now get a list of midterm grades and we run through things like the students who are taking the CLAST to be sure basically that they fulfill what they're supposed to fulfill. I will also look back at students who are on probation or have been academically dismissed. I try to find out more about how well they're doing and to see if we can call them in so that we can tell them what they have to do to get back on track. (UB)

Regular monitoring of students' GPAs was accomplished by establishing routines according to this UB advisor"

Now advisors are encouraging students to meet the stipulations of their major in a timely manner. I have a time each semester when I monitor their GPA the first semester and year; we can help them decide on another major if they are not going to be able to continue in the [current] major. (UB)

UB advisors talked about integrating tracking by routinely reviewing a student's academic history and identifying variables that might impinge upon a student's retention or graduation.

Referring students to resources was another practice that emerged during the implementation of tracking. By reviewing a student's record, advisors would attempt to isolate the cause of academic difficulty. Advisors at both UC and UB noted that they relied upon campus resources to insure students would be successful:

If a student is totally lost and he can't do anything, like the young lady I am meeting with today... she has been dismissed and she's coming back and she has to choose a major that has a 2.0 GPA. Her big thing is, 'I don't know what I want.' Her biggest asset is that she doesn't live that far from campus. So I told her to go ahead and pick a day where she can schedule a trip to the Career Center. That is true for all the kids that are wanting more information about what their major heading them toward. (UC)

I think clear across the board our job is to facilitate matriculation. We are here to refer students. It's a big university and especially on a big university there's a lot of resources. I tell students, 'Let me be your first stop. Let me be your 411. Let me plug you. I'll be your operator, and I can direct you to whatever line you need to go to. (UC)

You [the student] might be going through something at home that is affecting your schooling, so now it might be necessary to refer you to get that assistance you need. I can't counsel you but I can hear you and I can see where you're coming from and what's affecting you. I know somewhere you need to go for that assistance. (UB)

We built a new database to keep track of students that we send to the Career Center. We are making those connections for them and following up on their progress. (UB)

Advisors indicated that making referrals to the appropriate resources was even more crucial since tracking.

Advisors at each institution employed registration holds to incorporate academic tracking into their daily work. This administrative action had not been necessary prior to tracking. However, if tracking was to be fully integrated, students would not be permitted to take courses unless the course moved them closer to graduation. At UB and UC, students who were unsuccessful in meeting critical requirements were placed on hold. .

They have to complete these milestones in order to stay in the major. If they don't complete the milestones or fall off track too many times, they will eliminate themselves from that major. They'll [students will] come in and say, 'You know, I know I have a hold and I know it's from this.

This advisor, representative of others at UC, discovered that students were learning quite quickly that being off track led to serious consequences.

Incorporating a Major Declaration Policy

Another step toward integrating tracking was accomplished by attending to new academic policies. Each institution adopted a major declaration policy to require that students declare a major within a specified number of credit hours. Interviews from this study revealed that the policy was somewhat controversial. It tended to concern and frustrate advisors working with undeclared, undecided or transitioning students. The policy gained more support from advisors working in the colleges. When addressing the

major declaration policy, quotes from advisors working in centralized offices differed from those working inside the colleges:

It really bothers me because it doesn't give the students time to explore; because if they started out in some random major, and they wanted to change, they may be too late. (UC)

One of our concerns about tracking was, the question was would freshmen be ready? The freshmen that come through our area, undecided, undeclared... would those freshman be ready for chemistry the first semester and anatomy and microbiology the second semester of their freshman year. (UB)

This advisor was referring to assigning students to coursework that would place them on track for a degree in nursing, but may not be appropriate based on the student's profile. When she talked about being "ready," she clarified that she was referring to a student's emotional development. Would the student have the dedication, the motivation, and the focus to do well in those types of courses as an incoming first year student? In the following quote, the advisor at UA contends that when students identify with a major early on, it meets the needs of parents more than the student according to literature in the field.

Yeah...the parents love this because it doesn't give them...and you know... I look at, you know, like Chickering and Tinto and the fact that it does not allow them the flexibility of looking at different things and often times students will come in with a major, switch majors in the Grad on Track program and we're able to keep them the first year because, hopefully, the courses are similar enough, but after that it may not necessarily happen. So, it doesn't give them that sense of

exploration... that kind of thing. So, you know, establishing identity, developing purpose; we're asking them to have that already somewhat completed at the start of their college experience and they're not always there. (UA)

Another theme that emerged from the advisors working at UB and UC with undeclared students was the concern that students might be manipulating the system. Advisors had observed students declaring a major simply to comply with the university's policy and to be released from a registration hold. These types of concerns served to dismantle advisors' attempts to integrate the policy in a meaningful way. Certainly, if an advisor began the journey of sensemaking with hesitation about the need for academic tracking, believing that students were manipulating the system made it easier to conclude that there was little reason to make any real adjustments to their daily processes. McCaskey (1982) revealed that even if people in an organization are certain of the effects they hope to achieve from a change, if they are not clear on the relationship of cause and effect in this case major declaration and timely graduation, they struggle with how to act appropriately.

College advisors shared comments that indicated they saw the value of students declaring a major early on:

Previous to the system, the university didn't have any declaration policies in place as far as students having to declare by a certain amount of completed credit hours. That was a big change because it didn't exist and now there was a big emphasis on getting students to declare to keep them on track. (UB)

"You [advisors] want to get these students into a program before they accrue too many hours. For the student, it's beneficial to have a plan" (UB).

They [administration] found that [declaring a major helps] so a student is not feeling lost after their first couple of semesters. When students felt like they weren't progressing in any certain direction, they weren't being successful and they would leave the university. (UC)

Even while the policy caused some debate among advisors and administrators, it was used by both centralized and college advisors as a means of integrating tracking. The policy provided a framework for helping students set goals toward graduation.

At UC, one advisor reasoned that advisors should celebrate declaring a major as a necessary step toward meeting academic goals. She asked students and colleagues to consider the declaration of major as a beginning, rather than an end.

A major is not a terminal decision. You are not deciding the rest of your life right now. You are just heading into the major to study things you are interested in and can build on. (UC)

With this understanding, tracking became a vehicle for moving students toward their future.

Focusing on Benefits to Students

When advisors spoke of their initial reactions of tracking, their emotions ranged from frustration and worry, to interest and enthusiasm. Advisors were able to fully integrate tracking when they moved beyond defining it as an administrative mandate. A theme that emerged from the data suggested that advisors recognized how tracking might benefit students. They theorized that tracking made the advising process more structured; thus, students would become well informed. As a result, students were thought to be exercising responsibility for their educational planning.

Advising Becomes More Structured

Without exception, advisors at all three institutions noted that advising had become more structured by implementing academic tracking. Tracking made academic planning for all majors far more clear. As a result, advisors reported being more purposeful and proactive in their efforts with students. Advisors concluded that students were the recipients of more organized and comprehensive advising sessions.

“We didn’t have to worry about where a student was in terms of degree completion. Now we do. It’s an extra step and much more accountability” (UB).

It’s a lot more organized. Before tracking, I was looking only at the first two prerequisites. I am much more comprehensive in my approach. Every semester matters. (UC)

At all three institutions, four year plans for each major were a new component of advising. Advisors referred to the document as a “tool”, a “map”, or a “guide”. The positive connotation conveyed by these metaphors seems fitting considering that each advisor who spoke about the plans felt they were a true benefit to advisors and students.

Increased structure in advising was viewed as beneficial to students in transition. When advisors at UB and UC reflected on their own college experiences, they recalled feeling lost, confused, and overwhelmed. These reflections during sensemaking prompted advisors to understand academic tracking as a welcome source of structure for their students.

It is what students need. I wish I had it when I was a student. It makes things more focused and brings your future into greater focus. If you know anything about the millennium students, they love those goals. Tell them what they need to do. (UC)

It helps with the transition. My personal experience is that I had to take an extra class that I was not told about, so I had to wait to graduate a whole year. I wish my advisor would have known about tracking. (UC)

We never had any of this when I went to school. We had to figure it out on our own using just a catalog. (UB)

Advisors sensed that tracking would clarify the academic planning process and allow students to take responsibility for their educational journeys. Prior to tracking, selecting courses was confusing and students became overwhelmed. Advisors contended that rather than take ownership for their educational choices; students would often defer responsibility to parents, friends, or advisors.

How can you take ownership of something that you don't know exists or that you are confused about? 'I do not know what in the world I am supposed to take I just take whatever is this professor, this advisor tells me. So they have not really been given an opportunity to take ownership. Well you give them a curriculum and you say. 'Look, these are milestones. You have to take this course by this semester or you are going to be behind.' Now they can take ownership. 'I have a task, I have a goal, and this is what I need to complete.' I think it helps. It may help grades as well. When you are given a deadline you know you have to get this done by this time. So it gives them goals. (UC)

They understand the process better. They are clearer now that we are laying out the path for them. Then, they can make the determination on their own that this is a high priority class. The decision making process starts to become more substantial in their own mind. (UB)

I turn the [computer] screen to them and say, ‘This is where you are now.’ I look at the map and say, ‘Write down the terms for fall and spring. Now, do you get it?’ (UC)

Advisors at all three institutions accredited tracking with students taking responsibility for their academic planning.

Increased and Earlier Communication

Advisors at each institution confirmed that students were benefiting from earlier and more frequent communications with their advisor since tracking. Before knowing much about tracking, advisors predicted that with detailed “maps” and “tracks”, students would be inclined to forgo seeing an advisor. Advisors reported that this was anything but the case. Advisors indicated that the increased structure prompted students to seek confirmation about their decision making.

“I think when you find a student that needs this structure, they are asking for affirmation. That’s why we see them so often. They just want to make sure” (UA). Even though four year plans were available to students, advisors at each institution noted students utilizing advising services earlier on and with greater frequency since tracking.

Early communication between advisors and students was facilitated at UB and UA by assigning freshmen to a specific advisor. At UB, advisors in the centralized office moved to a system of assigning freshmen undeclared students to a cohort. Each cohort was assigned to an advisor; thus, the communication pattern initiated with a clear union between student and advisor. At UA, all students who volunteered to be tracked were advised by one advisor housed within the First Year Advising program. After the first year, if a student had declared a major, the student would seek advising from a designated

advisor connected with the program. Consider what was said by an advisor at UB working with students in a cohort:

These students are assigned to you so you're responsible for tracking them. So you're communicating with them via email and Blackboard and there are all these additional systems in place that weren't before. It opens the lines of communication, which were at best, once a semester. Now your communication with them in addition to when they come to see you in the office. You're communicating with them by forms online, and notifying newsletters, and more intrusive emails, and phone calls. (UB)

At all three institutions, advisors agreed that tracking was labor intensive in that it required them to be proactive, intrusive, and purposeful in their communication with students. Advisors at UA and UC noted that they redesigned orientation sessions to reduce the ratio of advisors to students. They suggested this was necessary to insure that academic tracking was fully explained to incoming students. "We hammer it into them from orientation on. That is why we meet in such small groups at orientation. They need to know this matters" (UC).

"We have small groups at orientation that we work with since they are in a special population. They are handed this plan right at orientation. If they stick to the plan, they are told they will graduate in four years. (UA)

Another opportunity for communication emerged from increased monitoring and use of registration holds. Students who was deemed "off track" at UC or undeclared at UB were placed on hold. The hold would prevent students from registering until they

received mandatory advising. In those instances, advisors used the hold as a springboard for discussion.

I am better able to actually communicate with them. I'm monitoring them. I'm calling them in and getting them to understand this is what you need to do. That's what people respond to. They don't necessarily respond to policy. They respond to the person telling them how the policy works. (UB)

Not only did the frequency of communication change, some advisors indicated that the content did as well. Candid communication with students was necessary since tracking and advisors indicated that a more assertive approach was keeping students realistic about their progress. Advisors in prescribed tracks such as Visual and Performing Arts, Engineering, Biology and Computer Science had almost no flexibility in course options during educational planning. This meant the advisor's message was not always welcome, but always necessary:

It's hard in so many different ways because you're not always going to give good news. I am over telling students who have gotten more unsatisfactory grades than they're supposed to and they have to change their majors. In this way, it may seem punitive. (UC)

This advisor laments about having to redirect students to another major when they have fallen off track too often. This UC advisor commented:

There's more of a 'come to Jesus', sit down meeting. I mean, that is what has got to happen. We are looking at what you have to have with mapping. There is no real compromise with the milestones. You try to console them, but you are very assertive with the message that they are not going to remain in that major. (UC)

At UB, an advisor of a very demanding academic program expresses the inherent conflict faced by streetlevel bureaucrats working between the goals of students and the institution:

If I don't present them with these prerequisites, they won't be here they'll be in another college. So, there's sort of this, what's the word I want? Not chasm, but friction there. You want to be able to express concern, but you also want them to get through that damn calculus course. (UB)

A UC advisor intimates that students are benefiting from the direct approach she has developed since tracking. She now placed responsibility squarely on students for deciding what path they will take in these rapidly changing times at her university.

What I tell them is that no one is going to whistle Dixie and wave a flag and call you by name and say, 'I'm your major!' You have got to be aware and think through the process. Right now, you've got blinders on and road blocks up. (UC)

This UC advisor was able to use a student being off track as an opportunity to talk about her academic goals:

If a student is off map, then I have an opportunity to say, ' Help me understand this. You say you want to be in this major, but what you say and what you are doing is another matter. (UC)

In this statement, it appears that the advisor has been able to use the tracking system as an instrument to perform her role as an advisor. She facilitates the students' development by empowering them to evaluate and redirect their behavior. At the same time, she has attended to institutional objectives of keeping students on track with their intended major.

The messages advisors were sharing with students suggested that advisors had been focusing on the significance of the student's involvement in advising. Students were not allowed to be passive recipients during advising. Advisors found ways to communicate in a purposeful fashion with students and engage them in the process. Advising was approached as teaching rather than telling. This quote from a UC advisor addresses what she observed as development on behalf of students since tracking:

Accountability for students now...although they're feeling more pressure, they're also getting a little courage now. We could call it courage now instead of pressure. (UC)

RQ 4: What messages regarding the new role of advisors were attributed to the implementation of the system?

This final research question was posed to understand how advisors thought tracking had impacted the role of advising at their institution. The answer to this question received the most varied responses due to its complexity and the number of variables that appeared to impact sensemaking. In answering this question, advisors drew upon the context in which they worked their professional identity, prior knowledge, and outcomes since tracking. That being the case, the themes that emerged tended to resemble the institutional lines and will be presented in that manner. One exception was the difference in perceptions held by centralized advisors when compared to college advisors. This difference in understanding will be shared at the end of this section.

At UA, the philosophy, structure, and services offered within a comprehensive first year advising program provided a comfortable fit for the addition of a voluntary

tracking program. Therefore, within the centralized first year advising office, the tracking program was regarded as a compliment to previous practice:

The philosophy of First Year is basically the same since tracking. The tracking program is just one of those smaller special populations we have within our office. To be honest with you, we're seeing more and more. In our office we have all have sort of special, smaller populations. We continue to build on things and change things, but our philosophy won't change. They stay with us the whole first year...undeclared, declared, or tracked. (UA)

Advisors within UA's colleges reported that the tracking initiative had little impact on the manner in which they worked with students. Therefore, they expressed no worry about its implementation. Perhaps with the growing popularity of the program among UA's students, changes will need to be made to incorporate greater numbers. For now, college advisors defined the tracking initiative as an incentive to attract concerned parents with high-achieving students to their institution. In fact, among the college advisors, they felt students who participated in the tracking program considered themselves to be in an elite society:

Students will come in and say, 'I'm a GOT (Grad on Track) student...really demanding and expecting this level of service. It's like they are entitled to special treatment because they are in the program. They are a special population. Even if we have to by-pass other policies to get the students what they need. That's what we do. (UA)

UA college advisors seemed to suggest that tracking was an indication that their role would be increasingly shaped by market-minded students and their parents.

The UA tracking program had become a model for other programs at the institution that sought to aid students in achieving their educational goals. Similar to how initial conversations with administration described UA as ‘a university of innovation that focuses on student success, tracking was defined as an expression of the university’s priority to be at the leading edge of trends in higher education. The following quote exemplifies this observation: “The program has sort of become a model for other special populations. We continue to build on things and change things, but our philosophy wont change” (UA).

At UC, advisors were well aware of their position in the state university system. They spoke about the state’s political agenda regarding funding and graduation rates. When advisors were asked to consider why tracking had arrived at their institution, references were made about their rival institution. “I remember them [administration] talking like, ‘Well, UD has it. UD does mapping and it’s successful. Well then we’re gonna do it, too!’” (UC).

As the flagship institution had successfully implemented a tracking system that increased graduation rates, advisors at UC did not seem surprised to be following suit. The tracking system at UC closely mirrored that of the flagship institution.

UC advisors integrated tracking in a manner that would preserve their professional identity by incorporating a new vision for advising. Advisors at UC spoke about how a national professional organization on advising set forth an agenda to redefine advising. *Advising is Teaching* was the mantra guiding advisors as they implemented tracking. More than ever before, advisors found that tracking meant they

had to teach students, and sometimes the parents that planning and self-responsibility were keys to their achievement:

We still have students come in, not often, but still say ‘Mom and Dad said just have a good time your first two years. You can worry about a major later. I go, ‘Sorry, it doesn’t work that way. Mom and Dad’s era isn’t here now. It has changed.’ (UC)

Advisors at UC perceived tracking to be a sign that times were changing within the state and within their institution.

They constructed meaning by linking together their awareness of state legislation, university goals, and professional standards. Advisors at UC received praise for their efforts in implementing tracking. Administration reported that outcomes of their work revealed increased retention and graduation rates.

We just heard at one of our meetings that since tracking, our retention rate is up and that we have decreased the number of students being expelled. So, they [administrators] were giving us credit for that. (UC)

Advisors at UC were able to develop a collective sense of what the policy hoped to achieve. In that vein, they were able to create a coherent policy environment for themselves and students during increased accountability and economic hardships.

Advisors at UB expressed the greatest depth in their sensemaking process and the most diversity regarding the meaning of the tracking initiative. The deep reflections of UB advisors relates to the degree of uncertainty they experienced during implementation. It is noted that with the tracking initiative; UB advisors witnessed the restructuring of advising services, changes in leadership, and the addition of new advising positions

within the colleges. In addition, administration emphasized the institution's fragile standing among peer institutions pertaining to four-year graduation rates. Advisors struggled to construct meaning from the tracking initiative that preserved their identity in a transforming organizational culture.

Advisors at UB, both inside and outside the colleges, spoke of the tracking initiative as a commentary on their previous performance:

There's two sides of it. The first side of it is the administrative level that if we could have a better understanding of who the students are (in what major), where they are in their academic journey, we'd have a better understanding of how to plan for the courses we need to offer and how many faculty we need to hire. We don't have a handle on that. The other side is the student end. You've got students that are lost. They don't know how to get there [to their major]. If they don't know how to get from point A to point B, then they are randomly taking classes.

(UB)

Advisors indicated that while changes occurred that addressed the effectiveness of advising at their institution, uncertainty remained the measurable outcomes from such changes. "From my perspective, it would be great to have some kind of statistics to indicate how students are doing after all the changes in advising" (UB).

Another advisor had questions about the effectiveness of students declaring a major early on. Working in an office that helps students transitioning between majors, she has questions about the effectiveness of placing students on a track of prescribed courses:

I have seen no data on that [the outcomes of tracking], how many [student] are coming [for advising after being dismissed from a major]? Why are they returning [to our office for advisement on a second or third major]? What are some of the glitches that can be worked out to narrow the readvising of our students? (UB)

For some advisors at UB, both in the centralized office and in the colleges, their lack of certainty addressing their performance evaluation, led them to setting their own expectations and motivating themselves to be prepared through self-directed learning.

Personally, I evaluate myself. As far as parameters or goals (from administration), nope. That is one of the things I have trouble with on my end. There is no great purpose behind my job. (UB)

Compounding the perception that measures of success were lacking, some advisors stated there was no standard approach to the implementation or interpretation of the new system and accompanying policies. The following quote is representative of the majority of advisors interviewed at UB:

You get sucked into your own area. There is no standard way of doing this across the university. Each advising office has its own advising process and system. I am creating it as I go along. There is no great mission behind my position. (UB)

Perceived inconsistencies in implementation led to doubt over whether the changes had been successfully implemented. McCaskey (1982) contends that in environments where policies and practices are changing, when goals are not explicit or conflicting and measures of success are vague or invalid, people have more difficulty constructing meanings about their situations. They have more trouble moving to action.

All but one UB advisor spoke about the implementation of tracking as a symbol of the broader transformation occurring within their university. This following quote was representative of thoughts expressed by UB advisors regarding changes in the institution.

It [tracking] does make it little more structured than most people want it to be, but again that comes back to what is the nature of a university? A university's characters...are we, you know, free-floating or are we *you do what you gotta do to get a degree at UB?* (UB)

Following this statement, the advisor indicated that tracking was only one indicator of a larger organizational issue. His sense was that tracking was a quasi-statement about the need for effective advising, but more importantly, a statement about the organization's changing culture in competitive times. This perception was echoed by other UB advisors who shared that throughout the university, people struggled with questions surrounding the university's identity and image.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This study explored sensemaking during the implementation of academic tracking at three public universities in Florida. Sensemaking is a cognitive process occurring in organizations that allows individuals to create adaptive thoughts and behaviors to cope with change. The process is especially evident in times of uncertainty and ambiguity such as when new policies or practices are being implemented. During sensemaking, individuals focus their attention on significant cues in their environment to arrive at an interpretation of the event's meaning. This occurs with individuals at all level of the organizations; however, at the frontlines where policy is enacted and services are delivered, the sensemaking of policy actors becomes critical to policy outcomes. These frontline workers, or street level bureaucrats, use sensemaking to interpret policy's meaning and make decisions about how it can be implemented realistically. The rationale for studying the sensemaking process of street level bureaucrats comes from recent research in policy implementation, which suggests that lower level policy actors exercise discretion in enacting policy, the policy is recreated, and outcomes are impacted (Spillane, 2004, Brodtkin, 2000, Spillane, 1998). Knowing more about the sensemaking process of street level bureaucrats will help explain how gaps between the policy's intent and its practice are created, and illuminate opportunities for minimizing them.

Exploration of the sensemaking process was accomplished by using a case study design that involved collecting data from semi-structured interviews. Sixteen academic advisors from centralized and college advising offices at three public institutions participated in the study. At two of the institutions, the researcher obtained roughly equal

participation. This was not true for all sites, as one site was represented by half the participants than the other sites. The researcher planned to obtain equal representation from each site; however, one of the institutions, UA, had few participants who met the selection criteria. In quantitative studies this may present issues impacting validity and reliability. However, for this qualitative study, meaningful data was gathered even with small numbers from one site. The collected measures, as described in Chapter 3, insured that the researcher captured the participant's voice; this is sufficient for addressing concerns regarding the trustworthiness of the data. Moreover, concerns that the researcher may have missed a "key witness" can be settled by knowing that only qualified participants were interviewed, and all three volunteered. University A's tracking program was a small, voluntary initiative; thus, it produced a limited number of advisors who could be interviewed. This was not the researcher's oversight.

Tenants of Weick's (1995) theory of sensemaking and Lipsky's (1980) theory of street level bureaucracy were used to guide four main research questions. The four questions were:

- 1. What cues in the environment gained the attention of advisors which initiated their sensemaking process?*
- 2. What experiences provided opportunities for learning about the need and nature of an academic tracking system?*
- 3. How did advisors integrate the new system and accompanying policies into their daily work?*
- 4. What messages regarding the new role of advisors were attributed to the implementation of the system?*

Data were collected between March and May of 2007 and analyzed according to measures noted in Chapter Three. Data reduction methods appropriate for qualitative data were employed to reveal reoccurring themes. Themes were organized to address each of the four main research questions.

This chapter will present findings related to each of the four research questions. Implications for practice, further research, and a conclusion will also be presented in this chapter.

Summary of Findings

What cues in the environment signaled the establishment of a tracking system and initiated advisor sensemaking?

In this study, although a number of events could have signaled change, advisors focused the administrator's words and actions to construct a frame of reference for their sensemaking that addressed academic tracking. When upper level administrators spoke about the need to establish academic tracking, their announcements were received as directives rather than simply topics presented to inspire dialogue. The tone surrounding the announcement, the forum in which the announcement was made, and the players involved in the formulation of the tracking initiative all played significant roles in how advisors understood the intent of the tracking initiative.

What learning opportunities were provided for advisor to learn about the need and nature of the tracking system?

Learning opportunities in this study were categorized as either formal or informal. Formal, structured forums were those offered by administrators in each institution and leadership in professional organizations. Informal, sporadic learning occasions tended to

be organized by advisors and guided by their immediate and specific needs during implementation. All social learning opportunities, whether formal or informal, provided advisors a medium for shaping their perceptions about the new initiative.

Formal, structured settings arranged by administrators provided two significant elements during sensemaking. First, the relationships developed between administration and advisors facilitated the implementation process. Advisors received validation for their professional knowledge and emotional support for their efforts in evaluating current advising practices. Social psychologists contend that when administrators go beyond the technical aspects of the implementation process and address the impact that emotions and motivations have on sensemaking during implementation, they encourage meaningful reform (Dunning, 1999). In this study, advisors supported this finding when reporting that the leadership connected with the tracking initiative inspired their commitment to implement the policy. Administrators, who served in an advising capacity prior to assuming their upper level position, used their knowledge to bridge current practices to new procedures aimed at addressing institutional and state objectives. By listening to concerns, troubleshooting technical issues, and neutralizing feelings of frustration, administrators played a significant role in advisors' motivation to successfully implement the policy.

In cases where administrators arranged for regular meetings, they were able to guide the implementation process by planning for information sharing. In these regular meetings, advisors noted that administrators helped to defuse mounting concerns before they became detrimental to the process. Moreover, since administrators initiated new policies, formal learning opportunities allowed them to act as sensegivers by filtering

messages from external sources. They offered advisors a new perspective, one more closely aligned with institutional objectives. In this vein, they aligned advisors' sensemaking with their proposed plan.

In informal settings, advisors built collaborative networks with trusted colleagues, and increased their knowledge of the on-campus advising process. They learned how other departments assisted students and ways in which they could adjust their daily work to incorporate the tracking initiative.

This study's data supports previous research that suggests sensemaking is a social process, and social learning opportunities represent a key resource for street level workers during implementation. Hill's (2003) study addresses the value of resources for street level workers during implementation. He recommends that if administrators are trying to insure successful implementation of a policy, providing avenues for learning necessary skills and knowledge will reach farther than invoking strict bureaucratic controls. Social outlets for the construction of meaning were well received by advisors, as they offered networks of support and affirmation of their developing perspective about new practices in their institutions. Whether learning was achieved by participating in professional conferences, attending staff meetings, or consulting with colleagues, social outlets facilitated advisors' understanding of tracking during implementation. For advisors who reported engaging in opportunities for social learning, the meaning of the policy and its enactment was more consistent with colleagues in their own institution. Advisors who did not speak of instances of social learning opportunities tended to construct an understanding of the tracking initiative that differed from their colleagues; it led to variations in their enactment of the policy.

How have advisors integrated the tracking system and accompanying policies into their daily work?

Policy, by definition, tends to be vague and ambiguous. Historically, policy research focused on the failure of policy to create actual change when formulated at upper organizational levels and passed down to those on the frontline to enact (Barnett & Fudge, 1981, Sabatier & Mazmamian, 1983). Researchers exploring a top-down approach to policy indicate that upper level administrators rarely identify explicit procedures of how to implement new policy. Hence, policy enactors at the lower levels are often confounded by the logistics integrating the new policy with existing policies. The integration of tracking involved a complex interplay between professional roles, learning opportunities, and technical challenges. While the process of integration was not clearly linear, when each advisor began at the same point and ended with the same understanding, themes from the data support could be considered discrete stages of the process. The process consisted of the following stages:

- Reflecting on professional identity
- Participating in learning opportunities
- Establishing new processes
- Incorporating academic policies
- Focusing on how tracking was benefiting students

The initial response to tracking prompted advisors to reflect on the complexity of their roles. Advisors, especially those working with undeclared/undecided or transitioning students, acknowledged that their professional roles involved a dichotomy; they functioned as both an administrator bound to enforce policy and an advocate for

students. They considered their professional and organizational identities attempting to craft a response that would join administrative duties with advocacy for students.

Advisors moved from emotional responses and personal reflections to finding realistic ways to revise their daily work processes. This movement was largely facilitated by changes set forth at upper administrative levels. These administrators were credited with making changes to the structure of advising, the types of services offered by advising offices, the reclassification of students into exploratory tracks; they also mandated that students declare their majors early in their academic endeavors.

By complying with changes orchestrated by upper level administrators, advisors concluded that students were benefiting from the additional structure tracking provided. Advisors reconciled having to impose structure on students by perceiving it as a necessary step toward increasing student achievement. Since having integrated tracking, advisors perceived students were more self-responsible and proactive in their educational planning. They observed students making advising a significant part of their college experiences. By believing tracking benefited the majority of students, advisors were building coherency between institutional goals and professional objectives of facilitating student development.

What messages were attributed to tracking regarding the role of advising?

The implementation of new policy and practices becomes interpreted as symbolic of an institution's values. In this study, advisors formed interpretations of what tracking might be saying about their roles. Their sensemaking resulted in interpretations that varied due to a variety of factors including prior knowledge, life experiences, and professional identities. However, the context in which sensemaking occurred was an

overarching variable that played a profound role in molding the messages advisors attributed to the new policy. In one context marked by open communication between upper level administrators and advisors, tracking was perceived as an affirmation of the significance of advising to increase student achievement rates. In another context marked by numerous changes to advising, tracking conveyed a message that deficiencies in current advising practices may have contributed to excessive time toward graduation.

The three institutions in this study provided different contexts in which sensemaking developed. The contexts differed in four ways during implementation:

- The scope of change to advising accompanying tracking
- The degree to which changes differed from existing philosophy
- The level of involvement advisors had in decision making
- The reported outcomes since implementing new policies and practices.

One case in this study revealed an environment in which upper level administrators made large scale changes to advising. Changes in leadership, overall structure, services, and academic policies were perceived as contrary to the existing philosophy guiding advising practices. In addition, advisors reported no or minimal involvement in the decision making process. Advisors in this environment engaged in deeper levels of sensemaking to interpret the meaning of administrators' actions and develop ways of coping. In this context, advisors defined tracking as a vehicle for addressing deficits in advising practices. Advisors sensed that implementation moved too swiftly, somewhat inconsistently, and broadly across a diverse array of concerns. Questions lingered whether the implementation of tracking had achieved its desired

outcomes. The message attributed to the implementation of tracking was that the role of advising would be reshaped in accordance with leadership's vision.

In another case in this study, the sensemaking process of advisors during implementation was minimal. The context in which they worked held an existing philosophy that supported the new tracking initiative. For the most part, upper level administrators entrusted advisors with making decisions on methods to establish a tracking program formulated by the advisors. Therefore, advisors felt a sense of ownership and responsibility for establishing a program that would fit coherently within the existing structure. Advisors perceived tracking as an affirmation of their crucial roles in assisting students with transition from high school and their academic challenges, all up until their graduation from college. Tracking also conveyed a message to parents, students, and state policy makers. Establishing a tracking program was a necessary response from institutional leaders to ensure timely graduation, which had drawn the attention of public and state legislators.

Lastly, in a context where upper level administrators guided university-wide changes in advising by initially piloting the program—considering the feedback of advisors, providing ongoing learning opportunities, and creating positions for the advancement of advisors—the new policy and practices unified advising around a central purpose. After evaluating the impact of tracking, administrators credited advisors with positive outcomes such as increased retention rates, decreased dismissals, and a decrease in excess credit hours. These accolades encouraged advisors to continue with their meaningful efforts. Sensemaking in this empowering context resulted in a collective

message among advisors that their role was critical to student achievements and of their meeting institutional goals.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study suggest themes that may be meaningful beyond the context of this study. It is essential to consider how these themes can inform effective practices, specifically those occurring in higher education during policy implementation.

Three recommendations for practice are supported by this study's findings:

- Administrators should frame changes in policy in a manner that encourages street level policy actors to evaluate the effectiveness of current practices
- Frontline workers need to be involved in appropriate aspects of decision making during policy implementation
- Learning opportunities need to be provided to facilitate and guide sensemaking

Frame the Picture

Messages fashioned by administrators addressing the new initiative were the genesis for advisor sensemaking. Beyond initial announcements made by administrators pertaining to tracking, their words and actions during implementation guided the process. When positive interactions occurred between administrators and advisors, advisors were motivated to continue their commitment to policy enactment. It is reasonable to recommend that administrators be mindful of the moods they create when introducing change. Bolman and Deal (1991) discuss the significance of symbols used by leadership during organizational change. These symbols are extracted from administrative actions such as speeches, presentations, the inclusion and exclusion of particular individuals in meetings, and the appointment of new positions (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). These

symbols become a framework used by frontline workers to interpret the need for change. When administrators depict a new initiative with images of excellence, innovation, and equity, people involved in the transition can identify their efforts as a unique contribution in creating positive change. Additionally, administrators can serve as filters by determining which messages from the external environment should be celebrated, which need to be examined, and which may need to be qualified.

Another vital leadership role includes the emotional support leaders provide in times of uncertainty and change. In studies with teachers tasked with implementing reform in their classroom, research indicates that teachers are quite personally and professionally engaged, and often display strong emotional reactions to the reforms. When they determine that current practices have been questioned, devalued, or misunderstood, they become frustrated and unresponsive to administrative requests (Schmidt & Datnow, 2005). Advisors in this study declared that advising is a form of teaching. In doing so, they displayed similar negative emotions described in earlier studies with teachers. However, when advisors sensed their work was understood and valued by administration, their relationships with administration—perceived or actual—fueled positive feelings necessary to sustain the implementation process.

Takin' It to the Street

Studies in policy implementation suggest that discretion of street level bureaucrats—public service professionals responsible for delivering client services—accounts for much of the variability in policy outcomes (Spillane, 2002; Hill, 2003). While this study did not seek to correlate variations in the policy implementation with frontline discretion, notably, advisors used discretion when developing work patterns and

routines based on their unique understandings of the policy. Thus, their understandings of policy objectives produce critical information for administrators. Advisors who participated in discussions about the establishment of tracking expressed a clearer understanding of how its implementation would modify student behavior to meet institutional goals. When advisors were included in decision-making during certain phases of implementation, they assumed a level of responsibility for its design and success. Their inclusion in the process allowed them to shift from a personal perspective in their sensemaking efforts to one that was collective and collegial. Hence, administrators who acknowledge discretionary professional roles at various organizational levels of during implementation should consider inviting them to participate in discussions when appropriate.

Provide Learning Opportunities

Advisors who participated in learning opportunities tended to express a clearer understanding of the reasons for the tracking initiative, or the need, and how to integrate its nature into their daily work. Self-directed reflection and talking with close colleagues allowed advisors to engage in sensemaking that created meaning of the new initiative. However, limited interaction with formal learning opportunities tended to lead to subjective meanings. These policy definitions and their roles in its implementation went unchallenged and remained vague. Leaders should play a role in shaping sensemaking during implementation beyond initial messages at its outset. They can create learning opportunities, formal and informal, during implementation that can guide the direction of sensemaking. This is accomplished by promoting its occurrence in a professional, collegial environment rather than exclusive circles of friends.

Weick (1995) recommends to this effect by suggesting administrators *talk the walk*, rather than *walk the talk*. He describes a pattern of learning about what is believed and begins with action (walking). This culminates with thinking and reflecting on actions (talking). Without an opportunity to act and then reflect, a person's frame of reference remains resistant to change. It remains vital for administrators to create opportunities for testing new practices, and then evaluate their benefits. By follow-ups on trials and errors with discussions about what was experienced and learned, adaptive thinking and behavior will more likely emerge over time.

Further Research

Designing studies that focus on the sensemaking of lower level policy actors, charged with implementing change, can offer insights into the gap between policy and practice. This study was designed to explore the process, but further research will help explain the process.

While this study did not seek to identify differences in how professionals at various organizational levels make sense of statewide policy objectives, this study's findings suggest that research designed to examine this possible contrast is warranted. In this study, administrators influenced the sensemaking of advisors. This, it would be prudent to examine how the sensemaking process of administrators compared and contrasted to those at lower levels. Do administrators arrive at different meanings about the same initiative? What variables from the environment, both external and internal to the institution, impacted their sensemaking on the issue? What information is considered when administrators select which messages to use in their role as sensegivers? Understanding differences and similarities between administrators' and lower level

workers' sensemaking may illuminate discrepancies in policy interpretations during sensemaking.

This study was not designed to uncover how individuals who participate in social learning opportunities, both formal and informal, and those who remain isolated make sense differently. What exactly occurs during collective sensemaking that explains how meanings of the policy message are constructed? Can social learning opportunities be constructed to offer realistic scenarios that allow for practicing sensemaking? Further research could address these issues and provide recommendations for those leading policy changes in their organizations.

In conducting the interviews, it became apparent that some advisors had an awareness of their own sensemaking processes. By examining their own thinking, they made adjustments to oversimplifications in favor of more sophisticated mental frameworks. Research can address whether an awareness and understanding of the sensemaking process expedites the formation of adaptive thoughts and behaviors. Answering this question might suggest a topic for professional development for those involved in organizational change initiatives.

After analyzing the data from this study, policies and practices associated with academic tracking were responded to as a symbol of changes within higher education. Perhaps reviewing literature that addresses the impact of organizational change on people's thinking during implementation would provide a deeper understanding of the connection among policy implementation, organizational change, and sensemaking in future research.

Future research can offer a richer picture of what variables impact the sensemaking of street level bureaucrats, and whether the delivery of policy truly reflects their understanding. Concerning the first point, the researcher could have collected more information on the background of each advisor. Data such as age, prior work experiences, years in advising, and educational background were often referred to by the advisor, but not systematically collected at the outset. This type of information may have provided a more comprehensive advisor profile. Comparing the profiles of advisors may have illuminated factors that impacted their initial reactions to tracking and ongoing sensemaking. Addressing the second point, future research could explore whether street level workers actually enact policy according to their understanding of it, or whether barriers such as technical challenges or lack of authority impede connecting their understanding with their enactment. Observations could have been conducted to triangulate this study's data as a means of discovering whether advisors' understanding of tracking were detectable in their interactions with students. Finally, the methodology in this study could be strengthened in future studies by examining only one institution and following the participants through a course of time. The phases of their sensemaking could be documented in a phenomenological approach, well suited for research exploring a process such as sensemaking.

Conclusion

At three public institutions, institutional leaders responded to a statewide objective of increasing four-year graduation rates by establishing a system of academic tracking. Advisors tasked with implementing tracking engaged in sensemaking to interpret what message tracking conveyed about their roles. It would also determine how to incorporate tracking into their daily work. Their sensemaking was initiated by the

actions and words of upper level administration, and was shaped throughout the integration of the tracking initiative. Sensemaking was facilitated for advisors who engaged in social learning opportunities; as they provided a means of addressing obstacles, sharing experiences, and gaining needed support during implementation.

Issues of professional identity, diverse work experiences, educational backgrounds, and environmental contexts impacted sensemaking. Even with varied conclusions addressing what message tracking conveyed about the role of advising, one message was most common among advisors: tracking was only one form of change visible in higher education. Advisors witnessed changes in higher education that expanded beyond their departments by funding structures and the economic climate in the state. By engaging in sensemaking, advisors drew upon their prior knowledge and experience, but also considered their environments for context clues to help them understand why change was occurring. In their search for understanding, the majority of them expressed an awareness of the tenuous position administrators occupy when trying to formulate institutional policy, one that will guide existing practice toward meeting the state's needs. With that awareness, advisors integrated tracking accepting that it was not a measure to define the limits of their efforts with students. They could still build unique relationships with students within the framework of the new policy. Whether advisors understood how their sensemaking may have defined the limits and effectiveness of tracking, and its intended outcomes, remains to be seen.

Research in policy implementation suggested links between strategic sensemaking and organizational performance (Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993). The relationship among cognition, action, and outcomes suggests that sensemaking is the medium for

organizational change. When lower level policy actors are not cognizant of the espoused meaning of a policy, the discretion they exercise in their service to students, clients, or customers will undoubtedly fall short of producing anticipated outcomes. Moreover, if streetlevel bureaucrats incorporate new policy into existing practices in a merely superficial manner, the hope for real reform is dismal. Knowing how and what lower level policy actors think about a policy is defined by more than merely uttering politically-correct sentiments of support for colleagues. Leaders who appreciate the impact of sensemaking on the policy process will have gained valuable insights to initiate and guide change. The continued study of implementation from a cognitive approach will encourage practitioners to develop a collective understanding among policy actors at various levels of the organization. This will effectively implement policies, create coherent policy environments, and maximize sustainable organizational changes.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Contents of Email

Dear colleague,

Please allow me to introduce myself and request that you share your insight in a study I am conducting entitled, *The Advisor's Role during the Implementation of Academic Tracking Systems at Three Public Universities*.

I am a doctoral student in the dissertation phase of my Higher Education Leadership program at the University of South Florida.

I am sure you are aware that in the past five years, students, faculty, and administrators have been affected by unprecedented changes occurring in higher education. For instance, at four of Florida's top universities, the advent of academic tracking systems have signified a trend toward accountability and efficiency. My proposed study seeks to provide an opportunity for learning about the implementation of academic tracking systems in Florida institutions from advisors and coordinators of advising units.

I am asking for your participation in this study by agreeing to an interview. Please respond to this email if you wish to participate in the study.

Additional information will be forthcoming via phone call regarding a date, time, and location on your campus for your personal interview.

Respectfully yours,

Jeany Gonzalez
jgonzal@coedu.usf.edu
813-924-2821

Appendix B: Confirmation Email

Dear colleague,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study, *The Advisor's Role during the Implementation of Academic Tracking Systems at Three Public Universities*. Your interview will be a unique contribution to the findings. Again, the purpose of the study is to explore the implementation of the academic tracking system and accompanying policies at your institution.

My hope is that the findings of this study will be of use to administrators in higher education as they engage in policy implementation and organizational change.

From our communication, our scheduled appointment is for __ (day _____ at
__(time)_____. I will meet you _ (location)_____.
I will email you one week prior to the interview to confirm.

Again, thank you for your interest in participating in the study.
I look forward to meeting with you in the near future!

Sincerely,
Jeany Gonzalez

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the study. The purpose of the study is to explore the implementation of the academic tracking system at your institution. If there are any questions that seem vague or unclear, please feel free to stop me and ask a question. I may also ask additional questions to be certain I fully understand your response.

- 1) I would like to begin by asking you to tell me a bit about the tracking system/program developed at your institution.
- 2). How did you first learn that your institution was considering implementing an academic tracking system? For instance, did you attend a meeting where the tracking system was discussed; did you receive emails about its establishment, perhaps conversations with colleagues?
- 3).What messages did you receive about the need for implementing a new system/process in advising? For instance, what was the reason given for its establishment, how it would impact advising, the expected outcomes of establishing system?
- 4).What are your own thoughts about the need for implementing a tracking system?
- 5). Did the implementation of the system require any changes in policy or practice regarding when and how students declare and change majors?
- 6). Did the identification/classification of students change?
- 7). Has the advisement of students changed with the advent of a tracking system? By advisement, I am referring to the way you communicate with students about their major and course selection, the type of relationship you have with students, the level of documentation required...

Appendix C: (Continued)

8) Do you find you have made any adjustments in how you work with students? If so, in what ways and how have you been able to make necessary changes?

9). Do you think the role of advising has been affected by the implementation of an academic tracking system? Why or why not?

10). Before we conclude, is there something I should have asked you about that I didn't?

Thanks again for your participation.

You will be receiving a copy of the study when it is completed

**Social/Behavioral
Adult Informed Consent
University of South Florida**

Information for Participants of Research Studies

The following information is being presented to you to assist in your decision making regarding your participation in a minimal risk research study. Please read carefully. Address all questions or concerns with the Person in Charge of the Study.

Title of the Study:	<u>Advisor’s Role during the Implementation of Academic Tracking Systems at Three Public Universities</u>
Principal Investigator:	Jeany Gonzalez
Study location:	University of South Florida, Tampa University of Central Florida, Orlando Florida State University, Tallahassee

You have been asked to participate because of your position during the implementation of the academic tracking system at your institution.

General Information about the Research Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the sensemaking of advisors, coordinators, and mid-level administrators during the implementation of their academic tracking system. The intent is to more fully understand how this complex cognitive process impacts the implementation of new initiatives and leads to change, not only in daily processes, but change within the organization. The information from this study will enhance the breadth and depth of current policy research studies by approaching implementation from the analytic viewpoint of approximately 30 professionals involved on the frontline of the policy experience.

Plan of Study

Your contribution to this study will consist of granting an interview to the principal investigator. Depending on the depth you choose to provide, interviews will take approximately 1 hour. Interviews will be audio taped.

Payment for Participation

Your participation is voluntary and you will not receive payment for your participation.

Risk and Benefits

There are no known risks to participating in this study. You will not directly benefit from participating. However, by taking part, the overall benefit is that you have shared your insight regarding your experience.

Appendix D: (Continued)

Your consent- by signing this form, I agree that:

- I have fully read or have had read and explained to me this informed consent form describing a research project.
- I have had the opportunity to question one of the persons in charge of this research and have received satisfactory answers.
- I understand that I am being asked to participate in research. I understand the risks and benefits, and I freely give my consent to participate in the research project outlined in this form, under the conditions indicated in it.
- I have been given a signed copy of this informed consent form, which is mine to keep.

Investigator statement to be

I certify that this participant is being provided with an informed consent form that was approved by the University of South Florida's Institutions Review Board that contains the nature, demands, risks, and benefits involved in participating in this study. I further certify that a phone number and email is being provided in the event of further questions.

Signature of Participant

Printed name of Participant Date

Jeany Gonzalez _____

Signature of the Investigator or
Authorized research investigator(s)
Designated by the Principal Investigator

Print name of investigator Date

About the Author

Jean McCarthy Gonzalez is the daughter of James and Jean McCarthy, first-generation immigrants from Ireland and Italy respectively. As one of five children growing up in the Northeast, family, faith, education, and a strong work ethic were values that guided her desire to enter the field of education. She earned a Bachelor's degree in Social Science Education and taught in several public schools, then a Masters degree in Counselor Education which allowed her to serve as a school counselor. Since working in the public school system, she has found her home in student affairs in higher education. Entering the Ed. D. program in Higher Education at the University of South Florida completed Jean's formal education. However, she continues her lifelong education through professional development in student affairs, research in higher education, teaching leadership courses, and the invaluable lessons that come from raising two incredible children.