Enhancing Student Engagement: Regional Campus Students’ Access to High Impact Practices and Co-Curricular Organizations

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ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: REGIONAL CAMPUS STUDENTS’ ACCESS TO HIGH IMPACT PRACTICES AND CO-CURRICULAR ORGANIZATIONS

A Dissertation in Practice
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the Department of Higher Education The University of Mississippi

by

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ABSTRACT

Regional campuses serve a vital role in today's higher education landscape, extending access to college education for underserved locations and populations. The University of Mississippi’s university system has five regional campuses. The students at a regional campus, like their traditional main campus counterparts, aspire to attain bachelor’s or graduate degrees. However, regional campus students often exhibit characteristics more akin to community college or non-traditional students.

While literature on regional campuses is limited, ample research supports the positive impact of student involvement in higher education. Even more limited is research on participation levels of non-traditional students in co-curricular organizations and high-impact practices (HIPs) at regional campuses. This assessment aims to delve into and address the challenges surrounding low student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs specifically at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus.

The assessment's primary objectives are to identify barriers hindering participation, analyze disparities in involvement across various programs, and propose strategies to enhance student engagement. The assessment will employ a mixed-methods approach, utilizing surveys for quantitative analysis, interviews for qualitative insights,
and an environmental scan to evaluate current program landscapes and identify areas for augmentation.

The findings and subsequent recommendations will offer actionable insights to university stakeholders. These insights will enable the development of tailored interventions, fostering an environment that is more inclusive, supportive, and engaging. The ultimate goals of this assessment at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus are to increase degree completion rates, elevate the quality of educational experiences, and enhance student participation. Importantly, the recommendations stemming from this assessment can be implemented across all regional campuses within the University of Mississippi.
DEDICATION

To my family and friends who have supported me, and encouraged me to keep going through this process. Especially my mother, who sent a text every day to see if I had finished yet.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to say thank you to my committee; Dr. Amy Wells Dolan, Dr. Katie Busby, Dr. Ryan Niemeyer, and Dr. Whitney Webb. Their guidance, input, and encouragement throughout this process has been invaluable.
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**Co-Curricular:** Student engagement opportunities tied to the academic curriculum, that can result in academic credit. Co-curricular and extra-curricular are sometimes used interchangeably, however, “co” is defined as together with, while “extra” means outside of (Merriam-Webster, 2023). This assessment specifically examines activities that are collaborative to academics.

**Non-Traditional Students:** College students possessing characteristics including higher age upon entry, part-time enrollment, married, family responsibilities, work responsibilities, or place bound.

**Regional Campus:** Educational institutions geographically located away from the main university campus. At the University of Mississippi regional campuses include Booneville, Desoto, Grenada, Rankin, and Tupelo, Mississippi. The main campus is located in Oxford, Mississippi.
MANUSCRIPT I: LITERATURE REVIEW
INTRODUCTION

The state of Mississippi is consistently ranked as the poorest state in the United States (World Population Review, 2022). Low educational attainment can be a key contributing factor to poverty, and in a rural state like Mississippi accessibility to higher education can be an issue. That is why regional campuses play a vital role in the Mississippi higher education landscape. Regional campuses in Mississippi serve an important role in providing access to higher education, addressing geographic and economic barriers, offering affordable and flexible options, and promoting workforce development and economic growth. While regional campuses may help address some issues facing Mississippi when it comes to attaining higher education, higher education as a whole currently faces several issues. Some of the issues facing higher education institutions include rising costs, declining enrollment, technology integration, education delivery methods, student mental health, increased focus on applied learning and graduate employability, and falling student retention and completion rates (SEAtS, 2022). Each of these issues can be addressed in various ways, but for this study we will specifically examine the possibility of participation in High Impact Practices (HIPs) and co-curricular organizations to address falling student retention and completion rates. Regional campuses have the same responsibility as main campuses when it comes to ensuring students’ success and educational goal achievement. The findings and implementations from this study will help to address ways to improve student completion rates, ultimately increasing the number of Mississippians with a degree and improving falling completion rates of higher education institutions.
The pursuit of higher education is valuable to individuals and society, in furtherance of what Labaree (1997) considers the three distinguishable goals of higher education: social mobility, social efficiency, and democratic equality. Society as a whole, the people, the state, and donors spend a tremendous amount of money on higher education to attain these goals, representing the varied interests of consumers, citizens, and taxpayers who often see education as a private good or public good. For example, consumers value degree attainment for the social mobility that helps them to compete for social position. Taxpayers think about social efficiency where the educational focus is on training workers for economic stability and development of communities, and citizens think about the value of higher education for preparing citizens full participation in democratic societies. (Labaree, 1997).

McCabe (2000) stated that as many as four-fifths of high school graduates would require some postsecondary education. Later, in 2004, Pennington pointed out that college graduates earn almost a million dollars more throughout their working lives than those with just a high school diploma, making it is clear that earning a baccalaureate degree is the most significant rung on the economic ladder (Kuh et al, 2006).

For the state of Mississippi, education is critical to addressing poverty. The state of Mississippi is ranked as the poorest state in the United States with the poverty rate at 18.8%, which is double that of the poverty rates among the wealthiest states (World Population Review, 2022). Inheritable poverty, unemployment rates, low educational attainment, low levels of financial well-being, and the systematic exclusion of some people from fully utilizing the nation's institutions are just a few factors impacting poverty rates and the financial well-being of Mississippians (World Population Review, 2022). The average graduation rate from college in the state of Mississippi stands at 53.22%, just below the national average of 62%. However, the
excessive poverty rate means higher education institutions in Mississippi must work even harder to help students attain college degrees.

Regional campuses are a valuable resource for student success, especially in largely rural states such as Mississippi because they help to provide access to education for people who may not have any other way to get the education they need. The University of Mississippi’s regional campuses only offer junior, senior, and graduate-level courses, as each regional campus partners with a nearby community college. The University of Mississippi regional campuses are located on the community college campus or in the same building as the community college. For this reason, all University of Mississippi regional campus’ students are transfer students who have either completed an associate's degree or completed their first- and second-year student-level courses at another location.

There are many reasons students decide to attend a regional campus. Fonseca and Bird (2007) believe that “students are fundamentally place-bound… [and] desire education within a 30-minute commuting range” (p. 1), while a 2011 study by Hoyt and Howell showed convenience-related factors like scheduling, having fewer (but longer) classes, and location were the most frequently mentioned justifications. No matter the reason for being chosen, like their main campus, branch campuses are accountable for making sure that their students succeed and complete their learning goals.

In order to help students succeed and complete their learning goals, higher education institutions implement and invest in numerous strategies to promote degree attainment, including academic support programs, career advising, counseling services, and student support services. Initially, colleges encourage students to pick a career path in an area that they are passionate
about or connected to in some way. They then work to build support around this choice, including co-curricular support like student organizations and High Impact Practices (HIPs).

Kuh (2008) identified HIPs as: (a) first-year seminars and experiences, (b) common intellectual experiences, (c) learning communities, (d) writing-intensive courses, (e) collaborative assignments and projects, (f) undergraduate research, (g) diversity/global learning, (h) service learning/community-based learning, (i) internships, and (j) capstone courses and projects. The HIPs were studied comprehensively and found to carry significant benefits for the students (Kuh, 2008). Additionally, studies have shown a positive correlation between engagement in co-curricular student organizations and retention (Astin, 1993; Fredin, Fuchsteiner, & Portz, 2015; Kuh et al, 2007; Tinto, 1993).

Even though research exists on the relationship between engagement, participation and student success, an examination has not been conducted in the context of public university's regional campus settings, or on regional campus students. This study seeks to understand the experiences of students participating in degree-related co-curricular student organizations and HIP, along with their perceptions of the impact participation had on their degree completion persistence.
GUIDING QUESTIONS

In order to better understand the co-curricular participation and HIP experiences of regional campus students enrolled at UM Tupelo and how these participation experiences may have influenced student persistence and success, this study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do students perceive their experiences participating in co-curricular organizations and HIPs?
2. From the students’ perspective, how did participation influence persistence in degree completion, if at all?
3. What supports enhance the co-curricular participation of UM Tupelo students?
4. What barriers to participation do students identify?
As someone with a master’s degree in public relations who works as a communications specialist for the University of Mississippi Tupelo and Booneville regional campuses, I am very passionate about engagement and involvement. Through my personal and professional life, I have been able to see the benefits of being involved in various organizations, activities, and events where I have engaged with people of all types. This section will describe my professional and personal connection to my problem of practice, existing assumptions, and why I feel there is a necessity for the exploration of this topic.

Personal Background

Born in Savannah, Tennessee, I am an only child and the oldest grandchild on both my mother's and father's sides of the family. My grandparents owned a sporting goods store, and I spent significant time there throughout my childhood, engaging with the customers. I believe this is where I developed my love of engagement and interaction. I cannot remember when I have been unable to engage any person that crossed my path. This trait proved beneficial as I aged, giving me the confidence to be a cheerleader in high school, lead prosecutor for the mock trial team, hold various officer positions in numerous clubs and eventually serve as class president to approximately 300 students. I had no fear of speaking in front of large crowds, and graduation where I addressed hundreds of people. As I went into college, I was able to excel at public speaking, take part in leadership seminars, be active on various organizational committees, and openly communicate with my professors and classmates.

As a college student, I have had the opportunity to attend different types of higher
education institutions. As a senior in high school, I began my college journey by taking part in dual-credit courses for college credit. I then attended a regional community college to earn an associate's degree in business management, followed by an accelerated distance learning program through a private university to earn my bachelor's degree in business administration. After completing my bachelor's degree, I spent a few years working in management on both the corporate and non-profit sides. Realizing my love for engagement, I returned to a large public four-year university to earn my master's degree in public relations, where I also worked as a graduate assistant. During my journey, I found out how much I enjoyed working in higher education and being in a university setting. This brought me to my current position as a communications specialist for the University of Mississippi Division of Outreach, where I work with regional campuses and many non-traditional students.

**Professional Background**

In my professional background, engagement has been a vital part of every position I have held. Prior to returning to graduate school for my master's degree in public relations, my position as a manager for a retail corporation and later for a non-profit, required constant engagement and involvement in the community. The time spent participating in community organizations and events and engaging with community members and leaders allowed me to build connections and garner support that I continue to draw upon today.

**Key Assumptions**

As I research this topic, I want to remain cognizant of some assumptions. The first assumption is that students on regional campuses do not have access to all the services and opportunities available on the main campus. An environmental scan evaluating the current availability of co-curricular organizations and use of HIPs at the University of Mississippi
Tupelo regional campus will address this assumption. The second assumption is that regional campus students wish to participate in co-curricular organizations and HIPs but cannot due to barriers. This assumption will be addressed when gathering data. Evaluating the barriers to participation will be especially important when examining this topic through the lens of non-traditional student perspectives. The third assumption is that students attending a regional campus are not interested in participating in organizations. Some students do not wish to participate, while others may be unaware of the benefits they will gain through involvement, which is why there is a need to purvey the relationship between involvement and success in college to them.

**Significance of Topic Research**

Stressing the necessity and benefit of student engagement and involvement is imperative to increase success rates and a message that needs to be conveyed to students and administrators in higher education. The necessity of engagement and involvement in higher education is often overlooked in the effort to meet the demand for affordable degrees through attainable measures. As previously stated, institutions spend significant time and resources to recruit and retain students. Although we know involvement is a key component to retention, there is a lack of literature examining co-curricular organization and HIP participation at regional campuses, what regional campus students experience in relation to this participation, and how these experiences influence student success. A more thorough investigation of the students at regional campuses HIP and co-curricular participation correlation to student success would benefit both higher education scholars and student affairs professionals.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, we [marketers] are seeing the emergence of the desire for experience-driven opportunities, perhaps resulting from the months in lockdown and
the lack of access to events, experiences, and engagement. Many people, including students, are seeking the opportunity to be a part of something and develop a connection with others that was lost during the Covid-19 pandemic. While students express a desire to be involved and engage, they often do not realize the impact co-curricular participation can have on their higher education experience and their life after college, as research has shown that involvement impacts student outcomes upon graduation (Ethington, Smart & Pascarella, 1988; Pascarella, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Co-curricular involvement can offer students networking and skill-development opportunities that can significantly influence their career paths. Scholars are now finding that employability skills and career readiness are receiving increased focus as an outcome of earning a college degree. The participation in activities and learning experiences that come from participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs can cultivate a skillset that becomes transferable to future careers. Based on findings from their study of quantity and quality in co-curricular involvement, Vetter et al. (2019) suggested that students benefit from investing deeply in one or two meaningful co-curricular experiences, and that student activities professionals should “seek to identify visible pathways for co-curricular engagement on campus that foster student leadership, community building, and individual meaning-making” (p. 39).
This study seeks to better understand the co-curricular participation and HIP experiences of regional campus students enrolled at the University of Mississippi Tupelo and how these participation experiences may have influenced student persistence and success. This better understanding will be instrumental to regional campuses in developing new, and enhancing current meaningful co-curricular experiences for the success of their students. The term student success can have various meanings and in higher education is broadly used in reference to retention-persistence-graduation (RPG). For the purpose of this study, success will specifically refer to persistence to degree completion. This study's conceptual framework has three elements: student participation, degree-related co-curricular organizations and HIPs, and degree attainment at regional campuses. This section will discuss each component of the conceptual framework and how it will be used. A detailed illustration of the conceptual framework for this study can be seen in Figure 1 depicting what the author expects to discover as a result of the study. It identifies the variables important to the research and demonstrates how they may be correlated. The definition of conceptual framework according to Walden University (2021), "conceptual framework includes one or more formal theories (in part or whole) as well as other concepts and empirical findings from the literature. It shows relationships among these ideas and how they relate to the research study."
Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework Map
Student Participation, Engagement, and Involvement

The first conceptual framework element in this study is student participation, engagement, and involvement. According to the Center for Postsecondary Research (2018), student engagement refers to two aspects of college life: the amount of time and effort students devote to their studies and other educational pursuits, as well as how institutions design their curricula and other opportunities to encourage participation in pursuits that have been empirically linked to student learning. Studies have consistently demonstrated the correlation between student involvement, student retention rates, and academic success (Astin, 1984, 1993; Hu, 2011; Kuh, 2001; Stoecker et al., 1988; Tinto, 1993). Much of the research around student engagement, participation, and involvement stems from Astin (1984), who defines involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 300). Astin’s (1984, 1993) theory of student involvement states that participation in worthwhile educational activities directly correlates with a student's gains and performance in college. Additionally, the students must spend a significant amount of energy into this commitment. According to Tinto (1993), student involvement promotes retention, while Stoecker, Pascarella, and Wolfle (1988) posited that participation impacts overall student outcomes upon graduation.

Tinto also described the importance of how individual factors interact with institutional experiences, both academically and socially, in his longitudinal model of departure (Tinto, 1993, p. 114, Figure 2). The probability of persisting in college has been demonstrated to increase with higher social engagement levels (Hu, 2011). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) describes engagement as the amount of
time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities (Lundquist, 2020).
Figure 2.

*Tinto’s Longitudinal Model of Student Departure*

Most of the research on involvement and engagement has been conducted on traditional college students. Traditional college undergraduate students’ characteristics generally include enrolling in college right after high school graduation and an age range of 18 to 23; non-traditional undergraduate students are typically older than 24 or have stopped attending college for a while (Rabourn et al., 2018). Additional distinctive characteristics of non-traditional students according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) include at least one of the following: delayed enrollment after high school, part-time enrollment in education, full-time employment, financial independence from parents, caring for dependents, or did not complete high school (Choy, 2002). The distinctive qualities of non-traditional students make it difficult to replicate the co-curricular activities that are available to traditional students. Consideration should be given to altering co-curricular experiences to accommodate non-traditional learners’ personal and professional demands, as opposed to trying to persuade them to participate in activities intended for traditional students.

Tucker (2003) concluded that non-traditional students struggled to strike a balance between their career and family responsibilities and were unable to participate in other university activities. Additionally, studies have shown that non-traditional students place a greater emphasis on progress in their profession (Croix, 2006; Graham & Gisi, 2000). In a 2006 survey, NSSE found significant differences in participation levels of non-traditional versus traditional students in both co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, with traditional student participation levels being almost double those of their non-traditional counterparts. The same survey found a much higher percentage of non-traditional student participation in academic, course-related activities (Rabourn et al.,
Based on these NSSE survey findings, implications for non-traditional students could be negative in relation to involvement equating to success. A 2011 study by Shouping Hu examining the relationship between student engagement in college activities and student persistence in college indicated a non-linear link between student engagement and the probability of persisting. The study found that “even though a higher level of social engagement was related to an increased probability of persisting, a higher level of academic engagement was negatively related to such probability” (Hu, 2011, p. 97). It is counter-intuitive that students with high levels of academic engagement have a lesser propensity to stick with their studies than do students with moderate levels of engagement. However, research by Kuh et al. (2000) may be able to explain this occurrence. The authors created a typology of college students based on student engagement in various campus activities using student responses to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ). Kuh et al. (2000) discovered that 15% of college students focus primarily on academic activities and put little effort into other college activities, referring to this group as "grinds." Comparing the gains these students make from college to those made by other categories of students, they are consistently low, only ranking above the typology of “disengaged” (Hu, 2011). Drawing upon the characteristics of students, and the findings related to academic versus social engagement on persistence, the student participation and involvement component of the conceptual framework will help determine the methodology and analyze data.

**Degree-Related Co-Curricular Student Organizations and High Impact Practices**

Ultimately, student engagement can take many forms, such as collective learning and interactions with peers, faculty, and campus. The second conceptual framework
element of this study will specifically focus on student engagement, involvement, and participation in degree-related co-curricular student organizations and High Impact Practices (HIPs). The term co-curricular does not always apply the same way or to the same organizations across different higher education institutions. Bell and Hewerdine (2016) refer to student-led, content-based organizations as a type of community of learners or affinity group, while Chickering and Reisser (1993) refer to co-curricular activities as campus events closely connected to classroom learning. Other definitions and attributions to the meaning of co-curricular activities include Klesse and D’Onofrio (2000), who said that co-curriculars are structured to complement the formal curriculum in support of the broad mission of the university, while Rutter and Mintz (2016) posited that co-curriculars intend to enhance, augment, and align with the standard curriculum. This study will use as a basis the definition set forth by The Glossary of Education Reform (Sabbott, 2013). This definition stated that co-curricular activities, programs, and educational opportunities are those that in some way enhance what students learn in the classroom, i.e., are related to or replicate the academic curriculum (Sabbott, 2013).

High Impact Practices are those encouraged by educational institutions, and activities participated in by students that are identified by prior research as boosting advances in the engagement indicator scales of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and that are also attributed with fostering retention and persistence among college students (Di Maggio, 2017; Kuh, 2009). HIP engagement experiences can be curricular or co-curricular in nature. Learning communities and particular common educational experiences (such as writing-intensive courses and freshmen seminars), service-learning or community service activities, research with faculty outside of
classroom requirements, internship experiences, study abroad, and culminating senior experiences are the HIPs that promote higher scores on the NSSE engagement indicator themes, according to Kuh (NSSE, 2017).

In addition to the previously mentioned student retention and academic success, some other benefits that can come from participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs include: opportunities for professional development, the chance to meet others with shared interests, social engagement, the development of relevant skills, and a creative outlet to share ideas. Co-curriculurs and HIPs can include research-intensive experiences, internships and externships, study-abroad opportunities, innovation activities, and community involvement. The degree-related co-curricular student organizations and HIPs component of the framework will be used to frame the research questions in this study.

**Degree Attainment and Persistence at Regional Campuses**

The third conceptual framework element this study will look at is persistence and degree attainment at regional campuses. Regional college campuses, or branch campuses, have seen significant growth over the past decades. According to Fonseca and Bird (2007), this can be primarily attributed to location, referring to data showing 79% of students attend college in their home state, most of them within a few hours' drive. They speculated that many students are "fundamentally place-bound: limited in their opportunities by financial constraints, family responsibilities, personal characteristics, lifestyle choices, or combinations of these factors" (Fonseca & Bird, 2007, p. 2).

Fonseca and Bird (2007) also discussed that even with branch campuses' growth, they continue to be largely ignored in academic literature, with the collection of separate branch campus statistics by the National Center for Education Statistics stopping in 1986.
Lack of information is problematic because branch campuses are vastly different from a university's main campus in both what they offer and the type of students serviced. For example, the University of Mississippi's regional campuses only offer junior, senior, and graduate-level courses, as each regional campus partners with a nearby community college. The University of Mississippi regional campuses are located on the community college campus or in the same building as the community college. For this reason, all University of Mississippi regional campus’ students are transfer students who have either completed an associate's degree or completed their first- and second-year student-level courses at another location. Many of these students are not traditional college students and fit into the characteristics from Fonseca and Bird. Because persistence is a requirement for completion, theories of student persistence, including Bean’s Student Attrition Model and Tinto’s Student Integration Model, are the best way to comprehend the components that influence effective college completion (DesJardins et al., 2003). The supporting theories will be examined in detail in Manuscript II. This conceptual framework element will help determine the methodology and analyze data.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Expanding upon the elements of the conceptual framework, this literature review will examine four prominent themes relevant to the relationship, if any, between student participation in degree-related co-curricular student organizations or HIPs and persistence to degree completion at regional campuses. The first section of articles provides an overview of regional college campuses, their history, and how they and their students vary from students attending main college campuses. The second section will examine co-curricular organizations and HIPs, what they are, possible benefits, and their role in college student success. The third section will examine participation in these organizations and involvement theories predominantly based on those of Astin and Tinto. Finally, the fourth section will examine retention, persistence, and degree attainment or graduation (RPG).

Regional Campuses

Overview

A branch campus is defined simply by the Federal Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education. A branch campus is defined as "a location of an institution that is geographically distinct and independent from the main campus of an institution" in § 600.2 of the Code of Federal Regulations (Institutional Eligibility under the Higher Education Act, 2016). A branch campus is described in the definition as being permanent, having its own staff and administration, having its own budget and hiring
capacity, and offering courses that can be used to earn a degree, certificate, or other credential (Institutional Eligibility under the Higher Education Act, 2016). The term "branch campus" is also defined by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commissions on Colleges (SACSCOC), for each of its member institutions. A branch campus, as defined by the SACSCOC (2016), is a location of an institution that is geographically apart from and independent of a main campus. The branch campus is additionally described as a permanent establishment that offers courses that lead to degrees, certifications, or certificates, has its own faculty and administration, and has its own recruiting and budgetary authority (SACSCOC, 2016).

Fonseca and Bird (2007) broke down some different types of regional campuses, their varying typology, and the students they accommodate. Some, like the regional campuses of the University of Mississippi, offer the opportunity to complete a bachelor's degree with junior and senior-level classes together with post-baccalaureate degrees, such as a master's program. Community colleges in the area send students to these campuses. Other universities' regional campuses feature distinctive programs or carry out specific research not hosted by the main campus. Some regional campuses are partnered with a different organization that might only provide two-year technical programs, and others serve only those who are completing the requirements to transfer (Fonseca & Bird, 2007).

History

Regional campuses are not a new or even a somewhat recent concept. Regional campuses date back to the 1800s. The establishment of university regional campuses serves, in part, to support the educational advancement of students in underserved communities. The first community college satellite campus originated from the Morrill
Act of 1890, when a need to educate the general population was determined after the Civil War, bringing about the emergence of land grant institutions. In order to reach populations living in rural areas, educational extension services were used. After World War II, more satellite campuses were developed to meet the demand of new students brought about by the GI Bill (Vaughan, 2000). According to Dessoff (2011), a similar rise in student population exists today and has led to increases in regional campuses. Even with an increase in the number of regional campuses, this area of higher education continually remains largely ignored in the academic literature, with the collection of separate branch campus statistics by the National Center for Education Statistics stopping in 1986 (Fonseca & Bird 2007). The limited resources available on regional campuses covers a wide area of topics in their regard, thus making it difficult to find specific regional campus data. Another difficulty in assimilating regional campus data is the combination of information and statistics into the total population by reporting colleges and universities.

Even what should be the most basic information regarding regional campuses is difficult to find. One problematic example is determining the number of satellite campuses in existence nationally and internationally. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reports a vast amount of information on higher education institutions, including the total number of higher education institutions in the United States, profit versus non-profit, degree and non-degree granting, public versus private, two-year and four-year. They do not list any data on the number of regional campuses. Another basic point proven to be problematic is the term used to describe these extension campuses. Throughout the literature review process, different resources referred to them
as a satellite campus, branch campus, off-site campus, extension campus, and partner campus. During the 1990s, when there was a boom in campuses, the term "regional campus" was most commonly used (Hermanson, 1995), this is the term that is utilized by the University of Mississippi and will be utilized throughout this study. Hoyt and Howell (2012) highlighted that the body of research on regional campuses is diverse and broad, with numerous writers and researchers concentrating on various facets of regional campus organization, life, populations, and using various methodologies and surveys. The usage of technology at regional campuses, the political procedures involved in creating regional campuses, how regional campuses expand access to education, even the decision-making processes at regional campuses have all been the subject of study (Hoyt & Howell, 2012). There seems to be little follow-up on regional campus research, as well as a gap in the research when it comes to the experiences of not only students, but also of the faculty at regional campuses.

**Students**

The one commonality throughout the research is that student experiences are very different on regional versus main campuses. Students choose to attend regional campuses for a variety of reasons, such as flexibility with scheduling, smaller class sizes, the use of block scheduling for courses, the convenience of the location, an increase in instructor interaction, the personal attention of staff, the reputation of the campus, the campus offering a particular course or employing a specific instructor, and the notion that it may be "easier" to get a good grade (Hoyt & Howell, 2012, p. 111). Research also suggested that regional campus students are more satisfied and experience better outcomes than students on the main campus (Bambrick, 2002).
Though Bambrick (2002) indicated that regional campus students are more satisfied there are many limitations for regional campuses and their students. Students who attend regional campuses often differ from those who attend main campuses in that they are firmly rooted in the community, working parents who are married or divorced, and first-generation college students who are looking for conveniently scheduled course offerings that meet their personal and professional objectives (Nickerson & Schaefer, 2001; Snell, 2008). Many students at regional campuses are non-traditional and can have fewer opportunities and access to education (Ballantyne, 2012). Most literature supports two characteristics when identifying students as traditional or non-traditional, enrollment status and age, with anyone over age 24 considered non-traditional or adult learner. The National Center for Secondary Education Statistics (NCES) continues to expand the definition of non-traditional students based on a 2002 study of non-traditional undergraduates. The NCES definition includes: (a) the fact that nontraditional students most often delay enrollment at a postsecondary institution for one or more years after high school, (b) are usually enrolled part time, (c) are employed full time, (d) are not financially dependent on their parents, (e) may have a spouse and dependents but may just as easily be a single parent, and (f) in some cases, non-traditional students may not possess a high school diploma and attend college after obtaining a GED (Wyatt, 2011).

Non-traditional students often have additional obstacles and responsibilities that can make attaining a degree more challenging. Rabourn et al. (2018) analyzed and explained the characteristics that make adult learners unique from traditional college students. They also examined adult learners’ academic involvement and explored how they connect to peers and faculty on campus. Some of the primary characteristics of adult
learners Rabourn et al. discussed are the pursuit of flexible educational offerings, diversity, being more likely to be first-generation college students, being attracted to different institutional types, and having specific educational goals even though they are less likely to pursue advanced degrees than traditional students. The strongest indicative demographic variables of adult learners revealed by the authors were: they are more likely to take all their classes online, start their education at another school, and enroll part-time. The study also found that adult learners are more academically active than their traditional peers, and have favorable views of instructional activities and relationships with others. The findings did show that adult learners found their campus less supportive and engaged less with their peers and faculty. Results of analysis showing adult learners find campuses less supportive suggested, to me, a necessity for more research on and implementation of non-traditional student experiences and needs. These steps to a better understanding of adult learner concerns support the success of this sizeable population throughout higher education institutions as non-traditional students now make up almost half of the students enrolled in higher education institutions.

In addition to being non-traditional, many regional campus students are first-generation college students. Garcia (2010) examined first-generation college students and how co-curricular involvement played a role in their successful college degree attainment. Distinguishing characteristics of first-generation college students included being older, from minoritized groups, more likely to come from low-income families, less academically prepared for college, and having lower degree aspirations. The discussion of challenges faced by first-generation college students included enrollment and admission challenges, working more hours at a job while enrolling in fewer class
hours, and lack of persistence to graduation. Students are not alone when it comes to facing challenges, regional campuses on the whole often receive fewer support services and resources (Cavanaugh, 2007). Bird (2014) discussed limitations for regional campuses, noting that when it comes to making choices regarding questions of curriculum and faculty, many regional campuses lack independence, forcing them to rely on their institution’s main campus for guidance and help in these areas, which often results in program parameters designed for traditional students on a main campus setting.

**Co-curricular Organizations and High Impact Practices**

Co-curricular organizations and HIPs are also areas that can be impacted by limitations on resources and support services at regional campuses. Often recruitment can be the focus, however, student retention becomes more urgent during periods of diminishing enrollment. With college graduation rates remaining relatively the same for several years it is important for institutional administrators and policy makers to question how student success in college can be improved by the education system. Tinto’s (1993) research demonstrated that involvement promotes retention, and over the years he referred to the degree to which a student is associated with the social structure at their college or university as social integration.

Co-curriculars work in tandem with academic curriculum to enhance student learning and experience, offering students social integration, and are widely recognized and promoted as an integral part of the student life experience (Kuh, 2001). The term co-curricular refers to activities, courses, and learning opportunities that, in some manner, add to what students are studying in class, i.e., encounters that relate to or replicate the academic curriculum (Great Schools Partnership, 2013).
In addition to the previously mentioned student retention and academic success, some other benefits that can come from participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs include opportunities for professional development, the chance to meet others with shared interests, social engagement, the development of relevant skills, and a creative outlet to share ideas. Many researchers have found benefits to co-curricular participation including high educational aspirations, bachelor’s degree attainment, graduate school attendance (Pascarella 1985; Stoecker, Pascarella and Wolfle 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991), and sex-atypical career choice (Ethington, Smart & Pascarella 1988). More participatory benefits found were in the development of identity (Chickering & Reisser 1993), recognized improvements in cognitive development (King & Kitchener 1994), interpersonal and communication skills, desirable affective and attitudinal outcomes, and in job-seeking skills and actual employability (Astin 1993).

Co-curriculars can include things like research-intensive experiences, internships, and externships, study abroad opportunities, innovation activities, and community involvement. In support of her suggestion for ePortfolios as an enhancement to adult student learning, Madden (2015) discussed research findings that while universities do exert considerable time and effort on co-curricular activities, they are less commonly accessed by or available to non-traditional students for various reasons, including scheduling and time dedication. Drawing upon research showing the importance of using a multi-faceted approach to create the best learning environment, one of Madden's main points is that non-traditional students, specifically adult learners, have a rich and diverse life outside of school and a multitude of experiences to draw upon, that when shared through the narrative of an ePortfolio reveals multi-dimensional societal reflections that
can be poignant for both the adult learner presenting and others present. The implications point to connections drawn between classwork and relevant experiences.

Fontaine and Cook (2014) also presented an example of co-curricular engagement for non-traditional online students. They proposed that the same level of involvement and social support offered by co-curricular activities targeted to traditional students may not work for non-traditional learners. The unique aspects of non-traditional students do not allow the same co-curricular activities offered to traditional students to be repeated as they are not geographically bound or as flexible in their schedule. These two unique aspects can also set non-traditional online learners apart from commuter students. They suggested that instead of attempting to persuade non-traditional learners to partake in activities tailored for traditional learners, attention must be given to transforming co-curricular experiences to respond to the personal and professional needs of non-traditional learners. They recommend that administrators and faculty adapt co-curricular activities to a virtual model to offer distance learners connectedness, community, and campus experience.

**Student Participation**

Much of the research around student engagement, participation, and involvement stems from Astin (1984, p. 518), who defined involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience." In his theory, Astin put forth five fundamental hypotheses: involvement means the investment of physical and psychological energy in different objects that range in the degree of their specificity; involvement occurs along a continuum with different students investing different amount of energy in various objects at various times; involvement includes
quantitative and qualitative components; the amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement; the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement (Astin, 1984, p. 519). According to Astin, the final two postulates offer useful guidelines for creating student-centered educational initiatives that are more effective.

Statistics show that non-traditional students are less involved than traditional students in community service, volunteer work, extra-curricular activities, and research with faculty members (NSSE, 2006). However, statistics do show a much higher level of non-traditional student participation in academic areas than traditional students (NSSE, 2006). Wyatt (2011) suggested evaluating what non-traditional students need at various stages of their academic career; providing tutoring services specifically for students over the age of 25; incorporating non-traditional student learning styles in teaching; offering counselors who expressly understand non-traditional student needs; developing programs and events appealing to non-traditional students and that include their families; increasing marketing strategies and communication targeting non-traditional students; and re-evaluating general education requirements in order to improve and increase non-traditional students' engagement at universities.

Tinto (1993) posited that student involvement in co-curricular activities promotes retention, while Stoecker, Pascarella, and Wolfle (1988) theorized that participation impacts overall student outcomes upon graduation. Research has linked engagement and success among college students. Students perceive benefits from participation in content-based student organizations to be a sense of belonging, professional development,
professional or social networking, opportunities for contribution, and prestige from affiliation (Nolen et al., 2020).

Tan and Pope (2007) found that non-traditional, predominantly commuting students visiting campus for classes only recognized the importance of participating in non-classroom activities. However, their lack of connectivity to their institutions, job responsibilities, and certain institutional factors, such as the quality of co-curricular activities and academic requirements, restricted their participation in co-curricular activities. In a comparison of 18-year-old students, 24–29-year-old students, and students over 30 years of age the NCES (2011) found that non-traditional students have significantly lower graduation rates than traditional students (Markle, 2015).

**Degree Attainment/Retention**

Regional college campuses, or branch campuses, have seen significant growth over the past decades. According to Fonseca and Bird (2007), this can be primarily attributed to location, referring to data showing 79% of students attend college in their home state, most of them within a few hours' drive. They posit that these students are "fundamentally place-bound: limited in their opportunities by financial constraints, family responsibilities, personal characteristics, lifestyle choices, or combinations of these factors" (Fonseca & Bird, 2007).

Tinto described the importance of how individual factors interact with institutional experiences, both academically and socially, in his longitudinal model of departure from institutions of higher education (Tinto, 1993). The probability of persisting in college has been demonstrated to increase with higher social engagement levels (Hu, 2011). Throughout his research Tinto (1993) proceeded to refine his
hypothesis on student departure and noted additional factors like isolation, money, and other obligations outside of school that can affect student persistence. However, Tinto (1993) persisted in his belief that a student's likelihood of graduating increases with their degree of social and academic integration or a total academic program. He went on to say that campuses must seek to ensure student involvement if they honestly wish to integrate students into a total academic program (Tinto, 1993).

Statistics showing an increase in non-traditional students in the U.S. and statistics showing significantly lower graduation rates for non-traditional students make it essential for institutions to identify and alleviate barriers to completion faced by non-traditional students (NCES, 2011). Markle (2015) used a role theory perspective in a mixed-methods study to examine non-traditional students' persistence toward degree completion over a three-year period. The study's examination of influential factors among non-traditional student persistence had two goals. The first was to have a better understanding of barriers to degree completion and identification of persistence enablers. The second was determining gender's relation to persistence.

Markle found no significant difference between men and women in persistence but did find differences in the factors that influence persistence among each gender. Both genders' persistence was positively influenced by grade point average and confidence in graduating. Women enrolled part-time were more likely to persist than full-time, while this did not affect men. Inter-role conflicts were significant barriers for both genders, financial for men and time commitment for women. Markle suggested that the implications of the study's findings are useful for developing retention and graduation strategies in higher education institutions.
Also drawing upon research stating attrition rates for non-traditional students are higher than those of traditional college students, partially attributed to non-traditional students’ difficulty immersing themselves in the academic environment, Goncalves and Trunk (2014) conducted exploratory research to identify the obstacles non-traditional students identify as prohibitive to their successful academic outcome. The authors referenced additional research showing a positive correlation between college and university students' success rates and their engagement levels in the academic environment. The study's findings were similar to Rabourn et al. (2018), showing that non-traditional students felt positive about experiences with professors; desired online classes or more flexible scheduling, and specific educational goals. Non-traditional students expressed negative feelings regarding difficulty interacting with other students, feelings of isolation, scheduling conflicts, and interactions with the Bursar and Financial Aid offices. Suggestions from participants on ways to improve included clubs and organizations explicitly geared toward non-traditional students' needs and advisers who deal only with non-traditional students. The authors suggested cultivating on-campus activities and services to lead to increased non-traditional student engagement and participation.
MANUSCRIPT II PLAN

Manuscript II will explore a plan to help understand the behavior patterns of non-traditional student participation in co-curricular activities, and reinforce the need for the leaders of higher education institutions to effectively design regional campus focused strategies and practices specifically for engagement of non-traditional students. The lack of research surrounding regional campuses and their unique student population and environment further support the need for studies such as this one. The continued growth of regional campuses and non-traditional student populations require higher education organizations to take a closer examination of the services and organizations provided on regional campuses in relation to the differing needs of the student base.

Research, theories, and discussions pertaining to student retention have largely concentrated on one setting: the conventional, residential institution. The majority of the students in this model are standard college age, enrolled full time, and, if not living on campus, reside in the college community away from their homes.

With enrollment numbers already declining pre-pandemic and with resources diminished, we must ensure that every experience counts and that students are motivated to achieve their goals. Co-curricular activities enhance students' engagement in ways that influence their degree completion and post-college performance both directly and indirectly. In order to address many of the academic, social, and economic challenges that affect student retention and students reaching their goals, higher education institutions
cannot ignore co-curricular learning. To specifically address the barriers for co-curricular engagement of students at regional campuses an assessment of the opportunities available, opportunities needed, and hindrances to engage must be examined. When institutions make a conscious effort to build clear co-curricular pathways that support student achievement, those experiences can greatly enhance student retention and success.

In order to get a better picture of the regional campus landscape in relation to HIPs and co-curricular organizations a needs assessment including an environmental scan to determine reach and saturation will be conducted. This will provide a gap analysis of programs missing opportunities to offer these supportive practices. After identifying program gaps participatory and non-participatory students will be surveyed to identify any barriers to participation. After identifying gaps and barriers steps to rectify will be offered.
CONCLUSION

The review of the literature supports that there is an opportunity to explore the relationship between student participation in co-curriculars and degree completion rates at regional campuses. The lack of research surrounding regional campuses and their unique student population and environment further support the need for research in this area. In addition to focusing on personal characteristics, abilities, and dispositions, Tinto's longitudinal model of departure from higher education institutions also highlights the significance of how these elements interact with institutional experiences in terms of academic and social outcomes. Educators must consider what they can do to build learning environments that meet students where they are and remove obstacles to their success instead of concentrating exclusively on whether students are college-ready and on their perceived deficiencies.
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MANUSCRIPT II: ASSESSMENT PLAN
ABSTRACT

This assessment aims to explore and address the challenges surrounding low student participation in co-curricular organizations and high-impact practices (HIPs) at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus. Finding obstacles to participation, evaluating the disparity in participation between different programs, and suggesting tactics to boost student involvement are the main objectives.

A mixed-methods approach is the planned method of study for this assessment, incorporating surveys, interviews, and environmental scans. The survey gathers quantitative data to understand students' perceptions, experiences, and motivations regarding participation in co-curricular activities and HIPs. Interviews explore the perspectives of students in further detail, highlighting obstacles and support networks as well as the impact of involvement on degree completion. Additionally, an environmental scan examines the current landscape of available programs and identifies areas for improvement.

Key theoretical frameworks, including the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Behavior Engineering Model, guide the assessment process, informing the design and execution of strategies aimed at closing participation gaps. To improve student participation, recommendations might include curricular integration, mentorship programs, varied representation, and opportunities for reflection in assignments.
The assessment findings and subsequent recommendations will provide actionable insights to university stakeholders, enabling the development of tailored interventions that foster a more inclusive, supportive, and engaging environment. The ultimate goals at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus are to increase degree completion rates, improve the caliber of educational experiences, and increase student participation.
GUIDING PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS

This study will specifically examine the possibility of participation in High Impact Practices (HIPs) and co-curricular organizations as a way to address falling student retention and completion rates. Improving completion-rates among students in higher education institutions through increased participation in HIPs and co-curricular organizations can begin to be addressed through a better understanding of the patterns of behavior exhibited by non-traditional students. Studies like this one are necessary because there is a dearth of information about regional campuses, their distinct student body, and their surroundings. Higher education institutions must closely examine the programs and services offered on regional campuses in light of the varying needs of the student body, given the sustained development of these campuses and the influx of non-traditional students. This study will emphasize the necessity for higher education leaders to develop regionally focused strategies and practices that are especially targeted at engaging non-traditional students.

Regional campuses are a fundamental element when it comes to meeting students where they are, literally from a geographical standpoint, and in their additional offerings, including financial benefits and course scheduling. It is equally essential for regional campuses to determine the most impactful ways to boost student success and find ways to eliminate the barriers that keep students from utilizing resources such as HIPs and co-curricular organizations. To better influence policies and practices, the goal of this study
is to increase understanding as to what practices and experiences may be most influential in supporting regional campus student success, specifically through involvement in co-curricular organizations and HIPs. This increased understanding will be beneficial to the regional campus’ serving of students whose unique characteristics are not always considered or understood fully in terms of student programming. As the regional campus students’ needs are better understood, a strategic plan of support can begin.

Strategic planning is a vital component to the success of any mission. The business sector has long valued and devoted significant attention to strategic planning and the related process of environmental scanning; it is only in recent years that emphasis has been put on strategic planning analysis in education settings (Basham & Luneburg, 1989). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions have become more aware of the need for a primary objective in planning. This primary objective is to place the institution in a strategically flexible position to allow the altering of organizational strategies as environmental and institutional conditions change. Environmental scans are effective in the development of these strategies as they assume an open system whereby institutions must constantly change and adapt as the needs of the larger society change. Effective strategic planning must be outward-looking because most institutional changes are triggered by outside events (Pashiardis, 1996).

In order to get a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of needs and issues regarding HIPs and co-curricular organizations at the University of Mississippi - Tupelo Regional Campus, a needs assessment, including an environmental scan to determine reach and saturation, will be conducted. The environmental scan will provide a gap analysis of programs missing opportunities to offer these supportive practices. After
identifying program gaps, participatory and non-participatory students will be interviewed and surveyed to identify any barriers to participation and perceptions toward involvement and the impact it had on persistence.

One key step in this process is examining the co-curricular participation behaviors of regional campus students as their characteristics, experiences, goals, learning styles, and motivations for attending college differ from traditional main campus students. Specifically, regional campus students’ perceptions of the importance of co-curricular participation, what helps or hinders their participation, and the potential benefits of their participation.

The guiding questions for this study seek to understand the involvement in co-curricular organizations and HIPs by regional campus students. A comprehension of student perceptions regarding participation, current regional campus situations regarding HIPs and co-curricular organizations, and obstacles hindering student participation are needed to assess this area of study best. The guiding questions for this study are:

1. How do students perceive their experiences participating in co-curricular organizations and HIPs?
2. From the students’ perspective, how did participation influence persistence in degree completion, if at all?
3. What supports enhance the HIPs and co-curricular participation of UM Tupelo students?
4. What barriers to participation do students identify?

Framing the assessment around these questions will ensure that it is student-centric and addresses quantitative and qualitative insights, which are essential for
comprehending the subtleties of student participation. These questions will contribute to formulating recommendations that can successfully improve student engagement and degree completion, as well as the methodologies used for data collecting, analysis, and development in the assessment.
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The mission of higher education institutions is for all students who enroll to obtain their degrees and have a successful and enjoyable college experience. According to College Tuition Compare’s website (2022), for the year 2021, the average graduation rate for colleges in Mississippi was 52.92%, the transfer-out rate 15.18%, and the retention rate 69.83%. Higher education institutions implement various strategic practices and policies to increase retention rates and promote degree attainment. These include academic support programs, career option pathway identification, counseling services, and student support services. A primary step colleges take to promote degree attainment is encouraging students to pick a career path they are passionate about. The educational institution then works to build support around this choice, including co-curricular support like HIPs and student organizations. Studies have shown a positive correlation between participation in co-curricular student organizations or HIPs and degree attainment. Even though a vast amount of research exists on this relationship, an examination has not been conducted in the context of public university regional campus settings such as the University of Mississippi Tupelo or on the type of students that attend regional campuses, which varies from the traditional college student.

The majority of students at regional campuses are non-traditional and can have less opportunity and access to education (Ballantyne, 2012). Non-traditional students often have additional obstacles and responsibilities that make attaining a degree more
challenging. Statistics showing an increase in non-traditional students in the United States paired with statistics that show significantly lower graduation rates for non-traditional students make it essential for institutions not only to identify and alleviate barriers to completion faced by non-traditional students but also to implement as many success-boosting elements as possible (Markle, 2015).

In a 2006 survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found significant differences in participation levels of non-traditional versus traditional students in both co-curricular and extracurricular activities, with traditional student participation levels being almost double those of their non-traditional counterparts. The same survey found a much higher percentage of non-traditional student participation in academic, course-related activities (NSSE, 2006). Tan and Pope (2007) found that non-traditional, predominantly commuting students visiting campus for classes only did recognize the importance of participating in non-classroom activities. However, their lack of connectivity to their institutions, job responsibilities, and certain institutional factors, such as the quality of co-curricular activities and academic requirements, restricted their participation in co-curricular activities. In 2018, Rabourn et al. showed results from their study that overall, adult learners find campuses, in general, less supportive.

Tinto describes the importance of how individual factors interact with institutional experiences, both academically and socially, in his longitudinal model of departure from institutions of higher education (Tinto, 1993). The probability of persisting in college has been demonstrated to increase with higher social engagement levels (Hu, 2011). Several studies have found that institutions that do not integrate students academically and socially have low student retention (Hu, 2001; Pascarella et al., 2004). Higher levels of
social involvement have been linked to a higher likelihood of completing college (Hu, 2011). In contrast, higher levels of intellectual engagement have been linked to a lower likelihood of completing college (Hu, 2001). Providing co-curricular organizational and HIP involvement opportunities on regional campuses supports the mission of retention and completion.

Participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs allows students to network, work with mentors, participate in community service projects, and gain career experiences. While main university campuses offer a vast number of organizations for students to participate in, regional or branch campuses cannot provide as many opportunities in this area due to staffing, financial, and participant restrictions. The results of this assessment will enable the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of their students regarding degree-related co-curricular organizations, thus allowing regional campuses to provide more organizational opportunities across degree programs, highlight the benefits of participation to students, and remove barriers to participation. Removing barriers hindering non-traditional students from participating in co-curricular organizations and activities will help regional campuses facilitate more access to support programs that increase achievement and degree completion amongst students.
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

“Conceptual framework includes one or more formal theories (in part or whole) as well as other concepts and empirical findings from the literature. It shows relationships among these ideas and how they relate to the research study,” according to Walden University (2021). This study’s conceptual framework has three elements: student participation, degree-related co-curricular organizations and HIPs, and degree attainment at regional campuses. The following section will discuss each theory used in the development of the conceptual framework, identifying the variables important to the research and demonstrating how they may be correlated. This conceptual framework is based on theoretical framework from Astin’s (1984) Involvement Theory, Tinto’s (1993) Student Integration Theory, Tinto’s (1993) Longitudinal Model of Student Departure, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Non-traditional Student Attrition Model, Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda’s (1993) Student Retention Integrated Model, and Kuh’s (2001) Theory of Student Engagement, that collectively support that individuals who are academically and socially integrated learn more; develop a stronger loyalty to their institution; and have a sense of belonging, all of which have a beneficial impact on their decision to persist.

Student Participation, Engagement, and Involvement

The first conceptual framework element’s components of participation, engagement, and involvement from students are crucial aspects of a university education. Participation includes a broad range of activities that support students’ academic and
personal growth, both within and outside the classroom. Active engagement in coursework, discussions, and collaborative projects fosters deeper learning and critical thinking. Beyond academics, involvement in co-curricular organizations, clubs, and high-impact practices such as internships, service learning, and undergraduate research enriches students’ social, intellectual, and leadership experiences. In addition to fostering personal development, these activities have a favorable effect on retention and degree completion rates. Educational institutions all have the same objective of fostering a dynamic and inclusive campus community that promotes student involvement and accomplishment, ultimately equipping them for success in their personal, professional, and academic endeavors.

**Degree-Related Co-Curricular Student Organizations and High Impact Practices**

The second element, degree-related co-curricular organizations, and HIPs, play a vital role in higher education. Co-curricular activities tailored to a student’s major or area of study provide chances for more in-depth participation and real-world application of academic information. They facilitate networking, skill development, and a sense of belonging within a chosen academic community. Conversely, HIPs, which include activities like internships, undergraduate research, and study abroad programs, provide students with transformative learning experiences. HIPs enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, preparing students for real-world challenges. Improved retention, degree completion, and post-graduate performance are all associated with these practices. Degree-related co-curricular groups and HIPs provide a comprehensive educational experience that helps students achieve their academic and
professional objectives while also developing personally.

Degree Attainment and Persistence at Regional Campuses

The third conceptual framework element this study will look at is persistence and degree attainment at regional campuses. These campuses serve diverse student populations, often including non-traditional and place-bound learners. In these environments, obtaining a degree and encouraging perseverance may be more difficult for a variety of reasons, such as varied student demographics and scarce resources. At regional campuses, efforts are made to assist degree completion and persistence by customizing academic courses, support services, and extracurricular activities to these students’ unique requirements. Flexible scheduling, online education, academic advising, financial aid assistance, and fostering a feeling of community on campus are a few examples of strategies. These initiatives are central to ensuring that students not only enroll but also persist and successfully earn their degrees, contributing to their future career opportunities, personal growth, and support of their community.

Supporting Theories

As previously stated, this study’s conceptual framework has three elements: student participation, degree-related co-curricular organizations and HIPs, and degree attainment at regional campuses. Conceptually, this study is guided by various models, theories, and concepts of student involvement, engagement, retention, and completion. Many academic professions have produced ideas to explain the variation in student persistence, as retention is a complicated problem that resists a single solution (Hirschy & Wilson, 2017). The basis of almost all the theories, concepts, and models used in this study includes one or more of the following: Astin’s (1984) Involvement Theory, Tinto’s
(1993) Student Integration Theory, and Tinto’s (1993) Longitudinal Model of Student Departure. There has been a significant amount of research done on student retention using the aforementioned theories. While the majority of research focuses on traditional settings, information from this research on traditional campuses and community colleges can prove to be beneficial in explaining some patterns on regional campuses.

Astin’s Involvement Theory

Astin’s (1984) Involvement Theory is one of the more widely known and referenced theories regarding student participation. Some implications of the Student Involvement Theory exist for the phenomena of student retention despite the fact that it is an educational theory that focuses on improving the learning environment and student development in higher education. First of all, Astin’s (1975) research on college dropouts served as a partial source for his Involvement Theory. The second aspect of student involvement, according to Astin (1984), is student retention; the more involved students are in their academic institutions, the more persistent they are. In support of this idea, Astin further claimed that the majority of the explanations offered by students for leaving college point to a lack of involvement. In this theory, Astin put forth five fundamental hypotheses:

1. Participation is the exertion of both physical and mental effort toward a variety of things that vary in the degree of their specificity.
2. Involvement happens on a continuum, with individual students putting different amounts of effort into different things at different periods.
3. Both quantitative and qualitative elements are present in involvement.
4. The level of involvement, both in terms of quality and quantity, closely relates to the amount of learning and personal growth that students experience.

5. “The effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement” (Astin, 1984, p. 298).

According to Astin (1984), the final two postulates offer useful guidelines for “designing more effective educational programs for students” (p. 298).

Additionally, Astin’s I-E-O (Input-Environment-Output) model (1994) is another consideration when developing strategies for student retention. This model hypothesizes that an individual student’s input (I)—their pre-college traits—combined with their environment (E)—the college environment, which includes academics, policies, programs, peers, and organizational structure—influences their experience’s outcome (O). Astin suggested that a lack of involvement is a contributing factor to a student’s departure. He indicated that the most potent forms of positive involvement lie with academics and with increased interaction with faculty and student peers, while non-involvement with campus life has a strong negative impact on student outcomes. The I-E-O Model can be seen in Figure 3.
Figure 3.

Astin's Theory of Involvement: Inputs-Environments-Outcomes Model

In order to further boost the role that student involvement can contribute to college students’ successful educational outcomes, Vincent Tinto (1993) took one step further. According to Tinto (1993), intention and commitment are the primary factors contributing to departure. He stated that when these qualities are present, students are integrated into the educational community and lack anchoring factors when they are absent, referencing these two essential factors as the cause of students leaving higher education. Tinto defined intentions as the goals of the individual and suggests that a greater likelihood of retention occurs when the links between the goal of college completion and other valued goals are stronger. According to Tinto, leaving higher education is a reflection of how well one’s experiences have assimilated them into the institution’s intellectual and social life, saying “The absence of sufficient contact with other members of the institution proves to be the single most important predictor of eventual departure, even after taking account of the independent effects of background, personality and academic performance” (Tinto, 1993, p.56). When social integration is minimal, academic integration seems to be the most significant form of student involvement that influences retention and has the biggest beneficial impact on retention. The beneficial effects of academic integration seem to wane slightly as social integration rises. Academics have a bigger impact on retention in two-year colleges than social activity does. These are key considerations for regional campuses at the University of Mississippi, where the experience is two years and social integration can be minimal.

According to Vincent Tinto (1993), there are three main reasons why students leave an institution: problems in the classroom, an inability to fulfill personal aspirations
for their education and careers, and a failure to integrate into or stay a part of the campus community’s intellectual and social life. Tinto’s Model of Institutional Departure, Figure 4, posited in order for students to survive, they must be integrated into formal academic systems (academic performance) and informal social systems (faculty/staff contacts) as well as formal extracurricular activities and informal peer-group connections. Tinto argued that students’ experiences, especially in the first year of college, are marked by three stages of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation, adopted from Van Gennep’s social anthropology work (Tinto, 1993).

Another important aspect brought forth in Tinto’s Model is separation dynamics, which are especially significant for first-generation students (a large demographic of regional campus students). Tinto discovered that the initial phase of separation could be challenging, especially for people whose families highly doubt the necessity of a college education. Students are more prone to feel that they must reject the attitudes and values of previous communities if they have a higher initial level of institutional commitment, according to research by Elkins, Braxton, and James (2000), who also noted that it was critical to understand how important the support and/or rejection of attitudes and values are to retention.
Figure 4.

Tinto’s Institutional Departure Model

The Non-Traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model

Bean and Metzner (1985) posited that their Non-traditional Student Attrition Model, Figure 5, shares similarities with previous studies but has a completely different structure due to its focus on a distinctive type of student: the non-traditional commuter student. The authors said that non-traditional students seem to be affected primarily by factors of environment, including external responsibilities and familial obligations. According to the hypothesis, non-traditional students face environmental pressures resulting in less involvement with their academic institutions’ members or activities and greater interaction with outside environmental influences. This model gives external factors more importance than institutional socialization factors. Most theoretical models have a basis of social perspectives. Meanwhile, the lack of social integration is one of the defining characteristics of non-traditional students.

Four sets of factors serve as the foundation for the model’s conceptual framework: academic achievement, intention to leave, background and defined variables, and—most importantly—environmental variables. First, the model postulates that students who perform less academically are more likely to withdraw from their studies. Furthermore, while high school grades do not directly influence student attrition, a student’s high school success has a direct impact on their undergraduate performance. Second, psychological consequences have a greater impact on students’ intention to quit than do academic factors. Third, the defining and background elements that are anticipated to affect student persistence include the students’ high school accomplishments and their educational objectives, in addition to other variables from other categories. Finally, the model indicates that environmental factors such as finances,
working hours, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and transfer opportunities have the most significant direct effects on student attrition.
Figure 5.

Non-Traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model

**Student Retention Integrated Model**

The development of the Student Retention Integrated Model, Figure 6, was based upon merging the statistically confirmed variables of the two distinguished student retention models aforementioned from Tinto and Bean. The “courses” and “institutional fit and quality” constructs of Bean’s theoretical model were merged with the “academic integration” and “institutional commitments” constructs of Tinto’s theoretical model, with some indicator variables extracted from their parent constructs and included in the current model as independent variables. According to the results of the study conducted by Cabrera et al. (1993), the combination of the Tinto and Bean models led to a more comprehensive explanation and comprehension of the process of student attrition. Furthermore, the statistical research supported that environmental factors play a more intricate role in the student retention formula than Tinto perceived, thus, validating Beans’ assertions regarding the significance of such parameters.

The results of longitudinal study data by Cabrera et al. (1993) demonstrated the substantial overlap between the variables in the two theoretical models. Furthermore, the statistical analysis supported the fundamental assumptions of both theoretical models, which held that student attrition results from a complex process of interaction between the personal characteristics of students and the features of their academic institutions and that student-college fit has a significant influence on students’ intention to persist. The study’s findings demonstrated that the Student Integration Model had a higher level of robustness in terms of the quantity of verified hypotheses. Almost 70% of the assumptions in the Student Integration Model and 40% of the hypotheses in the Student Attrition Model were supported by the statistical analysis. On the other hand, Bean’s
Student Attrition Model did a better job of illuminating the importance of outside influences in the phenomena of student retention. The findings of this study led to the development of the Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera et al., 1993).
Figure 6.

*Student Retention Integrated Model*


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Theory of Student Engagement

Student engagement is another major factor that can predict student retention. “Central to the conceptualization of student engagement is its focus on activities and experiences that have been empirically linked to desired college outcomes” (NSSE, 2013, para. 2). A commonly accepted definition of student engagement was shaped by Kuh (2001), who stated that persistence and learning are associated with the time and effort students put into their experiences as well as the measures institutions take to get them to participate. Kuh (2001) contends that rather than characterizing issues with student performance as a student problem, institutions should bear large accountability for student results. A majority of the literature indicates that higher levels of involvement are statistically significant in predicting persistence and completion. Higher levels of student engagement were linked to better grades and persistence for first-year college students and had an even more significant effect on historically minority students’ persistence, according to Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008).

Utilizing the conceptual framework elements and the frameworks set forth by their supporting theories in this assessment will allow for systematically identifying gaps, barriers, and opportunities for increasing student participation in co-curricular activities and HIPs at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus. These theories will guide the development of targeted strategies to enhance student engagement and ultimately support their degree completion.
ASSESSMENT PLAN

In order to obtain a more inclusive and comprehensive set of insights while also allowing for triangulation of data between different sources, multiple tools will be used. A needs assessment, environmental scan, and gap analysis were determined to be the best ways to fully comprehend the guiding questions, building on an understanding of regional campus students, campus offerings, and student perceptions. The needs assessment will provide insight into primary data about what students may want out of the institution. In order to provide depth and breadth to the formal needs assessment, interviews with key stakeholders (students, faculty, staff) will be conducted in conjunction with surveys. Additionally, a SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results) analysis will be utilized to bring together various external needs with internal strengths and opportunities. The environmental scan will focus both internally (operations) and externally (students) to provide a broad perspective of organizational opportunities based on secondary existing data and perceptions. The gap analysis will identify missed opportunities across the various programs at the regional campus. Identification of program gaps will mark key areas upon which to begin the strategic planning improvements.

According to Teachmint’s website “an assessment can be defined as a methodical approach to acquiring, reviewing, and using the information about a student or a group of students in accordance with the standards of the time as a means of helping them improve where required” (Vishwaroop, 2022, assessment section). The outcome of an assessment is diagnostic and formative, as opposed to an evaluation, which is judgmental and summative. There are some areas for evaluation in this study, including the current co-curricular organizational and HIP
offerings at the regional campus and the gaps therein. These areas will be examined in the gap analysis. According to Colorado State University’s environmental scan and needs assessment overview (n.d.), the main objective of the needs assessment and environmental scan is to inform all subsequent parts of the program planning process, helping to be strategic on how to meet needs while giving a head start on actual program development.

The anticipated outcomes of this assessment will be beneficial to students, regional campuses, and the community. Beneficial outcomes for the students will be additional support due to co-curricular involvement, which research has shown to lead to success in degree attainment, increased employability skills, and networking connections that ultimately set them up for long-term success in their career field. The increased employability skills will benefit the community as a whole, with a skilled workforce output likely to remain in the local area as the majority of regional campus students are non-traditional and place-bound. Lastly, the outcomes will bring many benefits to the regional campus, including increases in enrollment, degree completion, student engagement, and connectedness, along with positive endorsements from successful graduates.

**Assessment Purpose**

The ultimate goal of this assessment is to increase regional campus student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs to boost student success. There are many limitations for regional campuses and their students. Regional campuses often receive fewer support services and resources (Cavanaugh, 2007). The one commonality throughout the research is that student experiences are very different on regional campuses versus main campuses, with research studies suggesting that regional campus students are more satisfied and experience better outcomes than those on the main campus. Implementing the strategic plan recommendations from this
assessment with intentional processes for planning, development, feedback, and implementation can lead to a deeper co-curricular experience for regional campus students, helping them attain their degrees and ultimately setting them up for long-term success in their career fields.

**Informing Theories**

Informing and guiding the development of this assessment are the Behavior Engineering Model and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Combining the Behavior Engineering Model’s emphasis on root cause analysis and performance improvement with the Theory of Planned Behavior’s focus on individual attitudes and perceptions, this assessment can create a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs. This understanding will inform targeted and evidence-based interventions that address both individual and systemic factors, ultimately increasing student engagement.

Thomas F. Gilbert (2007) developed the Gilbert Model or the Behavior Engineering Model (BEM). The model focuses on analyzing and addressing performance problems by identifying root causes and determining solutions. While the BEM is typically applied to workplace performance, its principles can be adapted to address challenges in the educational context, including co-curricular activities and HIPs. The model starts with the recognition of performance discrepancies, identifying where actual performance deviates from desired or expected performance. The importance of conducting cause analysis to determine the root causes of performance problems is also significantly emphasized. In this assessment, understanding the barriers to student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs is crucial. The model’s focus on root cause analysis can help identify the underlying reasons for low participation and degree completion issues. Acknowledging that the assessment and improvement process can be
iterative, the model encourages monitoring the effectiveness of solutions and making adjustments as necessary. In this assessment, this iterative approach can be valuable for refining strategies based on feedback and outcomes, ensuring that efforts to increase student participation are responsive and effective. The BEM’s emphasis on recognizing performance discrepancies, root cause analysis, solution development, and an iterative process aligns with the goals of this assessment, identifying performance gaps, determining root causes of low participation, and developing effective strategies to increase student participation and degree completion (Gilbert, 2007).

The key components of the Behavior Engineering Model are:

1. Performance Discrepancy: This stage involves recognizing that a performance problem exists. There may be a gap between the current performance and the desired or expected performance.
2. Cause Analysis: Once a performance problem is identified, a cause analysis is conducted to determine the root causes of the problem. The BEM distinguishes between three main categories of causes:
   - Resource Deficiency: Lack of necessary tools, equipment, materials, or resources.
   - Information Deficiency: Lack of clear instructions, feedback, or information.
   - Motivation Deficiency: Lack of motivation or reinforcement for the desired behavior.
3. Solution Development: Based on the cause analysis, potential solutions are proposed. Solutions may involve providing the necessary resources, improving information dissemination, or addressing motivation issues.
4. Solution Implementation: The chosen solutions are put into practice, and their effectiveness is monitored (Gilbert, 2007).

The second framework theory informing this assessment is the Theory of Planned Behavior social science theory. In the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), it is suggested that three key features need to be in place to perform a behavior. First, the people performing the behavior need to have positive attitudes regarding the behavior and think that it is a good idea. Second, there need to be subjective norms or strong social norms supporting the use of the behavior from friends, family, colleagues, and other associates. The third key construct in the TPB is perceived behavioral control or the belief of a person as to whether the behavior is within their control or capacity. These three key constructs together predict the intention to perform a behavior, and that intention predicts the likelihood of the person performing the behavior.

The TPB is relevant in the context of this assessment as it has been used to show the factors that inhibit or support educational innovation implementation. Determining inhibiting and supporting factors for involvement is one primary component of this assessment. This theory will be used in this assessment’s design of data collection tools. A self-report survey consisting of questions and rankings framed from the TPB will be used to capture the key constructs of the theory. By capturing feedback on these constructs, informed recommendations may be laid out for the program. Once the feedback has been gathered, the results can also be used in the development of program theory, providing insight into the reason for the program and the steps needed to reach goals. Understanding the constructs of TPB in regard to the co-curricular and HIP involvement of non-traditional students will allow regional campuses and other higher education institutions to increase what is a key to student success.
Guiding Questions

In order to adequately assess the needs that the University of Mississippi Regional Campus faces when it comes to student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIP, this assessment will ask the following questions:

1. How do students perceive their experiences participating in co-curricular organizations and HIPs?
2. From the students’ perspective, how did participation influence persistence in degree completion, if at all?
3. What supports enhance the co-curricular participation of UM Tupelo students?
4. What barriers to participation do students identify?

The first question, “How do students perceive their experiences participating in co-curricular organizations and HIPs?” emphasizes the significance of comprehending students’ experiences and viewpoints, which directs the assessment. It focuses the assessment on obtaining qualitative data about students’ perceptions, emotions, and experiences with HIPs and co-curricular organizations. The assessment aims to explore the impact of participation from a student’s point of view, providing insights into the perceived benefits and challenges.

The second question “From the students’ perspective, how did participation influence persistence in degree completion, if at all?” guides the assessment’s investigation of the relationship between co-curricular engagement and degree perseverance. It highlights the need to analyze whether students perceive that their involvement in co-curricular organizations and HIPs has any influence on their determination to complete their degree. It steers the assessment towards identifying potential connections and causation between participation and degree persistence from a student-centered viewpoint.
The third question, “What supports enhance the co-curricular participation of UM Tupelo students?” directs the assessment to explore the tools and support that facilitate student engagement in co-curricular organizations and HIPs. It emphasizes the importance of identifying the supportive elements that contribute to increased participation and pinpointing the factors that positively impact student involvement.

Question four, “What barriers to participation do students identify?” directs the assessment in the direction of identifying the barriers and difficulties that students face when taking part in co-curricular organizations and HIPs. It requires the assessment to gather information on the obstacles that students perceive, which could include lack of awareness, time restraints, budgetary worries, or other obstacles. A primary assessment goal is to determine the problems that might be preventing students from participating fully.

These questions help inform the assessment’s data collection methods, analysis, and the development of recommendations that can effectively enhance student engagement and degree completion. Framing the assessment around these questions ensures that it is student-centric, addressing not only the quantitative data but also the qualitative insights that are fundamental for understanding the nuances of student participation.

**Assessment Structure**

The assessment structure will have the following components:

- **Quantitative Component:** To determine gaps and saturation and to measure the degrees of involvement, conduct surveys, and assess environmental scan data in conjunction with existing data. Utilize statistical analysis to evaluate various co-curricular programs and HIPs, as well as to gauge the level of engagement.
• Qualitative Component: To help identify specific factors that influence student decisions, the conducting of interviews, focus groups, and document analysis will be utilized. The results will assist in the understanding of barriers to participation and allow for a gaining of insights into the experiences of students.

• Integration and Synthesis: Integration of the findings from both components. For example, qualitative data might offer context and recommendations for improvement if quantitative data indicates a low program participation rate.

• Recommendations: Use the results of the mixed-methods research to create focused suggestions for raising student involvement.

Methodology

For this assessment, in order to get the most comprehensive understanding, a mixed-methods assessment combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods will be utilized. A mixed-methods assessment is a research methodology that seeks to go beyond the limitations of either purely quantitative or purely qualitative research approaches. It aims to provide a more complete and nuanced understanding of a research question or phenomenon by collecting and analyzing both numerical and textual data concurrently. This approach will best address this Problem of Practice by considering not only the “what” (quantitative data) but also the “how” and “why” (qualitative data). Mixed-methods assessments are effective at capturing the perspectives of various stakeholders, including students, faculty, staff, and administrators, ensuring their voices are heard. The use of multiple tools will also allow for triangulation of data between different sources.

Building on an understanding of regional campus students, campus offerings, and student views, conducting a needs assessment, environmental scan, and gap analysis was determined to
be the best method to appreciate the guiding questions completely. The needs assessment will shed light on first-hand information regarding potential student desires for the school. Together with surveys, important stakeholders (students, educators, and staff) will be interviewed to give the formal needs assessment more depth and breadth. The SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results) analysis will also be used to integrate the different external needs with the opportunities and strengths within.

The goal of the environmental scan is to provide a wide perspective of organizational potential based on secondary current data and perspectives. It will concentrate internally (operations) and externally (students). Missed opportunities for co-curricular organizations and HIPs in the various programs offered by the regional campus will be identified by the gap analysis. Finding program gaps will highlight important areas where strategic planning changes might be started.

This assessment will quantify the extent of participation and measure gaps quantitatively while gathering rich qualitative data about the barriers and experiences of students and stakeholders. Additionally, using both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods will increase the validity and reliability of the assessment, with quantitative data providing statistical evidence of gaps and saturation levels and qualitative data providing context and depth to the findings. Qualitative data can be beneficial in identifying the root causes of participation barriers. Uncovering specific reasons why students may not participate in co-curricular activities and high-impact practices can be achieved through interviews and focus groups. By combining data from both quantitative and qualitative sources, this assessment will generate more nuanced and actionable recommendations for improving student participation based on both statistical trends and qualitative insights.
IMPLEMENTATION

As previously stated, this assessment will use multiple methods to collect and analyze data. The first method will be quantitative, using numbers gathered from the institution’s student information system. This information will include the number of students in each program, the number of students participating in each degree-related co-curricular student organization, did the student complete their degree, and the level of participation by each student who did participate in a co-curricular organization or HIP. Simply put, how many students are in the program, are they participating in the co-curricular organization or HIP, and to what extent are they participating. The second method will be qualitative, by asking the students for their perceptions of the benefits they received from engagement and involvement in a degree-related co-curricular organization or HIP. The qualitative portion of the study will also ask for the student’s perception as to what extent involvement in the co-curricular organization or HIP contributed to feelings of connection.

The entire population of students at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus will be utilized to gather the data needed. Data needs will include the number of students enrolled in each program, student participation in a degree-related co-curricular organization, and persistence to degree completion. Institutional data will be analyzed regarding program enrollment, participation, and graduation numbers. A regression analysis will be run to evaluate whether participation, the independent variable, has any relationship to degree completion, the dependent variable. A locally developed survey (Appendix A) of questions regarding students perceived benefits from participation, engagement and involvement level with
the organization, and perceived connectedness contribution from organizational involvement will be administered to gather qualitative data. Upon evaluation of the survey data results, more qualitative information may be gathered through locally administered interviews if deemed necessary. An example of possible interview questions is included in the appendices (Appendix B).

The data will be collected by the University of Mississippi Tupelo student services coordinator and communications specialist. Once collected, data will be de-identified in order to protect student identity. The de-identified data will be stored on a secure network drive separate from any data containing identifiable participant information. This study will take approximately three years to gather data and complete evaluation, as students are enrolled at the regional campus for two years to complete their third and fourth year of higher education. The only costs expected will be the time of the researchers and survey administrators.

After collection and analysis of the data, the findings will be compiled and reported to the University of Mississippi, Regional Campuses, Division of Outreach, Student Services for the Regional Campuses, faculty advisors for the degree-related co-curricular organizations, and leaders of the degree-related co-curricular organizations. As a result of this study, regional campuses will be able to present their students with more degree-related co-curricular organizations and HIP opportunities. The results will bring to light perceived benefits and hindrances for their students in relation to these activities. Regional campuses can also remove barriers keeping non-traditional students from participating in degree-related co-curricular organizations and HIPs. In order to ensure these improvements are met and remain relevant, a reassessment every 7-10 years is recommended.
The primary audience of the programs being assessed will be regional campus students. The students at the University of Mississippi Regional Campuses are primarily non-traditional. Non-traditional students often have additional obstacles and responsibilities that can make attaining a degree more challenging. These students are often older than traditional college students and have full-time jobs and families. Restraints on time and finances can hinder participation and degree completion. All students at the University of Mississippi Regional Campuses have either attained an associate’s degree or completed the first two years of higher education somewhere else; this means that these students may not have a great deal of knowledge regarding involvement benefits, opportunities, or concepts. Educating this audience on the benefits of involvement, including the relation to successful degree attainment and career success, could boost extrinsic and intrinsic motivation and increase their desire to learn more about involvement or make them become involved in co-curricular organizations or HIPs.

To ensure that all students have the opportunity to become involved in co-curricular organizations, the planning team will determine the need for co-curricular organizations and HIPs across the programs offered on the regional campus. Once programs without co-curricular organizations or HIPs are identified, members of the team will work with the program to establish regional divisions of co-curricular organizations and HIPs in that program field. After all organizations have been established, each EDHE 305 Transfer Student Experience class will spend one session at the beginning of the semester educating the students on the benefits of participation, involvement, and engagement. This course is intended to support transfer students in settling into the academic environment, improving their comprehension of university coursework, and pursuing further studies in their majors or careers. The course also addresses the ethical and social issues surrounding the operations of a comprehensive public university, as well
as its goals, objectives, and constituents. This course is recommended to all regional campus students and will be the initial point of information on co-curricular organizations and HIPs. In addition to EDHE 305, one of the core required courses in each program will also elaborate in more detail on the specifics of the co-curricular organization and HIPs related to that specific program, along with the opportunities and experiences specific to that particular organization. At this point, the organizations will have evaluated prior reasons for non-participation by students and alleviated those issues to allow for greater participation.

Since each co-curricular organization belongs to a specific department, the instructional staff and materials will come from within that department program. In order to ensure quality, each co-curricular organization’s faculty advisor will be met individually by the project manager to go over the reasons behind the importance of student participation and address any questions, concerns, or issues. In addition, guidelines will be put in place in the event of an emergency, such as a switch to remote learning like the previous experience with COVID-19. These guidelines will ensure that students will still be able to get the benefits of co-curricular involvement and HIPs in abnormal circumstances.

In order to achieve successful implementation and increase student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs at regional campuses, the following actions will be taken:

- Evaluation of program offerings and co-curricular organization deficiencies.
- Establishment of necessary co-curricular organizations across all regional campus programs.
- Detail benefits of involvement to students.
- Easily accessible information on organizations.
- Student highlight stories exemplifying benefits and outcomes.
• Ongoing support and interaction with co-curricular organization’s faculty advisors.
• Annual feedback and data collection.
• Re-assess program bi-annually.

Stakeholders, including regional campus students, regional campus faculty and staff, university admissions, and university leadership in academics and student services, all have a vested interest in seeing the implementation of more substantial support and engagement systems to promote degree completion at regional campuses. It will be necessary to engage with the stakeholders and involve them in different ways. For the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, the involvement will be to inform on progress and findings. The Director of Outreach will be in a consulting role involved in the assessment, enhancing the assessment’s credibility, anticipating landmines, and suggesting priorities. The Assistant Provost for Regional Campuses and the Regional Campus Directors will be involved in the assessment. Their positions allow for addressing concerns and issues with the options presented in the assessment, and their insight will also ensure the utility and appropriateness of the assessment. The Regional Campus Student Service Coordinators and the Faculty Advisors of Student Organizations will collaborate on the assessment. Both stakeholder positions will provide advice and suggestions for the assessment and will be part of the assessment process. The final stakeholder, the regional campus students, will be empowered. This program is entirely about the regional campus students and offering them all of the resources possible to ensure successful degree completion.

Overall, it will be important to set up an advisory committee consisting of members with a strong understanding of regional campus operations, atmosphere, environment, and student type. The advisory committee should include the Provost of Regional Campuses, the Director of Outreach, Regional Campus Executive Director, Regional Campus Student Affairs/Services,
faculty advisor for Regional Campus student organization, and regional campus student representatives, both traditional and non-traditional. In addition, faculty members from each program offered at the regional campus will be a part of the committee in order to establish needed co-curricular organizations and HIPs, ensuring students in all program offerings have available opportunities for involvement. Along with the advisory committee, quarterly meetings with the core members will be held to review progress and address issues. The core members will include student representatives, faculty advisors, and student services coordinators.

The resources necessary for this process will include staff time for assessing needs, planning, and implementing; research to determine programming numbers, non-traditional student needs, qualitative student views on engagement, and issues blocking student engagement in co-curricular organizations and HIPs at regional campuses. Additionally, expertise from program chairs or faculty will be necessary for implementation of co-curricular organizations and HIPs in regional campus program offerings that do not currently have co-curricular organizations or HIPs. Finally, funding may be necessary to alleviate financial hindrances students face dependent upon the barriers to participation research results.

Initially, a gap analysis will determine if there is a gap in opportunities for participation in degree-related co-curricular student organizations and HIPs between the various degree programs offered on the regional campus. If all degree programs do not offer the opportunity for degree-related co-curricular student organizational or HIP participation, then the gap in program organizations will be identified, and participation opportunities will be implemented. When all degree programs at the regional campus do offer this opportunity, measures will be taken to increase student involvement after determining what reasons keep students from joining the
organizations. The reasons blocking accessibility to participation, such as cost, timing, and other
variables, will then be evaluated and possible resolutions determined.

This assessment will take place over the span of two academic years in order to engage with
regional campus students before and after possible participation in co-curricular organizations
and HIPs. Table 1 lays out an estimated assessment timeline, and Table 2 lists possible activities
and time estimates. The time estimates are approximate and can vary based on the scope and
complexity of the assessment. This timeline is a general guideline and can be adjusted based on
the specific circumstances and resources available at the University of Mississippi Tupelo
Regional Campus. Regular communication and collaboration with stakeholders will be essential
throughout the assessment process.
### Table 1.

**Timeline**

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<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Collect data matrix</td>
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<td>Interviews</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Interviews
- Data collection matrix
- Analyze Data
- Compile findings
| Create stakeholder presentation | | | | | | | |
Table 2.

Possible Activities and Time Estimates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Time Estimate (in Weeks)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Project Initiation</strong></td>
<td>1-2 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define assessment objectives and goals</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assemble assessment team</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop a project plan</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Secure necessary resources and approvals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Pre-Assessment Preparation</strong></td>
<td>2-3 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review existing data and reports</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify key stakeholders and their roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop assessment instruments and surveys</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pilot test assessment instruments</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Finalize data collection tools</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Data Collection and Environmental Scan</strong></td>
<td><strong>4-6 weeks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administer surveys to students and stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Conduct interviews and focus groups with stakeholders</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Collect and analyze relevant documents and reports</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assess the current state of co-curricular programs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Data Analysis and Gap Identification</strong></td>
<td><strong>4-6 weeks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze survey and interview data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify performance gaps and barriers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conduct root cause analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Determine areas requiring improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. <strong>Stakeholder Engagement and Feedback</strong></td>
<td><strong>2-3 weeks</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>6. Strategy Development</strong></td>
<td><strong>3-4 weeks</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop recommendations and strategies for improvement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Prioritize and set clear goals</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Establish action plans and timelines</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>7. Action Plan Implementation</strong></th>
<th><strong>Ongoing</strong></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Execute the action plan and interventions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Monitor progress and make adjustments as necessary</td>
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</table>

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>8. Evaluation and Reporting</strong></th>
<th><strong>2-3 weeks</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate the impact of interventions</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Collect and analyze post-implementation data</td>
<td></td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prepare a comprehensive report with findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Follow-up and Continuous Improvement</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuously assess progress and make refinements</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustain efforts to increase student participation</td>
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</table>
In communicating the assessment findings, layered assessment reporting and data parties will be used. The layered evaluation reports will be used to disseminate information to various stakeholders and advisory committee members. A data party is a set-aside, multi-hour gathering where a range of stakeholders convene to collaboratively analyze gathered data (Franz, 2013). The data party will be used to convey assessment findings to members of the regional campus’ staff, faculty, and student body. The assessment findings will be shared at the end of the academic year so that decisions can be made in regard to steps and implementations needed for the upcoming academic year. Table 3 details the assessment findings communication plan.
Table 3.

*Findings Communication*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>25 Page Full Report</th>
<th>3 Page Executive Summary</th>
<th>1 Page Handout</th>
<th>Data Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provost of Regional Campuses,</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Director of Outreach,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Campus Executive Director,</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Campus Student Affairs/Services,</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty Advisor for Regional Campus Student Organization,</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Campus Student Representative (traditional)</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Campus Student Representative (non-traditional)</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Campus Faculty Members</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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</table>
INTERPRETATION

Interpreting the results of this assessment will be a critical step in the process, providing the basis for informed decision-making and actionable steps. This assessment aims to identify gaps, saturation levels, and barriers to student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus. The following section anticipates the interpretation of the data.

Quantitative Data

The quantitative data will be interpreted in the following ways:

1. Participation Rates: Quantitative data will be used to determine the current participation rates in various co-curricular organizations and HIPs. These rates will help identify which programs are successful and where participation is lacking.

2. Comparative Analysis: Comparison of participation rates across different programs and student groups to determine if certain majors or demographic groups are more engaged than others.

3. Trends Over Time: Available historical data will assess trends in participation to see if there have been improvements or declines in recent years.

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data will be interpreted in the following ways:
1. Barriers and Facilitators: Qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups will provide insights into the factors influencing student participation. Anticipated findings may include the identification of specific barriers, such as time constraints or lack of awareness, as well as factors that facilitate participation, including personal interests or supportive faculty.

2. Student Perspectives: A greater comprehension of the experiences and motivations of the students can be achieved by interpreting their quotes and narratives. This knowledge will provide an understanding of why some students engage while others do not.

Root Cause Analysis

The root cause analysis will be interpreted in the following ways:

1. Identifying Underlying Causes: The quantitative and qualitative data will be integrated to do a root cause analysis. An examination for patterns and correlations between participation levels and various factors may determine if there are systemic issues contributing to low participation.

2. Determining Key Contributors: The interpretation will involve identifying the key contributors to low participation. Anticipated key contributors include curriculum design, student support services, and administrative processes.

Interpretation of the results of the assessment will provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of student participation and the barriers that may exist. This knowledge will be important for developing targeted strategies and interventions that align with the problem of practice, ultimately increasing student engagement and degree completion rates at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus.
INFORM AND REFINE

Once the data from the assessment is received, it will be essential to use the results obtained to address the problem of practice in an efficient manner. Effective use of the findings necessitates an iterative and collaborative process that includes institutional partners, stakeholders, and the larger campus community. Throughout the process, it will be critical to keep lines of communication open and transparent, include all pertinent parties in decision-making, and continuously evaluate and modify methods as necessary. The following are key steps to ensure the results are utilized for meaningful improvements.

Recommendations and Actionable Insights

1. Formulating Recommendations: Based on the interpreted data, recommendations for strategies and interventions to address the identified gaps and barriers will be developed. The quantitative and qualitative findings will inform the recommendations.

2. Prioritizing Interventions: The interpretation will allow for prioritization of interventions based on the severity and root causes of the identified issues, determining the need for immediate attention or addressing over time.

3. Aligning with the Problem of Practice: The data will be connected to the problem of practice throughout the interpretation phase. How the assessment results align
with the challenge of increasing student participation and degree completion is an essential connection for creating a coherent action plan.

**Data Visualization and Reporting**

1. **Visualizing Key Findings:** In the assessment report, data visualization tools, including charts, graphs, and tables, will be used to help stakeholders quickly grasp the key findings and trends.

2. **Clear Communication:** Interpretation will involve clear and concise communication of the results, making it accessible to a broad audience, including administrators, faculty, and students.

**Stakeholder Feedback**

1. Throughout the interpretation process, feedback from stakeholders will be gathered to ensure that their perspectives are considered and integrated into the final recommendations.
CONCLUSION

Overall, this assessment will help understand the behavior patterns of non-traditional student participation in co-curricular activities and HIPs at one regional campus of a state flagship university and reinforce the need for the leaders of higher education institutions to effectively design regional campus-focused strategies and practices specifically for the engagement of non-traditional students. The lack of research surrounding regional campuses and their unique student population and environment further supports the need for studies such as this one. The continued growth of regional campuses and non-traditional student populations requires higher education organizations to take a closer examination of the services and organizations provided on regional campuses in relation to the differing needs of the student base.

Several tools will be engaged in order to get a more inclusive and thorough set of insights while also enabling data triangulation between various sources. Building on awareness of regional campus students, campus programs, and student perceptions, a needs assessment, environmental scan, and gap analysis were found to be the best ways to appreciate the guiding questions completely. In order to provide a broad perspective on organizational prospects based on secondary existing data and perceptions, the environmental scan will concentrate on both internal (operations) and external (students) components. Based on primary data, the needs assessment will offer insight into what potential students could seek from the regional campus. Surveys and interviews with
important stakeholders (students, faculty, and staff) will be carried out in order to give the formal needs assessment more depth and scope. In order to connect diverse external demands with internal strengths and possibilities, a SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results) analysis will also be used. Missed opportunities in all of the regional campus’s programs will be found through the gap analysis. Program gaps will serve as a major indicator of where strategic planning changes should focus.

In Manuscript 3, I will address a leadership plan in relation to the Problem of Practice and within the framework of CPED’s Working Principles by drawing on leadership theories, my conceptual framework, and other literature. The question “How will you continue to enhance your knowledge and skills as a leader and scholar?” will also be covered, along with my response.


*Engaged Learning: Fostering Success for All Students*. (0AD).


*Environmental Scan & Needs Assessment - Extension*. Colorado State University. (n.d.).

https://extension.colostate.edu/docs/staffres/program/Environmental-Scan-and-Needs-Assessment.pdf


Hoffower, H. (2019, June 26). *College is more expensive than it's ever been, and the 5 reasons why suggest it's only going to get worse*. https://www.businessinsider.com/why-is-college-so-expensive-2018-4


https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312034001039


NSSE. Evidence-Based Improvement in Higher Education. (0AD).


*Theories and Frameworks: Introduction*. Academic Guides. (0AD).

https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/library/theory.


APPENDIX
APPENDIX A
Before beginning, facilitators will provide a succinct introduction to co-curricular organizations and High Impact Practices in this particular context, and the assessment process' objectives. Likert-type scale responses based on Phakiti (2020).

**Student Survey**

The University of Mississippi Tupelo is asking you to participate in this survey to gather supporting data on program alignment and student learning outcomes regarding participation and involvement as a Regional Campus Student.

Directions:

Please complete the following survey as accurately and honestly as possible. Your participation is voluntary. Please answer the appropriate choice to the following questions.

1. Please Circle Your Degree Program:
   - Accountancy
   - General Business
   - Management: Human Resources or Healthcare Emphasis
   - Finance
   - Marketing
   - Management Information Systems
   - Criminal Justice
   - Law Studies
   - Social Work
Elementary Education
Secondary Education
Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)
Allied Health Studies
Interdisciplinary Studies
Psychology
Multi-Disciplinary Studies

2. Grade level (i.e., Junior or Senior):

3. I entered this college during the following semester and year: (fill in the blank with the year)

   Fall, ________ Spring, ________ or Summer, ________

4. While enrolled at this college, I participated in (circle yes or no). If no proceed to question number 6.

   An internship or co-op       Yes     No

   Volunteer work/service learning       Yes     No

   Honors classes       Yes     No

   A student organization       Yes     No

If yes, please list all student organizations in which you were a member:
5. In your opinion, on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 considered very much), how much has your involvement in co-curricular activities enhanced your achievement of institutional general education learning outcomes:

Reading

Writing

Speaking

Scientific Literacy

Quantitative Literacy

Critical Thinking

Technology Literacy

Information Literacy

Global Awareness

Provide one or more examples that would illustrate why you feel this way.

6. In your opinion, on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 considered very well), how well do college professionals (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators) at this campus encourage the role of co-curricular activities to students’ learning in the classroom?

7. In your opinion, how can college professionals (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators) at this campus improve co-curricular activities?

8. In your opinion, how can college professionals (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators) at this campus improve the access/ease of participation in co-curricular activities?
9. What are the obstacles to co-curricular participation for regional campus students?

10. Did involvement in student organizations increase your feeling of connectedness to the Ole Miss Tupelo community? (If applicable).
The following questions will serve as the guide for discussion-based interviews conducted by neutral facilitators with both individuals and groups. Prior to starting, facilitators will provide a succinct introduction to co-curricular organizations and High Impact Practices in this particular context, and the assessment process' objectives. Participants can choose how detailed or vaguely they want to respond to these questions. The facilitator will urge participants to have the discussions that come up as a result of these queries.

**Interview Questions**

1. Can you describe your experiences participating in co-curricular organizations and high-impact practices at UM Tupelo Regional Campus? What motivated you to get involved?

2. From your perspective, how has your participation in these activities influenced your overall college experience and degree progress? Can you provide specific examples?

3. Have you encountered any challenges or barriers that made it difficult for you to participate in co-curricular organizations or HIPs? What specific obstacles did you face?

4. What types of support or resources have you found helpful in enhancing your co-curricular participation? Are there any UM Tupelo programs or services that have positively impacted your involvement?
5. In your opinion, what improvements or changes could be made to encourage more students to participate in co-curricular organizations and HIPs? Do you have any recommendations or suggestions?

6. How would you rate the overall impact of co-curricular involvement on your personal and academic development? Can you provide insights into the benefits you've gained?
MANUSCRIPT III: PRACTICE IMPROVEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS AND
LEADERSHIP STATEMENT
ABSTRACT

The results of the assessment set forth in the first two manuscripts of this dissertation in practice are not entirely necessary for making recommendations to address the lack of student participation at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus. Drawing upon existing data regarding student participation and involvement, along with existing data regarding non-traditional student characteristics and needs, actionable steps can be recommended.

Strategies to enhance student participation might include curricular integration, mentorship programs, diverse representation, and incorporating reflection opportunities into assignments. Continual and active engagement from faculty, staff, and leadership, not only with students but also with the local community, constitutes another crucial element for success and maintainability. Accomplishing this engagement relies on a transformative leadership style that inspires and motivates followers. Additionally, a collaborative leadership approach allows harnessing the collective knowledge of faculty and staff to achieve objectives, fostering investment in the success of the program.

Implementing these recommendations will facilitate tailored interventions, promoting a more inclusive, supportive, and engaging environment. The overarching objectives at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus are to elevate degree completion rates, enhance educational experiences, and augment student participation.
GUIDING PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS

The purpose of planning this assessment is to examine the possibility of participation in High Impact Practices (HIPs) and co-curricular organizations as a way to address student retention and completion rates. Improving completion-rates among students in higher education institutions through increased participation in HIPs and co-curricular organizations can be addressed through a better understanding of the patterns of behavior exhibited by non-traditional students. Understanding, analyzing, and addressing the factors impacting students’ involvement in co-curricular activities and HIPs at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus serves as the assessment’s guiding problem. The goal of the assessment is to determine what obstacles, gaps, and difficulties might be keeping students from taking advantage of these worthwhile learning opportunities. Through an analysis of how involvement affects degree completion and success, the assessment seeks to improve student engagement and, ultimately, foster an environment conducive to student growth and achievement.

The guiding questions for this study seek to understand the involvement in co-curricular organizations and HIPs by regional campus students. The guiding questions for this assessment are:

1. How do students perceive their experiences participating in co-curricular organizations and HIPs?
2. From the students’ perspective, how did participation influence persistence in degree completion, if at all?

3. What supports enhance the HIP and co-curricular participation of UM Tupelo students?

4. What barriers to participation do students identify?

In order to ensure that the assessment is student-centric and covers both quantitative and qualitative insights—which are crucial for understanding the nuances of student participation—it will be framed around these questions. These questions will aid in developing suggestions for methods for gathering, analyzing, and developing assessment data that will successfully lead to an increase in student involvement and degree completion. Table 4 provides a brief overview of the planned methodology for this assessment, and table 5 provides an overview of the anticipated data interpretation points.
Table 4.

Methodology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation Numbers</td>
<td>Barriers to Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Saturation</td>
<td>Perceptions of Benefits and Persistence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.

Data Interpretation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative Data</th>
<th>Qualitative Data</th>
<th>Root Cause Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation Rates</td>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>Identify Underlying Causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative Analysis</td>
<td>Facilitators</td>
<td>Determine Key Contributors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trends Over Time</td>
<td>Student Perspectives</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

The cost of higher education continues to rise, and many are questioning the value of a degree. In addition to the cost concern, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting loss of jobs forced many to change direction regarding career and educational paths. As the prices of everyday necessities continue to climb, many people cannot focus strictly on education. The combination of working and attending school is prevalent. A report from Georgetown University stated that 70% of undergraduate students work (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). The aforementioned reasons make it even more important for higher education institutions to meet students where they are in terms of support.

Studies have shown a positive correlation between participation in co-curricular student organizations or HIPs and degree attainment. Even though a vast amount of research exists on this relationship, an examination has not been conducted in the context of public university regional campus settings such as the University of Mississippi Tupelo or on the type of students that attend regional campuses, which varies from the traditional college student.

Many students at regional campuses are non-traditional and can have less opportunity and access to education (Ballantyne, 2012). Non-traditional students often have additional obstacles and responsibilities that make attaining a degree more challenging. Statistics showing an increase in non-traditional students in the U.S. paired with statistics that show significantly lower graduation rates for non-traditional students
make it essential for institutions not only to identify and alleviate barriers to completion faced by non-traditional students but also to implement as many success-boosting elements as possible (Markle, 2015).

In a 2006 survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found significant differences in participation levels of non-traditional versus traditional students in both co-curricular and extracurricular activities, with traditional student participation levels being almost double those of their non-traditional counterparts. The same survey found a much higher percentage of non-traditional student participation in academic, course-related activities (NSSE, 2006). Tan and Pope (2007) found that non-traditional, predominantly commuting students visiting campus for classes only, did recognize the importance of participating in non-classroom activities. However, their lack of connectivity to their institutions, job responsibilities, and certain institutional factors, such as the quality of co-curricular activities and academic requirements, restricted their participation in co-curricular activities. In 2018, Rabourn et al. showed results from their study that overall, adult learners find campuses, in general, less supportive.

Tinto described the importance of how individual factors interact with institutional experiences, both academically and socially, in his longitudinal model of departure from institutions of higher education (Tinto, 1993). The probability of persisting in college has been demonstrated to increase with higher social engagement levels (Hu, 2011). Several studies have found that institutions that do not integrate students academically and socially have low student retention. Higher levels of social involvement have been linked to a higher likelihood of completing college. In contrast, higher levels of intellectual engagement have been linked to a lower likelihood of
completing college. Providing co-curricular organizational and HIP involvement opportunities on regional campuses supports the mission of retention and completion.

Participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs allows students to network, work with mentors, participate in community service projects, and gain career experiences. While main university campuses offer a vast number of organizations for students to participate in, regional or branch campuses cannot provide as many opportunities in this area due to staffing, financial, and participant restrictions. The results of this assessment will enable the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of their students regarding degree-related co-curricular organizations, thus allowing regional campuses to provide more organizational opportunities across degree programs, highlight the benefits of participation to students, and remove barriers to participation. Removing barriers hindering non-traditional students from participating in co-curricular organizations will help regional campuses facilitate more access to support programs that increase achievement and degree completion amongst students.

The Problem of Practice for this assessment is the need to increase student participation in co-curricular organizations and high-impact practices (HIPs) at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus. The educational options offered have the potential to enhance students' intellectual and personal development, yet the current participation rates are suboptimal. The challenge lies in determining and resolving the gaps, barriers, and systemic problems that impede student engagement and then creating tactics and interventions that work to encourage greater involvement. By fostering an
engaging and supportive campus community that values and promotes co-curricular involvement, the main objective is to improve student success and degree completion.
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

"A conceptual framework sets forth the standards to define a research question and find appropriate, meaningful answers for the same. It connects the theories, assumptions, beliefs, and concepts behind your research and presents them in a pictorial, graphical, or narrative format" (Sachdeva, 2023). This study’s conceptual framework has three elements: student participation, degree-related co-curricular organizations and HIPs, and degree attainment at regional campuses. This conceptual framework is based on theoretical framework from Astin’s (1984) Involvement Theory, Tinto’s (1993) Student Integration Theory, Tinto’s (1993) Longitudinal Model of Student Departure, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Non-traditional Student Attrition Model, Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda’s (1993) Student Retention Integrated Model, and Kuh’s (2001) Theory of Student Engagement. These theories collectively support that individuals who are academically and socially integrated learn more, develop stronger loyalty to their institution, and have a sense of belonging, all of which have a beneficial impact on their decision to persist.

Student Participation, Engagement, and Involvement

The first conceptual framework element’s components of participation, engagement, and involvement from students are crucial aspects of a university education. Participation includes a broad range of activities that support students’ academic and personal growth, both within and outside the classroom. Active engagement in coursework, discussions, and collaborative projects fosters more profound learning and
critical thinking. Beyond academics, involvement in co-curricular organizations, clubs, and high-impact practices such as internships, service learning, and undergraduate research enriches students' social, intellectual, and leadership experiences. In addition to fostering personal development, these activities have a favorable effect on retention and degree completion rates. Educational institutions all have the same objective of fostering a dynamic and inclusive campus community that promotes student involvement and accomplishment, ultimately equipping them for success in their personal, professional, and academic endeavors.

Degree-Related Co-Curricular Student Organizations and High Impact Practices

The second element, degree-related co-curricular organizations, and HIPs, play a vital role in higher education. Co-curricular activities tailored to a student's major or area of study provide chances for more in-depth participation and real-world application of academic information. They facilitate networking, skill development, and a sense of belonging within a chosen academic community. Conversely, HIPs, which include activities like internships, undergraduate research, and study abroad programs, provide students with transformative learning experiences. HIPs enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills, preparing students for real-world challenges. Improved retention, degree completion, and post-graduate performance are all associated with these practices. Degree-related co-curricular groups and HIPs provide a comprehensive educational experience that helps students achieve their academic and professional objectives while also developing personally.

Degree Attainment and Persistence at Regional Campuses
The third conceptual framework element this study will look at is persistence and degree attainment at regional campuses. Regional campuses serve diverse student populations, often including non-traditional and place-bound learners. In these environments, obtaining a degree and encouraging perseverance may be more difficult for a variety of reasons, such as varied student demographics and scarce resources. At regional campuses, efforts are made to assist degree completion and persistence by customizing academic courses, support services, and extracurricular activities to these students' unique requirements. Flexible scheduling, online education, academic advising, financial aid assistance, and fostering a feeling of community on campus are a few examples of strategies. These initiatives are central to ensuring that students not only enroll but also persist and successfully earn their degrees, contributing to their future career opportunities, personal growth, and support of their community.

**Supporting Theories**

Conceptually, this study is guided by various models, theories, and concepts of student involvement, engagement, retention, and completion. Many academic professions have produced ideas to explain the variation in student persistence, as retention is a complicated problem that resists a single solution (Hirschy & Wilson, 2017). The basis of almost all the theories, concepts, and models used in this study includes one or more of the following: Astin’s (1984) Involvement Theory, Tinto’s (1993) Student Integration Theory, and Tinto’s (1993) Longitudinal Model of Student Departure. There has been a significant amount of research done on student retention using the theories mentioned above. While the majority of research focuses on traditional settings, information from
this research on traditional campuses and community colleges can prove to be beneficial in explaining some patterns on regional campuses.

This Manuscript will offer recommendations for improvement on the Problem of Practice. Drawing from leadership theories, the conceptual framework, and other literature, Manuscript 3 will also discuss a leadership strategy in connection to the Problem of Practice and within the framework of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate’s Working Principles. In addition, I will address my answer to the question, “How will you continue to enhance your knowledge and skills as a leader and scholar?”
PRACTICE IMPROVEMENT

Research studies have shown a positive correlation between engagement in co-curricular student organizations and HIPs and retention (Astin, 1993; Fredin et al., 2015; Kuh et al., 2007; Tinto, 1993). While the planned assessment's data is not yet available, expectations are that the outcomes will be consistent with existing studies. The following recommendations for addressing the problem of low student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus are based on best practices and are designed to improve student engagement and participation.

**Promote Awareness and Communication**

As a marketing professional, I see all too often how awareness and communication are overlooked and can be last minute thrown together steps when it comes to programs and projects. More times than not, we [marketers] receive information on events, promotions, and campaigns at the last minute; this is not conducive to effective marketing, communication or awareness campaigns. For anything to be successful, the target audience must be aware of it. Recommended steps to promote awareness and communication in order to enhance student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs include:
• Establish a single page on the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus website with details on all the co-curricular and HIPs that are offered, including their objectives, schedules, and contact details.

• Implement email newsletters on a regularly, run social media campaigns, and use other communication techniques to inform students about upcoming opportunities and events.

• Organize sessions during new student orientation and workshops at the beginning of each semester to introduce students to co-curricular and HIP options. Workshops should also include current students to reiterate the benefits of involvement for those not participating.

Work with faculty to directly address classes on program-specific opportunities and benefits.

Faculty and Staff Engagement

It is equally important to have buy-in from faculty and staff on the importance of student involvement in co-curricular organizations and HIPs. Faculty members have the most interaction with students; thus, they are the front line when it comes to touting the benefits of involvement to students. The following are recommendations for faculty and staff engagement:

• Encourage academic staff to actively support and promote co-curricular activities and HIPs related to their fields of study.

• Develop an incentive system or recognition program for faculty and staff that advise or actively participate in co-curricular organizations.
• Provide professors and staff with opportunities for professional development focused on the best ways to get students involved in co-curricular activities and HIPs.

Financial Support and Scholarships

In order to address financial and budgetary constraints students may face when it comes to participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs, the following recommendations are suggested:

• Establish a fund to offer scholarships or financial assistance to students taking part in study abroad, internships, and service-learning initiatives as part of HIPs.
• Work with local businesses, alumni, and community organizations to offer sponsorship opportunities. A partnership between the Community Development Foundation and the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus exists currently. This partnership will be the starting point for this recommendation.

Mentorship and Peer Support

Peer support and mentorship are essential for assisting and guiding students in their co-curricular activities. These connections enable students to overcome obstacles, boost their self-esteem, and make the most of their involvement, eventually resulting in higher involvement and a better overall campus experience.

• Building on the partnership with local businesses, alumni, and community organizations mentioned previously, establish a mentorship program and career network for students to shadow community leaders and professionals in their field of study.
• Create a mentorship program where experienced students assist and advise new students in choosing and engaging in co-curricular opportunities.

• Promote student-led clubs or support groups that concentrate on specific co-curricular interests to build a sense of belonging and peer support.

Curriculum Integration

Curriculum integration serves as the bridge that connects the classroom with the co-curricular, increasing the relevance, impact, and engagement of education while addressing the issue of low student participation in co-curricular activities and HIPs. It creates a learning environment where students can see the immediate benefits of their involvement in these activities, which helps them succeed and grow as individuals.

Recommendations for curriculum integration are:

• Work together with the faculty to incorporate co-curricular activities and HIPs into the curriculum so that academic learning and co-curricular pursuits are seamlessly connected.

• Create culminating or capstone experiences that include co-curricular activities and HIPs to improve the educational experience.

• Work with faculty to implement reflection activities in assignments. Activities including journaling, writing portfolios, and other exercises that encourage students to reflect on their learning experiences and connect them to academic concepts. By encouraging critical thinking, self-awareness, and the integration of knowledge from several sources, these activities will assist students in getting the most out of their activities.
Inclusivity and Diversity

Promoting inclusivity and diversity is crucial in the context of co-curricular activities and HIPs because it ensures that all students from all backgrounds can take part in and benefit from these programs. By fostering an inclusive, representative, and encouraging campus community, it ultimately raises student achievement and participation.

- Make sure that the co-curricular offerings are inclusive and varied and meet the needs, interests, and backgrounds of a wide spectrum of students.
- Encourage all students to participate by promoting programming that is sensitive to cultural differences.
- Examine demographic gaps in programs and activities, and implement solutions such as recruiting diverse mentors who represent the demographic groups that are underrepresented in programs and activities. Followed by mentor-matching, considering the specific needs and goals of students when pairing them with mentors.
- Provide financial aid and scholarships to students from underrepresented groups that reduce obstacles to their involvement in HIPs and co-curricular activities.

Recognition and Awards

Rewards and recognition are effective strategies for encouraging, involving, and keeping students in co-curricular activities and HIPs. Ultimately, they create an environment of appreciation and achievement, which raises student engagement and success. Recommendations for recognition and rewards are:
• Create an awards program to honor exceptional accomplishments in co-curricular activities and HIPs. These awards may be presented at the graduation celebration event in the spring semester.

• To promote a culture of inspiration and acknowledgment, highlight and celebrate the accomplishments and efforts of students. These highlights may be shared on social media, email, newsletters, the lobby television feed, public radio and other community media.

**Strategic Partnerships**

Strategic alliances expand the scope of co-curricular opportunities, increase their applicability, and grant access to resources. Both sides benefit from these collaborations. Students gain access to a wider range of useful and interesting activities, while outside partners support the student’s academic and career development.

• Work together with local companies and associations to offer students internships, practical experiences, and networking opportunities.

• Work with community organizations and schools to develop co-curricular programs that benefit the institution and the community at large.

**Regular Assessment and Feedback**

In order to promote continuous growth, match efforts with data-driven insights, and create an atmosphere where students are actively involved in co-curricular activities and HIPs, regular evaluation and feedback are essential. Institutions can design a more adaptable and efficient approach for raising student participation by listening to the
voices of students and utilizing results from assessments. Recommendations for regular assessment and feedback are:

- Conduct regular evaluations of co-curricular activities and HIPs to see how they affect students’ academic and personal growth.
- Regularly gather student input to pinpoint participation obstacles and modify programs as necessary.

**Ongoing Evaluation and Improvement**

To ensure that progress and momentum are continuous, ongoing evaluation and improvement will be necessary. External and internal conditions change constantly, and the motivations and barriers that exist today will likely differ from those existing in the future. Recommendations for ongoing evaluation and improvement include:

- Assess the recommendations’ effects regularly and adapt based on data as needed.
- Evaluate these tactics’ efficacy once a year and make adjustments in response to input and results.

These recommendations were developed to solve the issue of low student engagement in co-curricular activities and HIPs at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus. These suggestions provide a thorough approach to raising student involvement in co-curricular activities and HIPs while also considering the particular requirements of the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus and best practices. By putting these tactics into practice, students should become more engaged and successful.
LEADERSHIP STATEMENT

Leadership is essential in directing and forming the strategy to address the issues surrounding student involvement in co-curricular activities and HIPs at the University of Mississippi Tupelo Regional Campus. Completing the assessment and putting the previously mentioned recommendations into practice will depend heavily on effective leadership. Working with faculty, staff, students, university administration, and some external stakeholders will be required during both the assessment and implementation phases. Choosing a thorough leadership philosophy and acting in accordance with it will be essential when working with these different demographics. In this section, I will discuss my leadership style and how it aligns with CPED’s Working Principles one through three while referencing leadership theories and this study’s conceptual framework.

Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate Framework

The Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate (CPED) Framework supports “creating quality, rigorous practitioner preparation” in the Ed.D. This is accomplished through program design/redesign that “prepares educators for the application of appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge, and for the stewardship of the profession” (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2021).

Among the first components of CPED’s framework is scholarly inquiry. This principle highlights the value of scholarly inquiry to address problems of practice. As a
part of a leadership strategy relevant to this assessment’s problem of practice, encouraging a culture of inquiry and study to identify and evaluate the variables influencing student participation will be implemented to support research-based initiatives and data-driven decision-making. Another central CPED principle is collaboration. Creating a collaborative environment as a leader encourages cooperation regarding this Problem of Practice among faculty, staff, students, and outside partners. The combined knowledge of the various stakeholders can be used to produce creative solutions by fostering a collaborative environment. A third principle in the CPED framework calls for innovation in addressing problems of practice. In order to build an innovative and adaptable culture, leadership strategy must include promoting innovative thinking, experimenting with new creative strategies, and continually assessing and refining interventions.

**Leadership Philosophy**

CPED’s focus on preparing education professionals uses working principles that are central to its mission and guide its efforts to improve the quality and effectiveness of education doctoral programs. A comprehensive leadership approach aligning with CPED’s principles and my own collaborative and transformational leadership approach will contribute to a strong and maintainable strategy for enhancing student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs.

**Core Beliefs and Attitude**

In order to establish my leadership philosophy statement, it was first necessary to identify my core beliefs. A negative culture is one of the most detrimental things I have witnessed throughout my professional career. Negative culture stems from the leadership,
primarily having a leader who does not participate or engage. As someone with a master’s degree in public relations who currently works as a communications specialist for the University of Mississippi Tupelo and Booneville regional campuses, I am very passionate about engagement and involvement.

Educational leaders must be able to forge connections with all parties involved, identify and play to the strengths of their staff and students, develop leadership skills by encouraging pupils and teachers to adopt an innovator’s mentality and lead by example. My ultimate goal would be to be a leader who uses the aforementioned essential elements to develop a favorable learning culture and who engages with all stakeholders.

I had a very successful career in leadership in the corporate field. I had a very low turnover rate in a field known for high employee turnover. I believe that this was greatly due to my leadership mentality, understanding that leaders are not superior to followers. Northouse (2019) defined leadership as “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal.” My personal belief is that in order to influence, a leader must have the respect of their followers and be willing to lead by example. I also believe it is important to comprehend both leaders and followers in connection to one another and as a whole (Hollander, 1992; Burns, 1978). They are in a leadership relationship together—and are two sides of the same coin (Rost, 1991; Northouse, 2019).

**Perspectives and Theories**

While I believe that experience is significant to leadership, I agree that “it is wishful thinking to assume that experience alone will teach leaders everything they need to know” (Copland et al., 2002, p. 75). Therefore, the perspectives and theories I draw
upon in leadership are collaborative and transformational. My method of leadership in dealing with this Problem of Practice is consistent with ideas of collaborative and transformational leadership, aiming to inspire, collaborate, and serve the needs of stakeholders.

Hurley (2011) described collaborative leadership as the process of using collective intelligence to achieve goals across organizational borders. It is based on the idea that, when it comes to solving the kinds of unique, complicated, and multifaceted problems that institutions face today, we can all be brighter, more inventive, and more competent as a group than any of us could be working alone. It encourages leaders to engage and align people, focus their teams, maintain momentum, and perform by using the power of influence rather than positional authority. Success depends on fostering an atmosphere of trust, respect, and common aspiration where everyone may freely and completely contribute to accomplishing group objectives. As a result, leaders must prioritize connections in addition to results, and the best way for them to do this is through high-quality dialogue (Hurley, 2011). Effective leadership is a team endeavor rather than the domain of a single person. Faculty, staff, students, and administrators will all be encouraged to share responsibilities within the framework of this problem of practice. As part of the strategy, a leadership team made up of various stakeholders will be assembled, and they will work together and share their knowledge to solve the low participation issue. This collaborative leadership method makes use of the community’s collective intelligence.

Transformative leadership, as opposed to transactional leadership, is the process through which a person interacts with others and forges a bond that increases both the
leader’s and the follower’s level of drive and morals. This kind of leader strives to assist followers in realizing their greatest potential while paying close attention to their needs and motivations (Northouse, 2019). Transformative and collaborative approaches work hand-in-hand, both relying heavily on relationships and engagement. The focus of transformative leadership is on encouraging and inspiring people to realize a shared vision. As a leader addressing the Problem of Practice at hand, it will be vital to motivate stakeholders to actively participate in the process of increasing student participation in co-curricular groups and HIPs. Setting a compelling vision for increased student involvement, getting support from faculty, staff, and students, and cultivating a collaborative culture where all parties are encouraged to contribute to the solutions are all part of this leadership style.

**Values**

Moving forward in my higher education career, stepping into leadership roles, the values I will use are shaped by collaborative and transformational leadership theories, both of which build on my core belief in the importance of engagement and relationship building. The following are some of what I see as essential action steps for this leadership philosophy:

- Establish relationships and trust by communicating clearly.
- Motivate the people I lead by clearly articulating how our professional growth, fresh initiatives, teaching strategies, or any other regular activity fits into that shared vision.
- Encourage and empower educators to have an innovator’s mindset
- Sense of urgency to produce sustainable results
• Committed to continuous growth – personally and professionally
• Connect via external networks and partnerships, as well as internal networks
• Team mentality, value team input, respectfully hear and consider ideas of others

A good flow of communication helps with the development of successful ideas and project execution. I hope to be remembered as someone who always listened to what others had to say and took the time to convey information and communicate to others in a way that is appropriately tailored to the recipient.
DISCUSSION

My time spent working on my dissertation in practice (DiP) has enhanced and revitalized my mindset in many areas. I now have firsthand experience using academic concepts to solve practical issues. This process has reaffirmed the notion that the role of the scholar-practitioner is vigorous and continuously changing and that real and lasting improvements in education depend on the integration of theory, research, and practice.

When it comes to being a scholar-practitioner, I have learned a multitude of important lessons while engaging in the process of addressing low student participation in co-curricular organizations and HIPs. At the very top of the list is the importance of research. The assessment process has shown me the value of research in informing decisions and actions, along with yielding insights that inform evidence-based improvement plans. Making data-driven decisions plays a crucial role in forming recommendations and action plans, highlighting the significance of using information to guide practice. A balance between theory and practice is necessary for a scholar-practitioner; theoretical models can inform practical solutions and actions. My work on this DiP has shown me how theoretical models can be practically applied to address complex challenges, giving me hands-on experience with theoretical application, thus enriching my scholar-practitioner skills.

This process has allowed me to apply and develop my leadership skills in a real-world context. As a result, my leadership capabilities have improved, making me more
capable of inspiring positive change and fostering success in learning environments. I have found that adaptability and flexibility are essential for effective leadership in dynamic and complex situations, and an effective leader must know how to modify their leadership style when situations alter, or new knowledge becomes available. Successful leadership also involves collaboration. The importance of establishing and maintaining relationships cannot be stressed enough. Another core quality of a successful leader is listening. As a scholar-practitioner and as a leader, one must be receptive to feedback and use it to refine and enhance work by incorporating feedback and ongoing evaluation into practice. A strong leader must be committed to continuous improvement. The quest for improvement is an ongoing process requiring flexibility and adaptability. While there has always been a quest for improvement, flexibility and adaptability have not always been at the forefront of higher education.

In the current landscape of higher education, it is important to be a visionary. Recent years have proven to the higher education community that traditional means are no longer the most viable or desirable option. I see my future continuing in higher education. Although it was not my original path, I have found that I love being in a university setting. Coming from a background in business, I have a customer service mindset and believe that the student’s interests should come first. The process of my DiP work has only increased my empathy, focus on student’s needs, and understanding of the student experience, making my leadership approach more student-centered. Ultimately, being a scholar-practitioner and a leader in higher education is about making a positive impact on student success, and that is how I plan to continue my future as a leader in higher education.
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