CHOOSING FOUNDATIONS OF EXCELLENCE: THREE PROFILES IN INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AND FIRST-YEAR STUDENT SUCCESS

by

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(Under the Direction of Libby V. Morris)

ABSTRACT

College-going rates in the United States continue to rise. Concurrently, college graduation rates in the U.S. are lower than those of peer nations, and retention rates in the U.S. have been flat for years. The first year of college represents a difficult transition for many college-going students. Foundations of Excellence is a year-long self-study that targets the institution with the objective of improving student success in the first-year of college and beyond. The process was developed by the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education based on extensive research and professional expertise; as of 2011 almost 200 institutions have completed the process. This multiple case study includes three participants: Kennesaw State University, Georgia Southern University, and Gainesville State College. This research explores purposes for participation, perceptions about the experience, and outcomes. Based on this research, all three institutions experienced substantive changes with respect to the first-year experience. This research also identified some best practices and lessons learned with respect to the Foundations of Excellence process. The process may be a worthwhile undertaking for many postsecondary institutions with a large number of first-year students. Foundations of Excellence merits further exploration and ongoing research.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

College-going rates in the United States continue to rise. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), enrollment of first-time, first-year students at degree-granting institutions increased from about 2.4 million in 2000 to over 2.7 million in 2007. (Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d08/tables/dt08_198.asp on November 30, 2010). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) gathers and reports comparative data on trends in international education including participation and attainment across 30 member nations. As of 2007 United States entry rates in what OECD calls tertiary education were above OECD averages, but graduation rates were below OECD averages. Tertiary education is analogous to entering a postsecondary degree-seeking program in the United States (Retrieved from http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/35/11/43619343.pdf on November 30, 2010). The statistics from OECD help illustrate the necessity of improving student success in areas such as progression and graduation.

Some studies use retention rates as a proxy for student success. The National Center for Higher Education Management systems (NCHEMS) reports first-year student retention data at 2-year and 4-year postsecondary institutions in the United States. In 2004, 76.5% of first-year students at four-year institutions were retained to their second year; in 2008, 74.7% were retained. In 2004, 53.2% of students at 2-year institutions were retained to their second year; in 2008, 53.5% were retained (Retrieved from http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/index.php?measure=92 on December 2, 2010); these
rates are nearly flat. Some of these students may transfer to other institutions, or their departure from postsecondary education may be temporary. Nonetheless facilitating first-year student success is critically important especially in public, postsecondary colleges and universities which are supported by public tax revenues. Students that do not persist in their studies may be less competitive in the job market, and they may struggle with feelings of failure. Successful completion of postsecondary education yields both public and private benefits. *Reaping the benefits: The public and private value of higher education*, a report published by the Institute for Higher Education Policy in 1998, identifies several public and private benefits of college graduation. For example, the higher salaries that often accompany educational attainment also yield a higher tax base (Retrieved from 

Helping students succeed during the first year of college is critical; “[institutions] typically lose the greatest number of students during the first year, especially during the first semester” (Rausch & Hamilton, 2006, p. 317). Because the first year of college represents a difficult transition for many students, and there is a greater risk that students will drop out or stop out during their first year, it is essential for postsecondary institutions to offer a first-year experience that will enable first-year students to transition to college successfully.

**Statement of the Problem**

The statistics from NCES indicate that student enrollment in the U.S. continues to increase, yet the data from OECD shows that graduation rates in the United States lag behind those of peer nations, and the statistics from NCHEMS demonstrate that first-year student retention rates have been flat for years. The facts illustrate that postsecondary institutions should
help first-year students succeed, and institutional efforts should be guided by research and best practices.

Purpose of this Study

Continuous improvement is built into the culture of higher education via processes such as accreditation. The purpose of this study is to explore institutional change with respect to the first-year experience from the perspective of three postsecondary institutions that chose to participate in Foundations of Excellence (FoE) a campus-wide, year-long self-study aimed at improving the effectiveness of the first-year experience.

Much has been written about change in higher education. For example, the literature includes definitions and change typologies (Van deVen & Poole, 1995; Kezar, 2001), empirically derived change principles (Eckel, Hill, & Green, 1998; Eckel, Hill, Green, & Mallon, 1999; Eckel, Green, Hill, & Mallon, 1999; Eckel, Green, & Hill, 2001; Kezar, 2001), and cycles of organizational change (Mintzberg & Westley, 1992). The focus of this study is an analysis of the implementation and outcomes of the Foundations of Excellence process at three institutions to understand its impact and potential as a process for institutional change and first-year student success. Foundations of Excellence seeks more than improved retention statistics. The process is designed to aid institutions in achieving their vision for the first-year; according to the website for the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education:

Now more than ever in challenging economic times, your campus needs a strategic action plan for the critical beginning college experience. Foundations of Excellence will yield a new vision for enhanced learning and retention of first-year and transfer students as well as priorities for resource allocation (Retrieved from http://www.fyfoundations.org/overview.aspx on January 2, 2011).
Foundations of Excellence is an aspirational model. The process is informed by research and professional expertise. I became familiar with Foundations of Excellence in 2006 while serving as an assistant to Dr. Libby V. Morris in her role as an external evaluator of the process. In 2008 I decided to conduct research on Foundations of Excellence because it targets the first-year experience, and based on my interactions with participants, the process generates energy and enthusiasm. In fall 2009, I initiated case studies at three institutions to explore purposes for participation, perceived impact on organization and culture, evidence of outcomes, and the degree of change that can be attributed in whole or in part to the Foundations of Excellence self-study.

History of Foundations of Excellence

The Policy Center on the First Year of College, now the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (JNGI), debuted in 1999. Initial funding for the Policy Center came from the Pew Charitable Trusts. In the early years, the Policy Center also received financial support from Lumina, USA Funds, and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. The JNGI has since transitioned to self-sufficiency and non-profit status. The JNGI is an extension of John Gardner’s work with the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition housed within the University of South Carolina; the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education continues to have a synergistic relationship with the National Resource Center. Many consider Gardner to be a leading authority on the first year of college.

The Foundations of Excellence process developed by the Policy Center on the First Year of College represents a holistic approach to creating conditions that will enable students to succeed in the first year of college; Foundations of Excellence and the Foundational Dimensions
are registered trademarks of the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. Foundations of Excellence targets all types of postsecondary institutions that have first-year students. In 2003 with support from the Lumina Foundation for Education and the Atlantic Philanthropies, the Policy Center launched Foundations of Excellence by conducting a pilot with 24 4-year public and private institutions (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2006, p 3). The Policy Center refers to the 24 institutions that participated in the pilot as founding institutions; one of the founding institutions, Kennesaw State University, serves as one of the cases for this research.

All postsecondary institutions seek continuous improvement; the target of change may be a specific program or service or the institution itself. Foundations of Excellence targets the institution and aims to achieve substantive changes that will improve student outcomes. The process offers the opportunity to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the first-year experience. Institutions apply to participate in the national select cohort or the transfer focus option. The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (JNGI) uses the term, national select cohort, to describe participants because the JNGI does not necessarily accept all applicants. John Gardner converses with the institution’s chief academic officer to gauge senior administrative support and ensure that expectations are understood. The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education began offering the opportunity to conduct the self-study with a focus on transfer students in 2009. Institutions may complete the process on a 9 or 12 month schedule. Foundations of Excellence is driven by data and supported by information technology. The web-based application that drives the process is called FoEtec (Foundations of Excellence Technology); Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI) developed the FoEtec system for the JNGI. Participating institutions have access to FoEtec for two years; the
cost of the program, currently $42,000, includes access to JNGI staff for a period of one year (Retrieved from http://www.fyfoundations.org/costs.aspx on December 3, 2010). Program participants include 2-year and 4-year institutions in the public and private sectors. Participating institutions are required to send a minimum of three representatives to the launch meeting in the fall; institutions may also participate in an optional winter meeting. As of the 2010-11 academic year, 198 institutions have participated in Foundations of Excellence (Retrieved from http://www.fyfoundations.org/participants.aspx on December 3, 2010).

Foundations of Excellence (FoE) offers a very well-defined process, but it is not prescriptive. Participants consider their mission as well as the students they serve as they develop a strategic action plan to match their objectives. Foundations of Excellence is an intentional and context-specific undertaking. The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (JNGI) demonstrates a culture of assessment; based on my experience, the principals at the JNGI actively seek feedback, and they value continuous improvement. Some institutions use the FoE process as part of their continuous improvement efforts. The JNGI is engaged in a partnership with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC); members of the HLC may use Foundations of Excellence as an approved AQIP (Academic Quality Improvement Program) while seeking reaffirmation of accreditation via the HLC. Foundations of Excellence could serve as the basis of a quality enhancement plan for other accrediting bodies.

Research Questions

In order to understand why each institution participated in Foundations of Excellence, how each institution approached the process, the perceptions of participants, the outcomes of the process, and the degree of change that occurred at each institution the following research
questions were defined:

1) Why did each of the institutions participate in Foundations of Excellence?
2) How did each of the institutions approach the process?
3) What institutional changes can be attributed to the process based on data and the perceptions of key stakeholders?
4) How do participants describe the experience of participating in the Foundations of Excellence process?
5) Based on the data collected, what degree of change occurred at each institution as a result of the Foundations of Excellence process?

Scope

This study includes three institutions in the University System of Georgia (USG): Kennesaw State University, Georgia Southern University, and Gainesville State College. The institutions completed Foundations of Excellence at 2-year intervals beginning in the 2003-04 academic year. The institutions represent different classifications within the university system. The university system classifies Georgia Southern University as a regional university, Kennesaw State University as a state university, and Gainesville State College as a state college. The name of each institution reflects its location. Georgia Southern University is located in Statesboro which is one of the larger cities in southeast Georgia; the surrounding area is primarily rural. Statesboro is about 60 miles northwest of Savannah. Kennesaw State University and Gainesville State College are named after their respective cities; the cities of Kennesaw and Gainesville are considered part of the Atlanta metropolitan area. Gainesville represents the northernmost part of the Atlanta metropolitan area defined writ large. As a multi-campus institution Gainesville State College also has a campus in Oconee County which borders Athens-Clarke County. All three
institutions experienced substantial enrollment growth in the past decade. Kennesaw State University serves over 20,000 students; Georgia Southern University serves over 19,000 students, and Gainesville State College serves almost 9,000 students. As public institutions in the state of Georgia, they share a common budgeting and reporting structure provided by the university system and the common context of the state and its politics.

Assumptions

The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education describes Foundation of Excellence as “an invigorating, institution-wide experience that brings together multiple constituent viewpoints about improving your campus's first year and can lead to substantive institutional change and improved student outcomes” (Retrieved from http://www.fyfoundations.org/firstyearselfstudy.aspx on January 2, 2011). This study was initiated with the assumption that the case institutions experienced some degree of change; at the same time, the researcher was open to the possibility that the strategic action plans that represent the culmination of the process became ‘shelfware.’

Importance

The number of institutions that participate in the Foundations of Excellence process continues to grow. The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (JNGI) engages in continuous improvement with respect to the process, but the underlying values remain constant. In 2009 the JNGI began offering an alternative track that focuses on transfer students. Foundations of Excellence may be the most comprehensive strategy for improving the first-year experience and student success that is available to both 2-year and 4-year institutions. Most of the research on Foundations of Excellence has been conducted by the
JNGI or by individuals engaged by the JNGI so this research will also help establish scholarly literature on Foundations of Excellence.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This research intersects with multiple areas of scholarship, and the review of the literature includes several scholarly areas. Foundations of Excellence (FoE) targets the institution with the objective of achieving substantive changes that will lead to improved outcomes for students in the first-year of college and beyond. Since the institution is the target of the FoE process, the literature on postsecondary institutions will be introduced. The institutions featured in this study all have first-year programs, and first-year organizational structures will be summarized. The concept of organizational frames will be included because frames help explain organizational characteristics and choices. Foundations of Excellence provides an opportunity to recognize the good things that are happening on campus with respect to the first year and identify the areas that need improvement. Improving involves changing, and reviewing scholarship on organizational change in higher education will help illuminate the characteristics that may have helped or hindered the change process at the institutions. Substantive change is synonymous with culture change, and the literature on culture will help yield understanding of the symbolic aspects of the change process. Foundations of Excellence seeks improved student outcomes; student success will be explored via definitions of student success and models of student persistence.

Comparing Foundations of Excellence to other first-year interventions and models of excellence will help build greater understanding of the process. Sometimes student success strategies are characterized as curricular, co-curricular, or institutional; summarizing these strategies will help situate Foundations of Excellence with respect to other first-year interventions. Foundations of Excellence is an aspirational model; according to Randy Swing an
aspirational model represents an ideal that institutions should strive to achieve but will never attain; aspirational standards represent the antithesis of minimum standards (R.L. Swing, personal communication, March 8, 2011). *Good to Great* is a model of excellence that will be introduced for comparison purposes.

A strategic action plan represents the culmination of the Foundations of Excellence self-study; resultanty the literature on strategic planning in the context of higher education will be reviewed briefly. Foundations of Excellence provides an opportunity to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the first year of college, and participants should conduct assessments to gauge progress on the objectives defined in their strategic action plans so the literature review will also include an introduction to assessment.

Some of the areas included in the literature review will serve as the conceptual framework for this research. All these scholarly areas provided context for this study and served as a frame of reference for data collection and analysis.

**Postsecondary Institutions: Models, Structures, and Characteristics**

Institutional models provide useful ways of thinking about postsecondary institutions and how they function with respect to their internal and external environments. Birnbaum uses several continua to describe institutions of higher education. He defines open and closed systems. “Closed systems are linear; the system parts do not change, and cause and effect can be predicted with great accuracy” (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 34). Open systems on the other hand “…are themselves systems; they constantly change as they interact with themselves and with environment, and the system evolves over time” (Birnbaum, p. 35). Birnbaum characterized postsecondary institutions as open systems, and he provided the following description of open systems: “…the boundaries are relatively permeable, and interactions are likely to occur between
the environment and many of the system elements” (p. 34). Furthermore, Birnbam indicated that “Cause and effect in [open] systems often can be neither predicted nor adequately explained” (p. 35). Weick (1976) used the term loose coupling to describe organizational functioning in education. According to Weick when organizations are loosely coupled connections between subsystems “…may be circumscribed, infrequent, weak in [their] mutual affects, unimportant, and/or slow to respond” (p. 3). Birnbaum includes the concepts of tight and loose coupling subsystems in his model. Colleges and universities tend to have loosely coupled subsystems. A tightly coupled subsystem tends to be predictable; there is a one to one correspondence between inputs and outputs. Loosely coupled subsystems, on the other hand, tend to be unpredictable; the same action can yield different results on different occasions (Birnbaum, p. 38 – 39). Birnbaum’s continua help explain some of the organizational properties of colleges and universities.

Birnbaum (1988) also presented five models of organizational functioning. Usually, one of the models will be more dominant on a particular campus, but most colleges will exhibit some attributes of all of the models. The models include the following institutional types: collegial, bureaucratic, political, anarchical, and cybernetic. Birnbaum’s models provide another way to characterize institutions of higher education.

A collegial institution tends to be organizationally flat; participants are colleagues. The following qualities characterize the collegial institution: “[an] emphasis on consensus, shared power, common commitments and aspirations, and leadership that emphasizes consultation and collective responsibilities…” (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 88). According to Birnbaum, the true collegial institution will be small in size because the institution depends on a strong culture of interaction, traditions, common values and shared backgrounds (p. 90 - 91). The role of the administration is
“…to provide support services and to represent the college’s interests to its various publics, but the administration is understood to be subordinate to the collegium and carries out the collegium’s will” (Birnbaum, p. 89).

Bureaucratic institutions tend to be more hierarchical. Birnbaum (1988) describes bureaucratic institutions as rational; he states “…there is some conscious attempt to link means to ends, resources to objectives, and intentions to activities” (p. 113). Bureaucratic institutions exert more control over individuals via rules and regulations; job descriptions or roles tend to be narrowly defined. Bureaucracy is often associated with red tape, but bureaucracies tend to be egalitarian. “Administrators and faculty who function within their roles must apply the same criteria to everyone, ensuring fairness and equity rather than personal favoritism, and subordinates are less subject to administrative caprice” (Birnbaum, p. 114).

According to Birnbaum (1988), within a political institution “…the power to get one’s way comes neither from norms nor from rules but is negotiated…” (p. 130). Conflict, competition, interdependence, and coalitions characterize political institutions (Birnbaum). In simplest terms, a political system is a power struggle.

The anarchical institution, “…depicts a setting that to the observer appears chaotic and in which people appear to do what they feel like doing. Yet there is structure to it” (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 153). The following characteristics distinguish the organized anarchy: problematic goals, unclear technology, and fluid participation (Birnbaum). According to Birnbaum, these characteristics inhibit rational decision-making at the anarchical institution. Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) pioneered the concepts of organized anarchy and garbage can decision-making. Sometimes individuals in complex organizations try to attach their agendas to other problems in the queue; garbage can decision-makers must remove all the extraneous garbage from the
decision at hand and find better cans for the excess garbage. In the anarchical institution, “...goals are typically a loose collection of changing ideas rather than a coherent educational philosophy” (Birnbaum, p. 155). Birnbaum defined technology as the procedures through which organizations convert inputs to outputs. Instruction serves as the primary technology of educational institutions, and Birnbaum described technology in the anarchical institution as unclear because effectiveness may be gauged by experience rather than evidence. Birnbaum’s models predate the increasing emphasis on assessment and accountability that characterizes the early 21st century; in the current climate unclear technology has become unacceptable at many postsecondary institutions.

Decision-makers in complex organizations often have to decide on the basis of incomplete information and without full knowledge of all dependencies. Simon (1957) called this approach to decision making satisficing. According to Birnbaum, community members at anarchical institutions, “…tend to move in and out of various parts of the organization, and their involvement in any issue depends to a great extent on what other opportunities for their attention happen to be available at the same time” (p. 156). Faculty members in particular tend to demonstrate fluid participation in the operations of the anarchical institution. Birnbaum borrows from Gouldner (1957) when he categorizes faculty using a continuum ranging from cosmopolitans to locals. Cosmopolitans are primarily devoted to their discipline, and locals are devoted to their campuses (Birnbaum). Lack of incentives also causes faculty participation to be fluid or minimal (Gayle, Tewarie & White, 2003).

Birnbaum identified loose coupling as a critical success factor at the anarchical institution. He wrote,
This kind of loose coupling is particularly advantageous in a complex and turbulent environment. An organization that has many semiautonomous units can be more sensitive and responsive to changes in different parts of its environment than can a centralized organization whose parts are closely tied together (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 166).

In an anarchical institution, everyday decision-making tends to be decentralized; individuals and units often have a lot of autonomy. Due to size and complexity, many postsecondary institutions demonstrate characteristics of the organized anarchy.

Lastly, Birnbaum presented the cybernetic institution. Birnbaum defined the cybernetic institution as one that adapts to stimuli and regulates itself through self-correction. Cybernetic institutions apply “…self-correcting mechanisms that monitor organizational functions and provide attention cues, or negative feedback, to participants when things are not going well” (Birnbaum, 1988, p.179). The cybernetic institution embraces the best qualities of the collegial, bureaucratic, political, and anarchical institutions.

Peterson (2007) offered an updated list of institutional models that emphasizes increased recognition of the role of the external environment. Peterson’s list includes adaptive, contextual, entrepreneurial, and virtual models. Peterson’s models are also more continuous than discrete; institutions typically demonstrate aspects of all models, and one model may dominate.

Mintzberg (1979) described five organizational structures; one of the models, the professional bureaucracy, is most frequently associated with higher education. Mintzberg’s fully expressed models include the strategic apex, midline, technostructure, support staff, and operating core. In a machine bureaucracy, the upper levels define the ends and the operating core supplies the means. These roles are reversed in a pure professional bureaucracy. In higher
education, the faculty supply the ends, and the other levels provide the means. Some depict the professional bureaucracy as an inverted pyramid with the operating core at the top.

These characteristics, models, and structures provide frames of reference that may help increase understanding of the case institutions and aid in the development of rich, descriptive profiles.

First-Year Organizational Structures

Swing and Alexander-Hamilton (2010) used a five-category typology to describe first-year organizational structures; Swing, Barefoot, and Gardner developed the typology as a resource for Foundations of Excellence. Swing and Alexander-Hamilton divided the typology into two levels: single administrative unit structures and multiple administrative unit structures. The single unit structures are comprehensive and non-comprehensive. The comprehensive single unit structure will appear on the campus organizational chart and will have a senior leader and a recurring budget; the non-comprehensive single unit structure will have some but not all of these traits. The typology includes three multiple unit administrative structures: 1) multiple units that are coordinated by a formal standing committee, 2) multiple units that collaborate to provide first-year resources and services, and 3) multiple units that operate autonomously with limited coordination. This typology will help classify the first-year organizational structures at the three institutions included in this research.

Organizational Frames

In *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice and Leadership*, Bolman and Deal (2003) proposed that the transforming forces of the 21st century necessitate a new approach to organizations and management. Bolman and Deal assigned the blame and the credit for organizational effectiveness to management. The Bolman and Deal model consists of four
frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. Bolman and Deal advocated using multiple frames to solve problems, improve performance, and avoid the shortsightedness that may accompany a single perspective.

Bolman and Deal set the stage for their model by summarizing organizational properties. According to Bolman and Deal (2003), organizations are complex, surprising, deceptive, and ambiguous. These qualities make it challenging for organizations to learn. Many fall into the trap of pursuing short-term gains over long-term solutions. Bolman and Deal cautioned that managers see what they expect to see. Organizational and situational complexities make it easier to rely on preexisting notions rather than seeking alternatives. Furthermore, preexisting notions may prevent managers from seeing flaws or other problems.

According to Bolman and Deal (2003), form (or structure) follows function. Bolman and Deal traced the roots of the structural frame to scientific management principles such as division of labor associated with Frederick Taylor and the monocratic bureaucracy or hierarchical form espoused by Max Weber. Structural form both enhances and constrains an organization. Structure creates tension between rigidity and flexibility; managers should seek balance between the two. The introduction to the human resource frame states that most organizations want high-involvement and high-commitment from employees, but many continue to use practices that have the opposite effect.

The political frame characterizes organizations as coalitions of individuals and groups with their own agendas. Bolman and Deal (2003) shared several definitions of power; most simply power is the ability to get things done. Bolman and Deal introduced the concepts of authorities and partisans. Authorities exert top-down power, and partisans exert bottom-up power. Bolman and Deal identified the following sources of power: positional power,
information and expertise, control of rewards, coercive power, alliances and networks, access and control of agendas, framing control of meaning and symbols, and personal power. Bolman and Deal included the concepts of overbounded and underbounded systems in their description of the political frame; these concepts originated in the scholarship of Alderfer (1980). In overbounded systems power is highly concentrated; in underbounded systems power is diffuse and distributed. Open systems with loosely-coupled subsystems could be described as underbounded systems. Power is about bargaining and negotiation; power can be exerted by individuals and groups at all levels of the organization. According to Bolman and Deal, “Those who get and use power best will be winners” (p. 201). Intuitively, one needs allies to get things done; after relationships have been established, negotiations can begin. Most managers face ambiguity, diversity, and scarcity (Bolman & Deal); winners and losers seem inevitable in the political frame.

Bolman and Deal (2003) recognized that temptations always exist when money and power are involved; at the same time, an ethical framework is the only way to keep politics positive. This is especially important in the wake of ethics scandals and increasing emphasis on transparency and accountability in the public sector.

The primary concern of the symbolic frame is sensemaking (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Organizational symbols take many forms. Bolman and Deal identified ritual, ceremony, metaphor, play, myths, values, vision, heroes, heroines, stories, and fairy tales as examples. Symbols play an important and powerful role in creating organizational culture (Bolman & Deal).

Bolman and Deal (2003) borrowed the concept of organization as theater from Mangham and Overington (1987). According to Bolman and Deal, “Organizations with higher levels of
ambiguity and uncertainty turn their back on technical processes and stage dramatic performances for internal and external audiences” (p. 274); as open, loosely-coupled, and underbounded systems postsecondary institutions often exhibit higher levels of uncertainty and ambiguity. Bolman and Deal identified the following activities as potential vehicles for organizational theatre: meetings, planning, evaluation, collective bargaining, and power. Bolman and Deal cited Cohen and March’s (1974) four symbolic roles for plans in universities. According to Cohen and March, university plans are symbols, and they can become games. For instance, a unit may prepare a plan to dramatize crisis conditions, or senior administrators may request a plan to test commitment. Plans are excuses for interaction, and they may even serve as advertisements in other words some plans may look more like marketing materials (Bolman & Deal). Image is an important aspect of the symbolic frame.

The final chapters of the book suggest strategies for applying multi-frame thinking across the organization from leadership to change management to ethics. Interestingly, the authors theorize that managers tend to prefer the structural frame, and leaders tend to prefer the political and symbolic frames (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Bolman and Deal indicated that context is key to successful framing. The four frames defined by Bolman and Deal will be used to organize and report the outcomes of the case institutions.

Empirically-Derived Change Principles/Best Practices

Kezar’s (2001) change monograph provides a useful reference for those studying organizational change in higher education. Kezar presented a synthesis of empirically-derived change principles for higher education. The table below summarizes the principles that help institutions be more successful in their change endeavors:

- Promote organizational self-discovery
• Be aware of how institutional culture affects change
• Realize that change in higher education is often political
• Lay groundwork for change
• Focus on adaptability
• Construct opportunities for interaction to develop new mental models
• Strive to create homeostasis and balance external forces with internal environment
• Combine traditional teleological tools such as establishing vision, planning, or strategy with social-cognition, cultural, and political strategies
• Be open to a disorderly process
• Facilitate shared governance and collective decision-making
• Articulate core characteristics
• Focus on image
• Connect the change process to individual and institutional identity
• Create a culture of risk and help people in changing belief systems
• Be aware that various levels or aspects of the organization will need different change models
• Realize that strategies for change vary by change initiative
• Consider combining models or approaches, as is demonstrated within the multiple models (Kezar, p. viii).

Some of the change principles presented by Kezar demonstrate alignment with models that will serve as a conceptual framework for this research. Kezar’s principles include references to structure, politics, and culture; these are three of the frames defined by Bolman and Deal. Kezar also mentions shared governance; the 4-year version of Foundations of Excellence emphasizes that senior administrators and faculty have joint accountability for the self-study. Shared
governance also represents a characteristic of Birnbaum’s collegial model. Kezar’s principles have been included in this study because they offer empirically-derived change strategies for higher education, and the principles share some commonalities with aspects of the conceptual framework for this research. The analysis process included looking for evidence of these change principles at the three institutions.

The American Council on Education (ACE) initiated a Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation in 1995; they worked with 26 institutions that undertook an intentional, internally-initiated, campus-wide change project. The Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation yielded change principles and an evidence framework. The study identified the following strategies for change leaders:

- Leaders make a clear and compelling case to key stakeholders about why things must be done differently.
- Change leaders craft an agenda that both makes sense and focuses on improvement without assigning blame.
- Change leaders develop connections among different initiatives and individuals across campus that create synergy and provide momentum for the initiative.
- Senior administrators support and are involved in institutional efforts.
- Collaborative leadership identifies and empowers talent across campus and at a variety of levels.
- Leaders develop supporting structures, create incentives, and provide resources for change efforts.
- Leaders focus campus attention on the change issue.
Institutional change leaders work within a culture while challenging its comfort zone to change the culture.

Leaders plan for change over the long term (Eckel, Hill, Green, & Mallon, 1999, p. 2–8). The Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation focused on leadership more than Kezar’s monograph; through their involvement with the project, Eckel, Hill, Green, and Mallon found that the most successful change leaders were intentional, reflective, and embraced the learning opportunities provided by the change initiative. The Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation emphasized the importance of gathering evidence and conducting assessments; the project provided an evidence framework that includes outcomes, activities, processes, experiences, structures, and language and symbols (Eckel, Green, Hill & Mallon). The ACE Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation yielded an accessible handbook for higher education administrators and others that wish to serve as campus change agents.

Postsecondary institutions are always changing (Peterson & Spencer, 1990), and most change strategies tend to focus on what could be characterized as adjustments or incremental changes (Eckel, Green, Hill, & Mallon, 1999). Based on the characterization of higher education as a loosely-coupled (Weick, 1976), open system (Birnbaum, 1988) perhaps adjustments or incremental changes are more compatible with the organizational properties of many postsecondary institutions than transformation. The change principles identified by Kezar and the American Council on Education are not anecdotal; they are empirically derived and data-driven. This cross-case analysis for this research will identify the presence or absence of these best practices at the three institutions.
Culture

Foundations of Excellence aspires to achieve substantive institutional changes that will lead to improved student outcomes; substantive change is often synonymous with culture change. According to Peterson and Spencer (1990), organizations are now viewed as subjective and socially-constructed rather than rational, and culture provides a useful way to study the irrational aspects of an organization. Leifer (1979) wrote that culture provides an unobtrusive control in higher education. According to Cohen and March (1974), higher education tends to be free of both implicit and explicit controls; based on this lack of controls, Masland (1985) suggested that culture plays an even more significant role in higher education than other organizations. Tichy (1983) indicated that culture plays a major role in organizational success. The American Council on Education Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation (Eckel, Hill, Green, & Mallon, 1999) identified the change paradox: change agents must work within the culture to change the culture.

Schien (2004) developed a general model that offers a useful way to categorize cultural elements; Schien’s model includes artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. Tierney (1983) created a frequently cited cultural framework for higher education; his framework includes the following categories: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. Several scholars have defined cultural models. Cameron and Quinn (2006) defined four cultural models: clan, adhocracy, hierarchy, and market, and Berquist and Pawlak (2008) offered a typology that includes collegial, managerial, development, advocacy, virtual, and tangible cultures. Cameron and Quinn espouse the belief that a modified culture is the output of change, and they developed an instrument called the Organizational Cultural
Assessment Instrument (OCAI) that is intended to measure culture and identify the gap between current and desired culture.

Peterson and Spencer (1990) pondered whether culture is something an institution *is*, an instrumental perspective, or *has*, an interpretive perspective. According to Peterson and Spencer, if culture is something an institution *is* then defining models to capture culture holistically will be elusive especially since culture has invisible aspects. Peterson and Spencer distinguished between culture and climate. They stated that culture is more enduring, and climate is more malleable; they used the following analogy: culture is the meteorological zone, and climate is the daily weather patterns. Masland (1985) presented a number of tools to gauge culture; he identified sagas, heroes, rituals, and symbols as cultural windows, and he presented a framework to gauge the strength of culture; the framework includes scale, tightness, age, and founding. Based on the importance of culture in higher education, the interview protocol for this study included questions such as ‘What makes your college unique?’ and ‘What sets it apart from other schools?’ in an effort to gauge the culture of the institutions.

Student Success/Models of Persistence

What is student success? A number of studies identified grades or grade point average as the definition of success (Bell & Short, 2003; Gifford, Briceno-Perriot, & Mianzo, 2006); others defined satisfaction as a predictor of success (Keup, 2006; Astin, 1991). Both of these definitions seem limiting. Tinto (1993) defined success more holistically; he characterized success as the academic and social development of individual students.

Since persistence and attainment are important aspects of student success, models of persistence help illuminate these concepts. Both Astin and Tinto developed persistence models. Astin (1991) used his I-E-O (Input-Environment-Outcome) model to gauge persistence; his
persistence model included 146 input variables consisting of various student characteristics such as high school grade point average, standardized test scores, and socioeconomic status, 192 environment variables such as institutional characteristics, peer characteristics, faculty characteristics, curriculum, financial aid, housing, and student involvement, and 82 outcome variables to measure student satisfaction with variables such as academics, career development, and campus environment. Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure model also recognized that students have various input characteristics that affect their goals and commitment to persist. Tinto described the progression from high school to college as a time of transition; he concluded that positive social and academic experiences would allow students to integrate into the campus community, and this sense of belonging would result in a greater likelihood of persistence. Tinto assigned responsibility for ensuring a successful transition to both students and institutions. Tinto indicated that institutions must make a commitment to the students they serve and commit to all students not just select subgroups; serving all students according to their needs is one of the nine Foundational Dimensions that serve as the core of Foundations of Excellence. Tinto also advised institutions to develop learning and social communities that would enable students to fully integrate into the campus community.

Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) broaden the definition of student success to include the following objectives:

- Developing intellectual and academic competence
- Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships
- Exploring identity
- Deciding on a career
- Maintaining health and wellness
• Considering faith and the spiritual dimensions of life
• Developing multicultural awareness
• Developing civic responsibility (p. 8 - 9).

The objectives specified by Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot provide a comprehensive definition of student success that includes academic, social, professional, physical, spiritual, and civic aspects.

Tinto’s theory and principles identified integration as the critical success factor; Astin’s model used satisfaction as the critical success factor; in both of these cases, success equals persistence. The persistence models and theoretical perspectives offered by Astin and Tinto and the holistic definition provided by Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot contributed a broad view of student success to this research.

First-Year Interventions

Foundations of Excellence could be described as a first-year intervention strategy; the review will examine other first-year interventions to situate Foundations of Excellence with respect to other strategies. First-year interventions could be categorized using the following framework: curricular strategies, co-curricular strategies, and institutional strategies. Some blurring exists between these categories; institutions internalize these interventions such that it is problematic to compare new student orientation at Oakton Community College to new student orientation at the University of Southern California; it is likely that their orientation programs have different features and campus-specific objectives tied to institutional mission and students served.
Curricular Strategies

Curricular strategies to improve student outcomes include introductory courses, first-year seminars, advising, faculty development, supplemental instruction, developmental education, and service learning (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Introductory courses and first-year seminars seem to be the most popular foci of research on curricular strategies. For instance, Gregory (1997) defined high expectations for introductory courses; he recommended that institutions design introductory courses to introduce students to the life of the mind, cultivate love of inquiry, and develop critical thinking skills. Keup (2006) conducted an I-E-O study using data from the CIRP Freshman Survey and the Your First College Year (YFCY) surveys. Keup identified satisfaction as a predictor of her outcome variable, self-assessed cognitive development. Her research findings led her to advise institutions to offer smaller, more engaging introductory courses.

The ubiquitous first-year seminar also received ample attention in the literature. Barefoot and Fidler (1996) identified best practices with respect to first-year seminars; the best practices include seminars that are 1) offered for credit, 2) designed by faculty and student affairs professionals, and 3) delivered with involvement from upperclassmen. Barefoot and Fidler also recommended that faculty receive compensation or incentives for teaching first-year seminars and identified assessment and information dissemination as critical success factors. Porter and Swing (2006) used data from the First-year Initiative (FYI) survey to study first-year seminars; they selected seminars that focused on the theme of transition which is the most common theme of first-year seminars. They found the strongest positive relationship between seminars that focused on time management and health-related content and their outcome variable, student self-reported intent to persist. Their study also corroborated findings from prior studies. They found
that women and those with higher high school grade point averages were more likely to express intent to persist. They identified a negative relationship between working and intent to persist. Like Astin (1991) before them they did not find a relationship between institutional resources and intent to persist; they also found that those at doctoral institutions expressed higher levels of intent to persist than those at baccalaureate institutions.

**Co-curricular Strategies**

Co-curricular strategies include learning communities, first-year experience programs, and first-year interest groups (FIGs); this review will focus on FIGs as a representative co-curricular strategy. Scholars at the University of Missouri at Columbia conducted an internal case study on the implementation of FIGs. Schroder, Minor, and Tarkow (1999) identified senior administrative support and collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs as critical success factors. The FIGs program at the University of Missouri at Columbia consisted of cohorts of 18 – 20 students that were organized around an academic or career interest. The cohorts resided in the same residence hall and took three courses as well as a first-year seminar. The seminar format used some of the best practices defined by Barefoot and Fidler (1996) i.e. they were developed by faculty and student affairs professionals and delivered by a faculty member or student affairs professional as well as an upper division student mentor. The themes of the seminars usually focused on study skills or the cohort theme. Schroder, Minor, and Tarkow reported increased retention rates for students that participated in FIGs; they also found that FIGs have an even more significant effect on retention rates for at-risk students.

**Institutional Strategies**

Research on specific curricular and co-curricular interventions creates opportunities for institutional decision-makers to make adjustments or isolated changes that are part of
incremental improvement efforts. Institutional strategies provide the potential for institutionalization or transformation. Foundations of Excellence, Achieving the Dream, and MAP-Works are three prominent institutional change strategies aimed at improving student outcomes. Chapter 3 of this study contains a detailed introduction to Foundations of Excellence. Achieving the Dream and MAP-Works will be introduced here.

Achieving the Dream is a national, multiyear initiative that targets community colleges and emphasizes improving the success of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and marginalized groups. Achieving the Dream describes itself as a broad, institutional change initiative supported by student achievement data. Lumina, KnowledgeWorks, and Nellie Mae provided funding for the development of the program. Achieving the Dream seems to focus almost exclusively on the quantitative aspects of student success. The program website identified the following student success criteria: completing courses, transitioning from remedial to credit courses, enrolling and completing gatekeeper courses, re-enrolling each semester, and earning a degree or certificate (Retrieved from http://www.achievingthedream.org/ on January 3, 2011).

The program involves a logical model that includes the following categories: context, challenges, strategies, outcomes, and student outcomes. Objectives are defined in the strategies category which consists of the following sub-items: institutional change, policy, public engagement, new knowledge, and partner capacity. The scope of Achieving the Dream includes the institution as well as external stakeholders. The policy sub-item includes references to state systems and state representatives; the partner capacity sub-item refers to strategies that target donors and other partners, and the public engagement strategies are directed at potential employers and other publics. The process is long-term; it includes 4, 8, and 12-year milestones. Including external stakeholders seems very savvy because state and local governments, public stakeholders, and
other partners tend to exert substantial influence over public institutions. The focus on quantitative data and outcomes reflects increasing emphasis on assessment and accountability.

Foundations of Excellence and Achieving the Dream are bounded strategies in the sense that closure is reached at some point even if objectives are ongoing. MAP-Works is an unbounded strategy in the sense that it may be used indefinitely. The ‘map’ in MAP-Works stands for Making Achievement Possible. MAP-Works is a student success and retention tool developed for first and second year students by EBI (Educational Benchmarking, Inc.) and Ball State University. Institutions that use MAP-Works enter institutional and student profile data; MAP-Works also includes a transition survey. The data enable faculty and staff to intervene if students are deemed at-risk. Students have access to their profiles to see how their academic and social expectations compare to their peers; this information may provide an opportunity for self-correction. MAP-Works also provides students with information about resources and services available on campus. Institutions have the opportunity so see how they compare to their peers and identify institutional improvement opportunities. For more information, visit

http://www.map-works.com/.

Foundations of Excellence (FoE) and MAP-Works potentially include all institutional sectors that serve first-year undergraduate students so they are more inclusive than Achieving the Dream. Several Foundations of Excellence participants have parlayed the process into grant funding for Achieving the Dream projects. Foundations of Excellence emphasizes collegiality, inclusion, and collective decision-making; qualities that are valued at many postsecondary institutions. Achieving the Dream does not seem to emphasize interactions and relationships to the extent that Foundations of Excellence does. Anecdotally, several of the individuals I interviewed while assisting Dr. Libby V. Morris with the external evaluation of Foundations of
Excellence mentioned that improved relationships or greater understanding of the contributions of others on campus (faculty, student affairs, advisors, etc.) represented one of the most beneficial outcomes of the process.

**Good to Great**

*Good to Great* is a model of excellence, and Foundations of Excellence is an aspirational model. *Good to Great* serves as an additional lens for considering Foundations of Excellence as a process that may lead to substantive change. This research identified some similarities between these models.

Collins (2001) and his team identified 11 companies that transformed from good companies to great companies based on the following criteria: 15 years of performance at or below market, a transition period, and 15 years of performance at least three times the rate of the market. Based on the availability of data for comparison purposes, Collins and his team restricted their study to Fortune 500 companies. Collins and his research staff identified eight common characteristics among the 11 good-to-great companies. In simplest terms, they identified organizations with disciplined people engaged in disciplined thought and disciplined action. The framework includes the following principles:

- Level 5 Leadership
- First Who…Then What
- Confront the Brutal Facts
- The Hedgehog Concept
- A Culture of Discipline
- Technology Accelerators
• The Flywheel and the Doom Loop
• From Good to Great to Built to Last (Collins).

*Level 5 Leadership*

Collins (2001) initiated the study with a bias against identifying the leader as a critical success factor. At the same time, he and his colleagues found what they call Level 5 leadership in all 11 good-to-great companies. Collins indicated that it’s not the leader; it’s the leadership. The qualities of Level 5 leadership contradict conventional wisdom about effective leadership. For instance, they found that a charismatic leader brought in from the outside is negatively correlated with transitioning from good-to-great. Level 5 leaders demonstrate unbridled passion, drive, and ambition for their organizations, not for personal recognition or achievement. Level 5 leaders setup their organizations and successors to sustain high performance after they depart. According to Collins, you can learn to be a Level 5 leader. Some leaders may evolve to Level 5, and others may find themselves in situations that bring out their Level 5 capabilities. Collins used the analogy of the window and the mirror to describe the style of Level 5 leaders: When they assign credit, they look out the window. When they assign blame, they look in the mirror. Level 5 leaders will do whatever it takes to help the organization succeed.

*First Who…Then What*

According to the principle of first who…then what, you build the team first, and then, you set the vision. Collins (2001) defined job one as getting the right people on the bus, getting the wrong people off the bus, and changing seat assignments as necessary.

Even though Collins did not explore concepts such as employee welfare or impact on society, organizations that practice the principle of ‘first who’ certainly demonstrate that they value human capital, and recruitment and retention strategies will be important in great and
good-to-great organizations. Although the ‘right’ people will not be motivated primarily by compensation, they will expect equitable compensation and other benefits. The principle of ‘first who’ has particular relevance in the social sectors because many of the individuals who work in the social sectors already have a desire to contribute to the public good, and most public servants do not pursue a career in the social sectors for the money. In the social sectors, some of the desired values preexist.

Confront the Brutal Facts

Collins (2001) recommended decision-making based on facts, understanding, and a consistent frame of reference. Collins suggested creating an environment in which employees do not just have their say, they are heard. It is impossible to know where the best ideas will come from, but leaders and managers have a chance of keeping them in their organization if they create an environment that elicits rather than inhibits free expression of ideas. In summary, retain faith in your ability to succeed and confront the brutal realities of your organization or industry at the same time.

The Hedgehog Concept

Collins (2001) shared the tale of the fox and the hedgehog: the fox knows many things; the hedgehog knows one thing. Collins found that the good-to-great companies were more hedgehog than fox. In other words, they became specialists. Collins indicated that good-to-great companies identified a hedgehog concept. The guiding principles of hedgehog identification are as follows:

1. What can you be the best in the world at?
2. What drives your economic engine?
3. What are you deeply passionate about (Collins)?
Collins described the guiding questions as three overlapping circles; the intersection of the circles is your hedgehog.

**A Culture of Discipline**

According to Collins (2001), “Bureaucracy compensates for incompetence and lack of discipline” (p. 121). In this case, bureaucracy refers to hierarchical organizations with lots of rules. As an alternative, Collins recommended a culture of discipline and an ethic of entrepreneurship. He advised leaders to build a system with clear constraints, freedom, and responsibility and manage the system, not the people. The right people will go the extra mile; they will “rinse their cottage cheese” (Collins, p. 127). The cheese rinsing analogy came from an Ironman tri-athlete who was known to rinse his cottage cheese to reduce fat content. Even though he burned thousands of calories a day, he still rinsed his cottage cheese to gain an edge. Collins also stated that most organizations need a ‘stop doing’ list as a companion to their to-do lists. The ‘stop doing’ list would include any items that are not aligned with your hedgehog concept.

**Technology Accelerators**

Collins (2001) and his associates found that technology served as an accelerator in good-to-great companies, but it did not create momentum. Good-to-great companies were very selective about the technologies they employed. They chose technologies that would facilitate their hedgehog missions, and they did not adopt technologies on the bleeding edge. Few of the good-to-great CEOs recognized technology as a critical success factor; they viewed it more as a mission enabler.

**The Flywheel and the Doom Loop**

Transitions from good to great were not overnight sensations; there were no moments of lightning bolt enlightenment. There was no killer app or single innovation that initiated the
transition. Getting great was about momentum. The doom loop is the other side of the coin: strategy without understanding, inconsistency, and rapid shifts from one activity to another.

*From Good to Great to Built to Last*

Prior to *Good to Great*, Collins and his colleague, Jerry I. Porras, wrote a book called *Built to Last*. *Built to Last* tells the story of companies that, by the authors’ criteria, demonstrate enduring greatness. *Built to Last* introduced the concept of BHAGs or Big Hairy Audacious Goals. Like hedgehogs, BHAGs are not based on wishful thinking; a big hairy audacious goal is based on understanding of the full potential of your organization. *Built to Last* presented the concept of clock building, not time telling. Clock building involves setting up an adaptable organization that will succeed indefinitely beyond the tenure of the killer app or the charismatic leader. *Built to Last* also offered the Genius of AND. Collins (2001) says organizations do not have to settle for one thing or the other; great companies can find ways to, for example, prosper and protect the environment. Finally, *Built to Last* reported that great companies preserve their core values and stimulate progress; they adapt. Collins and his team endeavored to write *Good to Great* as though *Built to Last* did not exist. Collins now views *Good to Great* as a prequel to *Built to Last*. He was inspired to write *Good to Great* by a colleague who told him *Built to Last* was worthless because it did not offer any advice to companies that want to become great. Most organizations are not great by Collins’ standards; all organizations should pursue continuous improvement.

*Good to Great for the Social Sectors*

Collins (2005) recognized that social sectors differ from the private sector in a variety of ways. First, the social sectors lack easy metrics such as profit to quantify success. Higher education and other public organizations can still demonstrate evidence of progress toward
objectives. Metrics can be useful, but many of them do not accomplish the intended results. Metrics such as decreasing time to degree or increasing graduation rates sound great, but there may be confounding factors (goals of students, age and status of students, length of degree program, etc.) that reduce the effectiveness of the metrics. Getting the right people on the bus and the wrong people off the bus is still possible, but it will take more time, effort, and patience in higher education and the other social sectors.

A hedgehog concept may be harder to define in higher education which is often characterized by ambiguous goals, but Collins (2005) argued that the concept still fits. He advised using the same guiding principles with a slight modification. ‘What drives your economic engine?’ becomes ‘What drives your resource engine?’ In other words, which well defined objectives will yield sustainable funding with growth potential.

Collins (2005) says you build momentum by ‘building the brand;’ brand could be equated with reputation if the organization does not have a recognizable brand such as the University of Georgia or the Red Cross.

*Good to Great* proposes a model of excellence for organizations seeking outstanding performance; this research identified some similarities between *Good to Great* and Foundations of Excellence.

**Strategic Planning**

Birnbam (2000) takes a somewhat cynical view of strategic planning; he wrote, “Institutions hungry for solutions may embrace strategic planning even though there are few data suggesting that it works” (p. 221). Strategic planning still has its advocates. As they say if you don’t know where you are going any path will do (Little, 2003) and [if] an organization does not have a vision, then there is no reason for existing (Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis, 2002). Minimally,
strategic planning can reinforce cultural ideals and high level institutional priorities. The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education refers to the culmination of the Foundations of Excellence process as a strategic action plan. Typically, strategic plans involve setting a vision, and action plans consist of action items. The final reports served as the boundary for the three cases; plans included strategic and symbolic elements as well as action items.

Assessment

The Foundations of Excellence self-study represents self-assessment. Astin (1991) distinguished between direct and indirect assessments; according to Astin, direct assessments focus on institutional improvement inside the classroom, and indirect assessments focus on institutional improvement outside the classroom. Foundations of Excellence encompasses both direct (DFWI courses, introductory courses, etc.) and indirect (philosophy, structure, etc.) assessments. Pascarella (2001) advocated a Deming-like emphasis on improving processes as the best way to improve outcomes. Based on the current climate which is characterized by greater demands for accountability and greater emphasis on quantitative outcomes, participants will need to demonstrate improved outcomes such as higher retention rates as well as improved processes. Institutions that participate in Foundations of Excellence should also develop assessments to gauge progress on the objectives defined in their strategic action plans. As per the American Council on Education (ACE) Project on Leadership and Institutional Transformation (Eckel, Green, Hill & Mallon, 1999), planning and conducting assessments contributes to the success of change endeavors.

Conceptual Framework

Student success strategies merit scholarly attention. As stated previously, institutions may be more receptive to improving or implementing specific programs rather than attempting a
campus-wide strategy that aspires to substantive change. At the same time, postsecondary institutions finds themselves confronted with a number of transforming forces such as new teaching and learning approaches, information technology, globalization, assessment, accountability, increased competition, diversity, and changing demographics (Kezar, 2001; Peterson, 2007). Perhaps the current climate requires substantive change.

Foundations of Excellence assesses the first year comprehensively; the institution is the target of change. The process culminates in the development of a strategic action plan. Consequently, this review includes scholarship on postsecondary organizations, first-year organizational structures, institutional change, definitions of student success, first-year interventions, aspirational models, strategic planning, and assessment. All of these areas helped facilitate analysis and answer the research questions defined for this study.

Institutional theory, Birnbaum’s models of organizational functioning, Bolman and Deal’s frames, and the change matrix defined by Eckel, Hill and Green served as the conceptual framework for this research. Institutional theory will be introduced in Chapter 3; institutional theory explained why the institutions participated in Foundations of Excellence. Birnbaum’s models of organizational functioning helped illuminate the way each institution approached the process. The frames defined by Bolman and Deal were used to classify the descriptions of the experience gleaned from participants, and they also offered a means to organize the outcomes of the self-study. The change matrix defined by Eckel, Hill and Green provided a way to categorize the degree of change that occurred at each of the institutions thus far. The four resources chosen to serve as the conceptual framework demonstrate perfect alignment with the research questions defined for this study.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN

As per Yin (2003), a case study approach is appropriate when conducting an empirical study of a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context especially when boundaries are not clear. This description captures this research perfectly. Foundations of Excellence (FoE) is a contemporary phenomenon; the process is not prescriptive; it is institution-specific so context is important in terms of both process and outcomes. Defining boundaries for the cases is challenging because it is difficult to determine if outcomes should be attributed to Foundations of Excellence, or if they are a result of preexisting priorities and ongoing improvement efforts. I have no control over the environment, and I want to retain the context-specific aspects of the self-study and outcomes at each of the case institutions. To my knowledge there is little or no scholarly work on Foundations of Excellence; the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (JNGI) has conducted internal and external evaluations of the process. I have seen references to FoE in literature associated with the JNGI, but nothing outside the JNGI. This research seeks particularization, not generalization, and a blend of qualitative and quantitative data was used to present the cases. The case study method appears to be the best way to answer the research questions defined for this study.

According to Creswell (2007), purposeful sampling is appropriate in qualitative research; institutions were selected with the objective of illuminating the research questions and the central phenomena of the study. Kennesaw State University, Georgia Southern University, and Gainesville State College were chosen based on access, common external context, geographic proximity, and the perception that the institutions would yield rich descriptions of the process,
implementation, and outcomes. The institutions completed Foundations of Excellence in 2-year intervals: Kennesaw State University in 2003-04, Georgia Southern University in 2005-06, and Gainesville State College in 2007-08; Kennesaw State University participated as a founding institution. Institutions that completed the self-study at least one year prior to the data collection process were chosen to ensure that all institutions would have time to make some progress on their action plans. A multiple case study provided a deeper understanding of Foundations of Excellence and facilitated cross case comparisons that may be compelling based on participation in different cohorts and different internal contexts (Stake, 1995). The cases include a descriptive profile of each case institution. This research will begin the process of identifying the outcomes that may be attributed to Foundations of Excellence as well as the purposes for participation and perceptions about the process. Institutions have been identified by name, and interviewees have been identified by their roles such as faculty member or academic administrator. To help ensure the anonymity of interviewees, the speaker and date of these personal communications were not specified.

Observations, document analysis, and interviews served as sources of data for this study. This research emphasized interviews because the eloquence of the interviewees and the richness of their descriptions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on an interview protocol. A generic version of the interview protocol is available as Appendix B. The protocol was revised slightly based on preliminary research about the institutions as well as the role of specific interviewees. Interviews primarily consisted of open-ended questions; the initial protocol was divided into sections to capture background information, institutional information, descriptions of the experience, and outcomes. Deviations from the protocol occurred when ideas emerged that seemed to merit further exploration. Most interviewees were stakeholders that participated in
both the self-study and the implementation phases of the process; at Kennesaw State University and Gainesville State College individuals that could be considered beneficiaries of the process were included.

Foundations of Excellence targets the institution, and this research focuses on capturing the experiences and outcomes of the participants featured in this study. Principals at the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (JNGI) were consulted to seek buy-in for the research and to facilitate access to institutions and data. The Policy Center (Institute) liaisons for each of the three institutions could have been consulted to gauge how effectively the participants completed the process from the perspective of the JNGI. The liaisons were omitted intentionally in an effort to focus on the perspectives of the participants and minimize possible bias. Foundations of Excellence offers a well-defined structure, but it is not prescriptive. Every participant will take an institution-specific approach to the process.

In September 2009 John Gardner facilitated introductions to an individual that served as a key informant at each institution; he prepared a cover message and attached the request for participation prepared for this research. The request for participation has been included as Appendix C. Key informants and their colleagues provided access to strategic action plans and other Foundations of Excellence-related documents. With the consent of the institutions, the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education provided access to FoEtec (Foundations of Excellence Technology) data for Georgia Southern University and Gainesville State College. Kennesaw State University participated in Foundations of Excellence (FoE) prior to the implementation of the FoEtec system. Additional sources of data included all components of the self-study: the current practices inventory, survey results, dimension reports, and the strategic action plan which serves as the culmination of the process. A description of these
components appears below under the heading, *Overview of Foundations of Excellence*. Relevant documents were retrieved from institution websites, and observations were conducted during site visits to each of the campuses. This research tried to restrict the cases to changes that could be connected to Foundations of Excellence and the final report/strategic action plan. At Georgia Southern University, the first-year faculty taskforce was an outcome of Foundations of Excellence so this research includes the outcomes of Foundations of Excellence and the first-year faculty taskforce at Georgia Southern University.

Sixteen interviews were conducted during the fall of 2009. Field notes were created during each of the interviews. All of the interviews were transcribed by the researcher; during the interviewing and transcribing process the researcher engaged in memoing to create reminders regarding emerging themes and patterns and also to document concepts that might merit further exploration (Charmaz, 2006). Dropbox.com was used to provide access to the documents, transcripts, drafts, and memos from any computer attached to the Internet. Using Dropbox enabled the researcher to record ideas upon inception.

A grounded theory approach was used to code the interview transcripts. As suggested by Glaser (1978) and Charmaz (2006), initial line-by-line codes were assigned using a combination of gerunds and nouns for example ‘seeking buy-in from faculty’ to emphasize actions and processes. Analysis included use of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Perspectives and events were compared within and across interviews (Glaser, 1992; Charmaz, 1995). Focused coding (Glaser, 1978) helped the researcher identify recurring themes such as preexisting ties to the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, wanting to grow yet retain core values, feeling stretched by resource constraints, seeking participation and buy-in from faculty, and being committed to student success. Conceptual ideas
also emerged such as the metaphor of lenses and the characterization of Foundations of Excellence (FoE) as a journey not a destination. Axial coding yielded the following outline for this research: what is the identity of this university, why did they participate in FoE, how did each approach the process, and what happened? As per Patton (2002), the coding process ends when the following criteria have been achieved: internal and external plausibility (i.e. internal and external homogeneity), reasonable inclusion of all data, reproducibility (the categories make sense and data are categorized appropriately), and credibility when reviewed by interviewees. The researcher made multiple passes through the transcripts to ensure that the coding process was exhaustive.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) identified confirmability, transferability, dependability, and credibility as trustworthiness criteria for qualitative research; three of these criteria were used for this research. Transferability will be achieved via thick description and applicability to other contexts, and dependability and credibility will be addressed via a thorough audit trail (Guba & Lincoln). This research used two of the four triangulation techniques defined by Denzin (1984). This study employed methodological triangulation by using multiple methods to gather data including observation, document analysis, and individual interviews. This study used data source triangulation; consistency within and between interviewees and other sources of data was sought. Interviewees were quoted directly as much as possible to capture emic perspectives and avoid imposing etic bias.

Theoretical Framework

Institutional theory serves as theoretical framework for this study. In simplest terms, institutional theorists believe that institutional change is driven by the desire to achieve organizational homogeneity. According to Scott (2004),
Institutional theory attends to the deeper and more resilient aspects of social structure. It considers the processes by which structures, including schemas, rules, norms, and routines, become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior. It inquires into how these elements are created, diffused, adopted, and adapted over space and time; and how they fall into decline and disuse. Although the ostensible subject is stability and order in social life, students of institutions must perforce attend not just to consensus and conformity but to conflict and change in social structures.

Bolman and Deal (2003) identify organizational theory as one of the ‘greatest hits’ from organization studies; they place organizational theory within the symbolic frame. The symbolic frame focuses on sensemaking and ascribed meaning. Institutional theory includes the concept of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983); in other words institutions in the same field tend to emulate each other. For example, organizations such as schools, prisons, hospitals, and churches are instantly recognizable by those with similar socialization. Organizations that deviate from conventions lack institutional isomorphism and as a result may be perceived as less legitimate than those that fit established patterns. DiMaggio and Powell identified three forces of institutional isomorphism that drive institutional change: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive pressures emanate from sources such as parent organizations or even cultural expectations. Mimetic pressures materialize from uncertainty; emulating successful peers is one strategy for reducing uncertainty. Normative pressures emerge from professionalization i.e. the idea that the formal education of professionals tends to impart similar values and biases, and the influence of the profession is sustained via professional organizations and other means. Institutional theory seems to be an invisible hand in organizational behavior. During this study, external influence was an overt influence and a covert influence i.e. sometimes participants
perceived their motivations as more internal than external, but the motivators could easily be linked to external influences. Bolman and Deal associate institutional theory with the concept of organizations as theater. There is a symbolic aspect to participating in Foundations of Excellence. After all John Gardner is considered one of the founding fathers of the first-year experience and as a result, he has ‘marquee value;’ participants gain some legitimacy (or perhaps even excellence) by association. As per Meyer and Rowan (1977),

[Organizations] are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society. Organizations that do so increase their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures (p. 41).

Participating in Foundations of Excellence is more than symbolic based on tangible outcomes in areas such as organizational structure and policy.

Overview of Foundations of Excellence

Understanding Foundations of Excellence and its components is an essential aspect of understanding this research; the following paragraphs offer an in-depth description of the process and a lexicon of commonly used terms. The nine Foundational Dimensions represent the core of the Foundations of Excellence process. The Policy Center on the First Year of College, now John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, collaborated with colleagues at Penn State University and Campus Compact as well as 219 member institutions of the American Association of State College and Universities or the Council of Independent Colleges to develop the dimensions and other aspects of the aspirational model (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2006, p. 3). The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education developed slightly different versions of the Foundations of Excellence process for 2-year and 4-
year institutions. In the 2-year version, the faculty dimension is called campus culture. The distinctions are subtle. The 2-year guidebook emphasizes that change is the responsibility of the senior administration; the 4-year guidebook emphasizes joint accountability between the faculty and the senior administration.

Foundations of Excellence (FoE) requires broad campus-wide involvement. There are numerous roles and committees. Collectively all participants are members of the Foundations of Excellence taskforce. The FoE process represents an enormous institutional undertaking so most institutions identify a liaison and co-liaison to chair the taskforce; using a liaison and a co-liaison builds a backup into the process and enables the taskforce leaders to divide and conquer the workload. Each institution will usually have one or two survey administrators who will oversee deployment and collection of the faculty/staff and student surveys. The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education strongly recommends faculty participation in the Foundations of Excellence process. Faculty are generally not given release time for their participation; all participants must add FoE activities to their existing responsibilities.

Most institutions form a committee for each of the nine dimensions: Philosophy, Organization, Learning, Faculty, Transitions, All Students, Diversity, Roles & Purposes, and Improvement. Each of the dimension committees should be staffed with appropriate stakeholders. Typically the Foundations of Excellence steering committee consists of the liaisons and the chairs of the dimension committees as well as senior administrators or key personnel that need to be involved in the process; it is not unusual for participants to wear multiple hats. The Institute provides external guidance throughout the year-long self-study. The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education assigns a senior staff member to each participating institution to provide feedback and serve as a liaison. External guidance may help
diffuse some of the politics and turf battles that can accompany internal committee work.

Participants also have the option of hiring a taskforce advisor who completed Foundations of Excellence at a peer institution; this role provides another source of external feedback in addition to the Institute liaison.

FoEtec stands for Foundations of Excellence technology; Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI) developed FoEtec based on the specifications of the Institute. The FoEtec web application gathers the data that enables institutions to set priorities and make decisions; institutions may upload logos and select an institutional color scheme to customize the FoEtec interface. FoEtec also includes access to survey results: one for faculty and staff and one for students. First-year students complete the survey toward the end of the fall term (Policy Center on the First Year of College, 2006, p. 15). A block of survey questions from the faculty/staff and/or student surveys correspond to each of the nine Foundational Dimensions. The survey results provide baseline data, and they serve as one of the sources of evidence for the reports prepared for each dimension. Participants have the opportunity to include up to 10 institution-specific questions in both of the surveys; five of the questions may be open ended (Policy Center on the First Year of College, p. 15).

A current practices inventory (CPI) helps each institution define its first-year cohort and produce an inventory of first-year programs, interventions, committees, policies, courses, demographics, and assessments. The data collected via the CPI is based on data for students enrolled as freshman during the previous academic year. In the 2-year version of the process, the faculty dimension is called campus culture. The dimension reports include sections such as current situation, opportunities, evidence, and action items. Action items may be assigned a high, medium, or low priority. The dimension reports are guided by the institution’s responses to
dimensional performance indicators. For example, the performance indicators for the philosophy dimension include philosophy/rational, influence, and dissemination. FoEtec also includes a resources section with guidebooks, conference call archives, presentations, promotional materials, and sample reports.

Based on a gap analysis between the current and desired state, participant institutions assign themselves a grade for each dimension based on their assessment of their current performance. Each dimension also includes a progress meter; the Foundations of Excellence administrator, usually the taskforce liaison or co-liaison, records the components of the dimension report that have been completed, and FoEtec displays a completion percentage based on this input.

The dimension reports and action items form the basis for the final report and strategic action plan; the content of the dimension reports should be synthesized and prioritized in the final report. The final report is typically prepared by the steering committee, and the report should indicate timelines, required resources, and the locus of responsibility for each action item/initiative.

Lexicon

Appendix A provides detailed descriptions of the nine Foundational Dimensions. The following terms will appear frequently throughout this study:

**Current Practices Inventory (CPI)** – the CPI represents the first assignment undertaken by the Foundations of Excellence taskforce. The CPI includes an inventory of structures and policies, captures student populations and sub-populations, and identifies existing data and assessments. The CPI and the faculty/staff and study surveys provide baseline data for the process.

**Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI)** – EBI develops software and analysis instruments for
the education market. The Policy Center hired EBI to develop FoEtec, the information technology engine for Foundations of Excellence. EBI also developed MAP-Works, a tool to improve student success and retention.

**FoEtec (Foundations of Excellence technology)** – FoEtec is a web-based application that provides access to all the data and other aspects of the Foundations self-study via a single portal. FoEtec facilitates the Foundations of Excellence process.

**Foundations of Excellence (FoE)** - Foundations of Excellence is a comprehensive, externally-guided, year-long self-study aimed at improving the institutional environment for first-year student success.

**Persistence** – Persistence refers to making academic progress from year to year. Students may persist at multiple institutions.

**The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (JNGI)** (formerly the Policy Center for the First Year of College) – The developer and purveyor of Foundations of Excellence; the JNGI is considered a leading source of expertise on first-year student success.

**Institute liaison** – The Institute liaison is a senior staff member at the Institute; an Institute liaison is assigned to each institutional participant. This Institute liaison provides external guidance and feedback throughout the year-long self-study.

**Retention** – Retention refers to the process of persisting from year to year at the same institution.

**Retention, Progression, Graduation (RPG)** – RPG is a University System of Georgia (USG) initiative that creates incentives and expectations for system institutions with respect to retention, progression, and graduation.
Strategic action plan – The strategic action plan represent the culmination of the Foundations of Excellence self-study. Most institutions identify short-term and long-term objectives as part of the process.

Student success – A general term that refers to one or more aspects of student success such as satisfaction, grades, persistence, and graduation.

Taskforce liaisons – The taskforce liaison and co-liaison serve as chairs for the Foundations of Excellence process; the liaisons may also have significant involvement in implementing recommendations from the strategic action plan.

University System of Georgia (USG) – The University System of Georgia (USG) serves as governance and policy-making body for 35 public postsecondary institutions in the state of Georgia. The USG reports to the Board of Regents. The system includes 2-year and 4-institutions and includes oversight for public libraries.

My Position

I am a novice researcher and a member of the community that I will study; I have spent most of my postsecondary career and most of my professional career at the University of Georgia (UGA). I began my relationship with UGA in 1988. Most of my first-hand experience has been cultivated at a research extensive university, and I want to avoid approaching the case studies with UGA assumptions although I found that using UGA as a frame of reference was useful. I believe I am well positioned to conduct research on Foundations of Excellence (FoE); I first learned about FoE in 2006, and I became very familiar with the process and some of the participants while assisting Dr. Libby V. Morris with the external evaluation of Foundations of Excellence.
The origin of the first-year experience served as a source of inspiration for this study. According to Cutright and Morris (2005), the first-year experience emerged during the last wave of the student protest movement at the University of South Carolina. In 1970 about 1,000 students protested the U.S. invasion of Cambodia by occupying the Office of the President and holding President Thomas Jones hostage. In this pivotal moment, Jones characterized the actions of the students as a failure of the university, and he wanted the university to do more to help students make a successful transition to university life. Collins (2001) would describe Jones as a level 5 leader. In 1972 Jones proposed the original first-year seminar, University 101, as a strategy to achieve this objective. One of the faculty tapped to develop and teach the course was John Gardner. Prior to Jones’ departure from the University of South Carolina in 1974, he named Gardner the director of University 101, and the rest as they say is history. Gardner went on to found the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition as well as the Policy Center for the First-Year Experience now the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. John Gardner is one of the founding fathers of the first-year experience, and Foundations of Excellence was developed based on research and practice.

Throughout my tenure as a doctoral student I struggled with defining myself epistemologically. When I was a master’s student in instructional technology I simply had to choose between two learning paradigms, constructivism and instructivism, and I could easily situate myself in the constructivist or learner-centered camp. Patton (2002) provided temporary relief from my dilemma; he wrote: "My practical and controversial view is that one can learn to be a good interviewer or observer and learn to make sense of the resulting data without first engaging in deep epistemological reflection and philosophical study" (p. 69); nonetheless one must take a position at some point.
Once upon a time I declared myself a post-positivist. I identified with the following descriptions of post-positivists offered by Crotty (1998):

They admit that, no matter how faithfully the scientist adheres to scientific method, research outcomes are neither totally objective nor unquestionably certain. They may claim a higher level of objectivity and certitude for scientific findings than for other opinions and beliefs, but the absoluteness has gone and claims to validity are tentative and qualified (p. 40).

Some aspects of Crotty’s description still work for me; I believe we should strive for objectivity and take an organized and rigorous approach to research. I believe it is impossible to completely eliminate our biases and socialization so I can easily espouse these post-positivist assumptions. At the same time, I do not claim a higher level of objectivity and certitude for scientific findings.

Some aspects of Stake’s (1995) description of constructionism are palatable to me: “most contemporary qualitative researchers nourish the belief that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (p. 99). I believe that knowledge is constructed or co-constructed so I can support this assertion, but then Stake mentions three realities, and he loses me. I reject dualism and triple-ism. Dualism represented one of my primary ontological obstacles. I cannot accept the idea of complete separation between the objective, external world and the subjective, internal world of mind, nor do I give primacy to the external or the internal.

John Dewey rejected the dualism inherent to the analytic tradition; analytic philosophers want to know how the immaterial mind can come to know the external, material world. Like Dewey, I espouse the belief that we are already in touch with reality (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). Discovering my anti-analytic orientation made me a pragmatist. Since I have struggled with
epistemology, it seems fitting that I identity with pragmatism since some call it an anti-
epistemology (Biesta & Burbules).

Dewey’s pragmatism emphasized interactions or transactions between human beings and
their environment, and Dewey stressed the importance of action. According to Dewey, action is
how we come to know. Pragmatism rejects dualism and unifies the objective and subjective via
intersubjectivity. Biesta and Burbules (2003) used the term, practical intersubjectivity, to
characterize Dewey’s pragmatism. Biesta and Burbules explained,

Communication is not the simple transfer of information from one mind to another, but
the practical coordination and reconstruction of individual patterns of action which
results in the creation of a shared, intersubjective world (p. 12).

According to Biesta and Burbules, the emphasis on action makes intersubjectivity practical.

Pragmatism has its critics. Some say pragmatism is compromising and accommodating;
West (1989) restores the critical origins of pragmatism: “[prophetic pragmatism] understands
pragmatism as a political form of cultural criticism and locates politics in the everyday
experiences of ordinary people” (p. 213). I have a melioristic orientation, and change is part of
my research agenda. According to Biesta and Burbules (2003), “Dewey saw a strong connection
between his theory of knowledge and his political philosophy” (p. 70). In other words, Dewey
infused pragmatism with democratic values such as openness and transparency, and these values
seem very relevant in the current climate with its emphasis on accountability and outcomes.

Dewey also ascribed equal value to theory and practice. As a researcher and practitioner,
I value both. As per Biesta and Burbules (2003), "Educational research, one might say, is not so
much research about education as it is research for education" (p. 1). I agree with this statement.
I hope that my study will yield principles that may apply to other institutional changes strategies
aimed at improving student outcomes such as the quality enhancement plans that accompany reaffirmation of accreditation. The Higher Learning Commission (HLC) recognizes Foundations of Excellence as an approved program to evaluate and advance quality (PEAQ). I aspire to create knowledge and understanding via my research, and ultimately, I hope that my efforts will improve practice and decision-making.
CHAPTER 4

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY: INVITING AND ENTREPRENEURIAL

Founded in 1963 Kennesaw State University (KSU) is a young institution compared to some of the other members of the University System of Georgia. Kennesaw State University transitioned from Kennesaw Junior College in 1966, to Kennesaw State College in 1988, and to university status in 1996 (Retrieved from http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-852 on January 7, 2011). In less than 50 years, enrollment grew from approximately 1,000 students to over 22,000 students. Between 1966 and 1996 enrollment nearly doubled every 10 years. (Retrieved from http://vic33.kennesaw.edu/EIMWebApps/vic/enrollment_archives/ on October 17, 2010).

According to one senior administrator,

[Enrollment growth] has made [Kennesaw State University] a more significant player in the system just by our mere size alone. Now that we are the third largest university in Georgia, it creates a certain kind of presence for us in the system.

An academic administrator shared that due to KSU’s rapid growth “every department on this campus is bursting at the seams.” Another senior administrator commented, “We aren’t blessed with a lot of land,” and another characterized KSU as underfunded and under-spaced.

Several participants described Kennesaw State University as entrepreneurial; they depicted a culture of doing more with less; one participant shared secondhand lamentations of the cons of being a model of efficiency. A senior administrator remarked, “Here there’s much more of an entrepreneurial spirit, a spirit of testing the boundaries of things - very much an attitude of let’s find a creative way to make something work.” Strategic use of information
technology represents one way in which Kennesaw State University has been innovative; for example, a senior administrator commented,

We were the first to do the virtual brochures that a student could go online and put in some information, and then within seconds they would receive a personalized brochure with information geared toward just with what they wanted to know, and then it would follow-up with a mailing; that instant feedback just makes all the difference.

Kennesaw State University began offering customized brochures in approximately 2003. Additionally, Kennesaw State University has had a first-year seminar since 1983 (Kennesaw State University, 2004).

Two participants mentioned the primacy of teaching at Kennesaw State University, and several mentioned a focus on students. Multiple participants stressed the importance of faculty connecting with students outside the classroom; Kennesaw State University demonstrates this emphasis via programs such as the Faculty Firesides which bring together faculty and students for informal interaction outside the classroom. Kennesaw State University launched the Faculty Firesides in the late 1980s (Kennesaw State University, 2004). Another participant characterized a focus on students as one of the legacies of former President Betty Siegel’s leadership.

According to a senior administrator, “most of Betty’s years were spent, frankly, on things that concerned students…so having that at the helm for so long I think really did help define us.” Betty Siegel was the second president of Kennesaw State University, and she served from 1981-2006. Her current title is Distinguished Chair of the Siegel Institute for Leadership, Ethics & Character and President Emeritus. Another senior administrator described President Siegel as a visionary leader. An academic administrator declared, “Betty Siegel put KSU on the map, on the globe;” she mentioned that “[Betty Siegel] is on record for being one of the champions for top-
down support for the first year,” and she characterized the first year as ‘Betty’s baby.’ She shared
President Siegel’s 3-legged stool for student success: the Center for Excellence in Teaching and
Learning (CETL), the First-Year Experience (FYE), and Counseling and Advising Programming
Services (CAPS). Several participants described KSU as an exemplar with respect to the first-
year experience. For eight years in a row, KSU’s first-year experience has been recognized as a
program to watch by U.S. News and World Report (Retrieved from
https://web.kennesaw.edu/news/stories/kennesaw-state%E2%80%99s-first-year-program-
recognized-among-best-usnews on October 17, 2010). Although ‘students first’ remains the
mantra, a couple participants acknowledged an increasing emphasis on research at Kennesaw
State University.

Kennesaw State University was strictly a commuter campus until 2002. Now about 3,000
students reside on-campus in one of four living, learning communities. Residence life reflects an
increasing emphasis on traditional age students, but Kennesaw State University remains
intentional about serving adult learners which one academic administrator characterized as
KSU’s bread and butter. A senior administrator mentioned that the residential students contribute
to creating a sense of community; this interviewee expressed pride in seeing more students
wearing Kennesaw State University paraphernalia. She shared:

It is, I think, a visual indicator of just how far we have come in creating a sense of
identity, and a sense of students having a feeling of connection with the school that they
didn’t have years and years ago. They were just sort of passing through till they could
transfer to be a bulldog.

In addition to residence life, Kennesaw State University has experienced other campus upgrades.
Another senior administrator mentioned overhearing a former student remark that ‘the place was
finally looking like a real campus.’ Kennesaw State University definitely looks like a real campus; it includes signage atop foundations of stacked rock, ample pedestrian pathways, and attractive landscaping.

Six interviews were conducted with key stakeholders at Kennesaw State University; most interviews were scheduled in December 2009. Five individuals participated in the Foundations of Excellence self-study and one individual did not participate in the taskforce but did participate in implementing the recommendations of the Foundations of Excellence action plan. Three interviewees came from the senior administrative ranks, and three were academic administrators. Although all participants are currently affiliated with academic affairs, several interviewees had a student affairs background. Over half of the interviewees came from the faculty ranks at Kennesaw State University, and several interviewees teach Kennesaw State University’s first-year seminars: KSU 1101, 1111, and 2290. One interviewee served as Vice-President of Student Success and Enrollment Services (SSES) during the Foundations self-study; Kennesaw State University calls their student affairs division Student Success and Enrollment Services (SSES), and this label reflects KSU’s commitment to student success.

A senior administrator described the campus as an inviting place, and this is consistent with the experience of the researcher. Everyone I encountered said hello. I spent a little time in the Carmichael Student Center which includes the KSU Bookstore. My visits occurred during finals week, and the student center was nearly deserted. The student center includes a few fast food establishments on the lower level, student life offices on the second level, and a variety of spaces for meetings and events. A large number of banners promoted various campus resources and services such as the Men’s Ensemble and the Coalition for Inquiry. I observed a few traditional age students, at least one adult learner, and multiple staff members; although the
number of students was small, I observed several ethnicities which reflect the diversity of Kennesaw State University’s students. Most of the students were wearing jeans, sweatshirts, and jackets; I saw one student wearing pajama bottoms adorned with snowmen. A group of students were participating in new student orientation on the second floor, and a few current students were selling used textbooks on the lower level.

One interviewee encouraged me to stay on campus for lunch and try the Commons, KSU’s state-of-the-art dining hall that opened in summer 2009. My visit occurred near the end of the semester, and a student offered to treat me to lunch to help consume the remaining credit on his ‘k-cash’ ID card. During my visit, the Commons was abuzz with activity; the contrast between the student center and the Commons was dramatic. The Commons looks like a food court in an upscale mall; it includes at least half a dozen different eateries as well as a bakery and a coffee shop that serves lattes and cappuccinos. The Commons features pendant lighting in yellow and blue and an abundance of seating sections including a loft. Most of the observed students appeared to be traditional age students; one interviewee mentioned that the Commons stayed open all night and offered a midnight breakfast during finals. I overheard two Kennesaw State University employees remark that they loved working at Kennesaw State University as they waited in one of the serving lines. I enjoyed the vegetable lasagna, coffee, and chocolate pie. The Commons made a positive impression on me, and I shared my experience with many friends and colleagues.

Why Foundations of Excellence?

Kennesaw State University was a semi-finalist in Institutions of Excellence, a project of the Policy Center on the First Year of College (now the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education) that preceded Foundations of Excellence. The Policy Center
conducted Institutions of Excellence with sponsorship from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Atlantic Philanthropies, and Lumina Foundation for Education. The Institutions of Excellence project sought institutions with exemplary first year programs, and the assessment data to prove it (Barefoot, Gardner, Cutright, Morris, Schroeder, Schwartz, Siegel, & Swing, 2005). The 13 finalists were featured in the book, *Achieving and Sustaining Excellence for the First Year of College*. Institutions that participated in Institutions of Excellence contributed to the development of the dimensions and other aspects of Foundations of Excellence. In the summer of 2003, KSU and 23 other 4-year institutions were selected to participate in a Foundations of Excellence pilot. For Kennesaw State University, FoE likely seemed like a natural progression of institutional efforts to evaluate and improve the first-year experience. Foundations of Excellence was originally called Hallmarks of Excellence, but the name was changed due to an existing trademark.

Ties between Kennesaw State University and John Gardner existed prior to both Institutions of Excellence and Foundations of Excellence. One participant described the initial meeting of John Gardner and former KSU President Betty Siegel as legendary. After meeting John Gardner in an airport, President Siegel purportedly dispatched three leading faculty to South Carolina to visit with him; at the time, John Gardner was director of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. As a result of the visit, KSU implemented what they called the Gardner workshops. John Gardner conducted the workshops on campus, and the objective of the workshops was to increase faculty involvement in the first-year experience. According to one participant, “if you hadn’t gone to a Gardner workshop, you weren’t anyone on this campus.” Since Kennesaw State University has grown and John
Gardner’s role has changed, KSU no longer offers the Gardner workshops, but ties between Kennesaw State University and John Gardner remain.

The professional synergy between John Gardner and Betty Siegel certainly represented a factor in KSU’s decision to participate in Foundations of Excellence (FoE). One interviewee stated that Kennesaw State University participated in FoE because, “Well the reason, the honest answer, is that Betty Siegel really wanted us to.” According to two participants, John Gardner approached President Siegel about applying to participate in Foundations of Excellence. One participant shared, “…we had to we had to fight the rumors that we didn’t really compete at the same level because of the well-known, well-documented affiliation/friendship of Gardner and Siegel.” The founding institutions completed a blind review process so Kennesaw State University earned their spot along with the other founding institutions.

According to one senior administrator the opportunity to conduct an inventory of first-year resources and services and pursue improvement opportunities made Foundations of Excellence appealing. He stated,

I think there was an effort to do two things. One to simply find out what everyone was doing relative to first-year students, and two to see if there was some way to organize them better in order to make them more efficient and effective.

Kennesaw State University has been doing a lot a lot relative to first-year students. KSU began offering a first-year seminar almost 30 years ago. KSU started producing a campus-specific textbook to accompany their first-year seminar starting in the late 1990s. Learning communities debuted in 2000, residence life launched in 2002, and enrollment continued to climb. According to an academic administrator, “We were just in the right place at the right time for Foundations.”
Multiple participants characterized the self-study as an opportunity for self-examination and self-reflection. One participated stated, “We had no systemic way of charting how well we did what we said we did. Assessment was not in the culture at Kennesaw.” A senior administrator described Foundations of Excellence as a way for Kennesaw State University to begin preparing for the 2007 SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) reaffirmation. Two senior administrators characterized the self-study as self-reflection. According to one senior administrator,

The big advantage I saw in doing it is that it would be a wonderful opportunity to step back and really do a more a thorough assessment of all the different pieces that go into making up the first-year experience because we had been doing it a long while, but you never know until you step back how things are truly going. To reflect. To do what essentially I think amounts to a self-study of the various programs that play into it.

Another senior administrator shared,

I think the self-study became a self-reflective time of really requiring us to look, to take a new look at the processes we had, the people who were involved, and to see what was working and what was not. If it wasn’t a pat yourself on the back time, but rather a time to say ‘OK let’s really get down to brass tacks here and see what needs to happen.’

This senior administrator also characterized Foundations of Excellence as an opportunity to renew KSU’s commitment to students, he remarked:

When we first started talking to John [Gardner] and Betsy [Barefoot] about doing this, it just seemed to be a good fit for us at the right time because I think we felt the need for a new sort of a renewed commitment, a new energy, a new focus on first-year students.
An academic administrator shared her hopes with respect to Foundations of Excellence, she shared, “I wanted to have an academic approach, and we were able to move that over. Because if you don’t, then you don’t have faculty buy-in.” Creating faculty buy-in at Kennesaw State University required ongoing effort over a period of years, and according to some interviewees, buy-in remains a work in progress.

A senior administrator mentioned the University System as an incentive for participating in Foundations of Excellence; he stated,

Yeah, we were also beginning to focus more intently on first-year retention and what later became the RPG [retention, progression, and graduation] initiative through the system office was already beginning to percolate at that time; it was important for us to ramp that up, and it’s always been a focus of mine. Even though I’ve always been in academic affairs, I’ve often been involved in student advising and retention.

At Kennesaw State University, first-time, full-time students are retained until the following fall at a rate that has hovered in the low to mid 70s for about 10 years. To learn more about retention, progression, and graduation rates at KSU, visit

http://vic33.kennesaw.edu/EIMWebApps/vic/rpg_tracking/.

Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory

Mimetic and coercive pressures played the greatest role in Kennesaw State University’s decision to undertake Foundations of Excellence. Kennesaw State University’s desire to validate and evaluate their first-year experience demonstrated mimetic influence. Coercive pressures emanated from sources such as the Board of Regents via the retention, progression, and graduation initiative and the Commission on Colleges and Schools via reaffirmation of accreditation. Normative pressures seemed less influential at Kennesaw State University perhaps
because they are considered an exemplar. At the same time, participants stated that they frequently interact with peer and aspirant institutions especially Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI). Kennesaw State University interviewees mentioned collaborating and consulting with other institutions more than any other participants in this study. In addition to IUPUI, interviewees identified the University of Texas El Paso, Western Kentucky, and Portland State University as collaborators.

How: A Process Pioneer

As a Foundations of Excellence (FoE) pioneer, Kennesaw State University entered uncharted territory. As per a senior administrator, “I remember it was a lengthy process. It was not quick.” She elaborated, “It was intense and really time intensive.” Another stated, “I really wouldn’t have any way to quantify the amount of time spent, but it was considerable.” One senior administrator expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to participate in FoE; she asserted,

I, for one, am very grateful that we had the opportunity to do it. It would have been nice to have done it after they made those, you know, web-based type thing as opposed to having to do all of that, but I’m very happy that we did, and I think good things came out of it.

All participants had high praise for the Policy Center on the First Year of College now the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education; a senior administrator stated, “John Gardner and his folks do such a good job. Their programs are very high quality. They are well organized. They are great consultants and advisors;” he continued, “It was beneficial and I would do it again and recommend it.” Kennesaw State University is doing it again; they are participating in the 2010-11 transfer focus cohort.
In the fall of 2003 during an opening of school event President Betty Siegel announced that Kennesaw State University had been chosen to participate in Foundations of Excellence as a founding institution. An interviewee who was a faculty member at the time recalled that there was a breakout session led by the Foundations of Excellence taskforce leader and a senior administrator to recruit a diverse group of faculty to participate in the process. Kennesaw State University formed a taskforce with 17 members including senior administrators, academic administrators, faculty members, and one student. Now most institutions that participate in the Foundations of Excellence process form a steering committee that consists of the taskforce liaisons and the chairs of the dimension committees. Between the membership of the steering committee and the dimension committees, it’s not unusual for over 100 people to directly participate in the process. Three participants felt that the lean approach worked well for KSU; one senior administrator commented,

But I do think there was something to be said for having people…everybody around the table and having discussions so that when we would discuss a specific topic, each one of us could talk to the others about areas, about how our areas played into that, and so I think that really worked well.

According to another senior administrator,

Committees that are too big, too representative oftentimes just really get stuck, and people have a tendency to be more protective of turf, or they…all of us as faculty, we all are smart and have big egos and so you have to plow through all of those various things, and sometimes it can be more of a challenge.

The Foundations of Excellence taskforce at KSU delegated action items to taskforce members but did not divide into subcommittees per se. A senior administrator stressed that the process
must be institution specific and avoid being too prescriptive, he declared, “I would think it’s going to be very much institution specific in terms of the approach that’s going to work best.”

Additionally, Kennesaw State University and the other founding institutions participated in Foundations of Excellence without the benefit of FoEtec, the web-based system that provides access to survey results and facilitates data collection and other aspects of the process. Interviewees shared that they used Microsoft Word and floppies. One interviewee recalled with a little frustration that some colleagues did not know how to use track changes. At least two participants mentioned that KSU was concurrently engaged in a service learning initiative. KSU did not pursue campus-wide buy-in for Foundations of Excellence. One participant shared,

I was sitting on the president’s cabinet and so the whole cabinet was very well aware that it was happening and pretty much invested in it and so that had a little bit of a trickle down effect. It was not the same campus-wide visibility and investment that say SACS had…I think because it was so endorsed from the top it trickled down, and I think most people were aware that it was happening for sure.

Buy-in may not have been stressed as much for the founding institutions.

Some participants recalled participating in NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) and FSSE (Faculty Survey of Student Engagement) as part of Foundations of Excellence. The Policy Center recommended that founding institutions participate in NSSE and FSSE. One participant recalled,

I did, of course, look pretty carefully at NSSE and some of it was…a lot of it was very affirming but, then some of it was a little bit concerning and so we talked about ways that we could ramp up some of the experiences things like not as many students as we would
like being a part of extracurricular things which you know at the time being a commuter campus it’s very difficult to do.

The faculty/staff and student surveys developed by the Policy Center and implemented by Educational Benchmarking, Inc. were not a component of the self-study for the founding institutions.

Several participants mentioned the benefit of external guidance. John Gardner served as Kennesaw State University’s Policy Center advisor. As per one interviewee, “Given John’s eye for detail I think actually it had a tremendous effect on the process.” One participant championed the dual benefits of external guidance and being a founding institution,

I’ve seen far too many taskforces with good intentions that sort of never really accomplish anything. I think having the external, and in our case being one of the founding institutions, we felt a responsibility to do it right. I really do, but without that external connection to kind of keep us on track and hold us accountable, I don’t think it would have been nearly as productive.

Another identified the camaraderie among the founding institutions as a benefit:

The other thing that helped us, and I don’t know how much this is still the case or not; perhaps, it was because we were first. There was a real good synergy among the institutions, and I think we learned quite a bit from each other so I think that was very helpful to us.

Kennesaw State University and the other founding institutions seemed to recognize that they were pioneers in a process that would be undertaken by many other institutions in the years to come.
Kennesaw State University achieved student input via a student representative on the taskforce and participation from Student Success and Enrollment Services (SSES) at the senior administrative level. The Vice-President for SSES provided updates to the student government association and other student groups.

All participants recalled strong senior administrative support for Foundations of Excellence. One shared,

I would say to anybody who is deliberating as to whether to do this or not, if you really put the right people around the table, and you support it from the top that you get your time and money’s worth out of it. I really think so.

A senior administrator recalled that he and the president pushed the taskforce by posing questions such as “Is this really the best we can be? Are we really providing everything we could and should to our students?”

Lumina and the Atlantic Philanthropies covered the participation fee for founding institutions. Interviewees had different perceptions about the importance of this sponsorship. One participant felt that competing priorities might have prevented Kennesaw State University from participating if they had not received sponsorship; she shared, “If there had been money involved, we probably would not have been able to sustain the interest again because everyone was fighting for growth and development of their units.” Another stated, “I think we would have done it without it.” A senior administrator stressed that having sponsorship was very important; he shared, “It also gives it a kind of a stature for the rest of the institution if you can talk about the sponsorship that you have for this project, and it’s not such a drain on resources.” Most University System of Georgia institutions would characterize the last decade as lean times so sponsorship certainly did not hurt. As a founding institution, Kennesaw State University likely
felt an obligation to do their very best even though they did not pay the participation fee. Of course, like other participants, KSU invested considerable time and other resources in the self-study and implementation of their action items.

Outcomes: Expected and Unexpected

The Foundations of Excellence self-study came to a close in spring 2004 and that summer President Siegel decided to allocate new faculty positions to University Studies to teach the first-year seminar, KSU 1101. This decision was motivated at least in part by Foundations of Excellence. As per one interviewee, the number of lines apportioned to University Studies was unprecedented; she explained,

The next year Betty Siegel says there’s going to be some money from the Board of Regents, and I’d like you to hire some people to teach KSU 1101, and I said, ‘Um, sure.’ And she told [the Dean of University Studies] ‘I’ll give you 10 slots. 10 full-time faculty members.’ 10! 10! We couldn’t believe it. We could not believe it.

These 10 faculty lines demonstrated a commitment to the first-year seminar at the senior administrative level and increased the visibility of University Studies.

Several significant outcomes at Kennesaw State University may be attributed at least in part to Foundations of Excellence, and the major action items mentioned in the executive summary were consistent with the milestones mentioned by the interviewees. University College Advisory Council was formed to continue the work that began with Foundations of Excellence and oversee the creation of University College. The president and provost visited Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) to learn about their University College model. Kennesaw considers IUPUI an aspirational peer and vice versa. Interestingly, John Gardner initiated the synergy between Kennesaw and IUPUI by facilitating contact between their
respective provosts. IUPUI participated in Foundations of Excellence in 2007-08. Kennesaw State University borrowed some ideas from IUPUI, but they created University College with some unique attributes. A senior administrator shared,

We are in, I think, an absolutely unique position in the country. At least John [Gardner] keeps telling us we are, and he ought to know. In that we have dedicated faculty in the department of first-year programs and that was my doing to create that. That is their sole responsibility is to run the first-year seminar and the learning communities program.

That’s unique in the country.

University College has a dean and consists of two primary departments: University Studies and First-Year Programs. First-Year Programs includes the first-year seminars and learning communities. University Studies includes several programs such as honors, the interdisciplinary degree program, learning support, supplemental instruction, and the senior year seminar that students may take as an elective. One senior administrator, although bullish on the University College model, identified one disadvantage: the misconception that University College is solely responsible for first-year student success; he shared, “I think in the other academic units, the academic units particularly, there is that sense that we are the ones that are supposed to doing all the work for retention, and they don’t have to worry about it.” This senior administrator also identified the benefits of the University College model; he explained, “I think it has increased the visibility; it has increased the acceptance at least at the higher levels, at the Deans levels.”

Foundations of Excellence contributed to making KSU 1101 more academically rigorous. According to one participant,

I still find some campuses in the country that the first-year seminar is not really respected, and usually, those are places that it doesn’t carry more than one hour credit,
and it essentially is more of an extended orientation, or you know a study skills thing, and on our campus it’s a 3-hour semester course, and it has some academic integrity to it.

Senior leadership attempted to make KSU 1101 a requirement for all students, but the initial proposal was voted down. Some of the resistance came from faculty in high credit hour programs who did not feel they could add another 3-hour requirement to their programs; faculty who viewed the course as fluff represented another source of resistance. An academic administrator recalled,

I think that was a real important point for academic affairs to realize that they had not done the job they needed to do in talking about the importance of the Foundations project, talking about how these departments, who were so concerned about their majors, weren’t going to see these majors if these kids were all dropping out in their first year.

A sub-committee of the University Council Advisory Committee helped build buy-in for a first-year requirement. An academic administrator recalled, “We made sure we had this diverse group of faculty all across campus saying ‘No, no, no! We came up with this idea; we think it would be helpful.’” According to this interviewee, the subcommittee spent about a year defining 11 learning outcomes for first-year students that could be accomplished via the first-year seminar or a learning community. The proposal of the subcommittee moved through the University Policies and Curriculum Committee with ease.

At KSU, learning communities consist of three courses linked by a common theme. One of the courses may be the first-year seminar, but some learning communities consist entirely of required courses. A couple interviewees mentioned that they were not entirely confident that the learning community option without the seminar really accomplished the objectives of the first-
year seminar but recognized that conceding the first-year seminar requirement made the first-year requirement possible. A senior administrator stated,

They would have courses that they were already required to take or already at least part of their gen ed program and therefore would not put in any extra hours on them and yet supposedly accomplish the same thing. I’m not convinced that it does but that was the intent.

By design, a learning community includes at least one small class with 25 students, but in the others the learning community cohort may be embedded in a larger course. Now KSU offers KSU 1111, a seminar with a global focus, and KSU 2290, a seminar with a service learning component, as well as KSU 1101.

Tinto (1993) identified committing to the academic and social aspects of student development as one of his principles of effective retention. Kennesaw State University characterizes the relationship between academic affairs and Student Success and Enrollment Services one of its ‘steeples of distinction;’ a senior administrator remarked, “My personal bias is that that’s how it should be; it’s much better for the two should work in sync.” An academic administrator commented, “We had two best friends seated as VPs, and they made people talk to each other.” According to a senior administrator Foundations of Excellence created recognition of the need to be more intentional about sustaining these ties; she shared, “…you’ve got to build in some assurances that even when certain people leave their position, things will continue to be connected.”

Three participants identified a link between Foundations of Excellence (FoE) and the advent of convocation at KSU. As per one interviewee,
One of the things that I think came out of the Foundations that I was so appreciative of is it became clear that as a young university that we needed some traditions and previously that had not very much on the scene so the early days of first creating a first-year convocation was very small, but it has now grown to where it is…in fact [the president] made the observation it’s pretty much on a par now with our commencement.

At Kennesaw State University, convocation is held in Convocation Center, a 4,500 seat arena.

Participating in Foundations of Excellence yielded some surprises. A senior administrator recalled,

I think one thing that surprised me I don’t know if the other people on the taskforce thought this way; I was surprised that there wasn’t more widespread knowledge at the time of just how far we had come in terms of establishing a first-year experience program. A lot of people just didn’t know about it or know what we were doing.

Concurrently, this participant shared, “I also think we were surprised though to see how much more there was to do in terms of connecting the various pieces.” Another senior administrator agreed; he stated, “that there was a lot more going on that we weren’t aware of and that there was a lot less communication than there probably should have been about those things.” He explained, “We thought we were more cohesive than we were.”

Another senior administrator emphasized that Foundations of Excellence helped facilitate data-driven decision making:

I think what it did was it confirmed some things that we thought were important and provided us some good data to make decisions about changes, and it also provided I think some good energy among the people who were most involved which oftentimes projects like this do.
He elaborated,

You need something like this every once in awhile even if everyone is doing good work. It’s not that things are broken necessarily but that you oftentimes need a focal point, an energizer to get people rethinking about things. So some things that came out of it: our learning community program really took off and now that’s become nationally recognized in many ways, and I’ve already mentioned that we were able to establish the learning communities, KSU 1101 as a requirement for all KSU students which was a big coup.

Two senior administrators shared that Foundations of Excellence helped build a culture of assessment at KSU; one stated,

I think after that it became pretty clear that even though we had an IR department that we needed to ramp up assessment, and I think as a result I believe we are in a better place now with assessment than we were back in those days.

Another shared,

The Foundations project did help that along because we were required to develop assessments to see how things were working, how they needed to be improved, what…part of that self-reflection process is having ways to check yourself on your goals and how well you are achieving the goals, and then using that information to get better, to make changes, make adjustments.

At KSU, Foundations of Excellence demonstrated the need to create more buy-in and recognition for the first-year experience. The data-centric nature of the FoE process helped make the culture more data-driven and assessment-oriented.
A senior administrator shared that Foundations of Excellence was instrumental in building the case to implement the first-year requirement at KSU and increasing faculty buy-in; he recalled,

I don’t think we would have done it without the FoE project because as I said it provided us some good thinking; it provided us some good data that the faculty involved could take to the faculty senate and eventually won those people over. I remember very clearly a senate meeting where people were very skeptical, and [an academic administrator] who you’ve probably met or have interviewed provided them a great list demonstrating how the learning communities and KSU 1101 were making a difference and really, really changed some minds there - so that happened.

Even though University College has a dedicated faculty of approximately 15, University College still struggles to identify all the instructors needed for the first-year seminar courses. According to one participant,

Initially the KSU 1101 sections were taught primarily by University College faculty. Actually, this fall for the first time since 2004 since that large group of faculty were hired in, we actually ran the numbers and realized that the first-year programs faculty are now teaching fewer than 50% of the sections and that’s due simply to the overwhelming growth in our student population.

Another participant mentioned that having faculty teach KSU 1101 is very important, but the number of faculty in University College are not adequate to meet demand. An academic administrator shared,

We’ve been very blessed to have a number of full-time staff members or full-time administrative faculty members, individuals in residence life, in our center for student
leadership, SSES sorts of affiliated departments that teach for free. It’s amazing. We could not offer nearly the number of sections that we need without them.

One participant lamented that the dedicated faculty of University College has one drawback in that it eliminates the need to seek collaboration and participation from the other colleges; she stated,

You don’t have to talk to anybody else in English, Communications, Math, Psychology because we joint appoint our faculty so we don’t have the same relationship that would force me to go and talk with the chair; we just do it all ourselves. It’s not a good thing.

In spite of challenges, interviewees expressed pride in accomplishing the first-year requirement objective.

The first Dean of University College is a respected, long-term member of KSU community from the faculty and senior administrative ranks. At the same time, according to one participant, “I think we still are looked at as slightly a tier below because we just don’t look like any other college I think it’s probably going to be another 5 – 10 year process.” DiMaggio and Powell (1983) might say University College lacks institutional isomorphism. The Department of University Studies is the home of the Interdisciplinary Studies program, but University College does not offer degree programs per se. An academic administrator mentioned that University College would like to develop and offer a master’s level graduate program to train the next generation of first year leaders. University College affiliates sometimes feel they have to justify the existence of University College and the first-year seminar. One participated shared,

I think faculty spend more time sometimes than they really realize almost justifying the existence of the course. This is why we are here; this is why what we are doing is important. You don’t walk into American history, and go now this is why we are here;
this is why what we are doing is important. And so I’d like us to get to the point where
we didn’t feel like we had to do that.

All participants identified University College as a significant outcome of Foundations of
Excellence; now emphasis has shifted to making University College as effective as possible. One
participated shared, “[Foundations of Excellence] is there as an underpinning, but I’m not sure
that it really gets much discussion any more.”

According to one senior administrator, the dimensions represented one of the most
beneficial aspects of the process; he stated,

Talking through the various dimensions of the project and doing a lot of soul searching in
terms of requiring us to take another look at our processes and how successful we are.
Furthermore, this participant indicated that the dimensions became part of the culture of KSU; he
remarked,

I think part of our success with the FoE project [was] that it did become parts of many
things on campus so it didn’t remain just one isolated activity; it rippled out in a number
of ways that helped it become…that helped the dimensions really become I think part of
our culture in many respects.

One participant shared that University College continues to set objectives that correspond to the
Foundational Dimensions. He mentioned several recent initiatives aimed at serving students
according to their needs; he shared,

We were doing things pretty generically. I didn’t feel like we were serving the students
that were coming in less academically prepared, those that were coming in with learning
support requirements for example; nor were we serving high achieving students that were
coming into the institution so in the last two years we’ve looked at programs specifically for those populations.

Serving all students according to their varied needs is one of the nine dimensions.

Two senior administrators characterized Foundations of Excellence as a giant leap forward for KSU in terms of the first year: One shared,

I think where we are now versus where we were pre-Foundations is light years further, and I’m not sure we would have made that kind of rapid progress had it not been for what amounted to a real year of intense work. I just don’t think it would have happened.

Another stated,

We would not be as far along as we are now without the project because we are always so busy, and I mean there’s so much to be done especially at a university like this that is growing so quickly. There literally is no time so you have to have something like this that forces you to rearrange your time that is already precious and becomes a priority.

Foundations of Excellence helped Kennesaw State University accelerate its tradition of providing students with a high quality first-year experience.

A senior administrator shared her belief that greater cohesiveness was the most beneficial aspect of Foundations of Excellence; she commented,

For me it was the whole thing about the comprehensive, connecting all the pieces because it seemed to me like we had, if you think of it as a giant puzzle, we had all the little pieces, but it needed to be put together and seeing it as a whole that for me was the number one thing to come out of it that I was the most appreciative of.

This senior administrator also recognized the necessity of continuous improvement; she shared, “You can only rest on your laurels so long, and then it’s time to reinvent yourself.”
University College continues to reinvent itself. One University College affiliate mentioned the long-term objective of creating a master’s degree program to train the next generation of faculty to teach first year students. This participant also characterized survival as an objective based on the need for more faculty and more classroom space. Based on KSU’s traditions of entrepreneurialism and putting students first, University College will surely endure. According to an academic administrator in University College, twenty-first century students seem to need the first-year experience more than ever; she confided, “I think as they show up every fall they need us more than they have the previous fall.” The coordination provided by University College helps make the first-year experience at Kennesaw State University more cohesive. Via University College, the first-year requirement, and numerous cultural changes, Foundations of Excellence empowered Kennesaw State University to become more intentional and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the first-year experience.
CHAPTER 5

GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY: A UNIVERSITY WITH HEART


Four interviews were conducted in November 2009. Interviewees included two faculty members and two academic administrators. With respect to Foundations of Excellence, the interviewees served as the liaison, the co-liaison, and two dimension committee chairs. Three participants have been at GSU over 20 years, and the other has been at GSU about 10 years. Fewer Foundations of Excellence participants were interviewed at GSU, but the four interviews represent approximately the same amount of time invested at the other institutions.

I spent a full day at Georgia Southern University and made many virtual visits. The bookstore and other sites were adorned with Christmas decorations for the upcoming holidays. The fall weather was mild, and some students were still wearing shorts. Most students looked traditional in age and appearance; one student had pink hair.

The campus demonstrates a consistent architectural style that complements the Georgian style of the oldest buildings on campus that cluster around Sweetheart Circle. GSU was once called the sweetheart campus because of the heart-shaped, tree-lined lawn that designates the
A line bisecting Sweetheart Circle separated the boys from the girls in the early days of the university (Retrieved from http://www.georgiasouthern.edu/traditions/sweetheart.php on January 4, 2011). Now Sweetheart Circle serves as a gathering place for events or hanging out. The campus also features a pedestrium that provides ample pedestrian pathways that wind throughout campus; the pedestrium includes green spaces as well as a rotunda and a gazebo. The campus offers pleasing landscapes and multiple lakes and fountains. According to a profile published on the Georgia Southern University website, “Founded in 1906, Georgia Southern University lays claim to being the most beautiful campus in the state” (Retrieved from http://students.georgiasouthern.edu/specialprojects/documents/case/GSU%20Profile-2.pdf on January 3, 2011).

The transition to a research doctoral institution reflects an increasing emphasis on research. At the same time, two interviewees were emphatic about the primacy of teaching at Georgia Southern University. One participant recalled that in the early stages of the transition to a research university priorities shifted and hiring mistakes were made; she stated, “So then we began to look at things and say ‘Hey, remember we are a teaching institution;’ the president himself kept reminding us of that.” Three participants mentioned dedication to providing a quality experience for students, and one of these invoked the phrase that emerged as part of GSU’s branding efforts: ‘Georgia’s large-scale, small-feel research university.’ A faculty member mentioned that GSU has a reputation as a party school, and multiple interviewees mentioned that this reputation sometimes creates a mismatch between faculty expectations and student expectations. Finding evidence of this gap represents one of the outcomes of Foundations of Excellence at GSU. Another faculty member described GSU as a community that still feels
small. GSU’s identity is rooted in its history as a regional comprehensive university. One participant shared,

   Our connection to the community and to the region has always been strong. Our history is, if you read the history of Georgia Southern University, we are here because the community put us here; they wanted a college here. That runs through the history of Georgia Southern University all the time.

Georgia Southern University gives back to the community via research, service learning, and other outreach activities aimed at the southeast region of the state. Georgia Southern University is an institution in perpetual transition based on mission changes, enrollment growth, and increasing academic standards.

Why Foundations of Excellence?

Georgia Southern University participated in the 2005-06 Foundations of Excellence cohort. The Foundations of Excellence taskforce included about 54 members and consisted of faculty, staff, students, and administrators representing both academic and student affairs.

Interviewees shared myriad motivations to participate in Foundations of Excellence. One participant identified Randy Swing, who served as Co-Director and Senior Scholar of the Policy Center on the First Year of College at the time, and Darlena Jones, Director of Research and Development at Educational Benchmarking, Inc. (EBI) as two professional colleagues that piqued his interest in Foundations of Excellence. Educational Benchmarking, Inc. administers the survey components of Foundations of Excellence and developed, FoEtec, the web-based application that facilitates the self-study. This participant characterized Foundations of Excellence as a means to build institutional support for the first-year program and gain more legitimacy through a formal process and external validation by the Policy Center on the First
Year of College now called the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. Two interviewees identified internal colleagues and institution/system objectives such as improving retention, progression, and graduation rates.

All participants mentioned dissatisfaction with the first-year experience at Georgia Southern University, and two participants mentioned a deficit of resources with respect to the first year as incentives to participate in Foundations of Excellence (FoE). One participant summarized the basis for participating in FoE; she shared:

It was clear that there were some excellent learning objectives, but there was not the support to really achieve what we wanted to achieve, and that we had to make a decision. We either were going to have a true first-year experience program, or we were not going to have one. We were playing patch, patch, patch, and that was not really serving the needs of anyone. You could look at the retention, progression and graduation rates. We were struggling with those. You could look at the surveys that were done. We do evaluations of all the courses that are taught on campus every semester. You could look at those evaluations, and you could see that faculty and students were somewhat frustrated. Basically what the first year was at that point was just a welcome to college; here’s what you need in order to survive, and here’s some resources on campus, but the whole academic piece was missing. It was more about services, programming, and even that was limited.

Two participants characterized the climate leading up to the Foundations of Excellence self-study as a perfect storm. The perfect storm consisted of dissatisfaction with the first-year experience, the need to make progress on objectives defined in Georgia Southern University’s Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), and a new provost with strong ties to both academic affairs
and student affairs. According to one participant, the new provost “…gave us that opportunity to get someone who could see the need for both parts of the puzzle.” A faculty member described Foundations of Excellence as “… a great plan. Something to try.”

Three participants characterized Foundations of Excellence as a way to address first-year objectives defined in the revised QEP completed in summer 2005; the objectives are:

- Freshmen will apply behaviors that demonstrate their responsibilities as engaged learners.
- Freshmen will practice behaviors that lead to lifelong learning.
- Freshmen will evaluate their responsibilities as engaged members in diverse communities.


Three out of five QEP objectives focus on the first year. The theme of the QEP is advancing a culture of engagement and creating engaged learners. All interviewees recognized the criticality of the first year. One participant shared:

I know as an advisor and as someone who works with our majors and the international students the better preparation you do early on the better the student’s going to succeed later. I think that’s what we really accomplished with the Foundations project is we had a chance to step back, and say yes, this is something that has to happen if we are going to do what we really want, and that is we’ve got to get students off on the right foot in the beginning. If we don’t do that, then we are trying to backfill, and you can’t backfill.

A faculty member emphasized student success as a motivation for participation; she said, “We want to just do our best to keep students in school.” This faculty member also shared that millennial students have different needs than their predecessors; she stated:

They engage, but I think they just need to be pulled, and if they are slipping, it’s because they are not thinking about classes. They respond to an email that says you are likely to fail this class if you don’t do something; they will. I think they need it more than we did.
For all these reasons, Georgia Southern University was receptive to undertaking the Foundations of Excellence self-study.

Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory

Reaffirmation of accreditation played a role in Georgia Southern University’s decision to participate in Foundations of Excellence. Accreditation is a peer review process; at the same time, it is an external review so the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) could be characterized as a coercive influence in Georgia Southern University’s pursuit of the first-year objectives defined in their QEP. One interviewee shared that Georgia Southern University struggled with retention, progression, and graduation rates; the decision to pursue these improvements is internal as well as external (coercive). The University System of Georgia (USG) defines strategic goal one as renewing excellence in undergraduate education to meet students’ 21st century educational needs, and this goal includes improving retention and graduation rates by sector (Retrieved from http://www.usg.edu/strategicplan/one/grad_rates.phtml on August 17, 2010). Between Fall 1999 and Fall 2008, Georgia Southern University achieved a 7.2% increase in the first-year retention rate. As of fall 2008, the first-year retention rate is 81.3% (Retrieved from https://www.sta.georgiasouthern.edu/sra/RPG/index.cfm on August 17, 2010). Georgia Southern University recently moved up to the research doctoral Carnegie classification and normative pressures require GSU to measure up to comparator and aspirational peers. Mimetic pressures are also influential in the pursuit of changes at GSU based on resource constraints. Two participants mentioned that prior to Foundations of Excellence and the first-year experience faculty taskforce the first-year experience had minimal dedicated resources.
How: Buy-in!

At Georgia Southern University, senior administrators in academic affairs made the decision to undertake Foundations of Excellence (FoE). Georgia Southern University paid $35,000 to participate in FoE, and they elected to make two payments over a 2-year period. Two senior administrators attended a conference held by John Gardner in Atlanta, and after attending the conference decided to pursue participation in the 2005-06 4-year cohort. Georgia Southern University’s liaisons used a dual strategy of recruiting specific individuals and asking for volunteers to participate in the Foundations of Excellence taskforce. According to two interviewees, the liaison and co-liaison assigned volunteers and recruits to the dimension committees and also designated the chairs of the dimension committees. The Foundations of Excellence taskforce liaisons intentionally recruited faculty to serve as dimension committee chairs and FoE taskforce members. Four out of nine dimension committee chairs were faculty members.

According to one dimension committee chair, getting faculty buy-in was the most challenging aspect of participating in Foundations of Excellence. She shared, “I think one of the biggest challenges was getting faculty to accept that we really wanted faculty to drive it;” she elaborated, “Things aren’t going to happen unless faculty are really committed to it.” She stressed the importance of bringing everyone to the table; she explained,

The big challenge for us was one to identify a true cross-section of the faculty who could provide us the input that we needed because you had to have everything from the person who was passionate about first-year and really believed in it to the person who thought first-year was a joke. You had to get all sides of the house represented.
Beyond the challenges of buy-in, this interviewee also recognized the challenge of getting faculty to participate in the self-study; she asserted,

You’ve already got a faculty that’s overworked, and you’ve got to convince them that it’s worth the time; it’s worth the effort because it’s going to mean in the long run it’s going to be better for everybody.

The liaisons tried to create incentives for faculty buy-in by framing a strong first-year program as a way for faculty to recruit highly prepared students to their disciplines; one participant shared:

If we could build a first-year program that did it’s job, what we would do is we would provide an opportunity for faculty to interact with students in a fashion where they could attract students into their disciplines, and they could get a better quality of student and a more committed student because they would have that opportunity early on to help the student do that academic exploration.

A faculty member conveyed that some faculty members are predisposed to reject Foundations of Excellence and other student success initiatives; she shared, “Some faculty don’t care about keeping students here.” She elaborated, “And that’s mainly faculty who just don’t have that heart that caring heart.” Other obstacles to faculty buy-in included skepticism that participation would lead to meaningful outcomes and isolation from institutional endeavors. Another faculty member found it rewarding to collaborate with colleagues outside her usual circle; she confided, “…we are just so isolated most of the time….”

Georgia Southern University encountered a number of obstacles to getting buy-in including the size of the institution. According to one participant, “I don’t think we really understood quite how large a project it was, and I’m not sure [the Policy Center] really understood all the challenges that we faced by trying to do it.” One dimension committee chair
conveyed that she never had a firm grasp on the objectives of the Foundations of Excellence self-study; she shared: “I like to see the big whole picture so I felt that was difficult for me to, again, see where it was going. I just knew the people in charge knew what they were going to do with it.” Other challenges to gaining buy-in at GSU included the amount of time involved in participation. One participant characterized Foundations of Excellence as “Time consuming. Overwhelming at times.” Another participant shared the point of view that Foundations of Excellence requires strong support from the senior administration and someone who can devote the majority of their time to the year-long self-study; she shared:

It’s a huge amount of work. You’ve got to have a lot of commitment; you’ve got to have your upper administration really committed to it because they’ve got to be behind you as you establish the committees, and you go through the whole process. They’ve got to make the case to the Deans. They’ve got to make the case to the university as a whole, and then you’ve got to have somebody who essentially is in charge of it - whose major responsibility is that; you can’t do this with somebody part-time trying to do this.

Multiple participants emphasized the amount of work that the self-study required; at the same time, one interviewee shared, “It’s a huge amount of work, but I have to say that if we had not gone through that process we would never have done the hard work that really needed to be done.” This interviewee also declared, “If I had to go back in time and make that recommendation again I would make the recommendation even more strongly than I did when I first made it.”

Dimension committee chairs recalled working to encourage survey participation among faculty and staff with the assurance that the data would be used and that Foundations of Excellence would go somewhere. Georgia Southern University used paper-based, in-class survey
administration for students. They utilized 47 sections of ENGL 1101 as their student survey population and based on this strategy achieved a 78% response rate: 741 out of 949 students. According to the GSU website, Georgia Southern University achieved a similar response rate from faculty and staff (Retrieved from http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/fye/facultybycollege.pdf on January 4, 2011). Faculty and staff completed web-based surveys.

Each dimension committee at Georgia Southern University included a student representative, but like other institutions in this study, GSU found that student participation was often sporadic. One participant felt that greater buy-in from the Deans might have helped if all of the colleges had identified representatives from their student groups.

Outcomes: Expected and Unexpected.

Foundations of Excellence enables institutions to achieve substantive improvements to their first-year experience program. According to one interviewee, “I think what it did was it really affirmed for us the absolute critical nature of a strong first-year program.”

Two interviewees identified a few desired outcomes with respect to Foundations of Excellence. A dimension committee chair stated, “I just wanted the students that came to be successful and to love their time here and want to stay.” Another interviewee defined her objectives: “To get a first-year office established with a fulltime director and to get advisement centers in the two colleges that did not have them.” She reiterated the importance of advisement; I’m convinced that bottom line is advisement that below everything is advisement, and if you don’t have excellent advisement, you are not going to have good student retention and graduation rates; you are not going to have a quality experience for the students; it’s all based upon advisement.
Based on progress to date, both of these interviewees must be pleased with the outcomes of Foundations of Excellence and the first-year experience faculty taskforce that formed upon completion of the self-study.

At Georgia Southern University, the outcomes of Foundations of Excellence were surprising to some participants. One participant identified the importance of honesty and openness with respect to the findings and follow through in terms of the action plan; she shared, [We] had to be very honest about what we found – no covering up. This had to be ‘let’s get the skeletons out of the closet’, and the other piece was that if there were recommendations, we had to follow through with the recommendations. We couldn’t just sweep ‘em under the rug. We couldn’t say ‘Oh well, we can’t do that because we don’t have the money’, or ‘We can’t do that.’ We had to really follow through with the recommendations.

Another participant stated, “…for some reasons we needed to do it slightly differently.” Georgia Southern University used Foundations of Excellence primarily for purposes of data collection and identifying strengths and weakness; the GSU surveys identified student affairs programming as a strength. The most significant finding of the self-study was evidence of a gap between faculty and student expectations with respect to academics. As per one contributor the surveys revealed, “There’s a disconnect between what we feel like we are making very clear and what students tell us - that they are not getting some of it.” This participant elaborated, “We had to do some work on the academic side.” The interviews also revealed a gap between the administration and the faculty. Some faculty viewed the first-year experience as the domain of student affairs. The organization dimension committee expressed the following belief in the final report: “According to the Faculty Survey for this study, faculty have little voice in first-year matters”
(Georgia Southern University, 2006, p. 8). Furthermore the committee expressed frustration with data gathering that did not lead to action: “As a last point, all GSU 1210 class instructors are required to give Student Ratings of Instruction. It is unclear how these data are used” (Georgia Southern University, p. 9). Georgia Southern University recognized the need to address a gap between students and faculty as well as a gap between the administration and the faculty.

All participants characterized Foundations of Excellence as a trigger or catalyst for next steps with respect to the first year. One participant stressed the usefulness of the Current Practices Index, feedback from the Policy Center, and the surveys. Betsy Barefoot served as the Policy Center liaison for GSU. Another described the benefits of collaborating with colleagues and the opportunity to gain greater understanding of the operations of the university; she shared, “[I] just began having a different perspective on how the university works from the perspective of having been only a faculty member; [it] was valuable in so many ways just to see the bigger picture.” One participant summed up her Foundations of Excellence experience with the following words, “It’s a great way to get to know people all over campus. We learned from it. We’ve had some positive things happen as a result of it.” As a result of the need to do work on academic side, the provost convened a first-year experience faculty taskforce as a way to continue the work that began with Foundations of Excellence.

Based on the approach to Foundations of Excellence at Georgia Southern University, one participant shared, “We didn’t have a report that we trotted out and that we sort of held ourselves accountable to.” Instead based on the need for faculty to drive the changes and the need to emphasize academics in the first-year experience, Georgia Southern University formed a first-year experience faculty taskforce. One interviewee characterized the faculty taskforce as a pivot; the others characterized the faculty taskforce as a continuation of the work that began with the
Foundations of Excellence self-study. The faculty taskforce included 10 individuals; one of whom was a high school teacher in the area. The creation of the faculty taskforce yielded some disappointment from those who were excluded. One interviewee shared, “There was a little resentment too I think for the folks on student affairs because it was all academic affairs.” According to the taskforce web pages, Foundations of Excellence yielded three key findings:

1. Compared with other institutions who participated in the Foundations of Excellence project, Georgia Southern University scored fairly well when it came to affective measures of student engagement, but underperformed in areas of academic engagement.

2. On the whole, faculty envisioned the First-Year Experience as a Student Affairs unit rather than an Academic Affairs one. Because of this, efforts to improve FYE were not seen as an Academic Affairs responsibility.

3. Students did not, in large numbers, report that Georgia Southern University accurately communicated academic expectations prior to enrollment. Only 49 percent indicated that the University did so to a "very high" or "high" degree. (Retrieved from http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/fye/tf_background.htm on January 3, 2011).

Three out of four interviewees participated in the faculty taskforce, and these participants described the first-year experience faculty taskforce as a singular experience. As per one participant,

The people that were on that committee; we worked so hard and met for so long. It was a type of professional experience that you can’t even measure the value of just the interchange of ideas, and the debates, and the camaraderie, and the sense of accomplishment even when we came up with goals and what ones could be achieved immediately and making arguments to the administration about this is why you need to
put money back into the first-year program. All of that was just unexpected and a real highlight I think for me.

Another participant conveyed other attributes of the first-year experience faculty taskforce, “…I have to give the faculty the credit for being really engaged, but we paid them for committee service and that doesn’t happen very much.” The first-year experience faculty taskforce benefited from strong senior administrative support; the group was charged by the provost, and the provost and the associate provost participated in some of the meetings.

Data collected via Foundations of Excellence seeded the first-year experience faculty taskforce. The first-year experience faculty taskforce web page describes the charge of the group; the provost “…charged the group with developing challenge/support initiatives, particularly academic in nature, to strengthen the First-Year Experience on campus” (Retrieved from http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/fye/facultytaskforce.htm on January 4, 2011). According to the taskforce web pages, the group met in fall 2006 and produced their recommendations on December 15, 2006. The recommendations of the taskforce cover three themes: curriculum, expectations, and intervention. There is a lot of overlap between the recommendations that appear in the Foundations of Excellence final report and the recommendations of the taskforce.

Those that did not participate in the faculty taskforce may have felt that Georgia Southern University did not close the loop with respect to Foundations of Excellence (FoE). One participant stated, “I never thought that Foundations was wasted, but I do wonder if we kind of left the people involved a little hanging.” Distinctions between the first-year experience faculty taskforce and Foundations of Excellence are murky for some participants. One interviewee credited FoE with laying the groundwork for a first-year philosophy that was finalized by the first-year faculty taskforce; he shared:
I think if were to ask faculty now ‘What is your view of first-year?’ They would have a very different view. I think we made some strides when it comes to moving it off the fringes of…that taskforce philosophy statement that we’ve done. That process began with Foundations.

Many outcomes may be attributed to both Foundations of Excellence and the first-year experience faculty taskforce. The major outcomes included creating a dedicated director of the first-year experience attached to an office of the first-year experience, redesigning the first-year experience course, developing the Global Citizens course, improving advisement, implementing Conversations with Professors and more granular mid-term grades, and limiting course withdrawals for undergraduates.

The recommendations to create a full-time director of the first-year experience and an office of the first-year appeared in the Foundations of Excellence organization dimension report, and these organizational changes occurred upon completion of the Foundations of Excellence self-study. Prior to July 2006, the first-year experience had an interim or part-time director. Often the first-year experience had been bundled with other areas such as honors and advisement. The office of the first-year experience uses an advisory board to build advocacy and engage in continuous improvement. One interviewee shared that prior to the formalization of the office, a committee of interested parties carried out the work of the first-year experience on an ad hoc basis. He explained, “Now when I meet it’s an advisory group. Before it did a lot of work; there was nobody to do it.”

The interviews yielded different perspectives on assessment. One participant associated the QEP, Foundations of Excellence, and the first-year faculty taskforce with an increased emphasis on assessment; she stated,
I think assessment is talked about all over campus now. On our syllabi we have to make sure that we stress how we are going to assess how the students are doing in class; we have to list objectives. Never before had we done that sort of thing.

Another participant mentioned the importance of frequent assessment for first-year students; he shared, “I offer more assessments in my first-year seminar. I allow students to write, revise, resubmit.” This participant also conveyed that assessments at GSU occur with frequency and variety. Another participant felt it was time to assess the effectiveness of the changes that had been made as a result of Foundations of Excellence and the faculty taskforce.

The roles and purposes dimension committee articulated the following recommendation: “Make academic advisement mandatory for all students and coordinate advising across campus” (Southern University, 2006, p. 45). An interviewee confirmed that advisement is now mandatory for all undergraduates. Additionally, the two colleges that did not have advisement centers now do. Georgia Southern University uses MAP-Works, a program developed by EBI, the administrator of the surveys that accompany Foundations of Excellence. MAP-Works is a web-based tool to help improve student retention and success by identifying risk factors and giving faculty and staff opportunities to intervene. As of 2009, the first-year experience office includes a coordinator of academic intervention, and this position uses MAP-Works as one tool to help struggling students get back on track. The office of the first-year experience also oversees advisement of undeclared students.

Prior to Foundations of Excellence, there was recognition that the first-year experience course needed improvement. According to one participant, GSU has had a first-year seminar since the mid-1980s; initially the seminar was an extended orientation course. GSU 120 became GSU 1210 under the semester system; upon conversion to the semester system the course
became a requirement. GSU 1210, a 1-hour course, was often taught by staff in academic affairs or student affairs. Some participants felt that Georgia Southern University had a first-year course, not a first-year program. Based on findings from Foundations and Excellence and the recommendations of the first-year experience faculty taskforce, the course was reinvented as FYE 1220 a 2-hour credit with 1.5 hours devoted to an academic theme and .5 hours allotted to extended orientation topics. The thematic portion of FYE 1220 must be taught by faculty; the extended orientation component may be taught by faculty or professional staff with a master’s degree. One participant mentioned that retaining the extended orientation component of the course was a bit of a struggle. The extended orientation component uses peer leaders as teaching assistants. GSU offers two compensation options to faculty that teach FYE 1210. Faculty may receive overload compensation or request that funds be transferred to their department budgets so they may be used for professional development, travel, or other needs. Changes to the first-year seminar mirror the objectives of the QEP; the course aims to create engaged learners. One participant shared that at GSU and most institutions the office of the first-year experience operates from a position of soft power; he elaborated, “I’ve got 143 faculty members, and one of them directly reports to me. I’ve got no ability to tap into…they’ve got to find intrinsic reasons to do it.” This statement reiterates the importance of faculty buy-in. GSU still struggles to recruit enough faculty to teach the number of FYE 1210 sections that are needed.

In addition to FYE 1220, the faculty taskforce recommend the development of another required first-year course called Global Citizens. The 1-hour course will replace IDS 2210, an interdisciplinary course called Turning Points and Connections. Georgia Southern University offered several pilot sections of the Global Citizens course, and the requirement will go into
effect in the 2011-12 academic year. The diversity dimension report in the Foundations of Excellence action plan made a recommendation similar to the Global Citizens course:

The University could require a course [to] directly address diversity or world cultures.

This would function in the same fashion as the "significant international content" requirement for some Bachelor of Science degrees. Most students take INTS 2130, a three hour course, to satisfy this requirement. If the University were to re-design the Area B requirements and discontinue Turning Points and Connections, a series of one-hour courses could be developed on topics of world religions, cultures, etc. to replace Turning Points and Connections. All students would choose one to meet the requirement (Georgia Southern University, 2006, p. 37).

Based on recommendations of the first-year experience faculty taskforce, another taskforce was formed to craft a course description and define learning outcomes for Global Citizens.

Inspired by James Madison University, Georgia Southern University implemented Conversations with Professors; this recommendation appears in the Foundations of Excellence action plan and the recommendations of the faculty taskforce. The program debuted in fall 2007. The Sunday before classes begin in the fall over 100 faculty devote 75 minutes to meet with 20 to 30 first-year students to share expectations and discuss the respective roles of students and faculty. All faculty participants work with a student assistant who serves as a role model for faculty/student relationships and handles logistical tasks such as taking role.

The final report of the learning dimension committee included recommendations to use mid-term grades more intentionally as an intervention tool (Georgia Southern University, 2006). The recommendations of the first-year experience faculty taskforce resulted in a total of 9 midterm grade options; previously S (Satisfactory) and U (Unsatisfactory) were the only choices.
The new options include S (Satisfactory), U (Unsatisfactory), UA (Unsatisfactory attendance), UG (Unsatisfactory grade(s)), UP (Unsatisfactory class participation), UAG (Unsatisfactory attendance and grades), UAP (Unsatisfactory attendance and participation), UGP (Unsatisfactory grades and participation), and UAGP (Unsatisfactory attendance, grades and participation). The expanded options provide an opportunity to explain the basis or bases for unsatisfactory performance.

The first-year faculty taskforce recommended limiting course withdrawals for undergraduates. Georgia Southern University implemented limited withdrawals in the 2009-10 academic year. According to the policy, students may withdraw no more than five times during their undergraduate years. Details of the policy are posted online:

http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/advisement/aa_policy.html

Several participants mentioned greater alignment between student affairs and academic affairs as an outcome of Foundations of Excellence and the first-year experience faculty taskforce. As per on interviewee,

I think what I saw come out of the Foundations was that recognition that without a real strong collaboration between the two you were not going to accomplish that quality experience for the students.

A couple participants specifically mentioned housing as a collaborator with academic affairs. One shared,

They have a whole set of programs that are not only focused on the programming that has to do with daily life, you know all those issues that students have to deal with, but also with the academic part of it and so they have academic programming built into their residence life program.
This participant also mentioned enhancements to RIGs (Residential Interest Groups) and FYRE (First-Year Residential Experience) as well as the advent of an international learning community. Foundations of Excellence yielded recommendations regarding FYRE including tracking retention of participants and developing and assessing learning outcomes. The first-year experience faculty taskforce included recommendations to expand participation in FIGs (First-Year Interest Groups). Georgia Southern University appears to have both RIGs and FIGs. One interviewee predicted that participation in these programs will increase based on grant funding received by the College of Science and Technology and upgrades to campus housing.

References to Foundations of Excellence and the first-year experience faculty taskforce still appear on the first-year experience website. The recommendations from the Foundations of Excellence action plan are made succinct in the recommendations of the first-year experience faculty taskforce. The complete recommendations of the faculty taskforce are published at [http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/fye/tf_recs.htm](http://academics.georgiasouthern.edu/fye/tf_recs.htm).

Based on this research, Georgia Southern University took a different approach to Foundations of Excellence; they made laudable strides with respect to the first-year as a result of Foundations of Excellence and the first-year faculty taskforce. Georgian Southern University pursues continuous improvement of the first-year experience via the director, the office, and the first-year advisory council.
GAINESVILLE STATE COLLEGE: STUDENT FOCUSED, LEARNING CENTERED

Gainesville State College (GSC) originally called Gainesville College formed in 1964 and began offering classes in the fall of 1966; the college achieved state college status in 2004 and started offering 4-year degrees in the 2005-06 academic year (Retrieved from http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-1440 on January 6, 2011). The main campus is located in Oakwood about six miles southwest of Gainesville, Georgia. Gainesville State College is about 10 miles away from Lake Lanier, a large, man-made lake, which attracts about 7.5 million visitors per year (Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Lanier on January 3, 2011). A senior administrator identified location as one of GSC’s assets; she said, “Our location is so strategic for students who want to go to UGA, North Georgia, Georgia Tech, and Georgia State because they can go with us, and then they can actually end up commuting to the others.” Gainesville State College opened a branch campus in Oconee County in 2003 at the site formerly occupied by Truett-McConnell College. Gainesville State College also offers some courses via the Lanier Technical College building in Winder, Georgia. Based on an increasing emphasis on 4-year degree programs, GSC represents an attractive institution for this study and serves as an interesting comparator alongside Kennesaw State University and Georgia Southern University. Gainesville State College currently offers five 4-year degrees, and they intend to offer 12 or 13 more.

At the time of the site visits, over two years had passed since GSC began the Foundations of Excellence self-study. Seven interviews were conducted in October 2009. Five interviews were conducted on the Gainesville campus and two on the Oconee campus. I made two visits to
both campuses. Interviewees included senior administrators at the vice presidential level or
higher, faculty, and leaders in both academic affairs and student development. With respect to
the GSC Foundations of Excellence taskforce, the research participants served as the liaison, the
co-liaison, a dimension committee chair, and other taskforce members. One participant
represents an outcome of Foundations of Excellence.

Gainesville State College completed the Foundations of Excellence application process in
spring 2007 and identified their liaison and co-liaison in March 2007. Gainesville State College
selected a respected, senior faculty member on the Gainesville campus to serve as liaison and
chose a student development leader from the Oconee campus to serve as co-liaison. These
selections were deliberate, and GSC made efforts to ensure adequate representation on the
taskforce from the Gainesville and Oconee campuses as well as the organizational structure. The
GSC Foundations of Excellence taskforce included over 93 faculty, staff, and administrators and
at least 12 of these including the co-liaison and one of the dimension committee chairs
represented Oconee. Although Gainesville State College is the smallest institution in this study,
they had the largest Foundations of Excellence taskforce.

Gainesville State College participated in the in 2007-08 Foundations of Excellence cohort
as a 2-year institution. One interviewee offered the following rationale for this decision:
“Because we are primarily an access institution and the majority of our students do transfer to 4-
year schools so the character of our institution, our focus on general education is more consistent
with a 2-year model.” Gainesville State College began the Foundations of Excellence self study
in fall 2007 concurrent with new expectations surrounding assessment of general education
which added tasks such as defining course objectives and metrics to many faculty workloads.
One participant characterized the general education assessment as a stressful undertaking; she
remarked, “And with the gen ed assessment we had ground to make up so there was a lot of intense pressure around that.” Interviewees believed that the timing of Foundations of Excellence was good with respect to changes such as enrollment growth and increasing emphasis on 4-year degrees, but challenging with respect to the time involved as well as the workload and the funds invested.

At least three of the individuals interviewed had been at GSC 15 years of longer, and they witnessed GSC grow from an institution serving 1,800 students to an institution serving over 8,000 students. In a five year period between fall 2004 and fall 2008 enrollment grew 42.5%. Visit http://www.gsc.edu/about/internal/opir/factbook/2008-09/Documents/Students%202008-09/FY09%20Headct_FTE_Gender_Age_RaceEth_FTPT_Nontrad.xls.pdf to view enrollment trends at GSC. The significant enrollment growth experienced by GSC would change the character of any institution. Concurrently, GSC became a multi-campus institution, became a state college, and began offering 4-year degrees. A couple participants identified Gainesville’s civic involvement and contribution to the community as institutional strengths; one participant declared, “I think we have an extraordinary involvement and interweaving with the local communities where our campuses are.” Change is constant at GSC. At the same time, GSC remains committed to the missions of access and serving northeast Georgia.

Visitors could become familiar with the layout of the Gainesville campus in one or two visits; one interviewee described the campus as manageable. Campus architecture might be described as 20th century functional. The Gainesville State College campus currently consists of 11 major buildings. The layout of the campus appears traditional, and the Student Center serves as the campus core. The campus offers attractive landscaping including maples, azaleas, lantanas, and petunias as well as green-space and wide pedestrian walkways with benches and
lampposts near building entrances. Subtle signage flanks the sidewalks and promotes upcoming campus activities. As one might expect from a commuter campus, ample parking is available on the perimeter.

The Student Center received an extensive renovation and reopened in October 2008. The Student Center includes Admissions, Financial Aid, the Registrar, the Bookstore, a ballroom, Academic Advising, Student Development, Enrollment Management, and other aspects of student life. The center also includes several dining options and a large space with tables and chairs for eating, studying, and socializing; tables include table hats that provide reminders of activities and services available on campus. During my visits, the student center was abuzz with activity. Most students observed were traditional in age and appearance – lots of jeans, t-shirts, and sweatshirts. A few students had less traditional attire such as studded belts and rope sandals. The Student Center was more active and lively than the exterior spaces even though the fall weather was mild.

Offices within the Administration Building reflect a neutral palette; offices appear professional and functional with minimal personalization. The day of my first visit to the Gainesville campus Voice over IP (VoIP) phones were being installed in the Administration Building. Pamphlets abound on both campuses and reflect the desire to provide students with information about programs and services. During one of my visits I observed a button-style pin attached to a small bulletin board outside someone’s office in the Academic II building on the Gainesville campus; the pin read ‘The First Year Matters.’ This pin represents a vestige of Foundations of Excellence; the Gardner Institute (Policy Center) often makes the pins available at launch meetings and other events.
The Oconee campus consists of four major buildings and like the Gainesville campus reflects functional, 20th century architecture. An Oconee-based interviewee stated that the Oconee campus, as the new addition to the GSC family, has red-headed stepchild syndrome; contrariwise two Gainesville-based interviewees declared that being a multi-campus institution is very much a part of the identity of GSC. On my first visit I noticed call boxes in the parking lot. Adding call boxes to enhance campus safety represented one of the short-term objectives from the Foundations of Excellence final report. The Student Resources Center on the Oconee Campus includes a coffee bar called Café:ine which includes an assortment of coffee drinks as well as sandwiches and baked goods.

A commitment to putting students first was ubiquitous among interviewees, and many placed near equal emphasis on faculty and their role in helping students succeed. At least five interviewees invoked the phrase ‘student focused, learning centered.’ Several mentioned the importance of shared governance in academic matters and described a progressive climate where innovation is supported. Faculty development resources include professional development days, learning circles, the Center for Teaching Learning and Leadership, and other resources. Learning circles focus on topics such as heart-centered leadership, teaching students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or discussing a common reading such as Teaching Unprepared Students. Many felt that buy-in particularly faculty buy-in was a critical success factor for Foundations of Excellence at GSC.

Even though GSC now offers some 4-year degrees, many students transfer to other institutions. Based on the number of students that transfer, one participant characterized GSC as ‘that stepping stone school.’ Another commented, “Still for the majority of our students, we are a 2-year school, and they will be transferring.” Resultantly, GSC recognizes transferring as one
path to student success. The vast majority of degrees awarded are associate degrees. At the same
time, GSC ranks first or second among state colleges in the University System of Georgia in
terms of retention (Gainesville State College, 2008, p. 12).

As a commuter campus Gainesville State College struggles with the challenges of creating community and connectedness without the benefit of on-campus housing. One participant stressed the importance of establishing a connection between students and the college; she shared:

We now had more data which I guess was good for Student Life and Student Affairs that they we were realizing that the more involved [students] were, and the more connected they felt then the more likely they were going to be successful too.

The number of students that transfer represents another obstacle to creating a connection between students and GSC; the first-year experience becomes even more critical when students may transfer at any time. Another participant identified connectedness as a constructive way of framing student success that still addresses the broader issues of retention, progression, and graduation; she stated:

How do you define success? But if you start looking at the first-year experience: what gets students here, helps them connect, makes them feel welcome, and helps them continue successfully then that’s a way of framing the question in an important way that you can deal with, that’s crucial, that touches on all those broader issues especially for a 2-year school where your students could be transferring at any time.

This statement echoes Tinto’s (1993) principles of retention. Gainesville’s identity as a transfer school is reflected in the spring 2010 edition of Anchors Away, the Gainesville State College alumni newsletter, which refers to GSC as ‘your first alma mater.’
Strong female leadership represents another distinctive attribute of GSC. As of early 2010, all senior administrative positions were filled by women: the President, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, and the Executive Dean of the Oconee campus. Within this research, Gainesville State College is the only institution in which all interviewees were women. The interviewing strategy for this research included the recommendations of the Gardner Institute as well as the names that came up repeatedly during the data collection process, and in the case of GSC, all the individuals that fit these criteria were women.

Two interviewees used the word, stretched, to characterize GSC; all interviewees characterized the past and present as lean times. Gainesville State College feels fiscally stretched due to resource constraints brought on by budget cuts and state appropriations that have not always kept pace with enrollment growth, and physically strained based on multiple years of double-digit enrollment growth that have resulted in larger teaching loads, more part-time faculty, larger class sizes, and increasing demands on the physical plant. According to one interviewee, “Formula funding had not caught up so we were lean on human resources, lean on fiscal resources, and lean on space resources. It’s always the same.” The conditions of being stretched and strained have become a part of the culture and identity of GSC. Because of the strains on the identity of the institution, one interviewee expressed the sentiment that “We don’t know who we are but we are wonderful.” A theme that emerged from the interviews was the desire to embrace an emerging identity and preserve the ‘student focused, learning centered’ culture valued pervasively by members of the GSC community. A senior administrator expressed a commitment to nurture ‘a small college feel’ in a climate of enrollment growth. Confidence in
the administration and deeply shared values mitigate the strains on identity currently experienced by GSC.

As a result of being stretched and strained, GSC has hired more part-time faculty, and according to one participant 20% of current faculty have been hired since the self-study. The Foundations of Excellence faculty/staff survey showed that 58.1% of faculty/staff had been at GSC five years or less during the survey administration period, and 27.6% of faculty and staff respondents were part-time employees (Gainesville State College, 2007a, p. 17-18). One interviewee indicated that realizing that the institution was heavy with junior faculty and administrators was a bit of an epiphany. Hiring represents one of the ways GSC sustains its culture. Interviewees spoke of mentoring and orientation programs that facilitate socialization into the GSC community.

Why Foundations of Excellence?

Interviewees identified myriad reasons GSC participated in Foundations of Excellence. All interviewees who participated in the self-study identified the advocacy of a senior administrator who participated in Foundations of Excellence at another institution as a major factor in generating support to undertake Foundations of Excellence at GSC. Many interviewees were familiar with John Gardner and the Policy Center on the First Year of College now the John Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. A couple interviewees indentified John Gardner as a professional colleague prior to undertaking Foundations of Excellence at GSC. Several senior administrators continue to have ties to the Institute. For instance, GSC President Martha T. Nesbitt currently serves on the Board of Directors for the John Gardner Institute, and former Associate Vice President Mary Lou Frank consults with the Institute as a member of the advisory support team for 4-year institutions.
Based on the increasing emphasis placed on 4-year degrees at GSC, several interviewees expressed a need to retain focus on first-year students and their success. As per one participant:

Well, we did need to focus on that first year experience. I mean we hadn’t done it before, and we’ve moved from a 2-year school to a 4-year school even though we don’t have lots of 4-year programs, but we are still an open access institution that still is a priority so I personally thought it was a great idea.

Another stated:

I think that’s one of the questions we grapple with every day and that part of it is keeping at the forefront that students are our focus, and I think that’s one of the drivers behind our participation in the Foundations of Excellence process too was being aware of sort of the strains on our identity as an institution and wanting to really say students, their success, their first year that’s essential, and we really need to look at what we are doing that’s right and what’s not helping us.

To a certain extent, GSC’s focus on the first-year is inherent; as of 2009 GSC has the second largest number of freshmen in the University System of Georgia (Retrieved from http://www.usg.edu/research/students/enroll/10yr/rpt00-09.pdf on January 3, 2011).

At least four interviewees expressed the idea that Foundations of Excellence was not only an opportunity to focus on students, but also an opportunity to take a more focused and comprehensive approach to the first-year. One participant shared:

I felt like we had done a lot of work sort of piecemeal. We had piloted some learning communities; we had looked at different ways of configuring our orientation class. We had had groups work on advising, but we had not looked at the first-year experience comprehensively.
A senior administrator characterized Foundations of Excellence as an opportunity to be more intentional. She expressed the following hoped for outcome of participating in the self-study: “I did want us to be more intentional and more thoughtful across campus.” Others expressed a need to pause, a need to evaluate, and a need to ask questions about institutional fit based on enrollment growth and other changes at GSC.

Three interviewees mentioned the upcoming Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) reaffirmation and the Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) as motivations for participation with the idea that some of the data from Foundations of Excellence could be funneled into the QEP or other aspects of reaffirmation. Based on documents posted to the QEP section of the GSC website, it appears that the theme of student success and data from Foundations of Excellence will serve as drivers for the QEP during the next reaffirmation in 2013. Some interviewees also contrasted Foundations of Excellence with reaffirmation of accreditation. One interviewee said “It’s totally different from that kind of self-study. This is very functional, a functional approach to the first-year experience.” Another participant declared, “It’s not about proving to some outside entity that you are doing a, b, c, d.”

Theoretical Framework: Institutional Theory

According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), isomorphic or structural change occurs by three mechanisms: coercive, mimetic, and/or normative. These mechanisms are not necessarily mutually exclusive. According to the authors, each of the three has its own precedents. Coercive pressures emanate from external sources such as parent organizations or even cultural expectations; mimetic pressures materialize from uncertainty, and normative pressures emerge from professionalization i.e. the idea that the formal education of professionals tends to impart similar values and biases, and the influence of the profession is sustained via professional
organizations and other means. In the case of GSC the decision to participate in Foundations of Excellence, set objectives, and pursue them seems to be based primarily on mimetic and coercive mechanisms. Mimetic pressures because of the uncertainties brought on by being stretched and strained as well as the uncertainty surrounding institutional identity. Coercive pressures because of an emergent need to look like other 4-year intuitions and gain legitimacy as a 4-year institution.

Normative pressures did play a role in establishing the validity of the Foundations process. According to one participant, “Recognizing that it was a major investment of funds and the people who had experienced it or knew of it through conferences or other campuses could also speak to the validity of the process.” When I asked a GSC staff member to tell me a bit about GSC, he responded, “They want to be Kennesaw.” Others may heartily disagree with this assertion, but GSC certainly demonstrates an aspirational culture based on double-digit enrollment growth, becoming a state college, becoming a multi-campus institution, and increasing the number of 4-year degrees offered.

A number of interviewees mentioned Kennesaw State University as being influential in GSC’s decision to participate in Foundations of Excellence. A GSC administrator participated in Foundations of Excellence when she was at Kennesaw State University, and based on feedback from interviewees, this individual was influential in the decision to pursue Foundations of Excellence at GSC. One participant stated, “Knowing that [she] had been involved in the pilot cohort at Kennesaw was important to me….” Five interviewees mentioned Kennesaw State University as a role model or influence; for instance, one interviewee mentioned that “Kennesaw is a model for learning communities and that’s been proven to help with student success.” One participant deviated from the norms expressed by others, she said “…it wasn’t that I realized say
for example, that Kennesaw had done the process two or three years before Gainesville State College was going down the road.”

How: “You have to get faculty buy-in.”

All taskforce participants identified buy-in as a critical success factor. One participant said, “I would say that a self-study is only as good as the buy-in you have from the participants.” During the application phase, GSC conducted a vote of faculty and staff to gage support for Foundations of Excellence, and 70% responded in the affirmative. Most contributors characterized the vote as meaningful and democratic; one participant regarded the vote as more of a gesture. The outcome of the vote reflected a high-level of support for Foundations of Excellence. At the same time, participants characterized buy-in as an ongoing process.

Champions represented an important aspect of building and sustaining buy-in for Foundations of Excellence, and GSC benefitted from a lengthy roster of champions. The liaisons, most dimension committee chairs, and other task force members were recognized as champions by multiple participants. Senior administrators were champions as well. The change literature cites senior administrative support as an essential aspect of an effective change process (Eckel, Hill, Green, & Mallon, 1999; Kezar, 2001). At GSC, the Foundations of Excellence process benefitted from unwavering support from senior administrators including President Martha T. Nesbitt. One participant shared the following statement about GSC leadership:

I think the commitment is there in our administration. I think they are very well aware of the strains on faculty, of the workload, of ways to offer support and show appreciation and that goes a long way towards getting people to buy-in, to validate these efforts for an affirmation of the importance of shared governance and broad buy-in to the things that we do and who we are as an institution.
Respected faculty members and other leaders were advocates for Foundations of Excellence. According to a senior administrator, an advocate declared, “We could do this on our own, but it would take us two to three years. They’ve already got the structure; they’ve got the surveys done; we can plug into that.” According to another participant, Student Life professionals stood up and said “My programs are going to be the ones under the microscope, it’s going to be about orientation, and advising, and registration, and student life, and I want this.” These rousing speeches helped garner and extend support for Foundations of Excellence.

According to one interviewee, there were anti-champions too. A faculty member begrudgingly characterized the most challenging aspect of Foundations of Excellence as, “Dealing with complainers. Not students to a degree. The faculty. It’s not the staff; it’s the faculty. The faculty would grumble because I said that.” One taskforce member conveyed that the liaisons had some tough times; she shared, “I’m just being pretty candid; it was tough; it was tough; it was hard.”

Three interviewees mentioned an internal reputation for creating reports that sit on the shelf as one of the challenges to getting buy-in for Foundations of Excellence from faculty and staff; this sentiment was not echoed by senior administrators. Several interviewees spoke of the challenges of reconciling the distance between the two campuses while engaged in the self-study, but they indicated that these are challenges they face as an institution, and bridging this distance of about 42 miles is part of their culture. Other obstacles to buy-in included increased workloads and the general education assessment.

With respect to Foundations of Excellence, GSC adopted the strategy of communicating broadly and frequently. Email and other announcements were sent to all faculty and staff prior to the end of spring semester 2007; those interested in serving on a committee were asked to
contact one of the liaisons. In July, the liaisons and other key stakeholders attended the launch meeting in Asheville, North Carolina. Gainesville State College also promoted Foundations of Excellence during the summer and again at the annual breakfast prior to the beginning of fall semester. These communication strategies represented another aspect of GSC’s efforts to achieve buy-in for the process.

All case institutions struggled with finding effective ways to include students in the process. Those that included students in the dimension committees found that their participation was often sporadic at best. At GSC, the primary source of student representation was the student survey that accompanies Foundations of Excellence, and GSC focused their efforts on getting the best possible response rates from students as well as faculty and staff. As a commuter campus, Gainesville identified gas cards as an incentive that would appeal to their students. Gainesville State College held multiple random drawings to encourage participation throughout the survey completion window. The strategy helped; the response rate for the student survey was ~22%: 1,642 out of 7,474 students based on enrollment levels during the administration of the Foundations of Excellence student survey.

Gainesville also wanted to provide an incentive to faculty and staff, and they borrowed a strategy from another institution that participated in Foundations of Excellence (FoE). Based on reports received from the FoE survey administrator, Educational Benchmarking, Inc., the liaisons on both campuses provided a PayDay candy bar and a handwritten note to survey respondents with the sentiment that ‘We can’t pay you more, but here’s a little extra for your paycheck.’ Both liaisons mentioned that this strategy was both a blessing and curse. It seemed to create some enthusiasm, but at least one of the liaisons found that the candy bar notes became a bit too time
consuming, and both recalled that there was a bit of candy bar backlash when one respondent received a PayDay that was broken.

Gainesville State College paid $35,000 to participate in the Foundations of Excellence process; they elected to make two payments over a two-year period. The founding institutions received sponsorship from the Lumina Foundation. Due to being stretched and strained, GSC would have liked to receive financial assistance. At the same time, GSC recognized that investing limited resources would make buy-in even more powerful. One participant declared, “I think it’s a harder sell when you have to pay for it yourself so that broad buy-in is that much more important which in the end is going to make the process that much more successful.”

Another stressed the added commitment that comes from making a sacrifice; she asserted:

When you sacrifice something I think, even psychologically, there’s a sense, I must really want this because I have to really sacrifice to do it. At the same time, when there are so many institutions now that can’t afford much, I think grants would be helpful, but I think even if you keep some percentage that an institution has to commit to I think that that leads to potentially deeper change.

One participant considered the total cost perspective, she said:

If you are talking about the perspective though of participation just in general, it could be a pretty costly thing. If I used my example, I spent a ton of time on this - the nights and weekends kind of stuff because nothing else went off my plate or anybody else’s.

All believed Foundations of Excellence was worth the time and money invested. The interviewees expressed nearly universal positive feedback for Foundations of Excellence and the Policy Center. The liaisons both found the feedback from John Gardner, who served as the Policy Center liaison for GSC timely and useful. Negatives were extremely few. One interview
mentioned a few struggles with FoEtec, the web-based application that facilitates data collection and reporting. Interviewees also voiced the idea that Foundations of Excellence is for all institutions especially institutions with a lot of first-year students, those that are open to the process, those that have the support of their senior administration, and those with a collegial culture. A senior administrator conveyed the idea that the Foundations of Excellence process could be an effective tool for changing the culture of an institution. All interviewees thought that getting broad buy-in and disseminating information might be more challenging for very large universities.

The concept of lenses represented a pervasive theme from the interviews. A senior administrator characterized the Foundations of Excellence self-study as a way to view the institution with fresh eyes:

This is an opportunity for you to look at yourself and your college in ways you haven’t before and in ways that you wish you could when you first started your work on a college campus. Because when you first started you said ‘What can this be?’ and then pretty soon you became of the way things were, not the way they could be, and you fell into this same realm of limitations that we all do whenever we work at a place for awhile. We don’t see the potential, but it lets you go back to that and kind of revision who you are, who the institution is, and what you can be if you want to be your best.

One participant described the Foundations of Excellence self-study as a means to “get out of your bubble” and gain greater understanding through exposure to the experiences and perspectives of others, and another described Foundations of Excellence as another way of framing into the first-year experience, she said “I think this process and having the gen ed assessment going on were two ways of looking at some of the same issues.” Foundations of
Excellence requires faculty and staff to get out of their comfort zones and encounter new things such as FoEtec, the web-based application that serves as a repository for evidence and reports. One participant recognized parallels between the struggles of taskforce members and the first-year student experience. She shared how Foundations of Excellence simulates the first-year student experience:

"Just getting people to think through the lens of ‘What is it like to be a first year student?’ Because we don’t think about that often. When people were saying ‘I can’t get this survey to work,’ imagine how your students are feeling about the syllabus right now so that was one of the ways. We are not the only ones that are muddling through right now so let’s feel a little bit more compassionate with these people who are coming from a very structured ‘Mom-wakes you-up, Mom-does-your-laundry ‘to you are on your own."

Gainesville State College defined a first-year student as any degree-seeking student with less than 30 credit hours, and this definition provided taskforce members with a new way of thinking about first-year students. One participant shared,

"We defined it as before their 30 hours are up. We can have students who have been here for four years and still don’t have 30 hours yet. They are still part of that cohort we were looking at so that let us hone in a little bit I think."

Another participant recognized the power of framing change in terms of student success; she said:

"If you can take an issue and frame it in terms of student success you can get people’s minds open to change and to altering their practices in a way that you can’t if you say it’s about you performing better, and you really are performing better but you are framing in terms of the student success, and I think that that helps us in a lot of our activities."
This statement helps capture the power of Foundations of Excellence. Focusing on students and their success helps dissolve barriers and facilitate collaboration.

Outcomes: Expected and Unexpected

Gainesville State College developed action items across five themes: college culture and cohesiveness, faculty recruitment and development, student learning, student development/services, and civic & academic engagement. These were distilled into short-term and long-term goals. Short-term goals included creating a first-year director and first-year experience council, improving academic advising, phasing in GSCE (Gainesville State College Experience) 1101 as a requirement for all students, developing a website devoted to best practices in teaching and learning, and assessing the Early Alert Program.

Long-term goals included faculty and staff compensation, developing a first-year experience website, and assessing DFW courses i.e. the introductory courses from which students frequently withdraw or receive a grade of D or F. At GSC, DFW courses include introductory courses in Math, English, Psychology, and Political Science. With respect to faculty and staff compensation; a senior administrator voiced the following commitment:

One of the long term goals was faculty/staff hiring compensation, and it is a very legitimate concern. And obviously these economic times have slowed that down or they’ve practically stopped it, but it is the first thing on our agenda when we come back.

Institutions in the University System of Georgia continue to experience lean fiscal times; some have characterized these conditions as the new normal.

Gainesville State College accomplished many of the objectives they identified in their action plan. First and foremost they hired a Director of Student Academic Success. Several administrators put together grant proposals to the state system to create the director position.
Gainesville State College did not receive funding based on their first attempt, but they tried again and succeeded. According to one participant, the position was initially posted as a blended role of Director of the Advising Center and Director of the First-Year, but was reposted as Director of Student Academic Success to encompass student success comprehensively. Participants believed that senior administrators really followed through on the recommendations from the action plan. One participant shared:

I think the actual making the commitment to hire [the Director of Student Academic Success] to coordinate First-year Experience and have someone focused on academic success that was one of the primary recommendations of the study and to have the institution make that investment in the current budgetary climate is huge and so now we need some time to implement some of the ideas and the plans that she has, but I think that speaks volumes.

Gainesville State College completed the final report in June of 2008. The Student Academic Success director position was filled in May 2009. Gainesville State College also hired a Director of the Advising Center at about the same time. Additionally, GSC formed a First-Year Advisory Council to continue the work of the Foundations of Excellence taskforce.

Multiple participants hoped that making the GSCE 1101 course mandatory would be a short-term outcome of Foundations of Excellence. The barriers to full participation are space and having enough faculty to offer the number of sections that would be needed; currently faculty teaching loads are also an obstacle. For example, the School of Humanities may not feel they can spare faculty to teach GSCE if they are already struggling to offer the number of English 1101 courses that are needed to meet demand. Several interviewees described a progressive plan that they hoped would lead to GSCE 1101 for all students in the longer term. Currently, some
students complete the computer-adapted college placement test (COMPASS) as part of the admissions process. Those that require remediation in one or more areas take learning support courses before moving on to other college courses. Students with three or more learning support requirements must take the GSCE 1101 course. The GSCE course is taught predominantly by learning support and student life personnel. Course content focuses on study skills and transition to college. Participants described a step-wise strategy to increase participation. First GSCE 1101 would be required for students with two learning support requirements, then one learning support requirement, and then full participation. Currently Learning Support is the home of the GSCE 1101 course, but there is some discussion about the future home of the course if all students participate. Gainesville State College continues to explore learning communities or learning clusters. In fall 2010, GSC offered a learning cluster called Wild Culture: an ecological learning community. Students that participate in the cluster will took special sections of English 1101, Art Appreciation 1101, and Environmental Studies 2030. The courses all fulfilled core requirements.

Interviewees lauded the data-driven nature of the Foundations of Excellence (FoE) process. Many stated that Foundations of Excellence helped facilitate a data and assessment driven approach to making decisions about the first year. In the words of one participant, “Instead of this one person has an idea, and then we run with it. Why? Why would we do that? Here’s the data to support why this might be good, and that’s what it got us to do.” Several stated that FoE helped confirm institutional strengths with respect to the first year and revealed opportunities for improvement. Interviewees identified Student Orientation, Advisement, and Registration (SOAR) and Supplemental Instruction as strengths. Academic advising and the Early Alert Program were among the improvement opportunities. Data from the study survey demonstrated the need to improve academic advising. The student survey contains five questions
that pertain to advising; the first question asks if advisors have explained the requirements for specific degree programs and majors, 47.2% of students responded moderately, slightly, or not at all (Gainesville State College, 2007b, p. 3). The faculty/staff surveys indicated that the Early Alert Program needed improvement. According to the faculty/staff survey, 72.5% of faculty felt that the Early Alert Program at GSC was moderately effective, slightly effective or not effective (Gainesville State College, 2007a, p. 21). Foundations of Excellence also created recognition that some programs had not been assessed. Foundations of Excellence created opportunities to determine if, for example, the GSCE 1101 course was accomplishing its objectives.

Gainesville State College has accomplished all of their short-term objectives with the exception of developing a website devoted to best practices in teaching and learning. I could not locate an explicit definition of student success or first-year philosophy per se, but GSC created a first-year experience web page which attributes the first-year experience at GSC to Foundations of Excellence, research, practice, and data; the page includes themes, objectives, and goals. Visit http://www.gsc.edu/academics/acadenrich/sas/Pages/default.aspx to learn more about the first-year experience at GSC. Gainesville State College has already undertaken assessment efforts with respect to both the Early Alert Program and the DFW courses.

Gainesville State College’s Foundations of Excellence objectives also included the adoption of a symbol to bring recognition to the first-year experience. The image of a tree drawn by the daughter of taskforce member became that symbol. Interviewees expressed mixed opinions about the recognition of the tree as a symbol of the first year. Some felt that the opportunity to unveil the tree as a symbol was missed. Highlights from the final report were shared at the annual fall breakfast on a glossy handout that featured the image of the tree on the
front and a high-level summary of Foundations of Excellence recommendations on the back, but the opportunity to present and explain the symbol was missed.

The phase ‘student focused, learning centered’ seems to have garnered more traction thus far than the symbol of the first-year experience; the phrase is attributed to Gainesville State College’s president. Several interviewees articulated the sentiment that they hoped the tree would become more widely recognized over time; one interviewee characterized the symbol as hovering. Others felt that maybe GSC didn’t need another symbol since they already have a mascot, Laker T. Goose. The image of the tree includes the phrase “Growing Responsible Learners and Engaged Global Citizens.” This is also the title of the GSC action plan that represents the culmination of Foundations of Excellence.

Several interviewees characterized committee work as a very beneficial aspect of Foundations of Excellence. One interviewee described Foundations of Excellence as a leadership development opportunity for GSC newcomers and junior colleagues. Gainesville State College clearly focuses on students and values faculty; at the same time, these foci do not seem to have resulted in culture like the professional bureaucracy suggested by Mintzberg (1979) instead GSC reflects many characteristics of the collegial institution depicted by Birnbaum (1988). According to one interviewee, individuals of all ranks and tenures accepted junior colleagues in leadership roles.

Four participants expressed the idea that Foundations of Excellence made GSC more intentional about the first-year experience. One interview described Foundations of Excellence as an opportunity to go from “pockets of good things to a cohesive, collaborative approach.” Another stated, “I think this caused us to be intentional in seeing the value in collaboration and
seeing how fundamental collaboration across all segments of the institution is to student success.”

One of the unexpected outcomes for some Foundations of Excellence participants was the discovery of some of the innovations being tried on the Oconee campus. One interviewee stated, “We actually discovered that our Oconee campus in some cases had practices that were more responsive, that were more visionary for handling a particular situation, but it was not uniform across the institution.” Foundations of Excellence provided an opportunity to evaluate innovative practices that might be implemented on a broader scale. Additionally, “People found out there was much more going on on campus than they thought in terms of enhancing the first-year experience.” Faculty/staff and student survey disparities represented another unexpected outcome. For example 96.6% of faculty responded high or very high regarding communicating academic expectations to new students (Gainesville State College, 2007a, p. 11), and 76.2% of students responded high or very high to the comparable question on the student survey (Gainesville State College, 2007b, p. 9). As per one interviewee, “Some of it I think was discrepancy between what students thought and what faculty thought that you just scratch your head and go ‘Wow. OK’.”

Success in the first year of college includes both academic and social aspects (Tinto, 1993). One interviewee mentioned that Foundations of Excellence and the qualities of being stretched and strained made evident the need to be intentional about collaborations between academic affairs and Student Life. Interviewees stated that shared values strengthen ties between academic affairs and Student Life at GSC. Interviewees characterized the Director of Student Academic Success as a means to ensure alignment among all elements of the first-year experience.
None of the participants had the expectation that Foundations of Excellence would transform GSC. Participants characterized Foundations of Excellence as a work in progress and a long-term process. One interviewee said that Foundations of Excellence “helps you prepare yourself to take the next development step in the maturity of an institution.” Another stated, I think you also need to be aware that some of the ultimate benefits are out there; they are down the line. You have to be aware, like for us if we do this thing called first-year right, if we do that right, we are talking about changing a lot of things so we may not start seeing a really good first-year experiences for a while now, but you start with what you can start with and you keep working on it instead of throwing your hands up. It is a journey. Keeping it kind of on people’s radar however you can.

Several interviews mentioned that they hoped that the Director of Student Academic Success would bring campus-wide recognition to student success initiatives at GSC and a reputation for quality. One participant stated, “What I would wish is 10 years from now we are talking about first-year experience and there is going to be an immediate identification.” This participant also stated that Foundations of Excellence “created a mindset that I don’t think existed prior to going through that process.” She elaborated, “You can’t really place a value on my heightened awareness nor that of 80, 100, 120 other people that are influencing what happens around here.”

Conversations about Foundations of Excellence may no longer be a regular occurrence at GSC, but Foundations of Excellence most definitely lives on via the Director of Student Academic Success and the First-Year Advisory Council. Foundations of Excellence also lives on via strategic planning and the QEP that will accompany the 2013 reaffirmation. In all these ways Foundations of Excellence has left a lasting imprint on GSC.
CHAPTER 7
CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

The University System of Georgia (USG) includes 35 public postsecondary institutions: 4 research universities, 2 regional universities, 13 state universities, 8 state colleges, and 8 2-year colleges. The three institutions included in this research represent different classifications within the USG. Kennesaw State University is a state university; Georgia Southern University is a regional university, and Gainesville State College is a state college. Since 1993 the state of Georgia has had a merit-based, lottery-funded scholarship program called HOPE (Helping Outstanding Students Educationally) (Retrieved from http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-1483 on November 23, 2010). HOPE contributed to increases in college-going rates in the state and has likely had an effect on enrollment growth at the three institutions. College-going rates in Georgia mirror national trends; for example, the college-going rate for Georgia 9th graders by age 19 was 31.6% in 2002 and 38.1% in 2006 (Retrieved from http://www.higheredinfo.org/policyquestions/doc.php?id=3 on November 23, 2010). The institutions share the common external context provided by of state of Georgia and the USG.

The institutions completed the Foundations of Excellence in 2-year intervals. Kennesaw State University participated as a founding institution in 2003-04; Georgia Southern University participated in 2005-06 and Gainesville State College in 2007-08. Participants from each of the institutions expressed the idea that the timing of the Foundations of Excellence self-study was a good fit for the institution. Kennesaw State University recalled being in the right place at the right time, Georgia Southern University described the timing as a perfect storm, and Gainesville
State College mentioned a need to focus on the first-year experience and keep students at the forefront in a climate of institutional changes. In the early stages of this study, I was concerned that Foundations of Excellence might have disappeared from institutional memories especially at Kennesaw State University since they participated seven years ago. Instead I found that Foundations of Excellence made a lasting impression in every case, and all interviewees had much to say about the experience. Recency of participation did not seem to make much difference in terms of recall, but recency of participation did affect progress on action plans. Although all institutions expressed current and emerging objectives with respect to the first-year experience, Kennesaw State University and Georgia Southern University completed most of their Foundations of Excellence-related action items by the time interviews were conducted in fall 2009. Gainesville State College still had some Foundations of Excellence-related objectives on their to-do list; phasing in a first-year seminar requirement for all first-year students is the most significant remaining objective.

The three institutions included in this research all demonstrated some degree of receptivity to the process. Institutions that were not as receptive to the process would likely have different outcomes. For Kennesaw State University, Foundations of Excellence (FoE) represented a natural progression; they participated in the Institutions of Excellence project, and they have had a first-year seminar for almost 30 years. Georgia Southern University has also had a first-year seminar for almost 30 years, and dissatisfaction with the first-year seminar helped increase receptivity to participating in FoE. At Gainesville State College, the desire to focus on first-year students ensured receptivity to participating in the process. Gainesville State College also conducted a vote to provide evidence of campus-wide buy-in. All three institutions struggled with buy-in especially faculty buy-in. Multiple participants from each institution characterized
their faculty as overworked, and being overworked represented one of the obstacles to faculty participation and buy-in. Participants from all institutions also mentioned that some faculty still view the first year as fluff, and this perspective presented another obstacle to building buy-in. A senior administrator at Gainesville State College shared her belief that the Foundations of Excellence process could be used to change the culture of the institution as long as the institution had some champions to guide the process. The receptivity of three institutions included in this study had a positive affect on their experiences.

The institutions also demonstrated tenacity. On their first attempt, first-year advocates at Kennesaw State University did not have adequate buy-in to implement a first-year seminar requirement; after spending a year building buy-in, the first-year experience requirement passed through the Policies and Curriculum Committee with ease. Gainesville State College did not receive funding to create the Director of Student Academic Success on their first attempt, but they tried again a year later and succeeded. Georgia Southern University demonstrated tenacity via the creation of the first-year experience faculty taskforce; they realized that Foundations of Excellence self-study was only the beginning of the work that needed to be done. Tenacity is a virtue with respect to the first-year experience.

John Gardner and his colleagues describe Foundations of Excellence (FoE) as an aspirational model; *Good to Great* is a model of excellence. Foundations of Excellence and *Good to Great* demonstrate some similarities. *Good to Great* includes the concept of Level 5 leadership; the origin story of the first-year experience demonstrates level 5 leadership. Based on the findings of this study, leadership in the form of senior administrative support was critical to the success of the FoE self-study. Foundations of Excellence creates a hedgehog concept by providing an opportunity to focus on the first-year experience, and information technology
facilitates the FoE process. Based on Kennesaw State University’s results, it is possible to complete the process successfully without FoEtec, but interviewees at Kennesaw State University believed that FoEtec would have made the process easier. The data-driven nature of Foundations of Excellence provided an opportunity to confront the facts, and the emphasis on being intentional results in deliberate and disciplined action. Foundations of Excellence could be described as *Good to Great* for the first year of college.

The institution represents the target of change for Foundations of Excellence. Although some participants mentioned retention as an institutional and university system priority, other participants deliberately created distance between retention and student success. As per one participant at Gainesville State College,

Retention is about the institution; it’s not about the students. If you want to talk about student success, you want to talk about persistence, you want to talk about goal attainment, graduation, whatever; we’ll talk about that because that is about the student.

Foundations of Excellence aspires to more than improved retention statistics. Foundations of Excellence is a comprehensive, data-driven, self-study which yields an institution-specific action plan that may lead to substantive enhancement of the first-year experience. According to John Gardner, “The data tells you what you need to do” (J. N. Gardner, personal communication, September 1, 2009). Kennesaw State University and Gainesville State College developed strategic action plans to match their circumstances and objectives. Georgia Southern University formed the first-year experience faculty taskforce, and this group crafted recommendations for the senior administration.

*Reframing Organizations* by Bolman and Deal (2003) provides a useful way to categorize the changes that occurred at each of the institutions. Kezar’s empirically-derived change
principles, the evidence framework proposed by the American Council on Education, or the nine Foundational Dimensions may have been viable alternatives, Bolman and Deal’s frames were selected because Bolman and Deal explicitly refer to institutional theory, the theoretical framework for this research. The Bolman and Deal model offers four frames: structural, human resource, political, and symbolic; Bolman and Deal reference institutional theory within the symbolic frame. These frames provide a means to organize and report the findings of this research.

The Structural Frame

The structural frame includes elements such as the organizational model and hierarchy as well as organizational controls. All case institutions made structural changes related to participating in Foundations of Excellence, and some interviewees identified structural changes as the most significant outcomes of participation. The formation of University College at Kennesaw State University represents the most dramatic organizational change at the three institutions. The creation of University College placed the first-year experience and related programs on an equal footing with the Colleges of Education, Business, Arts, Health and Human Services, etc. Georgia Southern University established the Office of the First-Year Experience and recruited its first full-time director, and Gainesville State College created the Director of Student Academic Success. According to Bolman and Deal (2003), “Organizations increase efficiency and enhance performance through specialization and a clear division of labor” (p. 45). The creation of an organizational home and/or a position to coordinate the first-year experience provides an opportunity to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the first-year. All three institutions embraced this tenet and made this commitment; each used Foundations of Excellence as an opportunity to enhance their first-year organizational structure.
According to Bolman and Deal (2003), policies “…help ensure predictability and uniformity” (p. 51). Bolman and Deal characterize policy as a type of vertical coordination within the organizational structure. Two institutions implemented policy changes. Kennesaw State University achieved the first-year experience requirement. Georgia Southern University accomplished the Global Citizens course requirement, more granular mid-term grades, and limited individual course withdrawals for undergraduates.

Senior administrative support was a critical success factor especially at Kennesaw State University and Gainesville State College. At both of these institutions, the president herself played a key role in building buy-in for Foundations of Excellence. At these institutions, presidential support facilitated buy-in at other levels. Senior administrative support for Foundations of Excellence did not seem to be as strong at Georgia Southern University; the institution transitioned from Foundations of Excellence to the first-year faculty taskforce. The first-year faculty taskforce was explicitly supported by senior administrators and had buy-in from faculty by design.

All three institutions featured in this research wanted students to participate in the Foundations of Excellence taskforce; Kennesaw State University seemed to be the most successful in this endeavor. Interestingly, the student that participated in Kennesaw State University’s taskforce is now an adjunct professor. At Georgia Southern University and Gainesville State College, the student survey provided the most meaningful source of student input.

Participants revealed that Foundations of Excellence created awareness of strengths and weaknesses with respect to the first-year experience and also demonstrated the need for greater alignment and cohesiveness. Participants at all institutions used words such as puzzle, piecemeal,
and patch as ways to characterize the first-year experience at their institutions prior to FoE. A senior administrator at KSU stated, “We really took what [John Gardner] said I think seriously; particularly when he started talking about how to make, or the need to make what we were doing 1) more cohesive and 2) more visible academically.” According to John Gardner, “Students experience college as a whole, not as discrete units” (J.N. Gardner, personal communication, September 1, 2009). Hunter (2006) agrees with the necessity of being intentional about all aspects of the first-year experience; she wrote, “Student success requires intentional efforts by those of us responsible for the academy” (p. 4). Foundations of Excellence inspired participants to reduce ambiguities and be more intentional about the first-year experience. Via the ACE project on leadership and transformation, Eckel, Hill, Green, and Mallon (1999) identified being intentional as one of the attributes of successful change leaders.

According to Bolman and Deal (2003), “Structure has to be built around an organization’s procedure for transforming raw materials into finished products” (p. 60). Teaching is the core process in higher education. Participants at all three institutions mentioned a desire to embrace their aspirations and retain the core values of the institution especially the centrality of teaching. For instance a faculty member at Gainesville State College revealed a desire to sustain the practice of serving individual students,

I thought we shouldn’t lose that attention that we are giving the students, and we didn’t want them to just fall by the wayside or get lost in the shuffle and fail out their first semester or first year, and go ‘Well college is tough.’

A faculty member a Georgia Southern University made the following statement about faculty recruitment, “Research is important, but we want to feel that they want to teach as well.” She elaborated, “I think it’s a big effort among faculty here to get to know their students. We work
hard to keep the classes as small as we can.” An academic administrator at Kennesaw State University remarked,

I think the university as a whole has really struggled to figure out what it’s role is within the USG because it has had such a short but varied history going from junior college to 4-year college to state college to university there’s this constant sense of exactly who are we, and yet through it all I do truly believe that we have maintained a centrality to teaching.

According to Kezar (2001), retaining core characteristics helps institutional change endeavors succeed. Identifying strengths is part of the Foundations of Excellence process, and this step helps participants document their core values and the other characteristics that they want to recognize and retain.

First-Year Organizational Structures

The five-category typology employed by Swing and Alexander-Hamilton (2010) will be used to classify the first-year organizational structures at the three institutions; Chapter 2 included a description of the typology. Based on a survey conducted by Swing and Alexander-Hamilton, the university college model occurs most frequently. After participating in Foundations of Excellence, all three institutions have a single unit first-year organizational structure. University College at Kennesaw State University exemplifies a comprehensive single unit/administrative structure; as per Swing and Alexander-Hamilton a comprehensive unit appears on the campus organization chart and has both a senior leader and a recurring operating budget. The Office of the First-Year Experience at Georgia Southern University and the Director of Student Academic Success at Gainesville State College also fit into the single unit/administrative structure category. They have some but not all of the characteristics of a
comprehensive unit. With respect to the organization chart, the First-Year Experience at Georgia Southern University and Student Academic Success at Gainesville State College are roughly analogous to academic departments. Student Academic Success at GSC is currently a single position department. Participants from each of the three institutions recognized the importance of organizational structure and reporting relationships. The leaders of the first-year experience at all three institutions report to academic affairs; first-year leaders at both Georgia Southern University and Gainesville State College explicitly conveyed their conviction that reporting to academic affairs was advantageous for their office/position.

The Human Resource Frame

The Human Resource frame emphasizes meeting the needs of personnel. All three institutions seem to offer a positive work environment from the perspective of the interviewees. Kennesaw State University received external recognition from *The Chronicle of Higher Education* which recognized KSU as one of the great colleges to work for in 2009. Four interviewees at Gainesville State College mentioned an emphasis on professional development. The primacy of teaching was mentioned at all institutions. At the same time, Gainesville State College mentioned increasing dependence on part-time faculty. During the data collection process in fall 2009, over a quarter of the faculty at GSC were part-time. In fall 2009, less than half of the first-year seminars at Kennesaw State University were taught by faculty, and Georgia Southern University struggles to recruit enough faculty to offer the number of first-year seminars that are needed to meet demand. Even with uncertainty created by enrollment growth, resources constraints, and other transitions, all interviewees were all true to their schools. An academic administrator at Gainesville State College acknowledged uncertainty and veneration with the words, “We don’t know we are, but we are wonderful.”
Awards represent one way organizations can recognize the outstanding contributions of their employees. Both Kennesaw State University and Georgia Southern University offer an outstanding first-year student advocate award. An academic administrator at Kennesaw State University shared, “We are one of the eight campuses that it started with, the outstanding faculty advocate, patterned after the national award.” Georgia Southern University offers both the Outstanding Advocate for First-Year Students and a FYE (First-Year Experience) Peer Leader of the Year award. The Dean of University College at Kennesaw State University received the national award made by the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition in 2009. A senior administrator at KSU obtained this recognition in 1999, and a faculty member and former coordinator of the first-year experience at Georgia Southern University won the national award in 1997. The campus-based awards help demonstrate that the first-year experience is an institutional priority; the national award provides external recognition and validation for campus-level efforts.

Multiple interviewees at all institutions expressed a passion for the first-year experience and first-year students; at the same time, participants at each of the institutions also mentioned that the first-year experience still struggles for legitimacy, and some faculty still view it as fluff. For instance, the faculty dimension report at Kennesaw State University revealed that “faculty in the Department of University Studies place a high value on the degree and quality of faculty-student interaction (Kennesaw State University, 2004, p.14)” In contrast, “A survey of Deans and Department Chairs across campus indicated that most rated the importance of interaction with first-year students for both annual performance reviews and [tenure and promotion] medium to low” (Kennesaw State University, p.14). Several participants described the first year as being almost addictive. A faculty member from Georgia Southern University stated,
Again, I’m a strong advocate for first-year students. I joke with everyone…that I teach freshmen by choice not as a stepping stone to get out of it to teach upper level classes. Any way I can stay involved with first year I do.

An academic administrator from KSU shared her enthusiasm for the first-year experience, she exclaimed, “We get to be excited when they learn how to do laundry; it’s just neat.” And a faculty member from Gainesville State College said,

Generally, I think the majority of faculty and staff and custodians and people in the registrar’s office, they genuinely care about the students, and they are very patient and understanding. It doesn’t matter where you work. We have security officers who have supportive relationships with students in terms of helping them out. I don’t think you can fake that; that’s the culture of your school.

Participants at Georgia Southern University and Kennesaw State University both expressed the sentiment that millennial students need the first-year experience more than ever. According to an academic administrator at GSC, about 50% of students start with at least one learning support requirement. As an access institution, Gainesville State College has always served students that might need extra help making the transition to college. All interviewees demonstrated a commitment to the first-year experience and student success.

The Political Frame

As per Bolman and Deal (2003), “Politics is simply the realistic process of making decisions and allocating resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests” (p. 181). Colleges and universities frequently have multiple missions including teaching, research, and service. The higher education environment involves competing priorities and finite resources so the first-year experience seeks resources and pursues alliances like other units on campus.
The leaders of the first-year experience at Georgia Southern University and Gainesville State College both characterized their power as soft power. At GSC, the Director of Student Academic Success said, “If I feel like there’s a lot of resistance, then I don’t necessarily go there at the moment. I’m trying to establish those islands of good ideas and support I guess on campus.” The Director of the First-Year Experience at Georgia Southern University stressed the importance of advocacy; he stated,

I don’t supervise anybody; I’ve got 143 faculty members, and one of them directly reports to me. I’ve got no ability to tap into…they’ve got to find intrinsic reasons to do it.

You do everything you can to sort of support that process.

Contrariwise, at Kennesaw State University, the leader of the first-year experience has a bit more positional power as a senior administrator and Dean of University College. Positional power may offer some cachet and influence that soft power lacks.

Kennesaw State University and Georgia Southern University participated in the 4-year version of Foundations of Excellence, and Gainesville State College participated in the 2-year version of the process. As stated previously, the 4-year version emphasizes that accountability for Foundations of Excellence is shared by the senior administration and the faculty. The 2-year version identifies the senior administration as the responsible party. All three institutions struggled to gain buy-in for Foundations of Excellence and the first-year experience especially faculty buy-in. Both Kennesaw State University and Georgia Southern University transitioned to a more academically oriented first-year seminar in part to achieve greater faculty buy-in. Georgia Southern University took additional steps to achieve faculty buy-in via the first-year faculty taskforce. These outcomes are political because in part they represent strategies to achieve faculty buy-in. Based on the three institutions included in this study, there were no noticeable
differences between the 4-year version and the 2-year version. Joint accountability between the senior administration and the faculty appeared to be important at all three institutions. Of course, GSC recently began offering 4-year degrees, and they intend to offer more.

Funding status with respect to Foundations of Excellence played a role at all three institutions. As a founding institution Kennesaw State University received sponsorship from Lumina and the Atlantic Philanthropies; Georgia Southern University and Gainesville State College paid to participate in the process. One participant suggested that paying out of pocket demonstrates a clear commitment; at the same time, a couple participants at Kennesaw State University mentioned that as a founding institution they felt obliged to be an exemplar. Interestingly, Georgia Southern University paid faculty to participate in the first-year faculty taskforce which was an outgrowth of Foundations of Excellence. All the individuals I interviewed who participated in the faculty taskforce at Georgia Southern University characterized the taskforce as extremely effective, and some participants described it as a singular experience. All institutions made a substantial investment in the Foundations of Excellence in terms of allocating time and other resources to achieve the objectives defined in their strategic action plans. All participants characterized the Foundations of Excellence process as very time consuming; overall all institutions found the process very worthwhile.

Politics is about power, and one participant at GSC mentioned that agendas sometimes crept into the Foundations process. She shared, “We had a couple of folks that had some agendas, and they worked their agendas into their dimension reports.” The idea of agendas did not come up as overtly with the other participants. At the same time, many participants expressed awareness that the first-year competes with other institutional priorities; Kennesaw State
University and Gainesville State College mentioned being stretched and strained as a result of resource constraints and enrollment growth.

The Symbolic Frame

According to Bolman and Deal (2003), “The symbolic frame focuses on how humans make sense of this messy, ambiguous, world in which the live. Meaning, belief, and faith are its central concerns” (p. 240). Bolman and Deal (2003) placed institutional theory in the symbolic frame in the chapter titled “Organizations as Theatre.”

Institutional theory suggests that keeping up appearances explains organizational behavior. The three institutions participated in the process for four primary reasons: 1) ties to the Policy Center for the First Year of College (now the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education), 2) motivation to improve the first-year experience, 3) desire to focus on the first-year experience and validate the good things that were already happening, and 4) an aspiration to make the first-year experience more cohesive and intentional. Although some participants characterized their motivations for participating in Foundations of Excellence (FoE) as internal, external expectations seemed to play a role either implicitly or explicitly. Participants at all institutions had ties to John Gardner or other Institute colleagues, and these relationships were influential in the decision to undertake Foundations of Excellence. A faculty member at Georgia Southern University stated that her interest in FoE was strictly internal. At the same time, she mentioned perceived weaknesses with respect to retention at Georgia Southern University based on feedback received from SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools); a couple participants at each institution identified SACS as an influence in the decision to engage in Foundations of Excellence. Kennesaw State University and Georgia Southern University both identified the University System RPG (retention, progression, and graduation)
initiative as an incentive to prioritize initiatives related to institutional and student success. External forces were influential at all institutions; the institutions could have pursued improvements to the first-year experience without Foundations of Excellence, but they all felt that the structure, the research, the data, and the external guidance provided by Institute (Policy Center) made the investment worthwhile. Institutional theory works well as the theoretical framework for this research; there is symbolic aspect to participating in Foundations of Excellence. At the same time, the outcomes of participation are more than theatrical or symbolic; they are tangible and substantive. Although some participants provided examples of theatrical behaviors that occurred during the self-study, all institutions achieved quantifiable outcomes. Institutional theory explains why the institutions participated, but it does not explain the outcomes of the self-study.

Bolman and Deal identified the symbolic aspects of evaluation. They wrote, “It shows that an organization takes goals seriously, cares about its performance, and wants to improve” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 281). All participants indicated that Foundations of Excellence helped create a culture of assessment or made assessment processes more effective and data-driven. Most participants seemed committed to evaluation as tool for continuous improvement. Some interviewees felt that the quantity and frequency of assessments teetered on being excessive; an academic administrator at GSC stated,

Some people, I guess, maybe feel like we are too assessment driven, and we lose sight of the humanity behind all that, but if assessment is done correctly… it provides you information that you do something with - instead of having information for the sake of having it.
Two senior administrators at Kennesaw State University described the self-study as an opportunity for self-reflection; they both characterized reflection as the process of identifying strengths and weaknesses. According to the American Council on Education (Eckel, Hill, Green, & Mallon, 1999), being reflective is one of the characteristics of successful change leaders. Reflection seems to be a euphemism for assessment. Assessment has both symbolic and substantive aspects.

Identity issues also seem related to the concept of image and the symbolic frame. Kennesaw State University and Gainesville State College both expressed identity issues. Both have experienced tremendous enrollment growth; Gainesville State College’s transitions to a multi-campus institution and a state college are still rippling through the institution. Likewise Kennesaw State University has experienced significant increases in enrollment; the identity issues at Kennesaw State University clustered around University College. University College is on an equal footing with other colleges in terms of the organizational structure but still struggles to gain university-wide acceptance, status, and respect. Georgia Southern University is also a growing institution engaged in transition based on tensions between embracing a research institution identity and sustaining the primacy of teaching, but the interviewees did not convey the impression that identity of Georgia Southern University is in flux. At the same time, some participants at Georgia Southern University mentioned a desire to distance themselves from the party-school image that creates a mismatch between the expectations of students and the expectations of faculty.

Based on the interviews, symbolism seemed most prevalent at Gainesville State College. Although it has not entirely caught on yet, a couple participants shared a desire to use the image of a tree as a symbol of the first-year experience at Gainesville State College. Multiple
participants at Gainesville State College mentioned the metaphor of lenses; this metaphor functioned on at least two levels. One participant characterized Foundations of Excellence as a way to see the institution with fresh eyes, and another felt that the challenging aspects of participating in Foundations of Excellence such as using new technology or working with colleagues from other areas were analogous to the first-year student experience. Framing was mentioned explicitly at Gainesville State College; one participant shared that framing faculty development in terms of student success yielded greater attendance and receptivity to change; another said that Foundations of Excellence offered another way to look at the same issues brought up by the assessment of general education. Traditions and symbolism were mentioned at Kennesaw State University. A senior administrator at Kennesaw State University mentioned the importance of creating traditions such as convocation and relationships/memories via activities such as the Faculty Firesides; she also expressed pleasure at seeing more students demonstrate their community membership by wearing KSU garb. Participants at Kennesaw State University and Gainesville State College identified institutional connectedness as an aspect of student success.

Stories are an aspect of the symbolic frame. An academic administrator at Kennesaw State University ascribed legendary status to the meeting of Betty Siegel and John Gardner. Participants at Gainesville State College infused Foundations of Excellence with lightheartedness and memorable recollections of PayDay candy bars and candy bar notes; a few taskforce participants at GSC earned nicknames such as ‘egghead’ for the resident data maven and ‘runs with scissors’ for a taskforce member who had a reputation for throwing caution to the wind. The liaisons at Gainesville State College intentionally approached the challenges of Foundations of Excellence with good humor.
Heroes are another element of the symbolic frame, and at Kennesaw State University many would call Betty Siegel’s presidency iconic or heroic. The President of Gainesville State College stressed the importance of champions in the Foundations of Excellence process, and the president herself was recognized by participants as one of the champions of the process.

Culture is an aspect of the symbolic frame. According to Bolman and Deal (2003), “Culture is glue” (p. 243). Kennesaw State University in particular characterized Foundations of Excellence as a culture changer. A senior administrator mentioned that the nine Foundational Dimensions have become part of the culture at Kennesaw State University, and another linked an upcoming project to the ‘serving all students’ dimension. Furthermore participants at Kennesaw State University shared that Foundations of Excellence helped build a culture of assessment and facilitate a transition to data-driven decision making. Participants referred to culture explicitly and described for instance, ‘a culture of doing more with less.’ One participant at Georgia Southern University invoked the phrase, ‘Georgia’s large-scale, small-feel research university.’ The characterization of Georgia Southern University as a big university with a big heart stuck with me. One participant at Georgia Southern University shared a story about facilitating travel arrangements to help an international student return home to attend her mother’s funeral and taking steps to ensure that the student would have a smooth return to the university; a trustee who heard this story commented, ‘You folks at Georgia Southern University are just amazing for what you do for your students.’ References to culture were not as prevalent at Georgia Southern University; at the same time, many aspects of Georgia Southern University’s QEP focus on first-year students and building a culture of engagement. These emphases reflect a desire to sustain and enhance a culture of student success. A couple interviewees at Gainesville State College mentioned culture explicitly, and the culture of GSC emerged via descriptions provided by other
interviewees. Things like ‘stretched and strained’ and ‘student focused, learning centered’ are etched in my memory. College culture represents one of the themes from GSC’s Foundations of Excellence action plan which included items such as creation and dissemination of the first-year philosophy and symbol. References to Foundations of Excellence endure on the websites of all three institutions reflecting pride and lasting impact.

Paradoxically institutions must work within the culture to change the culture (Eckel, Hill, Green, and Mallon, 1999), and this is consistent with the experiences of the three institutions. All identified buy-in especially faculty buy-in as a critical success factor. Both Kennesaw State University and Georgia Southern University made their first-year seminars more academically rigorous in part to achieve greater faculty buy-in. An outcome of Foundations of Excellence at Georgia Southern University was the creation of the first-year faculty taskforce. Data from Foundations of Excellence made it clear that faculty would need to drive changes related to the first-year experience at Georgia Southern University. The use of shared governance and collective decision-making represents one of the change principles identified by Kezar (2001). At this time, Gainesville State College requires all students with three or more learning support requirements to take the first-year seminar; as a result the first-year seminar at GSC focuses on study skills and making a successful transition to college. Gainesville State College plans to phase in a first-year requirement for all students over time which will likely result in a more academically rigorous seminar and a higher level of faculty participation. One participant mentioned the possibility of having one format for students with learning support requirements and another format for students without these requirements.

All three institutions seem to have an aspirational culture; Georgia Southern University and Gainesville State College have undertaken substantive mission changes in the past 10 years.
With the addition of a fourth doctoral program, Kennesaw State University transitioned from a SACS doctoral institution level V to level VI in April 2010 (Retrieved from http://sacs.kennesaw.edu/substantive_change_reports.html on November 22, 2010). Riesman (1956) characterizes institutional aspirations as the academic snake. One participant reflected this metaphor with the words, “I kind of laugh; I think institutions never feel comfortable in their own skin.” All institutions mentioned looking to other institutions as role models in one or more areas. For example, Georgia Southern University looked to James Madison when they implemented Conversations with Professors, Kennesaw State University visited Indiana University – Purdue University Indiana to prepare for the launch of University College, and Gainesville State College identified Kennesaw State University as a leader in learning communities.

Degree of Change

The American Council on Education (ACE) identified four types of change: adjustment, isolated change, far-reaching change, and transformation (Eckel, Hill, & Green, 1998). These categorizations offer a useful way to classify the degree of change that occurred at each of the institutions so far. ACE provides the following definition of transformation:

Transformation 1) alters the culture of the institution by changing select underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors, processes, and products; 2) is deep and pervasive, affecting the whole institution; 3) is intentional; and 4) occurs over time (Eckel, Hill, & Green, 1998, p. 3).

The degree of change is based on the depth and pervasiveness of the change. The American Council on Education considers the categories to be more continuous than discrete. Nonetheless it is tempting to assign the institutions to a specific category with the understanding that the
placements are imperfect. The three institutions viewed the self-study as part of continuous improvement efforts with respect to the first-year experience. According to a senior administrator at Gainesville State College, “… it’s helped us to keep our focus on students and be more mindful, if you will, of those first-year experiences. I think it’s really more of a long-term process.” The institutions characterized Foundations of Excellence as an accelerant. Transformation was not necessarily expected.

The American Council on Education (ACE) indicates that intentional change is more effective than unplanned change (Eckel, Hill, Green, & Mallon, 1999). Participants from each of the institutions mentioned that Foundations of Excellence created awareness of the need to be more intentional about collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs and other aspects of student success. The leaders of the first-year experience at all three institutions report to academic affairs. At the same time, the Director of the First-Year Experience at Georgia Southern University stated, “It’s a very luminal position. First-year programs generally are that way; we sort of have our feet in both camps no matter where we report,” the Director of Student Academic Success at Gainesville State College shared,

I think it’s better though for me to be here than there and having to come over to academic affairs and try to get some support, and there are committees on campus where student affairs and academic affairs come together. I think the first-year advisory council is a good place for that seamlessness to happen.

As mentioned previously, Kennesaw State University deems collaboration and cooperation between Student Success and Enrollment Services and academic affairs as one of its ‘pillars of distinction;’ as a result of Foundations of Excellence, Kennesaw State University and Georgia Southern University recognized the need to be intentional in order to sustain collaboration after
specific individuals leave their positions. Both Georgia Southern University and Gainesville State College described positive relationships between academic affairs and student affairs, and both thought that these relationships improved as a result of Foundations of Excellence.

Based on the American Council on Education’s definition, the changes at Kennesaw State University meet the criteria for transformation. The creation of University College placed the first-year experience on an equal footing with other colleges in terms of the organizational structure. Kennesaw State University also achieved the first-year experience requirement. These actions affected the entire organization and all students. The faculty buy-in that made the first-year experience requirement possible reflects changes in values and underlying assumptions. The business/finance side of the house was affected at KSU by the creation of an entirely new college with a budget, over 10 positions, a building, etc. The changes that occurred at Georgia Southern University as a result of Foundations of Excellence (FoE) and the first-year experience faculty taskforce could be described as far-reaching change. The Global Citizens course requirement will affect all students, and policy changes regarding mid-term grades and limited course withdrawals affected everyone on the academic side of the house. Foundations of Excellence contributed to the creation of a full-time director and a dedicated office. For now, the changes at Gainesville State College are somewhat isolated. Gainesville State College hired the Director of Student Academic Success and created the First-Year Advisory Council. Gainesville State College initiated improvements to advising, they conducted an assessment of Early Alert Program, and they launched learning clusters. According to participants at GSC, Foundations of Excellence also created renewed mindfulness about the criticality of collaboration and communication with respect to the first-year. Although GSC was most successful at getting campus-wide buy-in for FoE via the initial vote and a high level of participation, the changes
thus far have been deep but not necessarily pervasive. Some faculty and staff were probably
unaffected by the process. In fall 2009 when the interviews for this research were conducted, the
Director of Student Academic success had been on the job for about six months. Changes at
Gainesville State College will likely become deeper and more pervasive over time; statements of
multiple participants reflected a long-term commitment to ongoing enhancement of the first-year
experience. Based on this research, the first-year experience at Gainesville State College merits
program-to-watch status. Changes at Kennesaw State University reflected the greatest depth and
pervasiveness, but they have had more time achieve their objectives. As per Eckel, Hill, and
Green (1998), transformation takes time. Table 1 on the following page summarizes the
conceptual framework, the research questions, and the key findings from this study.
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<th>Institutional Theory</th>
<th>Normative Pressures</th>
<th>Coercive Pressures</th>
<th>Memic Pressures</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Why did each of the institutions participate in Foundations of Excellence?</strong></td>
<td>GSU: transition to doctoral research university</td>
<td>All: SACS, ties to the Gardner Institute</td>
<td>All: resource constraints</td>
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<td></td>
<td>GSC: validity of FoE process, transitions to 4-year and multi-campus institution</td>
<td>KSU, GSU: USG Retention, Progression, and Graduation initiative</td>
<td>KSU and GSU: validate and evaluate first-year experience</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Birnbaum’s Models of Organizational Functioning</strong></td>
<td>Colleagul</td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did each of the institutions approach the process?</td>
<td>GSU: conducted vote; chose liaisons very intentionally, formed large representative taskforce; engaged in continuous communication; student focused, learning centered</td>
<td>KSU: participation announced by president, formed lean taskforce</td>
<td>All: had resources constraints and sought faculty buy-in</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Bolman and Deal’s Frames</strong></td>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>Human Resource</td>
<td>Political</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What institutional changes can be attributed to the process based on data and the perceptions of key stakeholders?</td>
<td>KSU – University College</td>
<td>KSU and GSU: struggle to find enough faculty to teach first-year seminar due to increased enrollments</td>
<td>All: recognized need to be intentional about collaboration between academic affairs and student affairs</td>
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<td>GSC – Director and Office</td>
<td>KSU and GSU: first-year seminar became more academic</td>
<td>GSU: Conversations with Professors</td>
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<td></td>
<td>GSC – Director</td>
<td>All: enhanced assessment efforts and facilitated data-driven decision-making</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Policies: KSU – FYE requirement; GSU – Global Citizens, mid-term grades, and limited individual course withdrawals</td>
<td>KSU and GSU: first-year seminar became more academic</td>
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<td></td>
<td>All: expressed commitment to retain primacy of teaching as core value</td>
<td>GSU: global citizens course, mid-term grades, limited course withdrawals, full-time director and dedicated office</td>
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<td>GSU: mentioned agendas; champions and anti-champions</td>
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<td><strong>American Council on Education Change Matrix</strong></td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Far-reaching Change</td>
<td>Isolated Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do participants describe the experience of participating in the Foundations of Excellence process?</td>
<td>KSU: lean approach worked well</td>
<td>GSU and GSC: opportunity to collaborate with colleagues across campus: KSU and GSU - recognition and validation of first-year efforts</td>
<td>All: Very time consuming and very worthwhile, valued external guidance</td>
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<td>GSU: size created challenges</td>
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<td>GSC: mentioned agendas; champions and anti-champions</td>
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<td>GSC: multi-campus challenges; students may transfer at any time.</td>
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<td>KSU: recognition and validation of first-year efforts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Based on the data collected, what degree of change occurred at each institution as a result of the Foundations of Excellence process?</td>
<td>KSU: University College, first-year experience requirement, faculty buy-in, change in values and underlying assumptions</td>
<td>GSU: global citizens course, mid-term grades, limited course withdrawals, full-time director and dedicated office</td>
<td>GSC: isolated for now, director, first-year advisory council, assessments, learning clusters, greatest buy-in, a program to watch</td>
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Table 1 demonstrates alignment between the research questions, the conceptual framework, and the findings from this research. All three institutions achieved substantive changes as a result of participating in Foundations of Excellence.

Conclusions

Based on data collected and reported by NCES, OECD, NCHEMS, and others, student success should remain a national priority, and the first-year is the foundation that enables all aspects of student success including progression and graduation. Prior to undertaking this study I suspected that ‘something happens’ when institutions participate in Foundations of Excellence. Based on this research, Foundations of Excellence can lead to substantive change with respect to the first-year experience. Assessing the outcomes of the self-study is left to the institutions; Foundations of Excellence would benefit from the inclusion of an assessment framework. Eckel, Green, Hill and Mallon (1999) advise institutions to consider assessment during the earliest stages of their change endeavors. Additionally, I would like to see more research institutions engage in this process. As per two of the institutions, millennial students seem to need the first-year experience more than ever, and even though students at research institutions tend to be among the most academically prepared students, many still need assistance navigating the social aspects of college and assuming the responsibilities that go along with young adulthood. Receptivity to Foundations of Excellence may be lacking at some research institutions because many tend to demonstrate characteristics of the organized anarchy.

Succession planning may be challenge for the John N. Gardner Institute for Undergraduate Excellence. To a certain extent John Gardner is the Institute/ Foundations of Excellence, and there is a need to develop the next generation of national leaders of the first-year
experience. Institutional leaders were encountered while conducting this study, but none of them expressed the aspiration of taking on the mantle of national leadership.

A primarily qualitative study like this one seeks particularization, not generalization. At the same time, this study identified some commonalities with respect to purposes for participation, approaches to the process, and outcomes. Based on this study, critical success factors include senior administrative support, faculty buy-in, identifying and renewing commitment to core values, tenacity, and a commitment to student success. These qualities will likely help any change endeavor in postsecondary institutions be more successful.

Much scholarly work has focused on student success. There seems to be a paucity of scholarly research on the Foundations of Excellence (FoE) process although the Policy Center on the First Year of College now the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education (JNGI) conducts both internal and independent evaluations. Based on this study, Foundations of Excellence can be a powerful process for institutional change and student success. Other researchers may wish to explore outcomes in other sectors or other states; it may be interesting to conduct a similar study in a state that does not have a merit-based scholarship to determine if increases in the college-going rate and/or enrollment growth play a large role in the decision to undertake Foundations of Excellence. Alternatively, a more in-depth study could be conducted at a single institution. Successful participation could also be explored from the perspective of the JNGI. The JNGI now offers a transfer focus option, and this new track represents an opportunity for additional research. Other scholars may also wish to take a more quantitative approach and measure student success variables such as grade point average, satisfaction, progression, and graduation in the context of Foundations of Excellence; now that
FoE has been around for eight years, a longitudinal study could also be considered. Foundations of Excellence is a powerful process that merits further research.
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APPENDIX A FOUNDATIONAL DIMENSIONS


Foundational Dimensions statements constitute a model that provides institutions with a means to evaluate and improve the first year of college. As an evaluation tool, the model enables institutions both to confirm their strengths and to recognize the need for improvement. As an aspirational model, the Dimensions provide general guidelines for an intentional design of the first year. The Dimensions rest on four assumptions:

- The academic mission of an institution is preeminent;
- The first college year is central to the achievement of an institution’s mission and lays the foundation on which undergraduate education is built;
- Systematic evidence provides validation of the Dimensions;
- Collectively, the Dimensions constitute an ideal for improving not only the first college year, but also the entire undergraduate experience.

Foundations Institutions approach the first year in ways that are intentional and based on a philosophy/rationale of the first year that informs relevant institutional policies and practices. The philosophy/rationale is explicit, clear and easily understood, consistent with the institutional mission, widely disseminated, and, as appropriate, reflects a consensus of campus constituencies. The philosophy/rationale is also the basis for first-year organizational policies, practices, structures, leadership, department/unit philosophies, and resource allocation. (Philosophy)

Foundations Institutions create organizational structures and policies that provide a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach to the first year. These structures and policies provide oversight and alignment of all first-year efforts. A coherent first-year experience is realized and maintained through effective partnerships among academic affairs, student affairs, and other administrative units and is enhanced by ongoing faculty and staff development activities and appropriate budgetary arrangements. (Organization)

Foundations Institutions deliver intentional curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that engage students in order to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with the desired outcomes of higher education and the institution’s philosophy and mission. Whether in or out of the classroom, learning also promotes increased competence in critical thinking, ethical development, and the lifelong pursuit of knowledge. (Learning)
Foundations Institutions make the first college year a high priority for the faculty. These institutions are characterized by a culture of faculty responsibility for the first year that is realized through high-quality instruction in first-year classes and substantial interaction between faculty and first-year students both inside and outside the classroom. This culture of responsibility is nurtured by chief academic officers, deans, and department chairs and supported by the institutions’ reward systems. (Faculty)

Foundations Institutions facilitate appropriate student transitions through policies and practices that are intentional and aligned with institutional mission. Beginning with recruitment and admissions and continuing through the first year, institutions communicate clear curricular and cocurricular expectations and provide appropriate support for educational success. They are forthright about their responsibilities to students as well as students’ responsibilities to themselves and the institution. They create and maintain curricular alignments with secondary schools and linkages with secondary school personnel, families, and other sources of support, as appropriate. (Transitions)

Foundations Institutions serve all first-year students according to their varied needs. The process of anticipating, diagnosing, and addressing needs is ongoing and is subject to assessment and adjustment throughout the first year. Institutions provide services with respect for the students’ abilities, backgrounds, interests, and experiences. Institutions also ensure a campus environment that is inclusive and safe for all students. (All Students)

Foundations Institutions ensure that all first-year students experience diverse ideas, worldviews, and cultures as a means of enhancing their learning and preparing them to become members of pluralistic communities. Whatever their demographic composition, institutions structure experiences in which students interact in an open and civil community with people from backgrounds and cultures different from their own, reflect on ideas and values different from those they currently hold, and explore their own cultures and the cultures of others. (Diversity)

Foundations Institutions promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education, both for the individual and society. These roles and purposes include knowledge acquisition for personal growth, learning to prepare for future employment, learning to become engaged citizens, and learning to serve the public good. Institutions encourage first-year students to examine systematically their motivation and goals with regard to higher education in general and to their own college/university. Students are exposed to the value of general education as well as to the value of more focused, in-depth study of a field or fields of knowledge (i.e., the major). (Roles and Purposes)

Foundations Institutions conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to achieve ongoing first-year improvement. This assessment is specific to the first year as a unit of analysis—a distinct time period and set of experiences, academic and otherwise, in the lives of students. It is also linked systemically to the institutions’ overall assessment. Assessment results are an integral part of institutional planning, resource allocation, decision-making, and ongoing improvement of
programs and policies as they affect first-year students. As part of the enhancement process and as a way to achieve ongoing improvement, institutions are familiar with current practices at other institutions as well as with research and scholarship on the first college year. (Improvement)

The Foundational Dimensions were developed by John N. Gardner, Betsy O. Barefoot, Stephen W. Schwartz, Michael J. Siegel, and Randy L. Swing of the Policy Center on the First Year of College in collaboration with Robert R. Reason, Patrick T. Terenzini, Edward Zlotkowski, and 235 colleges and universities. The following campuses provided national leadership in the inaugural use of the Dimensions: Augsburg College, Aurora University, CUNY - Brooklyn College, CUNY - Medgar Evers College, Chadron State College, Columbia College, Endicott College, Franklin Pierce College, Georgia Southwestern State University, Illinois State University, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, Indiana Wesleyan University, Kennesaw State University, Madonna University, Maryville College, Marywood University, Missouri Western State University, Nazareth College of Rochester, Plymouth State University, Saint Edward’s University, SUNY - Brockport, Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi, University of Charleston, and University of Wisconsin-Parkside.


These Foundational Dimensions statements constitute a model that provides two-year colleges with a means to evaluate and improve the new student experience. This model recognizes the multiple roles and functions of two-year institutions as well as their service to diverse student populations that have widely varying educational backgrounds and goals. As an evaluation tool, the model enables two-year institutions both to confirm their strengths and to recognize the need for improvement. As an aspirational model, the Dimensions provide general guidelines for an intentional design of the new student experience. The Dimensions rest on four assumptions:

- The academic mission of an institution is preeminent.
- The experience of new students is central to the achievement of an institution’s mission because it lays the foundation that enables students to achieve their educational goals.
- Systematic evidence provides validation of the Dimensions.
- Collectively, the Dimensions constitute an ideal for improving not only the new student experience, but also the entire college experience.

Foundations Institutions intentionally cultivate learning environments for new students that emerge from a philosophy of two-year colleges as gateways to higher education. The philosophy is explicit and easily understood. It is consistent with the institutional mission, reflects a consensus of internal and external constituencies, and is widely disseminated. The philosophy is also the basis for organizational policies, practices, structures, leadership, and resource allocation to support the new student experience. (Philosophy)

Foundations Institutions provide a comprehensive, coordinated, and flexible approach to the new student experience through effective organizational structures and policies. These structures and policies guide and align all aspects of the new student experience. Through effective partnerships, critical stakeholders such as instructional, administrative, and student
services units provide a coherent experience for new students that is enhanced by ongoing faculty and staff development activities and appropriate budgetary arrangements. (Organization)

Foundations Institutions deliver curricular and co-curricular learning experiences that engage new students in order to develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors consistent with the institutional mission, students’ academic and career goals, and workplace expectations. Both in and out of the classroom, these learning experiences promote critical thinking, ethical decision making, and the lifelong pursuit of knowledge. (Learning)

Foundations Institutions make new students a high priority for faculty and staff. A culture of responsibility for the experiences of new students characterizes these institutions. This culture is realized through high-quality instruction, services, and support as well as substantial interaction with students both inside and outside the classroom. Campus leaders nurture this culture and support it by appropriate institutional recognition and rewards. (Campus Culture)

Foundations Institutions facilitate appropriate student transitions beginning with outreach and recruitment and continuing throughout the period of enrollment. They communicate clear curricular/co-curricular expectations and possibilities, and they provide appropriate preparation and support for educational success. They are forthright about their responsibilities to students as well as students’ responsibilities to themselves and the institution. These institutions create and maintain communication with secondary and other postsecondary institutions, families, employers, community agencies, and other sources of support for students. (Transitions)

Foundations Institutions serve all new students according to their varied needs. These institutions anticipate, identify, and address the needs of traditional and non-traditional students in response to their individual abilities, backgrounds, interests, and experiences. These efforts are subject to assessment and adjustment as needed. Institutions also ensure campus environments that are inclusive and safe for all students. (All Students)

Foundations Institutions ensure that new students experience ongoing exploration of diverse ideas, worldviews, and cultures as a means of enhancing their learning and participation in pluralistic communities. Institutions cultivate an open and civil community in which students interact with people from varied backgrounds and cultures. These institutions guide students to reflect on ideas and values different from those they currently hold, and explore their own cultures and the cultures of others. (Diversity)

Foundations Institutions promote student understanding of the various roles and purposes of higher education and those unique to two-year institutions, both for the individual and society. These roles and purposes include learning for personal growth, career enhancement, workplace preparation and retraining, transfer for additional education, engaged citizenship, and serving the public good. Institutions encourage new students to examine their motivation and goals with regard to higher education in general and to their own college. Students are exposed to the value of both a general education and focused study in an academic or career field. (Roles and Purposes)
Foundations Institutions conduct assessment and maintain associations with other institutions and relevant professional organizations in order to effect improvement. Assessment provides feedback to new students to guide their learning, to faculty to guide their teaching, and to the institution to guide planning, resource allocation, decision making, and improvement of programs and policies. As a way to facilitate improvement, these institutions are knowledgeable about current practices at other institutions as well as relevant research and scholarship. (Improvement)

The Foundational Dimensions were developed by John N. Gardner, Betsy O. Barefoot, and Randy L. Swing of the Policy Center on the First Year of College in collaboration with 87 two-year colleges. The following ten campuses provided national leadership in the inaugural use of the Dimensions: Kennebec Valley Community College, Longview Community College, Middlesex Community College, Montgomery County Community College, Oakton Community College, Pellissippi State Technical Community College, San Jacinto College South, Spokane Falls Community College, University of Wisconsin Colleges, and Virginia Highlands Community College.

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APPENDIX B PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Several interview questions were based on the scholarly work of Masland (1985) and Stufflebeam (2001).

Institutional Culture

What makes your college unique? What sets it apart from other schools?

Foundations of Excellence Origins

Describe Foundations of Excellence in a nutshell.

How did you/your institution get involved with Foundation of Excellence?

Why did you/your institution participate in Foundation of Excellence?

What were your objectives? What did you hope to achieve at the outset?

What qualities does an institution need to participate in the FoE process?

Are some institutions better positioned than others?

Some institutions received funding and others paid to participate in the process. What role does ‘funding status’ play in the process?

The Policy Center offers the same process to 2-year and 4-year institutions. Do you think this process is better suited to some sectors or institutional types than others? Explain.

If I contacted you as a colleague interested in Foundations of Excellence, what would you tell me?

What wouldn’t you tell me?
Outcomes

What aspects of Foundations of Excellence met your expectations?

What aspects of Foundation of Excellence did not meet your expectations?

To what extent does the process achieve its goals?

What are the shortcomings of Foundation of Excellence?

What are the benefits?

In what ways and to what extent to various stakeholders value the program?

To what extent did the program effectively meet beneficiaries’ needs?

Was the program appropriately effective for all beneficiaries?

What were the most important reasons for the program’s success/failure?

What are the most important unresolved issues?

What were the unexpected outcomes?

What are the total costs of participation?

How does this program compare with alternatives?

How has Foundation of Excellence evolved over time at your institution?

Is the program sustainable and transportable?

What was the most critical success factor at your institution?

How faithful was the institution to the objectives defined in your action plan?

Which objectives endured, and which ones evolved?

What policies, programs, services, or positions were created as a result of this process?

Did new objectives emerge post action plan? Please describe them.

Were any objectives discarded? Why?

What changes occurred with respect to faculty, staff, students, and administrators? How did you
change as a result of this project?

What kinds of measures are you using to gauge first-year student success now?

What are your institutions current objectives with respect to first-year students?

Process

What interesting stories emerged during the self-study and implementation?

What wouldn’t you change about the self-study, strategic action plan, implementation process?

What effect did external guidance via the Policy Center have on the self-study process?

What are program stakeholders’ judgments of program operations, processes and outcomes?

In hindsight, what do you think you or your institution should have done differently?

Closing

Who else should I interview?

What documents or data should I review?

What else would you like to tell me about Foundation of Excellence?
APPENDIX C REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION

From: Christine E. Miller, PhD Candidate
University of Georgia
224B Old College
Athens, GA 30602
cemiller@uga.edu
706-542-1546

Re: Request for Participation in Dissertation Research

Hello,

I am a PhD candidate in higher education at the University of Georgia. I am writing to introduce myself and request the participation of your institution in my dissertation research. I will conduct multiple case study research on three 4-year public institutions in Georgia that participated in Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year. I would like to include Kennesaw State University (2003-04 cohort), Georgia Southern University (2005-06 cohort), and Gainesville State College (2007-08 cohort) in this study. I have completed the institutional review board process at my home institution, and I have received the support of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, a constituent unit of the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, for my proposal. This study will answer the following research questions:

- Why did each of the institutions participate in Foundations of Excellence?
- What institutional changes and student outcomes can be attributed to the process based on data and the perceptions of key stakeholders?
- Do key stakeholders characterize the change as substantive and enduring? If so, what aspects of the process or implementation enabled these substantive and enduring changes?

If you consent to participate in this study, I would like to work with you or a liaison to schedule a site visit later this fall. While on site, I would like to conduct interviews with key stakeholders that participated in both the self-study and implementation phases of Foundations of Excellence; risks of participation will be very minimal. In most instances I anticipate that the interview process and potential follow-up questions will consume about two hours of time. If specific key stakeholders are no longer with your institution, I may request an introduction so I can attempt to include their perspectives in the case study.

Interviewees will have an opportunity to reflect on their participation in Foundations of Excellence. This study may also reinvigorate discussions about student success in the first year of college and beyond at your institution.
I would like to identify institutions by name and identify interviewees via descriptors such as a senior administrator or a student affairs officer, but not by name. I will work with interviewees to select appropriate descriptors that will help maintain confidentiality.

I am conducting this study under the direction of my major professor, Dr. Libby V. Morris. Please let me know if you would be willing to lend your support to this project. I am happy to respond to any questions you may have throughout the duration of the study.

Sincerely,
Christine