DEVELOPING A MODEL OF THEORY-TO-PRACTICE-TO-THEORY IN STUDENT AFFAIRS:
AN EXTENDED CASE ANALYSIS OF THEORIES OF STUDENT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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by
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Abstract

Recent literature suggests a problematic connection between theory and practice in higher education scholarship generally and the study of student learning and development specifically (e.g. Bensimon, 2007; Kezar, 2000; Love, 2012). Much of this disconnect stems from a lack of differentiation between various types of theory used in student affairs practice—critical among them: formal, informal, and implicit theories.

Formal theory is produced by scholars and, to the maximum extent possible, conforms to standard social science assumptions about knowledge production, generalizability, and predictiveness (Parker, 1977). Since formal theory will not always apply perfectly to practice, student affairs practitioners may choose not to adapt it for their own uses as they create a theory-in-use—essentially a set of values, beliefs, and assumption that guide their practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974).

Though there is some disagreement in the literature as to whether the use of formal theory is necessary (Evans & Guido, 2012; Love, 2012), most hold that the goal of higher education research is to influence practice through the production of relevant theory (Bensimon, 2007; Kezar, 2000). As a result, it is possible to distinguish between two different types of theory-in-use: implicit theory and informal theory. Implicit theories are a body of loosely considered values, beliefs, and assumptions that are not connected in any systematic way to relevant formal theories (Bensimon, 2007). In contrast, informal theories are based on formal theory but also include the understanding of context and relevant professional experience of student affairs practitioners (Parker, 1977).

While determining the precise role of each of these types of theory is critical to theory-to-practice conversions (Reason & Kimball, forthcoming), no empirical work has
yet examined the role that each plays in student affairs practitioners’ conceptualizations of student learning and development. As such, this dissertation uses the extended case method (Burawoy, 1991; 1998; 2009) to examine the thinking of six academic advisors and three residence life professionals at a large public research university to address three linked research questions:

1) How do practitioners understand student experience?
2) What is the role of theory in that understanding?
3) What is the connection between theory and practice?

Major findings reveal that the way that student affairs professionals think about learning and development are the unique products of the contexts in which they work. Effectively, these practitioners employ “guiding concepts” synthesized from formal theories as well as their own experiences in order to construct a flexible theory-in-use capable of useful application in a wide variety of situations within the environment in which they work.

Additional findings suggest that learning and development, despite recent attempts to synthesize them (Reason & Renn, 2008), remain independent-yet-related concepts in the minds of the students affairs professionals who participated in this study. Important findings related to student affairs work also include an acknowledgement of the critical roles of technostructure—the systems, processes, and tools that enable a professional role to be constructed in a particular way—and the larger social context play in practice. Finally, in order both to honor and benefit from the knowledge of student affairs professionals, this dissertation closes by proposing a model of theory-to-practice-to-theory based on the extended case method and designed to allow for a tighter coupling between formal and informal theory.
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Chapter One:  
An Introduction to the Problem of Theory-to-Practice

The Theory-to-Practice Problem

We presently have two radically different ways of developing theory. One body of theory is created by those with expert knowledge utilizing rigorous, systematic techniques (Kuhn, 1962/1996); this form of theory development is most often associated with academic scholarship. Another set of theories is produced by individuals in the course of their daily life based upon the assumptions that they find useful in explaining their experiences (James, 1907/1981; 1909/1978). This divergence in theory development has clear implications in the study of student learning and development: academics working within the paradigm of expert knowledge, for example, may produce theory that is at odds with the utility judgments of those who would use the theory in practice. Exploring the question of theory application in academic advising, Kimball and Campbell (forthcoming) suggest the pivotal role that the values, beliefs, and assumptions of advisors play in determining how scholarly knowledge is utilized. Research findings on the role of “personal practical theories” in educational settings likewise demonstrate that a person’s values, beliefs, and assumptions often override their formal training support (Cornett, Yeotis, & Terwilliger, 1990; Levin & He, 2008).

Focusing on student affairs practice, Parker (1977) distinguishes between the contrasting methods of theory development utilizing the terms “formal” and “informal” theory. Formal theory accords with the scholarly understanding of theory development described above. It is produced and validated primarily through induction, deduction, and statistical modeling. Relevant research questions are seen as arising principally from the
logically continuous body of scholarship that preceded a given study (Kuhn, 1962/1996). Such a theory is designed principally to have predictive power; it is held to be true until such time as it might be demonstrated false or another theory is shown to be more predictive (Popper 1959/2002). In contrast, informal theory emerges directly from human experience (James, 1907/1981; 1909/1978). Formal theories represent one such set of experiences but so too do interactions with students; personal values, beliefs, and assumptions; and an understanding of relevant institutional factors. Thus, informal theories are far more eclectic than formal theories. All informal theories, however, share several characteristics. They are heuristic: they represent a meaningful shorthand through which new circumstances and understandings can be evaluated based on prior experience. Further, given their heuristic nature, they are not focused principally on generating truth. Instead, they are intended to be useful. As such, they are designed to be flexible enough to explain a wide variety of situations and are thus heavily dependent on the judgment of the individual applying the theory.

Given the contradictory nature of theory, it is perhaps not surprising that the connection between theory and practice in higher education has long been regarded as problematic (e.g. Cooper, 1980; Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994; Keller, 1998; Kezar, 2000; Bensimon, 2007; Love, 2012). In her presidential address to the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Estella Bensimon (2007) suggested the dual nature of this long-running problem. On the one hand, a lack of a clear theory-to-practice connection resulted in “the invisibility of practitioners in the discourse on student success” (p. 443). This invisibility, Bensimon went on to assert, is problematic for scholarship as practitioner knowledge represents a valuable source of information about
student experience and the success of existing theories. On the other hand, this same practitioner invisibility renders it difficult for scholars to think about the actual implications of their work on the daily lives of students—since practitioners represent the likely delivery mechanism for many scholarly recommendations.

Focusing specifically on the problem of equity in college access, Bensimon (2007) further asserts that the lack of integration between the work of scholars and practitioners may lead to the uncritical acceptance of assumptions that perpetuate rather than alleviate inequalities—stating that:

I argue that practitioners in higher education, over time and through a variety of experiences, have developed implicit theories about students: why they succeed, why they fail, and what, if anything, they can do to reverse failure. I say “implicit theories” because practitioners for the most part are likely not aware of what knowledge or experiences constitute their sensemaking and how the judgments they make about a phenomenon such as student success or failure are shaped by their sensemaking. (Bensimon, 2007, p. 446)

Thus, Bensimon (2007) argues that scholars have an ongoing obligation to attend both to the implications of their work for practice and to practitioners. A lack of this sort of attention leads to the creation of implicit theories, which are based on casual assumptions about student behavior rather than critical consideration of scholarly knowledge. The lack of critical reflexivity inherent in implicit theory can lead to the internalization of undesirable assumptions about student experience, development, and learning. As a result, Bensimon (2007) suggests the need both for a careful examination of implicit
theory and for a formal theory that is more practical. By simultaneously attending to each, we can produce work that is more accurate and useful.

Though Bensimon (2007) is writing for a scholarly audience and consequently focuses principally on practitioners as possible sources and recipients of scholarly knowledge, her work demonstrates the complicated nature of the theory-to-practice problem in higher education. It is the product both of ambiguity around the epistemological and methodological origins of theoretical knowledge—referenced by Bensimon (2007) as “implicit theories”—and the lack of a coherent vision for how the leap from theory-to-practice might best be made. These concerns are echoed by a critical reappraisal of higher education scholarship conducted by Kezar (2000), in which she advanced four arguments:

First, practitioners are more likely to use research that they have participated in creating. Second, the research itself is more likely to address the concerns of practitioners. Third, practitioners become more aware of research; their participation serves as a consciousness-raising. Fourth, involving practitioners demystifies the research process and makes the results more accessible; it has the potential of awakening practitioners to the possibility that research can legitimately meet their concerns, thus closing any perceived gap. This process also may educate researchers by giving them valuable experiential knowledge from which they are sometimes separated. (pp. 445-446)

At a very basic level then, what Kezar (2000) suggests is the need for reflexive relationships between scholars and practitioners wherein utility guides the selection of appropriate problems, investigations buttressed by rigorous methods are undertaken, and
research results are written with an eye toward application. Thus, Kezar (2000) describes a resituated form of scholarship with an epistemological basis in practice rather than the scholarly community—effectively a form of engaged, scholarly praxis.

The problems that Bensimon (2007) and Kezar (2000) identify are the product of a seeming inability to align theory and practice such that they inform one another in reasonably predictable ways. My dissertation is designed both to model this problem and to suggest a possible way forward. Focusing on a group of student affairs practitioners at a large, mid-Atlantic research university (Central University) it examines the way that various forms of knowledge—particularly theoretical knowledge in its various forms—impact their understanding of student experience, and as a result, the practices in which they engage. It thus proposes three linked research questions:

1) How do practitioners understand student experience?

2) What is the role of theory in that understanding?

3) What is the connection between theory and practice?

It then uses the real world examples afforded by these practitioners in an attempt to recast the relationship between theory and practice such that a clear, actionable link between the two might be created—thereby addressing the lack of alignment suggested by Bensimon (2007) and Kezar (2000).

In seeking to understand the origin of the theory-to-practice problem, the epistemological foundations for the study of higher education are a reasonable starting place. Though organized as a standalone department at many institutions, higher education is more appropriately thought of as field of research than a discipline (Cooper, 1980). Properly speaking, a discipline has three characteristics: 1) the existence of a
specialized discourse community, 2) an epistemological orientation, and 3) a shared methodology or set of methods (Agger, 2007); in contrast, a field need only to coalesce around a shared set of problems—that is, the formation of a discourse community. As Eisenmann (2004) notes, higher education has historically been informed by disciplines including psychology, sociology, political science, economics, history, and philosophy. While individuals working within these disciplines reached agreement about the types of problems that would be studied under the banner of higher education, they traditionally “applied modes of inquiry from their home disciplines to higher education” (Eisenmann, 2004, p. 4). That is, while the discourse community in which they participated was the field of higher education, their epistemology and methods were borrowed from the disciplines in which they were originally trained. As Eisenmann (2004) notes, however, increases in the number of higher education graduate programs have produced an environment in which not all scholars of higher education have been academically socialized in disciplinary programs. This change in graduate training results in an environment wherein epistemology and methodology can potentially be left unexamined—with the potentially negative results identified by both Bensimon (2007) and Kezar (2000).

Recent research has revealed some of the negative consequences originating from the separation of discussions regarding the problems of higher education and epistemological and methodological concerns. For example, Tight (2007) conducted an analysis of recent issues of Journal of Higher Education, Research in Higher Education, and Review of Higher Education which revealed that 98% of all authors were based in either the US or Canada and therefore presumably more likely to be focused on US
populations. Further, the bulk of these analyses did not focus on individuals, but instead on institutions or systems, driven primarily by quantitative methods. Similarly, Hutchinson and Lovell (2004) found that articles in higher education were more likely to utilize intermediate to advanced statistical techniques to analyze survey data. As a result, Hutchinson and Lovell (2004) suggest the need for increased statistical and methodological training in higher education graduate programs. This echoes the concern of Keller (1998) about the overtly quantitative focus of higher education scholarship, who also asserted that the field of higher education was being led astray by the utilization of quantitative methods divorced from considerations of their epistemological and methodological assumptions.

In his work, Keller (1998) reviewed three common critiques of quantitative research in higher education: 1) it is limiting, 2) its results are not useful, and 3) it is epistemologically unsound. Agreeing that quantitative methods led to an inattention to individual cases and context which in turn could lead to the normalization of observations rather than their explanation, Keller (1998) also suggested that the quantitative methods that produced these sorts of findings were increasingly reified as ends in and of themselves—leading to the loss of a focus on utility. As a result, Keller (1998) called for greater attention to producing socially useful findings utilizing a variety of research techniques—effectively arguing for a resituation of epistemological and methodological concerns to higher education.

Both the findings and the recommendations of Keller (1998) are reiterated by Kezar (2000), whose four propositions regarding the importance of practitioners foregrounded this analysis of epistemological and methodological problems in higher
education. Kezar’s work (2000) documents limited agreement between practitioners and researchers views of higher education scholarship—noting that while both groups are capable of pointing out the limited theoretical foundations for higher education scholarship—practitioners are more pessimistic about the utility of the work that is being produced. Kezar’s (2000) finds that practitioners are more likely to value works that are timely, clearly articulate connections between theory and practice, and offer holistic approaches to problems. In contrast, researchers prize the rigor and novelty of research. Functionally, this lack of agreement guarantees that there will be a gap between theory and practice. Further, it stands to reason that this gap will be greatest where the problems raised in practice are the most varied and the hardest to address given the prevailing quantitative methodology. Given the complexities of research focused on human interaction and meaning-making, student learning and development is thus arguably the most problematic application of theory-to-practice in the field of higher education.

At present, there is a lack of consensus in the scholarly community regarding what comprises student learning and development as well as whether it is appropriate to conflate the two (Reason & Renn, 2008). As a result, the student affairs profession, which takes as its special province student learning and development (Evans & Reason, 2001), will have significant problems in applying theories to practice. Tanaka (2002) suggests that student development theories have not kept pace with developments in social theory being produced in related fields such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Key among his concerns are issues of marginality, hegemony, knowledge production, validity, and social justice praxis (all key issues in practice) raised by critical
approaches (including critical feminist, queer, and race theories) and the challenges raised by relativist epistemologies (including post-structuralism and post-modernism).

This lack of scholarly consensus and seeming lack of responsiveness to new scholarship earlier led Bloland, Stamatakos, and Rogers (1994) to dismiss student development as a meaningless term. Though it reduces significantly the volume of their critiques, they offer four major challenges to student development theory’s utility:

- *Since it redirects attention away from the curriculum, student development is divorced from the overall learning focus of college.* Although this concern is mitigated by the movement to elide learning and development referenced above (i.e. ACPA, 1996), the incomplete nature of this synthesis (Reason & Renn, 2008) leads to the need for ongoing acrobatics in theory-to-practice applications as practitioners struggle to utilize both student learning and student development theories in meaningful ways.

- *Student development theory is neither useful in a descriptive, explanatory, nor strategic sense; it was created principally to validate the need for student affairs staff members.* Such a critique can be addressed through research. Given Bloland, Stamatakos, and Rogers (1994) focus on utility, I suggest my second research question (focused on which types of theory are being used) might be used to gauge the reasonableness of this proposition.

- *There is little research to support the theories themselves or that interventions designed based on theories are particularly effective.* Though discussed in greater depth during Chapter Three, I suggest that the extended case method—which utilizes contrary observations to modify or extend existing
theories—can help to address this concern. Further, case study research would demonstrate the relative success or failure of various theories in supporting the conceptualization of interventions—as well as the effect of those interventions.

- Theories designed to be applied universally cannot take into account variations in students and institutions. Such a critique ignores the modern conception of social theory, which holds it is designed to predict the most likely case rather than explain any specific instance (Parker, 1977). Though Bloland, Stamatakos, and Rogers (1994) do not suggest it, they are asking social theory to perform the role of Bensimon’s (2007) “implicit theory” or Parker’s (1977) informal theory. Social theories, designed to operate as abstractions of reality and as analytic tools for data reduction, inevitably entail the loss of the sort of specific information essential to individual practitioner. I discuss the need for—but differences between—both types of theory below.

While I do not agree with Bloland, Stamatakos, and Rogers (1994) that the study of student development is a fool’s errand, they raise a number of legitimate critiques of the way that we model our understanding of student experience. The concerns that they raise virtually guarantee that student affairs practitioners will utilize theories of student learning and development eclectically, if at all—adapting key concepts from a variety of theoretical perspectives, utilizing their own experiences and assumptions as a heuristic lens for the creation of an informal theory, or theory-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974). This eclectic usage, in turn, prompts the need for theory-to-practice translations, and the question of how best to effect these translations has once again emerged as critical to
higher education in general and student affairs more specifically (Evans & Guido, 2012; Love, 2012; Reason & Kimball, forthcoming).

Appearing recently in the *Journal of College Student Development*, the higher education field’s preeminent publication focused solely on student experience, Love (2012) holds that most theories of student development do not conform to standard social science definitions of theory and further suggests that theoretical knowledge of student experience would not prove particularly helpful even if it did exist. The focus of student affairs work, Love (2012) argues, is more appropriately the individual student or small groups of student. At this level of application, student development scholars have long held that theory breaks down (Parker, 1977; Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994). Instead, Love (2012) suggests we need thoughtful ways to process our own understandings of student experience and to integrate it with information provided by a variety of sources—including scholarly literature that suggests important “guiding concepts” (Reason & Kimball, forthcoming) that might structure our student affairs practice. While these guiding concepts might in some sense be based on theory or something that we label theory, Love (2012) suggests that the intervening step of thinking about these guiding concepts through the lens of practice strips them of any pretension to generalizability or universality—key components of most definitions of theory (Jaccard & Jaccoby, 2009).

Writing in response to Love (2012), Evans and Guido (2012) suggest that practice is inevitably informed by theory whether we label it such or not. The issue, Evans and Guido (2012) suggest, is how formal an approach to theory we ought to adopt. Advocating for a highly formalized and rigorous approach, Evans and Guido (2012) hold
that the use of informal theoretical approach advocated by Love (2012) without the structured guidance of formal theory is likely to introduce untested and potentially problematic assumptions about the nature of student experience. Only via our aspiration to formal theory, even if executed in imperfect ways, can we safeguard against this sort of error. While they also hold that a level of informal theory might prove useful in mediating between theory and practice, Evans and Guido (2012) forcefully suggest that the connection between formal methods of theory production and practice can we aspire to create optimal student experiences.

Though not formally a part of the exchange between Love (2012) and Evans and Guido (2012), Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) position their work to respond to the respective concerns of both pieces. Carefully walking a middle ground between these pieces’ positions, Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) hold that, while the application of theory may be problematic at present—as suggested by Love (2012)—its utility can be greatly enhanced through the use of a structured process designed to situate formal theory within an institutional context, produce informal theories based on both formal theories and that context, and then create strategies for practice. Their model can thus be seen as a response to Evans and Guido’s (2012) call for a direct connection between theory and practice. As a result, the work of Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) represents a useful encapsulation of the current state of the theory-to-practice debate and forms the basic understanding of theory-to-practice applied throughout this dissertation.

As briefly stated above, Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) hold that there are four elements in a theory-to-practice process: formal theory, institutional context, informal theory, and practice. Building in two feedback loops, they also suggest that their
theory-to-practice model is designed to be self-correcting—thereby promoting great alignment between theory and practice. Reproduced in Figure 1, the Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) model is structured around a series of questions designed to be asked at various points in the theory-to-practice translation.

Figure 2: Model of Theory to Practice (Reason & Kimball, forthcoming)

The model begins from the assumption that student affairs practitioners require a solid foundation in the most important historical and contemporary theories of student development. This broad base of knowledge enables student affairs practitioners to select appropriate theoretical approaches based upon a variety of contexts—including the level of desired intervention and the institutional context. Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) state that the key questions at the level of formal theory include:

1) What formal theories are part of the shared knowledge among staff members?

2) What new understandings of formal theory are provided by the scholarly community (e.g. articles, books, conference presentations)?

3) What are the specific outcomes encouraged by these formal theories?

4) What student populations are represented (or not) by the research on which these theories are based? (p. 10)
Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) suggest that, while missing from many models of theory-to-practice, the institutional context layer is critical to effective translations. Defining the institutional context quite broadly—and thereby including standard institutional characteristics like Carnegie Class and admissions selectivity as well as the overall understanding of student experience held by the campus community—Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) argue that student affairs practice is not a values-neutral activity and is consequently foregrounded by an institution-specific understanding of student development goals. They thus argue that, at the level of institutional context, student affairs practitioners ought to consider: the sociodemographic characteristics of students, the educational objectives of the college, the value commitments they hold, and the extent to which the above align (Reason & Kimball, forthcoming).

In suggesting that formal theory and institutional context should always precede the adoption of informal theories, Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) depart significantly from Love’s (2012) less structured approach. Like Love (2012), however, they hold that it is at the informal theory stage that student affairs practitioners derive the understandings of student experience that they “use in their everyday practice” (Reason & Kimball, forthcoming, p. 18). As they define them, informal theories are “produced based upon the confluence of formal theories, institutional context, and the individual student affairs practitioner’s positionality” and are thus the precursor to all good practice (Reason & Kimball, forthcoming, p. 18). At the layer of informal theories, Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) hold that answers to the following questions structure practice:
1) How do I believe learning and development occur during higher education? Or, in Parker’s (1977) terms, what is my informal theory of student learning and development?

2) How is my informal theory influenced by my own educational experiences and the institution at which I work?

3) How does my understanding of formal theory influence my understanding of learning and development?

Defining practice as “the point at which formal and informal theories are translated into specific, concrete behavior with students,” Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) hold that reflection on practice is a key part of theory-to-practice translations (p. 19). Following a careful examination of issues such as the relationship between practice, informal theory, institutional context, and formal theory, Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) hold student affairs practitioners can then use their reflections on practice to modify their understanding of both informal theory and institutional context via structured feedback loops. One of these feedback loops is focused on the use of lessons from practice to inform a practitioner’s understanding of informal theory. It involves an expansion of the student affairs longtime commitment to assessment to include questions about preferred interventions strategies, their theoretical foundation, and evidence. The other feedback loop connects practice to institutional context via a series of questions about the connection between programmatic goals and programmatic outcomes.

As presented by Reason and Kimball (forthcoming), their model of theory-to-practice represents a novel synthesis of existing models and critiques. This literature base is reviewed in Chapter Two in order to illustrate the relationships between theory and
practice that might be in evidence at Central University. Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) further suggest that their model is distinguished by its ability to guide action, produce reflexive practice, and structure an ongoing empirical literature base concerned with theory-to-practice. Such an argument is predicated upon the belief that social science can and ought to be a reflexive enterprise with practical implications. The literature and theoretical arguments supporting this position are presented beginning in Chapter Two and continuing throughout Chapter Three, which also includes a detailed description of methods and the site where this research was conducted. Departing significantly from other works that focus solely on the meaning-making processes of student affairs practitioners (e.g. Amey & Reesor, 2009; Hirt, 2006; Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004), this work employs the extended case method proposed by Michael Burawoy (1991; 1998; 2009) to explore the differences between the formal theoretical understandings of student experience developed by scholars, the informal theoretical understandings of student experience espoused by student affairs practitioners, and use of the two in practice. Chapter Four thus provides a review of major formal theories of learning and development before suggesting that transformative learning theory and self-authorship are useful lenses through which to view the larger canon of student learning and development literature relative to practitioner experience. Chapters Five and Six present the results of an ethnographically-informed study conducted in an advising office and a residence life office at Central University. Finally, Chapter Seven provides a synthesis of findings and an argument for a new model of theory-to-practice-to-theory—effectively closing the epistemological loop suggested by Kezar (2000) and Bensimon (2007) by acknowledging the potential lessons for theory held by practice.
The primary contributions of this dissertation are methodological. My work not only demonstrates applicability of Burawoy’s (1991; 1998; 2009) work to research in higher education—thereby introducing a relatively new research technique to the field—but also provides a provisional model for theory-to-practice-to-theory conversions. The model I describe has the potential to produce both more theoretically-informed practice and more practically-oriented research.

**Key Terms**

The terminology necessary to speak clearly about different types and uses of theory in thinking about student learning and development is daunting. For the sake of clarity, I provide a brief glossary here of the concepts that I have used in this chapter and use moving forward.

*Formal theory* is a body of thinking about student learning and development that is presumed to be produced in accordance with prevailing norms of social science research. It is thus abstract and generalizable; it is thus best applied to large populations. Nonetheless, key questions concerning formal theory include its ability to be representative of individual cases and the methodological rigor with which it is produced.

*Informal theory* refers to the theoretical understanding that practitioners have of student learning and development based upon their interpretations of formal theories through the lenses of their own experiences. In contrast, *implicit theory* reflects the values, beliefs, and assumptions that practitioners operationalize in their daily practice—often without awareness that they do so. While informal theory is always heavily
influenced by formal theory, implicit theory is often produced without the guidance of formal theory.

Both informal theory and implicit theory are forms of *theory-in-use*—a guiding set of knowledge and assumptions designed to assist in the interpretation of specific situations or contexts. A *theory-to-practice model* is a set of processes or key concepts designed to assist in the production of a theory-in-use based upon relevant formal theories.

Theories-in-use often differ from the formal theories that may have influenced them or are designed to represent similar situations or contexts. I frequently call the difference between theories-in-use and formal theories “slippage” or a “gap.” A *theory-to-practice-to-theory* model is designed to assist in the conversion from formal theories to theory-in-use and then utilize the discontinuity between formal theories and the theory-in-use to refine existing formal theories.
Chapter Two:  
Knowledge Production and Theory-to-Practice

The Gap Between Theory and Practice

For those interested in student learning and development, the gap between formal theory and informal theory has several problematic implications. In practice, the highly individual nature of informal theory may mean that individuals working with the same student(s) within the same institution may have radically different understandings of what comprises student learning and development. As a result, we may end up creating non-optimal levels of dissonance and support within the student experience (Vygotsky, 1978; Cranton, 2006; Kegan, 1982; Bronfenbrenner, 1979)—possibly resulting in negative outcomes for students. At a theoretical level, the gap between formal and informal theory has problematic implications as well. Student affairs practitioners and faculty members who work directly with students in a wide variety of contexts represent an important resource which is not typically part of academic research. By finding a way to connect more directly to this knowledge base, we can greatly enrich our scholarly dialogues. Informal theory can represent a useful source of information about possible topics for scholarly investigation as well as provide informed critiques of existing theories.

However, within higher education research, we presently lack a way to discuss informal theories in a scholarly context. Since informal theories are at least partially rooted in individual experiences, they introduce ambiguous personal elements to a scholarly process designed to favor dispassionate logical reasoning. This seeming incompatibility arises due to the lack of a rigorous, systematic technique concerned with informal theory development that could directly connect to the scholarly literature which
forms the basis for formal theory. The discontinuity can be seen most clearly via a review of existing models of theory-to-practice—most of which are deeply ambivalent about the role of informal theory and none of which treat it as epistemologically or ontologically equivalent to formal theory.

As a result, I suggest the need for a method designed to bridge informal and formal theory. Such a methodology would be principally useful at the level of informal theory but would regard that theory base with the same rigorous, systematic approach common to formal theory development. This understanding of theory development is consistent with techniques based upon abductive reasoning utilized in the medical sciences (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). Such a movement is also consistent with the need articulated by Bensimon (2007), in her presidential address to the Association for the Study of Higher Education.

Though sometimes neglected in methods textbooks, abduction is a third form of logical reasoning that formalizes the more or less subjective process of utility judgments based upon past experiences—including an understanding of relevant literature—that characterizes informal theory. In suggesting the role that abductive reasoning might play in qualitative methods, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) describe abduction as follows:

In abduction, an (often surprising) single case is interpreted from a hypothetic overarching pattern, which, if it were true, explains the case in question. The interpretation should then be strengthened by new observations (new cases). The method has some characteristics of both induction and deduction, but it is very important to keep in mind that abduction neither formally nor informally is any simple 'mix' . . . it adds new elements. During the process, the empirical area of
application is successively developed, and the theory (the proposed over-arching pattern) is also adjusted and refined. (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 4)

Abductive reasoning has a long history in the medical professions, where clinicians are often called upon to utilize their past experience to generate a working hypothesis to explain a specific case. That hypothesis, if proven useful, becomes part of the clinician’s lexicon and will be refined in subsequent instances. Recognizing the knowledge that clinicians possess, the medical sciences have long utilized case study research (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) to formalize abductive understanding. They thus have access to that expertise in formal scholarship.

In the case of student learning and development, an abductive approach to case study research would help reduce the gap between informal theory and formal theory. Such a technique relies upon the knowledge and experience of practitioners, but produces scholarship consistent with the norms established for formal scholarship. Informal theory can then become a meaningful part of the ongoing scholarly debate about student learning and development. It can thus suggest points of commonality and conflict in existing formal theories. As suggested by Parker (1977), the student affairs practitioner synthesizes formal theory in a novel way—a synthesis we can utilize to expand our understanding of how we might go about organizing knowledge within the field.

Methodologically, the abductive case study method described above is most similar to Burawoy’s (2009) extended case method, which aims to capture knowledge that traditional social science cannot. As Burawoy (2009) notes:

In saving both science and the extended case method, however, I do not eliminate the gap between them. Making context and dialogue the basis of an alternative
science unavoidably brings into prominence power effects that divide the extended case method from the principles of reflective science. [...] Given that the world is neither without context nor without power, both sciences are flawed. But we do have a choice. (p. 25)

The extended case method is thus designed to extend reflexive methods of scientific theory development to the social sciences by calling upon the scholar as an engaged, knowledgeable participant in the creation of knowledge. By design, the researcher attempts to abstract general “rules” from the observation of a limited number of unique cases based upon the researcher’s prior expertise. It is thus consistent with the definition of abductive reasoning I propose above (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) and the general use of case studies within the health professions (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). I thus conclude this chapter by reviewing insights from social theory that afford support for the contention that we can treat informal theory commensurately with informal theory and thereby adopt the abductive reasoning described above.

**Common Models of Theory to Practice**

Given the long-running critiques of research in higher education generally, and student learning and development specifically along epistemological and methodological grounds, we might reasonably assume the existence of a body of practitioner-oriented literature designed to assist in the translation of theory-to-practice. Unfortunately, much of this literature is equally problematic. Responding to the impulse described by Argyris and Schon’s (1974) *Theory in Practice*, this literature base relies on the innate human ability to make meaning of new situations, take action, and reflect upon that action in
order to develop a working model of the world moving forward. This model, according to Argyris and Schon (1974) is a theory-in-use and takes into account “assumptions about self, others, the situation, and the connections among action, consequence, and situation” (p. 7). Unfortunately, however, the theory-to-practice literature in student affairs is either too rigid, too fragmentary, or both to be of much use in addressing the challenges raised by Argyris and Schon (1974).

The first of these theories designed specifically for student development practitioners was created by Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst in 1974, subsequently revised by the authors in 1980, and revised by Evans in 1987. Initially, Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst (1974) suggested that the theory-to-practice conversion involves three considerations: 1) the target of the intervention—ranging from individual to institution; 2) the purpose of the intervention—ranging from reactive to developmental; and 3) the method of intervention—ranging from personal contact to the use of media. These vectors were reframed slightly by Evans (1987) as target [individual or institutional], type [planned or responsive], and approach [explicit or implicit] but remain functionally the same as articulated by Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst (1974).

Both works (Morrill, Oetting, & Hurst, 1974; Evans, 1987) hold that developmental theory can be applied both directly and indirectly in the short- or long-term. They do not, however, clearly connect the selection and application of theory with the considerations in application outlined above—leading to ambiguity in the translation process and compromising the utility of the proposed models. In their later work, Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst (1980) clarify their thinking regarding the target, purpose, and methods of intervention and emphasize that much of their thinking is rooted in ecological
development theory: in this regard, their treatment of primary and associational groups are particularly reminiscent of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) microsystems and exosystems respectively. However, even with recent resurgence of ecological approaches to development (Renn, 2003; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Renn, 2004), developmental ecology’s limited representation in the student development literature (Evans et al, 2010) suggests that current practitioners would have trouble applying a theory-to-practice model with underlying ecological assumptions without a more detailed explication of the process and theoretical assumptions involved.

Building from a different theoretical tradition, Rodgers and Widick (1980) proposed a grounded formal model for theory-to-practice. This model, which emphasizes both practitioners’ knowledge of scholarly theory and their creativity, suggests a seven phase process designed to connect theory-to-practice. As articulated by Rodgers and Widick (1980), the grounded formal model involves:

1) the selection of a problem encountered by a specific population in a specific context;
2) the selection of appropriate and useful scholarly theories;
3) the translation of those theories into the context of practice;
4) the formulation of goals for the intervention and/or program;
5) the design of the intervention and/or program;
6) application of the intervention and/or program;
7) evaluation of the intervention and/or program—including gaps between the formal theories utilized and the theories-in-use employed by staff.
While Rodgers and Widick’s (1980) model thus addresses the concerns regarding the ambiguity and theoretical underpinnings of Morrill, Oetting, and Hurst’s (1974; 1980) model, it too has serious limitations. It places a great deal of faith in formal theories as a guide for action—a faith that Bloland, Stamatakos, and Rogers (1994) would tell us might be misplaced. Even more importantly, however, it places heavy demands on the scholarly knowledge of practitioners—particularly in theory selection and program evaluation phases—by requiring them to be well-versed in a wide range of theoretical perspectives. However, as Cooper (1980) suggests, the undifferentiated nature of higher education as a field may preclude even highly trained scholars from being well-versed enough in the range of theories required for success in Rodgers and Widick’s (1980) grounded formal model.

Stage (1994) addressed the expertise problem introduced by Rodgers and Widick (1980) by proposing a process-driven model of the theory-to-practice translation. Suggesting that knowledge of developmental theory should be driven by professional context, Stage (1994) indicates that the problem being addressed via theory and the theory being selected to address that problem are co-constitutive of one another. Further, Stage (1994) moves to concretely ground the theory-to-practice translation through the selection of a single, specific case for application. Once this selection is made, Stage (1994) suggests the need to plan carefully and educate student affairs staff members who need to share the same understanding of theory-to-practice in order for the plan to be successful. Once this work is complete, the intervention should be implemented and its results evaluated to determine their efficacy. As a whole, Stage’s (1994) process model makes notable improvements over Rodgers and Widick’s (1980), Morrill, Oetting, and
Hurst’s (1974; 1980), and Evans’s (1987). Its full utility is hampered, however, by an abridged discussion of how theory is actually applied and by its lack of acceptance in student affairs—not having been featured in any of the recent student development or student affairs textbooks that I reviewed (Evans, Forney, & Guido-Dibrito, 1998; Komives & Woodard, 2003; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010).

Nonetheless, Stage’s (1994) model does serve as the basis for the case analysis model presented by Stage and Dannels (2000), which is not explicitly a theory-to-practice model, but can be used as such. According to their model, theory-to-practice would consist of a series of eight decisions: 1) the identification of actionable issues; 2) the gathering of available key information; 3) the collection of additional information which is not readily available; 4) the identification of key persons in the case; 5) the identification of relevant theories; 6) the identification of alternative understandings; 7) an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of all alternatives; and 8) the selection of a course of action. Since the model is intended for ex post facto analysis, Stage and Dannels (2000) could not have been expected to include an assessment feedback loop. They can, however, potentially be critiqued for again describing the theoretical grounding which occurs in step five as “the most individual of those [steps] in case-study analysis” (Stage & Dannels, 2000, p. 43). Such an insight contradicts the basic tenets of formal theory while also implicitly suggesting the need for informal theories as well as a process for bridging the gap between the two theory types.

An additional attempt to offer suggestions for theory-to-practice, proposed by Brown and Barr (1990), actually presents little in the way of a formal model—indicating only the need for awareness of theory and context before implementation and
evaluation—but does offer a useful critique of the direction suggested by Stage (1994).

Holding that theory-to-practice efforts are hampered by a lack of consensus, a lack of knowledge, a lack of felt need for theory, and the desire for a more holistic approach, Brown and Barr (1990) suggest that scholars ought to examine the needs of practitioners more critically if theory-to-practice is a goal of scholarship. Though Brown and Barr (1990) discuss this problem in practical terms, their argument is virtually identical to the scholarship-focused arguments of Keller (1998) and Kezar (2000).

In an effort to get at usefulness more directly, recent attempts to discuss the theory-to-practice problem have increasingly focused on the individual interpretive act—eschewing models of application for discussions of important considerations when evaluating theory. In her chapter “The Nature and Uses of Theory,” for example, Marylu McEwen (2003) provides an extended discussion of the way in which theory might prove useful—including as a foundation for practice, a medium for conversation, a way to engage the scholarly discourse, and a data reduction technique—before diagramming connections between various types of theories. McEwen (2003) also suggests that multiple origins of theory-as-broadly-conceived—including higher education scholars, the disciplines, institutional knowledge, and personal experience—and the things students affairs practitioners should be attentive to evaluating theory—including culture, gender, context, and its treatment of the individual. Less clear, however, is how exactly any given person is supposed to balance these seemingly contradictory demands in the theory-to-practice translation, which still leaves the practitioner with the frightening prospect of having to explain their sensemaking to colleagues in order to create a holistic institutional vision for student learning and development.
A similar approach is taken in the leading textbook(s) on student development. In the work of Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998), many of the models discussed above are outlined. However, they are presented more or less sequentially with no indication given as to how they might be synthesized. As such, the closing sections on key concepts in theory application—including discussions of such things as Lewin’s interactionist perspective, Sanford’s challenge and support, Astin’s involvement, Schlossberg’s marginality and mattering, and Rendon’s validation—are likely to have the clearest implications for theory-to-practice. Presented as a largely compatible theoretical framework, the implication is that these concepts represent a workable translation of theory-to-practice. Appearing in the revised work of Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010), the recently updated version of this chapter does little to address the continued need for a model for theory-to-practice. Instead, it cuts the discussion of past models entirely and adds a discussion of using theory to accommodate individual difference. It also added a brief defense of student development theory, which additionally serves to highlight its connection to student learning.

Though the movement toward a discussion of key theoretical concepts in lieu of a formal model of theory-to-practice suggests the potential for increasingly large gaps between the student affairs practitioner’s theories-in-use, it also represents a more reasonable approximation of the way individuals go about making meaning of theory (Love, 2012). Most scholars would still argue that it cannot fully replace models of theory-to-practice (Evans and Guido, 2012), but it must be thought of as a notable expansion. As described in Chapter One, the work of Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) walks a meaningful middle road between approaches based on formal models and those
based on key theoretical concepts. It is thus a highly useful approach to the theory-to-practice translation grounded in and largely consistent with the theory-to-practice literature which preceded it. Like this literature, however, it begins from the first premise that formal theory must be granted a privileged ontological and epistemological position—in effect, it states that formal theory must lead to informal theory (Parker, 1977) rather than leaving open the possibility that informal theory might someday lead to formal theory. This argument is entirely consistent with the dominant understandings of knowledge production in the social sciences, but as Love (2012) indicates, once we accept that informal theory is a valid alternative means of knowing, the overall question of how knowledge is produced bears further scrutiny. While my dissertation upholds the key role of formal theory advanced by Evans and Guido (2012) and confirmed in Reason and Kimball (forthcoming), emergent trends in the philosophy of social science suggest that it cannot be provided the epistemological primacy it has long been afforded. As a result, a new model that is capable of attending to the formal theory focus of theory-to-practice models while also focusing on the practitioner meaning-making represented by informal theory is needed.

**The Production of Theory**

In the following sections, I try to make the connection between the epistemological and methodological concerns that I identified with regard to higher education and longer-running concerns in social theory. Specifically, I advance the need for a social science sensitive to local, contextual truths in the way incorporated by informal theory (Parker, 1977) and modeled via the extended case method (Burawoy,
1991; 1998; 2009) as a three part argument. First, I suggest the failure of a positivist model of knowledge production by expanding on the tension between normal and revolutionary science posed by Kuhn (1962/1996). Following Feyerabend’s (1975 / 2010) critique, I suggest that revolutionary science is inherently ascientific and further that this violation of scientific rules is actually what produces new knowledge—echoing Burawoy’s (2009) claim that error is the “spice of science” (p. 247). As a result of Feyerabend’s (1975 / 2010) critique, I argue that the natural ontological attitude proposed by Fine (1986 / 1996), which holds that science is a discursive space rather than a set of methods, is actually the basic condition of science. Thus, I suggest that a methodology for developing informal theory and using it to critique formal theory need not conform to disciplinary norms with regard to knowledge production.

Next, I attempt to determine what an alternative methodology for understanding informal theory might look like. Accordingly, I attempt to capture what I call the hermeneutics of the every day. Following Martin Buber (1923 / 1970), I suggest that meaning is principally carried by relationships in the social world. As these relationships interact with one another in more or less predictable patterns, they create self-contained “language games” as described by Wittgenstein (1953). I further suggest that the linguistic nature of understanding produced by relationships forces us away from a correspondence theory of truth and toward a conception of truth as socially-produced. This argument is fundamentally consistent with the work of Gadamer (1960/1975), who suggests that a socially-produced truth must be regarded as independent from methods. That is, methodological productions can be held up against social truth to evaluate possible gaps between the two.
As such, the final argument that I make concerns the relationship between theory and practice. Drawing on the work of Habermas (1963 / 1973), which suggested that praxis is a field mediating between individuals and structures, I hold that there is a need for a critical social science focused on modeling the field of praxis. Such a model is supplied by Bourdieu (1971 / 1977) who utilizes the concept of habitus to produce a modellable interaction between individual and structure in the field of praxis. This insight, I suggest, is consistent with the basic insight of Giddens’ (1976) work prior to the formal articulation of the theory of structuration, which in contrast to his later work treats individual agency as the central problematic in the structuration relationship. This focus on individual agency in the production of understanding returns us to the critical insight of the pragmatists (James, 1907/1981; 1909/1978). The debate between Richard Rorty and Pascal Engel (2007) thus represents a meaningful way to synthesize the epistemological conception of truth as situated with the methodological conception of truth as the product of hermeneutic understanding. By incorporating pragmatist philosophy in this way, the discussion of social theory returns to the local and contextual knowledge identified as critical in informal theory during the discussion of the theory-to-practice problem in higher education. As a result, this discussion of social theory provides foundation for the transition to a discussion of the extended case method in Chapter Three.

**A Philosophy of Science**

According to Kuhn (1962/1996), our understanding of science is predicated upon a knowledge paradigm, which might broadly be thought of as a set of values, beliefs, and
assumptions delimiting appropriate problems for study and the epistemological assumptions that must undergird the solutions to these problems. A paradigm forms when a new scientific insight is “sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity” while also being “sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve” (Kuhn, 1962 / 1996, p. 10). That is, Kuhn (1962 / 1996) argues that science is prized for its heuristic qualities and that the assessment of heuristic value is determined in part by social factors having little to do with the actual truth of the insight. Over time, a new paradigm replaces the old as the critical mass of researchers shifts from one set of values, beliefs, and assumptions to another. As part of this shift, a complex of methodological approaches becomes more or less synonymous with the paradigm itself—creating an “implicit body of intertwined theoretical and methodological belief that permits selection, evaluation, and criticism” of scientific knowledge (p. 17). Thus, within a given paradigm, there is an incentive for producing knowledge which is logically continuous with the understanding which preceded it. As a result, a compelling narrative about the way in which the world works and the role of science in explaining natural phenomenon arises.

Kuhn (1962 / 1996) also suggests, however, that a paradigm’s delimiting function can have profoundly negative consequences. Since a paradigm creates a set of rules for science, problems that violate the assumptions of these rules “cannot be stated in terms of the conceptual and instrumental tools the paradigm supplies” (p. 37). As a result, such problems may either be invisible to the scientific community or appear insignificant despite their potential social importance. For Kuhn (1962 / 1996), the structural
determination of problems and solutions is normal science; due to its bounded nature, he also argues that normal science is a form of “puzzle-solving” (p. 42) proceeding according to predictable rules. As a result, Kuhn (1962 / 1996) must posit the existence of revolutionary science to explain the way in which radical discontinuities between past scientific knowledge and current scientific knowledge arise; the Copernican Revolution and the Theory of Relativity, for example, represented logical departures from previous science which cannot be explained via the conditions of normal science, which thus introduces the need for revolutionary science.

Kuhn (1962 / 1996) suggests that a paradigm shift, or the integration of revolutionary science, is largely the result of the reinterpretation of prior scientific knowledge. Characterized by a sense of novelty and openness abnormal for scientific work, revolutionary science arises from the discovery of an anomaly—often a longstanding one—that cannot be addressed via normal science. Exploration of the problem then leads to a new theory, which in turn is assimilated into the corpus of scientific knowledge. As a result of this assimilation, revolutionary science becomes normal science and prior scientific knowledge is reinterpreted according to the new paradigm with the assumption that the new state of knowledge was always intrinsically true. For Kuhn (1962 / 1996) then, the existence of revolutionary science is a remarkable act of faith for the scientific community; first, the originating researcher must risk ridicule from the community of normal science, and later, a growing number of scientists have to leave the logical security of normal science in favor of the new community. Kuhn (1962 / 1996), however, does not suggest how reinterpretation of scientific fact was precipitated or how the faith required to adopt new paradigms originates.
While Kuhn (1962 / 1996) was mostly interested in explicating the general condition of science, Feyerabend (1975 / 2010) considered explaining scientific innovation to be the fundamental problem of the philosophy of science. Accepting Kuhn’s (1962 / 1996) contention for the incommensurability of normal science and revolutionary science, Feyerabend (1975 / 2010) significantly expands the argument to hold that science is inherently designed to produce theories which are incommensurable with one another and that these theories are held up against one another only via the imposition of a formal set of methods, which themselves are often violated in order to advance the overarching theoretical argument a researcher wishes to make. Feyerabend (1975 / 2010) thus suggests that “the events, procedures, and results that constitute the sciences have no common structure; there are no elements that occur in every scientific investigation but are missing elsewhere” (p. xviii).

Based upon this premise, which is supported via historical evidence, Feyerabend (1975 / 2010) argues that science has increasingly adopted a form of methodolatry to counter the fact that is cannot claim a representational relationship between its truth claims and the objective reality to which they are supposed to correspond. However, since the truth produced by science originated not from method but from the independent theory development of human-beings acting from very human impulses, Feyerabend (1975 / 2010) suggests that we need not consider ourselves to be bound to those methods.

To support this argument, Feyerabend (1975 / 2010) offers a series of critiques to institutionalized normal science. In brief, he argues that the logical continuity emphasized by scientific reasoning and the normative influence that this exerts leads to demands that new hypotheses agree with existing theory rather than to the production of theories that
are more accurate. Such a formulation typically leads to the assumption that discrepancy between theory and observation arises from measurement problems rather than that these discrepancies suggest the need for better theories. Thus, it privileges scientific norms above real world observation—a problem Burawoy (1991a) tries to rectify by creating “dialogue between theory and data” (p. 3). Feyerabend (1975 / 2010) thus suggests that the distinction between discovery and justification traditionally assumed in philosophies of science—and preserved tenuously by Kuhn (1962 / 1996)—ought to be dismissed entirely. Instead, theory and data co-constitute one another. For Feyerabend (1975 / 2010), this understanding leads to the conclusion that science is anarchical—containing “not just facts and conclusions drawn from facts” but also “ideas, interpretations of facts, problems created by conflicting interpretations, mistakes, and so on” (p. 3).

For Feyerabend (1975 / 2010), science is thus inherently ascientific and can make no universal claim to truth. To encapsulate the totality of this argument briefly:

Thus all we can say is that scientists proceed in many different ways, that rules of method, if mentioned explicitly, are either not obeyed at all, or function at most like rules of thumb and that important results come from the confluence of achievements produced by separate and often conflicting trends. The idea that “scientific” knowledge is in some way . . . free from differences of opinion is nothing but a chimaera. (Feyerabend, 1975 / 2010, p. 253)

In short, science is the product of people. It is thus a reflection of the person performing it. As such, scientific knowledge is actually locally situated in the context of its production. For Feyerabend (1975 / 2010), this conclusion means that we ought not to argue for any special epistemological status for science. Likewise, Burawoy’s (1991;
1998; 2009) extended case method follows Feyerabend (1975 / 2010) in holding that scientific reasoning can be informed by and must be brought into dialogue with knowledge produced via different means.

Though Fine (1986 / 1996) agrees with this claim in principle, his proposal for the natural ontological attitude offers a useful way forward given the epistemological hollowness of science. Suggesting that epistemology is actually the province of individuals, Fine (1986 / 1996) shifts the purpose of science away from realist and anti-realist conceptions of truth and toward the creation of a discursive space. The natural ontological attitude assumes no position with regard to truth, accepts the locally-situated nature of scientific findings, and the incommensurability of its results. Instead, it focuses simply on the utility claims of science and suggests that both realist and anti-realist epistemologies can be satisfied by a science gauged by its social utility. Fine (1986 / 1996) writes:

> When NOA [the Natural Ontological Attitude] counsels us to accept the results of science as true, I take it that we are to treat truth in the usual referential way, so that a sentence (or statement) is true just in case the entities referred to stand in the referred-to relations. Thus, NOA sanctions ordinary referential semantics and commits us, via truth, to the existence of the individuals, relations, processes, and so forth referred to by the scientific statements that we accept as true. Our belief in their existence will be just as strong (or weak) as our belief in the truth of the bit of science involved, and degrees of belief here, presumably, will be tutored by ordinary relations of confirmation and evidential support, subject to the usual scientific canons. (p. 130)
In this regard, the claim of the natural ontological attitude is quite simple: truth is a discursive assumption of science but the validity of that truth claim is ascertained contextually. Truth then is the product of relationships—recalling the concept of contingency raised by Buber (1923/1970) and Rorty (1999)—which in turn are embedded in self-validating contexts similar to Wittgenstein’s (1953) language games.

**The Hermeneutics of the Everyday**

In *I and Thou*, Buber (1923/1970) demonstrates the fundamentally dialogic nature of human consciousness and thereby extending the insight Fine (1986/1996) produces for the sciences to all human relationships. For Buber (1923/1970), our conceptions of self were produced via relationship with others. Utilizing the *Ich-Du* (I-Thou) and *Ich-Es* (I-It) relationships to describe the production of consciousness through interaction, Buber (1923/1970) suggests that our perception of reality is shaped through our discursive relationships with the world around us. In the “I-Thou” relationship, an authentic dialogue is created wherein the identity of the individual is shaped via interaction with external influences and persons and vice versa. This state of being is positive and holistic given that the relationship is characterized by a genuine respect and no attempt is made to constrain either party’s authentic being.

In contrast to the “I-Thou” relationship, an “I-It” relationship is a dialogically nullifying act. Whereas the “I-Thou” relationship was characterized by reciprocity and mutuality, the “I-It” relationship is characterized by the individual’s objectification of the other—the creation of the “It.” Since we are all co-constituted in a series of relationships, the “I-It” relationship can be produced by either actor and is particularly problematic in
relationships containing power differentials. In “I-It” relationships, we treat real persons as mental representations rather than actual beings. In so doing, we deprive them of the reciprocity and mutuality that allows for fully developed consciousness found in the “I-Thou” relationship. Since an abstraction is not a real being, the “I-It” relationship not only objectifies the other, it also deprives the “I” of the possibility of a dialogue—creating instead a state in which it is not possible to attend to the needs of the other. Therefore, the Ich-Es relationship is in fact a relationship with oneself; it is not a dialogue, but a monologue. Such a state is problematic as it allows the “I” to impose thoughts and social strictures upon the “It” that may be contrary to that person’s needs or interests—both of which would be revealed if an “I-Thou” relationship were created.

Taking the concept of relationality a step further, Wittgenstein (1953) extends the dialogic conception of human experience to physical objects and even words via his arguments that human beings interact with the world through “webs of meaning.” In both its description and its execution, this concept is reminiscent of Geertz’s (1973) definition of culture and serves to bridge the thought of Wittgenstein (1953) to Habermas (1963 / 1973) and Bourdieu (1971 / 1977) with regard to fields of praxis. We might then think of these three concepts as related—perhaps reflections of one another. That is, when we interact with the world, we interact with a web of cultural significations (or a field of praxis). These cultural significations reflect and are reflections of meaning webs that connect to particular words or concepts. We are thus doubly suspended at any given time—recalling the double hermeneutic of Giddens (1984) in daily life. Not only does my interpretation of the world require interaction with an interconnected web, so too does my ability to express that interpretation. There are, as a result, many different ways in which
we can fail to express our exact meaning, which ultimately suggests that our understanding must be based on relational meaning-making rather than absolute certainty. In this regard, Wittgenstein (1953) paves the way for Gadamer (1960/1975).

Presently, however, it will be useful to explore in a bit greater depth how Wittgenstein’s (1953) webs of meaning work in practice. Wittgenstein (1953) viewed language as a fundamental dialogic act—a series of “language games” in which words are defined by their common usage and in which they imply the entire “web” of that usage. Wittgenstein (1953) begins his demonstration of the falsity of fixed meaning by describing the way in which we typically acquire language—through the association of objects and words. He notes: “The ostensive teaching of words can be said to establish an association between the word and the thing” (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 4). In practice, however, Wittgenstein (1953) suggests that this method of association creates an imperfect relationship between the signifying word and the signified object. To demonstrate, he invokes the more abstract concept of learning to count:

No one can ostensively define a proper name, the name of a colour, the name of a material, a numeral, the name of a point of the compass and so on. The definition of the number two, “That is called ‘two’”—pointing to two nuts—is perfectly exact.— But how can two be defined like that? The person one gives the definition to doesn’t know what one wants to call “two”; he will suppose that “two” is the name given to this group of nuts!—He may well suppose this; but perhaps he does not. He might make the opposite mistake; when I want to assign a name to this group of nuts, he might understand it as a numeral. And he might equally well take the name of a person, of which I give an ostensive definition, as
that of a colour, of a race, or even of a point of the compass. That is to say: an
ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in every case. (Wittgenstein,
1953, p. 13-14)

Through this example, Wittgenstein (1953) suggests the multiple ways in which a given
classification can be defined. In any given instance, we do not know whether a person refers to
an object as an example, an abstraction, an ideal type, or one of its constituent
components. We do not know meanings with any fixity; instead experiencing meanings
only through our relationship with specific situations.

As I have suggested above, the fact that our language for describing something is
imprecise does not restrict the actual utility of language nor does it imply that the object
is meaningless. As Wittgenstein (1953) suggests, either assertion turns upon peculiar
definitions of learning and meaning—in his formulation a model based on “illicit”
correspondences (p. 20). Instead, we must think of both learning and meaning as
relational acts. Thus—when Wittgenstein (1953) employs the term “game,” as in his
description of communication as a series of “language games”—he is not speaking
derisively. Instead, Wittgenstein (1953) is suggesting that language derives its specific
meanings through our shared agreement about a common set of assumptions (rules)
assumed to govern the relationships, and in which, these rules function primarily in a
limited context. In much the same way that we would not expect to play the game of
chess via the rules of bridge, so too would it be meaningless to attempt an understanding
of one “language game” through the rules of another.

Having made this statement, however, unlike the case of chess and bridge, we are
united via common elements—be they words, circumstances, or something else—in daily
life that allows us to relate one language game to another as we might connect chess and
checkers or bridge and hearts. This understanding is the basis for Wittgenstein’s (1953) assertion that:

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all,— but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them language. […] Consider for example the proceedings that we call “games.” . . . if you look at them you will not see anything that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 31)

As Wittgenstein (1953) continues to expand on this metaphor, we see that he conceives of specific language games as connected by “overall similarities” into families of resemblance that are connected as part of a “complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” one another so as to create some aggregate meaning (p. 32). This formulation of meaning leads to Burawoy’s (1991b) emphasis on the interpretive act as independent from scientific knowledge—that is, a refusal to “stress science over hermeneutics—the objective over the subjective” (p. 284). Yet, as with Feyerabend (1975 / 2010) above, the work of Wittgenstein (1953) leads us to believe that the act of discovery and justification exist simultaneously: discovery is created via interaction with the “complicated network of similarities” (Wittgenstein, 1953) while justification is a product of human consciousness. Temporally, however, they occupy the same time and cognitive space.
As I mentioned above, Gadamer’s (1960/1975) hermeneutics represents a useful expansion of Wittgenstein’s (1953) thought through its focus on the intersubjective nature of understanding and meaning-making. At its simplest level then, Gadamer’s (1960/1975) thinking is a reminder to take care not to divorce individual experience from its context nor to consider society without the individual. In and of itself, this reminder is quite useful to scholars of higher education who are often prevented by the very nature of post-positivist scholarship from recognizing the co-constituted nature of reality (Keller, 1998). Gadamer’s (1960/1975) arguments are, however, far from simple and much can be gained by unpacking them further.

Gadamer (1960/1975) asserts that the contemporary discursive tradition that separates truth from methods is flawed. In our modern, post-positivist discourse on knowledge, we make the assumption that our scientific methods will lead us toward truth. Focusing mostly on the way in which this tradition has been misappropriated by the humanities and social sciences, Gadamer (1960/1975) suggests that truth consists not in accurately figuring the world—as such an endeavor is impossible—but in the attempt to capture the shared meaning represented by experiences. That is, Gadamer (1960/1975) was interested in truth as a co-constituted phenomenon—or, in his formulation, a “historically effected consciousness.” He writes:

The fact that such an encounter takes place in verbal interpretation . . . and that the phenomenon of language and understanding proves to be a universal model of being and knowledge in general, enables us to define more exactly meaning of the truth at play in understanding. We have seen that the words that bring something into language are themselves a speculative event. Their truth lies in what is said in
them, and not in an intention locked in the impotence of subjective particularity.

(Gadamer, 1960 / 1975)

Thus, Gadamer (1960 / 1975) describes the inherently problematic nature of human understanding of truth as grounded in an imperfect hermeneutic. An individual or text can only adequately be understood by examining the culture and historical contingencies from which ze/she/he/it emerged. Further, in this understanding, the researcher’s understanding is contingent upon their own culture and historical development. As a result, the “truth” of any object of study is in reality a peculiar blend of the lived reality of that object of study and the lived reality of the researcher. Though Gadamer’s (1960/1975) primary concern in Truth and Method was the nature of scholarship, his findings can be applied to daily life as well. Knowing that our understandings are produced by our own past experiences, our discrete interactions with people and things, and our culture allows us to focus on the interaction of these three very different sources of truth in attending to the meaning-making of individuals.

**Theory and Practice in the Social Sciences**

As articulated by Habermas (1963 / 1973), the relationship between theory and practice is a central problem in the social sciences. The literature on theory-to-practice reviewed above is thus a partial reflection of a critical issue in social theory. For Habermas (1963 / 1973) it is only possible to understand the connection between theory and practice via the field of praxis—which mediates between the individual (or micro-interactional) and the institutional (or macro-structural) via the creation of a space in which empirical observation, epistemological critique, and methodological challenges
can decenter the hegemonic construction of knowledge. Praxis is thus a way of making social theory real and improving that same theory.

In language that echoes both Buber (1923 / 1970) and Gadamer (1960/1975), though the argument is likely drawn from the former, Burawoy (1991a) builds on this aspect of Habermas’ (1963 / 1973) conception of praxis—noting:

We advocate neither distance nor immersion but dialogue. The purpose of field work is not to strip ourselves of biases, for that is an illusory goal, or to celebrate those biases as the authorial voice of the ethnographer, but rather to discover and perhaps change our biases through interaction with others. Thus, an “I-You” relation between observer and participants replaces a “we” relation of false togetherness and an “I-they” relation in which the I often become invisible. Remaining on the sidelines as a marginal person or positioning oneself above the “native” not only leaves the ethnographer’s own biases unrevealed and untouched but easily leads to false attributions, missing what remains implicit, what those we study take for granted. (p. 4)

The extended case method then, to use Habermas’ (1963 / 1973) phrasing, is where the lifeworld of the researcher intersects the lifeworld of the subjects of research. This intersection produces a field of praxis which is the fundamental productive unit of the social sciences.

This intersection represents the creation of intersubjectivity, which for Habermas (1963 / 1973) means the “consultation or cooperation of individuals living together” (p. 13). Thus, we come to see the production of social scientific meaning as referring not to an external truth but back to the field of praxis which created it. This claim is driven
home by Habermas’ (1963 / 1973) subsequent discussion of how science alters reality. Arguing that scientific method represents an artificial third aspect of the field of praxis for knowledge production—joining the researcher and reality—Habermas (1963 / 1973) suggests that this formulation requires that “we place ourselves (fictitiously) outside the social interrelationships of life in order to confront them” (p. 210). Instead, the solution is to recognize the inherent intersubjectivity of the researcher; this formulation admits that: “The interest in attaining control over society initially invested in the cognitive initiative of scientific theories interferes with the simultaneous interest in society ‘in itself’” (p. 210). That is, we must recognize the inherent use claim made by the production of social scientific truth and in so doing we must subordinate the knowledge we produce to our own personal hermeneutic.

For Bourdieu (1971 / 1977), the personal hermeneutic—the underpinning of which is described above—is itself the product of praxis. He begins Outline of a Theory of Practice by stating that:

The anthropologist’s particular relation to the object of his study contains the makings of a theoretical distortion inasmuch as his situation as an observer, excluded from the real play of social activities by the fact that he has no place (except by choice or by way of game) in the system observed and has not need to make a place for himself there, inclines him to a hermeneutic representation of practice, leading him to reduce all social relations to communicative relations, and more precisely, decoding operations. (Bourdieu, 1971 / 1977, p. 1)

That is to say, meaning is derived due precisely to the context in which meaning is experienced. As such, the hermeneutic interpretation of the social scientist is inherently
flawed when it attempts to stand apart from that context and still ascertain the causal
meaning inscribed in that context.

For Bourdieu (1971 / 1977), the solution to this interpretive problem is to extend
the notion of praxis or intersubjectivity advanced by Habermas (1963 / 1973) to include
the intersection of competing field of praxis inscribed with meaning down to level of
individuals. Bourdieu (1971 / 1977) labels these meaning schemes “habitus” and defines
them as broadly as theories of practice—sequences of action or thought designed to
produce specific ends in predictable ways—and more specifically as “the product of
history” which “produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in
accordance with the schemes engendered by history” as well as “the system of
dispositions—a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the
future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles” (p. 82).

In a very reductionistic sense, habitus then might be conflated with culture—the
logically continuous body of values, beliefs, and assumptions residing in Geertzian webs;
Bourdieu’s (1971 / 1977) concept of habitus, however, is much more subtle as it is
designed to get at the tension between individual agency and structural reproductive
forces in a way that culture cannot. Functionally speaking, Bourdieu’s (1971 / 1977)
concept of habitus is a way of addressing the need to model praxis articulated by
Habermas (1963 / 1973) while also introducing the aspects of the theoretical insight
provided by the loosely conceived theory of structuration laid out by Giddens (1976) in

In this work, Giddens (1976) is principally concerned with the problem of
“human social activity and intersubjectivity” (p. 7). Suggesting that sociology has
historically understated the importance of individual agency and relationality in the production of society, Giddens (1976) argues that the rules of the scientific method are not appropriate for the social science because the subject of study is fundamentally unlike in the natural sciences: “The difference between society and nature is that nature is not man-made, is not produced by man. Human beings, of course, transform nature, and such transformation is both the condition of social existence and a driving force of cultural development” (p. 15). Noting that we have already sufficiently troubled the notion of a scientific science generally, Giddens’s (1976) argument is still quite useful: in essence, he is making the claim that, without a theory of practice at the individual level and more importantly a way to model the changes that theory of practice introduces, we risk missing the dynamism of society. Social rules may function as parameters for understanding individual action but they are neither universal nor invariant.

In making this contention, Giddens (1976) moves to unify phenomenological and functionalist approaches to sociology in a way not possible since Marx. Such a connection places the hermeneutic act—that is, the individual interpretation of the larger social structure—at the center of a fully developed social science. It also requires that social scientists be attentive to the full implications of the theories that they put forth as a lack of attention to this issue leads to the reification of society via theory at the expense of that which is observable via praxis. Giddens’s (1976) conception of individual agency is thus critical to addressing the theory-to-practice-to-theory problem. Giddens (1976) defines agency as “the stream of actual or contemplated causal interventions of corporeal beings in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world” (p. 75). Such a formulation suggests that the agentic experiences of individuals represent applications of the very
social theories that we attempt to test and, in turn, makes it incumbent upon the researcher to consider this source of knowledge—or even truth as it has been decentered in this chapter—in reconstructing theory.

(In)Conclusion(s)

As I stated above, I believe that the collective insights of Kuhn (1962/1996), Feyerabend (1975 / 2010), Fine (1986 / 1996), Buber (1923 / 1970), Wittgenstein (1953), Gadamer (1960 / 1975), Habermas (1963 / 1973), Bourdieu (1971 / 1977), and Giddens (1976) lead us to the conclusion that all knowledge is locally contextualized and that all theory is a form of personal hermeneutic designed to better understand the world. From Kuhn (1962/1996), Feyerabend (1975 / 2010), and Fine (1986 / 1996), we derive the insight that science is the projection of a collective hermeneutic onto the social and natural world and that the collective breaks down into individual hermeneutics in practice. Meanwhile, Buber (1923 / 1970), Wittgenstein (1953), and Gadamer (1960 / 1975) suggest that personal hermeneutics are the product of social relationships produced via linguistic interpretation independent of methodological rigor. Finally, Habermas (1963 / 1973), Bourdieu (1971 / 1977), and Giddens (1976) give us a way to think about the production of individual understanding in the context of the social sciences via theories that link the micro-interactional with the macro-structural.

In essence, this argument confirms the fundamental insight of William James 1907/1981; 1909/1978), who argued that truth was not the product of the union of epistemology and ontology but resided in human experience alone. So too does this argument echo the basic understanding of Burawoy (2009), who writes: “I take the view
that everyone is a theorist in the sense that some coherent account of the world is necessary to live in community with others. We all have tacit theories of how the world works, leading us to anticipate the behavior of others” (p. 269). In practice, this argument means that theory counts something as true if it is useful to believe it is true—typically because doing so allows us to organize our thinking about the past, present, and future in a synthetic way. As James (1907/1981; 1909/1978) suggests, our experiences constantly brings new concepts into conflict with our prior assumptions. We must then either accept these new truths and assimilate them into our personal hermeneutic or reject them in favor of our past. Consequently, in the pragmatist’s worldview, our state of knowledge is constantly in flux; as new truth replaces old, all we really know is change.

The malleable nature of truth within a pragmatist epistemology has led some to argue that it is an inadequate foundation for academic reasoning, which in term prompts pragmatist rejoinders that they simply describe the reality of human experience. One such debate is encapsulated by Rorty and Engel (2007). This work reproduces a debate over the difference between truth and utility conducted between Richard Rorty, who was the leading scion of American pragmatism until his death in the same year as the work’s publication, and Pascal Engel, a highly-regarded analytic philosopher and logician.

Engel begins by describing the pragmatist conception truth in what he considers to be a scathing manner—stating that it holds that: truth has no explanatory use; a correspondence theory of representation is inherently false; realism and anti-realism debates are hollow; justification is a preferable epistemological aim to truth; and that this formulation does not diminish our ability to speak of causality or values but that doing so must be predicated on contingency.
Though Engel expects vociferous objection, Rorty simply agrees with his statement of pragmatism’s view of truth. Functionally then, pragmatism reprises Fine’s (1986 / 1996) natural ontological attitude while Rorty’s response indicates the utility of this approach in redirecting non-productive discourses. Functionally, Rorty’s lack of argument is designed to suggest that the fundamental nature of the debate is moot: academic arguments about the nature of truth obscure the critical issue of what people actually do. Here, Rorty advances two arguments that, in turn, recall the individual hermeneutic and connection between theory and practice described earlier as critical to an adequate conception of social science:

[1] To give meaning to an expression, all you have to do is use it in a more or less predictable manner—situate it within a network of predictable inferences. [paragraph] The question that matters to us pragmatists is not whether a vocabulary possesses meaning or not, whether it raises real or unreal problems, but whether the resolution of that debate will have an effect in practice, whether it will be useful. […] For the fundamental thesis of pragmatism is William James’s assertion that if a debate has not practical significance, then it has no philosophical significance. (Rorty & Engel, 2007, p. 34)

[2] . . . our responsibilities are exclusively toward other human beings, not toward “reality.”[…] Trying never to have anything but true beliefs will not lead us to do anything differently than if we simply try our best to justify our beliefs to ourselves and to others. (Rorty & Engel, 2007, p. 41 & 45)

For these arguments, Rorty can offer no academic proof—only the reasonable argument that such a formulation leads to a better understanding of reality and a more human form
of social science. It is to the work of Burawoy (1991; 1998; 2009) that we must turn if we want a conception of truth rooted in utility to coexist happily with academic knowledge: the methodological foundations for this endeavor are explored in Chapter Three.
Chapter Three:  
The Methods of Theory-to-Practice

Introduction

In chapter one, I suggested that a problematic connection between theory and practice in higher education produced potentially negative consequences and that a new model for theory-to-practice conversions was required. Chapter two described existing theory-to-practice models before exploring various approaches to knowledge production in the social science. Taken together, these two chapters demonstrate both a practical need and a foundation in the social sciences for an analysis of theory rooted in practitioner experience. They thus suggest that findings related to the three research questions proposed at the outset—1) How do practitioners understand student experience? 2) What is the role of theory in that understanding? 3) What is the connection between theory and practice?—could be integrated into both higher education theory and practice. In this chapter, I layout the methodological approach required to produce findings of this sort.

The first section—“From the Extended Case Method to an Ethnographically-Informed View”—describes the extended case method (Burawoy, 1991; 1998; 2009) relative to chapter two’s discussion of knowledge production. From this explanation, it becomes clear that the extended case method is fundamentally an extension of the ethnographic point-of-view, which is based on a fundamental respect for their knowledge of research participants.

The chapter’s second section expands the description of the ethnographic enterprise. It offers brief descriptions of its most important elements—connecting the
practice of participant-observation to the narrative form. Pivoting on the concept of narrativity, it describes an alternative approach to validity rooted in the ability to create connections between research participants, researchers, and readers.

The final section uses the discussion of both the epistemological foundations of the extended case method and the ethnographic tradition as the basis to articulate the design for this study. It lays out in concrete terms how the extended case method was applied to the sites researched in this study—including the production of an initial theory, the selection of a research setting and cases, data collection and analysis techniques, and a reflection on the researcher’s role.

**From the Extended Case Method to an Ethnographically-Informed Point-of-View**

To address the need for a workable model of theory-to-practice-to-theory translation identified in Chapter One, I utilize the extended case method of Michael Burawoy (1991; 1998; 2009) as the overarching methodological framework for my dissertation. As Burawoy (2009) suggests, the extended case method is capable of transcending the limits of traditional research to produce a resituated epistemological and methodological foundation:

The answer lies with the extended case method, defined by its four extensions: the extension of observer into the lives of participants under study, the extension of observations over time and space; the extension from microprocesses to macroforces; and, finally, and most important, the extension of theory. Each extension involves a dialogue: between participant and observer, between
successive events in the field, between micro and macro, and between successive reconstructions of theory. These dialogues orbit around each other, each in the gravitation field of the others. (Burawoy, 2009, p. xv)

As a result of this re-situation and the fundamentally dialogic nature of research it entails, the extended case method views knowledge as a social production; sees the hermeneutic function of knowledge as its applied function; and treats praxis as inherently implicated in the research itself. As such, it is also fundamentally consistent with the theoretical concerns raised in Chapter Two; in fact, the extended case method is grounded in the work of two of the major theoretical contributions discussed as part of the literature review—both Giddens’ structuration (seen in Burawoy, 2009) and Habermas’ lifeworld (seen in Burawoy 1991a).

The extended case method is based upon six assumptions about human experience and the social sciences (Burawoy, 2009). First, it assumes that theory is a necessary tool for understanding the social world—functionally, that social theory exists both as “cognitive maps of the world we inhabit” at the level of “practical to tacit knowledge”—Parker’s (1977) informal theory—and also as formal theory when we think in “abstract formalisms” designed to mirror “mathematical theorems” (Burawoy, 2009, p. xiii). Thus, Burawoy (2009) indicates the inevitability of both informal and formal theory as well as the real potential for slippage between the two. Since the two theory bases are produced according to different models, it is unlikely that they will neatly align—creating gaps in the predictive and descriptive properties of formal and informal theory and the assumption that they do fundamentally different things. In other words, they initially appear incommensurable, but they need not be.
Given this slippage, Burawoy’s (2009) second postulate holds that good social theory is engaged at both the academic and the practical levels. This position is designed to address the third postulate of the extended case method, which is that a focus on macro-structural issues—the normative condition of academic work—obscures micro-interactional realities. Burawoy’s (2009) fourth postulate thus holds that the production of scholarly knowledge is not a neutral act—that it requires an intentional decision to focus on a theory at some point on the continuum from practical to academic—and that in the selection of a point-of-view, we commit ourselves to a specific negotiation of the macro-structural and the micro-interactional. Burawoy (2009) thus suggests that a critical social science would hold the predictions of macro-structural theory up against the reality of micro-interactional processes in order to ascertain the veracity of academic theory. As Burawoy (2009) writes:

Analytical theory enables us to see and thus comprehend the world, but that does not imply automatic confirmation. To the contrary, the world has an obduracy of its own, continually challenging the causal claims and predictions we make as social scientists on the basis of our theories. That is how we develop science, not by being right by being wrong and obsessing about it. (Burawoy, 2009, p. xiv)

Burawoy’s (2009) fundamental assumption then is that the slippage identified as part of the first postulate will inevitably be incorporated into academic theory as a form of error, and that this slippage is not reducible via academic work. Instead, in order to reduce the gap between formal theory and experience, we must use practical knowledge to critique academic knowledge. This claim is the foundation of Burawoy’s (2009) final postulate: “Analytical theory is not necessarily incomprehensive to lay people. Social science and
common sense are not insulated and incommensurable” (p. xiv). In other words, the language of theory and the language of practice can and must inform one another.

Given these postulates, the extended case method assumes neither the deductive logic of formal theory nor the inductive logic of experience. Instead, it holds induction and deduction up against one another in an attempt to produce new knowledge as part of an iterative process. It is thus an abductive, reflexive method (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Treating each new case as an opportunity to modify prior understanding, Burawoy’s (1991, 1998, 2009) extended case method offers an alternative way forward for the production of social theory—in this case, theories of student learning and development. In so doing, it expands upon traditional concepts of theory development via case study research; the models of George and Bennett (2005) and Yin (2008), for example, hold that theory development in case study research is an inductive act designed to produce propositions testable via others methods. Such a model attempts to move the specific observations contained in a case to the level of a generalizable theory.

In contrast, however, the extended case method utilizes individual cases to modify existing theories directly to take into account the lessons offered by the case.¹ As will be discussed in greater detail below, the extension of theories produced via deductive reasoning produces alternative demands for validity and generalizability: “The extended case method looks for specific macro determination in the micro world. . . It seeks generalization through reconstructing existing generalizations, that is, the reconstruction of existing theory” (Burawoy, 1991b, p. 279). Having utilized a generalizable theory

¹ The extended case method, while otherwise quite similar to the process tracing method proposed by George and Bennett, departs in this regard. In contrast to the extended case method, the process tracing method treats variations between the case and theory as an occasion for the researcher to revisit the interpretation of the case and not the argument of the theory.
validated according to the traditional rules of the social scientific method to try to explain
a specific case, the extended case method asks how that theory can be modified to take
into account a specific case if the case is not entirely explained by that theory. In
Burawoy’s (2009) words:

In our fieldwork we do not look for confirmations but for theory’s refutations. We
first need the courage of our convictions, then the courage to challenge our
convictions, and finally the imagination to sustain our courage with theoretical
reconstruction. (p. 53)

It thus calls upon the research to perform a fundamentally abductive act, relying on the
researcher’s own reflexivity as an instrument of research. Such a stance places the
extended case method firmly within the tradition of critical reflexive ethnography.

For Burawoy (2009), this critical reflexivity is rooted in the researcher’s refusal to
allow dialectics between “participant and observer, micro and macro, history and
sociology, theoretical tradition and empirical research” to be closed, and to instead
“[bring] them into dialogue” (Burawoy, 2009, p. 8). The success of this model is
suggested both by Burawoy’s (2009) own research results as well as independent
research designed to produce theory-extending case analyses (e.g. Hillyard, 2010). More
broadly, however, I suggest that this stance is simply part of the contemporary
ethnographic point-of-view; as such, while I cannot claim that my study is a proper
ethnography, I do endeavor to produce a study which is “ethnographically-informed” in
both the best and worst sense of the phrase.

As Wolcott (2005; 2008) has indicated, we mean a wide variety of sometimes
divergent things by ethnography. Put simply, ethnography is now taken to mean both a
specific set of qualitative methods and a scholarly stance focused on cultural analysis. In the tradition of cultural anthropology, there is often no distinction between the two (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). However, as ethnography has become a methodological construct in an increasing variety of disciplines, it is sometimes now taken to mean simply those qualitative methodologies often associated with cultural anthropologists (Wolcott, 2008). In reconciling these two disparate definitions of ethnography, it is important to distinguish between its adoption due to philosophical agreement and its adoption due to instrumental utility. While some researchers adopt ethnographic techniques as a matter of philosophical principle, I embrace this approach due to its ability to address holistically the structuration—or macro-micro—problem (Burawoy, 2009). Suggesting that an understanding of either society or the individual is derived from the other, the ethnographic view is designed to produce a depth of understanding with regard to a limited number of very specific cases (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). As a result, the ethnographic view is able to capture the paradoxical nature of human experience relative to structural forces.

In this regard, the work of Paul Farmer (1996, 2002, 2004, 2006) is particularly illustrative. Writing on the phenomenon of human suffering, he suggests that there is a critical distinction between describing a social phenomenon and trying to gain a real comprehension of it—that to describe may detach it from its social context and treats it as normal whereas a deeper understanding would be based on an exploration of its connectedness, myriad manifestations, and even its seeming contradictions. Taken as a whole, Farmer’s (1996; 2002; 2004; 2006) work explores the various “betweenesses” of human experience and the myriad ways in which traditional scholarship fails to
adequately account for—let alone describe—them. By “betweenness” I mean to suggest that through a variety of human constructions—including language, patterns, and normative patterns of behavior—we perpetuate a very specific dominant point-of-view which has the potential to marginalize many (Carspecken, 1996). Though this recognition has recently begun to appear in ethnographic work—producing hyper-aware works of self and disciplinary criticism such as Diversi & Moreira’s (2009) *Betweener Talk*-- it quite hard to operationalize.

Burawoy (1991b) suggests that the ability of the researcher to exist simultaneously as participant, observer, and critic of social conditions grants the extended case study a liberatory and scholarly potential that might otherwise be lacking:

. . . participant observers differ from participants precisely in their status as observers, which gives them insights into the limits of communicative action and the sources of its distortion, that is, how the system world denies freedom and autonomy in the lifeworld. As observers who also stand outside the lifeworlds they study, scientists can gain insight into the properties of the system world, which integrates the intended and unintended consequences of instrumental action into relatively autonomous institutions. Indeed, these can be understood only from the standpoint of the observer. (Burawoy, 1991b, p. 284)

Once cases are selected, the extended case method utilizes a critical ethnographic approach to develop a detailed understanding of each individual case. It then utilizes the researcher as an interpretive lens to determine similarities and differences across cases. Likewise, within the overall framework of the case study methodology, I use an
ethnographically-informed approach that relies on participant-observation, interviews, and document analysis.

Nonetheless, in positioning this study as ethnographically-informed rather than a proper critical ethnography, I depart from the methodology proposed by Burawoy (1991b). A typical extended case analysis would begin with a prediction based on social theory and attempt to apply it to a given social context. For example, a researcher employing the extended case method might say that existing social theory suggests that a factory would behave in X manner. Based upon an ethnography of a given factory, which arises from a sustained engagement with the cultural environment of that factory, the researcher might find divergent results. These divergent results are then incorporated into a modified theory. My dissertation differs from this process in two notable regards. First, my study will lack the macroscopic focus of the ethnography. I did not investigate Central University (or even a single office at Central University) with the depth that characterizes an ethnography. Instead, I focused on specific individuals with reference to that larger context. Second, my dissertation lacks the sustained focus of the proper ethnography. Detailed in greater precision below, I did not spend sufficient time in any one context to capture it fully. Instead, the focus remained on the study participants and relied upon the research to synthesize seemingly disparate findings.

As Tierney (1988) and Vidich and Lyman (1994) suggest, ethnography bridges time and place, individual and structure. Furthermore, Vidich and Lyman (1994) suggests that ethnographies are uniquely well-suited to produce multiply-situated findings—that is, ethnography allows the researcher to gain self-knowledge, advance theoretical understanding, or address a discrete problem. Historically, however, it has been
problematic to connect these three outcomes into one coherent, scholarly outcome. However, the extended case method—via its appropriation and reconstruction of existing theoretical knowledge—offers the potential to do just that: using the researcher’s own experience as the interpretive lens, scholarly work can be reconfigured to address the specific local demands presented by a given case. Such a movement is consistent with the critical and deconstructionist potential that Shumar (2004) identifies for ethnography in higher education.

From Ethnographically-Informed to an Alternative “Validity”

Magolda (1999) emphasizes the usage of artifacts as a symbolic representation of human thought within the overarching use of culture as an interpretive lens. Writing in a higher education context, he suggests that a review of artifacts as part of an ethnography can “reveal the implicit and explicit symbolic messages communicated by the administrators and the students” and “juxtapose espoused values with operational practices” (p. 10). This work provides an increased depth of understanding about student experience and campus culture. These new understandings can then help to inform both theory and practice. Ignoring the question of exactly how representative ethnography might be, Magolda (1999) suggests that it should be employed simply because it gets us someplace intellectually we could not get before. While we may not have accurately represented the lived experiences of those we research, we know something about them that we did not before, and even more importantly in Magolda’s (1999) view, we know something about ourselves that we did not before. The same impulse has led George and Louise Spindler (1997b) to label ethnography “the dialogue of action and interaction” (p.
By depicting ethnography as dialogic in nature, they offer a meaningful way forward—accepting the perspectival and provisional nature of our findings—while at the same time demonstrating the importance of reciprocity in ethnographic research.

Wolcott (2005; 2008) speaks of the dialogic nature identified by the Spindlers (1997b) as arising from the tension between ethnography-as-interpretive-lens and ethnography-as-epistemology. This dual nature poses major interpretive problems for the ethnographer, which has often led to purely descriptive ethnographies wherein the interpretive lens utilized as a reified body of methods independent ethnography’s underlying epistemological assumptions. Wolcott (2008) critiques such a move and suggests that an ethnography that does not holistically focus on culture is a form of misconstrual and thus deviates from true ethnography. Nonetheless, Wolcott’s (2005) description of ethnography as an art form requiring the active emotional and cognitive engagement of its artist rather than the cool detachment of the positivist scientist grants the researcher considerable leeway in implementing the ethnographic approach. Focusing on ethnography’s analytical holism rather than its attempt to write culture, it is thus possible to suggest that an ethnographically-informed study would represent the contextual immersion of both the researcher and the researcher’s findings. Thus, an ethnography within the extended case method is about engaging in and, to the greatest extent possible, accurately representing the “interaction” of people, thoughts, and things (Wolcott, 2005).

My study aims to accomplish precisely this outcome and does so by making use of participant-observation to generate a holistic view of the interaction between students and student affairs practitioners, relative to major theories of student learning and
development. As Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) suggest, participant-observation is uniquely well-suited to exploratory, unstructured, and/or micro-focused studies and, like the extended case method more generally, it relies heavily on the researcher as an interpretive lens. Such a stance places a great deal of pressure on the language employed by informants in communication with the researcher and the language employed by the researcher in reporting findings to accurately represent the lived reality of informants.

While this tension has led some researchers to focus solely on language as a carrier of symbolic meaning (e.g. Giffney, 2009; Heath, 2009), it can also lead to careful attention to the nature of narrative—both as a research methodology and as a symbolic construct. In effect, this makes the discovery of implicit and explicit truth claims the primary focus of ethnography (e.g. Carspecken, 1996). This issue produces continuity between ethnography, narrative, and the extended case method.

In one sense, narrativity raises questions about how we can adequately uncover the whole “story” associated with a people or a place. In another, it poses challenges about the manner in which we might represent these findings as a linear narrative in the form of a journal article or monograph. Finally, in perhaps its most important sense, narrative can stand in as a metaphor for culture as it does in the extended case method when stories of individual agency and experience are juxtaposed against macro-structural theories. The narrative research tradition thus displays heightened attention to oral and written textual data—suggesting that it forms the basis for most people’s meaning making activities. Gubrium and Holstein (2009) suggest that a failure to recognize this fact—that narrative is “social action” and not a finished “social product”—prompts many of the challenges associated with narrative (p. 1). Narrative, they suggest, is intrinsically
“intertextual,” which implies that “individual accounts owe much of their structure and meaning to other accounts” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009, pp. 185-186). Thus, for narrative researchers, a focus on story construction allows for exploration of human interaction in a relatively discrete, but important, field of social action. Learning is seen as emerging from the text being studied: “Narratives convey an understanding of environmental and interpersonal context, temporal sequence, and affective domain of the story” (Reason, 2001, p. 95). The argument is that, since those within a given cultural environment use narratives to make sense of their environment, so too can the researcher—an insight that yields information about both the construction of narratives and their use. Clearly, this insight is something that we can bring to bear within the ethnographic point-of-view. By looking at the way in which documents and stories function as cultural artifacts, we gain a sense of the larger organizational saga.

Recognizing the multiple ways that stories can be told encourages a view of organizations as actively constructed through discursive activity. By implication, both researchers and people in organizations are actively involved in the narrative reconstitution of organizations, and the choices made about what is included and excluded in the stories that are told and re-told by researchers. When research is re-cast as a process of telling stories about stories, the means by which those stories are created is an important area for analysis and methodological reflection (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 178). This study, for example, endeavors to understand how the dominant narrative regarding student learning and development represented by formal theory is contested and redefined through the informal theory of practitioners. It is, in effect, an effort to capture the multiple narratives that exist regarding the nature of student experience.
Raising questions about representation, this understanding highlights the fundamental subjectivity of ethnographic research. Holley & Colyar (2009) have taken this argument about subjectivity to its logical conclusion and suggested that we must actively look at authorship—both our own and that of others—as part of qualitative research. They depict the researcher as a “storyteller” engaged in a series of “strategic writing choices” (Holley & Colyar, 2009, p. 680). Such an understanding grants the researcher greater comprehension of how their readers might interpret their findings—demonstrating still again the importance of reflexivity in ethnographic research. Holley and Colyar’s (2009) findings suggest that it is important to ask the question: do I mean what I say when I use these words in this way, and will my readers understand my words in this same way?

As a result of the need to raise these questions, scholars like Vidich and Lyman (1994) and Gubrium and Holstein (2009) have spoken the scholarly narrative as a limited, bounded discourse. Vidich and Lyman (1994) describe the impact of this understanding on ethnography nicely:

. . . ethnography is now to be regarded as a piece of writing—as such, it cannot be said to either present or to represent what the older and newly discredited ideology of former ethnography claimed for itself: an unmodified and unfiltered record of immediate experience and an accurate portrait of the culture of the "other." (Vidich & Lyman, 1994, p. 41)

Based upon this understanding and the larger discussion of narrative, I am now in a position to answer a question posed to all research and typically focused with greater ferocity on qualitative research: in what ways are these findings generalizable? Though I
shall reprise this question at the close of the dissertation once the reader has greater information about the people and ideas associated with this research, I believe the provisional answer is clear: they are not, or rather, they are not unless you think they are. A nuanced understanding of a people and place can always have value, but a thorough understanding of the nature of narrative should suggest that it is incumbent upon the reader and not the author to determine what meaning these findings might have.2

This assertion echoes the findings of Koro-Ljungberg et al. (2009) who demonstrate that epistemologies, and thus truths, are multiple and situated. They suggest that while it might be possible to speak of an epistemology which is concretely grounded and universally consistent, it is not particularly productive. Instead, they argue for the embrace of (e)pistemologies which would be more contextual and conjectural—and thus subject to revision:

This constructed and plural view on (e)pistemological awareness and instantiation of methods highlights the role of interactions, language games, situatedness, and the uncertainties and flexibilities associated with knowing, signifiers, discourses, and justification systems. Within this epistemic system—which could also be marked by a move toward a postmetaphysical space—knowledges, the instantiation of methods, and transparency become more situational, complex, nuanced, and discourse dependent. (Koro-Ljungberg et al, 2009, p. 688)

2 This claim is driven home with great effect by Sanjak’s (1990). A collection of invited chapters examining the state of ethnography, Bond’s (1990) depiction of the fieldnote—the basis of all ethnographies—as neither discursive nor narrative and Lutkehaus’ (1990) discussion of the semiotics of research—and the impossibility of an outsider assuming the point-of-view of the researcher—are of particular interest.
Such an approach treats research and other forms of knowledge production as embedded in the very same semiotic webs as culture as all human activity. Given the multiply situated nature of the way in which we experience truth, Burawoy (2009) argues that our primary ethical and epistemological obligations must be to individuals—noting: “We have to be careful not to reify those forces that are themselves the product of social processes—even if those social processes are invisible to the participant observer” (p. 17). That is, Burawoy (2009) suggests the need for an alternative concept of validity and generalizability rooted not in the scientific method but the experiences of those with whom a researcher creates meaning.

Such a statement poses threats to the credibility of the researcher within the academic community. However, there is simply no way to avoid the fact that the ethnographer is the research instrument in an ethnography. As such, all findings emerge from the interpretive lens of the researcher. Further complicating this statement is the importance of ethical behavior in field research, which in the form of ethnography often takes the form of discretion (Adler & Adler, 1994; Wolcott, 2005). In some cases, the researcher must deliberately withhold information or restrict inquiry to avoid invasion of privacy or participation in behavior which the researcher holds to be wrong or unethical. Another concern is the adequacy of the researcher’s portrayal of the contextual and constructed nature of any findings. As Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) describe it:

In light of this reflective humility, critical researchers do not search for some magic method of inquiry that will guarantee the validity of their findings. [ . . .] To a critical researcher, validity means much more than the traditional definitions of internal and external validity usually associated with the concept. [ . . .]
Trustworthiness, many have argued, is a more appropriate word to use in the context of a critical research. It is helpful because it signifies a different set of assumptions about research purposes than does validity. [. . .] One criterion for critical trustworthiness involves the credibility of portrayals of constructed realities. [. . .] A second criterion for critical trustworthiness can be referred to as anticipatory accommodation. Here critical researchers reject the traditional notion of external validity. The ability to make pristine generalizations from one research to another accepts a one-dimensional, cause-effect universe. (p. 151)

The determination about each of these matters belongs to the reader. I have endeavored in text of this methods section, throughout the text, and in the conclusion to assist the reader in this process by including reflexive observations about my own behavior (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) and thick descriptions of my observations (Geertz, 1973).

Like Burawoy (1998), I argue that traditional validity and significance criteria are inappropriate for research designed to reconstruct existing theory to take into account the experience of individuals. That is, I suggest that the results of extended case method studies are legitimated through the social context from which the results arise. This argument suggests that dialogue and contextualization should be the primary assessment criteria for research produced utilizing the extended case method. Burawoy (1998) thus urges the reader to consider two questions: 1) Does the research make sense to me as a reader given my values, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge? and 2) Does the research make sense to me as a reader given my understanding of the context in which the research was produced? Likewise, I suggest that the primary criterion for the assessment of an informal theory is its ability to achieve common ground—or, in Lincoln & Guba’s
(1985) parlance, credibility—with the reader. As William James (1907/1981; 1909/1978) would tell us, judgments of transferability, confirmability, and dependability are all based upon an individual’s assessment of the face credibility of the idea. At a very basic level, it is highly unlikely that we will regard the research as transferable, confirmable, or dependable without the ability to fit a research finding into the context of one’s own values, beliefs, assumptions, and prior knowledge. Thus, I suggest that the creation of common ground is the primary criteria via which this work should be evaluated.

My attempt to achieve common ground with the reader is enhanced by efforts to be reflexive and transparent while common ground with the individuals whose experiences represent the “findings” of this research are achieved through the use of elicitation devices, thick description (Geertz, 1973), extended excerpts of interview transcripts, and member checks. This strategy follows Talburt’s (2004) recommendation that ethnographers in higher education endeavor to produce “open” texts that take into account the ambiguity of the “real” at the expense of the pretense to positivist science.

Notably, in its dismissal of traditional validity claims and measures of significance, the extended case method radically departs from the attempts of Yin (2008) and George and Bennett (2005) to place the case study on the same epistemological foundations as the rest of social science. While George and Bennett (2005) aim at generalizability, their focus on inference as the basis of truth claims rather than observation means that each individual case is not treated as significant but rather that the overall research is validated by conformity to conventions of analytic rigor. A clear contrast is apparent when we juxtapose their argument with Burawoy’s (1991b) claim that: “. . . significance refers to societal significance. The importance of the single case
lies in what it tells us about society as a whole rather than about the population of similar cases” (p. 281). Yin (2008) goes even further than George and Bennett (2008) in adopting traditional validity criteria—among them construct, internal, and external validity as well as reliability—to address concerns about the case studies lack of rigor. Even given this fact, however, Yin (2008) admits that the generalizability of case study research is predicated on its analytical generalizability rather than its statistical conclusions.

Burawoy (2009), however, dismisses this claim as inherently false and argues that: “The extended case method makes no pretense to positive science but, to the contrary, deliberately violates the 4R’s” (p. 32). While attempts to achieve non-reactivity, reliability, replicatability, and representativeness might make for good research, the extended case method argues that they may be at odds with truths based on experience.

**From Alternative “Validity” to an Extended Case Design**

As noted above, despite its departures from typical social science methods, the extended case method is a rigorous form of design and analysis designed to move theory closer to the lived reality represented by micro-interactional processes. As applied in this study, the design of the extended case method included five steps: 1) the generation of an initial theory; 2) the setting and selection of appropriate cases to elucidate the initial theory; 3) the collection of data; 4) the analysis of data; and 5) an acknowledgement of the researcher’s role. Each step is described in detail below.

**An Initial Theory**

The extended case study method begins with a sustained engagement with scholarly knowledge. Using existing social theories, the researcher clearly articulates
their expectancies for their research focus (Burawoy, 1991c). As such, I conducted an in-depth review of literature related to student learning and development. This review included time spent reading major journals in the field (e.g. *Journal of College Student Development*, *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, *Journal of Higher Education*) and as well as key textbooks (e.g. Evans et al, 2009; Merriam et al, 2007). I describe the results of this literature review in Chapter Four and utilize my own experience and academic training to suggest a provisional synthesis of these theories. This section thus also serves as an initial documentation of researcher reflexivity; as much as it captures the current state of scholarship on student learning and development, it also serves to capture my own informal theory (albeit one articulated in markedly scholarly tones).

**Setting & Selection of Cases**

All participants were drawn from the staff of Central University’s primary campus, which enrolls more than 25,000 undergraduate students. Central University is also consistently among the leading public research universities in terms of overall annual research expenditures (Geiger, 2004). As such, it is consistent with the paradigmatic research university that forms the backdrop of a great deal of higher education research (Evans et al, 2010). Consequently, its environment is similar to the institutional context in which formal theories of student learning and development are often produced: thus, if differences between formal theories and informal theories are found among student affairs practitioners at Central University, it is reasonable to assume that additional investigation would be warranted elsewhere.
This study utilizes a multi-case design, which Burawoy (2009) suggests is appropriate when looking for divergences in theoretical utility across settings. I selected cases based upon a shared set of characteristics (Burawoy, 1998): first selecting all participants from Central University and second selecting them from within one of two offices. For research purposes, I treated each individual student affairs practitioner interviewed and shadowed via participant observation as a unique case while aggregating cases based in similar contexts (i.e. advising cases and residence life cases) as part of the same analytic units. In this regard, my study differs from a standard application of the extended case method in terms of its scope—focusing on individuals rather than cultures. Consequently, the cases in my study are best conceptualized as existing within an overarching cultural narrative (e.g. Central University).

This represents a notable divergence from Burawoy’s (1991; 1998; 2009) application of the extended case method wherein cultural differences are frequently a tool via which problems in theory are illuminated. Given Burawoy’s (1991; 1998; 2009) contention that theoretical refinements can emerge from a single divergent case, however, it is still possible to safely apply both a multi-case design and the extended case method: the multi-case design allows for a controlled comparison method of case selection to ensure similarity and difference amongst cases. For my study, I created the potential for controlled comparison (Maxwell, 2005) by selecting cases from an office of academic advising and cases from a residence life office, which introduced variation between the cases based upon the different types of experiences and encounters students have with the two offices. I thus selected cases that had the potential to confirm, refute, or offer mixed support to my initial theoretical statement.
Since a single divergent case has the ability to suggest a possible reformulation of existing theory (Burawoy, 1991), the typicality of cases is not required for the application of the extended case method. However, my own prior experience studying higher education and working at a variety of colleges and universities over the past ten years suggests that the student affairs practitioners with whom I worked and the settings where this research is based are relatively typical of higher education as a whole. Repeated conversations with colleagues have confirmed these assumptions. The student affairs practitioners with whom I worked were uniformly caring and committed professionals working with serious resource constraints—among them: time, money, and institutional structures that they could not control. As such, in analyzing and presenting the results of this research, I make the assumption that the reader is as fully committed to understanding and creating positive students experiences as the participants in this study—that is, the participants with whom I worked are “typical.”

By virtue of Central University’s large size, it has developed a multi-tiered and highly-siloed student affairs staff—including the separation of academic advising from the student affairs division, where it is placed at many institutions (Dungy, 2003). This disjunction suggests a potential fissure along which differing conceptions of informal theory might develop. As such, I examined two offices separated by divisional processes—an advising office and a residence life office—to determine whether differences in student affairs practitioners’ approach to formal theories and informal theories might be attributable to where their work is located in an institutional context.

At Central University, residence life operations are organized into several “areas” that are concentrated on the provision of services to students of different academic years.
The Commons, the residential area where I recruited participants, housed approximately four thousand students and was staffed by six full-time student affairs professionals and a large support staff. The majority of students living in The Commons were sophomores or juniors and were student athletes and/or members of a fraternity or sorority.

I employed a convenience sampling strategy that relied on potential participants contacting me following a neutral announcement from their supervisor. Five student affairs professionals in residence life responded to this announcement. Two indicated that they were unable to participate due to time constraints while three agreed to meet with me to discuss the project. I then briefly met with each of them to outline my research design, offer them the opportunity to ask any questions that they might have, and to obtain their consent to participate. Following these meetings, Hughes, Alice, and Barbara confirmed their willingness to participate.

Each participant supervised approximately eight hundred residents spread across one-to-four buildings with the assistance of a staff of ten-to-fifteen upper level undergraduate students. Two participants had previously worked at smaller institutions. One participant had previously completed a degree at Central University before later returning as an employee. Though a convenience sample, the participant pool conformed to my preliminary assumption that professional staff working in residence life would likely have graduate-level exposure to theories of student learning and development. Two had graduate degrees in higher education-related fields. This sample thus ensured access to student affairs professionals who were likely to have access to the lexicon of formal theories of student learning and development. In terms of research design, the residence
life office represented a “best” case scenario for positive findings regarding the utility of formal theory.

Academic advising operations at Central University are operated by each academic administrative unit. The School of Management and Information Technology, the site where I conducted my research, has an enrollment of around five thousand and employs roughly fifteen full-time academic advisors with experience levels ranging from zero to twenty years in the profession. Again, utilizing a convenience sample, I made a presentation to the advising staff at the request of the division manager and asked interested individuals to contact me to express an interest in participating. Six advisors (Lisa, Jean, Marie, Linda, Brenda, and Tom) chose to participate. This sample included advisors at all ranges of the experience spectrum. Three of the participating advisors had graduate degrees in education, two in counseling, and one in business. Several also had an undergraduate degree in one of the fields of study offered by the School of Management and Information Technology or had earned a degree at some point from Central University. Given the wide range of experience levels and educational background, I selected the advising office at the School of Management and Information Technology with the expectation that it would offer a range of divergent ways of thinking about student learning and development.

**Data Collection**

In keeping with both the ethnographic (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994) and the case study (Yin, 2008) traditions, I utilized participant-observation, interviews, and document analysis to generate data for this study. Throughout the course of my research at the residence life office, I conducted approximately forty hours of participant
observation—including time spent shadowing Hughes, Alice, and Barbara; observations of office operations; and general observations of The Commons. Roughly fifty-five hours of participant observation research were conducted with the academic advising office. This data collection included shadowing most of the participating advisors; observations of office operations; and general observations of the School of Management and Information Technology.

Initial observations were recorded utilizing a scratch pad and a digital audio recorder. I then utilized qualitative data analysis software—Atlas.ti—to produce field notes that could be more easily analyzed. Following Bernard (2006), I produced four types of field notes: jottings (notes and recordings made in context and later digitized); a researcher’s diary (which included documentation of my own experiences and assumptions as well as more formal observations regarding reflexivity); a research log (which documented research activities, interview schedules, consent forms, and other design considerations); and field notes (more formal descriptions of observations, interview transcripts, and preliminary analysis). Information was initially recorded in the form of jottings and audio recordings as time allowed. Following my research each day, I converted jottings to formal field notes and recorded other pertinent information in my researcher’s diary and research log. As part of this work, I produced initial topical codes for the field notes.

For the interviews, I primarily employed the loosely structured format (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994) favored by many ethnographers (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Though I began my study with a tentative interview schedule, I departed from the schedule based on the responses of the participants (Fontana & Frey, 1994) and developed
instrumentation for the second interview based upon an analysis of the first interview responses (Spindler & Spindler, 1997a). The first interview included questions related to participant backgrounds; theory use; understanding of student experience; definition of learning and development; and professional role. The second interview included questions related to common student scenarios (i.e. a student who was not adjusting socially; a student who was over-committed; a student who was in the “wrong” major; and a student moving through a conduct or judicial process); the role of technology and structure; and the social context of their work. In the second interview, I also asked participants to respond to a model of student learning and development that I produced based on first interview responses. Though I originally intended to include interviews with students identified by participants as exemplifying their thinking about student learning and development, I eliminated this part of my research design when it became apparent that participants did not readily associate examples of student learning and development with specific students. Interview schedules for both the first and second interview are included in Appendix I.

Document analysis supplemented my direct observation and interviews and was utilized to produce a greater understanding of context. According to Smith (2006), the decision to focus on these sorts of documents is critical since “It is what enables [the study] to reach beyond the locally observable and discoverable into the translocal social relations and organization that permeate and control the local” (p. 65). Phrased slightly differently, document analysis allowed me to ensure that the patterns I observed in the relatively short time I was on site were typical of the offices generally. This claim is based upon Turner’s (2006) argument that texts encode specific sequences of behavior
and that, in aggregate, they suggest institutional sequences of behavior. Examples of the
documents that I reviewed include academic plans, policy documents, event plans, and
newsletters. All were public documents in the sense that no special permission was
required to share them with me nor were any restrictions were placed on their use. In fact,
many of these documents were available to Central University students via the
institution’s website or institutional publications such as the academic catalog or student
handbook. Nonetheless, I would not have looked for any of these documents without
specific referrals from the study’s participants; while they were all freely available, they
were not widely known.

Data Analysis

All coding and analysis was completed in Atlas.ti. As this data was collected, I
utilized an abductive approach to analysis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009)—holding cases
and theories up against one another to suggest how theories might be reconstructed to
take into account the lessons of practice (Burawoy, 1991b). I proceeded in an iterative
fashion—frequently and continually reexamining and recoding data through the lens of
new findings. As Burawoy (1991c), suggests: “Analysis . . . is a continual process,
mediating between field data and existing theory” (p. 11). Consequently, I employed a
cut-and-sort coding method wherein I first associated excerpts of interviews or field notes
with an open or in vivo code and then determined the extent to which similar meaning
was inscribed elsewhere in the study (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Initial codes, whether
labeled in an open or in vivo fashion, were always based upon my understanding of the
meaning communicated by research participants. I then combined similar open and in
vivo codes to produce an emergent code defined by the range of initial codes. I then
clustered similar emergent codes into code families that included similar, divergent, and related meanings. Based upon these code families, I produced the thematic findings described in Chapters Five and Six.

While it is relatively common to suggest that key themes “emerge from the data” (Murchison, 2010), I do not believe that such an assertion fully represents the nature of the research process. My perspective as a researcher shaped my research; to suggest otherwise is to commit the fallacies that Wolcott (2005; 2008) has labeled “the intellectual equivalent of spontaneous combustion” and “immaculate perception” (Wolcott, 2005, p. 148; Wolcott, 2008, p. 74). Further, the statement of theoretical expectancy provided by Chapter Four demonstrates the extent to which existing theories serve as sensitizing constructs in my analysis (Burawoy, 1998). As I examined each field note and transcript, I sought not only the information the data offered but also to determine what I had expected but which the data was not saying.

It is with regard to this analytic scheme that the distinction between the extended case method and grounded theory emerges the most clearly. Burawoy (1991b) notes that:

. . . the extended case method derives generalizations by constituting the social situation as anomalous with regard to some preexisting theory (that is, an existing body of generalizations), which is then reconstructed. Grounded theory, on the other hand, discovers generalizations by abstracting from time and place (Burawoy, 1991b, p. 280).

Unlike grounded theory, which attempts to treat each case as part of a generalizable pattern, the extended case method treats each case as inherently true in and of itself and attempts to modify existing theory based upon that truth. Whereas the existing theory is
valid according to the macro-structural approach of the social scientific method—the level to which grounded theory aspires—the extended case method asks it to apply to the micro-interactional level and for the resultant analysis to be validated at that same level (Burawoy, 1991c). This produces a two-part critique of grounded theory based on: 1) its inattention to the hegemonic power of macro-structural in micro-interactional domain, which runs the risk of reifying rather than critiquing this imposition of power; and 2) its focus on clearly observable and manipulatable variables in the micro-interactional context, which may not be the appropriate focus at the macro-structural level (Burawoy, 1991b; Burawoy, 1998).

The Researcher’s Role

Given the nature of my study as both abductive in design and qualitative in methods, I must acknowledge that my expectations as a researcher have the potential to impact my findings in very real ways. I discussed above the reflexive techniques that I employ. These techniques cannot alleviate all possible concerns about my role. Instead, they are designed to allow readers to make their own decisions regarding whether my research findings are produced in a manner that they find appropriate. In this spirit, I offer the following disclosures about my expectations prior to beginning my research as well as the extent to which these expectations were met.

First, having worked in student affairs previously, I expected that there would be a range of implicit theory, informal theory, and formal theory being utilized by student affairs practitioners. I also expected that the precise manner in which these various types of theory were synthesized into a theory-in-use would differ from office-to-office and person-to-person. Though I was surprised at times by the level of consensus that did
exist, there was considerable overall variation in the way that student affairs practitioners thought about student experience. In part because I expected participants to attempt to conform to their assumptions regarding my expectations, I was actually quite surprised by the frequency with which formal theories were dismissed outright.

Second, prior to beginning this study, I believed that the way that scholars of higher education produce research findings was fundamentally problematic. Following Agger’s (2007) work on the formation of a rhetorical community in sociology, I believed (and still believe) that we privilege conformity to the norms of scholarly community above common sense, and the development of new research findings above the solution to practical problems. The findings of this dissertation simultaneously indicate the extent to which a problematic relationship between theory and practice exist as well as the very real possibility that my expectation was unduly pessimistic.

Finally, I acknowledged (and still acknowledge) that I write from a position of incredible privilege—writing as a Native English-speaking, middle-class, white, heterosexual male in an academy that implicitly looks upon such positionality favorably. When I began my dissertation, I also wrote from within the same scholarly tradition that I hoped, in part, to critique. Having since begun full-time work as the Director of Institutional Research at a small New England college, I am now much more closely attuned to the difference between producing “good” research and “useful” results. At the same time, however, I am even more acutely aware that in no form of research—be it the most qualitative autoethnography or the most quantitative experimental study—can we ever escape the reality that it is a human being that selects the problem, conducts the research, and reports the results. I attempted to minimize my own intrusion into the
thoughts and experiences of participants through the use of a researcher’s diary in which I audited my own values, beliefs, and assumptions; conversations with colleagues; regular questions that asked participants to reject or confirm my understanding; and member checks of this document. It is nonetheless a text that I am present in throughout; wherever possible and wherever it is known to me, I have tried to make my own role in producing these research results as clear.
Chapter Four:
A Provisional Theory of Learning and Development

Introduction

Learning and development are problematic concepts in higher education (Reason & Renn, 2008). Though recent attempts have been made to equate the two (e.g. ACPA, 1996; Joint Statement, 2004; 2006), a long tradition of scholarship treats them as fundamentally distinct enterprises (e.g. Merriam et al, 2007; Evans et al, 2010). Though both are based in psychological approaches to studying human behavior, student development is primarily focused on change over time and adopts counseling psychology’s focus on human growth. In contrast, theories of learning emerge primarily from behavioral and cognitive psychology; as a result, theories of learning are focused on understanding discrete events. Nonetheless, both learning and development are fundamentally concerned with the question of how human beings make meaning of the relationship between self and surrounding, which can otherwise be understood as a cultural activity (e.g. Mead, 1934; Geertz, 1974). Indeed, recent scholarship building on Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Vygotsky (1978) suggests that both learning and development are fundamentally acts of meaning-making situated within a broader cultural context (e.g. Bruner, 1992; Cole, 1998; Segall et al, 1998).

While it is highly unlikely that many student affairs practitioners are acquainted with the ongoing debates in higher education scholarship regarding the precise nature of and relationship between learning and development, the fundamentally human nature of each phenomenon suggests the possibility that student affairs practitioners will synthesize the two in practice. To suggest how such a synthesis might occur, this chapter provides a
brief review of major approaches to the study of learning. Based upon this review, I suggest that transformative learning theory incorporates many of the key elements of the major theories of learning, and subsequently review the literature on transformative learning theory in greater depth. I then review major approaches to the study of development before suggesting that self-authorship reflects many of the elements of both psychosocial and cognitive approaches to student development. Using this discussion as a foundation, I suggest that an underappreciated element of both theories of learning and development is the key role of the “self”—or the unique nature of the individual we might hope to understand via learning and development theory. As a result, I review recent literature on intersectionality—which attempts to uncover the unique ways that nested social forces impact individuals—and the model of multiple identities proposed by Jones & McEwen (2000) and expanded by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007)—itself based upon the tenets of intersectional research.

**Major Theories of Learning**

Leading survey textbooks differ in how they represent the major theorists and intellectual movements in the study of learning, but most agree that there are at least four broad approaches to learning theory: behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, and humanism (e.g. Merriam et al, 2007; Phillips & Soltis, 2004). Each major approach to the study of learning is associated with a long tradition of scholarship and a core group of proponents. Typically, textbooks will also include a section focused on learning theories that critique, synthesize, or expand existing theory (e.g. Friere, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995) under the rubric of critical, radical, or non-traditional approaches to learning. Since
this literature is much harder to synthesize, I do not review it here and instead rely on the subsequent discussion of transformative learning theory to suggest the power of approaches that adopt a more eclectic approach to understanding learning.

Behaviorist approaches emphasize the role of the environment in shaping the behavior of the individual, and suggest that resulting changes in behavior are equivalent to learning (Phillips & Soltis, 2004). Emphasizing the measurement of an individual’s response to external stimuli, behaviorist theories of learning do not consider the underlying thinking or mental states that produce behavior. Much of the seminal work in behaviorism was produced by Watson (1919; 1924) and Skinner (1938; 1948) early in the twentieth century before behaviorist approaches increasingly fell out of favor or were combined with other approaches to learning. The work of Bandura (1962; 1971; 1973; 1975; 1977; most famously with Ross & Ross in 1961), for example, combines cognitivist approaches with behaviorism to produce a useful approach to social learning.

Despite behaviorism’s current nadir, it remains a useful shorthand for talking about learning and represents the baseline understanding of learning for many (Zuriff, 1985). Behaviorist approaches assume that behavior is based upon both an external stimulus and an internal response that manifests itself through action; as a result, learning is understood to be based on an innate systemic understanding of reward, punishment, and intermittent reinforcement (Merriam et al, 2007).

In contrast, cognitivist approaches to learning emphasize the role of the mind as a processing device and center. Gaining popularity since the widespread adoption of the computer (Phillips & Soltis, 2004), cognitivism is a far less unified body of theory than is behaviorism. Nonetheless, each cognitivist approach endeavors to answer the question of
why an individual has chosen to behave in a certain way and suggests that the answer to
the “why” question is what constitutes learning (Merriam et al, 2007). Weiner’s (1985;
1986) attribution theory, for example, explores the fundamental human need to make
causal inferences and how the type of causal inferences made impacts both behavior and
future expectations.

While Weiner’s attribution theory attempts to focus on both the individual and the
environment, other cognitivist approaches tend to privilege one approach or another. For
example, the apprenticeship theory of Collins, Brown, and Newman (1987) suggests that
the key determinant of learning is what one observes in the external environment. In
contrast, the load theory advanced by Sweller, Van Merriënboer, and Paas (1998) focuses
its attention on how a person handles the cognitive load introduced during information
processing. Cognitivist approaches typically directly connect mental states with behavior
and hold that learning is enhanced via structured modeling, scaffolding, and reflection
designed to facilitate positive outcomes (Merriam et al, 2007).

Constructivist approaches tend to emphasize the role of the learning as an active
agent in both the interpretation of the environment and the production of information; the
results of both tasks are regarded as learning by most theories of learning in the
constructivist paradigm (Merriam et al, 2007). They are thus less focused on behavior
than either behaviorism or cognitivism—though action remains a key way to understand
whether learning has occurred for constructivists (Phillips & Soltis, 2004). Key
approaches in constructivism include Vygostky’s (1978) social development theory,
which emphasizes the key role of both social relationships through its focus on more
knowledgeable others and the individual via the zone of proximal development’s
emphasis on developmentally appropriate challenges; Piaget’s (1975; 1985) stage theory of learning, which focuses on the acquisition of key learning at critical developmental points; and Dewey’s (1900; 1916; 1938) application of pragmatism to education, which emphasizes the key role of experience in shaping and reshaping cognitive frames.

Notably, constructivists suggest that certain actions and cognitive attributes are associated with specific points on a growth trajectory via the notion of developmental readiness—whether as a formal part of theory as in the case of Piaget (1975; 1985) or as implicit part of the theory’s “progressive” orientation as is the case in Dewey’s (1900; 1916; 1938) work. Constructivists thus hold that, given someone’s developmental readiness, an appropriate level of “challenge” and “support” might be offered to learners in order to maximize positive outcomes (Sanford, 1968). This understanding casts learning in experiential terms (Kolb, 1984; Jarvis, 1987), which in turn suggest the close connection between constructivist and humanist approaches.

The final major approach to learning, humanism, is principally concerned with the relationship between a learner’s sense of self and the acquisition of learning (Merriam et al, 2007); as such, it is perhaps the major approach to learning with the least explicit focus on the environment—though humanist theories frequently emphasize the key importance of social context as a determinant of one’s sense of self (Phillips and Soltis, 2004). Perhaps most famously articulated by Maslow (1943) in his hierarchy of needs, which holds that human beings can only achieve self-actualization once the base requirements for safety and security against want are met, humanist approaches tend to focus on the role of the affective in learning. Major differences in conceptual approach—though not overall understanding—are represented by Rogers (1959; 1961), whose work
focused on the universal development of self concept as a fundamental part of holistic human growth, and Kolb (1984), whose work focuses on the very different ways that human beings prefer to process information within an overall archetype of experience, reflection, abstraction, and testing. Humanist approaches are thus concerned with the unique nature of individuals—including differences in the way they prefer to learn and process information—and emphasize reflection as a way of building toward a holistic understanding of the self (Merriam et al, 2007).

**Transformative Learning**

Explicitly interrogating and then synthesizing cognitivist, constructivist, and humanist approaches to learning, transformative learning theory is one of the most widely debated and important of the learning theories that attempt broaden our understanding of human learning. Given its relatively recent emergence, there is still no scholarly consensus as to define the parameters of transformative learning theory. However, I follow the convention established by Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007) of separating individual learning processes resulting in transformation (transformative learning) from group processes resulting in transformation (radical education). Once this warrant is accepted, the definition of transformative learning becomes a bit easier. Consistent with the definition of Cranton (2006), I hold that transformative learning is “a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validated” (p. 2). Cranton (2006) further suggests that transformative learning is a
voluntary, self-directed process emerging from experiences and collaborative relationships based on a respect for persons and differences in learning styles.


1) a disorienting dilemma;
2) self-examination;
3) critical assessment of assumptions;
4) relating discontent to similar experiences of others;
5) exploring new options;
6) building competence and confidence in new model;
7) planning a course of action;
8) acquiring necessary skills;
9) trying a new model;
10) re-integration. (Cranton, 2006)

As a result of this process, individuals acquire frames of reference which organize themselves into distinct patterns of mind designed to shape a response to the external environment. Taken as a whole, then, transformative learning is an iterative process of cognitive incongruence, synthesis, and application.

Though Mezirow’s thought has evolved over the course of more than two decades of writing on transformative learning and pedagogy, it retains a clear focus on meaning-making, critical reflection, and perspective transformation. Further, it suggests the vital role of the individual in determining reactions to educational interventions and
experiences while arguing that educators must appreciate each learner’s inherent worth and uniqueness. In 1981, Mezirow defined transformative learning as an “emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings” (p. 6). As part of this work, Mezirow articulated a framework that is fundamentally the same as that depicted by Cranton (2006). Notably, however, Mezirow (1981) situated this entire process within the umbrella of culture and made the important distinction that one’s ability to undertake a perspective shift—itself constitutive of the broader transformative learning process—was predicated on the presence of an environment conducive to self-awareness.

By 1990, Mezirow’s thought had undergone a minor shift; within the existing theory articulated above, Mezirow began to differentiate between meaning schemes (defined as a set of expectations about the world) and meaning perspectives (defined as an aggregation of meaning schemes and mental habitus). While meaning schemes include both societal assumptions and an individual’s visceral reactions to a variety of stimulus-response relationships, meaning perspectives are a more nuanced, personal framework of knowledge; to the extent that these are critically questioned and conceptually integrated, one can be regarded as having undertaken a transformative learning process (Mezirow, 1990). One of the fundamental assertions of this formulation of transformative learning is that we experience a number of “sociocultural distortions [that] involve taking for granted belief systems that pertain to power and social relationships” and that transformative learning is the interrogation of the relative veracity of these belief systems (Mezirow,
By 1994, Mezirow made the explicit claim that transformative learning, though an individual process, was social in nature and intended primarily to account for the heuristic nature of human experience. Further, Mezirow (1994) began to more fully articulate the evolutionary nature of transformative learning suggesting that it was synonymous with the “developmental process in adulthood” (p. 228).

Through the depiction of learning as a simultaneously personal and social process, Mezirow began to approach a fully codified theory. Mezirow (1995) described transformative learning as a psycho-cultural process and, perhaps more critically, noted the inter-contextual nature of the learning process: not only was transformative learning individually- and socially-mediated, it was contingent on the multiple nested identities of the learner. Further, transformative learning—given its locus at the intersection of the psychological and the cultural—was depicted as sensitive to local needs and constructivist in orientation (Mezirow, 1996). With these slight alterations made, Mezirow then offered his most complete encapsulation of transformative learning theory—writing that:

Transformation Theory represents a dialectical synthesis of the objectivist learning assumptions of the rational tradition by incorporating the study of nomological regularities and the interpretive learning insights of the cognitive revolution by incorporating the concept of meaning structures, and a sensitivity to the importance of inclusion and interpretation of the meaning symbolic interaction (Mezirow, 1996, p. 165).

In this final formulation, as well as its evolution, we can see Mezirow’s transformative learning theory not as a proscriptive set of recommendations for educators but as
powerful methodology for examining the complexity of learning experience at the level of the individual student.

Having discussed Mezirow’s contributions, I must now note that transformative learning theory is not a monolithic entity; like all social constructs, its definition is contested—especially among those most concerned with its role in the scholarly discourse. As Dirkx (1998) suggested, since transformative learning is itself a socially-contested meaning scheme, its definition is still evolving—with emerging themes focused on critical consciousness, critical reflection, adult development, and spirituality. Taken as a whole, these scholars expand the important role of the individual in the transformative learning process. Belenky & Stanton (2000) suggest that transformative learning is can be connected to educational equity and offers voice and opportunity for those marginalized by other educational models. Kegan (2000) argues that transformational learning must be seen as an iterative process—a premise on which Mezirow’s work is ambiguous—whereby learners develop increasingly nuanced understandings of their reality. Further, Kegan (2000) relates perspective transformation to critical judgment, which is consistent with Merriam’s (2004) assertion that Mezirow understates the cognitive complexity required for a learner to undergo a transformative learning experience and resultant shift in overall perspective.

Meanwhile, despite Mezirow’s assertion (1996) that transformative learning is local in nature, a long-running critique of transformative learning theory has held that it is acontextual (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Henderson, 2002). Clark and Wilson (1991) suggest that transformative learning theory fails to account for the multiple nested contexts of individual experience and the way in which these contexts impact the learner’s ability to
critically reflect. While Clark and Wilson (1991) advocate for the outright rejection or full reconceptualization of transformative learning theory, Henderson (2002) has suggested that a supporting body of literature which specifically explores contextual aspects of transformative learning is needed.

In this vein, a number of recent attempts to embrace the contextual nature of the transformative learning process have been made (Courtenay et al, 2000; Yorks & Sharoff, 2001; Baumgartner, 2002; Feinstein, 2004). In conducting a study of HIV positive adults, Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, and Baumgartner (2000) found that transformational learning occurred and persisted over time. In a follow-up to this study, Baumgartner (2002) found that perspective transformation remained stable; previously developed meaning schemes were put to use by study participants; transformations were continuing to evolve; and these findings were impacted by social interaction.

As a whole, these articles suggest that transformative experiences have a persistent rather than transitory effect. Further, given the specific context of the studies, unique mechanisms for interpreting transformation were necessary. Taking the theoretical application of transformational learning a step further, Feinstein’s study (2004) found that, in ecological contexts, cultural insiders can successfully impart specialized environmental knowledge to “outsiders” via experiential learning practices. This finding further suggests that contextual immersion and a broadened social awareness is fundamental to the learning process—a claim that resonates with the literature on cultural agency which I discuss later in this chapter.

To date, transformative learning theory has remained largely a theoretical debate. Taylor (1997) conducted a meta-analysis which demonstrated empirical support for
transformative learning theory, but noted that critical studies of theory validity were often unpublished. There is some evidence, however, that this trend is starting to reverse itself. Taylor (1994) found that transformative learning accounts for the development of an inclusive and integrated world view in a study of twelve émigrés. With a move into a new host culture, “cultural disequilibrium” is created. The degree to which this impacts a given person is mediated by individual background and ability to reflect critically upon their new environment.

Taylor’s (1994) findings appear to have influenced recent attempts to apply transformative learning to the undergraduate context. Madsen (2009) found that female students in college in the United Arab Emirates met Mezirow’s conditions for transformational learning. Further, for those students who underwent perspective transformation, family support emerged as a critical component of student learning. Likewise, Lee and Greene (2004) identify a supportive culture as critical to transformative learning. They employed Mezirow’s model to create recommendations for a culturally sensitive social work education. Overall, Lee and Greene (2004) suggest a relationship between transformative learning and both a supportive learning environment and an appreciation for diversity of thought and persons.

Finally, Harvie (2004) attempted to create a model for the undergraduate experience through the lens of transformative learning theory. It situates the transformative experience at the nexus of individual habitus, university habitus, and shared experience before suggesting that these, taken together, can result in a disorienting dilemma which may result in transformation. Harvie’s (2004) conceptual model is reproduced in Figure Two:
Several additional aspects of this application of theory are worth noting. First, and consistent with the transformative learning theory as articulated above, the catalyst experience is nested within the interaction of the individual and the institution, which is in turn nested in university culture and societal culture. This conceptualization speaks to the inherently constructivist nature of the undergraduate experience. Additionally, Harvie (2004) does not contend that the relationship between transformational potential and the undergraduate experience will result in a transformative learning experience. Instead, this model maintains the inherently individual and subjective nature of the learning process. Finally, Harvie’s work (2004) is notable for having undertaken a large-scale qualitative investigation of undergraduate experience as it relates to the model in Figure 2. Three
themes emerged from this investigation: 1) the need for students to understand the relevance of an experience in order to foster critical reflection, 2) the role of critical reflection in developing an appreciation of dialectical tensions, 3) and the importance of independent critical inquiry. In cases where these conditions were met, Harvie (2004) indicates that students may experience a disorienting dilemma, which may in turn lead to a transformative learning experience. Transformative learning theory thus emerges as an approach to learning that is uniquely able to appreciate the role of individual, context, reflection, and personal growth.

**Major Theories of Development**

As represented by the major textbooks in the field (e.g. Evans et al, 1998; Evans et al, 2010), there are two basic ways of thinking about learning and development which focus on very different facets of the human experience. The older of these two traditions is concerned with the affective dimension of student experience and focuses on the relationship between individual perception and the larger social context. Approaches falling within this umbrella are typically labeled “psychosocial” theories of development. The more recent tradition, which has generated more literature of late, focuses on the mental structures and processes by which students make meaning of their experiences. As a result, these approaches are usually referred to as the “cognitive” theories of development. Though other approaches to development have been advocated to address various aspects of student experience, these theories can best be understood as outgrowths of either cognitive approaches (for example, theories of moral development) or psychosocial approaches (including most theories of social identity).
Though most theories of development fall strictly within the purview of either psychosocial or cognitive approaches, more recent attempts have been made to produce a theory of development capable of integrating affective and cognitive dimensions of student experience. Some of this work (e.g. Renn, 2003; 2004) seeks to resituate student development as an ecological or cultural phenomenon by calling upon the work of psychologists such as Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Cole (1998). While these approaches are quite promising, they are logically discontinuous with much of the student development work that preceded them. As such, in the following section, I review recent works on self-authorship (e.g. Baxter Magolda, 2003; 2009) that expand the theory beyond the cognitive dimensions explored by Kegan (1982) as the leading example of an integrated approach to student development.

As suggested by Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010), psychosocial approaches to development “examine the content of development—that is, the important issues people face as their lives progress, such as how to define themselves, their relationships with others, and what to do with their lives” (p. 42). While these approaches assume that there are times or stages at which one might reasonably expect to encounter certain issues, they are less explicitly focused on the mental growth of an individual and more focused on how the individual interacts with an environment.

Though not explicitly a student development theory since it is concerned with the entire life course, the major psychosocial approaches to understanding student experience stem from the work of Erikson (1959 / 1980; 1968). Erikson (1959 / 1980; 1968) describes development as a sociohistorical phenomenon wherein the individual progresses through eight stages in a linear progression triggered by a series of crises. The
first four stages—1) Trust vs. Mistrust; 2) Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt; 3) Initiative vs. Guilt; and 4) Industry vs. Interiority—occur during childhood and are prerequisites to forming a stable, adult identity. The vast majority of college students will have already progressed through these stages prior to college and, according to Erikson’s model, will be in the fifth stage—identity versus identity diffusion—by the time they enter college. The principal work of stage five is developing an enduring sense of self. Subsequent student development theorists working within the psychosocial approach—including Marcia (1966) and Josselson (1978 / 1991)—begin their models here. Though few college students will reach the subsequent stages, the work associated with them is often thought of as beginning in college. These stages include intimacy versus isolation (wherein mature, caring relationships are nurtured); generativity versus stagnation (focused on the creation of an enduring legacy); and integrity versus despair (which is concerned with reflections upon one’s life and experiences—ideally producing a sense of satisfaction).

The theory of psychosocial development advanced by Erikson (1959 / 1980; 1968) has been consistently critiqued since its production. Rodgers (1980) has suggested that the theory is overly general and too vague to guide action. Both Gilligan (1982) and Josselson (1996) hold that it neglects crucial gender differences. Including his own refinement to the theory (Marcia, 1966) in the critique, Marcia (1975) has argued that the theory produces an essentialist understanding of identity, which he holds problematic given the evolving nature of one’s sense of self. Perhaps the most productive of these critiques, however, have come from works that seek to refine the overall understanding of student development produced by Erikson’s work. Marcia (1966), for example, recast
psychosocial development as a process involving “ego identity statuses” based on processes of exploration (triggered by crises) and commitment (leading to goal directed behavior) in the realms of politics, religion, occupation, and sexuality. Based upon this theory, Marcia (1966) proposed four identity states reflecting varying levels of crisis or commitment: foreclosure (low crisis; high commitment); moratorium (high crisis; low commitment); identity achievement (high crisis; high commitment); and diffusion (low crisis; low commitment). Though not strictly developmental in its own right, Marcia’s (1966) work represents a useful way to understand the developmental work occurring in each of Erikson’s (1959 / 1980; 1968) eight proposed stages. Building on Marcia’s (1966) refinement, Josselson (1978 /1991) suggested the gendered nature of identity states and connected development in college to future developmental states through her description of archetypal patterns.

Emerging from observations of college student behavior, Chickering’s (1969) work is an entirely distinct approach to psychosocial development. Since revised by Chickering and Reisser (1993), “Chickering’s Vectors” hold that student development occurs simultaneously along seven distinguishable vectors: 1) developing competence; 2) managing emotions; 3) moving through autonomy and toward interdependence; 4) developing mature interpersonal relationships; 5) establishing identity; 6) developing purpose; and 7) developing integrity. Chickering and Reisser (1993) hold that students move through these vectors at different rates and may not necessarily progress uniformly. The lack of predictive power this understanding has entailed has led some to dismiss the theory as imprecise and perhaps inappropriate for some student populations (Evans et al, 2010; Schuh, 1995) while others defend the theory as generally predictive (Reisser,
Meanwhile, empirical support for the theory has been mixed at best (White & Hood, 1989; Foubert et al., 2005; Martin, 2000).

Despite their volume, the cognitive approaches to development are actually quite similar. Love and Guthrie (1999) provide an excellent description and synthesis of the major theories of cognitive development—including Kegan’s self-authorship; Baxter Magolda’s epistemological reflection model; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule’s theory of women’s development; and King and Kitchener’s reflective judgment model. In their review, Love and Guthrie (1999) suggest that a synthesized understanding of cognitive development incorporates four major elements: unequivocal knowing, radical subjectivism, the great accommodation (as much the contact point between two stages as a stage in its own right), and generative knowing.

In the unequivocal knowing stage, people believe that a single, universal truth exists and that this truth can be learned from authoritative sources. As this understanding is brought into question by life experiences, students enter a phase of radical subjectivism wherein the world is no longer seen in absolute terms but instead is characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty. As truth is increasingly seen as a social product, people come to believe that truth may not exist and that it can be personally defined. At this point, students undergo what Love and Guthrie (1999) call “the great accommodation” wherein the complex and perhaps unknowable nature of truth is reconciled with the understanding that one’s own truth might exist in dialogue with the views of others. At this stage, cognitive theories of development propose that students enter a stage of generative knowing wherein truth is increasingly seen as the product of the interaction between self and context. In the generative knowing stage, students once again assume the same level
of comfort around their conception of truth that they had possessed in the unequivocal knowing stage as they come to accept their active role in meaning-making.

**Self-Authorship**

Emerging from Kegan’s (1982) work, more recent work on self-authorship retains the focus on cognitive schema and stages described above while also adding a focus on the powerful role of one’s identity and its relationship to social context—thereby incorporating the most salient aspects of psychosocial development. As Baxter Magolda (2001) indicates, self-authorship is a nuanced form of meaning-making that must be understood as a developmental learning process. It involves the development of three distinct-yet-intertwined epistemological stances—how we know, how we view ourselves, and how we relate to others (Baxter Magolda, 2001). Further, Baxter Magolda (2001) suggests the highly contextual nature of self-authorship—arguing that the learning environment is complex and socially-constructed, that the self is critical to knowledge construction, and that knowledge is mutually constructed by virtue of shared authority and expertise. In this regard, as we move from more external (absolute) ways of knowing to more internal (contextual) ones, the relationships that we have with others and with learning environments are made a critical focus of scholarly concern.

Elsewhere, Baxter Magolda (2008) emphasizes the role of resistance in self-authorship—an emphasis that resonates with the intersectional literature reviewed below. Arguing that self-authorship involves a growing ability to trust one’s own judgment (internal voice), the development of a core sense of self (internal foundation), and the establishment of volitional convictions (internal commitments), Baxter Magolda (2008)
suggests that self-authorship both recognizes and transcends the social structuring of reality. This argument resonates with the findings of Pizzolato (2005), who demonstrated that the initial disequilibrium (provocation) for self-authored learning came from external stimuli but that the development of a self-authored way of knowing (equilibrium) was a personal act. Further, as Pizzolato and Ozaki (2007) suggested, the development of a stable, self-authored way of knowing is an iterative process that begins with provocation and involves a series of intellectual changes—including altered beliefs, the development of cognitive interdependence, and increased self-regulation—over time.

Yet, as others have emphasized, self-authorship is not a linear process: it varies extensively based upon the learner and the environment. Wawrzynski & Pizzolato (2006) found variations in the presence of self-authorship based upon gender, prior academic experiences, and transfer students among a population of 368 undergraduate students and suggested that structural aspects of the college environment further impacted the development of self-authored ways of knowing. Torres & Hernandez (2007) utilized a model of self-authored ways of knowing to suggest that Latina/o college students developed distinctive patterns of self-authorship in order to resist racist models for their identity. Meanwhile, studies suggest that—among at-risk, and particularly low-SES, students—self-authorship is commonly developed earlier in life than among the average college-going population (Pizzolato, 2004) but that, absent the ability to actively resist marginalizing influences this self-authorship disappears (Pizzolato, 2004). These findings demonstrate the importance of looking at variations in student learning and development across student identities.
Likewise, recent findings highlight the importance of looking for those structures—both at the institutional and societal level—that might produce marginalizing influences. Creamer and Laughlin (2005) demonstrated not only that there might be gender-related variations in self-authorship but that these gender-related differences might be partially attributable to one’s social network. This analysis is consistent with Baxter Magolda’s (2004a) formulation of the learning partnership model, which assumes that in order for learning environments to promote self-authorship educators must acknowledge that: 1) knowledge is complex and socially constructed, 2) the individual's sense of self is central to this construction, and 3) social construction is experienced in community. Based upon these assumptions, educators can provide for experiences designed to: 1) validate the learner; 2) situate experience in context; and 3) emphasize mutually-constructed meaning-making (Baxter Magolda, 2004a). Notably, Baxter Magolda (2004b) sees this sort of learning environment as critical not only to supporting the individual learner but also to constructing a proper relationship between individuals and society moving forward.

**Intersectionality**

In psychosocial theories, a detailed understanding of the self emerges as critical to a full understanding of student development. Baxter Magolda’s reconceptualization of self-authorship extends the role of the self to cognitive development, which also reiterates the importance of the broader social context. In this regard, student development theory recalls Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration which holds that society is the result of a confluence between individual agency and social structure. Exploring the same
phenomenon from a different perspective, intersectional research explores differences in human experience based upon the intersection of two or more facets of individual identity. Through a focus on what Crenshaw (1989) has called the “multidimensionality” of experience—essentially the recognition that an individual’s various social identities carry with them meanings and experiences that cannot be separated—intersectionality demonstrates the importance of simultaneously considering one’s sense of self, the social definition of self, and experience. Indeed, as Crenshaw (1991) would later go on to indicate, “single-axis” understandings of human experience are inherently flawed as they fail to capture the complexity of human experience.

A growing body of literature suggests that intersectional research can help to understand the connection between individual and structure in higher education (e.g. Amason et al, 1999; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Turner, 2002). Thomas and Hollenshead (2001) found that women of color were marginalized by social structures in the American research university but that they utilized the formal apparatuses of the university itself to combat institutional barriers and improve campus climate. Similarly, Amason, Allen, and Holmes (1999) found that women faculty of color felt compelled to identify with other faculty based upon either their gender or their race, and as a result, the academic careers of such faculty appeared to be systematically devalued. Finally, Turner (2002) found “interlocking effects of gender and race” which inhibited the academic success of women faculty of color. For these faculty members, feelings of isolation, representation, and identity fragmentation resulted from dominant institutional structures. Nonetheless, it is clear from these works that at least one strategy female faculty of color employed to combat the “white/patriarchal dividend” (Messner, 2000) was the
appropriation of this discourse and the utilization of its rhetorical stratagems to achieve space for their own identities. This finding has clear implications for an understanding of identity development as it suggests first that university structures are actively read and interpreted by those within the institution and further that these messages about valued identities are not passively accepted.

McCall (2005) has suggested that intersectional research to date has proceeded in three distinct directions: anticategorical research (which involves the philosophical deconstruction of difference), intercategorical research (which involves the use of existing typologies to explore the commonalities of several group experiences), and intracategorical research (which involves the in-depth exploration of a single group experience). Like McCall (2005), I assume that intercategorical research has the broadest potential to explain human experience and generate a nuanced understanding of student identity. Intersectional research, then, can help us to explore “the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories” (McCall, 2005, p. 1785-86).

Before examining some of the specific findings of intersectional research, it will be useful to examine its theoretical utility in greater depth. Collins (1998) has asserted that intersectional research can be used to analyze the impact of societal power structures on social groups—specifically the family—and to explore the disparate impacts that social structures can have on individuals based on their gender, race, or social class. Likewise, Alfred (2001) suggests that intersectional research can help to reveal the tensions between private and public, individual and group in modern society. More broadly, Alfred argues that cultural pluralism is a necessary adaptation to social
complexity. Such a finding seems consistent with the work of Messner (2000). As both a theoretical and practical matter, Messner suggest that society inherently provides a “white/patriachical dividend” that privileges a certain viewpoint; consequently, whether this viewpoint is consistent with one’s individual identity or not, social structures make fluency in its discourse mandatory for those wishing to participate in complicit institutional and social structures.

These findings are consistent with the recent proliferation of research which indicates that social success is dependent on conformity to the hegemonic culture. Kibria (2000) concluded Asian Americans were taught a pattern of “model minority” behavior that inhibited the development of a shared cultural identity. Likewise, Ward (2004) found that lesbians participating in an organization for gays and lesbians found themselves pressured to conform to a gay, white, middle class point-of-view or risk being labeled as ungrateful for their inclusion in the group. In both these cases, the pressure to conform to socially normative behaviors represented a threat to individual identity. Elsewhere, Gonzales, Blanton, and Williams (2002) have shown that Latinas experience a “double minority effect” whereby awareness of their status as ethnic minorities makes them more susceptible to negative effects of gender stereotypes as well; in a school setting, this was seen as suppressing academic achievement via stereotype threat. Other literature appears to indicate that the intersection of various aspects of identity has a profound impact on psycho-sexual development (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999; Weekes, 2002). Finally, Reid (2002) has indicated that intersectional identities create a disparate economic impact for black women via a dual occupational segregation.
Taken as a whole then, intersectionality suggests a lack of uniformity of experience and calls for attentiveness to three dimensions of identity which have implications for other dimensions of identity as well. Hill Collins (2004) suggests that attending to the differences in experiences across intersections of identity leads to a more nuanced understanding of the hidden social assumptions of the way that identity is employed—writing in *Black Sexual Politics* that “it is used to justify patterns of opportunity and discrimination that African American women and men encounter in schools, jobs, government agencies, and other American social institutions” (p. 6). Thus intersectionality is a call for attentiveness—one that Collins picks up in her collaboration with Anderson on *Race, Class, and Gender*, an anthology of intersectional scholarship. Arguing that studies which attempt to isolate any one aspect of identity “treat these factors as if they are equivalent” and ignore their “additive effects,” Anderson & Collins (2006) suggest in their introductory materials that intersectionality represents a useful analytical framework because it is capable of focusing on the full “matrix of domination” represented my hegemonic discourses on identity (p. xi; 7). Thus, they suggest that, despite intersectionality’s typical focus on race, class, and gender, it affords a unique lens for understanding the social manifestations of all identity labels:

> Once you understand that race, class, and gender are simultaneous and intersecting systems of relationship and meaning, you also can see the different ways that other categories of experience intersect in society. Age, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, physical ability, region, and ethnicity also shape systems of privilege and inequality. (Anderson & Collins, 2006, p. 13)
Thus, Anderson & Collins (2006) begin to articulate a methodological point-of-view for intersectionality that has generalizable implications for identity. By focusing on the way in which race, class, and gender figure into individual, institutional, and societal discourses on identity, we can also reveal the way in which they intersect with a wider variety of other identities.

**Identity**

Responding to the same imperative for careful attention to differences in experience raised by intersectional research, recent literature in higher education suggests the importance of connecting one’s own sense of self to educational experiences. Museus and Quaye (2009), for example, demonstrate that student success in college is facilitated by the ability of a student to connect their identity to the institutional identity. Since colleges and universities are inherently hegemonic enterprises, they suggest that culture agency, wherein institutional insiders help to translate the campus through an appropriate cultural lens, can be an important step in allowing students to maintain their cultural integrity while also participating fully as members of the campus community. In this sort of conceptualization, the cultural agent becomes a guide for individual students as they seek to interpret an institutional culture through the lens of their own values and assumptions. While Museus and Quaye (2009) are principally concerned with one’s cultural identity, this meaning-making process can be extended to other aspects of identity as well. As Torres et al (2009) indicate, identity is socially-constructed, contextual, and develops over time. All forms of identity development can thus also be characterized as an iterative process of meaning-making.
The model of multiple identities first advanced by Jones and McEwen’s (2000) and subsequently revised by Abes, Jones, & McEwen (2007) captures the relationship between self and social context demonstrated via intersectional research and addressed by Museus and Quaye (2009). Shown in Figure 3, the model of multiple identities distinguishes between one’s sense of self, and one’s identity.

![Jones & McEwen's (2000) Model of Identity](image)

**Figure 3: Jones & McEwen's (2000) Model of Identity**

The fundamental premise of Jones & McEwen’s (2000) model is that a core sense of self unites a variety of more specific identities—among them things like race, sexual orientation, and religion—that have more or less salience depending on social context. Thus, Jones and McEwen (2000) suggest that:

> The model is a fluid and dynamic one, representing the ongoing construction of identities and the influence of changing contexts on the experience of identity development. [. . .] The model is also drawn to depict the possibility of living comfortably with multiple identities, rather than simply describing multiple dimensions of identity (p. 408).
Jones & McEwen (2000) suggest that, while an individual has a core sense of self, identities are social products that may vary by circumstance.

Since its articulation, Jones, McEwen, and others have expanded the model to emphasize the role of social structures and meaning-making in identity development. Abes & Jones (2004) emphasized the applicability of the model in conceptualizing contextual influences on sexuality—an analysis strengthened by Abes & Kasch’s (2007) usage of queer theory to connect these contextual influences to sexual, religious, gender, and social class identity while accounting for student resistance to heteronormativity. Effectively, Abes & Kasch (2007) succeeded in “queering” Jones & McEwen’s (2000) model—making its use in tandem with intersectionality all the more appropriate. The contextual nature of identity development is also emphasized by writings on Quaye et al (2008) and Museus (2008) who suggest the need for inter- and intra-identity group interaction and the creation of cultures of cognitive congruence across difference respectively. It is also echoed by Jones & Abes (2004), who demonstrated that service learning could function as a point of congruence and impetus to identity development self-authorship for a group of undergraduate students. Findings of this sort led Abes, Jones, & McEwen (2007) to make the explicit argument that identity development was a form of meaning-making, which suggests its connection to self-authorship.

**A Provisional Synthesis**

Collectively, this summary of theories of learning and development—together with a discussion of intersectionality and identity—suggest the important dual roles of the individual and structure in thinking about student experience. While theories of learning
and development tend to focus on what is seen as universal, the lessons offered by intersectionality and identity suggest the importance of also attending to how individuals respond to the same experiences in radically different ways. The theory of multiple identities, for example, suggests that while the search for a sense of self is a universal human experience the way in which one articulates an identity is the product both of self narrative and structural influences. Intersectional research then offers a compelling vision of how we might proceed to think about the broader social forces acting on individuals—particularly as they relate to identity.

While not the focus of theories of learning and development, they too acknowledge the importance of both the individual and social structure. Self-authorship, for example, draws on both the psychosocial (focused on the relationship between self and society) and cognitive (focused on how knowledge is produced) approaches to development to articulate a universal, stage-based approach to the human growth trajectory while also recasting the cognitive process as an extension of the self. Likewise, transformative learning theory acknowledges the critical role of the individual and the highly variable nature of the learning experience by placing disequilibrium and reflection at the core of the learning process. While these elements apply to all learners, they cannot and will not be experienced at similar times or similar ways by all learners. Notably, however, transformative learning theory also suggests that learning is precipitated by cultural discontinuity and social dialogue. In this regard, it is quite similar to the cognitivist, constructivist, and humanist traditions from which it emerges: each of these major approaches suggests that learning must be seen as an iterative process involving both the individual and the environment.
Chapter Five:
An Extended Case Analysis of Theory in Practice at an Advising Office

Introduction

This chapter contains four main sections—focused on the relationship between theory and practice, the nature of learning and development, the role of the advising technostructure (a term which I take mean the systems, processes, and tools that enable a professional role to be constructed in a particular way), and the role of the social context in advising relationships. As a whole, these findings suggest that formal theories play a problematic role in the advising practices of study participants but that informal theories are widely used and seen as useful.

As described in Chapter Three, my dissertation research was organized around three phases of data collection: first, I developed an in-depth understanding of the academic advising office in the School of Management and Information Technology via participant observation; second, I utilized this understanding to conduct preliminary interviews with participants; and third, comparing the results of all the preliminary interviews, I developed a second interview protocol designed to ask all participants to respond to information that appeared salient based upon ongoing coding and analysis.

While information collected via participant observation functions as the backdrop for all of this analysis, I discuss this information sparingly—preferring to allow participants to speak for themselves—and always in the context of interview findings.
The Connection Between Theory & Practice

In this section, I present findings related to the ways that academic advisors spoke about the connection between theory and practice. Beginning with a discussion of their academic backgrounds, I describe first interview findings that suggest the problematic role of theory in advising practice. I next discuss how research findings and theoretical knowledge are applied—indicating that theory application is often based on guiding concepts (Reason & Kimball, forthcoming). The section closes with a discussion of second interview findings based on advisors’ responses to hypothetical scenarios that I presented as elicitation devices to gauge how theory influenced practice.

Academic Backgrounds

The advisors who participated in my study had varied academic backgrounds—including undergraduate and graduate degrees in counseling, education, and business. While most did not explicitly connect their current work to their academic study, those that did focused primarily on discrete skills. Brenda, for example, described her graduate degree in business as providing an enhanced understanding of the interpersonal and organizational elements of her work. Likewise, Jean’s described her personal advising style as question-based and suggested that her ability to ask questions in a way that prompted reflection and action stemmed from her training as a counselor:

I mean certainly it’s an ability to work one on one, but I think it’s also an ability to elicit information without . . . people feeling like they’re being badgered. I think certainly that background affects my approach and the way that I interact with my students. I think that it allows me maybe to pick up on nuances and if there are other things going on beyond the academics. . . I think it makes helps
me to be more attuned to getting resources out to students, and I see that as a big part of my role—making sure that they know what’s here that they can access.

Jean thus describes a part of the role of all the advisors with whom I worked—serving as connector and referral agent to other parts of her institution—as part of the orientation imparted by her graduate training. My time spent observing Jean’s advising practice confirmed that this function was indeed a substantial part of her professional identity and that she pursued this role with greater clarity and efficacy than others. When working with one student, for example, Jean presented the same registration policy in at least three different formats and utilized questions after each different presentation and at the close of the meeting to ensure that the student had ample opportunity to clarify his understanding if needed.

Academic advisors with backgrounds in education, which included advisors who had studied both adult and higher education, tended to focus on how their graduate training led to career opportunities rather than to a discrete skill set. Marie, for example, described her current work as having emerged from her graduate study in higher education wherein she developed an interest in college access patterns and career development; meanwhile, Tom described specific coursework focused on intentionality in practice that helped shape his commitment to student affairs work. The difference between the instrumental utility ascribed by those with graduate degrees in fields other than education as compared with the more content-oriented connections made among those who studied education provides an interesting lens through which to interpret subsequent findings regarding the utility of student learning and development theory.
Though not a formal part of my interview protocols, several advisors volunteered information about their undergraduate degree because they felt it positively impacted their ability to advise students in the School of Management and Information Technology. Typically, advisors made this connection when their undergraduate degree was also in management or information technology, which heightened their ability to provide curricular advice to undergraduates, as well as to speak from a position of prior experience. This belief was particularly in evidence when the undergraduate degree was earned at Central University; given that the size and culture of the institution is relatively distinct, participants felt that having also attended the institution gave them an advantage in understanding the experiences of the students with whom they worked. Marie, for example, suggested that having earned an undergraduate degree in a business field from Central University enabled her to communicate with students as someone who had previously experienced many of the same things that they were presently encountering. While those with graduate degrees from Central University also mentioned the connection, they did not articulate the perceived increase in understanding as clearly as did undergraduate degree recipients.

As a whole, participants’ discussions of their academic backgrounds echo their discussion of the role of practical knowledge in advising. Several participants suggest that a varied professional background assists in the diverse range of functions performed by academic advisors at Central University. Linda, for example, emphasized that among the best preparation for her current role had been a position in a small student affairs office where staff were required to “know a little bit about everything anyway no matter what you did.” Likewise, Marie describes the way in which she used her academic
training to connect to students: “I have work experience and practical . . . business experience that I can impart [when working] with students.” Expanding on this statement, Marie goes on to state that this experience assists her in viewing scenarios through lenses that benefit the student—noting that her “business background comes in when like when I am giving students advice on what this employer might be thinking or what are they going to be.”

The Role of Theory

Participants’ narratives revealed their complicated relationships with student learning and development theory. At one extreme was a group of advisors who either eschewed direct use of theoretical approaches altogether or argued that theoretical bases drawn from other disciplines had greater utility for their work. For example, despite the fact that her graduate training and professional experience had offered her broad exposure to both student learning and development theories, Linda stated when asked about student learning and development theory: “I don’t consciously think about those.” She did admit, however, that they might function in some background capacity. Marie found slightly more use for them, but argued for an eclectic approach that incorporated her experience in career counseling. In talking about theory, she also moved seamlessly between research findings and formal theories of student learning and development—making no distinction between the differing ontological and epistemological foundations of these two literature bases. Likewise, Jean traced her thinking about how best to manage the developmental load to prior experience with literature related recovery communities. In effect, both Marie and Jean utilized their academic and professional training to elide the
distinction between theory and theory-in-use and, in so doing, created a more useful theoretical narrative.

Others accomplished this synthesis differently. Brenda attributed her understanding of student learning and development primarily to her background—noting that her approach, which recalls recent literature on positive psychology—stems from her cultural background and more specifically her mother’s parenting. In our interviews, Tom frequently referenced his graduate training but did not identity particular concepts with specific theorists. Instead, he noted:

I tend to be one of those people who can take information from anything and kind of apply it in some way . . . so I found all of it [theoretical approaches] to be fairly useful I don’t try to pigeonhole myself into one particular approach. I think that [all] students are different . . . so if can honestly have the same approach with every single student I’m not [going to] be as effective.

Explaining how theory functioned as a background layer, Tom noted that “you get to know pretty quickly some theories are useful in some situations and not so useful in other situations” and that as a result it “definitely helps a lot too just having that that background” so that he could fall back on theory as needed.

Of the six advisors I interviewed, only one described having made explicit use of formal theory—though not as part of her current work. Suggesting that theory use is at least in part the product of institutional culture, Lisa noted that she had frequently utilized strategies based on student development theory when working at a medium-sized urban research university “because our dean at the time . . . did his dissertation in that [area] and just had us working [in] these small work groups and [going] through all the different
theories and approaches.” While she noted that this experience served as a background for her current work and had produced some desirable outcomes at her prior institution, Lisa also suggested that this did not occur in her current academic advising work.

Stemming in part from their very different approaches to formal theory and in part due to the role of the academic advisor as a key part of intervention delivery (Kimball & Campbell, forthcoming), the theories-in-use demonstrated by academic advisors differ considerably. Ranging from the theoretical eclecticism advocated by Tom to the more directive questioning designed to promote self-actualization of Jean, each theory-in-use was unique to the advisor. Nonetheless, the theories-in-use that I observed seemed well-adapted to work with a wide range of students. While some advisors described borrowing parts of their theories-in-use from other advisors, most acknowledged that their advising practices likely departed significantly from their colleagues. Several advisors, for example, described their commitment to proactive engagement while noting that they were unsure that their colleagues approached their work similarly—with one advisor noting that: “we don’t sit on each other’s advising sessions so we don’t know how each other [advisor works] . . . [but] we hear rumors from students.” Statements such as these seemed to reflect a lack of clarity about how theories-in-use should be evaluated and validated among the advisors with whom I spoke.

The Application of Theory or Research Findings

In my work with the academic advisors, I frequently observed their theories-in-use to be based not upon the holistic incorporation of formal theories but instead upon key elements—or guiding concepts (Reason & Kimball, forthcoming)—that they had adopted from these theories or their own experiences. Some advisors referred directly to
recent empirical research as they described the guiding concepts employed in their research. Marie, for example, referenced research on “millennials” emerging from demography when describing the typical student in the School of Management and Information Technology. Tom also mentioned having consulted recent higher education scholarship and went on to indicate that his understanding of student experience was structured by some of his own attempts to answer questions about the students with whom he worked via original research. More often than not, however, the role of guiding concepts was made clear not by an abstract discussion of theory itself but in the way that advisors spoke about how they addressed specific student experiences.

Many participants were employing concepts related to Nevitt Sanford’s (1968) description of the role of challenge, support, and readiness in student experience. It was unclear whether this application was attributable to the research itself, its widespread diffusion, or an understanding derived from experience. Regardless, these guiding concepts structured their work with students. Linda, for example, described her work as a careful balance of “hand holding,” and “making sure that you’re supporting whatever growth [a student is] engaged in” based in part on the student’s progression through the College of Management and Information Technology. Tom suggested the important role of readiness in structuring a student’s response to offered support—noting that “Sometimes you have to encourage students more than once. Sometimes it’s like a broken record with students.”

The previously described structured questions employed by Jean were also consistent with the dialectical push and pull nature of student affairs work, rooted in a conception of challenge and support. Jean’s advising practice was also consistent with
Tom’s belief that sometimes a “broken record” approach with students could be beneficial. During the sessions that I observed with Jean, she would frequently present a piece of information, ask a question about it, present the information again in another form, ask the student to respond to it, and then conclude the session by recapping all of the salient information. In follow-up conversations, Jean mentioned that she would occasionally also summarize the information for the student via email. Though she expressed uncertainty as to how well this information was received by students, it is a behavior entirely consistent with Sanford’s (1968) contention that there is an appropriate level of support for each readiness level. Her work provided information in multiple forms, accessible to students of varying levels of developmental readiness.

Others also noted that they adjusted the level of support that they provided depending on the maturity of the students with whom they were working. In our interview, Marie depicted her work as an evolving partnership wherein students are asked to take increasing levels of responsibility for their education and their decisions—going on to state that the goal is to “try to help them with decision-making, not . . . make decisions for them.” Similarly, Lisa described first year students as having relatively high support needs; an interim step where they learned how to be successful at the School of Management and Information Technology; and finally, a dramatically reduced need for support in the students’ final years at Central University.

Other guiding concepts appeared less frequently or directly. For example, the understanding that students moved from an absolute way of knowing to a more contextual approach (Love & Guthrie, 1999) is reflected in the discussion of readiness above. It was also mentioned by several participants. Marie noted that many students
seemed to begin their college careers seeking the “one or two answers that will fit all.” while Jean described the progression in student thinking as altering the advising relationship from one of “telling” to one of genuine give-and-take.

Another way academic advisors organized their thinking about student experience was via the concept of engagement (Kuh et al, 2005)—a research construct based on empirical findings that suggests that positive student outcomes are fostered when students feel a sense of connectedness to or psychological investment in a place or in people. Mentioned most directly by Lisa but reinforced in all the interviews, participants saw academic advising as a process enhancing the connection between the institution and the individual student. Lisa noted this concept was particularly powerful at Central University. Given the size of the institution, it was quite possible that students had more direct contact with their advisors than any other caring adult. She is: “. . . probably the one person they know the best after their four years cause the meet with me the most . . . because realistically I’ll meet with these students about a dozen times in their four years.” As a result, the advisor was consistently depicted as a key person in enhancing a student’s sense of engagement as well as in shepherding the student from absolute to contextual ways of knowing.

Most of the guiding concepts employed by the academic advisors focused on the uniqueness of the individual student. Building on the commitment to engagement described above, Lisa tried to approach every student as unique individual, explaining that each student experienced their developmental trajectory in a unique way—saying that “growth and development is different for every individual.” Meanwhile, Brenda described the advising process thusly: “it’s about them figuring out what they should do,
and . . . guiding them [to do] so.” While these are the clearest statements regarding the role of the individual, all the participants suggested at some point that the advising process had to be uniquely tailored to the unique needs of the students with whom they were working.

From Theory to Practice

As part of the second interview protocol, I asked advisors to respond to three or four scenarios that I had observed to be relatively common student experiences encountered by student affairs practitioners at Central University. I originally intended these scenarios to be opportunities for advisors to speak in theoretical terms about the ways in which they worked with students. None of the advisors responded to these questions via formal theory, but all the responses confirmed the crucial role played by theories-in-use. Lisa, for example, noted that her understanding of student experience evolved with each interaction—noting that, once she had observed a practice to be useful for a group of students, she would incorporate into her repertoire of future practices.

Most of these theories-in-use were based on guiding concepts derived from, influenced by, or otherwise similar to key elements of student learning and development theory. For instance, Tom noted that when he was struggling to find an approach that would work for a student he often fell back on engagement literature and focused on increasing a student’s sense of connection to Central University. Likewise, Linda stated that her default response for a student struggling to adjust socially would be to “get them engaged in a community.” Marie expands on that concept—noting that an environment as large as Central University “can be as big or small as you want . . . it is a big place but . . . getting involved in clubs and organizations and getting to know your faculty . . . getting
involved in some things that you’re interested” can reduce the environment to a manageable human scale.

Others indicated the important role that their understanding of developmentally-appropriate challenges played in spurring student learning and development. As one example, when I asked Linda how she would approach a student who was over-committed and struggled with time management issues, she indicated that it was “one of our cautions”—a core concern related to student success that she checked in frequently about with her students since many students struggled with this issue early in their academic careers. Marie described the way in which students gain greater comfort and familiarity with difficult situations through repeat exposures—effectively diminishing the level of challenge a scenario presents over time. Likewise, Tom demonstrated a similar appreciation for the creation of appropriate levels of challenge given a student’s developmental readiness in his summation of good advising practice—noting that “in this field, one of the things that that we try to do is meet the student where they are . . . that’s the most effective thing to do.” Marie’s comments confirm that this insight is shared by the advisors in my study via her statement that “you can’t pull a student into young adulthood.” Instead, she and the other advisors articulate the important role that appropriate levels of support can play in ensuring appropriate levels of challenge.

In thinking about theory-in-use, the advisors I spoke with articulate two different levels of intervention—one at the group level and one at the individual level. At the group level, advisors seek to foster engagement by introducing students to affinity groups. Again, Linda notes that “just [tries] to get them engaged in a community.” To start, these communities may be based on a student’s social identity—with Linda stating,
for example, that she might recommend that a Catholic student join the Newman Society—but participants consistently suggested the importance of broad-based engagement strategies. Brenda, for example, described her engagement work as “a multi-step process” involving a discussion of the transition to college, student interests, and a shared search for involvement opportunities.

Other times, engagement work more closely resembles the cultural agency process put forth by Museus and Quaye (2009). Jean relates her experience working with one struggling student:

Last year, I had a student who actually wasn’t one of my advisees, but I met him through the freshman seminar that I was teaching at the time. He was just not going to make it without significant and quick intervention, and so I had called the diversity office and found someone who was willing to kind of reach out to him . . . I had him go and meet with some different folks who I would think probably talked with him about some of the same things but he was hearing it from different places.

Acknowledging that her own supply of resources did not afford her the optimal ability to connect with this particular student, Jean actively sought out caring others who might understand the student’s struggles differently.

In this regard, Jean’s clear focus on the individual student is reminiscent of the commitment of other advisors. When working with a student who might be in the “wrong” major, Tom focuses on “helping the student to feel comfortable that whatever decision they make [is okay] as long as it’s a good decision for them.” As a result, the strategies that Tom employs differ from student-to-student. In his words: “I often say this
to students and parents . . . as much as you think about [Central University] as being a big school, my job is to work with students sitting in the chair across from me.” He does so by treating students as unique—or to borrow Lisa’s language, ensuring that he’s “not meeting with every student and going through the same standard mode of operation.”

**The Nature of Learning and Development**

This section describes the many ways that the participants in this study talked about learning and development. Initial interview findings are presented separately for learning and development. Second interview findings are organized around the discussion of a model synthesizing key concepts—including learning and development—derived from participant responses in interview one; as a result, learning and development are described together during the description of second interview findings.

**Initial Conversations About Learning**

Participated displayed a wide variety of theories-in-use in their thinking about student learning. Brenda described learning in the broadest sense—stating that it was a process of figuring out “what works and what doesn’t work for you.” Other participants focused more on how learning occurred based on the unique nature of the individual student. Jean, for example, noted that students have “different ways of learning and different ways of remembering” and that she tried to provide different types of support to different students. For others, learning was more focused on experience and resultant changes in behavior. Marie, for example, stated that: “if you are cognizant and self-aware, you are learning from experiences and from things that work and things that don’t
work.” Learning then is seen not only as a reflective process emerging from experience but also one that leads to observable change.

In fact, the role of experience emerged as one of the more salient components of most theories-in-use. In the clearest description of its importance, Tom described college as a process wherein students go about “gaining those experiences that are [going to] help them learn”—with a particular emphasis on the co-curriculum where students learn “team work, presentation skills, communication skills . . . all those things.” Expanding on this further, Tom identified study abroad as among the more important learning experiences for the students at Central University. The responses of other advisors confirm that study participants assigned a crucial role to study abroad. Describing one of her students, Brenda noted that:

Students will go abroad. They learn something. They learn about a different culture . . . one [student] said, “Wow, we are so lucky in so many aspects here in the US.” You know . . . he went to Spain, but he was like, “God, we are so sheltered.” It was a huge learning experience.

Continuing further, Brenda suggested that other experiences—with internships foremost among them—could prompt a similar level of reflection, but study abroad was perhaps unique in that almost all students seemed to experience some sort of new self-understanding as a result. That said, Brenda was careful to note that the type of change that originated from new experiences like study abroad or internships did not uniformly affect students—stating that: “we all learn different things from the same experience.”

The responses of other advisors help provide an expanded understanding of the importance of novel experiences. Just as Brenda did, Linda described a student who
studied abroad and came back “a different person.” In the case of Linda’s student, however, it was her observation about the radical change that the student had experienced that prompted reflection and, in her view, learning. Experience, according to the advisors with whom I spoke, offers the potential to introduce disequilibrium into a student’s understanding of the world—or, in Jean’s words, “a whole different spin on every reality they’ve grown up with.” This observation helps to explain why most advisors suggest that students who participate in a large number of varied experiences including internships, study abroad, and student involvement opportunities tend to mature faster than their peers.

It also became clear that most advisors did not make a clean division between learning and development. For example, when I asked Tom directly whether he thought of learning and development as similar or different things, he responded that: “. . . they’re very connected; in my mind, they’re very connected.” Likewise, when I asked Jean whether she was employing the terms learning and development synonymously, she confirmed their relationship while also suggesting that there was distinction between the two. In Jean’s words, “. . . learning is a part of development, but development is not always . . . I’m trying to think through some situations I would consider development, and all of them include learning.” The second interview protocol was designed to elicit more information about the precise relationship between the two.

**Initial Conversations About Development**

In contrast to learning, which participants described mostly in terms of discrete examples, development was viewed as more abstract. Tom, for example, described development as the background against which students “make decisions about life and
where they’re [going to] go and what direction they’re [going to] take.” Elaborating further, Tom went on to suggest that life experience was constitutive of both learning and development, but it was more difficult to ascribe causality to developmental change since it represented the confluence of a wide range of experiences, whereas learning was more contextual. Though his understanding was far more sophisticated than a simple behaviorist approach, like many of the other advisors, Tom treated learning as a discrete event where clear connections could be made between a stimulus and a learned response. In contrast, he saw development as consisting of a series of changes over time—meaning that while it was possible to determine that development had occurred it was often not possible to determine why or how.

Others, including Linda and Jean, separated development into constitutive components—among them physical, emotional, moral, and intellectual—in a manner similar to the division of the cognitive and affective in most student affairs textbooks. In Jean’s case, the multiple forms of development led her to believe that all learning led to some form of development, and all development was preceded by some form of learning—noting that “I don’t know how you could learn something and not be changed by that in some way” and that “If you look at the end result . . . it’s the product of all the little pieces along the way and who’s to say how this piece way back here [impacted it].” Jean then connected the students’ overall experience via the acknowledgement that, while it was useful to think of separate forms of development, students “bring their whole selves to that chair [pointing to the chair typically occupied by students during her advising appointments] . . . so we’re not just looking at academics because they’re so many things that affect how they are today.” In this regard, Jean’s comments echo the
holistic approach to learning and development advocated by both transformative learning theory and self-authorship. At the same time, however, they indicate a very real tension in the role construction of academic advisors: though their primary connection to the institutional mission is curricular, academic advisors are inevitably called upon to address non-academic matters as well.

All participants elided the distinction between learning and development in practice—often explicitly stating the distinction was not meaningful. Some, like Lisa, stated outright that the two terms were equivalent. Though she could not say precisely why, the term “development” made Brenda uncomfortable; instead, she preferred to utilize the term “growth” while still holding that learning and growth were intrinsically related. In practice, participants relied on the distinction between a change in behavior and a student’s change over time (which I call “growth,” following Brenda’s nomenclature) to a much greater extent than they did thinking about learning and development via formal theories. Given the intermittent but repeated nature of advising appointments—typically occurring once each semester—advisors were uniquely well-positioned to observe the changing nature of student behavior from one point-to-the-next. Tom described this sort of change as resulting when something “clicked.” Others explicitly connected change back to the concept of experience described earlier. Appearing more rarely, advisors sometimes also suggested the possibility for radical changes that entail major perspective shifts. Once again, this form of change was often associated with study abroad.

When participants were asked to think about change over multiple points of time, they tended to think of that change as growth. Linda, for example, noted that: “there’s a
world of growth between the time when they walk on campus at seventeen or eighteen and when they walk off campus at twenty-two.” She goes on to note that it is this personal growth, and not the acquisition of knowledge, that constitutes the real work of college. Tom also elaborates on the theme of college-as-an-opportunity for growth—suggesting that college is a process of discovery wherein intellectual sophistication and understanding of the self feed off of one another.

Once again, it becomes clear that these processes are seen as highly individual and connected to the student’s sense of self. Lisa, for example, notes that “growth and development [are] different for every individual.” Jean meanwhile states that advising sessions “have to be guided not only by [a student’s] past but also by their future. And also by their present, so though they may not always realize that . . . when I’m [working] with someone is to make sure that we’re considering as many of those influences as possible.” For these advisors, growth is a process wherein students become who they will be and is the unique product of the student’s experiences and goals. Seen this way, advising students to spur growth is a directive process. As Brenda describes it: “. . . we push this concept, this goal setting . . . here is our goal, and how do you build up [to it]?”

While none of the advisors that I spoke with indicated a view of growth that was consistent with the level of universality proposed by formal theories of development, many did hold that there were archetypal “stages” through which students progressed. An understanding of these stages was perceived as helpful in working with students in the institutional context. While the broad progression of these stages is explored as part of the discussion of readiness above, the pervasiveness the stage orientation bears further discussion here. Tom, for example, described his work as designed to ensure that students
have “gotten what they wanted out of their education here and they can kind of move to
the next phase of their life.” As a result, his advising practice focused first on ensuring
that students were working within a broad area of interest, then narrowing that interest,
then gaining experience, and finally gaining a feeling of accomplishment. Likewise, Jean
suggested that the typical freshman student was very different than the typical senior.
Lisa echoed this sentiment describing the freshmen year as a time of adjustment—
including getting acclimated to the institution, tempering expectations, and finding a
good fit—and subsequent years as increasingly focused on what students would do
following graduation. Brenda echoes this sentiment in her statement that, while
sophomores are primarily concerned with gaining access to the major of their choice,
juniors and seniors are more concerned with acquiring relevant experience via
internships. Since the advisors with whom I worked saw most students only twice a year
and these meetings were prompted by the academic calendar, these stages were discussed
primarily in terms of academic standing. They nonetheless roughly correspond to the
developmental trajectories forecast by both cognitive approaches and self-authorship.

Learning and Development Redefined

In the second interview, I asked participants to respond to a tentative model that I
created based upon first interview findings. Focused principally on the relationship
between the two theoretical bases, I presented participants with a narrative description
that suggested that experience (which I defined broadly as a student’s ongoing experience
of the world) led to learning (which I defined as a change in behavior or mental state).
Learning, I suggested, was more readily apparent when it held meaning to the student in
question, and if it held continued meaning, a student was likely to reflect upon that
learning. Reflection, which I defined as an examination of the relationship between learning and a student’s sense of self, could lead to the accumulation of long-term and persistent change (or growth). Utilizing the definitions derived from the first interview summarized above, I suggested that this form of growth was development. Where necessary, I clarified that we could think of development as the process via which students become more complex or fully realized versions of themselves.

Perhaps not surprisingly given the bias introduced by the researcher, virtually all the participants voiced initial agreement with the tentative model as I presented it. Linda, for example, responded to the model—noting that the model makes “perfect sense.” When pushed further, however, she suggested what turned out to be the most consistent refinement: the participants with whom I worked consistently felt that the model was too linear—or, to use Linda’s language, she was “not sure it’s a straight line.” She went on to describe a resituated model in terms similar to the iterative nature of an assessment cycle—wherein a student might enter the process at any point on the model and still change as a result.

Notably, Linda also suggested the model could function in a recursive manner a student found themselves engaged in a protracted struggle. As she unpacked this statement further, she suggested that the core concepts in the model—experience, learning, reflection, and development—might best be represented as “little bubbles that just kind of float around touch each other and explode like you know.” Jean meanwhile reprised Linda’s description of the model as cyclical while also suggesting just how wary we must be of thinking about change as a straight line:
I wouldn’t see that as a linear process. I think that there’s a lot of back and forth and circling around and . . . accumulation that may or may not . . . I mean, everything that you’re touched by . . . it changes you in some way but how, how that matters or how that manifests . . . sometimes it can be one thing but I think it’s very circular. If you think about something, something else happens: it changes how you think about that again. You could go around and around eighty times until you kind of make a decision about how that’s going to sit with you.

Confirming the often circuitous path to learning and development, Lisa came up with perhaps the most evocative of description of the relationship between learning and development when she described the process as a “roller coaster.”

Others emphasized that the model was a normative description—more a description of an advisor’s aspirations for students than something we could expect of everyone. Marie, for example, noted that the model was “what you’d like to see” before going on to state that she was often uncertain whether her work with students prompted that level of change. Brenda also suggested that the overall goal of growth, which she viewed as subsuming all the other potential stages of the model, was the real focus of her work and not the interim steps. Likewise, when I asked Jean whether she thought that the terminology that I employed around learning and development was artificial, she indicated it was: while she thought there was analytical power in separating learning and development, she did not believe that the division corresponded to actual student experience. More broadly, though, the participants I interviewed did find utility in the tentative model and the four concepts that undergirded it. Reviewing their responses to
the model and their discussion of student experience, we gain a much richer sense of how these terms are operationalized in practice.

Experience is consistently depicted as critical to a student’s learning and development. Marie, for example, stated that “experience is huge in everything.” Brenda indicated that “experience is a huge part of growing and learning.” Tom described college as a process not just of classroom learning but also of accumulating a wide-range of experiences. Linda echoes this sentiment—noting that students with a wider array of experiences learn faster. Jean is even more direct in her statement about how experiences shape learning and development. In her view, “experiences shape how you perceive things—the scope of your empathy . . . your ability to take another perspective. People don’t’ exist in a vacuum, so . . . I would say experience is everything.” Experience then, in the view of this study’s participants, performs two key functions: it supplies students with the raw material for learning and development while also fundamentally shaping their sense of self and how they will respond to future experiences.

In the view of the academic advisors, not all experience leads to learning. Focused attention is necessary to move from experience to learning. In her responses, Marie repeatedly emphasized the powerful role that a student’s responses to experience play in determining whether learning occurs. Likewise, Lisa indicated that in her work a key way to determine whether learning had occurred was to see students “taking what you’ve told them in the previous advising session acting on it and following up with you.” Others emphasize that a change in behavior alone does not constitute learning; it must be precipitated by a change in mental state as well. Brenda, for example, notes that she doesn’t view a student who simply conforms to her expectations as having learned; for it
to be learning, that change in behavior would have to persist over time and be reflected on the student’s initiative. As a result, Brenda suggested that reflection might, in fact, presage learning in her version of the model with a stage of provisional change incorporated following reflection (i.e. experience $\rightarrow$ change $\rightarrow$ reflection $\rightarrow$ learning $\rightarrow$ development)—noting that she was unsure “which comes first the reflection-to-learn or the learning-to-reflect.”

Moving to the importance of reflection, the advisors consistently emphasized the importance of relating learning to one’s sense of self. Jean described this process as “internalization.” In a similar fashion, Marie described reflection as a process of becoming “self-aware.” Others, like Linda, described reflection as important but difficult for many students. Suggesting once again the importance of study abroad, Linda indicated that sometimes the creation of disequilibrium was necessary to spur reflection—recalling the cognitive dissonance that serves as a catalyst in both theories of transformative learning and self-authorship. Lisa also noted that sometimes students required some time before reflection would be beneficial observing that: “sometimes that realization comes on a little bit later in the four years you’re meeting.”

Other advisors explicitly identified their style of advising—heavy on problem-posing and carefully-crafted questions—as designed to prompt reflection. Advisors did note, however, that this approach worked better for some students than others. Jean noted that a student’s level of comfort with questioning and reflection was “very personality specific” but that “if they’re open to reflecting they may learn, grow, change more rapidly.” Finally, one advisor noted that some advisors were more comfortable fostering reflection than others: “I know some of our advisors do struggle . . . with reflection . . .
it’s easier for them just to, you know, check off what the student has to do.” Despite the ambiguity around how best to foster reflection, advisors uniformly felt that it was an important way to spur development.

Importantly, the way that advisors spoke about development departed significantly from standard textbook conceptions: neither the assumption that an understanding of development could be employed universally nor the belief in invariant stages or statuses was consistently demonstrated. In this regard, the way that the term “development” was employed more closely resembled the definition of “growth” as change over time than it did any of the formal theories of development. For example, Marie stated that she knew development had occurred when students were “different.” Lisa talked about this difference in terms of change over time. Tom meanwhile spoke about development in terms of “movement” and “steps” toward a goal. Jean described development primarily in terms of a student’s growing sense of independence. Once again, Brenda expressed a preference for using growth instead of development. It is certainly true that none of these definitions of development are incompatible with formal theories of learning and development—indeed formal theories can easily be subsumed under these understandings—but it is equally true that the advisors with whom I spoke do not find the fine gradations in development articulated by formal theories particularly meaningful in practice.

**Advising Work and the Development of a Technostructure**

This section describes findings related to an emergent theme from data collection: the powerful role of systems, processes, and tools that enable advisors’ roles to be
constructed in specific ways. I refer to this complex of ideas as the “technostructure” of advising. Since I did not anticipate that these findings would be a key element of this study at the outset, there were not specific questions associated with these findings in the first interview. As a result, I describe the process by which it became clear that I would be unable to capture fully the way that advisors thought about theory and practice without discussing the technostructure. This description occupies the first part of this section. The second part of the section focuses principally on participant responses to a question about the role of technology in advising asked during the second interview.

**Initial Interview Findings**

Throughout the course of this study, I was repeatedly struck by how the technostructure shaped the way in which participants approached and described their advising practices. When I first consulted my field notes, for example, one of my repeat observations concerned the way in which advisors managed large caseloads—taking detailed notes on each interaction and utilizing the computer as a mechanism to extend both their own memories and their ability to interact meaningfully with students. Interviews with the advisors revealed the extent of these practices, but none of theory-to-practice texts that I consulted dealt with the operational details and administrative support structure necessary for meaningful developmental interventions. In conversations with every participant, they advanced the key mechanisms through which they sought to engage students. Marie described how educational podcasts explained the scheduling process to students. Tom talked extensively about the changing nature of advising—emphasizing the importance of email as a medium for conversation but also the ongoing importance of face-to-face advising. In his work, he distinguished between the types of
work that was well-suited to each communication form. Likewise, Lisa utilized social media applications both to connect to current and past students, which allowed her a more in-depth view of students’ growth over time.

While there was considerable variation from person-to-person, there were also overall patterns that suggest that many of these innovations have become part of the technostructure of advising and in many ways are indistinguishable from the practice of academic advisors, a practice which when described directly by advisors was cast primarily in terms of one-on-one relationships. A centralized database system allows advisors to record information about their advisees’ academic studies, personal information, and career aspirations. It thus serves as an ongoing record of the relationship between the advisor and the advisee—allowing the advisor to recall quickly information about a student that they may not have seen in several months. Though the advisors varied in their approach to recording advising notes, most were similar to Jean, who jotted notes during advising appointments and blocked out several times throughout the day to complete more detailed notes in the computer system.

The advisors also differed in the amount of information that they thought it appropriate to record. While some advisors recorded only relatively neutral material as the notes functioned as an extension of a students’ academic records, other find it valuable to record more personal information via a system of shorthand or in personal file systems. The advising notes served to extend the experiences of one advisor to other advisors, should they need to temporarily assume part of another advisor’s caseload. Further, they allowed the advisor’s to recall their own experiences with students far more quickly than would otherwise be the case. Tom, for example, expressed confidence that
not having to deal with paper records dramatically increased the caseload that advisors in the School of Management and Information Technology could handle.

Though not a formal part of the advising notes database, other advisors maintained a library of frequently used materials—both in paper and print form. Jean, for example, structured her entire office around dual computer screens, which allowed her to display certain information for students while restricting her notes for her view only. She was also able to maintain a series of bulletin boards that displayed information to which she referred frequently. Referring to it as a “catalog and information” system, Jean also mentioned that it was something that she had developed over time to expedite and increase the helpfulness of her communication to students. Others, like Brenda and Lisa, had an extensive collection of previously sent emails that functioned as a template that evolved iteratively and allowed for easy responses to common student queries. Most advisors had an analogous system.

Having a well-developed technostructure was repeatedly identified as critical to good advising practice. During registration periods, Marie addresses “at least as much [of her advising caseload] through email as face to face.” The extent to which economies of scale can be realized in that work—a topic Tom raised several times—greatly enhances the efficacy of advising work. To that end, several advisors mentioned the need to present information via multiple technological platforms. Brenda communicated regularly with her students by email, text message, social media, and phone in order to reach a wide variety of students. One advisor even mentioned that electronically-aided communication had become such a vital part of advising work that they had a student in their caseload whom they had never met in person but who was on the verge of graduation.
The technostructure described above is both necessitated and made possible by the size of Central University. A remarkably complex organization consisting of many schools and satellite locations, Central University has the full complement of bureaucratic processes which characterize the modern organization (Berman, 1988). When asked which part of their jobs they liked the least, the advisors almost uniformly indicated the paperwork—and no one spoke in favor of it. The attitude toward the bureaucratic aspect of advising work is captured best by one of Marie’s comments: “If you are not meeting with someone, you are filling out forms.” Marie went on to note that advisors were rarely consulted before decisions that impacted their work. Brenda shared this assessment—indicating that: “Rules are being made above us that [the rule makers] don’t . . . [think about] how they impact students.”

Curricular decisions, in particular, were a source of frustration as they often introduced problems in major section, course scheduling, or program completion that advisors were then left to try to alleviate. Likewise, tight budgets enforced at higher levels of the institutional bureaucracy generated increased course loads. One of the participants in this study who also held a supervisory position in the advising office presented the problem as follows:

[An advising office is] almost like a production setting. The more pressure you put on your machinery . . . the more production you try to get, the more chances there are for things to slip along the way. I think that that’s something in advising that really . . . needs to be looked at. It depends on what level . . . of support you want to provide students.
At the same time that the technostructure allowed advisors to deliver on the commitments to student success that they all embraced, it was also a response to a structural reality that they could not control. In that regard, despite their utility, it was not clear that they would have adopted these innovations if given the choice. Lisa, for example, noted that her reliance on advising notes to give students the level of care that they deserved felt like it was “cheating.” As with many of the advisors, she thought of her work as consisting primarily of one-on-one relationships: the inclusion of the computer as a key part of the advising relationship struck her as discordant with this understanding.

The institution’s structure served to control the work of advisors in other ways as well. Several advisors noted that the only time that they could predictably expect to have contact with most students was during the scheduling period—when the advisors played a key gatekeeping role. As a result, many advisors depict themselves as the mediator between students’ needs and a structure that they cannot control. Brenda described this phenomenon most succinctly—noting that, “A lot of times we are the people stuck in the middle.” More concrete instances of advisors being “stuck in the middle” can readily be found. After describing the powerful role of study abroad, for example, Jean noted that “it’s getting harder for students to do practically because of the way the course scheduling is set up.” Several others lamented the tension between the amount of time they could spend in a typical advising appointment—thirty minutes—and the amount that they hoped to accomplish with the student. Though the advisors’ work was driven by a real commitment to the students with whom they worked, it was also constrained by institutional structure.
Though it was a clear source of frustration for the advisors in this study, many also felt that they were of the most assistance to students when helping them to navigate the institutional structure. Marie described “the largest part” of her work as “helping students with carrying out academic policy and getting their stuff done” while other advisors talked about the importance of understanding the “nuances” of policy, the importance of “scheduling trivia,” and the need to “navigate” the curriculum to the advantage of students. In this regard, academic advisors survey as key purveyors of institutional knowledge about the unwritten exceptions to policies. For example, Lisa noted the importance of asking “the right person” to get answers to student questions while Tom noted that sometimes it took him some time to deliver the answer that best suited student needs. Several participants mentioned the importance of appointed liaisons to various departments and satellite locations. Tom described a regular meeting with presentations from “other people from around the college or . . . the university [designed to] help fill us in on things that are going on out there that may be of interest to us or that we really need to know.” In the words of Lisa, all these efforts are designed to “make sure that however it ends up it’s the best that is can possible be for the student.”

While much of their work focuses on mediating between students and institutional policy, advisors play a vital connecting role in other areas as well. Advisors frequently describe being asked to provide basic, non-professional counseling services before referring students to mental health counselors on staff at Central University’s counseling center. Academic advisors also mentioned career counseling centers and academic support services frequently when describing their own role as referral agents to other institutional offices.
Second Interview Findings

As part of my second interview protocol, I asked academic advisors to comment more directly on their role as institutional connectors and the extent to which that role was aided by technology. Findings confirm the critical importance of the academic advisors in mediating access to key institutional information. To that end, advisors consistently emphasize the importance of viewing the institution from a student’s point-of-view and finding a helpful way to navigate the bureaucracy. Recalling Tom’s promise to students that his job is to focus on the person “sitting in the chair across from me,” Brenda described how she would work with students to change their majors even after official deadlines—noting “I will fight [for] them, and I will help them come up with an argument because they’re paying so much in tuition.”

This work, however, is complicated by the complex nature of both Central University and the School of Management and Information Technology. Several advisors noted that their access to certain types of information—including access to student conduct records—was limited and that they sometimes knew only what students told them. In response to this information deficit, the complex technostructure described above was created to enable advisors to serve both student and structure simultaneously. When asked to comment on its importance of their computer systems and administrative processes, several advisors mentioned that they had never really thought about it until my questioning: it was simply the background layer against which they worked. In her comments, for example, Marie described at the outgrowth of an increasingly technological world and a necessary way to communicate with students. Others stated
that technological solutions had arisen in response to structural or economic issues. In
Tom’s words:

. . . technology has really enabled . . . when I first started in [the School of
Management and Information Technology], we had two hundred students in an
advising load . . . we’ve been as high as four hundred fifty, and I feel like the
quality of our advising has actually gotten better over time because of technology
even though we have more students—which sounds counterintuitive . . . but I
think that technology has given us the ability to do that because I don’t have to
know something about [all] my students: I don’t have to remember it.

What Tom suggests, and what others advisors confirm, is that technological systems have
been developed to perform the part of an advisor’s job that they’d struggle with at the
present scale—mostly storage and retrieval of information—while allowing them to
concentrate on the interpersonal interaction that is the bedrock of advising practice.

Expanding on the statement above, Tom goes on to describe the way that he uses
technology on a daily basis in a manner that many other participants confirmed:

. . . my notes [are] easily accessible, and a lot of advisors . . . they’ll put like little
things down like purposely . . . a little note there, you know, likes football or
whatever it is. Just so the next time they see that student they could actually make
a point to say that to the person. To spark that kind of like “oh yeah, you actually
know me.” [. . .] I could be . . . listening to the student [while] going back and
forth to my computer looking at their grades looking at their performance over
time and you know it can cue me in to things that that we might need to talk about
out into the future too. So it allows us to be more proactive with our students,
allows us to spend really less time preparing. You know what I mean: there was a
day when advisors used to go through their files every morning. [. . .] Now it’s
almost like you can do all that in like five minutes.
Functioning in the way Tom describes, the technological infrastructure of the advising
office becomes an extension of an experienced advisor’s mind and abilities. In effect, it
allows advisors like Tom to deliver on the very real commitment and care that they have
to creating positive, engaged experiences for students at the scale and pace demanded by
Central University.
Linda confirmed this thinking in her interview—noting that with the advising
notes database she was able to make students feel “remembered.” This feeling of
connection, several advisors reiterated, is vital from the student perspective: while an
advisor can have hundreds of advisees, a student only has one advisor, and in the School
of Management and Information Technology the relationship between and advisor and a
student matters a great deal. As Lisa explained in her interview, students “have the
closest rapport or relationship with us then they do with anyone at the University.” To
that end, Lisa actually provides a very specific example of how the advising notes
database helps foster engagement:

I do really think that it’s important that you create that bond with them . . . I’ll put
nicknames in because usually I’ll call them by their first name . . . I had a girl say
to me I really like [to be called Dottie] . . . And her mom had died and her mom
always called her [Dottie], and I know that was important to her. When I called
her [Dottie], she just was so happy that I remembered that, but I had it in big
capital letters.
From our conversation, it was very clear that Lisa genuinely cared for Dottie and was deeply committed to her success. It is also clear via the evident emotion with which she relates this experience that she would opt to remember Dottie’s preferred name if she could, but given the time constraints of the position, she was not confident in her ability to reliably do so. In that regard, the advising notes database clearly became an extension of the relationship between the advisor and the advisee in a very positive way.

**The Importance of the Broader Social Context**

Though a clear part of many theories, I did not include questions explicitly designed to gauge advisors’ thinking about the role of the social context in learning and development. As I thought about my research at the outset, it was designed to capture the role of theory in practice—not necessarily to focus on the constitutive elements of those theories. My first interview findings, however, began to indicate that the social context was a force in the advising relationship that dwarfed even the role of theory. I present these findings in the first part of this section. In the second interview, I asked a question designed to capture directly the way that advisors thought about the role of social context. Surprisingly, this question elicited little in the way of response; analyzing the findings, however, I discovered that the advisors simply viewed the question as one with an evident response to which little elaboration was necessary. To them, if not always to the researcher, the role of the social context was quite evident.

**First Interview Findings**

Participants frequently indicate the powerful role of the broader social context in the lives of the students with whom they work. Advisors repeatedly mentioned that some
students selected majors in the School of Management and Information Technology due to economic considerations or family pressures. While instinctively it might be tempting to condemn such behavior, participants took great pains to understand the full context of students’ decisions—acknowledging the key role of context in educational experience.

Often times, context was acknowledged via a focus on culture. Jean, for example, noted that she tried to be sensitive to the cultural differences experienced by international students attending Central University and frame her advising practice in terms of what would be typical in an American context while also seeking to understand experiences through the cultural lenses of the students with whom she was working. This process of translation, or cultural agency (Museus & Quaye, 2009), was seen as critical by many advisors due to intimidating scope and scale of Central University. To that end, Lisa repeatedly emphasized the importance of breaking student experience up into manageable segments for new students and assisting them in entering human scale environments. Likewise, Brenda focused on fostering a sense of connection and community among her advisees—regularly interacting with them outside of the advising office in order to make Central University a more “human” institution.

Most frequently, however, the social context became a component of advising relationships via the role of family dynamics—most importantly, parents. Though some advisors suggested that most students were unsure of their majors at entry, many felt that parental pressure played a powerful role in major choice. For example, Linda felt strongly that most of the students she worked with in the School of Management and Technology were “coming from families from business.” While this background certainly afforded students a degree of financial security and often served as important anticipatory
socialization, Linda also indicated that some students entered a major due to family pressures rather than genuine interest. More typically, however, the support of parents and families is critical to the success of students. As a result, several advisors reported working closely with the School of Management and Information Technology to provide parents programs throughout the year—including orientations and parents’ weekend.

Perhaps even more powerfully, however, one advisor demonstrated the powerful role of the social context is discussing how a change in one student’s family status had impacted her educational experience:

I had a student last semester—probably with worst thing I had in all [my] years here—her mother died mid semester, and she was devastated. She got a call she was battling breast cancer for the second time. . . She has a younger brother who has very bad Down’s Syndrome, and they were trying to patch the family together. She told me that it was real difficult for her because her mom sent her a care package for [the] holidays and her older sister that she had was married with her own family was trying to do that . . .

Absent the regular support of her mother, the student struggled, and as a result, the student’s family life became a very real part of the advising relationship.

**Second Interview Findings**

Based upon first interview findings, I also asked participants to comment on the extended social network at play in the advising relationship. Their responses reiterate the importance of the broader social context in the advising relationship. Linda puts this finding most aptly in her statement that “you can’t be here in a vacuum.” Tom stated that a student’s success in college depended in part on “what their relationships are and how
strong those relationships are.” More broadly, however, it was also the case that these social networks carried information about college experience that explicitly or implicitly became a part of the advising relationship. Marie, for example, noted that students were frequently provided with erroneous information by friends or roommates and that understanding where the information was coming from became a key part of her response. Lisa also spoke about this issue— noting that: “you also have to respect that they are sharing with you a lot of information and also what goes on in the advising session with them also travels out of the room too to all those people.”

The most salient external influence on a student’s education was seen to be parents. Tom described an active process wherein he tried to “negotiate with the student how much influence the parents have.” Like others, he did not view the active involvement of parents as an inherently bad thing but instead sought to understand how students were making decisions. Many others pointed out that the role of family and parents varied by culture. Once again, Jean mentioned that she tried to present information about “typical” ways to approach student experience in a neutral fashion to avoid imposing normative pressure on students whose cultural backgrounds differed from her own. Seen as an objective reality in advising sessions, parental influence is neither good nor bad, but it was something that advisors needed to confront. One advisor even noted that on occasion she would joke with certain students about having to play “the mom card” in certain situations if she felt that they were not living up the family expectations that students had revealed to her.
Concluding Thoughts

As I conducted and analyzed transcripts from the first interviews, it became clear that the academic backgrounds of participants had an impact—though often a diffuse one—on their work. Perhaps as a result of this disjunction, academic advisors also describe a loose connection between theory and practice. Nonetheless, while many advisors identified theory as having a dubious utility, my findings suggest that theoretical insights are being applied in practice—among them the notion of challenge, support, and readiness; an understanding of students as progressing from absolute to more contextual ways of knowing; and an emphasis on engagement.

In fact, advisors are able to articulate a sophisticated approach to learning and development that is both similar to and radically different from formal theory. Participants have developed a complex lexicon around terms like change and growth that allows them simultaneously treat learning and development as a heuristic model while also acknowledging the uniqueness of the individual. Notably, however, the emphasis on individuality in the informal theory of advisors was sometimes constrained by the institutional structure in which the advising work was located. In response, advisors developed a robust technostructure that allowed them to treat students individually within the context of an institutional environment that emphasized efficient operation. This technostructure also allowed advisors to cope effectively with the myriad social influences on their work.

Results from the second interview deepen the findings that emerge from the first. Based upon responses to questions more specifically tailored to emergent findings, it becomes clear that a theory-to-practice process that based on the use of guiding concepts
is used by many advisors. To that end, I detailed the elements of theories that participants find useful and explicate the way they work with students as both individuals and as part of affinity groups (Parker, 1977). Learning and development is thus seen as a process predicated both on informal stages related to participant defined conceptions of change and growth. These participant defined terms were used as the foundation of a tentative model of learning and development synthesized from participant reports. Second interview findings also shed light on the way in which the structural demands of the advising position necessitate new means of thinking about student affairs work. While these strategies emerge primarily from the implications of a heavy workload, they also help advisors to respond to demands for an extended network of advising relationships.
Chapter Six:  
An Extended Case Analysis of Theory in Practice at a Residence Life Office

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of this study as they relate to the experiences of three residence life professionals working in The Commons at Central University. It is based on three phases of research. First, I employed participant observation techniques to gain a detailed understanding of the nature of residence life work in The Commons. I next conducted an initial interview with participants to gain greater insight into the ways that they thought about student learning and development theory as well as student affairs practice. Finally, I conducted a second interview with all participants to follow-up on themes that emerged in the analysis of first interviews.

Below, I present the results of this research below in four sections. The first focuses on the nature of theory-to-practice conversions. The second describes the way that participants talk about learning and development. The third section details the role of the technostructure in residence life work at Central University. Finally, this chapter concludes with a description of the role of social context in the student affairs practices of study participants.

The Connection Between Theory and Practice

As described in Chapter Three, I intended the residence life site to capture the best case scenario for knowledge and use of student learning and development theories. This section, which is divided into two parts that correspond roughly to the first and second interviews, describes findings that both support and contradict this assumption. Indeed, the practitioners from The
Commons did demonstrate a broad awareness of formal theories but often articulated problematic relationships between theory and practice. This subject is the focus of the first part of this section. The second section focused principally on the way in which participants describe an eclectic approach to theory to inform practice.

**A Background in Formal Theory**

Two of the three residence life professionals with whom I worked had masters’ degrees—both in education. One of them, Alice, described her involvement experiences as an undergraduate—including service as a resident assistant—and indicated that these experiences had led her to work as a hall director following graduation. While so employed, she earned a master’s degree at the institution where she worked as a form of professional development. This transition—from an engaged undergraduate student to a residence life professional—was similar to that of all the study participants from The Commons. In fact, the one participant in my study who had not yet earned a graduate degree (Hughes) had secured his first position in residence life following an internship in a related campus office before moving to Central University in a professional capacity.

Perhaps as a result of this dual background of practical experience and academic training, participants displayed a complicated relationship with formal theory. Barbara, who was the residence life professional most inclined to speak about formal theory, indicated that her student development coursework had served to reinforce her understanding of students, which she stated was based primarily on “how I experienced college.” Expanding on this statement further, she stated bluntly:

I know you’re researching theories and how these apply but I think we can learn all these things in textbooks . . . but at the end of the day relationships with people trumps everything in really getting at who you are, where you come from, what
you’re about, where you’re going, what matters to you. I’ve seen so many of those theories . . . you learn about in class applied to what I’m dealing with, but it’s just crazy . . . I would say words on a page can’t sum up human experience.

For Barbara, real meaning was carried by relationships and experiences; though theories could attempt to approximate knowledge gained in this way, she held it to be a poor substitute—and one that would discarded whenever one’s personal knowledge contradicted it.

Though Hughes did not have a graduate degree, he regularly participated in trainings facilitated both by Central University and by national organizations that offered exposure to student development theory. Nonetheless, Hughes dismissed theories as not particularly useful and suggested that one could find theoretical support for any intervention that made practical sense. Furthermore, Hughes suggested that a careful examination of theory revealed that they could only be applied for certain populations and not for others. In this regard, he echoes a frequent caution in theory-to-practice literature that suggests that the both the population on which a theory is based and the population to which it should be applied should be carefully considered before using a theory to guide intervention (Parker, 1977; Stage & Dannells, 2000). As a result, Hughes stated he tried to focus his work on supporting individual students as they sought to reach their own developmental goals.

In this focus on the individual, Hughes echoed many of Alice’s comments. Summing up her work with students, for example, she noted that every time she works with a student “it’s a different person in front of you, so you’re never [going to] have the exact same [approach] with each person.” Perhaps due to this understanding, of all the
study participants, Alice found formal theory to be the least useful. When asked about theory, she stated:

I don’t think this is a field that necessarily requires it. I think a lot of what we teach used to be called common sense and listening to your elders. [...] I come from a really big family, and I think a lot of my perspectives and my values are really rooted in that. When you have [a large] family, there’s always somebody not happy with the decision, and somebody’s not getting their way. You really have to know how to communicate and so those are all things that I felt like I had before I went to grad school, before I learn student development theory and stuff like that. Some development theory I think is a load of horse shit, and they just need to stop.

Though I pushed Barbara a bit to identify specific theories that she found problematic, she preferred to focus on an approach that she found useful—thinking about balancing between appropriate levels of challenge and support (Sanford, 1968).

As with Barbara’s example, Alice finds the lens through which she understands most of student experience in her own past. In fact, she states that, given the way she was taught student development theory in graduate school, once she “passed that test any that didn’t really seem to apply to me I quickly forgot.” When asked to identify a theory of student development that she found useful, she indicated that only Sanford’s (1968) concepts of challenge and support were particularly meaningful to her. All other theories, Alice went on to state, weren’t useful because “they never tell you exactly what to do.” In short, Alice sought actionable insights, and while she found them in her own past, she didn’t in formal theory.
In contrast to the lack of utility found in formal theory, the participants that I worked with had highly sophisticated theories-in-use. Hughes, for example, framed most of his work around the concepts of connectedness and engagement. While Alice also frequently emphasized engagement in our conversations, her theory-in-use was focused on a respect for the individual student, which led her to emphasize being honest and straightforward. Though she felt strongly that this approach was right for her and worked well, Alice also believed that there was considerable variety in the way that staff at The Commons thought about student experience and admitted that a different theory-in-use might work better for someone else. Likewise, Barbara indicated that her own theory-in-use was rooted in the belief that there was a “sort of similarity” between her own experiences in college and those of her students; as a result, she felt that her theory-in-use was best understood via her own history. Interestingly, however, Barbara was also the residence life professional who most consistently emphasized the importance of viewing students as both individuals and as members of group. To that end, she spoke frequently about “assessing the needs of the community” in order to provide a background layer of programming and structure that would be good for the majority of students. Barbara also emphasized that in her work she then took pains to follow-up with individuals or smaller groups to ensure that everyone was having positive experiences.

**Developing Meaningful Practice**

Findings from the second interview confirm that theory is not explicitly used by the residence life professionals with whom I worked. Perhaps the most formal statement of a theoretical approach was made by Barbara, who noted that in her work she frequently referred back the interactionist approach to psychology, which serves as the
basis for Astin’s (1993) input-environments-outputs analysis. More often than not, participants’ practices were derived from theory-in-use. Responding to questions about four commonly occurring scenarios across both research sites, participants made frequent use of concepts including challenge and support; student engagement; and respect for individual autonomy.

Of these guiding concepts, challenge and support was the most frequently employed. Barbara, for example, began every interaction with a student that I observed by asking about classes and “everything else.” When I asked her why she did so, she indicated that she needed to “where they are, how they’re doing” in order to know how best to respond. A short time later, when responding to my statement of a tentative model of student learning and development, she indicated that being able to accurately gauge a student’s current mental state was essential because “the presence of something challenging [causes] the reflection, it promotes the learning” that is the goal of her student affairs practice. Without challenge, she notes, there is no impetus for change.

This sentiment was shared widely by the participants from The Commons. They differed, however, in their approach to introducing developmentally appropriate challenges. Alice, for example, tended to focus on creating engagement opportunities that allowed students to introduce challenge autonomously—noting that:

. . . so much of what we do is hooking students up with those different resources and saying: “Ok, well, you know you said you used to like to sail or you used to ride horses. There’s a club for that.” And then they . . . make friends that way . . . there’s also hooking them back up with the RA, saying: “Hey, you really need to make sure this person is included and gets a personal invitation for the floor
dinner because they’re not going to come on their own . . . so you need to knock
and say ‘Come to dinner with us.’”

In contrast, Barbara frequently focused on supporting students via one-on-one
interactions—whether through her own direct intervention or through one-on-one work
by her resident assistants. Meanwhile, one of Hughes’s responses suggests the
fundamental compatibility of the two approaches—noting that he prefers to create direct
intervention with a student via one-on-one conversation and then use engagement as one
strategy among several. Some of Alice’s and Barbara’s other responses suggest that they
would share that sentiment. Regardless, all three residence life professionals cast their
work in terms of the introduction of developmentally-appropriate challenge. They realize
this goal by addressing each individual case as unique—recalling Alice’s statement that
“That’s where it gets more individual with the student in front of you in terms of how
participatory they are in their own experience and their own learning” and Barbara’s
recognition that “you and I can be in the same environment and maybe have different
experiences with it . . . the outcome might be different.”

Notably, several of the residence life professionals with whom I met described
assessment as an important part of their work. Barbara, for example, connected her ability
to foster student reflection to the department’s ongoing efforts at assessment as a form of
reflexive practice. Describing the whole complex of advising activities in which she
participated, Barbara went on to note:

It’s quite a complex system. It is; we currently have housing surveys going on
asking students about their experience with housing. The dining halls have
surveys out. There’s quality of life surveys and RA feedback surveys in residence
life, and they’re all happening right now at the same time and so that’s kind of how we’re trying to get at how well are we servicing our students but [also] how well are we working together to do that. Because we do all respond together in several ways. Obviously there’s a housing staff and there’s a res life staff, but we work together. Our offices are all housed together. We field questions together and sometimes it takes both sides to answer questions . . . I think we are all trying to figure out how well is this working, what could we do better. And that’s an ongoing process, but it is fairly complex which partly is based on how large this institution is.

While assessment was not a major focus in the interview protocol, Barbara’s comments suggest its importance as a tool for reflexive practice. Further, given the variety of theories-in-use I found in evidence at Central University, her suggestion that it could be used to produce greater consistency in staff response to students indicates that structured assessment activities could be useful in aligning informal theories of student learning and development.

The Connection Between Student Learning and Development

This section describes the way that residence life professionals working in The Commons talked about both learning and development. It is organized in two sections. The first presents findings from initial interviews that suggest that both learning and development are cast principally in experiential terms. The second section describes the results of follow-up interviews and is focused principally on reactions to an elicitation
device that presented a tentative model of student learning and development based on initial interview findings.

**First Interview Findings**

Perhaps not surprisingly given the considerable variation in approaches to formal theory and theories-in-use described above, the residence life professionals with whom I worked displayed varied ways of thinking about learning and development. However, participants identified learning and development as somehow related to experience and social processes relatively consistently. Hughes, for example, suggested that experience was a direct precursor to learning and development. In her statements, Barbara was less certain—indicating that life experiences formed a backdrop against which reflection might occur. Barbara’s comments also suggest the fundamentally social nature of learning and development while expanding the role of reflection in disequilibrium in prompting reflection: “I mentioned relationships, but I think dialogs are so important in student learning because . . . one of the ways I’ve learned most about people who are different than myself.” Likewise, Alice suggested that she never expected to “see an immediate change in their behavior” and instead believed that real learning took time. Often, during that time, peers played a powerful role. In Alice’s words, “students learn primarily from each other.”

Though these sorts of statements tend to obscure the distinction between learning and development, participants did differentiate between the two. Alice indicated that there was fundamental difference between a simple change in behavior, which she described as learning, and a more persistent change in underlying understanding, which she thought of as development. Hughes’s comments support this assessment noting that
“students develop by learning.” He went on to indicate that students are constantly bombarded by new experiences at Central University and that these new experiences inevitably resulted in learning. Only with time and reflection could they lead to developmental changes. As he states, it requires the “retaining of interest.” Barbara echoes this sentiment via her statement that: “there’s a direct correlation, what you learn helps you to develop.” Whereas these statements tend to depict learning as a change that is directly observable, many of the participants expressed ambivalence as to whether developmental change could be observed in the year or so that most of their residents would live in buildings they supervised. Alice indicates, for example, that: “a lot of what you know we teach students . . . they don’t understand it in terms of development until they leave college.”

While these residence life professionals did find it difficult to identify developmental change in any one student, they were more comfortable articulating general patterns of maturation and growth. Barbara, for example, spoke of student experience in terms that recall Love and Guthrie’s (1999) claim that college students move from absolute to more contextual ways of knowing. Meanwhile, Alice talked about growth as something that you could observe down the road.” In the cases of Alice and Barbara, they both talked about the importance of a baseline; according to their way of thinking, it was necessary to know where someone had started in order to determine whether growth had actually occurred—or in Barbara’s words: “it’s hard to evaluate or assess what development happened if you don’t have some beginning point.”
Second Interview Findings

As I described in both Chapter Three and Chapter Five, I utilized the second interview to ask participants to respond to a tentative model of learning and development constructed based upon first interview findings. This model, which was mostly concerned with the relationship between theories of learning and theories of development, was presented to participants via a narrative description. The model began with the assumption that experience was comprised of student’s ongoing interactions with the world and that this experience could lead to learning. I defined learning as a change in behavior or a mental state. Learning, I stated in the model, was more common when it had meaning for a student, and if that meaning persisted over time, it was likely to lead the student to reflection, which I described as involving an examination of the relationship between a piece of learning and a student’s sense of self. Upon reflection, it was possible that the student would experience a long-term and persistent change, which I acknowledged some people thought of as growth but which I termed development.

Some participants asked for greater clarification of what I meant by development; when pressed, I stated that we might also think of development as a process wherein students become more complex or fully realized versions of themselves. In this section, I describe participant responses to this model as well as how the model was represented in responses throughout the second interview.

Once again, the participants demonstrated initial support for the model, but when pressed to determine if they would make any changes, they offered valuable feedback. Hughes’s response suggested that the model I described would “cover a lot of the bases that might be missing” from existing theories. Likewise, Barbara responded to the model
that “I think it’s fascinating because those are kind of the hallmarks of my own personal journey, and I do think that it’s like you’ve just articulated the approach I take to student development.” When pressed further, however, Barbara suggested that the challenge would be a critical component of determining whether or not a particular experience led to learning and reflection—stating that “when there’s the presence of something challenging causing the reflection, it promotes the learning [process].” Demonstrating the utility of that addition, Barbara continued to explain why the concept of challenge was critical to the model—noting that:

. . . if I have an experience, I might not see it as a learning experience until someone challenges me on what I think or believe about that experience . . . when your perspective or your experience is challenged it promotes that greater, deeper reflection about it which results in the learning . . . [as an example,] I just had this experience where I saw a blue sky and you say to me: “I don’t know was it blue? Because I kind of thought it was purple.” You telling me that, challenging me—“Was it blue?” You had a conflict of belief about it. Your experience was different. Your difference of experience having just looked at the same sky as I did is going to cause me to sit here and reflect: was it really a blue sky? And then, you know, then you get into all kinds of conversations: “Well, what is blue? And what is purple?” You know I just think it’s that challenged perspective or someone sharing a conflicting experience.

The introduction of challenge as prompt for both attention and reflection to this tentative model helps to explain why some experiences might lead to learning while others do not. It also begins to suggest how powerfully important the social context is in structuring
learning and development experiences. In Barbara’s example, so much of the meaning was carried by interaction and dialogue.

Alice also voiced initial support for the model before indicating that there were some possible refinements that she would suggest. Most importantly, she noted that learning and reflection would “have to be next to each other in some way.” In short, she suggested that I had ascribed too much linearity to the model. Like many of academic advisors described in Chapter Five, the work of residence life professionals was too messy to be neatly represented. In Alice’s own words:

I definitely think experience comes first. But I think that a lot of times it would be hard to put them quite so linear for a student. Otherwise, you’re only really doing that “hot stove” level of learning. Now... I wouldn’t say that they have to flip flop or anything like that I would more say that it’s a simultaneous process... Similarly, Barbara suggested that the model would work just as well “if reflection came before learning.” Once again, she suggested that it was hard to capture a messy, human process in strictly one dimensional terms.

In fact, for all of the advisors, the specifics of the model seemed less important than that the resultant product accurately represent their theories-in-use. Experience was consistently held up as a critical component of student learning and development. Alice, for example, noted that “a lot of times our experiences definitely shape kind of our outcomes because they shape our expectations for that experience.” Casting student learning and development in sociohistorical terms, Alice concluded that one of the best ways to understand both the present and the future was through the past. As a result a great deal of her work was focused on helping students feel “comfortable going forward
into the future” by relating it to “something they’ve done in the past.” That feeling of continuity, she goes on to suggest, leads students to feel supported, or to use Alice’s evocative phrase: “in terms of getting them to that next point developmentally, [it] makes it a lot easier because you’re not just trying to kick them off the edge and hope that they manage to fly somehow.” In a very similar fashion, Barbara noted that “you can’t necessarily discuss development aside from experience.”

Reflection was also seen as a vital component of the model—albeit a problematic one in practice. Barbara described reflection as the content via which development occurred—raising the question “if you don’t’ have anything to reflect on . . . how do you know how to move beyond that?” As she poses it, asking a question about development without the possibility of reflection is simply illogical. As described by others, however, it is sometimes the reality faced by residence life professionals. Alice, for example, noted that it was occasionally difficult to create genuine reflection in a student “who comes in knowing everything because it makes it a lot more difficult to ask a question that they will pause enough to actually reflect on.” She, like the other participants, focused on getting students access to relevant information that they can process in “their own time.” Expanding on this point, Alice suggested that the importance of creating the possibility of reflection—even she could not be sure it occurred—stemmed from the goal that “you should learn twenty years of life in four years of college.”

The Technostructure of Residence Life

In this section, I present findings related to the institutional context of residence life work as well as the unique complex of systems, processes, and tools that enable the
roles of student affairs practitioners to be constructed as they are in The Commons. These findings are organized based upon the interview from which they were derived—with first interview findings focused principally on the broader institutional context for the work undertaken by participants and the second interview findings focused principally on the way that the technostructure expanded the possible impact of the residence life professional in this study.

**First Interview Findings**

Every residence life professional that I spoke with confronted the challenges of an unpredictable work life. During my interview and observation with Hughes, for example, we were delayed or interrupted several times by pressing situations. Alice described her job as “both very defined and very not defined”—going on to explain that working in the large residence life operation at Central University entailed a high degree of structure in certain areas but also meant that her large number of residents had a wide variety of unpredictable needs. Further, she indicated that the placement of her office—in a building central to The Commons and housing dining facilities, residence life offices, and student spaces but no student residences—meant that she sometimes felt disconnected from her residents. In Alice’s words:

I don’t feel as connected a lot of times to students in terms of “I know every little thing about their daily lives” but I also think that because we have more focus on the administrative end of the role that . . . when students really need you they really see you as someone that can help them, and I think their perception of you is very important in terms of whether or not they will be willing to accept help and sometimes following your guidance and advice the first time you say it.
Phrased differently, her office location ensured that her job was “more formal” and more based on making referrals to other parts of campus than it might have been elsewhere. Serving as important connector to other resources on campus, Alice’s role at Central University was uniquely well-suited for the size and scope of the institution.

In this regard, the preliminary interviews also provide an indication that an important set of tools and processes have developed at Central University to enhance the effectiveness of the residence life staff. Hughes, for example, notes the importance of his staff of resident assistants—advanced undergraduate students responsible for working more directly with a small subset of the students he oversees—noting that on a weekly basis he spends a great deal of time attending to “their professional development, their academic progress, . . . advising on the sort of extracurricular activities they’re doing, . . . [asking] how’s the family, how’s the social life.” This level of detailed supervision is necessary both for the developmental well-being of the residents assistants and for the overall health of the residence life program.

The resident assistants function as the primary source of information about and intervention with regards to “what’s been going on in buildings whether they be student conduct issues and or programming or events that we’re trying to continue the student engagement.” The resident assistants then serve as key part of the technostructure via which the work of the residence life professionals I worked with is accomplished. Likewise, Barbara mentioned the importance of support from the central administrative office as well as from the facilities staff that handles all residence life maintenance issues. Noting that elsewhere she would be responsible for things like coordinating room
assignments and handing out keys, Barbara expressed confidence that having these activities handled elsewhere freed up time for her work with students.

**Second Interview Findings**

The size of Central University came up frequently in the participants’ narratives. More often than not, it was mentioned to explain a particular policy or practice that was uniquely well-suited for the way that The Commons functioned. When I made one such observation to Alice—noting that there probably was not another way to proceed given the institution’s size—she responded: “Not if you ever want to sleep.” This response echoes the sentiment contained in many participant responses. The status quo was neither good nor bad; it simply was the reality of what Barbara termed “a complex system.” In response to that reality, the residence life professionals developed a very specific repertoire of practices that enhanced their utility.

Once again, the most frequently mentioned practice was the importance of resident assistants. Good resident assistants serve to greatly enhance the programmatic reach of a residence hall professional—allowing them to work toward important developmental interventions in multiple places at once. Alice describes her reliance on resident assistants as follows: “I think the more students you have the more you have to rely on your RAs. [. . .] Because they are going to interact with that student much more than I am. And literally because I can’t.” Likewise, Hughes described utilizing his resident assistants to develop and shepherd at-risk residents to specific forms of programming. As a result, Hughes was able to extend not only his own capacity to work with students but also the capacity of his resident assistants as well.
Though resident assistants were the most important way that the residence life professionals whom I interviewed increased their impact, they were far from the only mechanism. Every participant indicated the importance of the residence life computer system at some time during participant observation or an interview—though none ascribed it the same important as did the advisors described in Chapter Five. Every residence life professional described the importance of the centralized administrative functions and maintenance services at some point. All interviews eventually touched on the importance of conduct meetings in spurring reflection. Finally, in my observations of Alice, I observed a strategy that she would later describe as “[striking] up conversations with students that just seem to be wandering aimlessly.” Part of her regular work was simply to be present and available while using her professional judgment to identify students who might need more follow-up. In this regard, Alice was making the physical environment itself a part of her technostructure—using the movement of students through the space as a catalyst for more specific interventions. All the participants had their own version of this practice.

The Social Context of Residence Life

This section presents findings related to the broader social context of residence life work. Findings from the first interview suggest that culture plays a powerful role in structuring both students’ experiences and their reactions to these experiences. Though my intent was to return to this theme in the second interview, participant responses focused instead on the impact of social relationships in residence life work.
Student Experience as a Cultural Product

Stemming from the recognition that their work differed in many respects from that of colleagues elsewhere within the institution as well as from other universities, the residence life professionals frequently talked about the importance of social context in shaping student behavior. Hughes, for example, noted that the environment produced more or less predictable patterns of behavior. He and Alice also both indicated that peer networks had the potential to replicate information over extended periods of time—with each at one point mentioning that students continued to refer to an old alcohol policy long after it had been changed. Due to the power of peer networks, Alice mentioned several times that students learn more from peer behavior than they do from staff interventions.

While describing her role in the student conduct process, Alice stated that:

You’ll have . . . an eight person incident or something like that . . . you’ll have the first person and they ask eight million questions and maybe they argue this, that, and the other point, and you explain all the different policy. By the time you get to the third person, they’ve all talked to each other, so the story is now exactly the same as whatever the first person told you but they don’t fight you on things. They’ll come in and say: “So this is what I’m getting,” and they’ll even know right down to sanctioning.

Alice indicates both the important role that peer networks play in carrying information as well as the important role that peer influence (via her discussion of a group incident) plays in creating student behavior in the first place. She confirms this elsewhere—noting that “peer pressure is huge” at Central University.
Others define the importance of the social context primarily in cultural terms. Barbara, for example, notes the high degree of school spirit as well as the pervasive alcohol consumption among underage residents before noting that “it’s hard for people sometimes in this culture to individuate and to actually be their own person.” Likewise, Alice describes the importance of being attuned to students who experience the culture at Central University differently on the basis of not just race and ethnicity but also differences that might be “hidden” like not coming from “upper middle class white suburban America.” Likewise, Hughes describes an important part of the work of college as learning to appreciate cultural difference. For each of these residence life professionals, the social context mattered because it became the impetus for further reflection; it was, in essence, the raw material for learning and development.

**The Role of Relationships in Student Learning and Development**

Second interviews also confirmed the importance of the social context in student learning and development. It often presented itself as participants talked about their efforts to get students to understand the longer term and real world implications of their actions. In talking about major selection, for example, Hughes quickly mentions friends, family, employers, and post-graduation plans. At some point in our conversations, each participant also mentioned the importance of direct social contact in intervening with at-risk students. Alice, for example, noted that she ensured that when she wanted a student to attend an event she made sure that they had “a personal invitation.” A personal connection or contact was seen as a critical way of directing or redirecting students toward learning and development processes.
As they talked about the role of social context further, participants made it clear that one of the biggest ways that it impacted student experience was through the lens of culture. Hughes, for example, frequently mentioned students’ cultural background as well as the “subcultures” in which they were engaged as Central University as a way to understand why different students responded to the same sorts of interventions differently. Perhaps not surprisingly, Hughes also described the importance of study abroad in getting students to gain skills in viewing the world from other people’s perspectives—noting the importance of having “experience in another culture, another language, different people, climate change, political aspects, how people live” and how that experience can offer a vital supply of resources for later developmental work.

The other major avenue via which participants recognized the importance of social context was family. Pushing beyond the stereotype of the “helicopter parent,” participants suggested that family influence on education could be positive or negative. Alice, for example, advocated for the importance of being honest and upfront with parents while going through the conduct process. She went on to indicate that having that conversation often prompted reflection that she could not. Likewise, Hughes acknowledged the importance of family support in selecting a major while also reserving the possibility that sometimes that influence could sway students away from their own interests. Alice describes the simultaneously positive and negative possibilities of parental influence most aptly—noting that it is important to acknowledge the influence of parents because “they’re trying to actively push their child in the right direction; hopefully we’re on the same page as them.” As with so much else about their work, study
participants identify this influence as neither good or bad—simply as a part of their professional reality.

Concluding Thoughts

Findings from The Commons suggest that there is a problematic connection between theory and practice. While a role for theory by some of the participants some of the time, none felt entirely comfortable adopting formal theory without significant revisions. Instead, participants reiterated the importance of guiding concepts derived in part by an eclectic approach to formal theory. Such an approach makes sense given that participants were focused principally on individual students or connecting these students to others who might be experiencing similar learning and development trajectories—recalling the affinity group level advanced by Parker (1977) as an appropriate venue for informal theory. Based in part on these insights, a tentative model of learning and development that also includes key roles for experience and reflection was produced and refined—most importantly acknowledging the importance of challenge and support.

As with the experience of academic advisors described in Chapter Five, residence life professionals also acknowledged the myriad influence on their work to promote learning and development. Importantly, a robust technostructure enabled them to maximize their potential impact by delegating specific tasks to experts or trained paraprofessionals. While the technostructure was the produced to meet the needs of the residence life professionals, their work was also influenced in important ways by the social relationships of the students with whom they worked and their own efforts to connect to students in meaningful ways.
Chapter Seven: Connecting Theory and Practice

Introduction

At the outset of this work, I proposed three linked research questions intended to help unpack the relationship between theory and practice in student affairs work. The first question—How do practitioners understand student experience?—sought to capture the way in which student affairs professionals working in an academic advising office and a residence life office at a large research university described student behavior. This question was motivated by recent literature (e.g. Bensimon, 2007; Kezar, 2000; Love, 2012) that suggests that practitioner knowledge of student experience may be based on a wider range of understandings than those represented by the theories produced by higher education scholars.

Literature on student affairs practice suggests that several different types of theory are utilized by student affairs practitioners. Formal theory is produced by scholars and, to the maximum extent possible, conforms to standard social science assumptions about knowledge production, generalizability, and predictiveness (Parker, 1977). Since formal theory will not always apply perfectly to practice, practitioners may choose not to adapt it for their own uses as they create a theory-in-use—essentially a set of values, beliefs, and assumption that guide their practice (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Though there is some disagreement in the literature as to whether the use of formal theory is necessary (Evans & Guido, 2012; Love, 2012), most hold that the goal of higher education research is to influence practice (Bensimon, 2007; Kezar, 2000) through the production of relevant theory. As a result, it is possible to distinguish between two different types of theory-in-use: implicit theory and informal theory. Implicit theories, as described by Bensimon
are a body of loosely considered values, beliefs, and assumptions that are not connected in any systematic way to relevant formal theories. As a result, Bensimon (2007) suggests practitioners utilizing implicit theories may internalize undesirable stereotypes of student behavior—leading to negative outcomes. In contrast, informal theories are based in formal theory but also take into account the understanding of context and relevant professional experience of student affairs professionals (Parker, 1977). Given the various types of theory available to student affairs practitioners, the second research question asked: what is the role of theory in way that student affairs practitioners understand student experience?

The final research question—What is the connection between theory and practice?—attempts to address a long running problem in student affairs research through empirical data: there does not seem to be a systematic way of moving from theory-to-practice that can be consistently applied. In their review of recent theory-to-practice models, Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) argue that there are two major approaches to theory-to-practice. One focuses on the production of a rigorous model that connects theory and practice via a set of proscriptive steps. The other is based on “guiding concepts”—a set of key ideas and insights drawn from relevant literature and applied eclectically to practice. These two approaches represent very different ways of thinking about what constitutes knowledge and how that knowledge might be used. Models based upon proscriptive steps are consistent with Evans and Guido’s (2012) argument that formal theory ought to structure practice and that knowledge is best produced via the social scientific method while the guiding concepts approach more closely follows Love’s (2012) suggestion that experiential knowledge has greater utility.
While these two sources of knowledge are difficult to integrate, literature on the philosophy of social science suggests that it is possible to do so. Recent calls for a reflexive social science (e.g. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Burawoy, 1991) have emphasized the need to embrace abductive reasoning, which integrates personal experience and scholarly judgment through the lens of expert judgment. Likewise, the argument that there are multiple ways of knowing has long been a staple of social theory. For example, Kuhn’s (1962/1996) contention that scientific knowledge is paradigmatic—that is, the result of a set of shared conventions regarding problem selection and techniques—indicates the possibility that seemingly incompatible truths might exist provided a conflict in paradigms.

Following Kuhn (1962/1996), Feyerabend’s (1975 / 2010) has suggested that scientific knowledge and other forms of knowledge are incommensurable and that, given that incommensurability, other forms of knowledge must be treated as equally valid. More recently, Fine (1986/1996) has proposed the “natural ontological attitude” to describe scientific knowledge as a discursive space rather than a series of empirical truths. In this regard, literature on scientific knowledge production closely resembles literature in social theory that suggests that meaning in carried via relationships between people, objects, and process (e.g. Buber, 1923/1970; Wittgenstein, 1953; Gadamer, 1960/1975). Given the essentially dialogic nature of meaning, Gadamer (1960/1975) goes so far as to suggest that social science methods and knowledge must be independently evaluated. Since they are human products, both knowledge and methods are produced in a state of praxis in which the researcher, research subjects, methods, and findings interact in myriad ways (Bourdieu, 1971 / 1977; Giddens, 1976; Habermas, 1963 / 1973).
Though treated as separate by much of the existing literature on theory-to-practice, it thus becomes clear that social scientific knowledge and experiential knowledge are epistemologically similar. Though not frequently employed in higher education, the extended case method proposed by Burawoy (1991; 1998; 2009) provides a means for reconciling these two different forms of knowing within the overall rigor of the social scientific method. Adopting the ethnographic point-of-view—including both contextual emersion and the techniques of participant-observation, interviews, and document analysis—the extended case method uses the experiential knowledge derived from the careful analysis of a case or series of cases to refine an existing body of formal theory. It does so through the lens of “expert judgment” suggested by abductive reasoning (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) and by extending the role of the ethnographer-as-instrument to also include theoretical revision through experiential knowledge.

This dissertation sought to demonstrate the utility of the extended case method in unpacking the problems in connecting various types of theory to practice as they relate to student learning and development. Consequently, I shadowed six academic advisors and three residence life professionals for a total of approximately one hundred hours of participant observation data collection. I then conducted two interviews with each study participants to generate more fully contextualized data. In the remainder of this chapter, I review the major contributions of this dissertation through a discussion of its empirical findings. Theories of learning and development, though representing very different literatures bases (e.g. Evans et al, 2010; Merriam et al, 2007), are seen as inextricably linked by the student affairs professionals in this study—even as study participants differ in their own theories-in-use. The residence life office at The Commons and the academic
advising office in the School of Management and Information Technology afford very different contexts for studying how student affairs practitioners understand student learning and development. The way that they think about learning and development emerges in part from the context. It is, in fact, the lack of uniformity among these smart, capable, and experienced student affairs practitioners that serves as the core principle organizing the findings of this study.

The major finding that practice offers for student learning and development theory is that rigor and precision are not nearly as important as flexibility and utility in the lives of student affairs practitioners. While this finding contradicts many of most dearly held assumptions about how we ought to pursue scholarship and construct formal theory, I do not believe that it undermines the importance or the legitimacy of the scholarly enterprise as some have argued (Bloland et al, 1994; Love, 2012). Instead, these findings suggest the importance of a resituated form of scholarship (Bensimon, 2007; Kezar, 2000) that might provide the foundation for a new model of theory-to-practice that is simultaneously rigorous and adaptive (Reason & Kimball, forthcoming).

Discussed in greater detail below, this dissertation offers five key insights via which we might structure both a new type of higher education scholarship and the theory-to-practice model that would result. First, it is clear that, in the view of the student affairs practitioners participating in this study, theory-in-use is far more important than formal theory. Theories-in-use—be they implicit or informal—structure practice. Second, monolithic formal theories do not conform to the lived experiences and expert knowledge of these student affairs practitioners. Though scholars have struggled to produce even the most provisional synthesis of learning and development (Reason & Renn, 2008), they
work with a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the two on a daily basis by reconstituting the two literature bases through “guiding concepts” (Reason & Kimball, forthcoming). Third, the image of student affairs practice evident in many of the texts we utilize to structure practice belies the dynamic nature of much of student affairs work. In so doing, it often neglects the importance of a sophisticated technostructure—the systems, processes, and tools that enable a professional role to be constructed in a particular way—designed to enhance practice. Fourth, though a part of many theories of learning and development (Evans et al, 2010; Merriam et al, 2007), the importance of the broader social context cannot be understated. Simply put, learning and development are both cultural acts and must be understood as such. Finally, reflecting on my overall experience conducting this research, it is clear to me that many of the student affairs practitioners that I worked with were actively seeking validation for the work that they did and the knowledge that they possessed.

Taken as a whole, these five broad themes suggest how we might refine the way that we think about the relationship between formal theory, informal theory, and practice. I thus close this chapter by reexamining the work of Reason and Kimball (forthcoming). Based on the findings of this dissertation, I suggest the inherent linkage between the theory-to-practice conversion made by student affairs practitioners and the experience-to-development process undertaken by students. Furthermore, I suggest a new model for theory-to-practice that fully incorporates the knowledge of student affairs practitioners—effectively proposing a theory-to-practice-to-theory model.
Theory-in-Use Matters More Than Theory

In his seminal discussion of theory-to-practice, Clyde Parker (1977) argues that we have two very different ways of understanding student experience. Formal theory, which is produced by scholars, is designed to be generally predictive across the population of all college students. Informal theory, which is produced by each and every student affairs practitioner, is designed to help understand a specific student or group of students. These are two radically different functions, but all too often, we fail to indicate precisely when it is appropriate to use one and when it is appropriate to use the other (Bensimon, 2007; Love, 2012).

Every one of the participants in this study had a clear theory-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974), but few found scholarly theories useful. As such, despite the fact that most participants had formal training in higher education or a related field, many did not see the clear connection between formal and informal theory proposed by Parker (1977). In fact, the lack of apparent connection led one participant to label formal theory as “horse shit.” At its most useful, scholarly theory was seen as a form of background—akin to ambient noise, pleasant to have but not entirely necessary. Surprisingly, though, the lack of formal theory being utilized did not seem to negatively impact the sophistication with which student affairs practitioner thought about their work or the experiences that they created for students. Instead, as Love (2012) suggested, they embraced informal theory and engaged in reflexive practice to ensure that they were helping students to realize their individual goals as well as those that Central University set for them.

However, the dismissal of formal theory is not inevitable. As I described in Chapters Five and Six, the majority of participants seemed influenced to some degree by
what Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) call “guiding concepts.” Responding to the call for engaged scholarship sent forth by Bensimon (2007) and Kezar (2004), there is no reason that scholarship cannot focus both on the production of formal theory as it always has and also its application via these guiding concepts. Doing so would preserve the very real advantages of rigor and generalizability incumbent in our current system of theory production, as articulated by both Bensimon (2007) and Evans and Guido (2012).

**The Relationship Between Learning and Development**

As I described in Chapter Four, theories of learning and development are two very different theoretical traditions that attempt to explain the human impetus to make meaning of the external world (Evans et al, 2010; Merriam et al, 2007). Major approaches in learning theory explore the world via the behaviorist, cognitivist, constructivist, and humanist traditions. Synthesizing these approaches—with the possible exception of behaviorism, which is itself appropriated by both the cognitivist and behaviorist perspectives—transformative learning theory represents a useful way to think about the overall process of learning. Transformative learning theory emphasizes the importance of a cycle of experience, disequilibrium, reflection, and change. Each of these emerge as salient guiding concepts impacting practice via the participants in this study.

Major theories of student development typically fall within either the psychosocial or cognitive approach. Psychosocial approaches emphasize the relationship between a person’s sense of self and social identity (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009) whereas cognitive approaches focus on the how truth is ascertained (Love & Guthrie, 1999). Since it focuses on the relationship between one’s sense of self and modes of knowing, self-authorship offers a synthesis of existing developmental theories. Findings that indicate the importance of social context and a growth trajectory from an absolute
form of knowing to a more contextual way of knowing demonstrate that self-authorship could also help to structure practice.

Regardless of the potential practical importance of these theories, however, they do not fully represent the way that the student affairs practitioners thought about student learning and development. Instead, as described in Chapters Five and Six, participants thought about student learning and development as related concepts and connected them via the use of guiding concepts. Based upon first interview findings, I constructed a tentative model that proposed that experience led to learning; learning led to reflection; and reflection led to development. Through follow-up interviews with each participant, the precise nature of each of these terms became clearer while the model lost a great deal of its linearity. Here, once again, guiding concepts were seen as more important than proscriptive guidelines. It was nonetheless consistently made clear that learning was seen as, at best, synonymous with but, more often than not, subordinate to development. In this regard, student affairs practitioners provide the synthesis that Reason & Renn (2008) indicate has eluded scholars.

The Importance of the Technostructure

Student affairs work at Central University was frequently cast by student affairs practitioners in bureaucratic terms. Suggesting that they functioned as institutional “connectors,” participants saw themselves as mediating between institutional structure and student experience. Notably, while the size and complexity of Central University were frequently seen as potential negatives, they also enabled a number of important innovations in student affairs practice. Specialization of functions, for example, allowed residence life professionals to focus their attention on working directly with students
(often through resident assistants) while others managed administrative and maintenance
tasks. Similarly, in the academic advising office, technological innovation allowed
advisors to spend less time remembering the details about students and more time
actually working with them.

In both sets of cases, it was clear that the question of how practice was
accomplished was actually separated from its intent. In advising, for example, student
affairs practitioners earnestly sought to authentic relationships with students designed to
foster learning and development. Technology helped to deliver that. In residence life,
much of the work of student affairs practitioners was focused on the creation of
engagement. More often than not, it was actually resident assistants who were responsible
for delivering on that commitment. Yet, in every case, the outcomes achieved were not
possible without the way that the technostructure enabled practice. While student affairs
professionals generated the commitment, there was an additional element—where
practice met student experience—via which commitments were actually realized.

A Broad Social Context

Many theories of learning and development suggest a powerful role for external
influences. Partly in recognition of that fact, I reviewed the model of multiple identities
proposed by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007), which treats identity as an intersectional
social phenomenon. Prior to beginning this study, however, it was less clear to me
precisely how that social context would impact practice. I was thus quite unprepared to
learn the frequency with which a student’s friends, family, and future employers—to
name but a few examples—were very much present in the relationship between a student
and a student affairs practitioner. These influences were powerful, pervasive, and
inescapable. Though atypical, I thus situate the entirety of both the theory-to-practice and the experience-to-development processes within a social context. Though the influence that the social context exerts may not be entirely predictable, it is undeniable. It thus bears careful examination as part of a reflective student affairs practice.

**A Need for Validation**

Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to make it clear when my questioning or involvement might have shaped the responses that I received. For example, I indicated in Chapters Five and Six that the way I questioned participants about the relationship between learning and development likely introduced some form of social expectancy bias. This level of reflexivity was, in fact, part of the design: it helps to demonstrate the utility of the extended case method for similar studies moving forward.

 Unexpectedly, however, I too felt the powerful need to validate the thinking of the participants with whom I worked. These were bright, capable, and experienced student affairs practitioners, and I was a graduate student with limited direct experience in either academic advising or residence life. Time and time again, however, I found myself responding to comments from participants designed to gauge the accuracy of their responses. After thoughtfully describing how a student might gain greater self-confidence, for example, an academic advisor somewhat ironically said: “I am not sure of that answer. It is probably a combination of things, I guess, with most people; right?” Another was self-deprecating—stating that “hopefully I’ve given you . . . valuable information.” Yet another expressed frustration at my questioning: “I never know if I’m answering your questions. I know there’s no right or wrong answer, but I don’t know if they’re addressing what you want to hear.”
More broadly, though, my dissertation offered participants the opportunity to hear their own words back from the mouth of someone that they considered a scholar. The words of one academic advisor capture this best: “You actually made me think about things that I hadn’t . . . certainly, they’re in my head, but I hadn’t verbalized . . . when you verbalize something, it’s like holy cow, like a light bulb went off.” Paradoxically, my aspiration—like that of any ethnographer—was simply to do justice to the richness and wisdom that I found in the site of my research. The words in which that participant found wisdom were, in fact, her own. Collectively, however, the scholarly community has not always offered practitioners an opportunity to share their voice and contribute their wisdom. Doing so in the future is not only important to validating practitioner knowledge, as can be seen here, but also offers the potential for better scholarship.

**A New Model**

As I have suggested throughout this dissertation, the concepts that students affairs practitioners find meaningful in their day-to-day work should be incorporated into our thinking about theory-to-practice. In their work, Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) synthesize existing theory-to-practice models—suggesting that there are four key elements to the process: formal theory, institutional context, informal theory, and practice. Following the selection of appropriate formal theories, the Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) model suggests that the selected theories should be evaluated to determine both how they fit the relevant student population(s) at the institution and how they fit into the overall institutional approach to theory. At the stage of informal theory, Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) then suggest that practitioners must carefully evaluate their own values, beliefs, and assumptions to determine how both the formal theories selected and
the institutional context might structure their own theory-in-use. This stage is vitally significant to uncovering implicit theories (Bensimon, 2007) and thereby eliminating potentially negative externalities. Consistent with Love’s (2012) assertion, Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) conclude that student affairs practice is structured most directly by informal theory. With the addition of two feedback loops designed to ensure that lessons from practice inform a practitioner’s understanding of institutional context and their own informal theories, they contend that the model is largely self-correcting.

This study suggests that there is empirical support for these elements. Most practitioners eschew a direct approach to formal theory and instead focus on more directly relevant guiding concepts. The conversion of formal theory to guiding concepts thus becomes a key part of the theory-to-practice conversion. By including a feedback loop from practice-to-informal theory and practice-to-institutional context but not one from practice-to-formal theory, Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) may have focused more on the scholarly rigor emphasized by Evans and Guido (2012) than the authenticity of practitioner knowledge championed by Love (2012).

For a fully-realized model of theory-to-practice, which also would serve as a theory-to-practice-to-theory model, we need to be able to embrace both. We must also acknowledge that the entire process is inextricably linked to the intended outcome of the theory-to-practice translation—in this case, learning and development—as well as the social context in which it is situated. In Figure 4 below, I thus include both the theory-to-practice process and the model derived from participant reports wherein students move from experience-to-development: if we expect theory to inform practice in meaningful
ways, our theory-to-practice model must also include our intended student outcomes. A brief summary of the model follows.

**Figure 4: A Conceptual Model of Theory-to-Practice and Experience-to-Development**

**Formal theory** is a set of generalizable assumptions designed to predict or explain an entire population of students. It is useful in practice principally to the extent that it produces guiding concepts, which can be thought of as key elements of a given theory that might be used eclectically. More direct applications of formal theory are certainly possible provided careful attention to the context in which they are being
applied, but the utility of scholarly works could be greatly enhanced through further attention to the production of guiding concepts.

The **institutional context** refers to the unique attributes of the organizational environment in which the theory-to-practice conversion is taking place. These attributes include both an understanding of the institution’s students and knowledge about the organizational culture—particularly as it relates to thinking about learning and development. The critical importance of the technostructure, a novel finding of this dissertation, suggests but one of the many ways in which the institutional context impacts both student experience and student affairs work.

**Informal theory** is a set of carefully considered values, beliefs, and assumptions through which a student affairs practitioner synthesizes formal theory with their own experience. It functions as the theory-in-use via which practitioners structure their response to specific student scenarios.

**Practice** refers to the overall design, with a particular outcome on intended outcomes, of a given developmental intervention or set of interventions. These may or may not be directly implemented by the student affairs practitioner undertaking the thinking about practice.

**Praxis** is the relationship between practice (what a student affairs practitioner intends) and student experience (the interaction the student has with those intentions). Due to the gap between intention and perception, it is very possible that practice and experience will not precisely align. In the modern institution, this gap may also be created when programmatic planning and delivery are decoupled—as was the case, for example,
in the residence life office that I studied due to the key role of resident assistants in
carrying out the plans of student affairs professionals.

Moving beyond the theory-to-practice translation, the findings of this study
suggest that student affairs practitioners connect their work to a larger process wherein
students move from experiences to development. While this dissertation cannot comment
on the accuracy of these stages for all students nor to how widely shared they would be
among student affairs practitioners, the suggestion that a theory-to-practice model should
be connected to student-level outcomes is supported by the empirical data. A description of
the experience-to-development process as described by study participants follows.

Broadly speaking, experience refers to the interactions a student has with the
world. These experiences function as the supply of resources from which learning and
development can be derived. In the context of theory-to-practice, we can also think of
experience as the manner in which a student perceives a particular instance of practice.

Learning refers to a change in behavior or mental state. Defined in this way,
learning may or may not be a conscious process.

Reflection is the process by which a student relates an experience or learning to
their sense of self. Students inscribe and reinscribe meaning via reflection.

Development refers to growth, or a series of persistent changes over time.
Viewed from afar, it is the process by which students become more complex human
beings. Development does also imply an enduring sense of self.

This entire process is situated within a social context. Here, the social context
refers to the extended social network interacting at any point in either the theory-to-
practice or experience-to-development spectra. This influence can be either be a direct
one (in the case of a person’s involvement) or indirect one (when broader social trends influence behavior).

The feedback loops in the theory-to-practice model are intended to convey the role that knowledge derived from practice can play in refining a student affairs practitioner’s understanding of their own informal theories, an institution’s understanding of itself, and scholars’ understanding of formal theory.

The lines connecting the theory-to-practice process are solid, which is intended to indicate the desirable normative convention of moving directly from one stage of the process to the next. In contrast, the lines connecting the experience-to-development process are dashed; the intermittent nature of the lines is intended to demonstrate that the process may not operate or appear to operate as directly when working with a given student. Likewise, both processes are presented at “steps” indicating that the process is neither fully linear nor as direct as might be desirable from a conceptual perspective.

**Conclusion**

Based upon this dissertation’s findings as well as relevant literature from both higher education and the broader social sciences, it is clear that there is a problematic connection between theory and practice. We produce formal theories because we want them to be generally true—and perhaps they are—but in their pretension to the universal, many student affairs practitioners cease to find them useful. Since they cannot utilize formal theory to guide their practice directly, practitioners produce theories-in-use. When they take into account both practitioner experience and guiding concepts derived from formal theories, these theories-in-use can rise to the level of informal theory—
sophisticated theories-in-use designed with a specific institutional context in mind to promote specific student outcomes. Though we can never be certain that the sort of careful consideration that results in informal theory will occur, a structured theory-to-practice process of the sort articulate by Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) would enhance its likelihood. The student affairs profession would be well-served by graduate programs that teach one or more theory-to-practice models and reinforce their importance through experiential learning opportunities structured to unite academic and practical knowledge. Likewise, careful applications of theory-to-practice models could greatly enhance program design.

In this regard, one of the clearest implications for this study concerns the relationship between formal and informal theory. While many scholarly texts focus on the rigor and generalizability of a formal theory, practitioners draw “guiding concepts” from these texts eclectically. The theory-to-practice conversion would be facilitated by greater attention by scholars to the possible ways that the formal theories they propose will be repurposed by practitioners. Rather than relying on participants or secondary literature to produce them, guiding concepts should become a key part of the way that scholars present formal theory. This implication echoes Kezar’s (2000) suggestion that practitioners will read higher education scholarship only when they can see it as a representation and extension of their work. It will also ensure that formal theories are interpreted by practitioners as scholars intend, as suggested by Evans and Guido (2011). An increased number of publication outlets that emphasize the publication of works accessible to practitioners yet structured by careful attention to various types of theory would facilitate this process.
At least as understood by the student affairs practitioners in this study, however, student learning and development are inextricably linked. While they describe learning as a discrete change in behavior or thinking, development is seen as persistent change over time leading students to become more fully realized versions of themselves. Though they do not use these terms with precision that higher education scholars do, the practitioners in the study have integrated learning and development in a way that has thus far eluded scholars (Reason & Renn, 2008). Given that so much of a student affairs practitioners’ professional identity is tied up in the concepts of learning and development, further research designed to explore whether this practical synthesis is sustained by empirical research is warranted.

Another clear implication concerns the connection between student affairs practice and student experience. Participants repeatedly suggested the importance both of their own experiential knowledge and the experiential knowledge of students. Since student affairs practice is principally concerned with the creation of student experiences designed to foster learning and development, the field could benefit from greater attention to whether their practices actually produce the experiences for which they are designed. This implication echoes Bensimon’s (2007) warning that we ought to be attentive to whether we are producing the outcomes that we set out to create. In this regard, one of the most significant limitations of my study was the inability to include student-level research data. Future work should investigate the extent to which the expert judgments of practitioners actually capture student experiences. Likewise, a regular component of reflective practice should include assessment and self-evaluation activities designed to structure thinking about the field of praxis uniting practice and experience.
Likewise, greater attention to the context in which student affairs work is performed is warranted. Put simply, while it certainly makes sense to focus some scholarly attention on best practices in student affairs, actual student affairs work is heavily influenced by an office’s or institution’s technostructure—a set of systems, processes, and tools that enable a professional role to be constructed in a particular way. The work of the academic advising and residence life offices that I examined in this study proceeded in very different, very idiosyncratic ways due to the institutional systems in which they were embedded. In an institutional sense, careful consideration of how information is shared and roles are constructed can help to create optimal conditions for student affairs practice. Further scholarly work to determine how institutional context influences student affairs work would also serve to enhance our understanding of the role of context in theory-to-practice translations.

The final implication of this study concerns how this empirical research might be produced. Study participants consistently sought affirmation of their ideas and perspectives. As Love (2012) has indicated, this stems in part from the seeming difficulty in reconciling personal experience with scholarly knowledge. The extended case method (Burawoy, 1991; 1998; 2009)—the utility of which is demonstrated by this dissertation’s empirical findings—provides at least one means for accomplishing this reconciliation. The expert knowledge of student affairs professionals represents a meaningful supply of information about student learning and development that might be harnessed to determine how formal theories could be revised on an ongoing basis. As a result, I have suggested the need to include a feedback loop in the Reason and Kimball (forthcoming) model indicating the potential for knowledge from practice to influence formal theory. To make
full use of this feedback loop will require student affairs practitioners who are well-
versed in formal theory, reflexive practice, and research techniques. However, producing
these sorts of highly-trained scholar-practitioners and honoring the knowledge that they
possess will ultimately lead to both more accurate formal theory and more carefully
considered theories-in-use.
References


Appendices
Student Affairs Practitioner Interview Protocol

I. Grand Tour Question (GT): Tell me about yourself.
   a. Question (Q): What’s your academic background?
   b. Q: How did you end up in this role?
      i. Probe: Did any of your previous work experience help prepare you for this position? How?

II. GT: Could you tell me about your work?
    a. Q: What does a typical week look like?
    b. Q: What do you enjoy most about your work?
    c. Q: What do you enjoy least?

III. GT: Who is the “typical” student with whom you work?
     a. Q: Tell me about what they are experiencing.
     b. Q: How do you work with them?
        i. Probe: What are the strategies you employ most frequently?
     c. Q: What are some of the resources that you draw on to be successful in this regard?

IV. GT: Are there any theories of learning or development that you use when working with students?
    a. Q: Tell me about them.
    b. Q: Are there any theories of learning or development that don’t really come up with students directly but which form the backdrop to your work?
       i. Probe: Tell me about them.
    c. Q: Could you give me a specific example of how these theories come into play?
    d. Q: How about an example of when they might not be useful?
V. GT: Tell me about how students learn.
   a. GT: Do you think that there is a difference between learning and development?
      i. Probe: Why or why not?
      ii. Probe: Tell me more about
   b. Q: How would you define development?
   c. Q: Could you tell me a bit more about how that compares to learning?

VI. GT: Is anything that I haven’t asked you about your work or what you know about students here that you would like to tell me?
Second Interview Protocol

I. Introduction

a. Thank you

b. I’m going to ask about:
   i. four situations that appeared frequently across all the settings that I’m doing research at; it’s perfectly okay to say that the question doesn’t apply
   ii. Learning and Development

II. Specific Situations

a. GT: How would you work with a student that you felt was struggling to adjust socially?

b. GT: How would you work with a student who was feeling overwhelmed?

c. GT: What would you do if you thought a student was in the wrong major?
   i. Q: What if they told you they thought they were in the wrong major?
   ii. Q: What is they described a lot of parental pressure?

d. GT: How do you approach a student going through the conduct process?
   i. Q: For example, cheating.
   ii. Q: What if you felt they were being unfairly impacted?

III. Learning & Development

a. GT: How do you think learning occurs?
   i. Q: How do we know when it has occurred?

b. GT: How do you think development happens?
   i. Q: When can we say that development has occurred?

c. GT: What’s the role of reflection in learning and development?
d. GT: What is the role of experience in learning and development?

IV. Unexpected Findings

a. GT: Could you tell me a bit more about the role of the social context in your work?

b. GT: Could you tell me a little bit more about how technology impacts your work?

1. Q: What do students think about it?

2. Q: Are there other administrative processes that impact what you do?

V. GT: Putting all together: Experience – Learning – Reflection – Development: does this make sense?
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Curriculum Vitae

EDUCATION

Ph.D. in Higher Education, Minor in Social Thought (Anticipated: 2012)
The Pennsylvania State University • State College, Pennsylvania

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