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15 to Finish: Exploring Campus Population Experiences and Policy Implementation

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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By

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the lived experiences of key campus stakeholders and policy implementation. Using semi-structured interviews, key stakeholders were asked about their experiences with 15 to Finish: a 2014 completion message that led to a financial aid policy. Through snowball sampling, participants included administrators from the state higher education system, senior administrators from academic and administrative units, professional and academic advisors, and students. Data was also collected through meetings agendas and agency reports. Interviews were transcribed and all text was analyzed using hermeneutic phenomenology. Three key themes were constructed: (a) administrators and faculty help students because it is the right thing to do; (b) messaging and communication of a policy and campaign can be divisive and should employ a communications plan; and (c) Nevada is experiencing a change in college culture from access to completion.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

This research considers how students, administrators, staff and faculty were impacted by a new policy on their campus created by administrators. The policy, known as 15 to Finish, is a completion policy that requires students to enroll in a minimum of 15 credits each semester, and began as a campaign message from the system office. Experiences of students who were instructed to follow the policy, staff who were tasked with enforcing and adopting the policy, and administrators who created the policy were collected through semi-structured interviews. The timing was ripe for the research, because the campus began this new completion policy within the last two years. The policy indicated a shift in organization culture for higher education, moving focus from enrollment to completion and using a state funding formula as the vehicle. This policy shift is similar to others as across the U.S. universities are changing to favor not just how many students sit in seats, but how many walk across the stage, degree in hand.

Using results from a 2013 funding formula study, administrators of the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) shifted institution funding from enrollment numbers to completion. The funding formula "consists of two basic components" (Nevada System of Higher Education, 2015). One component focused on completion and in the 2013-15 biennium was defined as the courses students complete with a F letter grade. All F letter grades were removed from the formula beginning with the 2015-17 biennium. The second component was a calculation called performance pool funding that examined state goals, state dollars, and seven specific institution indicators.

No additional state funds are allocated to performance pool funding. Instead, a certain percentage of the initial budget is set aside and funds can be awarded back if the administration's completion or graduation goals are met (NSHE, 2015). In this way administrators do not compete against each other for funding, rather each administration of each institution is given autonomy to define school metrics for their specific needs and population. This four-year implementation plan is as follows:

- Year one (FY2015) funding set aside is 5 percent.
- Year two (FY2016) funding set aside is 10 percent.
- Year three (FY2017) funding set aside is 15 percent.
- Year four (FY2018) funding set aside is 20 percent.

The school metrics are predominantly based on graduation and administrators have the option to focus on metrics specific to students who graduate from specific programs (NSHE, 2015). Program examples would be any degree from a Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematic (STEM) field, or allied health profession such as nursing (NSHE, 2015). Additionally, there are extra metrics for students from underrepresented populations who graduate. This shift in focus from enrollment to completion was implemented beginning July 1, 2013. The state legislature reviewed the funding formula each session thereafter. The purpose of this shift was to encourage administrators to increase graduation numbers and the numbers of courses being completed by students towards degree attainment. More students finishing classes led to more students walking across the stage, diploma in hand.

How policy affected me

As a former undergraduate student who did walk across that stage at a four-year university, I did not understand how enrollment policies governed my campus experience. Knowing what I know now, there are some definite changes I would have made, opportunities I would have taken advantage of, and resources I would have sought. My own experience may have been lived differently had I fully understood the policies behind decisions, or been included in the exchange of information that led to the policies.

Uncertainty flavored my first experience as a freshman at a large university. I was a first generation student from generational poverty and had been told my whole life, all 18 years of it, college was important. College was a way out. College meant respect and freedom. I did not know what to do upon my arrival. Once there, I had to make a decision about which degree program to pursue as there were several colleges with hundreds of options to choose from with regards to majors and minors. I started out as a business major because it seemed general enough to be applicable to a job upon graduating. An elective class that was taught by a professor who studied photography really piqued my interest. I wanted to find a way to blend the whimsy of visual imagery with the practicality of evidence-based decision-making.

After speaking with a professor, I switched my major mid-year to photojournalism. I really loved the art of photography and the storytelling that could be accomplished with the right lens and perfect lighting. It was a good spring semester and that taste of uncertainty was beginning to fade, until I came up against a set of policies regarding the storage of chemicals on campus. Storage of these chemicals was not allowed.

Uncertainty reared up as I panicked about being in a major that required chemicals and I knew I was not allowed to store those chemicals in my on-campus room. It did not occur to me to move off campus to stay in this major. Living on campus meant safety and stability, consistent hot meals, and access to friends. So I switched my emphasis and stayed in the school of journalism to pursue print.

The moments are plentiful where my life was altered because of a policy. A department policy allowed me to date a colleague who would become my spouse. A campus policy limited my access to archives for a research project. A state policy allowed my friends of the same gender to get married and become legal parents of their children. A national foreign policy sent good friends and family to a war they did not ask to be part of. At every level, small to large, policy has in some way governed the way I live and work. Be it positive or negative, I can recall no opportunity of being asked to share how a policy affected my life. This study did just that for students, staff, and faculty on a campus where a new completion policy was recently implemented. This study is more than a reactionary piece of the moment like so many news snippets that flood our inboxes on a daily basis. Rather, it is a thorough investigation into the journey of one campus policy.

Key stakeholder perspectives on policy

Campus news outlets quite often cover student and faculty responses to policy. Simon (2015) covered new sexual assault policies at the University of Pennsylvania after a group of law professors from the school wrote an open letter of criticism. New alcohol policies at Texas Christian University led to a few quotes of students who supported a campus resource (Hernandez, 2014). Students were interviewed about their opinion when the Affordable Care Act was enacted because human resource policies regarding campus employment were changed, limiting the number of hours a student could work to avoid paying insurance for those students (Miller, 2015).

In each of these examples a small group of students were briefly asked for a sound bite about their opinion of a policy change in their campus communities. In two of these instances, news coverage happened retroactively; the policy was implemented, people voiced frustrations, and those same people provided quick quotes for an article. These humble snippets provided a limited, and often biased, view of a policy. A more in-depth look at policy is needed as it has and will continue to dictate the higher education environment. "The fate of higher education is increasingly being shaped...by state and federal policy" (Blumenstyk, 2015, p. 3).

Policy is not the only factor that contributes to the development of higher education practices. It is accepted that newer trends, including online academics and new faculty roles are changing higher education and these "innovations are beyond the control of policy makers" (Blumenstyk, 2015, p.3). This study did not look at newer innovations, rather it examined how the known indicator of completion was established as an institutional performance indicator through system policy. There is an opportunity to examine what already is, allowing for a modicum of control over future implementation of policy, if not the actual content of that policy.

In asking how implementation was deployed, policy makers may better understand the workload necessary to carry out policy implementation. Feedback from campus stakeholders may be valuable in understanding the challenges that come with following a policy, as there may be issues not originally accounted for and not ever thought of by policy makers. It is more than grabbing a student in a coffee shop and getting a two-minute diatribe about how a policy is ruining his or her very existence. It is taking a methodical approach and being intentional in the investigative process, identifying key constituents, and telling the whole story of implementation through the eyes of those most intimately connected to it.

Research questions

This study delved deeper into one policy, considering multiple stakeholders and collecting data from the stories of those most intimate with the policy. From the people who created the policy to the people who upheld it, and the people who were tasked with following it, this study is a comprehensive investigation. There are four specific research questions this study aimed to answer:

1. What was the experience of students, faculty, staff, and administrators with regards to a newly implemented campus policy?
2. What, if any, were the perceptions, involvement, and awareness of the campus stakeholders and the policy?
3. What similarities or differences, if any, exist between the perceptions, involvement, and policy awareness of the campus stakeholders?
4. What lessons can be learned from these experiences for future policy implementations?

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

There has been a vigorous focus on the retention of university students, producing full scholarly journals devoted to the topic (Braxton, 2000). Campbell and Mislevy's study (2013) centered on enrollment patterns and identified student characteristics and perceptions that prevented students from being retained. A clear finding identified general attitude of students towards their campus as a contributor to retention. The authors agreed that traditional models, using indicators such as GPA or Pell status, do assist with predicting enrollment patterns while advocating that an important indicator is how the student likes his or her experience and if the student's perception of the campus was positive or negative.

The completion rate, or how many students in a traditional cohort graduate from an institution, is becoming a marketable statistic for universities and colleges (Bundy, 2013). Although the marketing of completion rates has not been as well researched as GPA or Pell status, completion policies have become crucial as funding formulas change nationwide. Current research does support completion policies and shows that students do complete at a higher rate when enrolled in 15 credits than when not (Nozicka, 2014).

Origin of 15 to Finish

Complete College America (CCA) is a non-profit organization whose members used research and advocacy to develop "gamechangers" to help state colleges and universities improve completion rates (Our Work, n.d., para. 4). This alliance is comprised of 35 states. The administrators of the state legislatures and the state governors who choose to join the CCA alliance agree to uphold its mission: "to significantly increase the number of students successfully completing college and achieving degrees and credentials with value in the labor market and… close attainment gaps for traditionally underrepresented populations" (Our Work, n.d., para. 6). To be part of the alliance, each state's governor committed to three actions. First, the governor and the state institutions agreed to set completion goals through 2020 because "statewide goals enable stakeholders to focus time and resources on a common effort, encouraging all to use the same yard stick to evaluate progress and celebrate success" (Alliance of States, n.d., para 3). Second, those in the alliance agreed to use consistent data through metrics provided by CCA and a promise to disaggregate that data as thoroughly as possible. Finally, everyone commited to developing an action plan that incorporated the gamechangers, such as changing policies on a campus and at the statewide level.

Institutional representatives may seek assistance from CCA with any of the defined gamechangers, which include Performance Funding, Co-requisite Remediation, Full-time is Fifteen, Structured Schedules, and guided pathways to success (Our Work, n.d., para. 5). Performance funding can come from metrics that tie state funding to student progression. Financial incentives, such as scholarships and grants, are given to students who persist, or graduate in high-demand fields. Co-requisite remediation occurs when a pre-requisite course and its predecessor are taken in the same semester instead of consecutive semesters (Gamechangers, n.d.). This allows for curricular adjustments. Taking courses together may allow a student to complete a major requirement or pre-requisite sooner than if the student took them apart. Plus, the retention of information would be cemented in one semester without a delay between classes. Full-time is 15, also known as 15 to Finish, encourages students to take 15 credits each semester to graduate in four years. This gamechanger also supports banded tuition for 12 or more credits and calls for a 120-credit cap for bachelor's programs. This formula mathematically ensures a student can complete a degree in four years if they take 15 credits each semester while removing the financial stress and burden of paying for those additional credits.

Structured schedules consider the non-traditional, off-campus responsibilities students have. For students who work or have families, this gamechanger allows for adjustments to be made so students can take classes when it is most convenient for them. These classes can be at night, on the weekends, or online. Guided pathways, or a specific set of directions provided by administrators of degree programs telling a student which class to take and when, remove a student's ability to take individual courses by creating highly-structured degree plans for the student to follow. These five gamechangers, Performance Funding, Co-requisite Courses, 15 to Finish, Structured Schedules, and Guided Pathways, when combined together are the directives administrators agree to implement when they belong to the CCA consortium. This study focuses on 15 to Finish because it was the only tenet implemented on the campus where the study takes place.

The full-time is 15 gamechanger is comprised of three main tenets. The first is that a student must take a minimum of 15 credits per traditional semester to graduate in four years (Full Time is Fifteen, n.d., para. 2). CCA argues that mathematically a student needs to be in a minimum of 15 credits if he or she is to graduate in four years, boosting an institution's completion rate. It is important to note this gamechanger is different from the federal regulation from the higher education act that defines full time enrollment as 12 credits for the purposes of financial aid (Gardner, 2004). This inconsistent definition may impact implementation of this edict.

The second tenet caps bachelor degree programs at 120 credits (Full Time is Fifteen, n.d., para. 3). The third and final tenet is the elimination of financial burdens for pursuing 15 credits. CCA specifically advocates for banded tuition so that the cost of taking 15 credits is the same as the cost for taking 12 credits (Full Time is Fifteen, n.d., para. 3). CCA's presumption is that implementing a 15 to Finish policy and following these guidelines will result in better persistence and completion rates.

State implementation

The state system of Hawaii was the first to develop the program of 15 to Finish (Williams, 2014). In the inaugural year of the program, there was a 17 percent increase in the number of students taking 15 credits. The Higher Education Policy Commission of West Virginia "found that taking 15 credits makes students more focused" and aided students in reframing their idea of how they define full time status (Williams, 2014, p. 18). Southern Illinois University is one example of a school that reviewed their degree offerings to ensure that they do not exceed 120 credits (Nozicka, 2014). This way, 30 credits a year does produce a degree in four years, saving the student time and money. An 11 percent increase in "the number of credits attempted per semester" was reported at Adams State University after implementing CCA's gamechangers of Flat Tuition and a messaging campaign about the importance of 15 credit enrollment per semester (Klempin, 2014, p. 6).

The results experienced by the institutions mentioned above began to be considered in Nevada. Administrators from the Office of Academic and Student Affairs (2015) for the state of Nevada reported all state institutions would move to full implementation of 15 to Finish in Fall 2014. Using the baseline of Fall 2012, administrators reported that six of the seven institutions reviewed reported an increase in the number of students enrolled in 15 credits (2015). Additionally, student cohorts enrolled in at least 15 credits had higher GPAs than students who were enrolled in fewer than 15 credits (C. Anderson, personal communication, November 24, 2015).

Klempin (2014) said institutions, states, and "higher education advocacy groups have identified the redefinition of full-time as 15 credits per semester as a crucial strategy for improving college completion rates" (p. 2). There were many ways to implement completion policies that have 15 credit enrollment as a basic tenant. Game Changers espoused by Complete College America matched Klempin's first two types of 15-credit strategies; financial incentives and social marketing were two distinct strategies identified by Klempin that advocates of 15 credit semesters use to boost credit enrollment (2014). Financial incentives may include tying state and/or institutional aid to being enrolled in 15 credits per semester or completing 30 credits in a year. Social marketing strategies included public awareness campaigns outside of the campus community that advertise "the importance of 15 credits for on-time completion through 15 to Finish campaigns," and more institution-specific awareness campaigns as well (Klempin, 2014, p. 2). The social marketing strategy was not a policy, although policy would have to be created and implemented to fulfill the financial incentive strategies.

Why is completion important?

"The more courses students take and the sooner they do so, the more likely they are to graduate" (Klempin, 2014, p1). Researchers from Complete College America (2014) said, "Every extra year of tuition and fees adds up, and borrowers who do not graduate on time take on far more in debt in years five and six" (p. 12). This means students who take longer than four years to complete a degree are spending on average "more than $3,000 extra at a two year institution and nearly $9,000 extra in tuition at a four-year institution" (Complete College America, 2014, p. 12).

Additionally, when students delay graduation they "miss out on the wages they would have earned had they graduated on time" (Complete College America, 2014, p. 11). Instead of completing a degree and moving into a higher-paying job or career, students continue to work in low-paying jobs, and "they are working more hours than ever before" while still in school (Complete College America, 2011, p3). Research also shows that the longer a student is in school, "the more life gets in the way of success" due to "students' lives filling up with jobs, relationships, marriages, children, and mortgages," leading to not only the absence of a degree but often times a large student loan debt (Complete College America, 2011, p. 3). Completion for students is important because students who do not complete their degree within four years are less likely to finish, leave school with student loan debt, and miss out on earned income from not being able to take advantage of career opportunities afforded to those with a college degree.

Completion is equally important for higher education institutions. Baer and Duin (2013) said the "rethinking, realignment, and reinvention of institutional policies and practices around a culture of student success" is needed (p. 33). Baer and Duin asserted that college presidents need to make retention and completion top priorities as the future of America relies on college graduates. "College completion rates are considered to be among the most important indicators of institutional quality" (Shapiro & Dundar, 2012, p. 11). Shapiro and Dundar (2012) defined college completion as earning a degree or certificate.

Similar to Baer and Duin, Shapiro and Dundar (2012) agreed that completion rates are a strong indicator of a college's success. Using Human Capital Investment Theory (HCIT), a student would value an institution with a strong completion rate, choosing to enroll in and graduate from that college. HCIT has been applied to higher education to examine why students enroll in college (Iarrobino, 2005). Adapted from the corporate sector, Watson Wyatt Worldwide's Human Capital Index was one of the first valid and reliable instruments to show the gains that a company could yield if it were to invest in human capital practices and policies. The instrument is what HCIT is created around.

Those who apply the theory are examining the benefits an individual weighs when making a decision (Iarrobino, 2005). Iarrobino said 43 "practices that positively impact shareholder value" can be broken down into five dimensions: total rewards and accountability, collegial and flexible workspace, recruiting and retention, communications integrity, and focused human resources technologies" (p. 18). For higher education, examples that mirror this practice could include investing in faculty research and professional development of administrative employees. At its core, HCIT recognizes that when people feel valued, or perceive they are receiving something that benefits them; they will perform better by choice.

Finally, completion rates are important to society in general as "the ranking of the U.S. in terms of higher education attainment has fallen over time" (Lumina Foundation, 2014, p5). A Lumina Foundation report (2014) showed that the "global economy is fueling an ever-increasing demand for skills and talent," with most other countries working to increase the number of degree-holding citizens (p. 5). In other words, global and local economies are in need of more skilled workers to address labor shortages. Authors of a report from the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University are in agreement. Their research showed, "by 2018, we will need 22 million new workers with college degrees, but will fall short of that number by at least 3 million postsecondary degrees" (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010, p. 90). The report broke down jobs into nine job clusters. Each cluster was projected to have job growth. One example was the Education Cluster. Jobs categorized as Education, Training, and Library Occupations were calculated to have 1.3 million new job openings and 1.7 job openings as a result of retirements (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). Other job clusters reported were Sales and Office Support Occupations, Blue Collar Occupations, Food and Personal Services, Managerial and Professional Office, Education, Healthcare Professional and Technical Occupations, STEM, Community Services and Arts, and Healthcare Support.

The state legislature for Nevada stated areas of focus for economic development to be Aerospace and Defense, Mining, Materials, and Manufacturing, Business IT Ecosystems, Logistics and Operations, Health and Medical Services, Clean Energy, and Tourism, Gaming, and Entertainment (Moving Forward, 2012). A Northern Nevada Regional Growth Study (2015) indicated economic growth to increase significantly in the next decade because "clustering will drive the region's economic future and its population growth," or a cluster of incoming companies will bring new jobs requiring more skilled workers (Northern Nevada Regional Growth Study, 2015, p. 10). Northern Nevada could potentially see a job growth forecast of 56,600 new jobs according to authors of the study. This combination of job growth by country, state, and region indicated a need for improved completion rates of Nevada graduates and a need to look at completion policies and practices.

The investment in completion rates through the implementation of a policy focused on completion could contribute to the student's perceived value of the college and ultimate choice to enroll. Understanding student choice and preference through policy analysis may be beneficial to creating future policies that benefit students. Additionally, understanding what value and benefits staff, faculty, and administrators perceive from implementing a policy and holding students accountable may also contribute to better policy development. This understanding begins with establishing what policy is and what policy is not.

Policy

Policy encompasses everything from formal government-approved direction for a state or country to an informal, agreed upon set of practices in an office setting (Fowler, 2009). The word *policy* stems from the science of politics, and while rooted in politics, it has a much broader connotation outside of the political arena. Laws, rules, regulations, procedures, best practices, and directives that aim to solve a problem can all be described as different levels of policy. They are complicated for the many stakeholders involved and/or affected by the written and unwritten policies that are to be followed, evaluated, measured, and improved.

Lowi breaks policy down into three different types: distributive, regulatory, and redistributive (Fowler, 2009). Distributive policy provides wealth to citizens through subsidies, contracts, and non-regulatory licenses. Regulatory policies are rules applicable to groups of people. Redistributive policies move resources between people and groups. Within each of these types of policies, best practices are used for navigating their implementation and maintenance. For instance, there are technical strategies that focus on identifying specific resources to resolve a problem. Cultural strategies rely on the "shared belief, values, and symbols" central to the problem (Fowler, 2009, p. 298). Political strategies alternatively use power and influence to win people over, persuading groups to employ a specific solution to a problem. These different strategies can be combined in the implementation of policy.

The importance of policy implementation strategy

The implementation of the policy is just as important as the policy itself. According to Squires (2013), college administrators can take advantage of policy windows to change campus culture and make improvements. A college president must find the appropriate time to implement a new policy; that timing includes evaluating campus climate, culture, politics, and other factors.

The timing, or open window for change, may not last long enough to implement new policies. In some instances, "the crises pass, the major stakeholders change, the issue no longer attracts attention, or a partial solution is implemented" and momentum is lost (Squires, 2013, p. 36). The timing of changing the culture of completion has to be precise, and the perceived value the policy has to students must outweigh any potential loss according to HCIT (Squires, 2013).

Understanding the policy windows may aid in defining the life of the policy. The timing of when implementation begins can be a good indicator of movement through various policy stages. To understand the life of a policy, the policy stages must first be defined.

The life of a policy

Policy studies are complicated beasts, full of overlapping stages and dimensions. Smith and Larimer (2009) said “there is overlap and redundancy, and no single dimension encompasses every single stage of the policy process” (p. 236). One dimension for analyzing policy is referred to as the stages model. There are primarily six theorists who developed stages models; Jones (1970), Anderson (1978), Brewer and deLeon (1983), Ripley (1985), and Lasswell (1951).

Jones’ (1970) theory emphasizes relationships of all people involved with policy creation. The people who first expressed concern over an issue that need to be regulated, the people who transformed those concerns into policy drafts, and the people who ultimately vote the policy into existence are all connected in some way and Jones’ theory examines those connections.

Anderson’s (1978) sequential pattern of action has several categories: problem formation, formulation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation. Each of Anderson’s actions are separate stages that a policy cycles through.

Similarly, Brewer’s and deLeon’s (1983) six-phase model includes initiation, estimation, selection, implementation, evaluation, and termination. This model differs from the other five theories most drastically because of the termination phase, a clear defined point that signifies the end of a policy without the opportunity to cycle back through the other stages.

Ripley’s (1985) policy-process framework is a compilation of various theories and relationships that contribute to political systems. The overall theme Ripley communicates is that a governing entity decides how to solve a problem through policy creation. Evaluation would include an overview of what that problem was and if the problem persisted after policy was implemented.

No theorist is more generally credited with creating the study of policy than Lasswell. Out of these six originators, Lasswell's (1951) model is about how decisions are made in the policy process. Each of the other five theorists based their work upon Lasswell's. These five models share similarities, and they stem from different questions and goals. As a social scientist during War World II, Lasswell helped the U.S. government create policy (Lasswell, n.d.,para. 2).

Lasswell (1951) identified several characteristics of policy. First, he said that policies were problem oriented in need of a solution. Second, Lasswell believed that policy was multidisciplinary. Policy is present in all areas, not just political science. It is formal and informal. Next, Lasswell believed quantitative methods could be applied to policy to advance the field. Concurrently, Lasswell also believed that theory was central to pushing policy studies forward. Developers of policy must understand the cultural norms, cause and effect of real world issues, and a general understanding of the operation of social, political, and economical systems. To be able to explain the why and the how of problem solving was crucial. In this way, though not explicitly stated, Lasswell also championed qualitative methods. Finally, Lasswell believed good policy led to good democracy. The value of a democratic society informed through sophisticated methodological approaches was part of his vision for the advancement of policy studies.

"Lasswell and Jones conceptualize public policy as a linear decision-making process of linked stages" providing a way to organize the study of policy (Smith & Larimer, 2009, p. 32). This organization aids in providing the foundation from which to begin this study, providing a focus or starting point from which to expand. There are multiple variations and descriptions that have stemmed from this stages model. The model is not without limitations. For instance, it is challenging to produce an overall theory of public policy because the different stages can be studied individually and still answer the research question. Each stage when studied in depth can answer a research question all on its own without fully coming together and so there are stages that receive more attention than others. The stages do not have to be studied as one.

A second drawback is the linearity assumption of policy work. There is no consideration for the process of the life cycle to start anywhere other than the first step. In reality, policy work can begin at any point in the cycle and jump from one to another while eliminating others. Further, there is no agreed upon set of characteristics that define the different stages. Characteristics for one stage may be insignificant in another. For example, a researcher may define constituent feedback as a variable in the formation stage to be dialogue on the motivating rationale for the policy, then choose to define feedback as feelings for the policy reported on a Likert scale in the adoption stage. The next researcher that comes along may choose to flip these variables or exclude them altogether. For the purpose of this study, the characteristics were defined in a consistent manner from one stage to the next.

Smith and Larimer (2009) argued "paradigms are not completely rejected until a new replacement paradigm is presented" (p. 35). There is not an agreed upon alternative and the stages model has become a living and breathing theory, changing and adapting to new thought and new perspective. More recently, Petersen's (2009) policy process life cycle in Figure 1 provides a current framework for higher education policy that is simple in its stages identification.

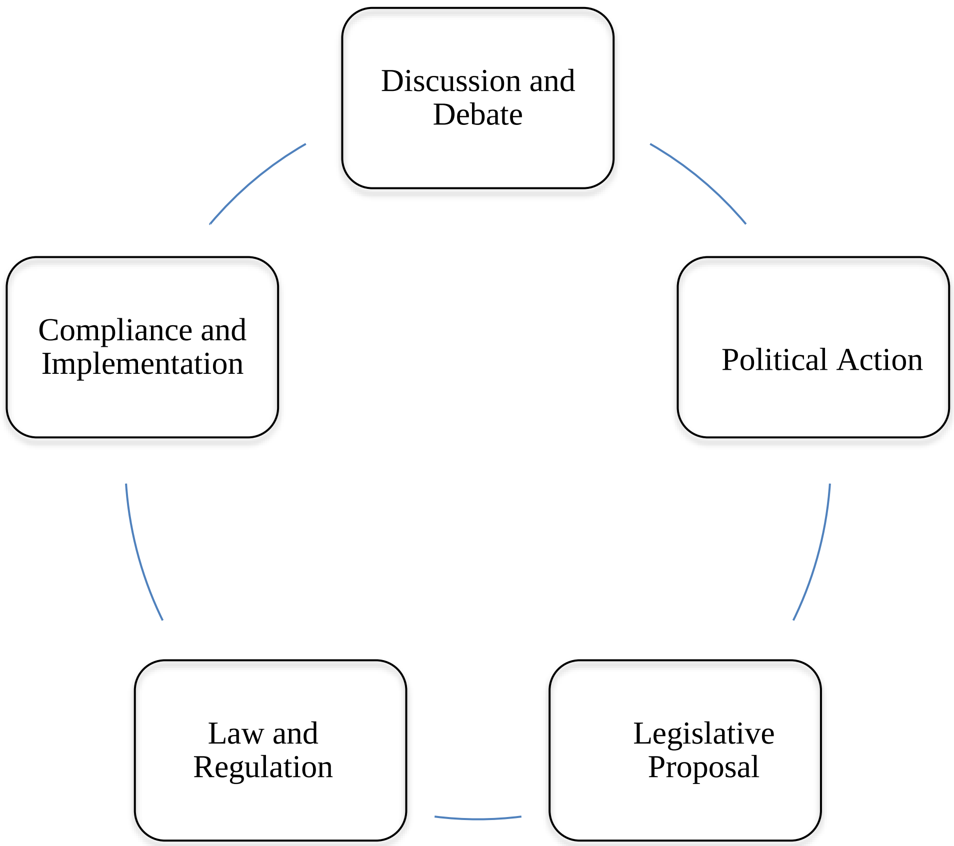

Figure 1. Petersen's (2009) policy process life cycle model.

Petersen's stages model (2009) stems from Lasswell's (1951) work in the political world, but has been adapted to a higher education setting. There are five components of Petersen's life cycle: discussion and debate; political action; legislative proposal; law and regulation; and compliance. The first stage of Petersen's model includes discussion and debate and suggests that policy begins here because of one of three reasons (Petersen, 2009). For instance, when a campus experiences a serious event that is tragic or unethical in nature, administrators may seek to create a policy to address those events in an attempt to not repeat history. Similarly, a concern brought forth by a student, staff member, or faculty may spark discussion on a needed policy. This concern does not have to stem from an event.

Finally, “policy debates are influenced by special interests” that can be internal or external to the campus community (Petersen, 2009, p. 74). An internal example could be a student club representative who wants to see a policy change that would allow his or her club priority access to scheduling campus facilities, and the student sits on a voting body with influence over the policy. An external example could be a politician who has a son or daughter who would like a different living situation on campus, maybe a private room, and the politician requests a policy exception be made. Whether personal or professional, selfish or altruistic, Petersen said there are people with specific interests and needs who may try to influence campus policy towards their way of thinking or wishes.

Stage two of the life cycle is political action (Petersen, 2009). The discussion and debate that took place in stage one moves from thought to action. A public statement, or an open letter are two examples of how the call to action becomes tangible. Petersen also said informal and formal investigations are action steps. Investigations may call for a new committee or task force to collect data through meetings, surveys, or roundtables.

The third stage is legislative proposal. Talking and action often result in legislative action in the form of proposals that become bills or resolutions (Petersen, 2009).

In stage four, law and regulation, these bills or resolutions became law after being voted on and approved upon by the appropriate entity. In federal government, both houses of Congress approve the law before the president signs it. In higher education, the faculty senate, board of regents, or alumni council may approve a new policy before sending it to the president and/or chancellor.

Once approved, the final stage of the cycle is compliance. “Compliance with a new law or regulation may require risk assessments, the establishment of new programs or services, the implementation of institutional policies, or other measures designed” to correct the original problem, concern, or issues the law was created to address (Petersen, 2009, p. 75). This compliance may also be seen as the implementation phase.

The simplicity of Petersen’s model allows for it to be used to analyze a single policy or multiple policies. However, it should be noted that while assessment can be generally assumed in this cycle, it is not explicitly stated. This flaw would see the cycle repeated itself without specific intent towards assessing; potentially leading to the continuation of a flawed policy.

Analyzing higher education policy

Using the stages model provides a way to begin analyzing the lived experience of a policy at a university. “There are different definitions of implementation and no agreed upon set of terms or methods” with which to study it reported Young and Lewis (2015,

p. 4). This lack of agreed upon methods can be viewed in a positive way, allowing for a multitude of methods to be acceptable even though they may be different from what others have used. For instance, in higher education policy implementation research, the most common method used is case study (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009), but it is not the only method that is allowable. The popularity of case study does not impede the choice to use a different design. Depending upon which part of policy is being analyzed, there are specific questions posed for specific purposes. Table 1 reflects a few of those options.

Table 1- Field of Policy Study

Field of Policy Study	**Representative Research Questions**	**Representative Conceptual Frameworks**	**Methodological Approaches and Examples**	**Representative Disciplines**
Policy and Politics	Does politics cause policy, or policy cause politics?	Policy typologies Stages, Heuristic	Quantitative and qualitative classification (typology and taxonomy), Statistical analysis, Case studies	Political Science
Policy Design	How do people perceive problems and policies? How do policies distribute power and why? Whose values are represented by policy? How does policy socially construct particular groups? Is there common ground to different policy stories and persepctives?	Discourse Theory Hermeneutics	Qualitative Text Analysis	Political Science, Philosophy/Theory, Sociology
Policy Implementation	Why did a policy fail or succeed? How was a policy decision translated into action?	Bounded rationality Ad hoc	Quantitative Analysis Qualitative Analysis	Political Science, Economics, Public Administration, Policy-specific subfields

(Smith & Larimer, 2009, pp. 21-23)

The purpose of the table is to highlight “key research questions and the conceptual frameworks formulated to address them” in a way that is easy to understand and apply (Smith & Larimer, 2009, p. 24). The Field of Policy Study refers to both a stage in the cycle, and/or the design of the policy. The next column refers to the way a research question is posed and is followed by the appropriate framework to use to address the question. The fourth column is the methodology that would be best to apply. Finally, in the fifth column the disciplines or areas of study for each are presented.

When conducting policy research, a researcher could use this table to build his or her research. Using the table, column by column, a researcher in a political science discipline could choose policy implementation in the field of study, a research question about the success of a policy, bounded rationality theory, and choose a qualitative design. An example is Marston’s (2002) research using critical discourse analysis to analyze housing policies. Marston rooted housing issues in policy frameworks that created those issues, then asked the researcher to use critical discourse as a way to “account for their own subjectivity” (p. 84). His research also looked at language, and the specific terms and phrases used in policy creation. One of his themes revolved around the difference between the economic language of the policy makers and the definitions of public housing/service believed by the residents. For example, a policy maker who was a pubic housing manager in Marston’s research defined public service and public housing in terms of cost and efficiency, while the residents had a different, more community-based interpretation.

In addition to using policy to advance research in the field, policy analysis may be helpful when conducting program evaluations. A formative evaluation may be helpful for assessing how well a new program or policy is working in its infancy (Smith & Larimer, 2009). If a program is more advanced and has had time to mature, a summative evaluation may prove useful. These evaluations are also done at any time during the policy life cycle to "decide whether to expand, contract, terminate, or continue a program" (p. 134). In addition to deciding whether or not to change course of action, or continue on that course of action, policy analysis is helpful with process and outcome evaluations.

When evaluating the process, information from the stages of the life cycle help look at how staff were trained to implement the policy (Smith & Larimer, 2009). Were all rules set forth followed? Is the policy doing what it was created to do, helping who it was created to help? These types of questions related to the function and process of the policy could be answered by conducting one or more of the studies outlined in Table 1. The outcome evaluation would "measure and assess what a policy" did (Smith & Larimer, 2009, p. 135). Questions of why the policy was successful or how the policy failed to meet its outcomes would also be analyzed.

Ultimately, understanding the life of a policy may lead to better implementation strategies and success. There are several agreed upon reasons why policy implementation fails. It is known that those instructed to implement new policies often misunderstood what they were supposed to do (Fowler, 2009). The people on the ground implementing policy "often lack the knowledge and skills necessary" to be successful in implementation and getting buy in from those the policy was meant to help (p. 273). Resources, such as materials and time, were often lacking and unavailable to those implementing the policy and those following the policy.

Using a table such as the table created by Smith and Larimer (2009) to analyze policy can be a productive means for inserting assessment into Petersen's stages model and policy life cycle. The simplicity of Petersen's model makes it applicable for analyzing higher education policy. In doing this, researchers may shed some light on the effectiveness of campus and state-wide policy; specifically with regards to a president's use of policy windows and the value an institution places on its student body.

Hermeneutics

The word hermeneutic is Greek in origin, "meaning the continual interpretation and reinterpretation of texts" (Bernard & Ryan, 2010, p. 256). Hermes, a Greek god, had the job of delivering and interpreting messages from humans to other gods. It was his job to understand the message and communicate the purpose of that message. Although not a deity, or of Greek descent, for the purpose of the study, I intend to play the part of Hermes and attempt to understand and interpret the messages delivered by research participants.

Researchers tend to agree that hermeneutics was originally put into practice by philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (Schwandt, 1997). Schleiermacher's method was used to make sense of the Bible. Throughout his lifetime, the method was expanded to review classical texts and legal documents. Hermeneutics rose in credibility and use at a time when doubt was being cast upon Neo-Kantianism.

Simply put, Neo-Kantianism was a theoretical framework that spearheaded a philosophical movement in the 1920s (Risser, 1997). It is a view "that knowledge equals judgment, truth equals judgedness equals objectivity equals valid sense," or knowledge is only constructed and true if built through a scientific method (Risser, 1997, p. 28). Conversely, Gadamer (1989) posited that in addition to scientific experiences, there is value in the everyday lived experience. Hermeneutics is "a way of thinking about everyday matters…how to understand what someone is desperately searching for the right words to say, how to make sense of why someone would do what they did" (Porter & Robinson, 2011, p. 298).

Hermeneutics has evolved greatly from its origins when used solely for interpreting Biblical texts to its more practical use in analyzing data. Porter and Robinson's (2011) six trends provide a brief timeline of how hermeneutics has been adapted for more practical application. In *Romantic Hermeneutics* of the late 18^{th} century, a shift begins from Schleiermacher's pure historical text to more general applications and a new development of methodological approaches for interpretation that include the researcher's personal connection to what is being understood. Friedrich Schleiermacher was the first to bring hermeneutics out of its strict Biblical confines into universal understanding as a means to interpret any and all discourse.

Phenomenological Hermeneutics was fathered by Heidegger (1982) and Husserl (1964) during the late 19^{th} and early 20^{th} centuries (Porter & Robinson, 2011). Husserl (1964) brought forth the descriptive method and phenomenology, believing the lived experience of others crucial to understanding how to live a rational life. Heidegger (1982) pushed the proverbial phenomenological envelope further by intoning that being is more than a present state: it is also a compilation of previous assumptions. "Human existence has a hermeneutical structure" comprised of scientific and cultural knowledge (Porter & Robinson, 2011, p. 60).

Gadamer (1989) took hermeneutics to the next step, cementing it in the 20th century with his Hermeneutic Circle (Risser, 1997). In examining the whole, looking at its parts, then coming back to the whole, the researcher puts himself or herself in the analysis by looking at how personal background contributes *a priori* to the object of study. The circle is repeated until no further analysis can be conducted. This *Philosophical Hermeneutics* establishes open-ended questions with no goal of a final answer. "The image of a circle refers to the fact that the interpreter is bound to a general communal tradition on one hand, and to the particular object of interpretation on the other" (Schwandt, 1997, p. 63). The interpreter cannot remove himself or herself completely, humanity and personal experiences are connected to the research.

Ricoeur's (1976) *Hermeneutic Phenomenology* focused on language as discourse. He also believed individual interpretations are not created equal in validity because of limitations established by the text and the several different ways text can be understood. Extending language into communication and social theory, Habermas' *Critical Hermeneutics* (2011) saw a person's existence as being comprised of the life-world around him or her and the systems in place that are lived in. Habermas dove deep into the importance of citizens having access to and an understanding of how institutions that control every day life occurrences, such as social reform, led to civil discourse and public reasoning.

Finally, *Structuralism* was work championed by Daniel Patte (2011) that "provides the means by which one can bring both exegesis and hermeneutic" to analyze Biblical text and analyze what that analysis means to the person reading the texts (p. 15). Exegesis is simply a very detailed analysis, concluded after objective analysis. It means to "lead out of" (Exegesis, n.d., para 2.), meaning the reader is arriving at a conclusion after reading the text. This analysis is in contrast to exegis, where the reader is being "led into" the text, injecting personal ideas and bias with a forgone conclusion before reading the text thoroughly.

One way to exercise exegesis is to use Gadamer's (1989) circle. Gadamer (1989) believed the human need for understanding to be part of a person's existence. In every experience there is the opportunity to understand. Repetition is a vehicle driven towards that understanding resulting in an interpretation that is well thought out and examined deeply. This can be accomplished using the circle. This practice is also what makes hermeneutics so applicable when doing qualitative studies.

Hermeneutics in qualitative study

Hermeneutics fosters a search for truth and understanding without the intent of absolute truth and universal knowledge (Porter & Robinson, 2011). One can strive to understand, but never completely know. The application of hermeneutics in research is not limited to one specific method or theory. It is an endless and ever changing way of looking at the world. Although limitless, there are a few methods that serve as a good beginning for novice researchers. One such method is the Hermeneutic Circle originally created by Flacius, but fondly referred to as Gadamer's Circle (Gadamer, 1989). This circle allows the researcher to look at the whole, examine the parts that make up the whole, then look at the whole again. The meaning of the parts inform the meaning of the whole, while the meaning of the whole allows for exploration of the parts. It is very much a chicken and egg way to cycle through text. One does not exist without the other. When interpreting meaning, our own experiences and existence help define that meaning.

This circle was created to find meaning in text, making it appropriate for qualitative research. Text, or raw text, is generated from all data collected in a study (Piantanida & Garman, 2009). Data include experiences, observations, interviews, stories, images, anecdotes, transcripts, and oral histories among other sources. These raw texts are broken down into several types: discursive, theoretic, experiential, formal literature, and real time discourse. To use these texts as data in research, a researcher must undergo "a process of sifting and sorting through the mass…to select those that most richly depict the phenomenon embedded within" (Piantanida & Garman, 2009, p. 89). The hermeneutic circle can be the process used to sort through the texts.

Research examples using hermeneutics

Hermeneutics has been used in qualitative research in different ways (Cresswell, 2009, Ferrara, 1995, Rennie, 2012. Stake, 2005). The original application of hermeneutics being used to analyze text can be seen in Thomas' study. Thomas (2011) interviewed patients and families, looking for meaning in journal writing. Twelve participants were current patients, former patients, or family and friends who had visited a patient. Interviews were conducted to ask about the lived experiences of the participants while in the hospital. These interviews were transcribed and coded for themes. Participants were also asked to journal about their experiences and these texts were collected as data. The hermeneutic circle was applied by repeatedly reviewing the transcripts and texts, and creating meaning from constructed themes. One finding was that families and patients both felt the need to act a certain way in order to gain the trust of the hospital staff. That trust resulted in easier access to information and focused attention on the patient. This was called "being on stage."

Similarly, Santoro's study included text as data that was examined with hermeneutics. Santoro also included interview transcripts. Santoro (2015) employed hermeneutics when looking at teacher dissatisfaction. More specifically, Santoro was interested in why teachers who worked in low income, high poverty schools were leaving even when they professed to enjoy their jobs. Her participants also used journaling to produce data, but were given an additional option to comment on those journals, reflecting deeper on comments and perspectives. In this way, the hermeneutic circle was applied. One finding was that the teachers Santoro interviewed were disappointed in the evaluation process, finding it limiting and not inclusive of their whole stories and skills.

While the application of hermeneutics is limited in education, there are more examples of hermeneutics in studies out of the education disciplines. Chan, Walker, and Gleaves (2015) used hermeneutic phenomenology when they looked at students and smartphone use in Malaysia. Twelve students were interviewed three times in six months using semi-structured interviews. One finding was a link between teaching and learning and a value of status and socialization with young adults.

The authors encouraged policy makers to consider adopting smartphone technology in the classroom.

Smith (1998) used hermeneutic phenomenology to study the lived experiences of the suffering of problem drinkers. Smith (1998) used his background to alleviate bias and establish connections when he collected and interpreted data because hermeneutics implores the researcher to consider his or her precognitive awareness when understanding and processing the research and data. Smith transcribed audio-taped interviews, read the text multiple times, extracted themes, and created patterns; writing and re-writing until the interpretation of the data was finished.

Hermeneutics offers a method for looking at various forms of data and constructing meaning. As evidenced from the examples, small samples are productive and conducive to this type of research when done methodically and intentionally. Additionally, texts and interviews are accepted ways to collect data for qualitative studies and hermeneutics provides a way to analyze that data. The endless options may appear overwhelming at first, but the flexibility allows for individualization of the studies to come through.

For the purpose of this study the policy being analyzed is one that was adopted by a governing body and implemented on a state level. By definition it is a regulatory policy. The intent of this research was to examine the lived experiences of all key stakeholders involved, from the policy makers at the legislative level, to the staff and faculty creating practices and rules that support implementation, and the students ultimately hearing the message and following the policy. Understanding the life cycle and stages of this policy aids in guiding the inquiry by providing a foundation from which to begin asking questions. The various stakeholders have different roles in the different stages. It is these different roles and stages that serve as parts to make up the whole of the analysis. In this way, Gadamer's (1989) Hermeneutic Circle was applied. Additionally, as a previous student and administrative faculty member at the university being studied, my personal history provides credibility, awareness, and historical context. The use of this social capital and goodwill is hermeneutic in nature and I acknowledge my previous professional and personal relationships with the campus open the door to information in a way that may not be accessible to someone without my lived experiences.

This research describes the life cycle of a state-wide policy implemented by a governing body, assessing how these implementation challenges were addressed at all levels and all stages of the policy. Lessons learned from those involved may help to influence future policy strategy in higher education and lead to greater success in solving problems so all stakeholders may attain their goals. At present, there is no published research that examines campus community perceptions of higher education policy with a hermeneutic lens. There is no research as of yet on perceived benefits and value associated with policy; be it from staff, faculty, administrators, or students. This study fills that gap; delving deep into the construction and implementation of a policy by employing a philosophical method for examining data.

Chapter 3 Method

This study is qualitative; employing phenomenology and using hermeneutics as the method by which to organize, collect, and arrange the data (Porter & Robinson, 2011). Husserl (1964) stated that the experiences of everyday life have value in the scientific world even when not collected in a quantitative way. These experiences include an individual's memories, perceptions, beliefs, and consciousness. The way to get at these experiences is through interviews and focus groups. Interviews and focus groups can be seen as Gadamer's (1989) *parts* that build the *whole.* For this reason, hermeneutics is well suited for this research because each piece of data is a *part* that contributes to telling the story of the *whole*, and when using Gadamer's Circle, all data would be reviewed repeatedly to establish trustworthiness.

Researcher Background

As a higher education administrator, I have worked 12 years in various departments in student affairs. Academic advising, residence life, student union, and adjunct teaching have contributed to my growth and development as both a professional and a person. I currently work in financial aid where I interact daily with students who have questions about the 15 to Finish policy. Because of my work with grants and grant reporting, I also have experience conducting interviews and focus groups with students. As a full time doctoral student in educational leadership, my academic background has been rigorous and provided the beginning of a strong foundation in philosophy.

Participants and Sampling

One method for data sampling is snowball sampling, where “one participant leads to another” (Seidman, 2013, p. 58). It is a process for choosing participants to interview and make part of a study. This type of sampling can also be more than just a way to select participants. Noy (2008) said snowball sampling “delivers a unique type of knowledge” (p. 331). Noy posits that snowball sampling does not just provide access to information, but that the act of acquiring that information is social because it uses social networks to obtain that information. Looking at the research study in its entirety, this “facet contributes synergistically to the overall research design, which, in turn, can potentially generate an organic” type of knowledge that is constructed because of the nature of how the participants were selected (Noy, 2008, p. 332). In other words, the snowballing method is hermeneutic in its knowledge building and collection.

“Snowball sampling is arguably the most widely employed method of sampling in qualitative research” (Noy, 2008, p. 330). Using this method may help with obtaining access to people who will otherwise choose not to participate, but because an introduction is made through a peer or colleague, a certain amount of trust is inherently established. Snowball sampling occurred with several key participants, representing different stakeholder groups. All interview participants were asked to sign a consent form. The identity of the non-student participants was public knowledge, however for this study, each participant was provided a nom de plume to protect anonymity.

Stages 1 and 2 comprised administrators and texts from meetings and discussions representative of the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE). This is the state body that oversees the Board of Regents (BoR) and eight institutions in the state. The BoR is where the push for completion originated in the form of a message and campaign centered on Complete College America's 15 to Finish gamechanger. Kate Anderson, a senior level administrator from the chancellor's office, was identified at the senior ranking official with the closest connection to the initial 15 to Finish campaign. For this reason, Anderson was identified as key stakeholder for the beginning of the policy life cycle, and the start to the snowball sampling. Anderson identified Diego Knight, a second influential, high-ranking administrator within the BoR, as a key stakeholder for Stage 2.

- The BoR and university administration were key stakeholder groups responsible for adoption of the policy. When asked who to speak with for data to inform Stage 3, Anderson and Knight individually identified the same four individuals. Jade Grimm was a native Nevadan who worked as a Regent for BoR. Shanice West an administrator who worked in the state system office, building the initial relationship with Complete College America. Stephanie Edinburg was a high-ranking official for the university administration. Mila Chavez was a senior administrator for the admissions and enrollment department that created the 15 to Finish policy. Within these interviews, key stakeholders further identified two additional participants of crucial relevance to Stage 3: Tasha Freemont was a mid-level administrator within admissions and Ted Wilson was a mid-level administrator in financial aid.
- The six key stakeholders from Stage 3 each provided three or four recommendations for participants for Stage 4. Of those listed, five people were

mentioned multiple times. Dave Folsom was a high-ranking administrator in academic advising and responsible for communicating both the campaign and message to advising staff. Ginger Davis, an alum of the university, was an academic advisor and lecturer from psychology. Georgia Smith, and alum of the university with 10 years of experience on campus, was a professional advisor for the college of science. Paula Em was an academic advisor and full professor from the college of agriculture, biotechnology, and natural resources. Over the past seven years Em was head of several university committees, most recently curriculum and instruction. Joe Thomas was a new hire to the university and served in an administrative role in academic advising for the college of business.

- Advisor outreach to students to serve as key stakeholders for Stage 5 proved unsuccessful, as students most affected were no longer in communication with the staff. To provide student perspective, 19 de-identified appeals to the financial aid policy were provided by the financial aid office. To include the student voice, de-identified data was provided from the financial aid office in the form of 19 written appeals to the policy. These appeals were submitted for Spring 2016 and totaled 586 appeals, of which more than 90 percent were approved. The following represents the descriptive portion of the student data:
- Word count of the appeal ranged from 92 word to 691, with a median of 223 words.
- Students were requesting enrollment numbers between nine credits and 14 credits, with a mode and median of 12 credits.

- Eight students submitted attachments to their appeals, such as copies of work schedules and class schedules.
- Fourteen of the appeals were addressed to no one in particular, indicating a lack in knowledge of who the appeal was being reviewed by.
- Appeals were submitted from November 24, 2015 to February 22, 2016.
- Thirteen of the appeals were submitted in January. Two appeals were submitted in November, December, and February.
- Nine students cited working as reason for not enrolling in 15 credits.
- Four students spoke up needing to support their families and not having time to enroll in 15 credits.
- Three students referenced health issues as reasons for not enrolling in 15 credits.
- The students were in different majors and disciplines.
- Five students cited lack of required courses being offered as reason for not enrolling in 15 credits.
- Two students could not work and were requesting to keep their financial aid. One student cited homelessness, the other self-identified as a non-U.S. citizen.

Data Collection

Looking at Petersen's stages model (2009) and simultaneously using Gadamer's (1989) circle, each stage of the completion policy is a part, while the policy itself is the whole. These stages, or parts, include discussion and debate, political action, legislative proposal, law and regulation, and compliance and implementation (Petersen, 2009). Within those stages are sub-fields of design, processes, and subsystems. Each of these stages will be explored through a review of documents and interviews of key stakeholders. Stages (parts) one through two of *Discussion and Debate* and *Political Action* will include documents, while stages (parts) two through five of *Political Action, Legislative Proposal*, *Law and Regulation*, and *Compliance and Implementation* will include interviews.

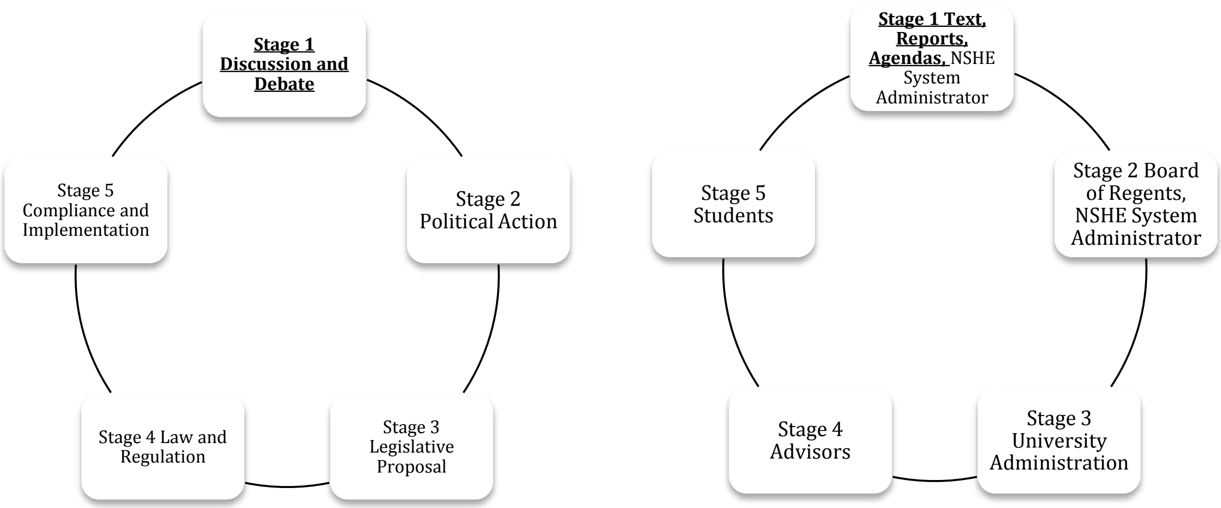

Figure 2. These two images reflect the policy life cycle as stages for evaluation. The cycle on the left is Petersen's (2009) five stages of a policy life cycle. The cycle on the right reflects data sources for each stage.

Data were collected in the form of text and individual interviews as reflected in Figure 2. This is appropriate as each stage (part) requires information that may either be obtained by text and written documents, personal communication, or a combination. Stage one (part one) of *Discussion and Debate* included a review of public records about the completion policy. Reports from CCA and similar higher education institutions were reviewed, as these documents are the precursor to the policy established at the university in this study. These data provided historical context.

All data in print format was accessed with permission by the respective owners of those data. When possible, printed copies of reports, agendas, and transcripts were converted digitally for storage and ease of access. Conference proceedings and other recorded media were downloaded as audio files and transcribed.

Stage two (part two) of *Political Action* included both documents and interviews for data that led to the creation of the policy at this institution. The Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE) is governed by an entity known as the Board of Regents (BoR). Documents from meetings where discussion on this policy was entertained were reviewed. The Vice Chancellor of the BoR was the first person interviewed. Using the snowball method, two to three other influential board members or administrators were interviewed.

Because of the access that can be gained to information and people, the snowball method was continued to be applied throughout the remaining stages (parts). Stage three (part three) of *Legislative Proposal* began with an interview of the university administrator responsible for adopting the policy on the campus. A senior administrator for student services was interviewed, followed by two to three other key stakeholders. Administrators with direct connections to implementation and enforcement from student services were included.

Stage four (part four) of *Law and Regulation* began with an interview by a senior administrator for academic advising. The person in this position has the responsibility of "supervising campus wide advising and student success" and thus would be in position to disseminate information and protocol about the policy to advisors, who in turn would have a direct link to advising students (http://www.unr.edu/academic-central/academic-advising/all-topics/contact-advisors/university-advising-center/advising-center-staff). From this person stemmed the next two to three interviews of advisors with direct experience with communicating the policy to students and holding students accountable. Academic advisors from the undergraduate advising area were included, but athletic and nursing advisors were not included because they were exempt from enforcing the policy.

Finally, it was through the advisors that students were to be identified for interviews to complete Stage five (part five) of *Compliance and Implementation*. The professional and academic advisors were asked to share this study and request participation from students they felt were most affected by the campaign and policy. Each advisor contacted multiple students through email, and phone messages. The advisors were provided with a script and an tailored email message with details of the study, my contact information, and approved study protocol from the Research Integrity Office. An estimated 400 students were contacted, there were no student responses. To still provide student data, a request was made and approved to receive de-identified student appeals from students who were requesting approval to not be in compliance with the policy. This request was fulfilled by the financial aid office and a file was sent via email with scanned copies of appeals written by students. These appeals served as text transcripts for analysis, falling in line still with the method of Hermeneutic Phenomenology.

For the interviews, a point of saturation occurred when no new data was being collected and the same information was being repeated at each stage where interviews occurred (Seidman, 2013). The questions asked were semi-structured and open-ended to allow for the participants to talk freely. All interviews with administrators, with the exception of the academic advisors, were asked the same opening statement and closing question:

1. Tell me about your experience with 15 to Finish.
2. Who else do you recommend I speak with?

The opening statement was asked at the beginning of the interview. The closing question was asked as the very last question. The questions in between were identified based upon the participants' responses. The interviews with academic advisors had the following opening statement and closing question:

1. Tell me about your experience with 15 to Finish.
2. Can you name two to five students whom you worked with directly and observed to have meaningful experiences related to the 15 to Finish policy, negative or positive?

Each interview with a non-student lasted approximately 60 minutes and took place in person at that participant's office or place of work.

All interviews were recorded using an iPhone 5S application, AudioMemos. It was password protected and only accessible by myself. Once recorded, each audiofile was downloaded to a personal desktop computer and transcribed. All files were saved to an online cloud based system and password protected. As an additional storage option, a recorder was also be used. Again, audio files were downloaded and saved to a cloud-based system and password protected.

Limitations

The policy was newly implemented Fall 2014. It is arguable that not enough time has passed to accurately assess and analyze the policy. Access to students for interviews was not attainable and only those students who appealed the completion policy provided data.

Data Analysis

From each stage (part), general themes establish a pattern or produce additional themes that lead to better policy implementation. Coding the data provided a basis for constructing themes. Coding completed digitally and on paper, though no software other than word and excel was used. All notes and transcriptions was reviewed multiple times, with repeated words being tallied and highlighted, then grouped together to create themes.

These repeated words were analyzed by going through text and transcripts line by line. Each line was numerically ordered beginning with the number one. As each line was analyzed, and each word was tallied, words and phrases that were repeated were be grouped together. These groups were then be organized into larger groups, establishing themes. I used these themes to contsruct patterns between the stages and provide insight into the lived experiences of those affected by a new policy and messaging campaign.

Gadamer's (1989) hermeneutic circle was applied as a way to continuously dissect the data and repeatedly sift through the data. As the themes were merged into trends, the trends were grouped and narrowed down to four to five themes. A final reading of the data occurred to look for any additional information that could be added to bolster a theme, or potentially construct a new theme.

Chapter 4 Results

The results presented in this chapter employ Gadamer's Circle (Gadamer, 1989). Gadamer examined the data as a whole, breaking it down into parts, then putting those parts back together again. In this study, the whole is represented by the university financial aid policy 15 to Finish. The parts are represented by Petersen's five stages of policy (Petersen, 2009). Themes constructed from data within each stage represent the parts coming back together. Themes constructed across all stages further represent the parts of the policy life cycle of 15 to Finish forming a whole analysis of the policy.

Themes from Petersen's Policy Life Cycle: Stage 1

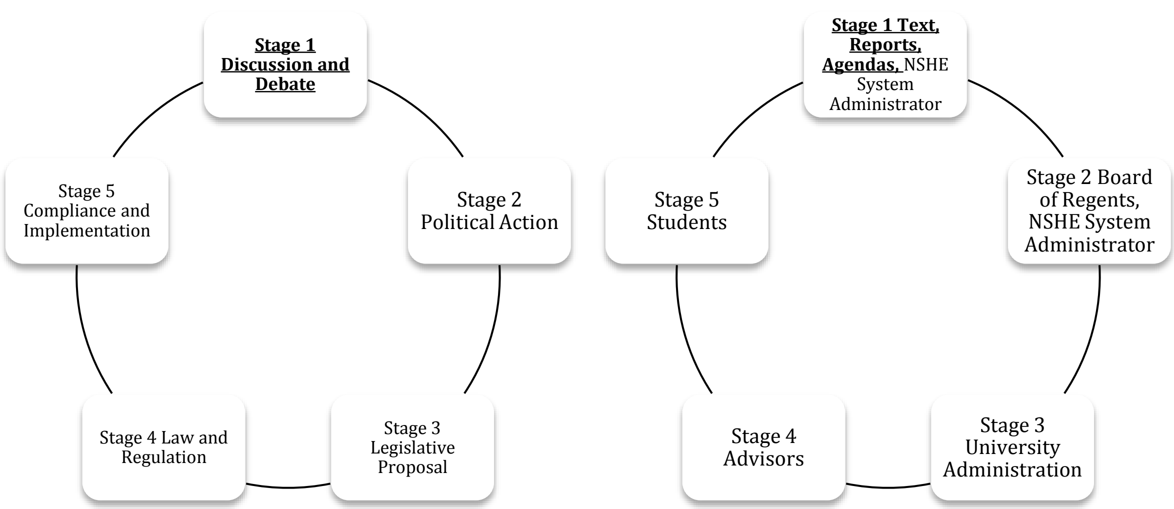

Figure 3. This image is a visual representation of Petersen's (2009) policy life cycle. It is in a circle to also represent Gadamer's Circle (Gadamer, 2009).

The first stage of Petersen's policy life cycle is called Discussion and Debate. This is the stage where the idea for the policy began. Part of the data includes conversations that identified the need to address a crisis through policy. Additionally, text or transcripts from meetings where the crisis and potential solutions were discussed are part of the data. Finally, promotional materials geared towards policy education may be considered data. The stages are reflected as cyclical to remain in alignment with Gadamer's Circle shared in Figure 3.

Theme 1: Data Was the Driving Force Behind Pushing the Nevada Initiative

Numerical data was present throughout initial conversations and discussions on the 15 to Finish campaign, such as that reflected in Table 2. A senior administrator for the Nevada System of Higher Education (NSHE), Anderson used this data "to tell the story" of completion, or lack thereof, in the state of Nevada. Anderson said she presented information in different ways, for example, displaying NSHE graduation rates by credit load. According to Anderson, graduation rates disaggregated by credit load and ethnicity

4-Year NSHE Institutions – Fall 2004 Cohort

	First-term Enrollment Load		
	<12	12-14	15+
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.0%	54.5%	52.6%
Asian or Pacific Islander	40.0%	41.8%	57.3%
Black Non-Hispanic	0.0%	34.7%	51.2%
Hispanic	21.4%	36.7%	48.9%
White Non-Hispanic	19.1%	45.9%	60.5%

2-Year NSHE Institutions – Fall 2008 Cohort

	First-term Enrollment Load		
	<12	12-14	15+
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.0%	9.1%	33.3%
Asian or Pacific Islander	3.9%	11.9%	25.6%
Black Non-Hispanic	1.9%	5.0%	10.3%
Hispanic	2.8%	14.2%	19.3%
White Non-Hispanic	2.8%	11.5%	23.3%

Table 2. Data reflects enrollment numbers by credits for college students disaggregated by ethnicity. The top half of the table is for 4-year schools in Nevada and the bottom half is for 2-year schools in Nevada.

for four-year and two-year Nevada institutions were important to show the gap and the need to improve completion rates. This pattern of showing data points disaggregated for different populations and schools continued in various presentations Anderson gave as he worked to show that Nevada lacked a culture of completion.

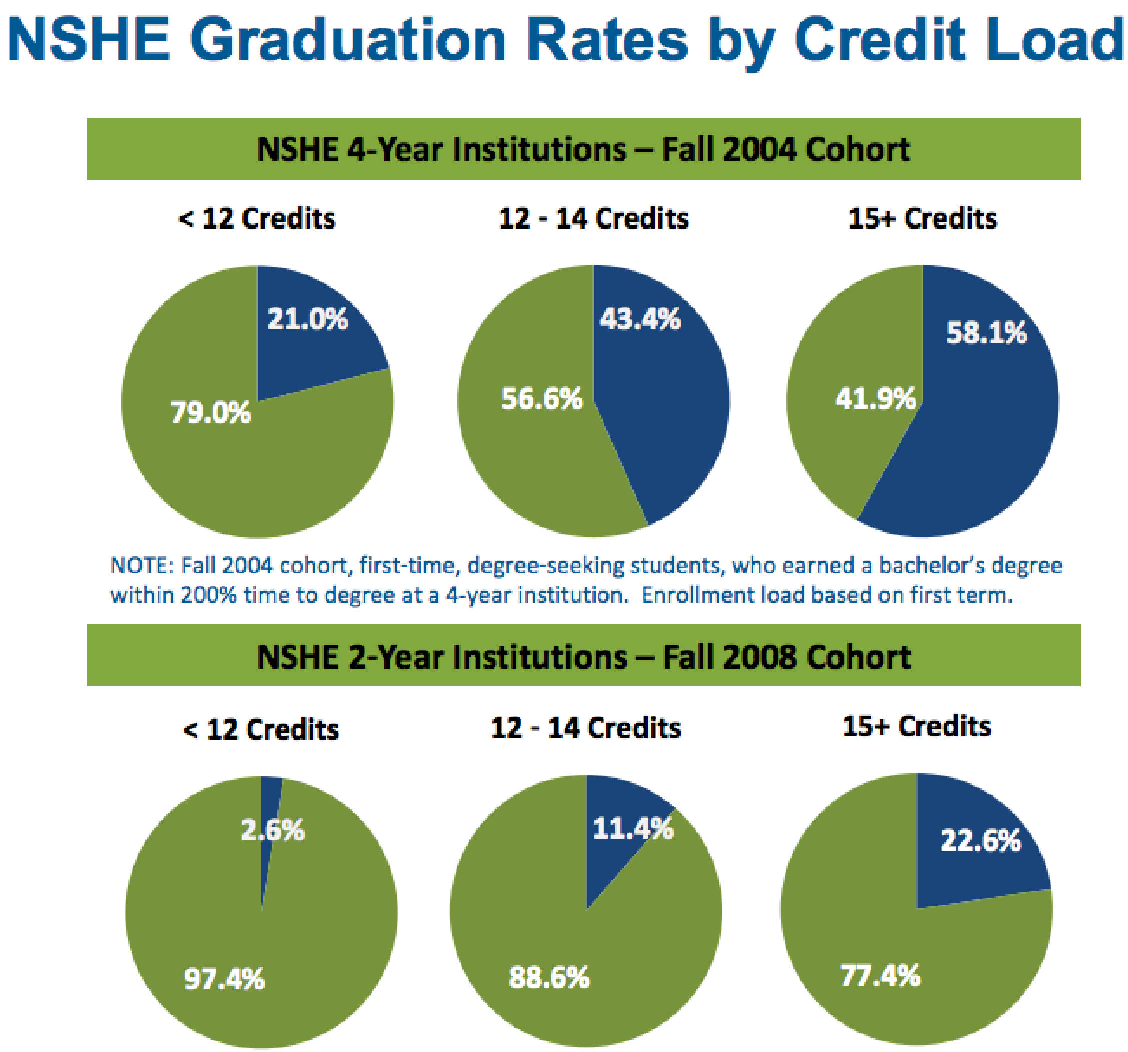

Figure 4. Data for 4-year schools and 2-year schools in NSHE shows the Fall 2004 and 2008 cohorts graduation rates for students broken down by their credit enrollment data. Students enrolled in more credits were more likely to graduate in 4-6 years.

In addition to credit-load, bachelor's degree awards conferred by all NSHE institutions were disaggregated by ethnicity. Anderson said this data contributed to telling the story of a lack of completion across ethnicities. Certificate and bachelor's degree award data were also broken down by institutional type. This data showed the more credits students were enrolled in, the more likely they were to graduate in 4-6 years. Table after table, number after number, campus after campus, were reviewed to serve as support for the campaign, according to Anderson (See Figure 4).

In addition to data described above, Anderson's office provided materials to all campuses that requested resources. Pens, t-shirts, and flyers were sent all over the state. The flyers did not vary by campus, and included one graphic image with wording aimed at students. Key words included complete, on-time, enroll, fifteen, faster, sooner, advisor, and semester. When printed in color, a consistent four-color palette appeared. Branding centered on one image with the wording 15 to Finish illustrated with a modern twist on a graduation cap. Secondary images shown in Figure 5 included a clock face with a graduation cap, a piggy bank with a dollar sign, and a hand, palm up with single dollar bills floating down.

Anderson said, "the base level of measure was Fall 2014" was when institutions would be responsible for collecting data and reporting shared outcomes. The introduction emphasized the campaign as a message, not a specific policy. The message was to increase enrollment by encouraging students to take 15 credits each semester, or finish 30 credits by their sophomore year. Enrollment data for part-time and full-time students was broken down by institution and disaggregated by two groups: degree-seeking undergraduate students ages 18-24, and first-time, degree-seeking students between the ages of 18-24. Enrollment numbers for all institutions increased except two. The College of Southern Nevada (CSN) and Great Basin College enrollment numbers were lower than the baseline. Additionally, CSN did not use the messaging created by Anderson. Anderson said this was important to note, because this demonstrated a connection between using data and resources available and obtaining a favorable outcome.

Figure 5. This flyer is an example of the graphics and texts used to promote the 15 to Finish campaign and reflects a softer message of 30 credits being promoted in a subtle way.

Anderson used data repeatedly saying:

> We broke out the credit loads and success rates for students who came in and placed at a college level course and those who placed into remedial courses. So we took that basic data and the first conversation that I had was with the chancellor because when I was on the plane it was just hey this is a great idea. We gathered the data, then I sat down with the chancellor, showed him the NSHE data and you know he caught on pretty quickly. Then we showed it to the council of presidents. After that, I took it to the student affairs VPs. and the provosts and academic officers. So, when we showed them the data, for the most part there wasn't any pushback.

Data was a driving force as Anderson used data in different formats at every presentation and conversation where she advocated for the campaign. Data was provided in table form and was shared anecdotally in written messaging. Data was disaggregated in multiple ways. Anderson clearly used data to tell the story of why the campaign was important, often saying, "always go back to the data."

Theme 2: Campaign Messaging Reflected a Softer 30 Credit Message

Each method used for distributing the message, whether flyer or t-shirt, had common elements of defining the campaign, target student populations, copious amounts of data, and an underlying subtle message. From the start, Anderson was clear that the campaign was just that, a campaign. This sentiment is reflected in meeting minutes where Anderson stated the campaign was a "commitment to change the narrative and culture towards completion" away from the status quo. The campaign and the message were never intended to be specific policies unto themselves.

This was confirmed by Anderson when she said she wanted to push the message, but leave the campuses to implement it the way they saw fit “because they know their students better” than she does. Anderson was more focused on changing the culture and supporting the campus administrators who would go “directly to the students because that’s not our job, that’s the campus’ job.”

Although not encouraged as overtly, a subtle acceptance of 30 credits in a year was woven into the message and campaign. This statement was printed smaller, and in a different font. The dialogue was short and brief. The imagery was consistently the number 15, as illustrated in Figure 4. Under the third step of the Getting Started heading, language states it is allowable to not take 15 credits; taking two semesters of 12 credits and one summer term of six credits is an acceptable option.

This softer acceptance of the campaign message is important to note because as each stage is constructed, this message gets lost initially before circling back to a stronger emphasis of 30 credits a year with no emphasis on 15 credits each semester.

Themes from Petersen’s Policy Life Cycle: Stage 2

The second stage of Petersen’s policy life cycle is Political Action (2009). Data from this stage is reflective of conversations between key stakeholders in positions of power to make decisions, or take political action to bring policy to fruition. The ideas and data from the first stage start to take a more substantive form in the second stage as ways to move forward are discussed. The progression around the policy life cycle circle is reflected in Figure 6.

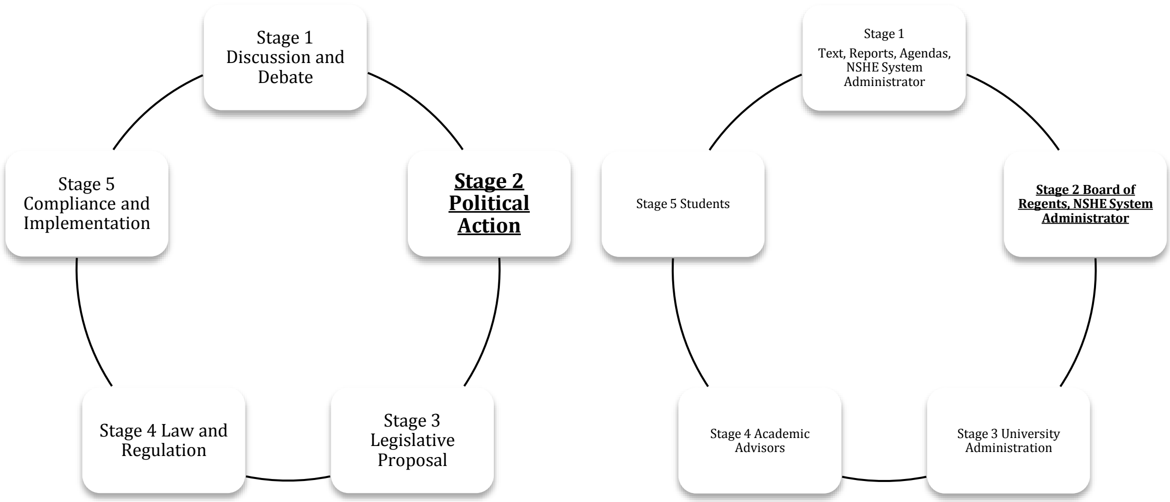

Figure 6. This image is a visual representation of the policy life cycle. It is in a circle to also represent Gadamer's Circle (Gadamer, 2009).

Theme 1: Data From Complete College America was Used to Make Decisions

Using data from Complete College America to make decisions was a re-occurring trend in this stage among participants. When questioned by others about decisions, participants in this stage responded with data, no matter if that data was specific enough to answer the question or not. Data was always an answer. Data was retrieved from many sources, but one constant was the sharing of data between Nevada and Complete College America (CCA) as evidenced by West. Shanice West served NSHE as the director of student services and financial aid for the state. West was crucial in establishing the relationship with CCA in 2009. As the "state liaison for Nevada," West worked with "primarily academic affairs and student affairs at different institutions and the governor's office" collecting and sharing data and following up on initiatives." West said there was a "significant data commitment where we had to provide data to Complete College

America, completion for full and part-time students." A heavy reliance on the CCA data was also apparent for each participant interviewed.

"As part of the information [CCA] provided to the states, their primary purpose was to help states," West said. West said she saw Anderson as the driving force behind the shift and these policy changes and reforms as a way to help students, "All of these policies, you know there's this perception that these policies are created to just be mean. They are created to help students be successful and they are created with students' best interest at heart. And they are created based on data that we receive."

Information on Hawaii's 15 to Finish completion campaign was a key data set shared with Nevada during a briefing. Anderson said the University of Hawaii had presented their 15 to Finish campaign and she knew Nevada would benefit from the idea. After attendance at a briefing for Complete College America, Anderson said, "Hawaii presented on their 15 to Finish campaign and the data was very compelling. When we saw that data, it was very impactful for me as a person and knowing that in this job I'm trying to figure out all these levers to move the degree productivity needle. So when I got on the airplane to go home, I sent a long email to the chancellor that said here's all the data, this is why I think we should do it and here's my plan for how we should do it."

Jade Grimm was "a Regent for Nevada System of Higher Education" for just "under 10 years." Grimm said, "We started looking at the 15 to Finish policy as part of the Complete College America goals program." Grimm said data provided by CCA showed, "a very clear break in graduation rates for students who do get on that fifteen to finish path." Grimm also said this data was used "to make the argument to the legislature" because it "looked like one of those concrete steps that we could take to meet our goals of improving graduation rates." Once data from CCA were brought in to build the argument, more data from Nevada institutions was considered, specifically graduation rates and credit enrollment. Grimm said, "It was the graduation rates. It was how many credits students were taking and the progression of students. We broke it out to the under twelve credits, twelve to fifteen credits, and the fifteen and above credits and there were very clear break lines there." Grimm called the graduation rates for students who enrolled in less than 12 credits "abysmal" and the graduation rates for students over fifteen credits are "where we get all our success."

Anderson started looking at "persistence rates, GPAs, obviously graduation rates. We didn't have SAT data. That was one of things Hawaii did have because of the excuses they heard from faculty and administrators who were pushing back was" that some students are not prepared for a higher load of coursework. To compensate for the lack of SAT scores, Anderson looked at "credit loads and success rates for students who came in and placed at a college level course and those who placed into remedial courses. And their grad rates and everything else, the data is insanely consistent in terms of the student success. Higher credit loads, higher chance of graduating, higher GPA."

As feedback rolled in and holes were poked in the arguments to move forward with 15 to Finish, Anderson repeatedly went back to the data to stitch the fabric back together "because for me if there is a lesson to be learned that has impacted how I communicate it's always go back to the data. If you start to lose your way, always go back to the data, because the data will always tell you what the right decision is." Grimm continued to "gather as much data" as he could, and when a decision is not producing desired results, choose a different course of action "because the data shows it isn't working."

Grimm, Anderson, and West used data as their rationale for supporting and promoting the campaign. Data originated with Complete College America in the form of reports and presentations. Data was collected from NSHE that either mirrored or partnered with the CCA data. It was this combination of data that fueled the conversation and actions of Grimm, Anderson, and West.

Theme 2: A Focus on Completion Suggests a Cultural Shift in Nevada Higher Education

"The culture of Nevada was so open access," West said. "We have not had a culture of completion. We do now." West continued to say that that a hole that is really deep "takes a long time to get out of" and that the "hole for completion" was very deep.

Grimm said, "some of its legacy, and it's just the way we've done things. The academic model in Nevada like most places hasn't changed much in a hundred, to four hundred years. It's trying to realize it's changing and getting people to understand what that change is."

Anderson used several data points to tell the story of how to create a shift in the culture of Nevada. Anderson used data to create messages that would resonate with students about high debt, and foregone income a result of non-degree attainment. Anderson said she used data to write a story for administrators of how this new campaign was consistent with existing policy levers and would help "shift our culture in Nevada to one of degree completion." Anderson "knew the institutions were going to need some help," in particular because "this is a culture change, especially for the community colleges."

This shift to a culture of degree completion coincided with the changing culture of education, according to Grimm. Grimm said, "With the cost of higher education, the traditional bricks and mortar model is not being supported by state legislature." Grimm said this shift in costs and funding requires a shift "in the way we do things." Grimm said other pieces culture of higher education were changing including "the academic model, how we take classes, in the classroom, lecturing, bricks and mortar, four years. Faculty work, etc."

West, Grimm, and Anderson each stated how the culture of Nevada was not one of completion, but this campaign would move it there. Grimm spoke of the changing costs and funding of higher education contributing to a cultural shift. West spoke of a transition from a culture of access to a culture of completion. Anderson spoke of cultures changing for community colleges. Each participant in this stage embraced the idea of a culture shift towards completion.

Theme 3: Nevada's Workforce and Economy Benefit from 15 to Finish

Combined with a trend of high expectations, the desire to help students access college and complete their degree may have led unintentionally to previously stated outcomes of producing a more skilled, robust workforce, and supporting a new state-funding formula for institutions.

Diego Knight was chancellor of the Nevada system from 2009 to 2015 and has been with the "system since October 1st, 2004." Knight was present when NSHE forged the relationship with Complete College America (CCA). Since joining CCA over a decade ago, Knight said, “a number of strategies to upgrade the general education level of the population here in Nevada” have been proposed to address our un-credentialed workforce. For Knight, the story is how degree completion sustains Nevada economy. “We just have a skills gap. And if you look at the evolution of our state you can see it. We have this huge state-wide dependency on the hospitality industry and what I always say is the first cousin of the hospitality industry is the construction industry.” Knight continued, “If you look at these two major drivers of our economy, at least and I’d say they have driven the economy, at least since the mid-80s, there was not an overwhelming need in either of those business sectors for a highly educated population. That’s changing. We’re moving toward a more global knowledge and information based society. That means more post-secondary information is required even if you are in industries like hospitality and construction.”

The educator in Grimm saw 15 to Finish as a way to support students, and an economist Grimm saw it as a way to support the growth of a skilled Nevadan work force. According to Grimm, the strategic plan for state education “looked at the state plan for economic development” when goals were created. “It’s very focused on the seven key sectors that the governor’s office” looked at. Grimm said, “Teachers, community leaders, building roads and bridges, wastewater system, everything that we need as a state to grow ends up being in our plan. It’s getting students into college and successfully through college to make sure they can serve those needs.”

Reflecting on the statewide completion data, Anderson’s takeaway was that Nevada students could be held to a “set of higher expectations.” Those high expectations would result in what Anderson called higher numbers for “Nevada citizen college attainment," leading more skilled Nevadans to the workforce, and creating a more educated citizenry.

Knight, Grimm, and Anderson each saw the campaign as a way to strengthen Nevada's economy and address a current skills gap. With more students completing degrees and taking less time to do so, the Nevada economy could experience an infusion of highly skilled, educated citizens.

Theme 4: Key Stakeholders Shared Similar Background and Higher Education Experiences

Each participant was fueled by altruism stemming from personal experience. West said she was a first-generation student who started college full-time before eventually finishing as a part-time student. She thinks of her own experiences when she is making decisions to support students. "We are here to help students get a degree. That's why I care. I really want to help them have all the access and knowledge they can." Grimm said his decision to attend school full-time as an undergraduate student was an expectation set forth by the administration. He and his wife, both first-generation, low-income students, worked through school and took advantage of scholarships. His background informs the way he makes policy decisions, but is also the reason behind the work he does. Grimm stated, "I want to make sure that everyone else has that same opportunity to take that next step up."

Data showed a clear consistency among the participants with regards to their undergraduate experience and structured pathways for course guidance. Grimm said, "When I showed up they hand me a piece of paper. It said this is what you take first year, second, third, fourth…and we just took it." Similarly, West "went full time" her first year in undergraduate study in Missouri. As a college student, Anderson said she attended full-time because that was what was expected of her. Anderson said, “Mom told me too. My mom was a college graduate. My dad was not. And I still distinctly remember my mom took me to orientation and at orientation you registered for your classes and she said ok, well, if you want to graduate on time, you have to take 15 credits. And see, that’s the difference too. I had a parent who had already navigated college. She got it. She guided me. Students who are first-generation, they don’t have that guide. And that’s why we need someone to communicate that message to them.”

A native of Nevada, Knight said he grew up in a small town in a family where previous generations were immigrants who had not been to college, sometimes not completing high school. “I understand in particular how education bends a family tree,” Knight said. “I’ve been given a huge gift and I have the ability to pay it back… Everybody deserves that choice, everybody deserves that chance, everybody deserves that opportunity.” Anderson said, “What motivates me is, I want kids to have what my kid has…who knows where he’ll be, but he knows that he is going to college... That is not a conversation that happens in every household in Nevada…but wouldn’t it be nice if everyone had the option? And that’s really what it comes down to.”

The key stakeholders in this stage shared similar experiences when they were undergraduate students. These experiences centered on being a full-time student in 15 credits each semester. Knight and West were both first-generation students. Anderson, although not a first generation student by definition, had one parent who went to college and one who did not. Each participant expressed a need to give back and help students.

Themes from Petersen's Policy Life Cycle: Stage 3

The third stage of Petersen's policy life cycle is Legislative Proposal (2009) (see Figure 7). Legislative proposal is the actual wording of the policy and how it will be enforced.

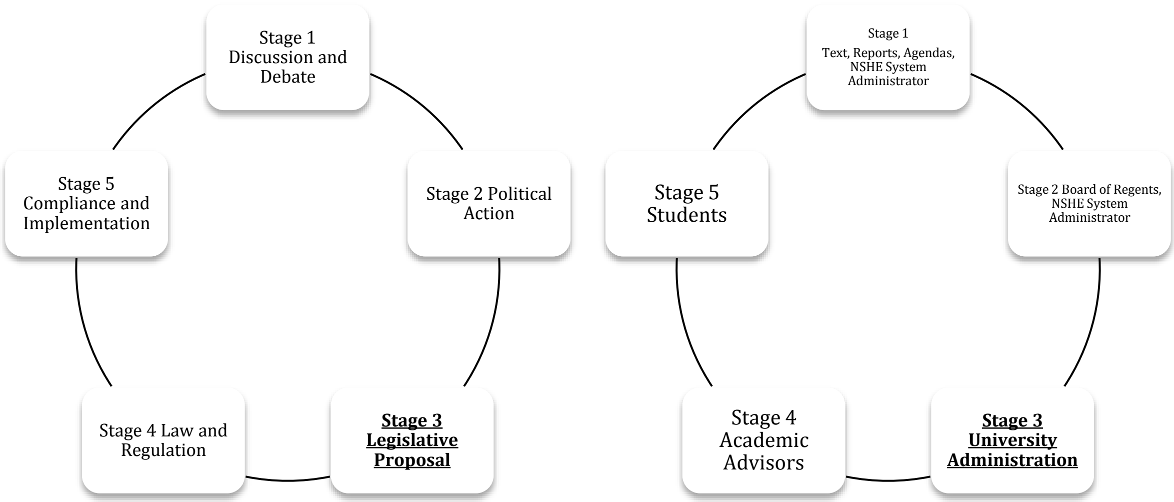

Figure 7. This image is a visual representation of the policy life cycle. It is in a circle to also represent Gadamer's Circle (Gadamer, 2009).

Interview data was provided by university administrators responsible for both the wording of the 15 to Finish policy and delivery of the 15 to Finish campaign message. Participants were responsible for specific policy creation and direct messaging to the campus community. It is here in Stage 3 where the NSHE initiative was transformed into a financial aid policy of the same name: 15 to Finish required students to enroll in 15 credits during the Fall and Spring semesters in order to obtain certain state and institution funding.

Theme 1: Changing Expectations of Students

Key stakeholders in this stage had a shared focus on the changing expectations set for students. Stephanie Edinburg was the vice president for student affairs at the university. Edinburg administratively supervised the departments and programs responsible for sharing the message with students and staff as well as creating policy that stemmed from the campaign. Edinburg saw the 15 to Finish campaign from the system office being in alignment with an already established standard of high expectations. "Our expectation is that you'll get out of here in four years…we only hire people who have high expectations," Edinburg said. Edinburg said her penchant for high expectations was evident when she was a full-time student in the 1970s. She "lived in an era when four years was what you did. And if you took longer than four years, something was wrong with you." Edinburg holds students to high standards, "I just don't want people to be afraid to have requirements and expectations of students."

Mila Chavez directly reported to Edinburg. As the associate vice president, Chavez managed enrollment services, admissions, and financial aid. Chavez believed the expectation of a full time student became mired in a redefinition of what it means to attend college full time. Chavez said, "There was no other option than to graduate in four years. That was always an expectation…You were expected to be at least 15-18 credits." Unsure of when it became 12 credits, she said the school catalog from years ago had specific, prescribed courses for 15 credits per semester and "you had to get the dean's permission to deviate from that in any way." This was the expectation.

Somewhere between the G.I. Bill and student loans, Chavez said she believed 12 credits became the new definition because that is what the federal government could afford to pay for when masses of veterans returned from the war and enrolled in their local colleges. Expectations were adjusted and adapted, catering to different groups of non-traditional students. Chavez said 15 to Finish is "the national level responding to

Obama's return to 15 to Finish" to reduce debt and get students into the workforce sooner," and at the "institutional level we took it one step further and looked at institutional aid" to be better stewards of state access dollars.

Ted Wilson was the financial aid director and as such, he reported directly to Chavez. It was Wilson's department that created the 15 to Finish policy in response to the system campaign. Wilson said, "with an expectation for the year for classes," students also had a new expectation of clearly identifying what classes they would be taking and when. Wilson said students now needed to have a plan in place. Wilson said the expectation of graduating in four years "was always an unwritten rule, but the financial aid campaign with 15 to finish kind of brought it to the forefront."

Key stakeholders in this stage said student expectations have changed. Chavez, Edinburg, and Wilson all identified with setting high expectations for students and those expectations were about completion. Although it was not clear if the expectation was present before the campaign, each key stakeholder discussed expectations in conjunction with the campaign.

Theme 2: There is a Culture Shift Taking Place in Nevada Higher Education

Edinburg said at some point between her time in college and now, the culture changed. The emphasis was no longer on completion. The 15 to Finish campaign was a shift back to what was and "this is a culture shift." The culture shift was not just students and the campus community, it was also the parents of the students attending. A generation ago, Edinburg said, "students really were more independent minded" and not "joined at the hip to their parents." Compared to today, Edinburg saw students call their parents for advice while in advising appointments. Edinburg believed that “parents got more involved” in every aspect of their students’ lives and thus, “students are wimpier.”

Additionally, Edinburg said the culture has changed with state funding and support for higher education, “The days of the social contract between states and higher -ed was broken twenty years ago. They don’t fund much of it. Everything has changed. In the 50s and 60s when things were flush, states would give you money and you could explore. Now you can still do that, they just aren’t going to pay for that. You explore on your own dollar.” This change of expectation is a culture shift that corresponds with the campaign and the ensuing policy. In Chavez’s own educational experience “the requirements were such that you had to complete x-number of credits in order not to be on probation” or else “you got kicked out.” There were no options or probation statuses the way there are today.

Other cultural shifts have also been addressed or recognized throughout the process by Tasha Freemont, the school registrar who reported to Chavez. “I think we’ve ebbed and flowed as a society,” Freemont said. “And UNR has ebbed and flowed with it. When college degrees first came about, it was you are focused on getting a degree…As society shifted to the idea of a college education for everyone, it shifted more, even further into the liberal arts model that it’s the college experience that’s more important. And it’s starting to swing back. This is a major shift back in our society. It’s not enough to be enrolled. There’s also a national crisis coming in that we are going to have a large group at retirement and not enough of an educated workforce to replace that. That’s a way to address that need, is to tighten up some of the financial aid regulations. As you tighten up those policies, you graduate students faster.”

This campaign was intended to assist in shifting the culture to one of completion among Nevada students, according to Wilson. He believed the change in the funding formula, “with the schools now being funded by the state now based on completion rate,” 15 to Finish has pushed the completion agenda as a priority for schools. The culture needs to change because “our society is changing.” Wilson said data showed that our society was crippled under student loan debt and “we need more people in the workforce” so they can start paying down their debt sooner. Wilson said the way to do this was through degree completion.

As the culture of Nevada’s economy was changing, key stakeholders said the college needed to change as well to remain relevant. The 15 to Finish campaign and message of completion was one tool used to change the culture on campus from one of access to one of completion.

Theme 3: Messaging About the Campaign and the Policy Went Awry

Chavez said they may have “been a little too transactional in our approach.” They “tried to deliver that message” but the message received by students had “a lot of misunderstanding about the policy regarding access money and 15 credits.” Additionally, the message went to all students, even though the target was traditional students and the “message was a little twisted and not understood.” Through student feedback, an approval process for the policy was created, some automatic exceptions were filtered in, and the name was changed to 30 to Complete. According to Chavez, the name change did not change the program itself: “15 to Finish was always 30 to Complete in the way” it was conceptualized. Chavez said, “the title has changed. There’s nothing different about it, acknowledging a shift in communication “and a shift in marketing” because it’s “the same program." Chavez continued the message of lost income and getting students to understand they are "losing a great deal of money every year" they "don't graduate beyond four years" and are not in the workforce, contributing to a substantial amount of lost income. The policy window at UNR was such that Chavez said, "it was the climate to enforce it and see" what everyone could learn going forward.

Although data was used in the policy creation, the lack of data available contributed to a lack of awareness of how to address potential challenges involving non-traditional students. "One approach basically based on intuition and one approach is based on facts," said Chavez. The policy "forced us to have evidence" that disadvantaged populations would potentially continue to be disadvantaged. In this way, the data was expected to come after the fact and "the general wisdom was that we would see if that was actually true or not." For now, each student is treated "as a special circumstance for approval."

Another key stakeholder in this stage was Dave Folsom, the director of undergraduate advising. Folsom did not report to Chavez; his position is part of the academic side of the house. Folsom did oversee all undergraduate advising and received communication from student affairs as to the campaign and policy. Folsom said gaps in messaging led to unanswered requests from academic advisors to the student affairs administrators that created the financial aid policy. Folsom said questions such as, "Who's being affected by this?" and "Do we need to offer more courses in particular areas that students have degree applicable courses… to get to 15?" were not being answered. Folsom said "that's important for us to have" and "we're not getting that" because he also wants to explore if there are correlations between students who were at

15 credits and students who were not at 15 credits and did not return for their sophomore year, low-income students, and under-represented students. Folsom wanted to look at disadvantaged students to see if the policy was putting them at a greater disadvantage.

Folsom saw the messaging being just as important for the advising staff as the students, finding inconsistencies in communications to both. “As with many of the policies in financial aid,” Folsom lamented, “they just made their policies and said, here, this is how we’re going to enforce it and then they went with it. Then came the exceptions afterwards. Students didn’t even know all the exceptions, but were being informed that this policy exists… that was hard on myself as well as the academic advisors.” Additionally Folsom said it was “hard to get that through to the faculty advisors.” All in all, the communication and timeline were challenging for Folsom. “It would have been nice to have an implementation and communication timeline of when that was going out to start so we could have gotten ahead of it and controlled the message before it got out to the students. By the time it got out to the students, all the students heard was, I’m required to take 15 credits no matter what. And that didn’t go over very well.”

Similarly, Freemont believed the communication of the message “may have faltered a bit.” In the beginning, Freemont said she participated in various forms of outreach that included workshops, flyers, pens, buttons, t-shirts, emails to all students, meetings with groups of advisors, and meetings with certain staff and administrators. Freemont said based on student feedback, “the marketing around the policy changed” to 30 to Complete although “the policy didn’t change” and it was here some missteps happened. Communication to students “has been one of our greatest challenges” with this and other policies. Even though "a blanket email to all students" was sent, "it's still hard to get communication to students. Additionally this blanket email to all students may have led to confusion because Edinburg confirmed this policy was "typically always aimed at 18-24 year old students."

Student services administrators made an effort to communicate with faculty as well. Freemont tried "multiple avenues to try and get the information out to them." She said, "We do some emails, and we send them something so they have something to refer to. We also go to academic leadership council, talk to deans, we go to university standards and curriculum and talk to associate deans. Once a semester we have the department chairs and administrative assistants meeting to pass information along. Unfortunately we can't meet with every faculty member." The methods of communication have changed from generation to generation through technology, and this cultural shift has been one that Freemont has attempted to address.

Messaging for the campaign and the policy was delivered through an "email out to the whole student population." or close to thirty thousand students. Wilson said he did not exclude anyone from that email. Additionally, the message was delivered through a "big PR campaign with pens, t-shirts of 15 to Finish, posters… in all of the award letters, and on the website."

Edinburg used the data to craft a story that students would hear and ideally take to heart with a message centered on the idea of lost wages. Edinburg "started to say for every year you postpone it's at least 28,000 dollars in increased tuition and lost wages" and this message got students' attention. "Student responses varied," said Edinburg. For some students it was "ok, no problem," while "other students were really pissed."

"We changed the name from 15 to Finish to 30 to Complete to acknowledge that some majors you take less one semester and more the next," Edinburg said. The name change happened during the summer of 2015, one year after the start of the financial aid policy. The name change was for the institutional financial aid policy, not the statewide campaign. The name change did not change the policy or the way it worked, it was only a change in name. "If you go on the web it's a 30 to Complete form. And that was the feedback from students," Edinburg said.

Once the campaign message reached this level of key stakeholders, the message started to blur. Each key stakeholder identified frustrations or gaps in information. Further, the initial target audience was expanded, contributing to widespread confusion for students and staff. This confusion was evident when the campaign and policy terms started to become interchangeable among students and staff.

Folsom saw the "NSHE policy as 15 to Finish being something we all agree with" but "tried very hard to carefully make sure it was not confusing" when he spoke about the campus financial aid policy. Folsom stated he believes the names were "used interchangeably and this interaction contributed" to his own and others' confusion about expectations.

Freemont was brought in to help create the financial aid policy that was informed by the system initiative: "The system office wanted us pushing this, wholeheartedly believing in this. This is something that our NSHE system believes in and wanted to make a reality. The initiative introduced from the system office that students have to be taking fifteen." Freemont sees the initiative as NSHE setting "the vision" and there was "no NSHE policy around it." Freemont saw the policy as the piece "put into place and developed to support the initiative."

Folsom said he was not consulted at the start of the financial aid policy, but was aware of the system wide campaign for 15 to Finish. In the campus policy, Folsom felt they had "missed a little bit in the translation of the 30 credits per year by doing the 15 to Finish piece" because the system campaign allowed for 30 credits, albeit not as strongly as it pushed a full-time message of 15 credits.

Both academic and administrative units began to hear a mangled message at this stage of the implementation. Terms were redefined or became interchangeable. Target audiences were expanded. Communication was not seamless or consistent. In these ways, the message began to deteriorate and distract from the original intent.

Theme 4: 15 to Finish Created Interactions with Other Policies

Chavez noted this policy and campaign was not the first to be created in such a way. Other new policies have been just as contentious, if not more so, including "probation, dismissal, faculty policies, mandatory advising, orientation…anything new, oh the health center fee, the graduate student insurance fee," any message that is different from what was known to be true by the student before. Folsom previously used data from CCA to justify and create policies around co-remediation and saw "success with it." The policy does support and work with other campus and system policies and initiatives, such as the funding formula, "they interact with each other." Freemont was clear the policy "was not set on the funding formula."

The policy has impacted FTE but this impact was an unintended consequence that "was nowhere in the conversations of whether it was the right thing to do or not…it had a side effect of impacting our FTE," Grimm said. Grimm said as an unexpected outcome, 15 to Finish contributes to the existing state funding formula for higher education. Twenty percent of state institutional funding comes from performance and "the biggest metric of performance is graduation rates." Other metrics include "enhancements for first generation, low income, at-risk students… total research dollars that come into the system… weighted student credit hour… persistence from first year to second year" for first-time, full time, degree-seeking students, and "grants and contracts…getting students to finish…is very important from the funding side." The unintended consequences of the 15 to Finish campaign contributed to the perceived success of the program. Grimm indicated the Silver State Opportunity Grant is such a policy. Grimm said it was created with the intent to incentivize students who took 15 credits at a state or community college, and that "the rates go up significantly for them to be able to succeed and they can get through the system fast."

West credits state involvement with CCA for several NSHE reforms. Reforms include "the 120 and 60 credit limits on degrees" for all bachelor and associate degree programs, gateway courses, and remediation reform. It all stemmed "from this data that Complete College America provided."

An unintended outcome of the financial aid policy was the creation of open dialogue between students and advisors about completion goals and life beyond college. "I talk about the website and seeing their advisors," Edinburg said. "Have a plan, follow the plan, talk to your advisor… all the studies show you don't ask for help." Edinburg tells students to get over not asking for help and start speaking up because "nobody is running after you."

Although intent could not be determined, the policy of 15 to Finish clearly interacted with other existing policies. Some of these policies had a focus on completion, and others did not.

Themes from Petersen's Policy Life Cycle: Stage 4

Stage four of Petersen's policy life cycle is Law and Regulation (see Figure 8). This is where the policy is put into action. Key stakeholders who provided data for this stage were academic and faculty advisors who worked directly with students to enforce the 15 to Finish financial aid policy and disseminate the campaign message. Additionally, these participants were key in sharing Anderson's message of completion through the NSHE 15 to Finish campaign.

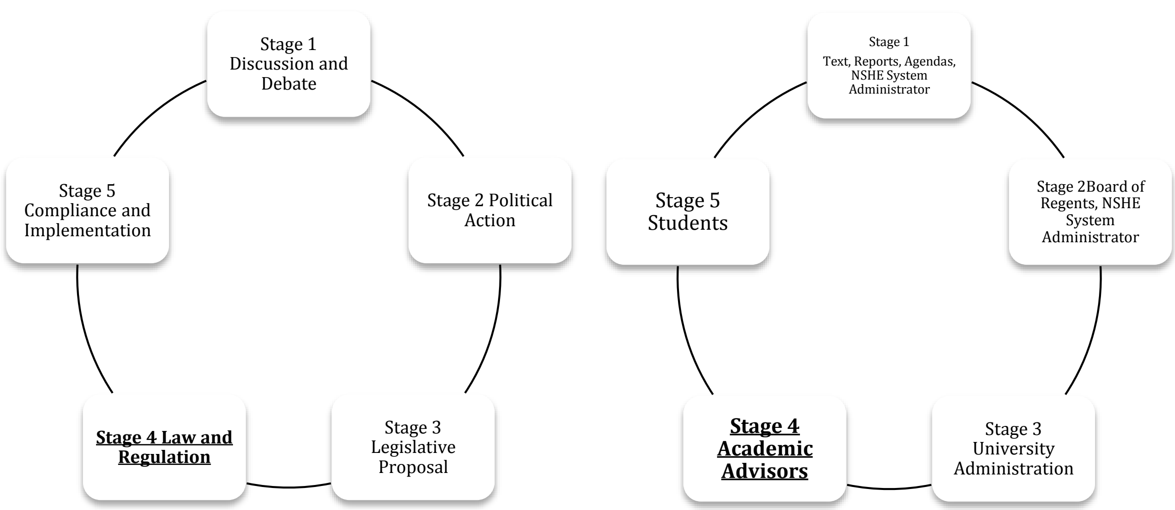

Figure 8. This image is a visual representation of the policy life cycle. It is in a circle to also represent Gadamer's Circle (Gadamer, 2009).

Ginger Davis was "a lecturer in the psychology department" who "primarily served as an academic advisor" with a semester caseload of students "anywhere from eight hundred, nine hundred, or more." Davis conducted "group advising and one-on-one appointments and email advising." With regards to the message of 15 to Finish, Davis recalled receiving “some emails about it” and hearing about it in an advisor meeting though she did not “recall exactly who they came from.”

Paula Em was an “associate professor and an academic advisor in the department of biochemistry and molecular biology.” As for communication of campaign and policy, Em said, “It landed on us. It was dropped out of the heavens. It was one minute they had to have 12 credits and then literally it turned around in the course of a week, no they need 15….we were given essentially no notice whatsoever.”

Communication of the campaign and policy first appeared for the key stakeholders in this stage via email. Georgia Smith, “an academic advisor in the college of science” who was “at the school of medicine for 18 and a half years as their education outreach coordinator” said:

> I actually still have the email. This was the first we heard of 15 to finish. It rolled out on July 14, 2014 with an email basically letting us know that this information had been sent out to students and there was not a lot of information which helped us understand how remedial classes fit into it. The initial assumption was that remedial classes didn’t count because technically they are zero credit. However, after some trial and error and a lot of frustration with us and for the students, we were finally given some information that remedial courses could count as the typical three credit class count for financial aid. So this was rolled out and emailed to students before we were notified it was going out and then we had an email after students were already contacting us panicked.

Smith said, “I do not think it was planned well. I feel that it was rolled out without a lot of thought or consideration with how it would affect students.” Thomas was new to the campus when the policy was implemented, "having only been here since July of last year (2015)." As a new member to the university, Thomas did not "recall it being necessarily discussed in terms of graduation rates or what emphasis was put on it by advisors." Thomas said, "I don't even think I remember reading about it when I was doing my research on the institution to prepare for the interview." As for an appeals process and other pertinent information, Thomas shared, "To be honest I don't even think I was aware of the appeals process for the first month or so. I would direct students over to financial aid, saying if you can't make it work I imagine there is some kind of appeal or someone you can talk to."

Key stakeholders in this stage were provided information about the campaign and policy the summer before the policy was to take effect. Overall, they did not feel the timeline was beneficial and would have appreciated more time between hearing about it and implementing it. Additionally, the information provided was minimal, leaving unanswered questions.

Theme 2: Advisors Would Like to Be Included in Pre-Planning

Smith was not involved in the discussions or planning of the campaign or the policy and her first knowledge of it was the summer of 2014 saying, "I think that they could have used academic advisors on the committee to discuss this. I think we would have provided some valuable input to the impact that this would have had on students." Smith was not clear who "put together all of the implementation, but the discussion among advisors was that no advisors were used in the discussion within the committee meetings deciding how all of this would be rolled out."

Em also said the charge to implement and follow policies "tend to be a one way thing": Em is directed by others who "decide what's going to happen," and does not have the opportunity to provide feedback. Em said it happens all the time, citing the creation of "an assessment tool for advising, which was yet another piece of paper" advisors were to "fill out" as an example of a policy or procedure created "without consulting" the advisors who are working directly with students. Em said, "I think there's a problem, I think that faculty advisors don't really get consulted on how to get things done." Davis agreed, saying, "There could be more communication. More feedback and create more of a loop within that system."

Smith said the struggles she and her colleagues have seen transcend disciplines. "The core of the conversation throughout advisors across all of the colleges on campus" was the lack of consultation and feedback opportunities before the messaging went out to students, said Smith. Smith also said advisors are the ones "in the trenches doing the work" and therefore should be consulted on policies that change the way they do their work. "We aren't consulted or asked for feedback by those who are making decisions," Smith said. Further, it is not enough to ask the director of advising "because typically that person is not advising students as they have other leadership responsibilities."

Davis said she is glad "that the university has had more of a focus on the importance of advising" but she also said, "There should be more of a dialogue happening with advisors before these policies are implemented."

Smith, Davis, and Em each advise students from different disciplines. They consistently expressed desires to be part of the planning process. Their consensus was advisers should be consulted about initiatives they are tasked with implementing because they may have insight others do not.

Theme 3: Advisors had Concerns for Transfer, Non-Traditional, and First Generation Students in Enforcing the Financial Aid Policy of 15 to Finish

Smith was most concerned with transfer students who only had upper division courses to take. These students had already completed their general education or core courses, and Smith believed taking five or more upper division science courses would be overwhelming. Smith said, “If I have a student who is ready to take O-Chem and Bio 300, I do not recommend O-Chem that first semester because the transition from community college to university and lower division to upper division classes is overwhelming enough as it is…we are setting them up for failure.”

Smith saw some of her students not being successful, with many on probation as a direct result of trying to be in compliance with the policy. “I’ll be perfectly honest with you,” Smith said, “For the students that this had the most impact on, they’re not here anymore.” Smith’s personal experiences as an undergraduate at UNR, combined with anecdotes from her students, inform her perspective on the policy and the campaign; leading her to believe that the low-income and non –traditional students are being impacted in a negative way. Smith said, “I’m a first-generation student college student. I grew up in a small community. I went to community college before I came to the university. For me, taking twelve credits as a first-gen kid was about as much as I could probably handle because I was also working part-time. I have a lot of empathy for these kids who have never experienced college life. They don’t know what to expect.” Smith believed enforcement of the policy was “very overwhelming” for her students. Her students found it distressing to “keep up with five classes.”

Em said when it comes to students she worked with the policy, “the ones who it impacts most negatively are in fact what I would call the non-traditional students.” She elaborated that non-traditional students are “a diverse group” that include “students with particular learning issues or psychiatric issues, so anxiety disorders who are being pushed to take a full credit load when they don’t really feel capable or ready to do so.” Em also said, “students with children or families and those types of responsibilities” are negatively affected along with “students who are having to work significantly so they are able to afford college…first generation…students coming in from community colleges.” Em continued, “this is a particular problem for students transferring from community college, where they may have already taken all of their elective credits.”

Davis also said, “a lot of students are full-time working and they can’t do 15 credits per semester.” Davis listed jobs and “family commitments” as examples of why students may not be able to follow the policy and said some students “could be financially not able to actually enroll in 15 credits, maybe they don’t have scholarships or loans. There’s a number of different circumstances that impact students.”

Jason Thomas, a director of advising for the college of business, was new to the campus. Having “previously worked in athletics as an academic advisor in Milwaukee and in Baltimore.” Thomas was new to Nevada but not new to the profession of academic advising in higher education. Thomas said his students listed “everything under the sun” as reasons for why they could not enroll in 15 credits to be in compliance with the policy. “I can only work, I can only go to class on Tuesdays and Thursdays because I have to work to support myself or my family. I'm a student athlete so I have practice two to five everyday, but I can only take classes prior to two, but then we don't necessarily offer a ton of evening classes, but they're primarily for upper-level classes. So student athletes, students who are working and taking care of families, students who frankly taking fifteen credits is just not in their best interest academically," said Thomas.

Key stakeholders expressed similar concerns for students who they identified as unable to comply with the policy for various reasons including family obligations, work schedules, and course availability. Additional concern was repeatedly expressed for students who would enroll in 15 credits of all high rigor academic courses.

Theme 4: 15 to Finish is not a Mold that Fits Every Discipline the Same Way

Thomas works with students who are required to add a minor to their degree program. Thomas said, "We get them in 15 credits, but now they're doing a minor and that doesn't, if you're doing the math, now it's not 15 to Finish because a minor adds and it's at least 18 to 21 credits. Now you're doing 38. I think there are some issues with that piece and some un-needed stress put on students that they stay in their 15 credits, even if they are failing or doing poorly." Thomas added, if students do not get into enough credits, they stress from being "waitlisted and now having to spend the next two months wondering are they going to get in." For Thomas, students in his college may not have access to the proper classes to fulfill the requirement and until the appeals process became known students were feeling stress. Thomas said, "I think there's almost a fear that if I'm not in 15 that I'm screwing up my college experience in some way." When Thomas advises student he will "put them in social science, we'll put them in a fine arts, maybe their communications class, but now they have used all of those classes, so the next semester they have to be in math, econ, accounting, and a natural science" or all academic rigorous courses. Thomas said, "I think there might be some unnecessary casualties that come with it."

Smith said of her program that they have "brought majors down to 120" from 128 credits or more. Smith said, "We have some varying as far as credit load for our different majors because of what's required…these are challenges because they have a specific number of classes they have to have to be able to go out into the workforce and it's not always a 120 credit degree." Smith disagrees with changing the degree credits to fit within the 15 to Finish campaign and policy. Smith said:

> I think it's inappropriate, I don't agree with that. We are really trying to prepare people to go out into the workforce, or prepare them for professional school, graduate school. We need them to have what they need in order to be ready and to be competitive. Otherwise we're sending them off into the work world without what they need to be successful. I don't think that numbers, finishing in four years, or our percentages, or our college going rate, or any of those things should be based on, we should dumb it down and have only 120 credits.

Em said the softer message of 30 credits in a year does not work for her students either because classes in her area "are simply not offered in the summer." Em continued to say, "If a student does two and then 12 and then can't do anything over the summer, I think that is a problem, especially for juniors and seniors." Em said that most faculty are not available to teach in the summer because "the science faculty are using the summer to do research" and therefore, there is no one to teach. Em also said, "There are many other courses they are required for their majors that are just not offered in the summer."

For Davis, the messaging was almost repetitive. “We’ve always tried to do that,” Davis says of pushing students to finish in four years. “We haven’t necessarily said 15 to Finish. It’s more, get an average of thirty credits per year done.” Davis saw students in her program struggle who “are not enrolled only at UNR but at other institutions.” Davis’ program allows for dual enrollment and the 15 to Finish policy “requires more work on the students’ behalf to get these workarounds or get these adjustments which can sometimes be frustrating for these students.” Additionally, Davis does not follow the guided pathways and structured schedules championed by 15 to Finish advocates, saying, “We follow a developmental model here where it’s not a prescriptive model, it’s not here are your courses, see you later. We talk about what you actually want to do when you graduate, what are your career goals and interests, how is this degree program going to help you with that? What are things you can do within your coursework or outside of coursework that would help you get to where you need to be because it’s not just about earning a degree.”

Each of the key stakeholders in this stage worked in different degree programs and disciplines. Each program had different characteristics that did not conform well to the policy or campaign. Business students were taking 15 credits of academically rigorous classes for lack of other requirements, creating an unbalanced workload. Program requirements were cut in the college of science to allow for a degree to be completed in four years, resulting in students not receiving all the content deemed necessary by faculty. In psychology the campaign message was redundant as the completion message was one that had been pushed with students for years. In biochemistry students are not able to take summer courses to complete 30 credits in a year. It is clear from the data provided by the advisors of these disciplines that the campaign and policy are not one size fits all approaches.

Themes from Petersen's Policy Life Cycle: Stage 5

Stage 5 of Petersen's policy life cycle is Compliance and Implementation (2009). Key stakeholders in this stage were students who had to follow the policy, or be in compliance with the policy (See Figure 9).

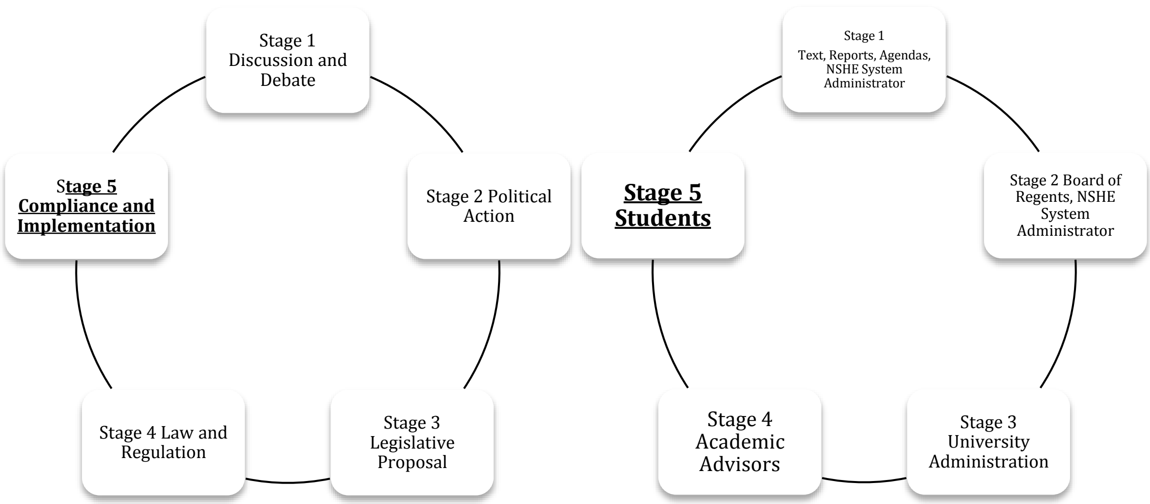

Figure 9. This image is a visual representation of the policy life cycle. It is in a circle to also represent Gadamer's Circle (Gadamer, 2009).

Theme 1: Students Appealed the Policy, Citing Class Schedules as Problematic

Multiple students cited class schedules and lack of flexibility with course offerings as reasons for not being in compliance with the 15 to Finish financial aid policy, and with the 15 to Finish campaign message.. A student said, "Currently I am enrolled in 11 credits at UNR. However, I am enrolled in Physics 152 for 4 credits at Truckee Meadows Community College which adds up to 15 credits for the Spring 2016 semester. Unfortunately I could not take Physics 152 at UNR because I couldn't manage to fit it in my schedule. Taking PHYS 152 at TMCC was the second best option for me because it is a requirement for my major, as well as fit in my schedule perfectly. Due to being involved in research and being enrolled in several upper division biochemistry classes I cannot take any more credits at UNR."

A student said, "I cannot take 15 credits because the classes required for my chemical engineering degree are only offered in the fall and spring, I am currently on track and do not require any other classes for my major. I could take additional classes that are not part of my major, but taking classes that are unnecessary for my major can deprive me from putting 100 percent of my effort on the classes that are more important for my career."

Another student said, "to fulfill graduation requirements" they only needed "four classes, one of which is not offered this spring." Still, for other students, classes were full and they were "waitlisted for a 3-credit class." Some students creatively enrolled in courses at a different college intending to transfer courses over that had been approved as part of their degree program, only to then find that those courses at other schools were not being counted towards their credit completion at the university. This was evident from a student who said, "I will be taking six credits from TMCC this spring semester in addition to my 12 credit UNR course load to get back on track. Via TMCC I am dual enrolled."

Scheduling conflicts at UNR led one student to enroll in "4 credits at the Truckee Meadows Community College" because "unfortunately I could not take Physics 152 at UNR" and they saw enrollment in the same course at TMCC as "the second best option…because it is a requirement for my major."

The students who appealed were from different disciplines and programs. Class scheduling, conflicts, and availability were common issues cited across disciplines for non-compliance with the policy and campaign.

Theme 2: Students Appealed the Policy Citing Family Obligations

A student said, “In addition to my academic responsibilities, I also have a wife to take care of. If I were forced to add another class I would not be able to earn money as a writing tutor and her burden would become that much heavier.” While this student spoke of a spouse to support, another student spoke of children and said, “I am not in a position to reduce my work schedule as I have a home payment, vehicle payment, and four dependent children to support.” Still a different student said, “My father is currently unemployed and my mother is on disability, until I’m able to find a job, grants and loans are how I’m going to be paying for gas, food, and rent.”

Students cited different family obligations as reasons to request an appeal from the policy. Between childcare, spousal support, or lack of support from parents, family was cited as a reason for not being able to enroll in 15 credits per semester.

Theme 3: Students Appealed the Policy Citing Work Responsibilities

A student said, “I work as a full time salaried engineer for IGT with the title of Manufacturing Test Engineer I. My work schedule does not allow for enrollment above 11 credits, which falls short of the 15 credit minimum for the State Access Grant.” Another student was “working for Renown a minimum of 24 hours a week” and needed the work experience because they were “applying for medical school” and needed to be “fully prepared for the MCAT.”

A transfer student said they “live on [their] own here in Reno and in order to pay for school, rent, utility bills, and other necessities I need to work 30-plus hours a week” and wanted to stay under 15 credits so they could have “more time to focus on each class and overall feel very comfortable” with the workload. An art student said they “work an average of 22 hours a week to maintain financial stability.” A finance major was “balancing the ability to work a 20 hour per week part-time job, a job necessary to help pay for my books, food, housing, and of course tuition” and stated further on in their appeal that their decisions “keep circling back to money.”

Although some students could not afford to take time off work, others who were out of work were relying on the access funds to live. A student who claims they were “unaware that 15 units were required for the Undergraduate Access Grant” because their financial aid award summary in the student software system led them to “assume I would be getting all awards since it let me accept them” was not working. The student said, “I have no source of income because I had to leave my job to move up here.”

Some students could not afford to work less outside of school, other students had no other source of income because they were not working, and one student was not allowed to work “because my visa status does not permit to work in the U.S.”

For students appealing the policy, work responsibilities and scheduling were cited as reasons to appeal. Students had various reasons for working, had different work experiences, and listed various monetary responsibilities that would not be met if they worked fewer hours.

Theme 4: Students Appealed the Policy Citing Extra Curricular Activities

One student was looking to enhance her college experience through study abroad, saying, "Since I was young, it has been my dream to travel and see the world… my ability to participate in the study abroad program is strictly contingent on the amount of financial aid I am awarded." The student also said, "Without my academic and need-based scholarships I would simply be unable to afford the tuition and fees, much less the costs involved in transportation to and from the program."

Other students were involved with athletics in some way, saying, "playing for the ASUN men's lacrosse team here on campus is very important to me. The ASUN men's lacrosse team will be playing 12 away games this semester, spending most weekends all over the West coast." Not only were there time constraints because of away games, "the lacrosse team also has a demanding practice schedule practicing Monday through Friday."

A different student wanted "to be able to continue participation in marching band" and needed to be in less than 15 credits to meet the time requirement that "often includes practice and travel on the weekends."

Extra-curricular activities were cited by students who appealed the policy as reasons for not being able to comply with the policy. The students referenced here were involved in activities they believed would enhance their overall educational experience at the university. The students clearly wanted to remain in these activities as they spoke of the benefits of participation.

Theme 5: Key Stakeholders Used Qualitative and Quantitative Data to Make Their Arguments

The stories shared before illustrate qualitative data used by students who made appeals to the financial aid policy. Students also used quantitative data in the form of credits to build their arguments. One student said, “I will have completed 32 credits at the university. Although these credits were not evenly distributed over the two semesters I will still be on track for a total number of credits required for the annual scholarship… I would also like to point out, as a student in the middle of my sophomore year, I have accumulated 58 credits thus far.”

This calculation of credits was a popular method for students to make their arguments. Another student said, “I have taken 17 credits during both spring 2015 and fall 2015 semesters. Because I have taken 17 credits in the fall, taking 13 credits this spring will still result in a full 30 credits for the year.” Even the student who wished to study abroad was able to illustrate how her credits would accumulate to meet the policy requirements, “the reading program only allows students to take a minimum of 12 credits. I will indeed be taking the maximum amount of classes possible, 20 credits, which transfers to 12 UNR credits… I am already enrolling in the maximum amount allowed by the University of Redding, England.” Finally, students enrolled in classes at other institutions also used data to show how the combined total of credits equaled the policy requirements and sometimes “actually engaging in 18 educational credits” in one semester when credits from both schools were combined.

Qualitatively, students used descriptions and stories to make their arguments for appealing the policy. Quantitatively, students often calculated and cited the number of credits they had already taken, the number of credits they needed to graduate, and the number of credits they were requesting approval to enroll in. If the student appealing was at more than one institution, they were careful to include the number of credits being taken for transfer purposes as well. This combination of story data and descriptive statistical data (credits) created a pattern among the student appeal submissions.

Themes Across Stages 1-5 of Petersen's Policy Life Cycle

Although the researcher constructed clear themes within each stage, a few were apparent in multiple stages.

Theme 1: Helping Students Because It's the Right Thing to Do

In Stage 3, key stakeholders had altruistic reasons for helping students. When asked about why she does this work, Chavez said "because that's all we have in this world is our shared humanity. The more I help you, the more it comes back to me, and the better off we all are." "When developing this policy it was about student benefit," Freemont said. Though funding is increasing because students are enrolled in more credits, "it wasn't aimed at the institutional benefit, it was aimed at the student benefit." Wilson said he believed "in higher education and we do make a difference one student at a time." Wilson "wouldn't be here today" if he did not receive financial aid and he would not "have the job opportunities" that he has now "if he didn't go to college." Wilson said he sees pushing this campaign as his way "to pay it forward."

This is similar to key stakeholders in Stage 2 who also expressed a desire to help students. In Stage 2, Knight saw his education as a gift that he could keep giving to others. West said she was here to help students get a degree. Grimm said he wanted to make sure students had opportunities the way he did. Although Stages 2 and 3 had key stakeholders who wanted to help students for altruistic reasons, Stage 4 included key stakeholders who wanted to help students for more practical reasons. The advisors in Stage 4 were very focused on doing the right thing for students to ensure they were successful as well.

Theme 2: Messaging and Communication of the Policy and Campaign Were Divisive

Key stakeholders in Stage 4 were upset at the short notice of the policy and campaign and the limited information. Key stakeholders in Stage 5 were sometimes unaware of the policy until denied financial aid. Key stakeholders in Stage 3 expressed frustration with how the messaging was rolled out, a lack of information sharing, and an expanded target audience that contributed to the confusion with whom the policy and campaign were intended for.

Theme 3: A Changing Nevada Culture

Stages 1-4 had repeated themes of a changing Nevada culture in terms of completion and communication. Data provided at meetings and presentations in Stage 1 was introduced to specifically highlight the need for a culture shift in completion because of low degree attainment in the state. System administrators in Stage 2 consistently called the campaign an attempt to change the culture of Nevada in terms of degree attainment. University administrators in Stage 3 spoke of a change in culture of student behavior with regards to alternative options to full time status as a student. Key stakeholders in this stage also reflected multiple times on a change in culture from access to completion. Advisors from Stage 4 reflected on a changing culture for their students in terms of not being traditional college ready students, but rather students with families, jobs, activities, and limited schedules. Stages 1-4 were a conversation about a changing culture. The students in Stage 5 reflected those conversations as evidenced by their reasons for appealing.

Theme 4: It is All About the Data

Data was used in each stage to illustrate points, build arguments, share information, and tell a story of why the campaign was needed and why the policy was created. As key stakeholders in Stage 5, students used data as a way to advocate for why they need to appeal the financial aid policy of 15 to Finish. The academic and professional advisors in Stage 4 used anecdotal data to show how they could not support promoting the campaign to non-traditional students. Key stakeholders in Stage 3 used data to make decisions about the financial aid policy, how it was drafted and how it was communicated were informed through data. The system administrators in Stage 2 used data as motivation for why the campaign was needed to change the culture of Nevada to one of completion. The data presented in Stage 1 from CCA and Hawaii was the beginning of the conversation. Data was used repeatedly to make and inform decisions of key stakeholders at every stage of the policy life cycle.

Chapter 5 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to use hermeneutic phenomenology to examine experiences of key stakeholders in the policy life cycle of 15 to Finish. While there is research on how the policy works (Complete College America, 2016), how administrators implement it (Klempin, 2014; Williams, 2014), and the importance of boosting completion rates (Bundy, 2013; Gardner, 2004; Nozicka, 2014), there was no qualitative data giving voice to key stakeholders connected to the policy life cycle of a completion policy from an idea to full implementation. Complete College America (2014) is a non-profit organization comprised of administrators working to improve completion rates through advocacy, research, and the promotion of five policy initiatives labeled gamechangers. These gamechangers (Structured Schedules, Full-time is 15, Guided Pathways, Co-Remediation, and Math Pathways) are meant to be implemented in an intentional way across all institutions within the states who are part of the alliance. This study looked at the evolution of the Full –time is 15 gamechanger on one campus, as the idea moved to an initiative, then a policy known as Fifteen to Finish.

The following discussion is in three parts so as to reflect Gadamer's Circle (1989). Part one is a discussion on the whole policy. Part two is a discussion on the different stages of the policy life cycle that make up the parts of the policy. Overall themes of advisor involvement, intentional gamechangers, 15 to Finish successes, messaging platforms, and student perceptions are the parts that make up this discussion. Part three brings it all together again to look at the entirety of the policy and how it contributed to a changing Nevada culture.

Part One: The 15 to Finish Policy and Campaign

The 15 to Finish message and campaign was implemented on campuses across the country including the Hawaii System, New Mexico State, West Virginia, and Southern Illinois (Klempin, 2014). While 35 states comprised the alliance of Complete College America (2016) not all states implemented all recommended gamechangers; some states chose to focus on evaluations of existing programs to explore options for where policy implementation would take place. The Nevada system, and this school in particular, were unique in that the participation in Complete College America led to a staggered implementation of the gamechanging policies (Anderson, personal communication, March 09, 2016). Unique to Nevada as compared to other schools in the CCA alliance was the level of autonomy provided to schools with regards to sharing the completion message and the active participation of a high level system administrator on the campus level. From the state-wide system level, Anderson was clear in that moving forward, Nevada would be a culture of completion with a hard message that full-time is 15 credits per semester, and a softer message that 30 credits completed over the course of a year was also acceptable progression.

The colleges in the system were given freedom to disseminate that message as best as they saw fit for their student populations. This level of autonomy was not referenced by other states in the alliance (Complete College America, 2016). Anderson took it upon herself to be the voice of the message, visiting campuses across the state to help staff and faculty understand why the message was important and how data could be used to tell the story of completion. This practice of a system level administrator personally delivering the message was not a practice reported by others Klempin (2014), Williams (2014), or Complete College America (2016). Anderson reported this experience in general as a break from the norm, saying that no other policy warranted such personal conviction as 15 to Finish did because of the massive cultural swing it would take to make the message viable statewide. Anderson said every school began to adopt the message differently, but no school was as on board as the institution in this study, no other school tied state and institution aid to the message in the form of a completion policy, and no other school drank so deep of the kool-aid.

As a result, this campus has seen a positive increase in student enrollment in 15 credits or higher per semester, while two schools saw flat numbers or a decrease, and others saw minimal gains. It can be said that for the success obtained, it was not just the presence of Anderson on campus that contributed; her presence was on other campuses who did not do as well. It was the policy teeth added to give some bite to the message that produced the results.

Part Two: Various Stages of the Life Cycle of 15 to Finish as a Policy and a Campaign

Advisor Involvement

Data from Hawaii, Southern Illinois, and West Virginia was used as a foundation for the beginning conversations on 15 to Finish in Nevada. Part of that data included a cautionary tale about involving academic advisors more in the conversation and sooner (Williams, 2014). Anderson, a self-identified champion of the 15 to Finish campaign, said she was fully aware of the need to involve advisors, not just to rely on supervisors to pass information down to direct reports.

Anderson spent time on campuses across the state of Nevada, making herself available to advisors and anyone else who would listen about the importance of the 15 to Finish message. Anderson knew from previous research that advisors were key in the success of pushing the completion message. However, in speaking with academic and professional advisors at this institution, the message was not delivered directly to them. The message was not heard. While the message was circulating, this institution created a financial aid policy in response to the call for action to boost completion. The information for the policy was also not provided to the advisors until a month before it was to take effect and after students had already been privy to information about the policy.

This miscommunication and timeline provided an unsavory experience for advisors who said they felt ill equipped to advise students on how to be in compliance with the policy and confused as to the motivation for the initial campaign. Advisors indicated they would have liked to have been involved closer to the beginning to offer insight into potential consequences of the policy and to simply have a voice and be heard. Additionally, advisors expressed a need for clearer communication and differentiation between the NSHE message of 15 to Finish and the financial aid policy of 15 to Finish, a transition that happened between Stage 2 and Stage 3 of this study.

This level of buy-in would have contributed to their perceived value of the campaign and policy (Iarrabino, 2005), in turn giving them leverage to promote it among their students and support their students with solid information. One stakeholder elaborated on the process for adding a course to provide an opportunity for students to take a degree applicable course that counted towards the financial aid policy requirement.

It was noted that scheduling decisions and course availability were determined in different organizational structures in each college. For one college it may be the dean who made the decision and in the next college it might have been a program advisor. For this reason, a communications plan detailing timeline, exceptions, and other pertinent information about the financial aid policy would have been ideal for dissemination to the campus to allow academic units the opportunity to restructure programs before the financial aid policy was implemented. In this way, students and staff would have been set up for success prior to implementation versus floundering after.

Intentional Gamechangers

Key stakeholders reported implementing gamechangers identified by CCA that were to work in tandem with or enhance the 15 to Finish message and policy in the way CCA recommended, but fell short. Banded Tuition was a recommendation from CCA noted as being effective (2015). Complete College America reported replacing negative consequences of increased costs incurred from increased enrollment in college classes by students with a positive incentive of capping tuition at 12 credits, with any additional credit fees being absorbed by the institution, as being an effective method for boosting completion and compliance (2015).

Anderson said the state of Nevada could not afford to implement Banded Tuition. Grimm agreed, acknowledging budget constraints and not the idea itself as the only reason this gamechanger could not be implemented.

Complete College America encourages schools within their alliance to make a choreographed effort when implementing the five gamechangers (2016). Data from this study was in opposition to this; Anderson and Knight both said the funding formula changes by the legislature were created independently of 15 to Finish, advisors said some degree programs were creating Structured Schedules while others were not and there was no cohesive transparent timeline that coincided with other gamechangers being implemented, and Folsom said a lack of access to information on course offering needs prevented a concerted effort for creating Guided Pathways.

Guided Pathways were implemented in some programs, but key stakeholders reported this gamechanger as unachievable as a one-size fit all model, citing lack of courses offerings, pre-requisites, and student individuality as barriers to bringing forth Structured Schedules. On implementing Structured Schedules so students could take a prescribed set of courses that included summer options to fit within the softer message of 30 to Complete, advisors said faculty were not available over the summer in some disciplines and courses would not be offered, preventing students from taking advantage of enrolling in 30 credits over a year and including summer as part of the calculation so they could enroll in less than 15 credits during the Fall and Spring semesters. Even though the deviation from implementing gamechangers in a concerted effort that was promoted by CCA was not carried out, results presented in the study still showed an increase in credit enrollment in line with reports from Complete College America (2016).

15 to Finish Success

Data collected in this study mirrored current research from CCA, supporting completion policies as a means for boosting enrollment (2015). Williams (2014) reported a 17 percent boost in the number of students taking 15 credits after implementing 15 to Finish in Hawaii, and an increase of 11 percent in enrolled college credits at Adams State University. Complete College America (2016) reports indicate that when colleges implement completion policies and a concerted effort of gamechangers, they see an increase in the number of credits students take.

Similarly, in this study, Anderson shared data from Nevada institutions with UNR showing an increase in the number of students enrolled in 15 credits after the campaign and policy were implemented. Data from Appendix A reflects in Fall 2013 there were 1,761 first-time, degree-seeking students enrolled in 15 credits or more. After implementation of the policy and campaign message, this number increased in Fall 2014 by 49 percent to 2,638 students enrolled in 15 credits or more. This shows the policy and campaign to be effective in increasing enrollment in credit hours.

Much like Adams State, Hawaii, and New Mexico (Klempin, 2014), the policy and campaign were too early in their development to show a boost in completion overall as the freshmen class that started with the campaign message and policy have yet to reach year four in their academic careers. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors who were tasked with policy compliance may have other contributing factors that led to their increased enrollment numbers in addition to the 15 to Finish campaign and financial aid policy. Data from Appendix A shows an increase in their credit enrollment of 32.7 percent, or 4,355 students enrolled in 15 or more credits in Fall 2013 to 5,782 students enrolled in 15 credits or more in Fall 2014.

Messaging Platforms

Anderson's multiple messaging platform through flyers and presentations was a strategy in line with the research of Klempin. Klempin (2014) indicated that social marketing campaigns to bring awareness to the general public and the campus community were tools being used by administrators at New Mexico State, Portland University, the Hawaii Community College System, and Adams State College. Anderson provided data showing awareness strategies in the forms of flyers, videos, and websites that were shared at presentation with the campus community. In this way Anderson's 15 to Finish campaign was in line with the research. The campaign was only distributed to students however, and this was not in line with Klempin's research because the message was not distributed to the wider public outside of the campus community.

Klempin (2014) also said that institutions featured information prominently on their websites, using animated graphics, headers, and pop-up boxes. Data from this study was in opposition to the research in that the website for the university did not provide all information on 15 to Finish in a consistent manner according to Smith and Williams. Smith said the email she received in July for the August implementation of the 15 to Finish financial aid policy reflected that information was not present on any website, but was forthcoming. Williams said information on requests for appeals was not consistently available online. Additionally, as for other modes of communication, and informing staff and students about the message and the policy, Williams indicated his area would stray away from single messages and move towards sending multiple messages to better get information out. This data is not in line with the research as the modes of communication were not used frequently or consistently.

Student Perceptions

This information is crucial to understanding what value students place on completion policies and understanding what challenges they perceive prevent them from being in compliance with completion policies such as 15 to Finish. Klempin (2014) said little no data is available on student feedback and perceptions of completion policies. Specific feedback from students who appealed the policy was not evident from Complete College America's reports from the Hawaii college system, New Mexico State, West Virginia, or Southern Illinois (2016). Understanding the perceived challenges and feedback from students who may not see value in compliance with completion policy can aid other key stakeholders as they create policy and deliver messages. To create buy-in and increase value in compliance with the policy, administrators can target messages that address challenges students perceive as barriers. Hence, data from this study contributed to this growing body of research by providing direct anecdotes from students about their perceptions of the value of 15 to Finish through personal anecdotal, de-identified data provided anonymously in written appeals. Data reported in this study by students who were key stakeholders in stage five was new to the research.

In reviewing student appeals, students expressed a high value for everything but compliance with 15 to Finish. Students valued experiences outside of the classroom, often saying these learning opportunities were just as important as the education they received in the classroom. Students valued playing sports, making connections to transferable skills they were learning. Students valued studying abroad, saying the cultural immersion experience would make them better global citizens. Students valued hard work and expressed a strong sense of responsibility for family members wellbeing and subsistence.

Students perceived time and schedule conflicts as barriers to increasing their enrollment numbers by credit hours. Students perceived lack of course offering as a barrier to compliance with the policy. Students claimed they were being required to take courses not required for their degree program to reach 15 credits, saying the additional credits were superfluous and expensive. Each of these perceptions and claims contribute to the growing body of knowledge on completion policies, and provide insight into how students are perceiving the change in the culture from open access to completion. These results indicate students are struggling with the culture shift. The initial culture of open access was focused on getting into college, and the students are in college, so they do not see an urgency to progressing in a specific amount of time. The new culture of completion, moving beyond getting into college but actually graduating with a degree in hand in four years, has a value that was not actualized by these students. Why?

Complete College America said the five gamechangers needed to be implemented in a transparent and intentional way. Key stakeholders in the study said this did not happen. Data from Hawaii and other colleges with completion policies said advisor involvement was crucial to the success of the messaging. Advisors in this study said they were not involved and received little information and communication. Klempin (2014) said colleges reported success when messaging crossed multiple platforms in a consistent and ongoing way. Multiple key stakeholders said messaging was inconsistent and occasionally non-existent.

This interplay of best practices shows a path to success, yet there were institutional structures that served as roadblocks, not allowing for the path to success to be fully followed, and still resulted in successes. Policymakers can use this information to ask themselves what level of success are they looking to aspire to, weighing how much of the path to follow against how successful they wish to be. Policy makers can take into consideration what structures are in place at their institutions that serve as roadblocks, weighing where to funnel resources and energy to bring about easier implementation or no implementation at all and deciding which roadblocks are surmountable versus which can stand alone and allow for some success.

Part Three: Completion Policy in a Changing Nevada Culture

A cultural shift from open access to completion, and using completion rates to demonstrate return on investment, is a national shift (CCA, 2016). In this study, key stakeholders who were not students, repeatedly said 15 to Finish was in response to the culture shift. The 15 to Finish policy began as an idea, a way to boost completion rates. The life-cyle journey of the idea from campaign to policy did produce desired results. However, as one academic advisor asked, could there have been a way to achieve those same results without student casualties, academically speaking? Completion policy was going to be implemented in some way at some point once the relationship and commitment to Complete College America had been solidified. Was this the right policy window of opportunity (Squires, 2013) for 15 to Finish to germinate? The data showing increased credit-enrollment would indicate yes. The voices of the students who appealed the policy and the advisors whose work was interrupted as a result of miscommunication and a challenging timeline would indicate no.

Recommendations for Future Research

Key stakeholders in the form of advisors provided data consistently that there was a concern for students being disadvantaged if they were in compliance with the policy. Various advisors expressed similar beliefs that some students from non-traditional populations were being negatively affected by 15 to Finish, both the campaign and policy. Advisors said students who work full time, students with families, transfer students, and students who were first-generation were suffering negative consequences in their personal, academic, and financial lives when they attempted to be incompliance with the policy. However, there is no data to support this concern. There was no data that showed a correlation of compliance with 15 to Finish having an impact on non-traditional and underrepresented students. Chavez confirmed this when she said they did not know what would happen with underrepresented students when implementing the policy but would watch it closely. Further research to look at the question if the 15 to Finish campaign and/or completion policy has a negative effect on non-traditional, low-income, first-generation students would address this concern.

A second concern prompted by data from key stakeholders in stage four involved content knowledge. Smith had concerns about jeopardizing the quality of programs when omitting content to reduce program credit requirements to 120 credits. Currently, there is no data to support the concern of reducing degree programs to ensure the total number of credits is at 120. Research should be considered to see if students graduate with less content knowledge than competing peers when degree programs are cut to ensure graduation in four years.

Finally, key stakeholders said multiple studies were done and reviewed to find out how students liked to receive information, but this same effort was not employed to look at best practices for getting information to staff and faculty who work closely with students. Freemont, a key stakeholder from Stage 3, said focus groups were done with students and students indicated they did not want emails, phone calls, or text messages when important information needs to be communicated to them. When asked about communicating to staff and faculty, Freemont said no focus groups were done. Traditional communication methods were relied upon including emails and attendance at staff meetings according to Freemont. Research in this area, of how policy changes could be communicated to staff, faculty, and administrators, may increase levels of HCIT among administrators and faculty tasked with implementing policy directly to those affected by it, in this case students (Iarrabino, 2005).

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Appendix A

15 to Finish: Fall 2014 Outcomes Data, NSHE, 2014

			Fall 2012		Fall 2013		Fall 2014	
Institution	**Status**	**Credit Load**	**Headcount**	**18-24 Headcount**	**Headcount**	**18-24 Headcount**	**Headcount**	**18-24 Headcount**
UNR	First-time Degree-seeking Freshman	< 12	35	31	26	25	56	51
		12 to < 15	1,012	906	1,087	979	580	530
		15+	1,720	1,547	1,761	1,583	2,638	2,336
	Total		**2,767**	**2,484**	**2,874**	**2,587**	**3,274**	**2,917**
	All Other Students	< 12	2,096	1,138	2,196	1,208	2,248	1,308
		12 to < 15	5,345	4,458	5,575	4,784	4,697	4,034
		15+	4,139	3,753	4,355	3,984	5,782	5,288
	Total		**11,580**	**9,349**	**12,126**	**9,976**	**12,727**	**10,630**
	All Students	< 12	2,131	1,169	2,222	1,233	2,304	1,359
		12 to < 15	6,357	5,364	6,662	5,763	5,277	4,564
		15+	5,859	5,300	6,116	5,567	8,420	7,624
UNR Total			**14,347**	**11,833**	**15,000**	**12,563**	**16,001**	**13,547**