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Community college transfer students' experiences of the adjustment process to a four year institution: A qualitative analysis

Karen R. Owens
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Community College Transfer Students' Experiences of the Adjustment Process

to a Four Year Institution: A Qualitative Analysis

by

Karen R. Owens

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Adult, Career and Higher Education
College of Education
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Jan M. Igansh, Ph.D.
Thomas E. Miller, Ed. D.
W. Robert Sullins, Ed. D.
William H. Young, Ed. D.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family; my daughter, Corina Marie, who always knew how to brilliantly encourage and keep me smiling; my son, Jeremy Graham, who knew when I needed quiet time and also when I needed to take time to stop and smell the flowers; my husband John, who gave me wings to pursue my dreams and unconditional love to achieve them; my father and mother, Kenneth Duane and Annie Joyce McGuffey, who provided unwavering faith and abundant love.

Mother, you were my inspiration every day. This is "our" dissertation!

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Finally, I want to acknowledge the transfer students who participated in this study. You offered invaluable candor in your e-journal entries and for that I applaud you. It was your willingness to share that made this study possible.

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Community College Transfer Students' Experiences of the Adjustment Process to

a Four Year Institution: A Qualitative Analysis

Karen R. Owens

ABSTRACT

Today's mobile student population follows diverse paths. This research

presents findings from a qualitative study investigating the perceptions of transfer

students while they were actively engaged in the transfer process. Fifty-seven

incoming community college transfer students (n=57) were interviewed, in a large

metropolitan area, through e-journaling during fall 2006 (while students were still

attending community colleges) and during spring 2007 (students' first semester

of admission to the university). The following research questions guided the

study:

- What do transfer students perceive as a successful transfer process?

- From the transfer student's perspective, what supports are needed to
  accommodate a successful transfer process?

- From the transfer student's perspective, what barriers inhibit successful
  transfer?

The study sought to identify transfer student retention policies and

practices that offer the most promising outcomes, as substantiated by the

transfer students. Their experiences and perceptions might have implications

for improving programs and policies at either the sending or receiving institution. The necessity to determine the challenges faced by students when entering a four-year institution is key to understanding student persistence and success in attaining the baccalaureate.

The Urban Transfer Research Network (UTRN) is a project funded through Lumina Foundation for Education. The purpose of this collaborative project is to chart the pathways and success of transfer students who begin their college careers at community colleges. The research conducted in this study served as the pilot study for UTRN's qualitative research.

The findings suggest three first stage transfer adjustment themes. The first stage includes: students' expectations prior to entering the university, students' initial experiences of marginality, complications from the need for guidance combined with feelings of entitlement, and students learning to navigate the university system. The second stage of the transfer students' adjustment identified the support systems needed by students: personal attention, academic integration, social interaction, and technology. Barriers to successful transfer involved the lack of communication students perceived among and within the community college and the university. The third and final stage of the transfer adjustment process offered student recommendations for change supporting reflections of self-reliance, and balance of academic rigor and personal identity.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In an age of constant student mobility, the students have changed and the paths they follow are diverse. Increasingly, those paths include transfers to and from many types of colleges and universities creating barriers to degree completion. In a recent issue of "Policy Matters," the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU, 2005) emphasized the need for collaboration and change among transfer students' institutions with these remarks:

> The process of bringing together so many different kinds of institutions and programs into common agreement will never be easy, but will remain an essential goal as student mobility increases and options multiply. (…) States, systems, sectors, and institutions must continue to work together to eliminate their differences and create smooth working models that encourage student success. (Conclusion section, para. 2)

While a fair number of large-scale, quantitative studies on transfer have been conducted (Adelman 1999, 2006; Cedja, 1997; Diaz, 1992; Hagedorn & Prather, 2005; Hills, 1965; Laanan, 1998; Rab, 2004; Soltz, 1993) the need for further qualitative research to augment earlier findings and quantitative research

remains unmistakably present. Miller, Bender and Schuh (2005) proposed that research must include student perceptions:

> [Colleges] should gather information about student expectations. (…) They should be doing so in an aggregate way to help explore system and program adjustments (…). They should also do it on an individual basis, exploring with students their aspirations and hopes and what they anticipate regarding college. It is on the individual basis that the negotiation of expectations can take place. (p. 245)

Transfer students are an integral part of university campuses. The necessity to determine the challenges faced by all students when entering a four-year institution is central to understanding student mobility and persistence.

The Urban Transfer Research Network (UTRN) is a project funded through Lumina Foundation for Education. The purpose of this collaborative project is to chart the pathways and success of transfer students who begin their college careers at community colleges. The project places particular emphasis on low-income and minority students. UTRN's action research model employs both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The research conducted in this study serves as the pilot study for UTRN's qualitative research, which includes individual interviews of community college students across three urban schools in a large metropolitan area of Florida.

Problem Statement

Florida's State University System consists of 11 institutions, and Florida's Community College System includes 28 institutions with students frequently transferring among these institutions. The state-level Articulation Coordinating Committee has been in place more than 20 years and has worked diligently to make the transfer pathways as seamless as possible; however, despite efforts to have policies in place to expedite transfers, some students still experience difficulties in transferring among institutions and obtaining degrees.

The Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability projected student enrollment "…to grow faster than higher education's share of state revenues" (OPPAGA, 2004, para. 1). With the Florida Legislature providing funding, it remains crucial that students who begin college persist and obtain their academic degrees. "In Fiscal Year 2003-04, the Legislature appropriated approximately $2.5 billion in general revenue and lottery funds to support Florida's higher education institutions, including the state's 28 community colleges and 11 universities (Background section, para.1)", OPPAGA (2006) further disclosed:

> The state of Florida ranks low in the number of [bachelor's] degrees
> it produces compared to other states. Approximately [19 of every]
> 1,000 Florida residents ages 18-44 who graduated high school and
> who did not previously attain a college degree earned a bachelor's
> degree in 2002-03. Florida ranks slightly below the national

average at 22.6 and falls in the bottom third among all states in new

degree production. (Current Issues section, para.6)

Transfer students from state community colleges represent a significant

portion of students in Florida's higher education system currently seeking

bachelor's degrees. To better understand the transfer adjustment process in

terms of student persistence, this study focused on capturing students'

perceptions as they experienced the transfer process.

<p align="center">*Rationale for Proposal*</p>

If this study could identify the elements of support and barriers to the

transfer adjustment process through the perceptions of students, it may provide

promising program and policy recommendations to higher education institutions

leading to greater transfer student persistence to degree completion. Improving

the transfer process could ultimately lead to increased bachelor's degree

production.

The study sought to identify transfer student retention policies and

practices that offer the most promising outcomes, as substantiated by the

transfer students. Their experiences and perceptions might have implications for

improving programs and policies at either the sending or receiving institution.

Limited research exists that evaluates the transfer adjustment process by way of

student perceptions (Flaga, 2002; Nowak, 2004; Richie, 2004; Richardson &

Bender, 1987; Townsend, 1995). Building upon the previous qualitative research,

while investigating the attitudes and perceptions of the transfer students as they

experience the transition process, provided new knowledge about the transfer transition. Expectations of students were an integral part of the research. Miller, et al (2005) stated:

> Personal explorations do not most usefully take the form of survey completion, but are better when they are private reflections in written form or in conversational encounters. It can be a way in which expectations can be comprehended and, as appropriate, adjusted. (p.246)

This research sought to discover exactly what transfer students' view as enhancements and barriers to a successful transfer adjustment process. The study concentrated on revealing issues through the previously missing component of student narratives. The qualitative research approach was intended to supplement the large body of quantitative research on articulation that typically relies on college transcripts to assess G.P.A., credit hours, courses taken, and institutions attended. This research endeavored to uncover recurring themes through qualitative methods and to help inform institutions about factors that contribute or hinder successful transfer adjustment. The researcher considered the personal as well as the institutional supports and barriers that affect the transfer adjustment process.

Flaga (2002) clearly communicated the need for further qualitative research in the conclusion of her dissertation:

The process of transfer student transition looks very different in this [qualitative] study than in the results of other [quantitative] studies. It does not deal with credits; it does not deal with numerical grade point averages. Rather, it captures the overall experiences of community college transfer students as they proceed through their first year at a four -year institution. In the future, it is important that this process approach be carried further with continuous studies at other four-year institutions, as well as studies starting with students while they are still at the community college. This will help to paint an even clearer picture of the process of transition as a developmental model with identity transformation implications. (p.146)

Research Questions

This qualitative research, through a phenomenological approach (integrating symbolic interactionism) coupled with a case study analysis, examined student perception of the transfer process at a large research university. The study compared student perceptions of beneficial and restrictive policies and experiences. The case study approach allowed the researcher to investigate the transfer adjustment process by identifying the underlying themes collected from participants.

Additionally, it provided data to answer these questions:

- What do transfer students perceive as a successful transfer process?

- From the transfer student's perspective, what supports are needed to accommodate a successful transfer process?

- From the transfer student's perspective, what barriers inhibit successful transfer?

Conceptual Framework and Methods

In the design of phenomenological research, "human experiences are examined through the detailed descriptions of the people being studied" (Creswell, 1994, p.12). Marion further explained, "Phenomenographers do not make statements about the world as such, but about people's conceptions of the world" (1997, p.145). In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher has the respondents relate their individual perceptions of a phenomenon, which all respondents are currently experiencing, through written communication. Complementing the discovery of the students' perceived realities was the case study method, which reports events as they unfold. The multi-case study approach is designed to offer detailed, descriptive accounts in areas in which little research has been conducted (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994).

The researcher identified prospective community college transfer students to a large four-year institution in the fall semester of 2006 and recruited 27 participants prior to the spring 2007 semester and 30 participants during the first month of the semester. Five hundred eighty one incoming transfer students from

two feeder community colleges registered for classes at the university in the spring semester. Data collection points occurred throughout the last half of fall 2006 semester while students were still attending the community college at two to three week intervals. This data collection continued at the same intervals throughout the spring 2007 semester at the university. The researcher asked students probing questions through email and asked students to respond through e-journaling. This process provided student perceptions as events unfolded.

The methodology used the guidelines set forth from Mitchell and Coltrinari (2001) in exploring student e-journal writing:

- Descriptive: What occurred that is significant to you in your transfer adjustment process?

- Metacognitive: What were your perceptions and feelings?

- Analytic: What do you understand as the reasoning surrounding this issue?

- Evaluative: What were the implications for you?

- Reconstructive: What changes would you recommend?

As expressed succinctly by Kerka, "A journal is a crucible for processing the raw material of experience in order to integrate it with existing knowledge and create new meaning" (2002, p.1). Learning builds on the connections that bring new knowledge to that which exists. It was anticipated that students responding through e-journals would encourage and expedite the students' use of analysis, synthesis, and reflection of prior experiences to current application focusing on

the transfer adjustment process. It was the intent of the researcher to consider personal barriers and supports as well as those that were institutional in nature.

Limitations and Key Assumptions

Limitations of the study were time constraints due to often-late semester declaration of a transfer institution by the transfer student. The community colleges in Florida do not capture transfer information in a systematic format. The community colleges rely on the universities to return information after students have applied to the university. The researcher requested transfer student contact information from the admissions office of the university once the applications of the transfer students had been processed. Each eligible transfer student (those transferring to the university with 60 or more credit hours) was invited through email to participate in the study. Prior to receipt of this data the researcher identified advisors at the community colleges by making informational presentations at programs such as the College of Education's Community College Advising Forum during the fall of 2006. Upon Internal Review Board (IRB) approval the community college advisors were asked to distribute the study's recruitment brochures at their respective schools (see Appendix A). The researcher also provided the research recruitment brochure and informational sessions through admitted transfer student resource days held at the university. In addition, the researcher contacted individual college advisors at the university requesting the advisors distribute the recruitment brochures to incoming transfer students within their respective colleges.

The researcher recruited 57 community college transfer students entering the university spring semester of 2007. The recruitment of students occurred from November 2006 though January 2007.Collection of narrative from these 57 community college transfer students continued through March 2007. This sample size provided adequate diversification of the incoming transfer student population. The researcher compared the demographics of the general transfer student population to the study population for sampling bias. All 57 students participated through the end of data collection.

The researcher referred all student concerns or questions on specific circumstances to university advisors. This advice may have affected the results of the study since non-study participants may not have received the same advice. Another possible limitation is that the sheer process of paying attention to students at the transfer stage in this study may have altered the students' behavior, commonly referred to as the "Hawthorne" effect.

In qualitative studies, the researcher must avoid bias in analysis by placing values and beliefs aside. The researcher maintained the integrity of the research by not allowing preconceived beliefs to interfere with hearing the students accurately. Questions were open-ended and continually reviewed with students for clarity of meaning before proceeding with analysis. A code checker was employed to verify researcher's interpretations. While collecting narrative, the researcher assumed students answered honestly without fear of judgment. By virtue of this purposive sample being self-selection, the data may not have

captured all perceptions of the non-volunteer transfer student population and therefore may not be generalizable. The students who voluntarily participated may be more invested in education and therefore predisposed toward a successful transfer experience.

Definition of Terms

Articulation agreements: These agreements are frameworks that provide for the transfer of credit from one academic institution to another, encompassing statewide policies and voluntary arrangements between two and four year institutions. Articulation agreements are often crafted to form legally binding admission requirements to specific programs, course equivalency guides, and common course numbering systems (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Hermeneutic phenomenology, Symbolic interactionism, & Case study: The researcher utilized this triad of methodology in the study. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher has the respondents (students) relate their individual perceptions of a phenomenon, which all respondents are currently experiencing, through written communication. Symbolic interactionism deciphers the interpretations individuals assign to the phenomenon. The case study method, which reports events as they unfold, synthesizes the discovery of the students' perceived realities.

Native student versus transfer student: Native students have attended no previous college or university as degree seeking students prior to entering their present four-year institution and complete at least 12 hours of credit within four

years of entry (Cohen & Brawer, 2003, p.56). Transfer students have attended one or more academic institutions as degree seekers and have earned at least 10 credit hours (Adelman, 2005, p. xv). In this study, the transfer student population was limited to those students who have earned an Associate of Arts degree or have completed 60 or more transferable credit hours at a community college prior to entering the university.

Paths: The metaphor used in present research to examine transfer students' course of academics is that of "paths". In past research, the metaphor often used was "pipelines." Clifford Adelman contrasted the terms "pipelines" and "paths" in his updated essay, *The Toolbox Revisited* (2006*),* with the following description:

> (…) There is no linear path to a degree, particularly for students who start out in community colleges. The default 'pipeline' metaphor, used to describe presumably linear learning experiences and environmental sequences, is wholly inadequate to describe student behavior. Pipelines are unidirectional closed spaces, and under the 'pipeline' metaphor students are passive creatures (…) swept along or dropping out of the space completely through leaks at the joints. But student behavior doesn't look like that at all: It moves in starts and stops, sideways, down one path to another and perhaps circling back. Liquid moves in pipes; people don't. (p.107)

Persistence: This study focused on the transfer student's adjustment process from the community college to the four-year institution. The researcher

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simultaneously focused on the effect of the adjustment process on students continuing their education at the four-year institution. Adelman (2006) distinguished between "attrition" and "persistence" in the following manner:

> When "attrition" is the governing term, we worry about students who (it appears) leave (…) college, and seek explanations for departure that have included theories of organizational turnover (Bean 1983) and failures of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1987). At the first sign of exit—even though the student may return—we turn to negativity. There has to be something wrong here, we say. The student was "at risk," the institution did not respond—we witness a cycle of blame. When "persistence" is the governing term, we take our directions from students. What did they do that resulted in attainment? What structures of opportunities do we need to offer so that future students can follow the same paths? (…) [Alderman's work concluded]: Drop "attrition," embrace "persistence"! (p.107)

Transfer Shock & Transfer Ecstasy: Transfer shock (Hills, 1965) has been defined as a decline in grades during the transfer students' first terms at the four-year institution. In contrast, Nickens (1992) reported conflicting results within studies of transfer students' grade point averages, demonstrating an initial increase, and coining the term, "transfer ecstasy."

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the need for this research by explaining that despite the efforts of the institutions within Florida to have policies in place to expedite transfers, some students still encounter difficulties in transferring among institutions and obtaining degrees. The rationale for the proposal described the need for identifying elements of supports and barriers to the transfer adjustment process through the perceptions of the students. The chapter proposed the mission of this research to be the investigation of clear connections supporting learning, success, and persistence of transfer students to obtain degrees through the methodology of reporting student perceptions. In conclusion, the researcher provided the limitations of the study, key assumptions, and definition of terms.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the relevant student adjustment literature and also includes notes of areas for further investigation. Chapter 3 elaborates on the conceptual framework and details the methodology used in this study. The transfer adjustment process was critically examined in this investigation and yields implications for further research endeavors. These could benefit organizational learning and change within academies as well as suggest implications for addressing the transfer student population's needs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In the fall of 2000, there were 3,151,809 full-time equivalent community college transfer students enrolled in four-year institutions nationwide. Forty eight percent of these full-time equivalent community college transfer students (1,504,492) were enrolled in five states: California, Florida, Illinois, New York and Texas. The policies and actions in these five states coupled with other high enrollment states will significantly affect transfer students nationally [National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2005]. Adelman (2006) aptly phrased it when he wrote, "The core question is not about 'access' to higher education. It is not about persistence to the second term or the second year following postsecondary entry. It is about completion of academic credentials—the culmination of opportunity, guidance, choice, effort, and commitment" (p. xv).

A review of the relevant research literature provides the reader with information concerning the reasons why some students fail to persist; also, it discusses efforts to support transfer students' endeavors. Therefore, the researcher organized this review into three major sections. The first section offers the literature on select theories of adjustment in higher education. The second discusses prior research on the transfer adjustment process. The third

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section describes the community college-university transfer partnerships in select colleges and universities. A summary concludes this chapter.

Theories of Adjustment

Transfer students originate from diverse backgrounds, and they view their worlds through varied perspectives. These students are typically older (over age 25); however, an increasing number of traditional age students (18-24) currently enroll as transfer students (Adelman, 2005). Transfer students from community colleges are not a homogeneous group. The complexity of the group does not allow application of a single psychological or sociological theoretical model [Educational Policy Institute, (EPI), 2005].

Tinto's (1975) landmark study synthesized research to develop his theoretical model of freshman student retention based upon the student-to-institution match. While this model only somewhat accounts for external environmental factors, the model has remained the foundation of student retention studies for the past 31 years. This section began by discussing Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theory of student integration through institutional commitment and includes the work of other scholars, such as the following:

- Astin (1984, 1985, 1993, 1999) Student Involvement Theory
- Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) Theory of Cognitive, Psychosocial and Moral Effects on College Students
- Schlossberg (1989) Theory of Marginality and Mattering

- Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) Transition Theory: Moving

    In…Moving Through….Moving On

 The focus of this section explores the work of other scholars who have

reframed the traditional models, for example:

- Beach (1999), Theory of Consequential Transition

- Adelman (2005) report "Moving Into Town-And Moving On"

- Hagedorn & Prather (2005) manuscript, "If University Students are from

    Mercury, Community College Students must be from Pluto"

Limited research by theorists specifically addressing transfer students'

adjustment process exists in the literature, but the greater amount of literature on

the broader adjustment persistence of students in college provides a basis for an

inferential framework that might also be applicable to the transfer students'

adjustment process. This section examines the traditional theories of college

student adjustment coupled with the newer reports of higher education

populations. It describes how these ideologies may inform stakeholders about

transfer students and their adjustment processes.

Traditional Models

Tinto's (1975) historic study links a student's persistence to Durkheim's

suicide model. He rationalized, "Durkheim's (1961) [predictability of] suicide is

more likely to occur when individuals are insufficiently integrated into the fabric of

society" (p.91). Durkheim specifically identified two forms of integration,

insufficient moral integration and insufficient collective affiliation. Observing

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student dropouts through Durkheim's lens of the greater society, Spady (1970) was the first to draw the analogy to the suicide model. Tinto considered Spady's model as a descriptive model opposed to his, which he viewed as predictive.

Tinto redesigned Spady's sociological model to integrate two equally significant dependent variables to students' persistence: academic integration, which includes goal commitment; and social integration, including institutional commitment. Spady's (1971) empirical study identified only academic integration as the "dominant factor" (p.38) in persistence. Tinto (1987) revised his theory to incorporate student development theories involving growth into adulthood. In 1993, he furthered his research to include a longitudinal process in which he acknowledged the diversity of populations in postsecondary education and the need for the availability of specifically varied pathways to persistence.

Bean's Student Attrition Model (1980, 1982, 1983, 1990) resembled Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975, 1987, 1993). However, Tinto's model focused the greatest attention on the culture within the institution while Bean's organizational model stressed external factors on persistence. Nonetheless, researchers noted common characteristics among the models. For example, Tinto's Student Integration Model referred to Institutional Commitment while Bean's Student Attrition Model identified Institutional Fit. Both models viewed persistence from a longitudinal focus of complex interactions (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992). Thomas (2000) explained the differences:

In both models, student commitment to the institution is theorized to be affected by peers' attitudes and pressures. Bean theorizes that among other potential modifiers, the encouragement of close friends may enhance a sense of commitment to the institution (institutional fit and quality). Tinto postulates a similar relationship, namely that the higher the level of social integration the greater will be the commitment to the institution. As integration is the central feature of the Tinto model it has therefore been carefully elaborated both conceptually and empirically. This should not discount the theoretical role of social structure in Bean's model, for friendships, or social ties, are presumed to impact the extent of students' shared group values, support structure, and affinity for the institution in both models--simply in different ways. (p.592)

Astin's (1984, 1985, 1993) contribution followed, offering first a developmental theory of student involvement in higher education and then presenting an empirical study of his model. He postulated that student persistence correlated directly to student involvement, which he described as an expenditure of energy by the student both physically and psychologically. The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, provided longitudinal data from their survey of college freshmen for Astin's later research. His findings indicated that the degree of student involvement in academics, relationships with faculty, and interaction with student peer groups;

were the most crucial variables for student learning, growth, and persistence. Astin extolled the benefits of involvement in the academic and social integration process as the best indicators of successful adjustment to college life.

As an educational assessment project, Astin developed the Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) model. According to Astin (1993), "inputs refer to the characteristics of the student at the time of entry to the institution; environment refers to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed; and outcomes refers to the student's characteristics after exposure to the environment" (p.7). His research convinced him that without the inclusion of all three components any evaluation of student persistence would be incomplete. While his model is similar to models developed by Spady, Tinto and Bean, the I-E-O model portrays the interactional essence of the persistence process. (Kelly, 1996)

Revealing insights from more than twenty years of research, Pascarella & Terenzini (1991, 2005) explained the cognitive, psychosocial, and moral development of college students. Similar to Astin, they discovered that involvement within the college experience was a leading indicator of college success. While Astin emphasized the motivation and behavior of the individual student, Pascarella & Terenzini investigated beyond these factors and linked the influence of the institutional climate as specific to promoting or inhibiting student involvement.

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Along the continuum from marginality to mattering, Schlossberg (1989) studied students in transition providing research addressing the students' need to become a significant part of their college culture. She described five aspects central to her theory: attention, importance, ego extension, dependence, and appreciation. Schlossberg postulated that if students felt marginalized, which leads to alienation from the greater college community, they were more likely to drop out of school.

Turning attention specifically to adult learners in transition, Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering's (1989) Transition Theory, "Moving In…Moving Through…Moving On", offered a model to help adult learners. They focused on intervention by the higher education institution. For example, Schlossberg et al. (1989) recommended three phases for helping adult learners adapt to the university. The first stage represented a transition process for moving in, offering entry support from academic registration to opportunities for social integration. Secondly, they described moving through, suggesting implementation of an adult support office. For moving on, the final entry suggested facilitating the transition to the workforce, implementing career search plans, analyzing student's strengths and weaknesses, and establishing a post-collegiate support forum.

Reframing of Traditional Models

Beach (1999) constructed a progressive developmental framework that accounted for change in the qualitative perspective, one that occurred over time throughout various facets of an individual's life. Beach did not see the individual

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student in isolation from his environment. Beach used these words to make the distinction:

> Consequential transition involves a developmental change in the relation between an individual and one or more social activities. A change in relation can occur through a change in the individual, the activity, or both. Transitions are consequential when they are consciously reflected on, often struggled with, and the eventual outcome changes one's sense of self and social positioning.
>
> (p. 114)

Adelman (2005) built his transcript-based community of transfer student portraits guided by the literature of environmental design, as did Schlossberg et al. (1989). The metaphor of towns and villages has been used for decades (Halprin, 1963; Jackson, 1970; Kerr, 1963; Lynch, 1960). However, Adelman's study focused not on the university or college as the unit of analysis but on the student as the primary concern. His analytical metaphor of "town" focused on the theme of academic process of the traditional-age student. He fully acknowledged that the academic history was his focus of inquiry when analyzing transfer student adjustment and persistence. He also affirmed his belief that further research could not ignore the social and psychological variables such as degrees of satisfaction with the experiences of the particular institution, interaction with faculty and other students outside of the classroom, and peer support networks along with job and family responsibilities.

His work begins with students' high school curriculums and continues through postsecondary attendance patterns and performances. Adelman views the populations of community college students through the lens of settlers described as "moving into town" and/or "moving on":

These populations are [characterized by] their histories, and if we think of them as starting out as settlers in or immigrants to a town or city that already possesses form and function, what we observe is a range of accommodations to the environment. We judge accommodations successful when they (…) allow individuals to move on to other education environments or to find harmony between education and economic activity. When attainment rates fall short, the elements of student academic history that play notable roles [deserve] special attention. [These elements do not] play equally notable roles in all community colleges, but they provide a very practical map for those in a position to study, redesign, and adjust to local environments. (p. xxiii)

Combining the typology of Adelman (2005) and Sheldon (1981), Hagedorn and Prather (2005) used transcript analysis in their work to focus on understanding urban community college students and their connectivity to the campus. Sheldon's work used transcript analysis and created systematic classification of community college students based on students' motivation to enter postsecondary schooling, their life experiences as students, and their lives

after leaving college. Adelman used transcript records to create a clearer understanding of how students used colleges as communities in which the students chose to become visitors or residents. Hagedorn and Prather were also guided by the conceptual framework of Weick's (1976) classical work in organizational theory in which Weick established the concept of loose coupling in academia; units are related to one another but retain separate identities and often do not respond to others. Hagedorn and Prather proposed this disconnect among academic units remains especially problematic for community college students who were not enrolled full-time.

Using an analogy of the solar system, Hagedorn and Prather's academic paper is entitled, "If University Students are from Mercury, Community College Students must be from Pluto." Their analogy referred to the solar system arrangement: Mercury is closet to the Sun (representing the academic institution) and takes the least amount of time to orbit; however, Pluto is the most distant and takes approximately 250 years to orbit the sun. They further denoted that the gravity of Pluto is very thin, creating weak ties with the other planets. Their research project, conducted as part of the Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students (TRUCCS) initiative, defined students who were most likely to persist as those with the closet ties to the college—the students of the "Traditional" planet (see Figure 2). These students shared an integral part of their lives with the community college. Students who attended the community college less frequently and were less involved were on planets at further

distances from the "TRUCCS sun." The "Uni-course" planet is the most distant

planet and its inhabitants are those students who usually come to the community

college for only one specific course, often-involving trade, or skill development.

Figure 2. Metaphor of TRUCCS Solar System: Illustrating Transfer Students' Relationship to the College
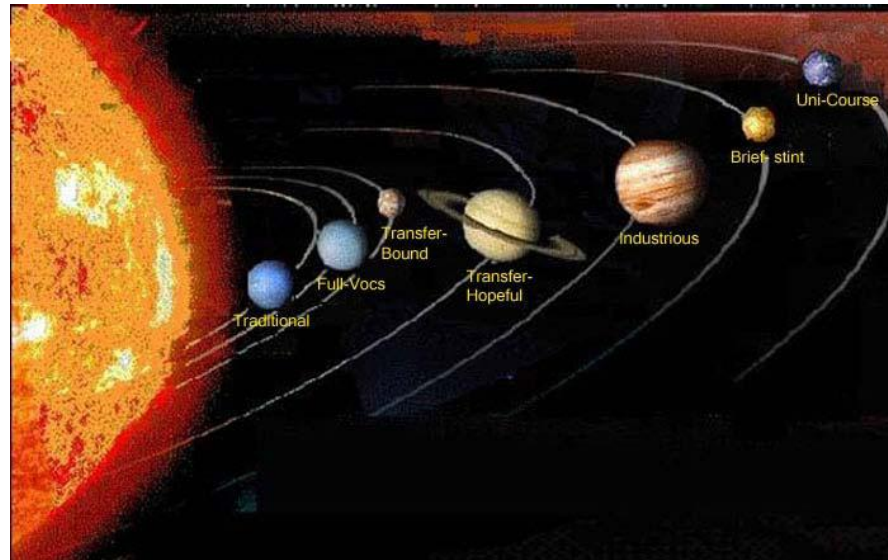
Note. From "If University Students are from Mercury, Community College Students must be from Pluto" by L. Hagedorn, & G. Prather, (2004, May, p.13) Paper presented at the annual meeting of American Institutional Research (AIR), Boston, MA. Reprinted with permission.

Table 2 indicates that "Industrious Planet" students composed the majority

of the students: almost four times that of the traditional population in the study

and represented the most diverse group when considering gender and

race/ethnicity.

Table 2. Properties of "Planets: Illustrating Transfer Students' Demographics

Orbit	Planet	N	Proportion of Sample	Size rank	% Female	% Hispanic	% African American
1	Traditional	1491	9.99%	4	46.7	27.4	7.7
2	Full-Vocs	1787	11.98%	3	67.8	47.2	14.6
3	Transfer-Bound	1370	9.18%	7	55.3	43.7	7.4
4	Transfer-Hopeful	3180	21.32%	2	60	50.3	14.7
5	Industrious	4327	29.00%	1	70.7	54.9	22
6	Brief-Stint	1381	9.26%	6	54.9	34	15.1
7	Uni-Course	1383	9.27%	5	56.5	35	10.2

These Industrious students having the goal of moving to the "Transfer Bound" planet, arrive at the community college with less than college level skills. They exhibited the lowest reported high school and community college GPA and persisted only two-thirds of the time (pp.14-15). (See Table 2)

Table 2. Properties of "Planets: Illustrating Transfer Students' Demographics   (Continued)

Orbit	Planet	Desire to Transfer	Average GPA	Average Success ratio	High School GPA
1	Traditional	Yes	2.91	0.7896	A
2	Full-Vocs	No	2.54	0.7185	B
3	Transfer-Bound	Yes	2.66	0.7333	B
4	Transfer-Hopeful	Yes	2.55	0.6991	B
5	Industrious	Yes	2.41	0.6595	C
6	Brief-Stint	Yes	2.54	0.7151	B
7	Uni-Course	No	2.84	0.8137	B

Note. Adapted (emphasis added) from "If University Students are from Mercury, Community College Students must be from Pluto" by L. Hagedorn, & G. Prather, (2004, May, p.13) Paper presented at the annual meeting of American Institutional Research (AIR), Boston, MA. Reprinted with permission.

In accordance with Adelman's research, Hagedorn and Prather accounted for transfer students' varied pathways with the following commentary:

> [Primarily] the solar system metaphor conveys the diversity that exists within the community [college] campus. Too often diversity is bound only by gender and ethnicity—demographics that are inherent and inflexible. However, academic background, course intensity, and transfer intentions are additional, important, and may be more potent with respect to the descriptors of students. But unlike the gender/ethnic demographics, the descriptors within the TRUCCS Solar System are changeable. Within the metaphor, interplanetary travel is possible. (p.16)

In summary, one realizes that transfer students illustrate a section of higher education not easily categorized in terms of psychological or sociological learning needs. Institutional policies at times act to encourage transfer adjustment processes that incorporate the unique characteristics of this population. Conversely, they struggle to understand and provide for the different characteristics of transfer students.

Review of Previous Research on the Transfer Adjustment Process

The traditional theory of transfer shock (Hills, 1965) remains a focus in the literature on transfer student adjustment. Transfer shock has been defined as a decline in grades during the students' first term at the four-year institution. Hills' research was conducted by reviewing community college data of transferring

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students from 1924 through 1964. He surmised that transfer students would encounter a meaningful decline in their GPA; thus, transfer students should be warned they will probably take longer than the native student to attain degree completion. Numerous researchers of the 1990s continued to discover results supporting the transfer shock theory (Cejda, 1997; Cedja, Kaylor, & Rewey, 1998; Diaz, 1992; Head, 1993; Soltz, 1993).

Notably however, in a meta-analysis of 62 studies conducted, Diaz (1992) reported that while 79 percent of the community college transfer students experienced transfer shock, the magnitude of change in GPA was less than or equal to one-half of one grade point. Diaz's study also revealed that 67 percent of students recovered from transfer shock within their first year at the new institution.

The causes instituting the transfer shock, potentially contributing to students leaving the colleges, remain unclear. Cohen and Brawer (2003, p. 64) suggested a multitude of factors that could contribute to transfer shock and junior-level dropout:

- Closer relationships of native students with faculty, producing more successful advising than that received by transfer students;
- Transfer students entering their specialized courses encountering greater difficulty than with general education courses;
- Community colleges possibly having passed students who would have failed at the four- year institution as freshmen and sophomores; and

- Community college students less prepared for higher academic standards.

Nickens (1972) conversely reported conflicting results within studies of transfer students' GPA's, demonstrating an initial increase and coined the term, "transfer ecstasy." Adding yet another insight, Cejda, Kaylor, and Rewey (1998) further discovered that GPA variances differed among academic disciplines. They argued that educators should use caution when examining increases or decreases in GPA's of transfer students:

> Although students in both the mathematics, sciences, and professions disciplines experienced GPA declines, only the mathematics and sciences decline was statistically significant. Students in both the fine arts and humanities and social sciences disciplines experienced GPA increases, yet neither increase was statistically significant. Shock and ecstasy would better describe instances of decrease or increase that are statistically significant, yet these terms have been used to describe all instances of decrease or increase. (pp. 8-9)

Numerous researchers (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Flaga, 2002; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005; Laanan, 1996, 1998; Nowak, 2004; Rab, 2004; Richie, 2004; Townsend, 1995) discovered alternative factors that may influence transfer students' successes. These included the number of credit hours earned prior to transfer, residence on campus, intensity of high school curriculum, degree of interaction with peers, extracurricular involvement, full-time versus

part-time status, attending multiple institutions, and on/off campus employment. The researchers concluded all of the aforementioned variables illustrated probable indicators of transfer student persistence; thus, the phenomenon of transfer shock cannot be viewed as independent of other variables.

Going beyond transfer shock, the work of Townsend (1995) demonstrated one of the earliest studies to use a qualitative research approach to study students' perceptions of academic environments and the transfer adjustment processes. Her work involved 14 students who transferred from a public urban community college to attend a private university during the academic years of fall 1987 - spring 1992. Five students graduated from the university when she started her data collection in the fall of 1992, and nine were currently enrolled. She interviewed current transfer students and used a survey instrument to elicit responses from transfer graduates.

Townsend's major finding revealed students reported a need to be "self-reliant." Transfer students did not report differences in academic rigor nor perception of the community college as more caring than the university, as Townsend had hypothesized. She wrote, "It may be that the help and encouragement of peers who have made it to the four-year sector are perceived as more accurate and reliable than institutional help" (p. 13). Townsend recommended that university faculty and administrators embrace Astin's (1985) model of "talent development", which places emphasis on student faculty collaboration. She concluded, "If the universities are sincere about increasing the

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enrollment and retention of community college transfer students, institutional endorsement of the 'survival of the fittest' approach to student success [in persistence] needs to be rethought" (p. 15).

Laanan (1996, 1998) researched the social aspects of the transfer adjustment process as well as the academic components studied by Townsend. His quantitative work used a survey instrument focused on between-group analyses. The findings revealed that traditional age and non-traditional age students experienced different transfer adjustment episodes but the students' transfer adjustment process was similar. Further, he stated that students involved in the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Transfer Alliance Program (TAP), and students who were not involved in TAP, experienced no distinguishable variances in adjustment. What was revealed in his findings, as significant differences between groups, were those of racial/ethnic divides. Laanan found the overall level of student satisfaction and student level of academic and social adjustment were unequal among Whites and non-Whites. Non-Whites reported extremely varied experiences in all aspects of the transfer adjustment process. Non-Whites spent more time in clubs, organizations, and academic counseling centers while Whites spent a greater amount of time socializing with friends. White students reported greater interaction with faculty in and out of the classroom as compared to non-White students. Non-White students reported feelings of isolation and being overwhelmed by class size in a significantly greater proportion than did Whites. Non-White students were more

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likely to be first generation college students and listed their goal of attending

UCLA as one to earn a bachelor's degree. White students listed their reason for

attendance at UCLA as a precursor to a graduate degree.

The seminal work of Adelman (1999), *Answers in the Tool Box: Academic Intensity, Attendance Patterns, and Bachelor's Attainment,* was a longitudinal study using multiple regression to explore the effects of 24 variables on degree achievement. Adelman's analysis was of a national cohort of high school students who graduated in 1982; he followed their progress through 1993. Using transcript analysis, he identified the variables of intensity and quality of secondary education combined with students' continuous college enrollment as the most reliable predictors of degree attainment. His unit of analysis focused on the institutions centering attention on the academic intensity and quality of the high school curriculum, and analysis of higher education institutional effects on degree completion.

In *The Toolbox Revisited*, Adelman (2006), tried to determine if the same "hypotheses and analyses based on (…) [the previous] cohort's history would hold up in the story of the slightly overlapping 1992-2000 period (p. xv)." In this study, he continued to use transcript analysis but the focus of his work followed the students as the unit of analysis and not the institution. Much of his analysis remained consistence with his earlier study. One major difference, however, revolved around the complexity of student enrollment patterns. The emerging tracking system of the 1990's allowed new patterns to become apparent.

Adelman found during the 1992-2000 period, vertical transfers from the community college to the four-year college "positively associated with degree completion" (p. xxi). A negative relationship to bachelor attainment arose when students attended multiple institutions. Adelman referred to this correlation as "purposeful migration versus swirling" (p. xxi).

Like Adelman, Rab (2004) accessed the National Educational Longitudinal Survey data of 1988-2000 for her quantitative research. Her hypothesis, however, focused on how the postsecondary pathway of swirling perpetuated social class stratification of students, resulting in inequitable access to higher education. As Laanan (1998) indicated in his work, the increasing diversity of transfer students suggests the value of assessing the particular experiences of minorities to more clearly understand the transfer adjustment process.

Rab used transcript analysis to identify pathways of multi-institutional attendance and to identify the degree attainment rates of minority and lower socioeconomic students. Her findings showed that economically disadvantaged students were more likely than economically advantaged students to engage in swirling. Rab's work supported Adelman's findings that swirling was negatively associated with degree completion and concluded that to devise ways to assist students from all backgrounds persist, the experience of swirling needed to be included in transfer adjustment research.

Using Beach's (1999) concept of consequential transition, Flaga (2002) studied the developing relationship of 35 transfer students to their new university environments. She interviewed students at the end of their first completed semester at the university, and again at the end of their second semester. Flaga's use of student reflection in her study allowed the transfer students' stories to be told in a comprehensive nature. In her analysis, she was able to identify five dimensions of the transfer transition: learning resources, connecting, familiarity, negotiating and integrating.

As Flaga (2006) explained, the dimensions are on a continuum from basic to comprehensive as transfer students internalize their understanding of the academic, social, and physical environment at the university. Her work indicated the movement might not be linear, as students have varied experiences, perceptions, and understandings. The significance of the dimension interrelationships, however, does make a "collective impact" and can "lead to a shift in perception or identity" (p.9).

Exploring community college transfer students' experiences at a large research university, Richie (2004) used case study methodology. She conducted four in-depth interviews with three traditional age students who transferred with junior level standing. The first interview focused on the participants' experiences at the community college. During the second interview, Richie asked students to detail their experiences during their first transfer semester at the university. Interview three allowed students to reflect on the meaning of their experiences at

the university and their perceptions of the transfer adjustment process. The final interview encouraged further reflection with emphasis on the students' perceptions of being a part of the research. A chapter was devoted to each student's story.

Richie found that none of the three students experienced a drop in GPA during their first semester. While each student received different experiences at the community college and the university to share, all were determined to find their "niche" at the university. All three students recognized being a transfer student varied from being a native student, but each told stories of using the university resources to help in their transfer adjustment processes.

As Townsend discovered in 1995, Nowak (2004) also found that transfer students were quite willing to assume responsibility for the paths they choose. The difference in Nowak's study was that transfer students reported the need to more clearly understand the university culture. She interviewed 23 transfer students and eight faculty or administrators who worked directly with the students interviewed. The student voices in this study provided extensive information about students' personal understandings and belief systems, pertaining to social and academic development during the transfer adjustment process.

Richardson and Bender (1987) drew from a study they jointly conducted, receiving support from the Ford Foundation, between January 1984 and November 1985. The research studied community college transfer students or potential transfers in eight urban centers covering eight states. "The questions

that drove this study were designed to assess the potential contribution of articulation and transfer policies to reducing discrepancies between minority and nonminority rates for attaining the baccalaureate degree" (p. 202). Their methodology was primarily case studies but was supplemented with survey instruments. Richardson and Bender's in-depth analysis described the complex problem of underrepresentation of minorities in four-year universities. They acknowledged that this problem remains well-known by policy makers at all levels, and suggest their book is "designed to provide a map of the forest for those who are intimately familiar with the trees" (p. xiii).

The transfer adjustment literature discussed in this section focused primarily on the student as the unit of analysis, similar to the research conducted in this study. It is necessary, however, to change the unit of analysis briefly to discuss articulation agreements and transfer partnerships in their role of assisting the transfer student adjustment process, as suggested by Richardson and Bender.

Community College-University Transfer Partnerships

Articulation agreements include the first steps to formalized agreements to transfer student credits among institutions. These state-level and institution-to-institution agreements widened access to the baccalaureate degree. Ignash and Townsend (2000) developed a framework for best practices going beyond these initial and crucial agreements. They argued that the institution must not distinguish between native and transfer students when creating an environment

that accommodates students' needs despite their postsecondary origin. Ignash and Townsend declared faculty must also be included into the environmental equation for lasting results in true partnerships. In this section, select studies and partnerships will be highlighted, exemplifying Ignash and Townsend's suggested best practices.

Transfer partnerships often consist only of articulation agreements between the community college and the four-year institution, and frequently the institutions provide nothing to further promote transfer beyond these articulation agreements. Researchers have not studied these partnerships through a conceptual qualitative viewpoint that help identify the factors serving as barriers or aids to achieving desired goals. "In sum, we have little understanding of the processes by which community college-university partnerships can be created and sustained" (Kisker, 2005, p.2). To facilitate meaningful partnerships, researchers suggest communication should be maintained with all institutions involved; however, too often this remains difficult to ascertain (Ignash & Townsend, 2000).

Kisker (2005) studied a five-year partnership between a significant California research university and nine surrounding community colleges. Her work used Gulati's (1998) key elements of partnership formation, governance structure, and consequences of the relationship between institutions as the guide. Qualitative data revealed that managing long-term goals on a day-by-day basis remains paramount. The partnerships must expand beyond agreement of

transfer credit to developing an understanding of each institution's unique culture. Cooperative relationships among faculty in all involved institutions emerged as vital to the success of the transfer partnership.

In Kisker's section on the necessity of transfer partnerships, she noted the importance of including students as the unit of analysis when she wrote these statements:

At the very close of every interview, I asked partnership participants to discuss how important they felt community-university transfer partnerships would be in the future. Without exception, all participants felt that collaborative efforts to enhance transfer were extremely valuable and perhaps even critical to the success of [community colleges'] ability to increase transfer (…). Indeed, several two-year college administrators felt the partnership had helped to increase transfer rates over the last five years, in large part because it made the colleges' transfer function more visible to students. As one mentioned, "I think that some of our [students] were not thinking [transfer], and so it helped [these students] to think, oh, I can do it. So I think…lifting their horizons (…) [were] beneficial. Some students won't be able to [succeed], but to at least have [students] think of it as an option….is a substantial change." (p.19)

Exemplary transfer partnerships are not always geographically close. Morphew, Twombly, and Wolf-Wendel (2001) researched the unique collaborative agreement between Smith College, an elite women's college in Massachusetts; Miami-Dade Community College, Florida; and Santa Monica Community College in California. The transfer partnership presented the framework proposed by Ignash and Townsend, as did the previous two case studies. All campuses involved their faculty. While each institution displayed various academic cultures, they all worked in conjunction to fit the students to the best environments for transfer success. Morphew, et al concluded with the following observation:

> In short, based on this study, we believe that community colleges are a 'gold mine' waiting to be discovered by elite colleges as well as other four-year institutions looking for diverse, highly qualified students. (….) [The transfer partnerships] will give students who have otherwise never considered broader options the motivation, confidence, and skills to consider institutions that have been, heretofore, the domain of the middle class. (p.18)

Numerous examples of transfer partnerships exist in the literature but hardly represent the norm. Rather, researchers and stakeholders view these partnerships as anomalies. In this section, this researcher reviewed a few studies as best practice transfer partnerships. This partnership infrastructure may aid in the transfer student's adjustment process as a silent partner.

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Summary

The chapter reviewed the literature on the transfer adjustment process, and revealed the considerable amount of quantitative data available. The review also noted the lack of qualitative research that provides the student's perspective. The purpose of this study was to investigate what occurs during the transfer adjustment process of community college students entering four-year institutions. It sought to identify transfer student retention policies and practices offering the most promising outcomes, as substantiated by the emerging voices of transfer students. To learn more about these areas the literature review was organized into three major sections.

In the first section, "Theories of Adjustment," the models of transition for traditional incoming freshman students; using such works as Astin (1984, 1993, 1999), Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), and Tinto (1997, 1987, 1993) were presented. These were compared to Schlossberg's (1989) "Theory of Marginality" as well as Schlossberg, Lynch and Chickering's (1989) "Model of Adult Learning." The focus concluded with models describing more non-traditional students such as those of Beach (1999), Adelman (2005), and Hagedorn and Prather (2005). The second section, "Review of Previous Research on the Transfer Adjustment Process" analyzed the studies of quantitative data and revealed the underrepresented qualitative studies in the literature. The third section, "Community College-University Transfer

Partnerships," offered research of best practices for successful transfer partnerships from select colleges and universities throughout the United States.

This literature review provided information on what has already been investigated concerning transfer and what needs further investigation. Notably, for decades, several discrepancies existed in studies investigating various racial/ethnic groups of transfer students. Certainly, the literature base contains a plethora of information on articulation and transfer policies conjoined with quantitative variables valuable to student persistence. However, this review revealed a sparser literature base on the actual transfer adjustment process through a "lived" transfer student experience. There appeared a lack of research studies that address issues relevant to actual students' problems and supports as they experienced the transition. Hence, this researcher investigated enhancements and barriers to a successful transfer adjustment process as revealed through the previously missing component of student narratives.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the conceptual framework and details the methodology used in this study. Chapter 4 presents the resulting themes of the initial transfer adjustment process collected through the voices of students. The initial transfer process was critically examined in this investigation and conclusions provided in Chapter 5 may benefit institutions as well as transfer students.

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

This chapter describes how the research was conducted concerning investigation of the transfer student adjustment process. To explore students' experiences in the academic transfer from community colleges to a large four-year research institution, the researcher selected mixed methods of qualitative research: *phenomenology* (hermeneutics), *symbolic interactionism*, and the *case study*. This variation produced a blended tradition of qualitative research with research in action.

The chapter contains four major sections:

1.   Design—discusses each of the qualitative methods within the conceptual framework of this study

2.   Trustworthiness—explains the biases of the researcher and controls by the researcher to produce effective quality and trustworthiness

3.   Data Collection and Analysis—explains how the students were selected, how their voices were relayed to the researcher, and how the emerging themes of experiences were coded and analyzed

4.   Summary—this concludes Chapter 3

Design

The field of qualitative research offers a diverse set of methodologies. Its approach in design remains separate from that of traditional quantitative design. "The traditional [quantitative] approach (…) leads to *hypothesis-testing* research, whereas the qualitative approach leads to *hypothesis-generating* research" (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p.4). This researcher did not test a hypothesis but instead generated new hypotheses about the process of student transfer. The integration of the qualitative mixed methods employed in this research is described and connected in the following sub-sections.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

In hermeneutic phenomenology, through written communication, the participants relate their individual perceptions of a phenomenon that all participants are currently experiencing. Theorists within this philosophy believed that although individuals experience the same phenomenon, the participants' perceptions are unique in interpretation (Creswell, 2005; Patton, 2002). The term "hermeneutic" initially referred to the study of interpretation of Biblical scripture. Recently, its use exists to "interpret the world as though it were a text" (Ehrich, 2003, p. 51). Phenomenology is the study of multiple persons' experiences surrounding a common phenomenon (Ehrich, 2003; Miller & Salkind, 2002; Prasad, 2005). The phenomenologist's goal is to report what the students perceive and not to provide an explanation. Additionally, this data analysis

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employed a method known as "reduction," which is the analysis of students' statements in detail to search for all possible meanings.

The goal of this researcher was to find the essence or core meaning of the individual's perceptions through reduction; this information determined if the essence supplied a common theme or remained specific to each individual. This led to the integration of symbolic interactionism (SI) methodology for more in-depth analysis.

Symbolic Interactionism

In her book, *Crafting Qualitative Research*, Prasad (2005) provided a clear understanding of symbolic interactionism (SI) as the American interpretation of the German mathematician and philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938); he introduced the study of phenomenology in the early 1900s. Tracing the historical origins and development of SI, Prasad highlighted the contributions of George Herbert Mead (1934), and Charles Horton Cooley (1918), who led the emergence of individual sense making when specifying the significance of the individual's role for building his or her personal reality. Prasad continued by describing the contribution of sociologist Herbert Blumer, who named symbolic interactionism when he promoted his philosophy at the University of Chicago. Prasad explained the relevance of Blumer's contribution when she wrote, "In essence, Blumer (1969) translated many of Mead's and Cooley's complex philosophic concepts in ways that made them accessible to social researchers (p.19)". Blumer (1969) defined symbolic interactionism by explaining:

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The term "symbolic interaction" refers, of course, to the

peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place

between human beings. The peculiarity consists in the fact that

human beings interpret or "define" each other's actions instead of

merely reacting to each other's actions. Their "response" is not

made directly to the actions of one another but instead is based on

the meaning which they attach to such actions. Thus, human

interaction is mediated by the use of symbols, by interpretation, or

by ascertaining the meaning of one another's actions. This

mediation is equivalent to inserting a process of interpretation

between stimulus and response in the case of human behavior.

(p.180)

This researcher's view of social construction through individuals'

perceptions resonates with the fundamental nature of SI. Understanding transfer

students' processes when venturing into and persisting through higher education

represented crucial background material for this investigation; this led to

understanding concepts resulting from the symbolic values these students

attached to their experiences.

Office [academic] rituals, organizational policies, managerial styles,

and new technologies are all meaningful in the sense that they

evoke a variety of emotions and responses to them. As a result,

they are also constantly interpreted and made sense of by

managers [administrators], employees [faculty and staff], customers

[students], and others who are exposed to the organization. For

symbolic interactionists, organizational phenomena only come to

life in and through these interpretations, and they have little

existential standing without them. (Prasad, 2005, p. 22)

Symbolic interactionists suggest that social structures viewed as constants

and insurmountable obstacles exist simply as negotiable issues open for change;

primarily, if the individual understanding is transformed into collective

understanding. This leads to the case study methodology where the focus

addresses a more "in-depth description of a process" (Miller & Salkind, 2002,

p.162).

The Case Study

Case studies are bound by time and place for in-depth research. Initially,

this may seem opposed to methods involving hermeneutic phenomenology and

symbolic interactionism; however, within the traditions of social constructivism,

the case study allows the researcher to initiate generating hypotheses that may

make a particular issue more generalizable.

Note, too, that there are two types of qualitative case studies: intrinsic and

instrumental (Creswell, 2005). Intrinsic case studies are unique situations to be

explored; an example may be the study of an exclusive curriculum within a

specific college. Instrumental case studies provide insight into an issue at large;

defined by this study as the transfer adjustment process of community college

students to large four-year institutions. Hartley (2004) explained the benefits of case study within organizational learning with the following affirmation:

Case studies are useful where it is important to understand how the organizational and environmental context is having an impact on or influencing social processes. Case studies can be useful in illuminating behaviour that may only be fully understandable in the context of the wider forces operating within or on the organization, whether these are contemporary or historical. (p. 325)

Moreover, using multiple research methods allowed the researcher to develop a hybrid methodology. Rubin and Rubin (2005) referred to this type of case study usage as "elaborated case studies," as opposed to "investigative interviewing" (pp.6-7). The elaborated case study interview allows the researcher to provide an explanation or understanding of the phenomenon, while investigative interviewing addresses a much narrower scope.

Research Questions

This qualitative research, employing a phenomenological approach with integration of symbolic interactionism coupled with a case study analysis, examined students' perceptions of the transfer process at a large research university. The study compared students' perceptions of beneficial and deterrent policies and experiences. The case study approach allowed the researcher to investigate the transfer adjustment process by identifying the underlying themes

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collected from participants; additionally, it drew research to answer these questions:

- What do transfer students perceive as a successful transfer process?
- From the transfer student perspective, what supports are needed to accommodate a successful transfer process?
- From the transfer student perspective, what barriers inhibit successful transfer?

Trustworthiness

The "epoche" of phemenologists asks the researcher to remove personal beliefs enabling students' voices to be fully understood (Ehrich, 2003, p.49). The researcher fully embraced the significance of these tenets. Thus, this study hopes to contribute to the understanding of the transfer adjustment process and why some students continue to leave college prior to obtaining baccalaureate degrees; moreover, the researcher's intent is to present the findings through thematic coding of students' perceptions. A code-checker was employed and while undertaking this process, the researcher asked students to review the analysis of their comments for accuracy and meaning, providing data trustworthiness.

Providing reliability in coding was crucial to final analysis. For this reason, a graduate student pursuing her doctorate in Measurement and Evaluation was asked to read the entire journal entries and identify common themes from students' journals. The only difference noted between the researcher and the

code-checker was that students' journal entries suggested multiple themes. These differences were reconciled between the two and integrated into a comprehensive final analysis. The researcher and coder reviewed their findings and fully agreed on the emerging themes.

To generate hypotheses while simultaneously protecting the trustworthiness, the researcher followed the six guiding principles outlined by Silverman (2005, pp.105-107) when collecting data:

1. *Begin with 'What' and 'How' Questions*: Avoid the temptation to rush to explanation with *'Why?'* questions.

2. *Chronology:* Gather data over time to thoroughly investigate processes of change.

3. *Context:* Consider how data is contextualized in the particular organizational setting.

4. *Comparison:* Divide data into different sets and compare each one.

5. *Implications:* Consider how recent discoveries may relate to broader issues.

6. *Lateral thinking:* Explore the relations between apparently diverse models, theories, and methodologies.

Participants

The researcher identified transfer students through the university admission's office and community college transfer advisors. To participate in this study, transfer students must have completed at least 60 transferable credit

hours and entered the university at junior level status. According to the university registrar, 581 incoming transfer students from the two feeder schools being studied enrolled for the spring 2007 semester.

Table 3.1 shows the total number of incoming community college transfer students from the two feeder schools (n=581) used in this study. These two schools represented 54% of incoming community college transfer students spring 2007 semester (581out of 1,074). Fifty-seven students participated in the research, which represents 10% of the two feeder schools' transferring population. The numbers from each school are as follows: Feeder School A (n= 366) and Feeder School B (n= 215). The percentages from each school, compared to the study population, showed close representation of feeder school percentages to those in the study with less than a 7% differential: Feeder School A, 63% and study participants 68%; Feeder School B, 37%, and study participants 32%.

Table 3.1: Feeder Schools Transfer Students to the University Spring 2007 in comparison to Study Participants

Total from Two Feeder Community Colleges	N=581	54% of Total Population	Study Respondents	N=57	10% of Feeder Population
Feeder School A	N=366	63%		N=39	68%
Feeder School B	N=215	37%		N=18	32%

Student demographics were compared to the general student population of incoming community college transfer students during spring 2007 for sample population bias. Table 3.2 shows that the bias was limited. The bias of greater than 10% occurred in the following four areas:

- Female students in study 74% versus 60% for population

- Male students in study 26% versus 39% for population

- White non-Hispanic students in the study 79% versus 67% for population

- Nursing Majors in study 11% versus 2% for population

All other differences were less than 10% between study participants and general incoming community college transfer student population with 60 or more transferrable credits.

Table 3.2: Comparisons of the Total Incoming Community College Transfer Student population Spring 2007 semester to Study Participants.

Total Florida Community College Transfers	N	%	Study Respondents	N	%
	1074			57	
Gender					
Female	648	60%		42	74%
Male	422	39%		15	26%
Not Reported	4	1%		0	0%
Race/Ethnicity					
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3	0%		0	0%
Asian/Pacific Islander	40	4%		2	4%
Black Non-Hispanic	125	12%		5	9%
Hispanic	131	12%		4	7%
Non-Resident Alien	29	3%		0	0%
Unknown	28	3%		1	2%
White Non-Hispanic	720	67%		45	79%
Major					
Arts & Science	457	43%		20	35%
Business	301	28%		12	21%
Education	146	14%		11	19%
Engineering	78	7%		3	5%
Health/Public Health	36	3%		3	5%
Nursing	19	2%		6	11%
Visual & Performing Arts	11	1%		1	2%
Undeclared	26	2%		1	2%

Additionally, self-reported demographics (see Appendix B for questionnaire) of student participants revealed 60% (n=34) were full-time students enrolled in 12 or more credit hours with 40% (n=23) attending part-time. Most students (74% n=42) were employed and of those 40% (n=17) worked 40 or more hours per week, 33% (n=14) worked between 21 and 35 hours and 26% (n=11) worked 20 hours or less. The participants' ages ranged from 53 to 20 with 56% (n=32) being 25 or older and 44% (n=25) being 24 or younger. The majority (70% n=40) had no children living at home. Thirty-two (56%) were single and 25 (44%) were married. When reporting number of prior institutions attended 58% (n=33) listed one, 21% (n=12) had attended two, 16% (n=9) had been enrolled at three different institution, 4% (n=2) at four other schools, and 1% (n=1) at five previous institutions. All but three of the 57 participating students attended classes at the university's main campus. The researcher noted no differences in the perceptions of those three student students attending regional campuses from the 54 students attending the main campus.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher requested community college transfer students contact information from the university admissions office; this was performed once the transfer students' applications were processed in January 2007. Each incoming student with 60 or more transferable credits was invited through email to participate in the study. Prior to receipt of this contact information, the researcher

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identified transfer students through advisors at the community colleges. This was

accomplished by making informational presentations at programs such as the

university's College of Education's Community College Advising Forum during

fall of 2006. The researcher also provided the research recruitment brochure at

informational sessions on the study through admitted transfer student resource

days held at the university—one in December, 2006, and the other in January,

2007. Individual college advisors within the university were asked to provide the

recruitment brochure to incoming community college transfer students within their

respective colleges.

During October, 2006, requests were sent to each of the two feeder

schools asking that recruitment information on this study be forwarded to their fall

2006 graduates. One school accepted and mailed a letter to each of their

forthcoming fall graduates' home address (see Appendix C). This letter and the

aforementioned recruitment procedures yielded 27 qualified respondents

interested in participating while still attending their respective community

colleges. The researcher recruited an additional 30 participants for the research

during January, 2007, bringing the total study population to 57 participants. All

students persisted through the entire data collection phase.

Data collection points occurred at two to three week intervals throughout

the last half of fall 2006 while students were still attending the community college.

This data collection continued at the same intervals throughout the first half of the

spring 2007 semester at the university. Students had the option of choosing

pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The researcher asked students participating in the study probing questions and invited them to respond through e-journaling. This identified students' perceptions as their transfer experiences occurred. The researcher collected personal and institutional supports and barriers throughout the study. Personal and institutional circumstances are reported separately in the results section of Chapter 4. The researcher developed the questions using the guidelines set forth from Mitchell and Coltrinari (2001) in exploring student e-journal writing:

- Descriptive: What occurred that is significant to you in your transfer adjustment process?

- Metacognitive: What were your perceptions and feelings?

- Analytic: What do you understand as the reasoning surrounding this issue?

- Evaluative: What were the implications for you?

- Reconstructive: What changes would you recommend?

The interviews were held in an asynchronous mode to allow students to answer at any time in the two-three week time span. The researcher followed up with individual students for clarification and explanation. The continuous redesign of questions allowed the researcher to build on new findings and emerging themes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). "The aim is to use the asynchronous, time-delay nature of email to facilitate reflexivity in communication, enabling reflection and consideration" (Morgan & Symon, 2004, p.23). This promoted a richer research

development through students' self-reflection in the social construction of the transfer process.

Ethics of E-journaling

Upon the Internal Review Board approval, students sent written correspondence (e-journaling) to the researcher's university email address, located on a secure server. Each student who participated acknowledged receipt and understanding of consent forms (see Appendix D), that detailed any known risks associated with this method of interviewing. Morgan and Symon (2004) scrutinized:

Qualitative interviews themselves vary by depth, structure, and time, so electronic interviews will also vary. Perhaps rather than (…) comparing them to face-to-face interviews we should consider them as a new symbolic form of "oral-text" exchange, with strengths and weaknesses that should be considered in relation to the research purpose, as with any other method. (p.32)

The researcher extensively used this method of data collection when teaching classes. The researcher acknowledges that using the asynchronous method of e-journaling allows the students to present their perceptions through reflection. This reduces the pressure and stress exerted by traditional interviewing methods. Thus, the asynchronous method fosters an in-depth research relationship with the students. While the use of e-journaling is not as prevalent in educational research, it has been used successfully in organizational and sociological

research (Chen & Hinton, 1999; Hine, 2000; Illingworth, 2001; Mann & Stewart, 2000).

Coding Procedure

The researcher followed the outline of Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) in analyzing the journal entries. While they advocate there is no right or wrong method for coding when considering theory development, a systematic approach provides for greater trustworthiness of research findings. The process began with the researcher acknowledging that data interpretation must be supported with text. The next step included removing the data that did not relate to the research endeavor. Students inevitably "address their *own* concerns, rather than *yours*" (p.33).

Raw text is the lowest level of coding, and from there it follows a continuum to a more abstract level of emerging theory. Beginning with the raw text, the researcher identified relevant text and reduced it to manageable proportions. Subsequently, repeating ideas were identified by noting recurrent words or phrases related to research concerns of the transfer adjustment process. Auerbach and Silverstein cautioned that these repeating ideas might be "within" groups or "across" groups (p.33). Moreover, the researcher identified themes among repeating ideas and multiple themes that emerged once the data were analyzed.

There were three decision rules used by the researcher when developing criteria for the selection of data. A theme was included if:

- mentioned by multiple individuals and concurred with previous research,

- a majority of individuals indicated it was significant or

- key respondents with in-depth e-journal entries responded to the theme (Oliver, 2004).

Additionally, theoretical constructs were proposed in the coding as an abstract form of grouping the themes. At this stage, the research concerns of the actual transfer adjustment process were addressed. The theoretical constructs were linked to the college adjustment literature from Chapter 2. The theoretical frameworks from the literature were compared and contrasted to the emerging findings. Table 3.3 delineates the six-step procedure of the coding process. The steps are divided into three major phases: 1) making the text manageable, 2) hearing what was said, and 3) developing theory.

Table 3.3 Six Steps for Constructing a Theoretical Narrative from Text (Making the Text Manageable)

1. Explicitly state research concerns and theoretical framework.

2. Select the relevant text for further analysis. Do this by reading through the raw text considering Step 1. Then highlight relevant text.

(Hearing What Was Said)

3. Record repeating ideas by grouping together related passages of relevant text.

4. Organize themes by grouping repeating ideas into coherent categories.

(Developing Theory)

5. Develop theoretical constructs by grouping themes into more abstract concepts consistent with the theoretical framework.

6. Create a theoretical narrative by retelling the participant's story in terms of theoretical constructs.

(From *An Introduction to Coding and Analysis: Qualitative Data* (p.43) by C. F. Auerbach & L. B. Silverstein (2003), New York: New York UP.)

The final procedure was to produce an organized platform of theoretical constructs into a theoretical narrative. This narrative used the students' stories to form an association among the researcher's questions, the literature base, and the theory that emerged from the students' lived experiences. Throughout the coding procedures, the researcher collaborated with the students to ensure integrity of analysis and triangulation of data.

Summary

In this chapter, the use of qualitative methodologies was discussed in relation to the research questions under study; the rationale for each methodology was presented. The methods of qualitative research used in this study were, hermeneutics phenomenology, symbolic interaction and case study.

The researcher disclosed the manner in which biases were controlled for trustworthiness of data. This included the use of a code checker to independently read the e-journals of all participants and perform thematic coding. The researcher and code checker's results were compared and reconciled any discrepancies. Students were also asked to verify the researcher's interpretation of their journal entries.

Participant demographics were provided and compared to the overall incoming community college transfer students' demographics for sample bias. The study population was noted to be representative of the two feeder school's transfer population to the university as well as the total transfer population to the university.

A detailed section of the coding procedure was included regarding the procedure for which data collection emerged into hypothesis generation. This procedure began with raw text grouped by repeating ideas then categorized into emerging themes. Decision rules provided transparency to the coding. The themes were further separated into three coherent phases of the initial transfer adjustment process. Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the data. Chapter 5 provides further meaning and implications from the results of the research.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine through a phenomenological lens the perceptions of incoming community college transfer students to a large research university. The researcher asked transfer students to relay their perceptions of supportive and detrimental policies and experiences as they encountered the common phenomenon of the transfer process. Students responded to the questions posed by the researcher through e-journals. The qualitative methods used included not only phemenology but also symbolic interactionism and case study.

This chapter will present the result of common themes in addressing the research questions:

- What do transfer students perceive as a successful transfer process?

- From the transfer student perspective, what supports are needed to accommodate a successful transfer process?

- From the transfer student perspective, what barriers inhibit successful transfer?

Student quotes are used throughout the chapter to support the emerging themes. The researcher chooses to report the quotes from students' e-journals entries verbatim, exactly as they were written with all spelling, and grammatical

errors and idiomatic expression in tact. This was done to preserve the students'
authentic voices.

The chapter is organized into five major sections. The first section
presents students' perceptions of a successful transfer beginning with the
students' expectations while still enrolled at the community college. The
researcher began by asking students, "What do you perceive as a successful
transfer"? There were 27 community college students e-jornaling the researcher
prior to beginning classes at the university spring 2007. Transfer students'
expectations of a successful transfer presented two major areas of concern: 1)
the academic environment and 2) "fitting in" to the university culture.

The researcher further presents in this first section transfer students'
perceptions of a successful transfer upon initial entrance to the university. An
additional 30 students were recruited during the first month of classes bringing
the total number of participants to 57. The themes that emerged during these first
weeks of the semester were: 1) experiences of marginality, 2) struggling with the
need for guidance versus feelings of entitlement and 3) learning to navigate the
system.

Using Mitchell and Coltrinari's (2001) guidelines, while exploring student
 e-journal writing, the first two sections asked the open-ended (descriptive)
question: "What has occurred (or what do you expect to occur) that is significant
in your transfer process adjustment process?" The researcher coupled the
previous question with the (meta-cognitive) question: "What were your

perceptions and feelings?" The second section presents results of research question two in relation to supports students' perceived needed to accommodate a successful transfer process. The four themes that emerged were: 1) personal attention, 2) academic integration, 3) social interaction and 4) technology.

The third section presents results for the third research question involving perceived barriers to transfer by students. This section encompassed Mitchell and Coltrinari's (2005) analytic and evaluative questions, "What do you understand as the reasoning surrounding this issue?" and "What were the implications for you?"There was only one theme that emerged as prominent and it was the lack of communication in and between academic institutions.

The fourth section summarizes students' voices after the midterm mark of their first semester enrolled at the university. At this time, the students answered Mitchell and Coltrinari's (2005) final guiding question from a reconstructive stance, "What changes would you recommend?" Respondents identified four themes: 1) transfer advisors, 2) transfer orientations, 3) transfer checklists and 4) a balance of academic rigor and personal identity. The fifth section reports students' perceived personal versus institutional supports and barriers. A summary concludes this chapter.

In this analysis of results, it is crucial to remember that the study focus was on the initial transfer adjustment process. The initial phase is defined in this study as the time incoming transfer students are still attending their community college through the mid-term mark of the first semester of class attendance at the

university (November 2006 - March 2007). The researcher found differences of perception among traditional age students (18-24) and non-traditional age or older students (25 and over). While age was the only reported distinct variable with differences at this stage, the other variables, 1) gender, 2) race/ethnicity 3) part-time versus full-time enrollment status, 4) part-time versus full-time employment status 5) marital status 6) number of children, 7) number of prior institutions attended, and 8) declaration of major, may prove notable differences as transfer adjustment time elapses.

What do transfer students perceive as a successful transfer process?

The decision to include a specific theme was determined by reading each student's e-journal adhering to the criteria for the selection of data proposed by Oliver (2004). A theme was included if:

- mentioned by multiple individuals and concurred with previous research,
- a majority of individuals indicated it was significant or
- key respondents with in-depth e-journal entries responded to the theme.

From this point, the researcher discovered repeating ideas by grouping passages of relevant text. This grouping of text laid the basis for naming the themes. The researcher then grouped the themes into categories or phases as they are referred to in this study. A code-checker reviewed the e-journals using the same process and all discrepancies between the code-checker and the researcher were reconciled. The researcher began the study by asking transfer students about their expectations of a successful transfer process prior to entering the

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university. Twenty-seven of the total 57 respondents began e-journaling prior to the commencement of spring 2007 classes. This first stage includes students' expectations and their perceptions when first entering the university.

Expectations

The researcher asked the future transfer students, "What do you expect to occur at the university that will be significant in your transfer process?" Incoming transfer students' responses began by relaying a common thread of cautiousness in changing educational institutions. A representative journal entry stated, "I don't like change so anytime I have to change I tend to get worried." Two prominent themes emerged during this expectation phase of change; the students' perception of the university's "academic environment" and the students' concerns of "fitting in" the university culture.

Academic Environment. All of the initial 27 students (100%) perceived academic studies at the university would be distinctly different compared to their community colleges. One student explains, "I expect the work load to be different at [the university], don't know exactly how or why, but I do expect it to be heavier…. I expect [the university] to make the students more accountable for their work." Eleven students (40%) of the initial 27 were older students (25 and over). Seventy-three percent (n=8) of those non-traditional age students worried that most university students would be much younger than themselves. Older students, however, were also expecting the university academic atmosphere to be more sophisticated. One 36-year-old student stated, "I hope to lose the high

school atmosphere that a lot of students at [my community college] have carried forward." Another respondent, age 32, elaborated:

I imagine the [community college and the university] will be different for the most obvious reason, [the university] is much larger. Considering it is a University it will cater to and naturally encompass a younger demographic. I believe community colleges are primarily made up of younger kids mixed with an older group who are returning to school. Universities seem to be a majority of students that are attending college right out of high school. I think I expect the atmosphere at [the university] to be more like the night classes at the community college, I'm here to get an education, and better myself. (…) I have attended both day and evening classes, and they are totally different [at the community college]. The night classes seem more set on getting the education, and the day classes feel like the students are playing at it. Is it like that in (…) courses at [the university]?

Fitting In. Another theme that arose from the data was students' concerns with "fitting in" the university culture. This theme was prominent in 93% (n=25) of all initial respondents. One student shared, "Right now, I am overwhelmed at the size of [the university] and I am sure that I will be lost. Hopefully, I will start to see some of the same people everyday and it will start to become a smaller community in a larger setting."

Students viewed themselves similar to Adelman's (2005) description of migrants or settlers moving into a new community. Most perceived that they would have little time to establish their niche. Their expectations showed apprehension of possible culture shock but also an underlying belief that the transfer would go well. Students from all age groups expected the university to provide services to help in their transitions (93%, n=25). A student journal entry affirmed:

It seems that [the university] has an effective system. Everything is organized and structured. Each program has its own space with well-established and knowledgeable individuals. [The university] is much bigger [than the community college] and offers many different services on site to help students.

Representative of several students, another student surmised, "… success at [the university] will come from the university's student services especially the opportunity to participate in the clubs, in general being able to take part in the overall services [outside of classes] offered the students. "

Initial Entrance to the University

Beach's (1999) model of consequential transition formed the underlying framework for the analysis of the respondents' stories upon their initial entrance to the university. Beach suggests that a changing environment leads students to struggle to discover their sense of self within new activities. An illustrative journal entry from one student reveals, "I sometimes feel that as a transfer student, I am

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pretty much forgotten about. I was handed a piece of paper that took me to a website, and a map of the campus, and then kicked to the wind to fend on my own."

The first stage encompassing the initial entrance to the university produced three emergent themes from students' perspectives: 1) their experiences of marginality, 2) their struggles with the need for guidance combined with feelings of entitlements, and 3) their learning to navigate the university system.

Experiences of marginality. The researcher continued throughout the first month of classes to recruit incoming community college transfer students to join the study. Thirty additional students responded, which brought the total number of respondents to 57. While only the initial 27 provided expectations prior to entering university classes, all 57 respondents provided "lived" experiences over the following 12 weeks. Not all students' responses contributed information that could be coded into each emerging theme. Fifty of the 57 (88%) however, provided information that was coded to contribute to at least one theme.

The researcher asked transfer student during the first weeks of classes, "What has occurred that is significant to you in your transfer adjustment process?" Thirty-four of the 57 transfer students (60%) provided responses suggesting feelings of marginality. Several students exhibited their feeling of marginality in relation to the physical size of the university. One student responded:

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So far, (first day) it's been really difficult. Getting lost was the

biggest problem! It seemed as if everyone else knew where they

were going and how to get around campus, and I was the only one

wandering around buildings in circles.

Another student answered:

I have been finding myself getting lost. It seems that I am to

automatically know what to do. I feel like I've missed important

information, but I have no idea what it is. Largeness of [the]

university is overwhelming at first, very big culture shock. I feel like I

am really just out there on my own [to] wander about.

Other students addressed the feelings of marginality within the university

classroom. As this journal entry explains:

I am in two classes where [there are over 200 students]. This is a

first for me. I am just a number, which is very different and

something I don't like. I do miss [my community college] and like

the accessibility I had to my teachers and other classmates for

help…. After a month, I don't like [the university]. I enjoyed

my community college a lot.

Of the 34 respondents including this theme in their writings, 13 (41%)

respondents over age 25 and 21 (84%) respondents age 24 and younger wrote

of the emotional distance they experienced. No differences within this group was

noted by the researcher with the exception that only non-traditional age students (n=8) referred to their own age in responses.

The following excerpts are representative of the non-traditional age students' journal entries:

- I feel completely alone and on my own at [the university]. I feel like I should be a mind-reader just to know everything I need to know to succeed at [the university]. I, for the first time in decades, feel like a little fish in a big pond. (Age 35+)

- I am a little overwhelmed and feel pretty lonely. Trying to find a niche for myself. In two of my classes, I am, by far, the oldest person in the room and that includes the teachers…. That threw me for quite a loop. (Age 45)

- I think it can be very overwhelming transferring in from a smaller atmosphere. You are entering in where a lot of people have been in residence for a couple of years and they have already achieved the school spirit and know the ins and out's (so to speak) and you're the newcomer. That has been a little hard, but it might also be because I am an older student. (Age 36)

This study showed no differences in students' feelings of marginality from those discussed as central concepts in Schlossberg's 1989 work, *Marginality and mattering: key issues in building community*. Students in this study were seeking what she described as central themes: attention, importance, ego extension, dependence, and appreciation. Her work led to the next emerging theme where

students struggled with their dependence needs, uniquely coupled with feelings of entitlement.

Guidance versus Entitlement. In addition to the issue of marginality previously discussed, the prompt "What has occurred that is significant to you in your transfer adjustment process?" students' answers revealed their conflict with guidance and entitlement. Fifty-two of the 57 (92%) respondents' answers exhibited characteristics of this theme within their stories.

The journal entries revealed that during the transfer process, students actively engaged in learning the university processes. However, the writings clearly demonstrated that the students strongly desired more help than they perceived they were receiving. Often students' journal entries were long and repetitive. The feelings of dissatisfaction mimicked voices "calling for help" while unable or untrusting of their ability to become more self-reliant. The initial entries extended the notion that respondents wanted university personnel, not other students, to offer guidance for a successful transfer. A student exemplified the feelings when she wrote:

> As a transfer student to [the university], I found myself starting the
>
> semester with more questions than answers. No one said, "Hey, if
>
> you have any problems or questions about what something is,
>
> where to go, or how to use something or find something, call me".

She continued by disclosing her feeling of entitlement and offering a solution to the problem that was representative of others' journal entries:

I think there should be a few people in each department designated

specifically to help with the transfer process. Each one could be

assigned X number of transfer students, and then send out an e-

mail to those students saying, "e-mail me or call me with any

questions you have about anything...I'm here to help you." Then the

transfer student would have someone to ask instead of feeling lost

or clueless and not knowing where to go or how to start.

Some students' voices manifested a greater degree of immediate frustration:

I had a hard time setting up my (…) account, and the help desk

said, "Did you watch all of the tutorials?" If I had time to spend

hours on the web watching tutorials, I probably wouldn't have been

there asking for help.

This theme of struggling with the need for guidance combined with

feelings of entitlement carried forward to the classroom setting, as the feelings of

marginality had done. One student's writing maintained:

The professors do not seem to be easy to have face-to-face

meetings with; I find this very difficult to handle. The professors

believe that all of their students have been at [the university] for

awhile, and therefore do not elaborate on instructions, office

buildings, or how to get into contact with them.

Frequently students perceived that faculty would offer little assistance and

issued warning to future transfer students, "Professors can think too much of

themselves [and] (…) some are very hard to work with because they will not explain on your level. Be prepared to do things more for yourself than you have had to in the past."

Several respondents were concerned classes would not be conducted in the manner to which they were accustomed: "I'm kind of at a loss because there is no study guide for [my class]. The professor says she doesn't make the tests too hard, but hard to her or me?" A 52-year-old student commented on the use of teaching assistants, "The professors are all doctoral students, which really surprised and disappointed me some. This could be because I'm older and paying my own way, but I thought when you paid your tuition, you would get professors, not additional students."

Navigating the System. As stated in Chapter 2, "Transfer students from community colleges are not a homogeneous group. The complexity of the group does not allow application of a single psychological or sociological theoretical model (Educational Policy Institute, (EPI), 2005)". This reasoning guides the understanding of the final theme in transfer students' initial entrance to the university, that of learning to navigate the university system.

The theme of "navigating the system" includes transfer students' experiences in registering for class, changing majors and in general learning how student services at the university works. A number of students commented especially about the course registration process at the university. One student wrote:

I just had a problem with the registration process; I am the primary

income in my household and often feel like I am shunned from the

(…) department for being a part time night student. Registration

was not individualized or helpful. In the (…) department the advisor,

(…) informed us that he had pre-registered everyone based on their

transfer credits and majors, he said he used to spend individual

time with each of the students and would stay past nine and found

it best that since our orientation was so late to pre-register us. I

asked him about the "pre-registration" and he confirmed (as he had

said in the past) that if you wanted to be a (….) major at [the

university] that it was a full time job and you really shouldn't have a

9-5 job. He had registered me for classes that I would have liked to

take, but with my job, would conflict. After orientation, I went online

and dropped all 14 of my hours, and registered for one night class,

so his time and efforts were wasted in pre-registering me [because

he never took the time to get to know me].

Commonly repeated ideas within the e-journals were ones that dealt with the

registration process. The student above shared her unique way of having her

needs met during the registration process. Several students provided examples

of how they personally navigated the university system to register for classes in

search of a successful initial transfer process.

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At the university in this study, students register for classes through an online process. Based upon their credits earned from freshman level to senior, students are given progressively earlier times to register. The earlier the student's registration time, the better chance a student has of getting into a particular class before it closes. However, junior level transfer students receive no registration priority in registration; instead they are given late registration times as are all incoming transfer students. This is in contrast to native students with junior level status.

Transfer students quickly learn from native students that a friend (with an earlier registration time) may register for a class and "hold it" for the transfer student. The friend will then drop the class on the transfer student's registration time and the transfer student immediately takes the "now" available seat. Another "way around the registration system" one student wrote was becoming a part of the Honors College simply to get the classes she needed: "…it has been a very big help because it is much easier and quicker to see an advisor and they can register you right away without waiting for your assigned registration time."

In addition to the registration process, students wrote of other ways they found helpful in becoming a part of the university culture. One student explained of navigating the system by changing majors largely based on the lack of attention from one college. He shared:

The transfer counselors at the college of (…) were awful. This

experience helped make my decision to not attend [the] college of

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(…). I am working on my BA in (…) now…. I am truly excited about

this decision. The advisors in the (…) department have been

wonderful. I finally feel like a part of [the university]!

Successful transfer as one student simply stated: "…is when everything goes

smoothly."

What supports are needed to accommodate a successful transfer process?

The second stage of e-journaling was during the first eight weeks of the

semester. The researcher asked students to identify supports needed to

accommodate their transfer process. During this phase four themes emerged, 1)

personal attention, 2) academic interaction, 3) social interaction, and 4)

technology.

Personal Attention

When probed for what supports the transfer students perceived they

needed, an overwhelming 95% (54 of 57) mentioned the need for personal

attention: "The most supportive thing at [the university] for me has been getting

help from people." Echoing this, a journal entry read, "Create a hands-on and

individual-based environment where the student feels like a person and not a

number." Reiterating this theme another student explained:

Perhaps each department should have people there to help transfer

students by answering their questions and walking them through

things that they are clueless about at any time throughout the first

semester at least. I am sure there are people who are willing or

available to do that, but I don't know who they are.

This theme emerged in traditional as well as non-traditional age students. Older students, however, were more precise in defining their individualized request as noted in 63% of the students' journal entries (n=20), One respondent wrote:

I believe that the supports needed to facilitate a successful transfer

include having someone to ask questions to and who is truly

interested in how you are doing. Possibly even an assigned advisor

would be helpful so that you have a chance to get to know the

person. I wanted to see a woman advisor because I thought I would

be more comfortable with that, but my appointment was cancelled

and rescheduled with a man (not my choice). (Age 40)

The responses to this prompt clearly showed students' desire for personalized support but also included observations of fellow students' dilemmas in 16 of the 57 students' journals (28%) as acknowledged in this student's journal entry:

[A needed support is] someone to help when you feel you've

reached a point where you are not sure you are where you should

be. I have watched this happen to another student, and wish it

didn't have to happen, I believe she would have made a great

teacher (better than me), but I think she is dropping out of the

program.

Within this theme emerged the need of support from other students (61% n=32). Guidance from fellow students was brought to the forefront as students wrote of finding their own paths. A representative journal entry declared:

Talking to other [university] students has significantly helped me to understand the transfer process from a community college to the university. I personally have co-workers who also attend [the university] and they told me what, when and how to do certain things on campus.

Students also mentioned the academic resources on campus that provide one-on-one services in their e-journal writing (32% n=18). This journal entry explained, "I go twice a week to the free tutoring center. I think this is one of the best [supports] I have found. They help me in every subject and take the time for you to understand the material."

Academic Integration

The need for the students to understand the academic environment was without question a crucial issue. Of the 50 students (88%) who commented on this theme, the reflections were almost evenly divided between excitement and worry about the academic challenges they were about to face. Fifty-six percent (n=28) voiced excitement when discussing the challenge of taking their academic pursuit to a higher level:

[Professors] challenge me in ways that I never thought possible. As a (…) student, they have opened my eyes to what needs to be

done (…). They have made me re-evaluate how I study and how I look at the classes in general. I am constantly being challenged and learning new things.

Students described professors introducing new ways of learning:

My professors are always looking for answers in our discussions concerning material we read in class. They want us to look beyond the box and understand what the speaker is trying to say to its audience. They are helpful and encouraging. (…) I have tons more reading [at the university] than I did at the community college. But I like it.

Another respondent furthered this theme:

I enjoy in-class discussions, especially about current events in (…). I like the fact that I'm not drowned in testing. Instead, we do projects and writing assignments that allow us to think outside the box. It's very refreshing to not learn solely from the text and pure lectures.

Conversely, 44% (n=22) felt overwhelmed with their studies and voiced concerns of handling the workload. As this student shared, "I feel intimidated and a little scared. I am doubting my abilities. I don't know if I will be able to handle the heavy work load." Another journal entry revealed a related reoccurring concern, "The workload at [the university] is double that of [my community college]. Most professors at [the university] think that the only class we are taking is their class. I wish they were more considerate."

Social Interaction

To examine the social interaction of incoming transfer students', the researcher inquired about students' involvement outside of class. Responses with this theme surfaced in 26 or 51% of journal entries. This probing brought forth a wide range of responses. One very socially motivated student wrote:

I constantly try to dive into student involvement, I've found myself much more busy due to the fact that there are a lot more opportunities to participate in than at [my community college]: Student Business Organization, Student Government, Residence Hall Council, Intervarsity, and hell, even Barbeque club!

Another respondent cautioned, "Students better be careful because there is so much to do in extracurricular activities that it's hard to study."

Numerous students turned their attention to social interaction in terms of study groups, as the following student's writing illustrated:

This probably has been the biggest adjustment for me. I don't know anyone in my classes. I come from a small town where I know so many people and see someone I know everywhere I go. Not knowing anyone has been a new experience for me. I did however last week meet with one of my study groups in one of the girl's dorms. This was fun and I was excited to be able to interact with other students in my class.

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Some students reported alternative meetings:

> The academic environment is much more involved at [the university]. Approaching the first set of tests, people are gathering in study groups and interactive study support. In 3 of 4 of my classes I will or have met with students to study, this is different from the Community College. The environment at [the university] is also study friendly in that I have many locations on campus where I feel comfortable sitting and studying with others. I have also noticed clubs for many different interest groups who meet in order to further their academic success. These points, to me, [are] what make this school a University rather a Community College.

A respondent (age 51) recognized:

> My being an older returning student puts me in a unique category making it a little more difficult for me to "hang out" with other students. That being said, I have met other students from my classes in the library for study time, usually in small groups of 2 or 3, but nothing on a regular basis. There are so many students on campus and so many seem to do their own thing. It's very casual. I like the way that everyone can "march to the beat of their own drummer". Getting together to study is often very spontaneous and may just be a few students randomly sitting on a bench going through notes.

In contrast, some non-traditional age students rebuffed the need for socialization: "You have to know that I didn't transfer to [the university] for the social aspect. I work in a job where I can't advance without a degree. I have kids so I'm looking to learn as much as I can in my classes, get as good of a grade as I can, then go home." (Age 28)

As Prasad (2005) contended, "Our understanding of important social realities such as schooling systems, (…) , is negotiated with others on an ongoing basis in different everyday situations" (p.23).

One 53 year old student describes:

As you might imagine, transfer students tend to gravitate toward one another at [the university]. This term I've run into several from [my community college], and a few more from other schools. The one thing we all immediately have in common is "academic shock" based on previous experience and expectations. It's very hard to accept and adjust to the fact that [the university's] teachers are more aloof, rigid, and less personable. This isn't a reflection on them personally or their teaching capabilities, only that their attitudes make learning far more difficult than necessary. Many of us are very hesitant to approach teachers with problems because we assume they don't have time to hear about it (they always seem too busy), don't care (don't want to take a personal interest) or expect you to figure things out totally on your own, or

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afraid that it will back-fire (affecting their grades). There are students who drop classes because they feel they can't communicate with their teachers--as they were accustomed to doing at other schools.

In order to investigate metacognition, that is students' perceptions about social interaction in the new environment (as discussed in Chapter 2), the researcher asked the above student, "What are your perceptions and feelings of this issue?" His reply while dealing with academics is exemplary of Beach's (1999) beliefs that individuals develop their perceptions by conferring with others, "group think". The student wrote:

A few of us have come to term this "age bias methodologies". Some of the classes are being taught by methods that can only be fully utilized (or appreciated) if you're 20-years-old with a perfect memory. Information is presented at such a break-neck pace that anyone over the age of 20 is put at a major disadvantage. Now, this isn't to say we want or expect the class to be easier or less technical, only that it seems to be intended to intentionally force older students out--who can't listen, comprehend, write it down, and reiterate it spontaneously. (…) While in one breath, [the university] is promoting the idea of "returning back to school", that "age isn't a barrier to learning", they present classes that prove just the opposite. These classes have a very high drop rate because they

are <u>unreasonably</u> hard in the way they're taught. I plan to stay at

[the university] and complete my degree. (Largely due to being able

to find a very good counselor who helps me navigate the system.)

But I'd prefer not to spend the next semesters yearning for my old

school. And I speak for many. This university could learn a few

things from our little ol' [community college].

The theme of social interaction is one that draws attention to the students'

potentially shifting identities as they transfer. Beach (1999) suggested that this

consequential transition occurs as students struggle to understand themselves

and their new environment through social activities.

Technology

Another theme that emerged from students' e-journal entries was the role

of technology. Having information readily available with no constraints on time or

location was prominent in 67% (38 of 57) students. Most respondents (79%,

n=30) had extensive internet knowledge and were comfortable with their

computer skills, which was reflected in their journal entries. Students referred to

the university's online systems, OASIS and Blackboard, as vital links in the

transition from the community college to the university.

OASIS is the university's online system allowing students to view their

accounts, encompassing financial aid, grants, registration, and personal

information. A representative journal entry concluded:

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The most supportive thing at [the university], at this point [the

second month of classes], has been the OASIS system, which has

allowed me to see my application status, add/drop my classes, pay

tuition, view and print balances, view financial aid award status, etc.

From a personal point of view, OASIS is a helpful tool when

students do not have the time nor flexibility to go and speak to a

person in the office during business hours.

The students also reported that the use of the Blackboard system (which

is the term used to refer to the university's academic portal) was critical to stay in

touch with their professors, fellow students, clubs and organizations, and

university news. One student wrote, "It is SO useful because it has everything

you need right there! Everything is online (real-time) and very efficient."

What barriers inhibit successful transfer?

In this study, students' e-journal entries reflected the lack of

communication within and between academic institutions. This lack of

communication was the prevailing barrier students discussed when asked, "What

has been most detrimental in your transfer to the university?"

Communication In and Between Academic Institutions

Students voiced their desire for information and advice from both the

community college and the university. Journal entries from 49 respondents (86%)

stated that the community college offered no help in the transfer process: "The

key factor is advising... on both ends. It would be most helpful if the community

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college advisors had some direct link with the university level advisors so one staff [member] could pickup where the other left off." One student explained: "To be honest, I think I'm challenged just by being enrolled." Another student added:

 If the students knew whom to ask their specific questions in both their community college and the university they wish to attend, transfer wouldn't become such a confusing issue. A huge risk occurs when community college guidance counselors neglect to point students to the right people who know more than just general academics questions, creating a situation of "the blind leading the blind".

Student voices repeatedly reported communication deterrents at the university as this entry noted:

The biggest barrier is definitely a confusing bureaucracy. There are a lot of different offices a transfer student has to go to and a lot of time is wasted standing in line only to be told one needs to go to a different office or fill out paperwork prior to standing in line. This can lead to a lot of dissatisfaction with the university.

Another student wrote:

 When calling the administrative offices (…) the receptionist or person answering and transferring calls does not understand where exactly to direct the call or does not give the right information where [the student should call]. This leads a student to call multiple people

and ask the same question over and over before getting a useful

answer.

Some students perceived having their questions answered as "lucky", as

relayed in one student's journal,

I was trying to ask a simple question about one of my classes and

had to go to the (…) center. I was shocked to learn that I had to fill

out a form and would be notified in 2-3 business days as to when I

could ask my question. I have always been involved in an open

door / open walk-in policy. Granted I may have to wait to be seen,

but I have never had to wait DAYS. This was a bit discouraging. I

luckily found someone who was not instructed to help me, yet out of

the kindness of their heart, answered my ONE question. I got lucky.

Another voice summarized the shared frustration, "There is just so much red

tape. Even easy stuff turns into an ordeal."

The theoretical framework for this study, as developed by Mitchell and

Coltrinari (2005) provided analytic and evaluative questions: "What do you

understand as the reasoning surrounding this issue?" and "What were the

implications for you?" As these questions were posed to students, they could

clearly communicate the implications for themselves (and in some cases their

peers) but had a much harder time in stating the reasoning behind the barrier.

Few respondents even attempted to do so. Of the students who did provide their

understanding of the reasoning surrounding an issue (10% n=6) the following entry is the most encompassing of all:

> Overall, I think being at such a large university is overwhelming to begin with and so far I feel like I've received a great deal of support but it's been somewhat unorganized. I almost get the feeling that several individual groups are working independently to try and introduce me to the university versus one presentation from one group/department…. My first orientation was with (…), then at transfer day, I met a whole other set of folks, and finally at my college I met with an instructor/guide/advisor. I feel like this could all have a more systematic feel - where one office takes a transfer student under their wing and helps guide them along. I've heard such a department exists but again I've been introduced to so many departments, I'm not truly sure who does what.

In 2005, Hagedorn and Prather found that part-time community college students in general had a more difficult time adjusting to the disconnect among academic units. In this study, however, the researcher found that part-time and full-time transfer students were equally distressed with the lack of central coordination of academic units.

"What changes would transfer students recommend?"

In this next section discussing student recommendations for change in transfer, student journal writings revealed that students wanted to be "guided"

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through the transfer process. Students were not able to speak of their perceptions from an analytical prospective. However, their writings symbolized their collective understanding of the university's loose coupling, which is that university academic units function independently of each other, as described in Weick's (1976) classical work in organizational theory. Students recommended changes based on obtaining guidance to bridge the gaps.

Transfer Advisors

Students perceived a lack of direction from the university. The e-journals entries revealed transfer students wanting to be guided through the transfer process. This student's journal excerpt exemplified the changes recommended by 28 (49%) of the 57 respondents, "When people change to a new environment, they are no longer in their comfort zone. Small issues tend to become large ones, or sometime the person is just on edge and things are blown out of proportion. Having transfer counselors available to help people with small issues or to just listen would be a good idea." Student voices affirmed through their journal writings that they wanted someone to be "their" advisor and "sounding board" (a university transfer specialist) as one student wrote: "The support a student might need should always be available. It is imperative the student not feel like a hindrance." Students' perceptions suggested they received no individual attention from an advisor knowledgeable in the transfer process. Transfer orientations were viewed by students as the closest available substitute.

Transfer Orientations

The orientations were received positively by 49% (n=28) of the students recommending changes. A student suggested, "I think if someone didn't take the opportunity to participate in any of the orientations and perhaps thought that coming to a university of this size was going to be a piece of cake they could get lost real quick." Another shared her experience:

I attended an Orientation Day, which I think was more geared

towards students who are shopping colleges. Unfortunately, I didn't

know that at the time; therefore, this was not a very productive visit.

However, I did have the opportunity to attend transfer day, which

was extremely helpful. I probably got more information than I

needed but overall the experience was helpful. Specifically, having

the chance to visit my college for my major was helpful. They

had specific answers to my questions about classes, registration,

and prerequisites. Being introduced to the financial aid office,

student health services, and getting my [university student ID] card

were also beneficial.

The recommendations for changes in the transfer orientation itself included varying the days and time of the orientation to accommodate students' varied work schedules.

Students perceived the campus tour as a valuable component of transfer orientations. Recommendations included providing all students with the campus

tour and not having it a part of a menu system from which students had to

choose, thus, replacing other sessions. Students expressed a desire to tour the

inside of buildings, especially those used most frequently by all students, notably

the library and athletic facilities. They commented on the difficulty of hearing the

tour guides and recommended either smaller groups or guides equipped with

microphones. Students also entertained the idea of a tram system as an effective

means of touring the campus.

Transfer Checklists

In addition to orientation, the recommendations in 15 (27%) students'

journals included the need for transfer "checklists" or "guides", as this student

suggested:

A useful feature would be to have a 'transfer checklist' included in

the transfer student webpage. The checklist would be easily printed

out from the webpage and it would include the step-by-step process

on what to do to successfully transfer to the university without

wasting time and resources for the student and the institution.

Another student offered:

Since everything is done online these days a web page designed

for transfer students to help with FAQ [frequently asked questions]

would be helpful and should include everything from parking to the

best way to get to a class. It should be an overall user-friendly site,

[providing] a list of people who are willing to help with their phone

numbers and email.

Balance

A fourth theme in students' recommendations for changing the transfer

process also reflected an awareness of the need to balance student and

institutional concerns. The recommendations showed the beginning signs of self-

reliance, as noted by about 35% of the students' e-journal responses (n=20).

One student wrote:

I believe, unfortunately, that I've experienced much more

teacher/student involvement at the community college level than

the university. At [the university], the teachers are very

approachable and make themselves available, however it does

take more initiative on the student's part. You get back how much

you put in.

Another expressed a related sentiment:

I perceive a successful transfer process to be one that is efficient

and effective. As long as the student has the appropriate motivation

then there shouldn't be any problems. The resources and tools are

available, its just a matter of using them effectively.

The tone of the journal entries during this final phase revealed a

noticeable change. Emotions were calmed after the mid-term mark of these

students' first semester. Anxiety, formerly present in their e-journal entries was

reduced, and self-reliance through personal reflection emerged, as illustrated below in these student quotes:

- "College is not a goal it is a path for me."

- "I thought I had a successful transfer when I was sitting in class during the first week of the semester, but now I know that the transfer isn't successful until the day I graduate."

- "At the end, academic success depends on the student and not on the institution."

Personal versus Institutional Supports and Barriers

Students focused primarily on institutional supports and barriers. It was rare for students to share personal needs. The students knew the researcher had undertaken this study in hopes of providing information to improve the transfer process. That may be the reason students focused on what they perceived the community colleges' and university's role entails in the transfer adjustment process. The limited number of personal supports and barriers that were discovered through e-journal entries are presented in the following sections.

Supports

Students expressed that without family support, attending any higher education institution would present difficulties. Journal entries revealed that in order for the transfer adjustment process to be successful there must be support from the immediate family. These perceptions were most prominent in journal entries of married students and single parents.

Barriers

Only two students spoke of personal rather than institutional barriers to their transfer process. One accepted a job promotion that required relocation; therefore, he had to leave the university at the end of the semester. The other student was diagnosed with cancer and immediately began chemotherapy. She did not finish the semester but aspires to return.

Summary

This chapter provided the emerging themes generated from 57 incoming community college transfer students to a large research university. The students' perceptions were relayed to the researcher through e-journaling; in turn, the researcher provided representative journal entries to substantiate each emergent theme.

The researcher analyzed the data and presented the finding in a narrative format to answer the following three research questions:

- What do transfer students perceive as a successful transfer process?

- From the transfer student perspective, what supports are needed to accommodate a successful transfer process?

- From the transfer student perspective, what barriers inhibit successful transfer?

The study was conducted from November 2006 through March 2007.The first phase of themes began with students' expectations prior to beginning classes spring semester 2007. Students' e-journal writing repeatedly reported

apprehension of the university's academic environment and the way in which the student would "fit in" the university culture. Next were the themes that emerged during the students' initial entrance to university classes: experiences of marginality, struggling with the need for guidance combined with feelings of entitlement, and learning to navigate the university system.

The second phase of emerging themes revealed students perceptions of supports and barriers to a successful transfer adjustment process. The support themes were identified as: the need for personal attention, academic integration, social interaction and the use of technology. The barriers reported by students dealt predominantly with communication in and between academic institutions.

The final phase asked students for transfer change recommendations. The four emergent themes revealed the students' desired: 1) transfer advisors, 2) transfer orientations, 3) transfer checklists and 4) balance between student and institutional concerns.

While there was integration of symbolic interaction and case study methodology, the primary method of analysis was through the phenomenological lens of reporting students' perceptions as they experienced the common phenomenon of initial transfer adjustment from a community college to a large research university. The task of phemenologists is to present perceptions and search for themes rather than to analyze (Marion, 1997; Patton, 2002; Prasad, 2005). It was in this vein the results were reported in Chapter 4. The students'

perceptions present in their e-journal entries were evaluated for further meaning

and implications in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter is divided into four major sections. First a summary of the study's findings are presented beginning with an overview of the methods, incorporating phenomenology, symbolic interaction and case study. Data collection methods of e-journaling are addressed including the decision rules used for the coding process. The three research questions guiding this study were grouped into three stages of findings. An overview of the themes coded from 57 community college transfer student e-journals were listed under each stage. The frequency of students mentioning the themes was listed along with corresponding percentages.

The second section summarizes the conclusions drawn from students' e-journals by the researcher. In this section of discussion, students' perceptions are provided ranging from loneliness and feelings of entitlement to reflections of balance in academic rigor and personal identity. The third section presents implications of the findings for practice and for future research. The fourth section presents the researcher's conclusion.

Summary of Study

Transfer student adjustment from the community college to the university affects the students' persistence in degree obtainment. This study primarily employed phenomenological methods to understand community college transfer students' perspectives of the transfer adjustment process from a community college to a large four-year institution. Within this interpretive methodology, the

researcher presented findings from students' journal entries. This qualitative research also included symbolic interaction and case studies. These methods helped uncover emerging themes of community college transfer students related to their transfer adjustment. The research questions guiding the study included the following:

- What do transfer students perceive as a successful transfer process?

- From the transfer student perspective, what supports are needed to accommodate a successful transfer process?

- From the transfer student perspective, what barriers inhibit successful transfer?

Fifty-seven community college students shared their individual perspectives on the transfer phenomenon though the mid-term mark of spring semester 2007at a large research university. The researcher's exploration of the community college transfer students' perceptions was conducted through e-journaling. Reading the journal entries, looking for iterations, and engaging in constant dialogue with students, the researcher was able to verify the interpretation of the emergent themes. It was not the goal of the researcher to place value on students' perspectives but rather to group them into common themes. The themes emerged through interpretation of the entire group of students' journal entries. The criteria of data selection offered in *Writing Your Thesis*, Oliver (2004) was used in the making of decision rules. A theme was included if:

- mentioned by multiple individuals and concurring with previous research,

- a majority of individuals indicated it was significant, or

- key respondents noted the theme and provided elaboration through in-depth e-journal entries.

There were three stages in the transfer adjustment process: 1) students' perceptions of a successful transfer, 2) student identified supports needed for a successful transfer and barriers inhibiting successful transfer, and 3) students' recommendations for a successful transfer.

Within the first stage students' responses were grouped into: 1) students' expectations prior to entering the university, 2) students' initial experiences of marginality 3) complications from the need for guidance combined with feelings of entitlement, and 4) students learning to navigate the university system. In the second phase of adjustment, supports and barriers to successful transfer, students identified and commented in their e-journal entries upon some of the personal, academic, social and technological supports and barriers they encountered. Barriers to successful transfer involved the lack of communication students perceived among and within the community college and the university. The third and final stage of the transfer adjustment process offered students' recommendations for transfer change that included transfer advisors, transfer orientations and transfer checklists. Findings for this stage also revealed students' reflections of self-reliance, and balance of academic rigor and personal identity.

The researcher presented students' perspectives through a narrative

format in Chapter 4. The results are now summarized in outline form below. This

summary provides findings identified by students as they progressed through the

transfer adjustment process.

Stage One Findings

This stage is inclusive of students' last few weeks of attendance at their

community colleges and the first few weeks of the students' entrance to the

university. Transfer students concerns before transfer *(n = 27)* included:

- Academic Environment (*n* = 27; 100%)

   ("How will it be different?")

- University Culture (*n*= 25; 93%)

    ("How will I fit in?")

Challenges the transfer students faced upon initial entry to the university *(n = 57)*

showed:

- Experiences of Marginality (*n* = 34; 60%)

- Struggling with the need for Guidance vs. Feelings of Entitlement

   (*n* = 52; 92%)

- Learning to Navigate the System (*n* = 37; 65%)

   (*"There is so much red tape even the easy stuff turns into an ordeal."*)

Stage Two Findings

After beginning classes at the university students began to provide e-journal entries representing supports and barriers they encountered. Supports transfer students *(n = 57)* perceived as needed for a successful adjustment were:

- Personal Attention (*n* = 54; 95%)

- Academic Integration (*n* = 50; 88%)

- Social Interaction (*n* = 26; 51%) and

- Technology (*n* = 38; 67%)

Barriers to the transfer process involved:

- Communication in and between Academic Institutions *(n = 49; 86%)*

  ("Hello…is anyone out there?")

Stage Three Findings

The final stage of the transfer adjustment process to the university was defined in this study as encompassing the weeks prior to entering the university and the first 12 weeks of classes (Nov 2006 – March 2007). It was during this stage students began to offer specific recommendations for a successful transfer and to write of a growing balance in their academic and personal identity.

Student recommendations (*n* = 57) for a successful transfer process included:

- Transfer Advisors *(n = 28; 49%)*

  ("Needing someone to call my own")

- Transfer Orientations *(n = 28; 49%)*

- Transfer Checklist (*n = 15; 27%*)

Balance of Academic Rigor and Personal Identity (*n = 20; 35%*)

    ("College is not a goal; it is a path for me.")

The discussion that follows elaborates upon the meanings and conclusions drawn by the researcher from students' journal entries.

Discussion

The study identified common transfer adjustment themes that emerged beginning with student expectations prior to entering the university and continuing through the mid-term mark of their first semester at the university. Students' expectations prior to beginning classes addressed the university's academic environment and the university's culture. The incoming transfer students expected the academic environment to be different from the community college but most students had a hard time determining what they expected the differences would be. E-journal entries demonstrated shared excitement and hesitation concerning their expectations of "fitting in" at the university. The researcher noted, however, that students expected the university to offer full support in their pursuit of academic and social integration.

Mirroring current culture, students viewed higher education as a commodity and themselves as consumers. Journal entries seen through a symbolic interactionist lens revealed that students expected client services from the university like those typically available in service industries. In this research, the writings of students displayed a sense of entitlement that university faculty

and staff would probably not expect or welcome. Townsend's (1995) work warned that institutions' attitude of "survival of the fittest" does not lend itself to supporting student persistence. Townsend also recommended that university faculty and administrators embrace Astin's (1985) model of "talent development," which places emphasis on collaboration. In this study, students emphasized a lack of collaboration among sending and receiving institutions as a real barrier to their transfer adjustment process. Students' e-journal entries demonstrated that they were asking for, and often appeared to demand, personalized attention in the transfer process.

Students' expected that the university would "take care of them" and see that they succeeded. Upon entrance to the university, not all the students' expectations were met. Many students found themselves with more questions than answers. While university personnel may view the expectation of being "taken care of" as unrealistic, the students struggled with this unmet expectation.

Beach's (1999) consequential transition contention that the individual and the environment are constantly evolving was demonstrated throughout the students' journal entries. Experiences of marginality, the struggle with the need for guidance combined with feelings of entitlement, and learning to navigate the new environment were all things that students grappled with and emerged as common themes in students' writing. Personal attention, academic integration, social interaction, and the availability of technology emerged as prominent themes upon the students' entrance to the university. The institutional barriers

most prevalent involved the lack of communication between the community colleges and the university, and also within the academic and student services divisions at the university.

The researcher, previously studying student development theories, was particularly aware of the students' comments regarding their cognitive, moral, and psychosocial development. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005) linked student persistence to developmental models combined with the institutional climate. Regarding the cognitive level, the students' narratives implied that many needed information provided by the university to be in a very direct and simplistic manner. Students often requested checklists and systematic guides. Numerous students' journal entries exemplified students' need to be instructed on "the" correct way of accomplishing a task. They seemed to be unaware of alternative solutions.

Students were also reflective of their moral development. They often wrote that it was acceptable for students to circumvent the system for personal gain as long as they had their needs met. This was especially apparent within the process of registration. The transfer students were concerned with functioning in their new environment and used varied ways of accomplishing their goals.

The third factor discussed by Pascarella and Terenzini, student's psychosocial development (personal identity), was frequently changed through the initial transfer adjustment process. Students' writings at the study's

culmination demonstrated an acceptance of their new environment, which led to positive transitions, most notably greater self-reliance.

In only 12 weeks of classes, the students in the study began to adapt to the new institution. For several students, this adaptation was quite difficult while for other students, it was presented as more of an irritant. The students still wanted more guidance than they were receiving from university personnel but sought this support through multiple sources, especially by learning to rely on themselves and other students. A caution in the interpretation of these results, however, is that the students in this study may be more invested in their education and therefore predisposed to a more successful transfer experience than non-volunteers, as stated in Chapter 1, Limitations to the Study.

Implications

Expectations of incoming transfer students were explored with 27 of the total 57 participants. These 27 students were interviewed while still enrolled at the community college. An additional 30 students were recruited during the first four weeks of classes. This study identified the incoming community college transfer students' perceptions of supports and barriers to a successful transfer adjustment, defined in this study as the last few weeks of attendance at the community college and the first 12 weeks of classes at the university. It is clear from the results of this study that student needs are not the same after the first or second semester, as suggested by other researchers (Flaga, 2002; Nowak, 2004; Richie, 2004) or even the first or second year (Richardson & Bender,

1987). The supports students need and the barriers they are experiencing are variables that change over the transfer process.

For Practice

The findings in this study suggest six implications for practice:

1. Transfer counselors at the community college and university (whether as centralized or decentralized units) need to work in close alliance.

2. Individual university colleges' should consider employing transfer counselors.

3. Transfer students benefit from on campus orientations.

4. User friendly online resources including transfer guides and virtual advisors need to be available to transfer students at the community colleges and the university.

5. Universities need to establish communities for transfer students that include peer mentors.

6. First semester University Transfer Experience courses should be offered.

The first implication of practice is to have counselors available at the community colleges and the university. While the institutions do not need to duplicate services, they do need personnel available to direct students to the proper resources. This might help to alleviate the discomfort students expressed as shown in the themes of marginality and need for personal attention, situations

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that emerged from this study. The findings in this study suggest that students perceive transfer counselors as necessary supports for a successful transfer. It may be that the second implication for practice, transfer counselors in each university college, could prove to be of greater benefit than one centralized office for some universities. A transfer office in each university college could offer specialized help to students within their majors.

Additionally, the practice of employing community college and university transfer admission counselors could help alleviate problems of transfer students' unrealistic expectations. This study concentrated on those incoming transfer students with 60 hours or more of transferable credits. Students having attended a community college for at least two years report a number of experiences in an environment quite different from a large research university. Tinto's (1975) theory of "institutional fit" reveals a significant impact by difference in environments on the attainment of a bachelor's degree for these community college transfers. Originating from smaller community colleges, including smaller regional campuses, students are frequently place-bound and select the urban research university for "convenience" rather than "fit." The lack of institutional fit and the subsequent feelings of marginality and unmet expectations posed problems for the students in this study. If university advisors were present at the feeder community colleges to answer potential transfer student questions, perhaps the pathways students choose could be a better "fit."

Expectations of the university for the incoming transfer students should be clearly communicated to these students. Also, transfer students need to understand what supports are available and what barriers they may encounter prior to and upon entrance to the university. This could be accomplished by having transfer counselors at the community colleges and the universities (whether as centralized or decentralized units) working in close alliance. The mission of the transfer student offices would be to ensure that transfer students had identifiable support personnel to rely on from the initial application process through graduation. Students' e-journal entries repeatedly demonstrated that they wanted "someone to call their own." Having an administrative center staffed with individuals who help transfer students work through their academic and social issues could provide this direct, human help.

Although students in this study were from two urban feeder schools, many had not visited the university prior to submitting their applications. At research universities, some faculty and staff believe that transfer students with 60 transferable credit hours or more are accustomed to higher education; therefore, they need less advising and personal attention. This study revealed the opposite to be true. A change in environment from a community college to a research university is overwhelming for many students.

A campus visitation hosted by student affairs in conjunction with academic affairs is suggested as a third implication for practice in preparing students for the transfer process. Currently at the research university in this study, community

college transfer students are not allowed to visit academic advisors until the students have been officially admitted. This practice should be eliminated during transfer students' visitation days. The first visitation may be of an informal nature to simply introduce the student to the campus and the academic program offerings. A follow-up visitation should be an official orientation day where students take extensive tours of the campus, are introduced to the staff of offices providing them services and have an opportunity to meet with individual university college advisors.

Developing a self-directed portal designed specifically for transfer students is the fourth implication for practice derived from students' e-journals. Students' writing in this study demonstrated they were computer literate and wanted a variety of resources available online. Findings also indicated that students wanted transfer guidelines and checklists. A web-site designed to provide such material and link students to individual colleges' information could be a leading support system. Having a virtual advisor available around the clock to answer students' questions could help transfer students feel informed and connected.

The fifth implication for practice concerns providing access to peer mentors for transfer students so the students feel they have someone on whom to rely. Communities specifically developed to integrate transfer and native students would encourage student engagement and transfer student self-reliance. This could be done through the final implication for practice, a University Experience course especially designed for transfer students. The findings of the study

emphasized that transfer students desired to learn about their new environment and find their "niche". A University Transfer Experience class could provide a semester-long introduction to the university's academic and social environment.

For Future Research

In-depth qualitative research provides for a clearer understanding of transfer students' perceptions as presented in this study. The better higher education understands transfer students, the better able faculty and administrators are to provide supports and recognize which policies may have detrimental effects. There are three implications for future research suggested by this study's finding:

1. Incremental time period research
2. Specific student population research
3. Perceptions of administrators and faculty

The developing theories of transfer adjustment need to become incremental in terms of periods. A longitudinal study combined with previous time specific research is warranted. Research could offer further implications by taking into consideration the students' term of entrance to the university: Are there differences in students' perception if they enter during fall semester rather than spring or summer? What are students' perceptions of needed supports after the first semester or first year? What barriers inhibit a successful transfer after the first semester of the first year? Understanding what is needed by the students at

each stage of transfer adjustment will help institutions develop policies and practices to help the transfer students persist to degree attainment.

Future research should also employ focus groups, interviews, and e-journaling to target specific populations such as minority and low income transfer students. Community college transfer students are often diverse, and investigating in particular the transfer adjustment process for students from underrepresented groups may enable universities to provide successful academic journeys for these transfers students. This would provide greater depth to the transfer recommendations of targeted populations than was provided through this study of the general transfer population.

A further area of inquiry would be to ascertain the perceptions of academic advisors, faculty and administrators in the community colleges and universities. This extension of research could help in the collaboration of all concerned in students' successful transfer adjustment process and ultimate attainment of bachelor's degree.

This research served as the pilot study for a Lumina funded grant to study transfer students in urban regions. The grant provided for both quantitative and qualitative data streams, with part of the latter stream the focus of this dissertation study. As campuses become more culturally diverse, it may benefit higher education to pursue mixed method research approaches to better serve students and ultimately society.

Conclusion

As the diversity of students continues to change, the perceptions of community college transfer students, academic advisors, faculty and administrators will change. Today's transfer students evolve into leaders of tomorrow. The paths chosen by students have become quite complex. The traditional vertical progression through higher education has become a pathway of the past. It does not suffice to simply understand the various pathways; we must understand why these pathways are chosen. This understanding comes through exploring the perceptions, ambitions and reasons for persistence of transfer students in their pursuit of degree attainment.

Understanding students' perceptions should not be underestimated. With the developed system of community colleges in the state of Florida and the state's commitment to transfer and articulation, this area of research is vital. The quantitative data provide a wealth of information for practitioners to advise students academically, but it is imperative to understand students' thought processes. What leads them to persistence?

From the findings of this study it was clear that students wanted help with their initial transfer adjustment to the four-year institution. The students did not indicate there was a lack of information available but that there was a lack of support to help them locate the information. Employing strategies of welcoming transfer students and helping them feel valued as students in four year

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institutions may lead to students' increased self-reliance and persistence to degree. This ultimately benefits the entire economy of Florida.

Large research institutions, however, have a complex problem of balancing their research and teaching missions. Where do they place the value of undergraduate education in the process of advancing research? How are they to interact with the community colleges? These questions are being addressed by faculty, college presidents, boards of directors and state legislators. To lead in transfer and articulation as well as research, Florida must commit financial resources to higher education that will allow successful implementation of transfer and research programs to benefit all citizens. Florida promises community college students that upon completion of an Associate degree they are ensured acceptance to a Florida university. Now Florida must promise that once the transfer students are admitted, they are provided with the best of educational practices leading to degree attainment.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Brochure

I want to know your
thoughts!

During the transfer process what supports are needed to
accommodate a successful transfer?

What barriers inhibit successful transfer?

How will it work?

You will receive a request from me through email every 2-3 weeks on a USF
secured web server. This will occur 8 times beginning during November
2006–January 2007and ending in March 2007.

I will be asking you about your experiences as a new transfer student to the
University of South Florida. I am interested in knowing what is going well in
your adjustment to USF and what have been barriers for you.

All of your thoughts and experiences you share will be sent back to me
through email.

What will happen to the information I give you?

All information you provide is protected by strict laws regarding confidentiality. You may
assign yourself a false name during email discussions. Nothing you say in the emails will be
tracked back to you by the research team. The information will be used in a dissertation paper
and may be used in subsequent articles for academic purposes.

Your participation is strictly voluntary.

What's in it for me?

1st (and most important):

A chance to be heard and to make a difference for other transfer students who will be going through the transfer process in the future.

2nd (the "good stuff'):

FREE gift certificates to fast food restaurants.

2 FREE chances to win $100 gift certificate to the USF bookstore.

Why?

I am working on a doctorate degree, and I am interested in what transfer students have to say about their experiences in the transfer adjustment process.

Whatever I learn from you will help me answer several very important questions that may have a direct impact on the way programs for transfer students are designed in the future.

You are on the right path!

I want to know how the journey is going …

Appendix B: Demographics Data Sheet

Demographics of Student Participant

Name or Pseudonym _____

Age:
18-24 _____ 25 or older _____

Race/Ethnicity:
Caucasian _____Black_____Hispanic _____Other _____

Gender:
Female _____Male _____

College:_____Major_____

Fulltime student status (12 credit hours or more)_____
Part-time student status_____

Employed:
Yes_____No_____ #of Hours working per week_____
On campus employment_____ Off campus _____

Marital Status _____ Children _____

Number of higher education institutions attended prior to USF _____

Verified with USF Admissions:

Transferred in from which community college _____

Completed 60 transferable hours prior to transfer to USF _____

Appendix C: Letter of Invitation from Feeder Community College

Dear Fall Graduate,

Congratulations on graduating from (…), and we hope you have had a great educational experience. Your diploma will be mailed to you in mid-February. We also encourage you to participate in our annual commencement ceremony in the spring. Details can be found at (…)

If you are transferring to the University (…) in January, you may be interested in participating in a research project that wants to know what you think. This project is being undertaken to find out what is working in the transfer process for students from community colleges to (…) and what is causing problems.

If you choose to participate, here is how the process will work.
1. You will receive a request from (…) through email every 2-3 weeks on a (…) secured web server.
2. You will be asked about your experiences as a new transfer student to the University (…). The University is interested in knowing what is going well in your adjustment to (…) and what have been barriers for you.
3. All of your thoughts and experiences you share will be sent back to Karen R. Owens, a doctoral student working on the research, through email. The project will begin during November-January and conclude in March.
4. All information you provide is protected by strict laws regarding confidentiality. You may assign yourself a false name during email discussions. Nothing you say in the emails will be tracked back to you in any way. The information will be used in a dissertation paper and may be used in subsequent articles for academic purposes.

Your participation is strictly voluntary. Here is what is in it for you:
1. A chance to be heard and to make a difference for other transfer students who will be going through the transfer process in the future.
2. **FREE** gift certificates to fast food restaurants.
3. **2 FREE** chances to win a $100 gift certificate to the USF bookstore.

If you are interested in learning more you may contact Karen directly:

Karen R. Owens
kowens@coedu.usf.edu
813-974-0029

Congratulations again, and best wishes on your future educational endeavors.

Sincerely,

Admissions, Registration, and Records Officer

Informed Consent to Participate in Research
Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study

Researchers at the University study many topics. To do this, we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. This form tells you about this research study.

**We are asking you to take part in a research study that is called:
Community College Transfer Students' Voices through "Lived"
Experiences of the Transfer Adjustment Process To a Four Year Institution:
A Qualitative Analysis**

The person who is in charge of this research study is Karen R. Owens**.**

The research will be done through email.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to learn what you think about the transfer process. This project is being undertaken to find out what is working in the transfer process for students from community colleges to the university and what is causing problems.

Study Procedures

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to provide your:

- ✓ race/ethnicity, gender, and age
- ✓ college of admission such as: College of Education, College of Arts & Sciences, College of Business
- ✓ number of hours you work on or off campus
- ✓ as well as if you are a part-time or full-time student.

Here is how it will work:
You will receive a request from the university through email every 2-3 weeks on a university secured web server. Approximately 8 times you will receive questions and will take you about 20 minutes to complete for a total commitment of 4 hours.
You will be asked about your experiences as a new transfer student to the University. The University is interested in knowing what is going well in your adjustment and what have been barriers for you.

All of your thoughts and experiences you share will be sent back to Karen R. Owens kowens@coedu.usf.edu, a doctoral student working on the research, through email. The project will begin during November-January and conclude in March.

Alternatives

You have the alternative to choose not to participate in this research study.

Your participation is strictly voluntary.

Benefits

The potential benefits to you are:

- A chance to be heard and to make a difference for other transfer students who will be going through the transfer process in the future.

Risks or Discomfort

There are no known risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation

We will not pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Upon volunteering you will receive:

2 FREE gift certificates to fast food restaurants.
2 FREE chances to win a $100 gift certificate to the USF bookstore.

Confidentiality

We must keep your study records confidential. All emails of your thoughts and information will be stored in password protected word documents. These will be kept for three years. After three years the information will not be destroyed but stored in a secure location.

- All information you provide is protected by strict laws regarding confidentiality. You may assign yourself a false name during email discussions. Nothing you say in the emails will be tracked back to you by anyone on the research team in any way. The

information will be used in a dissertation paper and may be used in subsequent articles for academic purposes.

- The researcher will do all in her power to protect you email from being accessed by outsiders, Due to emails traveling across the internet there may be minimal risk to confidentiality.

However, certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator.

- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.) These include:

  o   the University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the staff that work for the IRB. Other individuals who work for USF that provide other kinds of oversight may also need to look at your records.

  o   the Department of Health and people from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not let anyone know your name. We will not publish anything else that would let people know who you are.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study, to please the Principal Investigator or the research staff. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study. Decision to participate or not to participate will not affect your student status.

Questions, concerns, or complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, call Karen R. Owens at 813-974-0029.

If you have questions about your rights, general questions, complaints, or issues as a person taking part in this study, call the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University at (813) 974-9343.

About the Author

Karen R. Owens earned her Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education from the University of Florida, her Masters in Applied Economics from the University of Central Florida and entered the University of South Florida to pursue her Ph.D. in 2003. Her first two years at the University of South Florida she worked as a Graduate Research Assistant in the College of Education's Department of Adult, Career and Higher Education and adjunct professor of Economics in the College of Business.

Her final two years she served as the Florida Project Coordinator for the Urban Transfer Research Network (UTRN) funded by a research grant from Lumina Foundation for Education to investigate urban transfer in three metropolitan areas; Portland, Phoenix and Tampa. She has 12 years of business experience in the financial industry and 15 years of teaching experience at all levels of education—elementary, middle, community college, and university undergraduate and graduate.