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Major Adjustment: Students' Transition Experiences Leaving Selective Undergraduate Degree Programs

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MAJOR ADJUSTMENT: STUDENTS' TRANSITION EXPERIENCES
LEAVING SELECTIVE UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAMS

by

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DEDICATION

To Tom.

Many contributed to my success in earning a PhD, but you made it possible every step of the way. You offered only positive encouragement, and never once did you complain.

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I am very grateful to the students who were willing to participate in the study. Thank you for your honesty in expressing the joys and frustrations of switching majors. My Dissertation Committee challenged and supported me, guiding me through the endless revisions. Thanks to each of you for the individual gifts you brought to the table. Thank you to NACADA for financial support, much appreciated, via a research grant.

Like the students in my study, I relied primarily on family and friends during this transition experience. My husband Tom was unwavering in his support of me during the last 4 years and served as whatever was needed while I researched, wrote, did more research, revised, and revised again. Your encouragement and understanding were instrumental in getting me to the finish line. I love you. My teenage children, Jack and Elizabeth, seemed to know when to push and when to hold back. More than once they commented, “Mom, I am in middle/high school and this project is not a dissertation.” Thanks for putting up with me. My own parents, Jack and Peg Mulhern, supported me in so many ways. Thank you for instilling the value of education and life-long learning in your five children. My sister Mary earned her doctoral degree a year ahead of me and knew all too well the ups and downs of the journey. Thanks to my mother in law, Marian Halasz, and sibs John, Meg and Tom and their families for their love, support, prayers and understanding during the last four years. I appreciate the many friends who shuttled or otherwise cared for my children and were understanding when I forgot about or backed out of volunteer opportunities or social engagements. It really, truly takes a village.

ABSTRACT

This multi-campus, qualitative study investigated how undergraduate students previously enrolled in selective majors described coping resources utilized during the transition of leaving their previous major and selecting a new academic degree program. The study also examined which resources students identified as most valuable, and coping resources most influential in their retention decisions. Research about students in selective degree programs has been absent for the last 20 years, and previous research studies have not given voice to the experiences of students in transition between majors. The conceptual underpinning of this study was the 4 S System (Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson, 2006), used to assess how participants described managing the transition using four factors of situation, self, support, and strategies. A qualitative research design employing 26 semi-structured individual interviews allowed in-depth data collection. Participants included second, third, and fourth-year undergraduates enrolled in their new degree program at two state flagship universities. The findings enable institutional leaders to gain valuable insight into students' coping resources utilized in the program transfer process. Four key findings were identified from data analysis: While students relied upon multiple resources during their transition, they most frequently described support, primarily from family; students perceived a lack of support from the university in the major change process; the most valuable coping resource during the transition was support from others; and situation, specifically contentment at their current institution, was most influential in students' decisions to persist at the university. Additional findings in the form of advice to students facing a similar transition focused on researching options before switching degree programs. Through a greater understanding of students' perceptions about coping resources, academic advising administrators can develop interventions designed to foster or strengthen family partnerships, improve the major change process, increase personal attention, strategize major retention, and centralize advising for students in transition. As pressure from external sources mount for institutions to provide and for students to earn a degree within financial, job-related, and timeframe constraints, academic advisors and students must strengthen partnerships so students can achieve realistic and attainable academic goals.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

*Why would you take the harder route?
When there's an easy way
See what all the fuss about
We're calling it the M-Train*

The lyrics from a rap music video on YouTube created by two former Georgia Tech engineering students (Swafford & Baily/ the GTGs, 2008) offer some light-hearted advice for students struggling in engineering majors. In their song, they advocate using a Change of Major form to get out of engineering and onto the “M-Train,” referring to the Management (business) major as “the easy way.” At many universities, students pursuing an undergraduate business major would undoubtedly argue with the GTGs’ assertion that they took the easy way! Business and engineering are often classified as selective majors because students must meet progression requirements that exceed the university’s standards to remain in good standing. However, the point is still well taken: when some students switch from selective degree programs often considered difficult, they may choose another major with fewer restrictions.

Choosing an academic major is one of the most difficult decisions many college students will make during their undergraduate career. Numerous research studies cited by Gordon (2007) indicated that up to 75% of entering undergraduate students will change their major at least once. Several factors can influence students’ intended

academic plans: students change disciplines of their own volition, choosing a new major based on a positive or negative course experience (Malgwi, Howe, & Burnaby, 2005); family pressures (Barrios-Allison, 2005); parental occupation and socioeconomic status (Leppel, Williams, & Waldauer, 2001); or other extrinsic or intrinsic factors such as lack of knowledge about majors and difficulty making long-term decisions (Firmin & MacKillop, 2008). In other situations, those students who enter as undecided or in exploratory majors will eventually select an academic home (Gordon & Steele, 2003).

Limited program size and competitive admission requirements to upper-division selective degree programs mean that some students will be dismissed from their first-choice major, while others leave of their own accord. Second and third year students opting or mandated to leave selective majors may have limited options open to them as they have already earned a significant number of college credits, have an established grade point average, and may not meet eligibility criteria for a new degree program (Steele & McDonald, 2008; Steele, 1994).

For students in these selective degree programs, such as business, engineering and nursing, the decision to change majors is particularly complex and contributes to the stress they face. Students recognize that their choices of academic major selection decision may have long-term implications, such as influencing their postgraduate career path. To help advisors better understand the needs of these students, the present study explored how students manage the transition between majors and specifically which coping resources the students who left selective majors relied upon during the transition experience.

This multi-campus, qualitative study explored how 26 undergraduate students, previously enrolled in selective majors, describe the coping resources they accessed during the transition process of leaving the former major and enrolling in a new academic degree program. The research project also investigated which coping resources students identified as most valuable in navigating the transition and the support systems most influential in students' decisions to remain at their current institution.

Statement of the Problem

Previous research has addressed some of the issues related to students in competitive majors but has not given voice to the experiences of students in transition out of these programs. In discussing major-changers, Gordon (1992) stated, "students unable to access oversubscribed and selective majors are often left to find alternative academic and career directions on their own" (p. 82). Allen and Robbins (2008) found students who changed majors were more likely to take unnecessary courses, spend additional time earning a degree, and were at greater risk of leaving the institution.

While recent scholarly research has been conducted on major-changing students (Firmin & McKillop, 2008; Johnson, 2005; Micceri, 2001), a specific focus on students leaving selective majors is lacking, making it difficult for academic advisors to understand the factors that influence students' abilities to manage the transition. What resources do students use in deciding to stay at their university after they decide to leave or are rejected from their first-choice major? How do students manage the transition? The current study gathered students' experiences about dealing with the transition of leaving a selective major and enrolling in a new degree program.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how undergraduate students at large, state flagship universities described the coping resources they accessed as they transitioned from a selective major to a new major. The timeframe for the transition began when students left a selective major, such as business, education, or nursing and follows their transition experience into enrollment in a new degree program. The study examined how selective majors described their transition experience within the context of the four variables of *Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies* in Schlossberg's 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2008; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The study also explored which coping resources students described as most valuable while navigating the transition process. Further, participants identified the support systems they found to be most influential in the decision to remain at their current university.

Research Questions and Study Design

This multi-campus, qualitative study was centered on the experiences of undergraduate students previously enrolled in selective majors. The study explored how 26 undergraduate students described the support mechanisms they utilized during the transition process of leaving the former major and enrolling in a new degree program. Using individual interviews, the study explored students' stories about their experiences. Data were analyzed to identify themes from students' stories about the specific coping resources they used, resources they considered to be most valuable during the transition, and the support systems that were most influential in the decision to remain at their current institution.

The research questions for this study are:

- How do undergraduate students previously enrolled in selective majors describe the coping resources involving situation, self, support and strategies they utilized during the transition process of leaving the former major and enrolling in a new degree program at the same institution?
- Which coping mechanisms do students formerly enrolled in selective majors identify as most valuable in navigating the transition process?
- Which coping resources do students previously enrolled in selective majors identify as most influential in their decision to remain at the institution?

A qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews was selected as the best method to investigate the research questions in the study, as it provided an opportunity for students to fully describe the process of navigating the transition and provide in-depth data about their experience. A quantitative research study design would have limited both the depth and breadth of data collection, and it is unknown whether students would have been willing to complete a survey about a potentially disappointing and/or frustrating experience.

Significance of the Study

The study makes a significant scholarly contribution to the literature about selective majors and students at large, public universities. It has direct application to academic advising and college retention efforts, and addresses two prominent issues in the national higher education policy conversation- time to degree and college completion.

Why study students in selective majors, that typically include pre-professional degree programs such as business, education, engineering, and health-related majors? A quick answer is the sheer number of students selecting these degree programs. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2012a), of the 1,650,000 bachelor's degrees conferred in 2009–10, the greatest numbers of degrees conferred were in the fields of business (22%), social sciences and history (11%), health professions and related programs (8%), and education (6%). The most popular postsecondary degree programs include several selective majors, giving credence to formal inquiry focused on this area within academic advising.

Selective majors. The bulk of the scholarly literature on students in selective majors is outdated, having been written nearly 20 years ago (Steele, 1994; Gordon & Steele, 1992; Steele, Kennedy, & Gordon, 1992; Gordon & Polson, 1985). A related but outdated survey study of major-changing students focused on use and ranking of academic resources (Elliott & Elliott, 1985); findings indicated major-changing students depended upon information from a friend, the course catalog, family member influence, or work experience in making change of major decisions. This dissertation study is fundamentally different based on research design and monumental advances in how modern information technology shapes current decision-making. Some elements are shared with the Elliott and Elliott (1985) study, however, such as investigating the influential support systems students utilize in decision-making about academic major changes.

The study expands the body of knowledge about students in selective majors by providing insight into students' transition experiences of leaving the previous major and

enrolling in a new degree program. Academic advisors know first-hand that some students weather the transition better than others when leaving a selective major. In recent years, this anecdotal knowledge about student experiences has not extended beyond informal communication and collegial discussions. A more rigorous approach to researching student issues inherent in formal inquiry is beneficial to both the academic advising community and the students themselves (Habley, 2009). Further, the findings of the study highlight possible future research directions concerning students in transition from one academic degree program to another.

Application to academic advising and college retention. Analysis of the data provides insight into the coping and support mechanisms students characterize as most valuable in the transition: support from others, specifically family and friends. Advising administrators can use the findings of the study to better serve their students by strategizing ways to build partnerships with families, creating a more personal major change process, and to provide a variety of information sources about making a program change. Building on the findings of this study, academic advising administrators may elect to conduct campus-based research to determine the resource needs of students at their individual institutions faced with a transition from one academic major to another. In the highly competitive higher education market for students, institutional leaders can use the findings in designing programmatic interventions to positively affect persistence of a student population that may be at risk for departure.

Higher education and retention at large, public colleges and universities. The majority of students in the U.S. access four-year degree programs at public postsecondary colleges and universities as compared to the number of students in higher education at

private non-profit or for-profit institutions. Approximately 64% of all degrees conferred by four-year institutions in 2008-2009 were earned at public colleges and universities (US Department of Education, 2011a). The current study, involving two state flagship institutions, makes an important contribution to scholarship about students' experiences at large public universities and their retention decisions after a change in academic degree program.

Facilitating time to degree. The first of two issues in the current national higher education policy conversation related to this study is “time to degree,” defined as the number of years it takes students to complete a college education. For students in academic major transition, finding a new degree program that accepts all, or most, of their previous credits is a critical factor in time to degree, as students may accumulate excess credits in order to meet new program requirements. Students and their families face added financial pressure when students must unexpectedly extend their college career into a fifth or sixth year.

While the four-year graduation rate at public colleges and universities has held steady, around 27% since 1996, tuition costs at four-year public institutions have increased at a rate of about 33% (US Department of Education, 2011b, 2011c). Scholarships and other financial aid are often packaged with a four-year degree completion deadline, influencing students' decision to choose a new major that can be completed within a four year time timeframe. In addition, many states (e.g., Illinois, Ohio, Tennessee, and Texas) have adopted formal accountability measures for state universities such as time to degree and college completion rates (Goenner & Snaith, 2004; Jones, 2012; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2012).

Policy discussions have moved from general to specific in some states, such as Florida's governor-appointed higher education task force recommendations for tuition differential between majors in "strategic areas" such as engineering and health-related professions and degree programs with less marketability such as anthropology and philosophy (Alvarez, 2012). The current study's results indicate many students struggled academically in their selective majors before transferring programs. Policy proposals such as tuition freezes for pre-professional programs could further complicate and perhaps dissuade students from leaving selective majors, even those struggling with academic underperformance. The current study opens the door for future research investigating factors influencing initial program choice among selective majors and larger-scale research examining retention within these majors.

The findings of this study support the enhancement of processes and infrastructure at large universities to streamline the major change process: One third of participants discussed concerns about choosing a new program they could complete in four years. Institutional leaders may use the findings of the study as an impetus to examine and improve academic processes for students switching degree programs.

College completion. When students face an academic setback or disruption to their intended plans in a certain major, they may withdraw, transfer, or even drop out. If faculty and administrators understand more about students' behavior in these situations, institutional leaders may be able to plan and develop interventions to keep students enrolled. The study sample, comprised of second, third and fourth-year students, contributes to bridging the gap in scholarship about student persistence beyond the first year in college (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). The focus on college completion is more

than just an academic concern, however; it has real consequences for an individual's life prosperity.

From a more practical standpoint, the advantage of greater earning power for employees with a four-year college degree is quantifiable in the labor market. The personal economic benefits for college graduates are staggering. On average, full-time, twelve-month workers can expect to earn 84% more money than colleagues with a high school diploma over the course of their working career (Carnevale, Strohl, & Melton, 2011). Ultimately, society benefits from college graduates by increasing the number of highly educated workers, who in turn achieve a higher standard of living than workers without a postsecondary education.

Background on Oversubscribed Academic Degree Programs

For over 25 years the competition for limited space in oversubscribed majors has been an ongoing concern for students and their academic advisors. The National Academic Advising Association (NACADA)'s "Advising Students in Oversubscribed and Selective Majors" Task Force completed its first report in 1985. Subsequently, Gordon and Polson (1985) used a national survey of NACADA members to investigate the problem of increasing numbers of students unable to access their first-choice major. The study's purpose was to determine the extent to which students were excluded from selective majors, and whether concerns raised at professional conferences and other forums were a legitimate problem. The researchers also investigated the need for alternative advising if students were unable to access their first-choice major. The survey of 251 academic advisors sought to identify why students needed (alternative) advising for other program options if they were ineligible to enter their preferred major. The two

most common responses were “poor academic performance in students’ current majors” (87%) and “tightening of entrance requirements” (71%). While some institutions had special services for students who needed alternative advising, such as specially trained advisors, no campus had a systematic approach to address academic advising for these students at every level. Gordon and Polson (1985) concluded that students rejected from selective majors were often unidentified and left to fend for themselves.

Today, the competitive situation for selective, limited enrollment programs remains a barrier for students excluded from their first choice major. Persistent budget cuts and dwindling resources at colleges and universities have forced more stringent enrollment limits in many academic programs as a result of decreased programmatic and human resource availability (Connor & Ching, 2010; Fischer, 2011; Sieben, 2011).

Academic programs traditionally identified as selective majors (e.g., business, engineering, nursing) utilize a variety of approaches to limit enrollment on a regular basis. To manage supply and demand for their courses, some academic colleges with selective degree programs make eligibility contingent upon completion of a prescribed timeframe and level of academic achievement in a set of prerequisite courses. For example, assessment of minimum requirements for degree progress in many academic programs at the University of Florida is monitored each fall and spring term by the registrar’s office through a computerized program called Universal Tracking. If students get “off track” by failing to meet minimum progress requirements (grade point average and/or courses), they receive a registration hold which can only be cleared after meeting with an academic advisor in their major (University of Florida, n.d.). University of

Florida students who fail to get back “on track,” face a subsequent registration hold that can only be cleared after the student switches into a new academic major.

A similar approach is used with first-year business students at the University of Kentucky. First-year students are admitted directly into the college of business administration and maintain eligibility by satisfying progression requirements prior to completing 75 credit hours. In order to meet progression requirements, students must maintain a 2.80 cumulative grade point average and earn a minimum grade of C in prescribed courses that include accounting, economics, and management (University of Kentucky, 2012). Progression requirements like these at the Universities of Florida and Kentucky illustrate one method selective majors use to limit enrollment, admitting students first and limiting enrollment by “weeding out” through progression requirements or attrition.

Other selective programs use an alternative to progression requirements that requires an upper division application process. This approach is often employed by nursing and engineering programs that have a finite number of seats in laboratories, clinics, or high tech facilities. For example, at the University of Alabama College of Nursing, second-year students applying for promotion to the upper division program must earn a minimum 3.0 cumulative grade point average on all required lower-division courses, have a minimum 2.75 cumulative grade point average in all science courses, and have completed or be currently enrolled in all lower-division requirements by the application deadline (University of Alabama, n.d.). More information about alternative approaches used to limit enrollment in selective majors at the two state flagship institutions chosen as study sites is presented in Chapter 3, Methods.

Conceptual Framework

This research project used the 4 S System, part of the adult development theory and transition framework originally developed by Schlossberg (1981, 1984) to gain insight into the influence of factors related to the transition, the individual, and the environment (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995) provided a foundation to understand how students in the research study manage transition and assess how they utilized personal and institutional resources to cope with change.

An early collaboration between Chickering and Schlossberg (1995) utilized the 4 S System conceptual framework with research about college students. Chickering and Schlossberg co-authored a resource guide based on the results of an interview study with sixty first-year, junior and senior college students. The book's chapters on deciding on a major and taking and keeping control were particularly relevant to the current research because the authors present the information in a context of college student transitions. Some of the same challenges students identified in 1995 were expressed as concerns by participants in the present study.

Since that time, the 4 S System has been used in numerous research studies involving college transition experiences, including community college transfers to a four-year theatre degree program (Boyenga, 2009), first generation college seniors (Overton-Healy, 2010), and students with disabilities (Coccarelli, 2010). Based on the number of 4 S studies with college student samples and the nature of the research questions, Schlossberg et al.'s conceptual framework was an appropriate choice for a study involving transitions between degree programs.

Schlossberg's conceptual framework allows personal and institutional coping resources to be organized into four variables that influence how students navigate transition: situation, self, support and strategies. Coping resources can change at any time and may explain why students in similar situations experience the transition differently (Goodman et al., 2006), an important consideration for faculty and academic advisors working with these students.

A straightforward introduction to each of the four major variables is presented in this section. Information about the 4 S variables is adapted from Goodman and Pappas (2000)'s study about retired faculty. A contextual explanation, in relation to the current study involving college students, follows the section.

The *situation* variable captures the broad picture about what is happening in a transition; every person's situation is different and therefore every transition is unique. The situation variable is affected by timing, previous experience with a similar transition, and other stresses that may be happening in students' lives. In the current study, situation involves students leaving a selective major and choosing a new degree program. Students' abilities to manage the transition vary according to what else was happening in their lives at the same time.

The second variable, *self*, involves the personal resources, strengths or weaknesses, that individuals possess to manage change. Self focuses on the students' resilience, their ability to find meaning and purpose in new situations, and their belief in the ability to affect the outcome of a particular action.

The *support* variable is comprised of resources upon which people in transition can rely for assistance and depend upon, including family and friends. The variable

includes the availability of support from students' family, friends, significant others, university employees; whether students have a range of personal support networks; and their ability to access support systems.

The fourth variable, *strategies*, is concerned with the approaches individuals use to cope with the change. In the context of this study, the strategies variable focuses on the ways students have adapted in order to plan for and manage the transition of departure from a selective major to selection of and enrollment in a new degree program at the same university. A more detailed discussion of the nuanced dimensions of the four major variables is provided in Chapter Two, Review of Literature.

Assumptions, Limitations and Delimitations

The researcher made several decisions concerning assumptions, limitations, and delimitations in designing a significant yet manageable independent research project. The study assumed an above average level of cognitive ability for participants, who were enrolled as second, third or fourth year students at a state flagship university. It also assumed that students in selective majors at one study site shared similar experiences to students in selective majors at the second site.

Several factors limit the strength and applicability of this research study. Participants were recruited from two state flagship universities, and 92% of participants were enrolled at their first-choice institution. Using state flagship institutions as study sites may have positively influenced students' satisfaction with their situation; results may have been different with a sample from small colleges or regional universities. The present study was also unable to determine whether students who participated in the study rely on different coping resources than students who declined to participate in the

study. In addition, students who transfer to another institution after leaving a selective major may rely differently on coping and support mechanisms than those students who chose to remain at the institution, but the researcher had no practical way to recruit or contact students who left the institution. Another limitation is the number of participants (26) who were interviewed, limiting the generalizability of the results of this study. The use of a single interview also limits the study. The benefits of a single, 15-30 minute interview provided flexibility to conduct a multi-site, multi-state study and outweighed the limitation of a series of three interviews. In addition, a semi-structured interview design provided sufficient opportunity to use Rubin and Rubin's (2005) model of "responsive interviewing," which they described as the "art of hearing data" (p. 15).

The study was delimited by the researcher in several ways related to sample. First, the selective academic programs identified for this study required students to maintain a minimum 2.6 Grade Point Average (GPA) to continue in the degree program. While some may argue a 2.6 GPA may not be "selective," an investigation of traditionally selective majors at numerous state flagship universities found many programs had a cut-off below a 3.0 GPA. A second delimitation is research participants were recruited from state flagship universities with enrollment exceeding 13,000 students in the Southeast region of the United States. Students attending institutions with smaller populations or those at private institutions may have different characteristics than students attending large, state flagship universities, and are not represented in the current study. Third, critics may argue students in selective degree programs at two large, public universities do not provide enough variability to justify the site selection and sample size. On the other hand, twenty-six interviews with students previously enrolled in six

different selective majors provide enough different contexts to support the criterion sampling parameters described by Patton (2002). Participants' time of enrollment in their new degree program ranged from one to six terms, providing a richness of reflection and an understanding of the continuum of experiences selective major-changers may have.

Definitions of Terms

Definitions must be operationalized for several concepts involved in this study of undergraduate college students. For research purposes, the student participants in the study are identified as “selective majors in transition” at large, state flagship universities in the Southeast.

- “Students” are defined as undergraduate students and classified as sophomores (second year), juniors (third year), or seniors (fourth year), according to a self-report of how long they had been in college.
- The term “selective majors” is being used to describe undergraduate degree programs that determine eligibility based upon academic performance in a prescribed set of courses. The minimum standards for selective majors, most often measured by grade point average (GPA), usually exceed the requirements to be a student in good standing at the university (typically a 2.0 GPA on a 4.0 scale). For selective degree programs at state flagship universities in the Southeast, the required minimum grade point average routinely falls in the 2.6 to 3.0 range, although outliers exist. The minimum GPA for selective majors at the study sites was 2.6 on a 4.0 scale.

- While individual institutions may define “selective majors” differently, certain degree programs are typically characterized as such. Majors identified as selective often include, but are not limited to, architecture, business, education, engineering, mass communication, nursing, and pre-health related programs, such as pre-physical therapy. For participants in this study, the selective majors included business, education, engineering, nursing, pre-health, and social science (a general category that included several specific programs).
- “Transition” is defined as the situation in which students voluntarily left or were forced out of a selective major and enrolled in a new major at the same institution.
- At many colleges and universities, entering students choose a college “major.” A “major” is defined as a student’s choice of an academic area of study and can be as broad as a discipline (e.g., business) or a specific area within a discipline (e.g., supply chain management or marketing). For the purposes of this study, the terms “major,” “field of study,” “academic degree program” and “program of study” are used interchangeably.
- A “large university” is defined by the criteria of “L4/R, large four-year, primarily residential” according to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.). Both study sites have a “RU/VH” Carnegie Basic Classification, indicating research universities with very high research activity. “State flagship” definitions vary but most often

refer to the original land-grant university, often have the highest research profile and the greatest number of doctoral programs (Olson, 2012). In this study, “large universities” are defined as state flagship universities in the Southeast with student populations exceeding 15,000.

- The “Southeast” region includes Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. The region boundaries were defined according to the Association of American Geographers (see Appendix A).
- “Coping resources” are support mechanisms included as part of a Transition Model originally developed by Schlossberg (1981, 1984). The part of the model being used in this study is *Taking Stock of Coping Resources: The 4 S System* as a “way to identify the potential resources someone possesses to cope with the transition. The 4 S’s refer to the person’s *situation, self, support, and strategies*... one deals with it differently depending on these resources” (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 32). In this study, coping resources encompass the personal attributes and institutional support offices or employees students consulted with during their transition between majors.
- “Persistence” and “retention” are often used as interchangeable terms in higher education, but the two concepts should be distinguished from each other. Hagedorn (2005) defines a “persister” as a student who “enrolls in college and remains enrolled until degree completion” (p. 89). A broader interpretation of the term can include students who transfer to another

institution and complete a degree. In the current study, a “persister” is a student who remained at the same institution after leaving their selective degree program. Hagedorn cites definitions used by the Department of Education’s National Center for Education to distinguish “persistence” typically used as a student measure from “retention” referring to institutions. She succinctly states, “institutions retain and students persist” (Hagedorn, 2005, p. 92).

- “Academic advisor” is a term encompassing both faculty and professional staff involved in an “educational role...to enhance student learning and development” (NACADA, 2013). Many of the larger programs at the study sites are staffed primarily by professional advisors, but faculty advisors are also represented in degree programs as advisors and at the top level of advising organizations as advising administrators.

Summary of Chapter One and Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter One provided background information and an introduction to the topic of major-changing among college students leaving selective academic majors. The researcher identified the focus of the qualitative study, examining the coping resources students utilized during the transition of leaving selective majors and enrolling in new academic degree programs.

The significance of the study was highlighted in several areas. Previous literature about students in selective majors is nearly 20 years old and has not presented students’ perspectives or experiences. The study bridges a gap in the literature involving students beyond the first year of college (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005) with a sample of second,

third and fourth year students. In addition, the sample was comprised of major-changing students, a group that Allen and Robbins (2008) found were more likely to take unnecessary courses, take longer to graduate, and were at greater risk of leaving the institution. The study is timely as external pressure on public colleges and universities to facilitate students' time to graduation as well as college completion has taken shape as accountability measures mandated by state governments in Maryland, Texas, and Tennessee, among others.

In addition, as ideas to increase accountability in higher education gain momentum, selective majors are being thrust into the spotlight. Florida Governor Rick Scott's task force on higher education issued a report in November, 2012, recommending differential tuition rates based on program choice (Greenwood, 2013). The proposed tuition freeze for majors in "strategic areas" in demand by the job market such as engineering and health-related programs would be accompanied by tuition hikes in academic majors considered less marketable such as anthropology or history. The highly controversial recommendations include incentives for students choosing "job-friendly degrees" (Alvarez, 2012). Numerous selective majors are typically categorized as marketable, enhancing the significance of research focused in this area.

Chapter Two provides a review of existing literature about higher education at large, public universities; factors influencing academic major choice; the landscape of selective majors; advanced undecided students; major-changing students, of which students in selective majors are usually identified as a sub-set; and two model programs for students in transition. Chapter Two also presents an overview of Schlossberg's 4 S System which provides the theoretical foundation of the research study. Chapter Three

details the methodology and study design of the qualitative research project. In addition, selection of the sites and sample, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures are discussed. Chapter Four discusses results, and Chapter Five provides a summary, conclusions, and recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When students decide to leave their major, what do they do? To whom do they talk first? How do they tell family members? If anyone, from whom at the university do they seek assistance? How do they make the decision to stay at their university rather than transfer? How do they select a new major once they decide to remain at their current institution? Previous research on students in selective majors has focused on academic advising needs but has been devoid of presenting the first-person perspective from students who are in transition. One goal of this literature review was to determine whether previous research had sought to tackle the research questions of the proposed qualitative study; the short answer is no.

In discussing major-changers, Gordon (1992) stated, “students unable to access oversubscribed and selective majors are often left to find alternative academic and career directions on their own” (p. 82). Recent scholarly research is lacking on students changing out of selective majors, making it difficult for academic advisors to understand what factors influence the coping abilities of students faced with the transition.

The research questions for this study are:

- How do undergraduate students previously enrolled in selective majors describe the coping resources involving situation, self, support and strategies they utilized during the transition process of leaving the former major and enrolling in a new degree program at the same institution?
- Which coping resources do students formerly enrolled in selective majors identify as most valuable in navigating the transition process?

- Which coping resources do students previously enrolled in selective majors identify as most influential in their decision to remain at the institution?

The sources reviewed for the study were deemed relevant to research involving undergraduate students leaving selective majors (e.g., business, engineering and nursing). Within the practical limits of the study, the researcher attempted to consider, gather, read, and evaluate sources of information related to the context and participants in a systematic manner. As is often the case, what began as a literature search for a specific topic (students' use of resources during the transition) became a more specialized search on a particular aspect of the topic (coping resources as identified by Schlossberg's 4 S System that students use during the transition from one academic major to another). In the literature review process, the researcher retained and evaluated the most representative resources.

The researcher does not present the literature review as an exhaustive coverage of all aspects of the research topic. Rather, critical elements were identified by a thorough consideration of previous scholarship and are presented within the context of the study. The purpose of the comprehensive analysis of related literature is to determine the elements and evaluate previous scholarship in informing the current study.

While every attempt was made to use information sources published within the last 10 years, this guideline would have eliminated nearly all previous published research on the study population, students in selective majors. To include previous literature for this particular group, sources go back as far as 1985 (Gordon & Polson), followed by a flurry of activity through the mid-1990s (Gordon & Steele, 1992; Steele, 1994; Steele, Kennedy, & Gordon, 1993). With one exception (Reynolds, 2004), students dismissed

from selective majors are limited to brief mention in academic advising handbooks (Gordon, 2007; Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008). A major challenge in searching literature for this specific population was the classification of advanced students, those beyond their first year, making a major change; if unable to decide immediately, they could be shuffled into the “undecided students” group. For that reason, the literature search includes major-changing students and advanced undecided students. The following section presents an overview of how this chapter is organized.

Organization of the Review

The first section highlights the emergence of research about college student transitions. A focus on literature about college students attending large, public universities explains the challenges for students enrolled at this type of postsecondary institution. In order to better understand the type of institution in the study and what students’ experience may include, a review of the literature about challenges for students attending large, public universities provides context for the environment in which these students must operate and thrive in order to earn a degree.

The remaining sections of the chapter discuss factors influencing choice of college major, including family influence, career-related interests, and high-earning potential. Another section discusses types of student populations relevant to this research study, including advanced undecided students and major-changers. Also included is a critical examination of the study’s theoretical framework, the 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995), used to organize the institutional and personal coping mechanisms students used in their transition between majors.

The Evolution of Research about Students in Transition

Beginning in the 1980s, studies about first-year students and other students in transition appeared on university research agendas as institutions tried to understand student attrition and how to counteract it. The focus on first-year programs generated comprehensive approaches to retaining and engaging first-year students and fostered development of extensive scholarship on that population (National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, n.d.). More recent research has included students beyond the first year in transition, including sophomores, seniors and transfer students (Schreiner, Louis,& Nelson, 2012; NACADA, 2012), as well as military veterans returning to college (DiRamio & Jarvis, 2011; Stalides, 2008). In contrast, existing literature about students in the specific transition between academic majors is outdated and relatively sparse.

Within the broader research area of major-changing students, a gap in recent scholarly literature exists regarding students in selective majors. The specific population of interest for this study, students in selective majors, was a hot topic in the 1980s and early 1990s in the academic advising community (National Academic Advising Association, 2004). Within the broader area of major-changers, research involving students in the 1980s focused on students needing “academic alternative advising” (Gordon & Polson, 1985, p.78), degree programs that could not accommodate all interested students. Academic advising administrators in degree programs such as engineering and journalism developed entry requirements to balance supply with excess demand. In the early 1990s the more common term of “selective majors” (Steele, 1994; Gordon, 1992) was used to describe students in degree programs with progression

requirements, either at program entry or upper division admission. Several research studies involving students unable to enter their first-choice major and who participated in the Academic Alternatives Program (ALT) were conducted at Ohio State University (Gordon & Steele, 1992; Steele, Kennedy, & Gordon, 1993; Steele, 1994). The ALT initiative was designed to assist students in making an informed alternate program choice for their new undergraduate degree program.

In the last 20 years, however, research is missing about students who no longer want to or cannot continue in their first-choice major, except for a cursory mention in academic advising resource handbooks (Gordon, 2007; Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008). The dissertation study bridges the gap in the literature by presenting data about transition experiences with a change of major from the students' perspectives. The findings identified external support systems and attitude towards the transition as the coping and support resources students most frequently utilized during the process. In addition, participants singled out external support as the most valuable coping resource. Further, the study results indicated that students primarily draw upon their situation as a current student in making the decision to remain at the university, and in choosing a new degree program at the same university. In the next section, literature about large, public universities is presented to provide a context for the environments in which the multi-site study was conducted.

Students at State Flagship Universities

Critics have argued that many large, public universities are focused on research and graduate education, with fewer monetary and programmatic resources devoted to undergraduates (Lowry, 2004; Sperber, 2000). A criterion for universities considered as

study sites was a minimum undergraduate student population of 15,000. At very large institutions, students can get lost in the system when they change majors. If students have difficulty navigating the major change process, implications can include longer time to graduation, a concern that nearly one third of participants expressed. Other students may drop out, a population which the study did not attempt to include. Several research studies involving state flagship universities identify issues related to the specific institutional type selected as sites for this study involving students in transition between degree programs.

According to the 2004 ACT Report, bachelor's degree completion rates within five years or less for PhD public universities from 1983-2009 was less than 50% (ACT, 2009). The pressure to complete a degree in a reasonable timeframe has serious financial implications for students and their families as the cost of a college education continues to increase each year. For students in transition between majors, concerns about applying earned credits to a new degree program and financial pressure to graduate "on time" has become more acute as families are negatively affected by the current economic downturn and struggle with their ability to pay college tuition and related expenses (Fischer, 2011; Supiano, 2010; Supiano & Ashburn, 2011). The ACT Report included a more general institutional type encompassing PhD public universities, whereas the study below limited its sample to a selective group of state flagship institutions.

Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) examined factors influencing graduation rates at 21 public, research-intensive flagship universities and other public universities in four states. The authors chose public universities because more than two-thirds of full-time college students in four-year degree programs are enrolled at public universities.

Particularly relevant to the current research project are Bowen et al.'s (2009) findings on similarities and differences among graduation rates for sub-groups of students, differences in academic outcomes such as major, time to degree completion, and academic performance. In addition, the study found nearly half (44 %) of all withdrawals happened after the fourth semester and continued to increase each subsequent semester (p. 35). Among the reasons could be that students switch out of selective majors later in their college career. Unfortunately students do not receive prompt feedback on their major choice until their fourth or fifth semester of college because they typically are not able to take upper-level courses in a major early in their college career.

Another related finding was a weak relationship existed between choice of major and socioeconomic status. Further, male and female students from traditionally underrepresented groups were more likely to choose engineering, math and science majors than white students with similar background characteristics. This finding is relevant to the dissertation study as programs considered selective majors often include engineering, math and science. Even though Bowen et al. (2009) have been criticized for using a database derived from information about elite public universities rather than a more inclusive group of institutions, the data analysis of leading public universities is relevant to the study sample involving similar institutional type, state flagship universities.

A third study by Bound, Lovenheim, and Turner (2010) used longitudinal data from the National Center for Education in examining how long it took for students to complete a baccalaureate degree. The findings indicated time to degree varied across

institutional type; students entering college at the top 50 public universities completed their degrees faster than students enrolled at less selective public institutions. The Bound et al. study is relevant as six of 10 state flagships considered as sites for the dissertation study were among their “Top 50 Public Schools” list. Even though the flagship university may have more funding within an individual state, resources are relative to other universities on a national scale. The research, showing longer time to degree for students at less selective institutions could be attributed to declining resources such as fewer course offerings, and also that students attending this type of institution spent time outside school in part or full time employment. The data is limited by the follow-up data collected for the NELS, which ended eight years after high school graduation and may have confounded the data and influenced the results. A more controversial issue with the study is their method of using *US News and World Report* rankings to identify the top public and private universities and liberal arts colleges. Since the *US News* rankings are typically made by college and university presidents or their staff, the selections may be unduly influenced by reputation and subject to inconsistent research methods when measuring data.

Factors Influencing Choice of College Major

The factors influencing students’ initial choice of major may impact their ability to invoke coping mechanisms during the transition of leaving the first-choice major. For example, family pressure to select a particular major may affect how willing students are to seek family support when they are unable to continue in that program of study. Thus, studies presented and evaluated in this section focus on identifying how a variety of factors influence college major choice, including family, interest, work-related experiences, and motivation to earn money.

Family influence. For many college students, their families play an important role in shaping their academic and intended career interests. In a quantitative study examining family influence on students' occupational identity, Berríos-Allison (2005) measured the occupational identity status of 232 college students using several scaled instruments to assess family involvement and career identity. The concept of occupational identity is rooted in Erikson's (1963) work and relates to adolescents' experience in exploring and committing to occupational choices. The researchers weighted three-quarters of the sample with first-year students, a deliberate choice to investigate how students begin to develop their own sense of identity during college. For many first year students in the sample, family separation and independent living were simultaneous and recent experiences. The study found students' families who were connected or supportive encouraged occupational exploration. Students who had already decided on a college major were more likely to achieve occupational identity, defined as commitment to an occupational choice after exploring various job and career options. Students from higher income families were more likely to achieve occupational identity than those with fewer financial resources. One recommendation of the study was to consider designing programs that incorporate and consider family influences in career decision-making, which can be incorporated into academic and career advising. Berríos-Allison's (2005) recommendation is directly related to the support variable in the 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995), and confirms an important finding in the dissertation study that students rely primarily on their families during the transition between academic programs.

Leppel, Williams, and Waldauer's (2001) study investigated a slightly different approach to family influence by examining the effect of parental occupation and socioeconomic status on college major choice. Research methods included analyzing a national data set of 4,161 students in the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) 1990 Survey of Beginning Postsecondary Students. Results indicated that for women, a father's professional or executive occupation correlated with a higher likelihood to major in engineering and the sciences. Differences by gender were found across several indicators. High socioeconomic status was associated with majoring in business for men; among women from backgrounds with greater resources, they were less likely to major in business. This study used first-year students, limiting the interpretation of results for the dissertation study sample of advanced students since numerous studies estimate as many as 75% of students will change their major (Gordon, 2007). Leppel et al.'s study is included in the literature review because the majors highlighted in the study, business and engineering, are among the most common selective majors.

Career-related interests. Students may choose a major, particularly a pre-professional program, based on their intention to pursue a graduate degree or career related to their undergraduate major. Several studies about undergraduate business students confirm a connection between major and career plans.

A survey of 788 undergraduate business students conducted by Malgwi, Howe, and Burnaby (2005) examined influences on choice of the business major for first-year students as well as advanced students who changed into the major later in their college career. The survey was designed to assess both positive and negative factors influencing change of major. Results indicated the most influential positive factor for all respondents

was interest in the subject (business). For students who changed majors into business, the second most influential factor behind interest in the subject was career and job opportunities. Another finding related to later major-changers was the similarity among women and men on the top five positive factors influencing major choice. Other positive factors varied by gender, with women influenced by aptitude in the subject; in contrast, men were drawn to the business major for high earning potential. The negative factors were less significant than the positive influences for later change of major students, and the authors suggested students gravitate to a new major for positive reasons rather than leave their current major because they are dissatisfied.

The survey instrument constructs were not defined and ordering of forced choice responses were not explained, compromising the validity of the study. Malgwi et al.'s (2005) sample was comprised of current business majors and included both first-year students and transfers; the dissertation study included students from six degree programs and excluded first-year students and transfers. Despite omissions of research method details such as constructs and differences in sample, Malgwi et al.'s (2005) research is one of the few similar studies that included later change of major students in the sample.

A research study by Kim, Markham, and Cangelosi (2002) examined factors influencing why students chose particular majors within the business degree. The authors sought to examine the reasons students in various business majors (accounting, finance, computer/decision information systems, marketing, or management) chose business as their degree program. The top five reasons students chose a business major were: interest in a career related to major, good job opportunities, good fit with abilities, desire to run a business in the future, and earnings potential. The study results indicated similarities

among specific majors (e.g., finance, marketing) and highlighted differences across the discipline as well. The researchers administered a state test of basic skills to students in an advanced level business course at a middle-tier state university, limiting its applicability to other states and types of institutions. By testing students in an advanced business course, the results may be confounded as some students may have self-selected out of the major prior to arriving at this course in the required sequence.

High earning potential. For some selective majors, but not all, the possibility of a lucrative professional career may drive a program choice decision. A professional association for college career professionals and employers, the National Association of Colleges and Employers, conducts an annual survey of starting salaries for new college graduates. According to the *NACE Salary Survey* (2012), median starting salaries were highest in engineering (\$60,639), computer science (\$60,038), business (all majors, \$51,541) and health sciences (\$46,567). The research studies below offer information related to factors influencing a specific major choice in business.

A report by Itkin (2008), an economist in the Bureau of Labor Statistics, also used salary information from the National Association of Colleges and Employers. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), business is the most popular major choice. In 2005-2006, more bachelor's degrees were awarded in the area of business, nearly twice that of any other academic field. Economic analysis of salary information compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that a business degree can literally pay off; after one year in the workforce, graduates with business degrees earned about 16% more than the average salary for all degrees.

Another research project about business students was Hurt and Barro's (2006) survey study of 112 upper-division accounting majors, specifically examining the students' motivations for entering the accounting profession. For students in their first upper-division course, variables of lifestyle and money were motivating factors for both groups, but money had greater influence. The authors discuss implications for advising accounting students, including requiring advising for at-risk students, offering ideas for advising assignments in classes that focus on motivation to enter the profession and providing opportunities for involvement in accounting-related student organizations.

Relevant Student Sub-groups

Scholarship focusing on several student populations is relevant to this study of selective majors in transition. These student sub-groups include selective majors, advanced undecided students who share many of the same situational issues as the study participants, and major-changing students. When students encounter academic difficulty in major-related courses, as nearly half of the current study's participants indicated, they may proceed with the difficult choice to make a program change.

Students in selective majors. Students in selective degree programs, such as business and nursing, often choose their major with a clear sense of career goals. Dismissal from a major is difficult for all students, but for students in selective majors, the rejection can be particularly devastating as it creates a roadblock to their previously defined career goals (Reynolds, 2004). In an article written for practitioners, Reynolds, a faculty advisor, proposed that advisors use Mitchell and Anderson's (1983) grief counseling approach as they work with students dismissed from selective majors. While some students may be receptive to the idea of rejection from their first-choice major as a

loss, such a counseling-based approach may go beyond the training and comfort level of many faculty and professional academic advisors. Reynolds (2004) based the article on her personal experience as a faculty advisor at a small liberal arts college, where faculty members also have academic advising responsibilities. A grief counseling approach needs to be tested to determine its efficacy. In addition, greater caution might be exercised with faculty advisors, particularly faculty at large public universities, who typically do not receive in-depth advising training.

While Reynolds (2004) relied on personal experience to recommend advising strategies for selective majors, Hsu and Bailey (2007) used a survey of 224 undergraduates in a business foundations course to assess business students' views of advising resources. Resources assessed included advisors, course instructors, departmental staff, a mandatory foundation course, course catalog, friends and classmates, and parents. The survey question, "These advising resources are useful to me," does not include a definition of the construct "useful." Respondents may have interpreted "useful" in many different ways, making it difficult to generalize the study results. Despite that concern, data analysis compared first-year students against sophomores/juniors on the resources they identified as most useful. Participants identified the foundation course to be the most useful advising resource. The authors discuss possible future studies of interest, including research examining whether perceptions about advising resources differ based on classification (first-year, sophomore, junior, or senior). Hsu and Bailey's (2007) study of business students raised relevant questions for the current research project concerning specific institutional resources, such as academic advisors, course instructors and a major-related foundation course.

In a study examining math aptitude across the spectrum of business majors, Pritchard, Potter and Saccucci (2004) analyzed computational skills and basic algebra competency through performance on a state basic skills test. The purpose of the research was to examine whether a statistically significant difference in math skills existed among different business majors (e.g., marketing, finance). All students (n=87) were enrolled in an introductory finance course at a regional university. Study results indicated accounting/finance majors had higher scores on the quantitative assessments than management, management information systems, or marketing majors. The authors suggested decisions about a specific major within business should be made by students only after information about each specific major is presented. The authors recommended that business schools provide information to current and potential business majors about career opportunities, attributes, specific knowledge and skills, and post-graduate study options. Armed with that information, students can select a specific business major and more fully understand the short-term and long-term implications of their major decision. If students choose a major more closely matched to their skills, abilities and interests, they may increase the likelihood of sticking with and being successful in a specific program such as accounting, finance or management. A good match also has implications for retention within the business major and fewer program transfers to other degree programs.

Advanced undecided students. Issues related to advising this student population differ from first-year undecided or exploratory major students, as is evident in the work of Steele (1994); Hagstrom, Skovholt and Rivers (1997); and in Gordon's (2007) book on advising undecided students. In the monograph *Issues in advising the undecided college*

student, Steele (1994) posited that major-changers are a special type of undecided student and are similar to undecided first-year students, in that both groups need to actively explore academic and career options. Several characteristics of major-changers differentiate them from first-year students. At many universities, admission to selective majors is available to all first-year students. Once students earn enough academic credits to gain second-year status, gaining entry to selective majors may be contingent upon performance in required courses or determined through an application process. Even students already in the selective major face hurdles to stay there. For example, if their grades in prescribed courses do not meet minimum standards, they become ineligible to continue in their current field of study. The academic history of major-changers may deter, delay, or prohibit these students from transferring into their preferred selective major.

Steele's practical considerations for working with students forced to change majors are drawn from his extensive experience as director and advisor in the Alternatives Advising Program in University College at The Ohio State University during the 1980s and 1990s. Steele's (1994) timeless insights about and recommendations for advising advance undecided students remain relevant to working with current students in academic major transition.

A research study by Hagstrom, Skovholt, and Rivers (1997) involved interviews with 16 sophomores and juniors at the University of Minnesota for a qualitative study about undecided students. The interview questions probed feelings and thoughts about being undecided, and activities related to making a major decision. Among the themes that emerged from data analysis were: frustration, anxiety, and hopelessness; fear of

commitment, fear of judgment, self-doubt and low self-esteem, difficulty setting goals, family issues, reluctance to seek help, and the desire for a personal, caring advising relationship. The authors suggested undecided students were unsuccessful in making choices about academic majors due to myriad reasons. Among the obstacles were unrealistic expectations, such as fear of a rigid career path determined by major choice, and the need for the “perfect” major fit. The limitations of the study included a single site and the small sample size of 16 students drawn solely from the liberal arts college at the university. Despite the limitations, the study by Hagstrom et al. (1997) is one of the few studies that focused on upperclass undecided students and was helpful in the current study involving sophomore, junior, and senior students because participants experienced some of the same emotions and obstacles identified by the students in the Hagstrom et al. (1997) study.

Gordon’s (2007) third edition of her book about advising undecided college students updated her comprehensive review of issues related to working with the undecided student population. She defined the characteristics of undecided students, theoretical frameworks relevant to studying this population, types of undecided students, administrative models and scope of services targeted for this group, methods and techniques for working with undecided students, and best practices. Gordon (2007) summarized developmental, career choice and learning theories and addressed each theory in terms of implications and strategies for advisor interaction with undecided students.

The types of major-changers Gordon outlined were based on experience, as opposed to formal inquiry, making it prudent to exercise caution in assigning major-

changers to the groups she describes. Several types of major-changers identified by Gordon are relevant to the current study, including Drifters and Up-Tighters. Drifters sense their major choice is wrong but are reluctant to seek help. Several participants in the current study expressed doubt about a match with their previous major long before they actually made the decision to switch. Another type of major changing group is the “Up-Tighters,” which Gordon (2007, p. 90) described as facing rejection from the major or incompatibility between their abilities (e.g. mathematics competencies) and their interests (e.g., business degree program). The label “Up-Tighter” could be used to describe numerous participants in the current study who voluntarily left selective majors because of academic difficulty in required courses. Gordon recommended interaction with a positive, structured approach to exploring alternatives that also provide encouragement and support. The exhaustive literature review in the third edition included outdated studies in addition to recent research, which can be unwieldy for the reader. Despite these shortcomings, a section on assisting students in transition outlined brief but valuable considerations. Both new advisors and seasoned professionals working with exploratory major students can use the volume to sharpen their focus on and approach in advising students who may have some level of indecision when changing programs. Sections on administrative models, program components and best practices make *The undecided college student* a valuable resource when designing programmatic efforts or targeting outreach to this student population.

Major-changers. In the literature, major-changers have often been grouped with and treated as a sub-population of the broader undecided student group. While some major-changing students may be undecided, for others their major-changing activity is

the result of a firm decision to take a different academic path. The extant literature has included only the former group, treating all major-changers as undecided students.

Firmin and MacKillop (2008) examined the extrinsic and intrinsic factors that impact frequent major changers. The qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews of 20 junior and senior students at a small, private college who changed their major multiple times, defined as three or more times, and examined how frequent major changers understand the process that led to multiple major change decisions. The researchers found extrinsic factors influencing students' decision making process that included: low levels of guidance from sources outside their families, lack of basic knowledge about major requirements, and parents who were supportive but not directive about their child's major choice (Firmin & MacKillop, 2008). Intrinsic factors affecting frequent major-change were difficulty making "big" decisions, desire for a major that matched students' interests and passion, and lack of personal self-awareness. In general, students did not consider their frequent major changing to be positive experiences. The study did not identify how students arrived at a major change, either by their own choice or if they failed to maintain eligibility for their current degree program. It is impossible to determine why the participants had changed majors. Students at small, private colleges may have different institutional resources than students attending large, public, state flagship universities. More background information about the participants, such as how participants arrived at a program change decision, would have helped to gauge the value of Firmin and MacKillop's (2008) research in relation to the current study.

Cunningham's (2009) dissertation examined whether levels of psychosocial development, self-efficacy and parental education influenced major-changing students

(three or more program changes) at the University of Northern Iowa. Quantitative data were collected from 1,765 students using the Life-Skills Inventory-College Form and General Self-Efficacy Scale. Cunningham found that major-changers reported having lower self-efficacy than relatively stable students, those who have never changed their major or changed it once or twice. In addition, relatively stable students had a higher level of self-perception on scales of decision making and problem solving. The research study's conceptual framework was Chickering's (1969) psychosocial theory of student development. While one may argue she could have used an updated version of Chickering's theory (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), the rest of the study seems solid. Her research questions were different from the current study as her study focuses on major-changing students and their intrinsic skills and abilities, in contrast to the current study's examination of external and internal coping mechanisms.

A much older study by Elliott and Elliott (1985) was among the most relevant research reviewed; their study assessed the extent to which students used academic resources offered by the university in making academic major change decisions. The quantitative study focused on students in pre-professional majors, and the resources they used in selecting a new program, a self-driven decision. The survey design required participants to rank order 15 items on a checklist of academic resources. Among the items on the checklist were college catalog, departmental advising center, influence of a family member, other students in their living area, and work experience including summer job. Elliott and Elliott hypothesized that students would mainly use the college catalog/academic bulletin for program information when changing their major.

The expected outcome was only partially supported by the results; the academic bulletin was one of the four most frequently cited resources that students reported accessing during the major change process. The resources students most frequently accessed most were: “word of mouth” from a friend, college catalog, influence of a family member, and work experience in the field, including summer job. Students used resources if those resources were available when needed during the major change decision. One of the unexpected outcomes of the study was participants’ dependence upon informal contacts with other students in their intended academic program to make their decision; that finding is similar to results in the current study.

While the Elliott and Elliott (1985) study is over 25 years old, it is more closely related to the dissertation study than any others discovered. Both studies involved a similar sample of students, as many selective majors encompass pre-professional programs (e.g., nursing, engineering). In addition, the examination of resource type used was similar even though the research methods, survey versus interview, differed. A significant difference between the two studies was the means and methods by which students gathered information. Since the mid-1980s, the availability of on-line information sources has been revolutionized by technological advances; despite advances in information-gathering methods, the findings of Elliott and Elliott (1985) share similarities to the present study’s results and highlight the relevance and reliance on personal relationships in making academic major change decisions.

A slightly different approach to research on major-changing students was taken by Allen and Robbins (2008) in their study of factors influencing college major persistence into the third year. They used a data set of nearly 50,000 students to test a

theory for academic major persistence using academic preparation, interest-major fit, and academic performance during students' first year of college. Allen and Robbins (2008) argue for the value of students changing majors to find a better match with skills and interests. Students' experiences could be enhanced if they correctly identified their most suitable discipline at college entry. Students who initially declare and persist in the same academic major may graduate with fewer excess credits and finish in a more timely manner.

The study used hierarchical logistical regression to test three hypotheses related to major persistence. Drawing on Holland's theory of person-environment fit, the first hypothesis was interest-major fit predicted major persistence. The second hypothesis was that students will continue in the same major they declared at college entry if they had higher first-year grade point averages. The third and final hypothesis was related to high school academic preparation, measured by high school grade point average and ACT test scores indirectly influence academic major persistence, since both factors influence first-year collegiate grade point average. Results indicated support for all three hypotheses.

Allen and Robbins' (2008) study was important to the current study's review of literature as it is one of the few studies on major retention. In addition, the sample size of nearly 50,000 offers validity to the findings that the factors of interest-major fit, higher first-year collegiate grade point average, and academic preparation influence students' persistence in academic major into their third year. In addition, the authors discuss implications for academic advising, including a recommendation that institutions use the interest-major composite as a tool to identify students who may be at risk for transferring to another major.

The effect of major-changing on student retention. Research is unclear whether major changes have a positive or negative effect on retention, since the results of some studies in this area contradict others. Allen, Robbins, Casillas, and Oh (2008) examined the effects of academic performance, motivation, and social connectedness on a sample of 6,872 students at four-year colleges. Their study investigated third-year retention, transfer, and dropout behavior. Results indicated first-year academic performance was the strongest predictor of student retention; if a student enjoyed academic success, they remained at the institution for a third year. For students who left, first-year academic success also positively affected their transfer to another institution. In addition, social connectedness and college commitment influenced persistence but the study was limited by a single measurement early in the students' first year. Future study is needed and would be enhanced by including a subsequent assessment of these measures later in participants' college careers. Allen et al.'s (2008) research is extremely relevant to the current study as both studied students at four-year institutions who had previously declared a major and persisted beyond the first year. The study did not investigate whether grades in major-specific courses correlated with persistence in the degree program, so it is impossible to predict whether academic success in relevant courses is a predictor or not.

Several studies discussed below involved a retention initiative at Ohio State University created in the mid-1980s, the Academic Alternatives Advising Program (ALT). The Academic Alternatives Program (ALT) was created to provide academic and career advising to advanced students in transition from one major to another and existed from the mid-1980s to 2001 (Gordon, 2005; Gordon & Steele, 1992; Steele, Kennedy, &

Gordon, 1993). The program was in response to increasing numbers of students unable to enter selective and oversubscribed majors. In addition, the program was designed to increase the retention and completion rate of this population deemed at risk for departure. Despite the documented success of the program in promoting stability in new major choice and increasing student retention among students served by the ALT, the program and its administrative home in University College fell victim to bureaucratic politics and both were dismantled in 2001 (Gordon, 2005). Several research projects conducted by Gordon, Steele and associates centered on the ALT are reviewed in this section.

A description of the development, implementation and progress associated with the ALT was outlined by Gordon and Steele (1992). The ALT program established a separate academic advising office designed to meet the specific needs of students with advanced credit hours, including those denied admission to a selective program. The goals of the program were to provide intrusive academic and career advising, a personal and caring environment, assistance to students in choosing a viable alternative major, and services geared towards identifying and meeting individual needs. A three-pronged approach to working with these students was implemented, focused on individual advising, group advising, and a credit-bearing course taught by ALT program academic advisors. Data indicated students participating in the program had lower academic dismissal rates than non-participants. In addition, for participants still enrolled at the university five terms after initial program entry, an impressive 93% remained in their alternative major. The results indicated quantifiable positive outcomes to justify the program's existence and its positive effect on student retention.

Another research project conducted by Steele, Kennedy, and Gordon (1993) was a longitudinal study of the Academic Alternatives Program (ALT) at Ohio State University. The study compared retention and graduation rates of participants in the Academic Alternatives Advising Program with a randomly selected and matched-comparison cohort. Results indicated sophomores and juniors in the ALT program were more likely to maintain a stable major choice (stay in the new major) and graduate than the comparison group. The nature of the voluntary participation may have influenced the results, as students who took advantage of the Academic Alternatives program may have been more motivated to achieve their academic goals than students who were referred to the program but declined to participate.

Not all research indicates major-changing has a negative effect on retention and graduation. Micceri's (2001) study analyzing institutional research data on 13,000 second-year students at the University of South Florida (USF) from 1991-1994 found higher graduation rates were associated with students who changed majors at least once. Major-changers graduated at nearly twice the rate of their counterparts who never changed their major. In addition, program change did not significantly extend the time it took to earn a degree. Students remaining in the same program graduated in an average of 4.80 years, while those who made one or two major changes were close behind at 4.82 and 4.88 years, respectively. As with other studies about major-changing students, no information is available regarding the reasons students changed majors, limiting the value for the proposed research project. Another limitation was that students' majors were based on first semester intention; whether students actually enrolled in the intended major is unknown. Possible follow-up studies involving a comparison with more recent data at

USF or similar research projects at other institutions would give Micceri's (2001) study greater applicability.

In the next section, the conceptual framework will be presented, including its use in previous research projects and how it was implemented in the current study.

Theoretical Framework

The current study involved transition experiences of undergraduate students who transferred from selective majors and chose a new program at the same university. The concepts associated with the 4 S System in Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995) provided a relevant taxonomy for data analysis and organized coping resources into the 4 S variables of situation, self, support, and strategies. Many previous research studies involving college students have successfully utilized the 4 S conceptual framework in analyzing transitions, although the 4 S System has not been used in studies with major-changing students. In addition, Schlossberg and Astin (1995) used the same conceptual framework in a popular press book, *How to get the most out of college*. The widespread application of the theory to a variety of college populations enabled a comprehensive evaluation of the theory for the current study and the determination that it was the most appropriate conceptual framework.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory. This research study focused on how students deal with the transition from a selective major to another major. The conceptual framework underpinning this study of undergraduate students is the 4 S System, initially described by Schlossberg (1989) and integrated into Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The transition model has three major parts: Approaching Transitions (identifying the transition and the related process); Taking Stock of Coping Resources through the 4 S

System; and Taking Charge, using personal awareness to strengthen support resources (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Schlossberg et al. (1995) described a transition as “any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p. 27). An important caveat to the theory is that the transition exists only if the person experiencing the transition classifies it as such. The Transition Theory is widely recognized as a straightforward way to examine how change affects individuals. The 4 S System taxonomy was used in data analysis of the current study to assess the external and internal coping mechanisms an individual may possess.

Research variables: The 4 S System. The structure of the 4 S System was used as a framework to classify students’ appraisals of coping resources used during their transition (See Figure 2.1). By identifying resources that influence ability to cope with transition, the 4 S System assesses a person’s *situation*, *self*, *support*, and *strategies*. This study examined how students relied on their 4 S’s during the transition of leaving a selective major, either of their own accord or forced to change, and enrolling in a new program at the same university.

The first coping resource, situation, includes factors that generated the transition, external or internal control factors, and aspects of the transition within the individual’s control. In addition, duration, previous experience, other sources of stress, and who or what was responsible for the transition also contribute to situation. The second variable, self, contains two categories: personal/demographic characteristics, and psychological resources. Personal and demographic characteristics are gender, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, level of wellness, and stage of life. Psychological resources facilitate

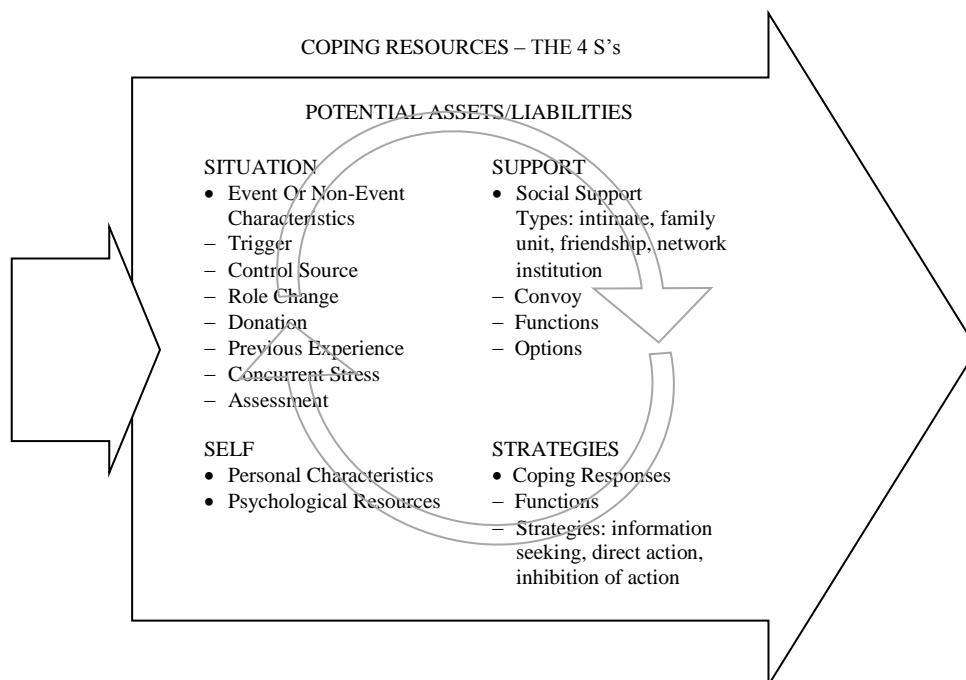


Figure 2.1. The 4 S System (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006, p. 56).

coping and include ego development, optimism and self-efficacy, and commitment and values. Third is support, specifically external social support systems such as family, friends, institutions, and communities. The fourth variable in the 4 S System is strategies, which encompasses coping responses that change the situation, control meaning of the problem, and facilitate stress management following the transition. Individuals who successfully manage transition are adaptable and use more than one method (Evans et al., 2010).

In the chapter, “Moving through college,” Steele and McDonald (2008) discussed types of transitions, including Schlossberg’s (1989) three-part model that undecided, major-changing, and underprepared students may encounter. The three types of transitions Schlossberg (1989) outlined are anticipated transitions, which people expect and do occur; unanticipated transitions, unscheduled or unpredictable; and nonevents,

transitions people expect but do not occur. In the context of the research study, the concepts of unanticipated transitions or nonevents may be most relevant. Students typically do not expect to change their major (unexpected transition). Some students expect to continue in the current selective major despite warning signals such as poor grades, but are dismissed (nonevent).

The 4 S System framework in other research studies. The straightforward presentation of the four variables in assessing coping mechanisms has made the 4 S System a popular choice for both qualitative and quantitative research studies in higher education. For example, Powers (2010) used Schlossberg et al.'s Transition Theory to develop a rather cumbersome interview protocol to assess each of the 4 S's during the three stages of Moving In, Moving Through, and Moving On among male college drop-outs. Curtis (2009) used the 4 S System in a quantitative master's thesis study about the unanticipated financial transitions graduate students experience. Two dissertations (Livingston, 2010; Rumann, 2010) used the framework for studies involving the transitions of military veteran students. A narrative study by Boyenga (2009) examined the four variables of situation, self, support and strategies involving community college theatre students and the transition to four year college theatre programs. Although the methodology and participants differed, the dissertations had similar elements of presenting the 4 S System in the interview protocol and gave the researcher an opportunity to consider elements of each protocol that best informed interpretation and application of the variables for the proposed study.

While developmental psychology stage theories have been criticized for failing to account for individual differences (Jordan, 2011), the 4 S System assesses how

individuals balance their assets and liabilities. It presents a relevant framework to analyze data on coping resources used and identified as most valuable by selective majors in transition. The 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995) provides an umbrella under which a broad range of coping resources influence how well individuals manage change.

Summary of Literature Review

The bulk of the scholarly literature on this population is outdated, having been written nearly 20 years ago and supports justification for the proposed study. The literature review has focused on exploring several topics, including challenges for students at large universities, influences on major choice decisions, relevant student populations and a discussion of the conceptual framework of the study. Schlossberg et al.'s (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995) straightforward approach for managing change facilitates its applicability to the study of college students in transition. The framework of the 4 S System provides a structure for categorizing the coping resources students are equipped with or seek during their transition between majors. This comprehensive review of the literature confirms the current study was needed to bridge the gap of research about students previously enrolled in selective majors.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

Subjecting one's intellectual curiosity to the rigor of an empirical study represents a web of decisions that creates the structure for the research process. These decisions are informed by a number of different factors including the topic of study, the context of the research project, ethical concerns, and the available resources... The combination of these factors (i.e., topic, context, participants, and researcher) are what make research in the field of higher education, student success, and student transitions so rich and interesting. (Henscheid & Keup, 2011, p. 19)

Incorporating the students' perspectives-by asking the students directly-influenced the choice of methodology that allowed participants to share their transition experiences. The results of the study are indeed interesting, as Henscheid and Keup's (2011) statement suggests. Several concepts of qualitative research made it the most suitable research method for this study of students in transition, voluntarily leaving or being forcibly dismissed from selective majors. The research goal of this study was to gather first-hand information from students about which institutional and personal resources they used during the transition. While quantitative research methods, such as a survey, were considered, they were rejected; it seemed unlikely that participation in a survey about a potentially disappointing experience would achieve an acceptable response rate. Further, research for a national data set involving college student major-changing behavior (e.g., Cooperative Institutional Research Program, CIRP, or National Survey of Student Engagement, NSSE) failed to uncover quantitative data at the aggregate level.

The advantage of a qualitative research design using interviews extended data collection beyond a simple checklist of resources and allowed a deeper level of meaning to be probed in the semi-structured individual interviews. Further, according to Merriam (2002), qualitative study focuses on the idea of meaning as “socially constructed by individuals in interacting with their world” (p. 3). In order to understand how the phenomenon being studied affects students, the focus must be on how they make meaning of the experience. Since recent research on this particular population is lacking, the researcher set out to investigate transition experiences by interviewing students who left a selective major. As students recounted their experiences, their descriptive narratives enhanced the presentation of the data and communicated their stories in their own words (Merriam, 2002).

This chapter outlines the research design and methodology used in the qualitative study, as presented in the following sections: study design, site selection, approval of study and access to participants, sample, instrumentation, role of the researcher, ethical protection of participants, data collection, trustworthiness, and data analysis. The research design and methodology are determined by the inductive nature of the study and used naturalistic inquiry to collect data related to how undergraduate students describe using coping resources in managing a transition from one degree program to another.

The research questions for this study are:

- How do undergraduate students previously enrolled in selective majors describe the coping resources involving situation, self, support and strategies they utilized during the transition process of leaving the former major and enrolling in a new degree program at the same institution?

- Which coping mechanisms do students formerly enrolled in selective majors identify as most valuable in navigating the transition process?
- Which coping resources do students previously enrolled in selective majors identify as most influential in their decision to remain at the institution?

The focus of the study is on sharing students' experiences about how they lived that experience and how they described using coping mechanisms and resources during their transition.

Research Study Design

The current study involved a basic exploratory qualitative research design to examine the coping strategies of students in transition using semi-structured, individual interviews. Interviews provided an excellent opportunity to collect data about students' transitions based on the phenomenon of coping resources used and considered most valuable in managing the transition. Chase (2003) recommended focusing on "inviting stories rather than reports during interviews" (p. 274). The design of the interview questions and the use of probes to follow up on initial responses enabled a more complete picture of how students managed the transition. In order to gather data on the coping resources selective majors used in the transition, students were directed to discuss their experiences in the context of coping resources using Schlossberg's 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995) variables of situation, self, support and strategies through the interview protocol. As a supplement to the semi-structured interview format, students were also provided an opportunity to discuss reflections and transition experiences which were unique to their journey via an open-ended interview question.

Research investigating students' experiences using coping resources and the support systems considered most valuable is better aligned with qualitative research methods. For this study, specific qualitative methods included semi-structured, individual interviews with undergraduate students at two large, public, state flagship universities who left selective majors and enrolled in a new degree program at the same institution. An interview protocol based on the research questions allowed participants to share their experiences about coping resources used during the transition from a selective major to enrollment in a new degree program. The "selective majors" in this study included academic degree programs with progression requirements. While progression requirements vary by program, the most common elements are minimum grade point average and/or minimum grade in a prescribed set of courses. The sample size of 26 was drawn from undergraduate students at two large (>15,000 undergraduates), public, state flagship universities in the Southeast that granted permission for the researcher to recruit students for the study. For the purposes of this study, the two institutions are identified as the University of the Deep South and the University of the Southeast.

Little is known about how, and how well, students manage the transition of selecting a new degree program after being dismissed from a selective major. Using interview data, the researcher conducted a "paradigmatic analysis of narratives" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 12) to gather common elements among students' stories using the taxonomy of Schlossberg's 4 S System. Simultaneously, the researcher attempted to preserve the unique journey individual students made while managing the transition. While the main research design was centered on an exploratory study using interviews, the study also used elements of phenomenology, a logical flow for research based on

interviews about a specific phenomenon such as the forced transition that follows dismissal from a selective major.

While other paradigms were considered, a basic exploratory study involving interviews provided the best fit based on the nature of the study. The value of a single or comparative case study is that it allows in-depth examination; those merits were weighed against gathering more data, which ultimately was deemed more important to the study. Another methodology considered and rejected was grounded theory, centered on an open-ended design. An ethnographic approach, which allows the researcher to spend an extended period of time at one institution, was considered and rejected because of the limitation of research with a single study site. The comprehensive nature of Schlossberg's 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995) provides a flexible structure akin to, but different from, a grounded theory approach. After consideration of several possible paradigms, an exploratory design was determined to be most compatible with the 4 S System in light of the research questions and goals of the study.

Site Selection

Sites were selected on the basis of meeting the established study criteria as large, state flagship universities in the Southeast. State flagship universities were chosen because of their large size and the wide variety of academic programs, including numerous selective majors. A criterion for "selective majors" in the current study was a minimum 2.6 grade point average.

This multi-site study was conducted at two large four-year, primarily residential public universities institutions ("L4/R") in the Southeast. A large university is defined by

the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.) as 10,000 FTE, degree-seeking students. In this research project, the two study sites were state flagship universities with more than 15, 000 undergraduate students.

Initially the researcher had planned to conduct a multi-site study involving three state flagship universities. The Institutional Review Boards at two universities granted the research study exempt status, and the third site denied the IRB application for the current study.

Information about the two universities used as sites for the current study is presented in this section. In order to further protect the identities of the student participants, the state flagship institutions have been assigned pseudonyms. It should be noted that both universities in the study enroll first-year students in the selective degree colleges. For example, first year business students at both the University of the Deep South and the University of the Southeast enroll in and are advised in the college of business. General information about the undergraduate population at the two university sites is presented in Figure 3.1, Institutional Characteristics.

Approval of Study and Access to Participants

The study was granted an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations after the Institutional Review Board (IRB) review on March 15, 2012 (See Appendix B). In assigning the research study Exempt Status, the IRB strongly recommended anonymity for participants and suggested research subjects' rights be outlined in a Letter of Invitation which did not require a signature and could be used in lieu of a Signed Consent Form. Appendix C contains a sample Letter of Invitation. Exempt status from the researcher's home institution opened the door to seek IRB approval from other possible

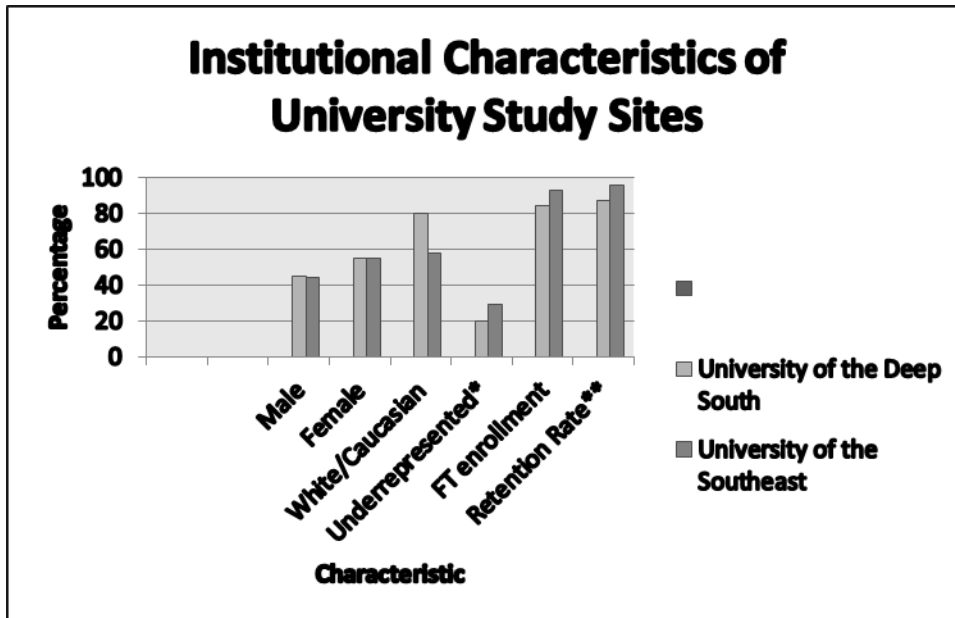


Figure 3.1. Institutional Characteristics of Undergraduate Students at research study sites. *Traditionally underrepresented ethnic and minority groups included African American or Black, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and Two or more races. **The percentage of first-year students who returned to the same university the following year. Information retrieved from the US Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Data Center, 2012).

study sites.

The plan to identify potential participants at several study sites involved (1) enlisting the assistance of academic advisors to send out recruitment materials, and (2) requesting a list of students who had changed out of specific majors included in the study. A major obstacle was encountered in gaining access to a list of students from the university registrar’s office at the first study site. After a series of meetings and phone calls with the Registrar and high-level student affairs officers in an effort to access a list of major-changing students, the Registrar’s Office staff decided that major-changing information was not considered student directory information and access was denied due to Family Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations. As a result, all

participants were recruited from academic advisor referrals or from students responding to flyers advertising the study.

An application packet was submitted to a second possible university which ended in notification of rejection, as previously mentioned, on April 6, 2012. After numerous communication exchanges, an IRB representative at second site, the University of the Southeast, sent an e-mail message on April 24, 2012, stating IRB review was only necessary if the study would trigger the university as “engaged in the research.” The IRB Office further clarified that “the providing of contacts, or distribution of study information to potential participants at [the university] along with information on how to contact the researchers directly, thus does not constitute engagement in the research.”

Upon receipt of the notification, the researcher communicated with several gatekeepers at the University of the Southeast to seek assistance in identifying potential participants. An announcement sent to academic advisors included a request that they consider referring students for the study as well as disseminating information to students in their programs. The study was also announced in a weekly electronic departmental newsletter sent to all undergraduate business majors. In addition, advisors were asked to send an email message to former advisees inviting them to join the study.

The researcher renewed her efforts to generate participants from the first site, the University of the Deep South, by soliciting assistance from over 30 departmental and central academic advising offices to distribute paper flyers and request that advisors send out electronic flyers on their listserv or post an announcement on Blackboard. In addition, she attended several university events targeted at academic advisors (e.g., campus advising network meetings, forums on general education curriculum). Sample e-

mail invitations and printed invitation flyers were provided to academic advisors to facilitate recruitment; both pieces of communication provided the researcher's contact information and requested students directly contact the researcher. See Appendix D for a sample recruitment flyer.

The flyers prominently noted the \$20 gift card awarded to students interviewed for a study involving students *dismissed* from selective majors. After one week, the poor response rate (2 inquiries) forced a quick change of plans, (and with the Dissertation Committee's approval) amended the proposed study about students dismissed from a business major to an investigation of students who "left" a selective major, defined as degree programs with a progression requirement of a 2.6 GPA or higher. Almost immediately, the researcher was managing dozens of inquiries and set up the first 10 interviews in April and May, 2012.

By working with on-site academic advisors, the researcher intended to put students at ease about participating in the research study. The researcher's personal experience working in higher education settings for over 20 years facilitated her ability to balance rapport-building with professionalism in communicating with study participants. To insure all participants were current students, the Letter of Invitation was e-mailed to their official university e-mail address.

Participants were given the choice of an in-person or phone interview. The researcher made the decision to offer two interview modes after consideration of several factors. It was impossible to know at the outset whether students would describe leaving a selective major in a positive or negative way, but the potential as a sensitive topic prompted the researcher to offer a choice of interview mode. Students did have some

distance from a potentially uncomfortable situation, as all participants had changed majors at least three months before they were interviewed for the study. The nature of the research and the time lapse was an important consideration in offering telephone interviews, which may provide greater anonymity in interviews about a sensitive topic (Greenfield, Midanik, & Rogers, 2000). In addition, previous research involving comparisons of face-to-face interviews with telephone interviews in qualitative studies found no significant differences in the interview data (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004; Novick, 2008). A significant practical consideration was rooted in the timing of getting past hurdles of accessing potential participants, which was finally resolved at the same time as final exams for spring term classes at the two research sites. The telephone interview option allowed students who were leaving or had left campus for summer work or other plans to participate in the research.

Six interviews were conducted in person and 20 were accomplished as phone interviews. Face-to-face interviews took place in interview rooms at the university career center during regular office hours (between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.). The interviews were recorded with the participants' permission, and all 26 participants agreed to being recorded. The length of the phone interviews was same as face-to-face interviews, an average of 18 minutes.

Participants were awarded a research incentive in the form of a \$20 gift card to Target or Barnes & Noble to compensate them for their time. In addition to generating interest in study participation, offering an incentive may have also encouraged participants of marginal financial means to participate, thereby increasing the diversity of the sample.

Subsequently, two face-to-face and eight phone interviews were conducted, nine with University of the Deep South students and one with a student from the University of the Southeast. The first round of 10 interviews was conducted between April 20 and May 10, 2012. Among those participants, seven students reported they voluntarily left and three said they were forcibly dismissed from their previous selective majors.

In mid-July, the researcher embarked on recruiting additional participants before the fall term began in late August. The researcher spent four days at the University of the Southeast going door to door to advisor offices, as she had done at the University of the Deep South. She met with advisors in business, education, liberal arts and sciences, and a TRIO type (first-generation, low income) scholarship program to promote the study and ask if advisors would contact students. Simultaneously, a faculty advisor at the University of the Deep South distributed the study announcement and almost immediately the researcher was managing communication from 50 students!

Once potential participants (total = 72) contacted the researcher, additional information was solicited through e-mail or text messages to confirm that participants met the study's eligibility requirements and to schedule interviews with those who did meet the criteria. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in an office space at the respective institutions' career centers.

After sorting through those who qualified, the second round of interviews was conducted August 1- 17, 2012 and included 10 additional University of the Southeast students and six more University of Deep South students. Four interviews were conducted face-to-face and 12 were completed by telephone. One additional student was screened and interviewed, but during the interview she was identified as a transfer student

and excluded from the sample. The sample criteria included only students who had enrolled as first-time, first-year students at their respective university.

Sample

Participant selection for the study was guided by Patton's (2002) concept of purposeful sampling. Two strategies were used to purposefully sample in this study. The first specific strategy, intensity sampling, was used to "seek excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest, but not highly unusual cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 234).

Participant eligibility for the study also used a second strategy, criterion sampling, which Patton (2002) described as meeting some predetermined criterion of importance.

Participants were selected on the basis of the following criteria: (1) previously enrolled in a selective major; (2) self-reported second, third or fourth year students, (3) enrolled at the university as a first-year student and did not transfer from another institution, (4) were "traditional age" students, defined as between 18 and 24 years of age, and (5) were enrolled in their new academic degree program. The definition of "traditional age" students was based on a definition used by the U.S. Department of Education and demographic information available from the Common Data Set (a set of standard data items and information provided by higher education institutions) indicating the average age of undergraduate students at each of the two sites was 21 years of age.

The context for the study sample involved second, third and fourth year undergraduate students enrolled at state flagship universities who left a selective major and were enrolled in a new academic degree program at the same institution. As part of the study design, students from selective majors (minimum 2.6 GPA required) at two universities were interviewed for a total sample of 26. The sample size exceeded

numerous other qualitative studies involving undergraduate students (Powers, 2010; Foote, 2009; Firmin & MacKillop, 2008; Simmons, 2008). Other demographic information related to gender, classification, and race/ethnicity was obtained as responses to background questions as part of the interview protocol. Table 3.1 presents an overview of the information about participant demographics.

Nearly three quarters of participants were female, and about one quarter was male. Third year students, juniors, comprised about half of the sample; nearly one third of participants were second year sophomores and 15% were seniors. Degree programs with a grade point average of 2.6 or higher were defined as “selective majors” in the current study, and previous majors included business, education, nursing, social science, engineering and pre-health. Two participants, one at each university, were previously enrolled in two selective majors. Students from traditionally underrepresented groups (as presented in Figure 3.1) comprised 46% of the study sample, much higher than the general undergraduate population at each of the two institutions (4.5% and 11%). Participants self-disclosing affiliation with academic support programs for first-generation, low income students were identified as such in the sample and in the summary of demographic information about study participants in Table 3.1.

A total of 26 participants were interviewed, 15 students from the University of the Deep South and 11 students from the University of the Southeast. In compliance with the Institutional Review Board’s recommendation that responses be confidential and anonymous, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym. Table 3.2, Individual Participant Demographics, displays demographic information about individual participants.

Table 3.1

Summary of Participant Demographics

Demographic Characteristic	Number	Percentage
<i>n</i> = 26		
Institution Attending		
University of the Deep South	15	58
University of the Southeast	11	42
Gender		
Female	19	73
Male	7	27
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	14	54
Traditionally Underrepresented (combined groups)	12	46
African American	8	
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	
Hispanic	1	
Classification		
Sophomore	8	31
Junior	14	54
Senior	4	15
Previous Selective Major		
Business	7	27
Education	7	27
Nursing	6	23
Social Science	3	11
Engineering	2	8
Pre-Health	1	4
First Generation College/Low Income	8	31

*Note: * All individual characteristics are self-reported*

Table 3.2

Individual Participant Demographics

Name	Classification	Previous Major	Race/Ethnicity	Age
University of the Deep South				
1. Leah	sophomore	NURS	African American	18
2. John	sophomore	ENGR	African American	20
3. Timothy	sophomore	SOC SCI	Asian/Pacific Islander	18
4. Lauren	sophomore	BADM	White/Caucasian	20
5. Lexie	sophomore	NURS	White/Caucasian	19
6. Ann	junior	NURS	White/Caucasian	20
7. Camille	junior	NURS ENGR	African American	21
8. Clyde	junior	BADM	White/Caucasian	21
9. Joe	junior	BADM	African American	21
10. Katherine	junior	NURS	African American	20
11. Shantelle	junior	EDUC	African American	22
12. Agnes	junior	EDUC	African American	20
13. Denny	junior	BADM	White/Caucasian	20
14. Emily	senior	Pre-health	White/Caucasian	21
15. Graciela	senior	NURS	White/Caucasian	21
University of the Southeast				
16. Dana	sophomore	EDUC	White/Caucasian	19
17. Farah	sophomore	BADM	Asian	19
18. Richard	sophomore	BADM	Asian/Pacific Islander	19
19. Audrey	junior	SOC SCI	Hispanic	20
20. Elizabeth	junior	EDUC	White/Caucasian	20
21. Janice	junior	EDUC	White/Caucasian	20
22. Jessica	junior	EDUC	White/Caucasian	21
23. Molly	junior	BA then EDUC	White/Caucasian	20
24. Quinn	junior	BADM	White/Caucasian	20
25. Monica	senior	SOC SCI	African American	21
26. Samantha	senior	NURS	White/Caucasian	21

*Note: *Selective major abbreviations are BADM-Business, EDUC- Education, NURS- Nursing, SOC SCI- Social Science (e.g. Economics, Political Science). All selective degree programs in the study required a minimum 2.6 grade point average.*

Instrumentation

The researcher served as the instrument to conduct qualitative interviews with the study participants. An interview protocol derived from Schlossberg's Theory of Transitions does not exist, although two pencil and paper assessments based on Schlossberg et al. (1995) were discussed in both editions of Evans et al.'s (1998, 2010) *Student development in college: Theory, research and practice*. In the first edition (1998), Evans et al. discussed *The Transition Coping Questionnaire* (1993) and *Transition Coping Guide* (1993). These instruments were considered as possible measurement tools for the study, but after extensive research the researcher found they were no longer available.

Evans et al. (2010) mentioned *The Transition Guide and Questionnaire* as an assessment instrument for Schlossberg's theory, which the researcher thought could be used in the current research project. The researcher investigated the availability of *The Transition Guide and Questionnaire* and after communicating with Nancy K. Schlossberg, was led to an updated version, *The Transition Guide: A new way to think about change* (Schlossberg & Kay, 2010). In addition to developing an interview protocol based on the research questions, the researcher sought and was granted permission to adapt content related to the 4 S System contained in *The Transition Guide* (Schlossberg & Kay, 2010). See Appendix E for the e-mail communication between the researcher and N. K. Schlossberg related to adapting the instrument for interviews. The interview questions were pilot-tested with peer leaders in an advising office for major-changing students at one of the study sites. The interview protocols for the study, one for

voluntary major-changers and another for students dismissed from their previous selective majors are listed as Appendices F and G, respectively.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's interest in the topic is based on extensive experience with undergraduate students at a variety of higher education institutions. Early career positions at small colleges shaped a commitment to facilitate connecting students in need of assistance with appropriate resource offices; this preceded a subsequent academic advisor role at a large, state flagship university. The researcher served as an academic advisor to hundreds of students who were interested in, enrolled in, or dismissed from a selective major. The difficult task of working with students in transition led the researcher to pursue a formal research study about such students' experiences.

By conducting all of the interviews herself, the researcher had an opportunity to hear students' stories and for students to discuss with the researcher how they experienced the transition, with the researcher serving as primary research instrument. This approach is supported by Patton (2002) in his description of the purpose of interviewing as

to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective...Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories. (p. 341)

The only relationship the researcher had with participants was as a researcher. She served as the sole point of contact for participants in setting up and conducting interviews. In addition, interviews at each institution were conducted only by the researcher.

Ethical Protection of Participants

The focus of the study, to interview students about an experience that was probably emotionally-charged, raised some ethical issues to insure participants were adequately prepared to discuss their experiences as a selective major in transition. The researcher was committed to maintaining awareness that recounting their stories may transport participants back to a difficult time in the past. The purpose of the research ran the risk of opening up uncomfortable emotions from study participants.

Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher worked with appropriate personnel at the interview sites to identify campus resources (e.g., counseling center, career center) and worked in conjunction with on-site advisors to make appropriate referrals for study participants if needed. In addition, participants' identities were protected according to the sponsoring university's institutional review board requirements, and participants were identified in all data collection and analysis processes only by a pseudonym.

Before on-site interviews began, several procedures were in place to provide ethical protection of participants. In addition to reviewing an Informed Consent form with each participant, the interviewer reviewed the option to leave the study at any time should the participant become uncomfortable. Although the situation did not arise, the researcher was prepared to award participation incentives (gift card) to students who participated in an interview session, even if the participant decided to opt-out prior to completion of the protocol questions in the session.

The researcher was familiar with and was committed to upholding the Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2004). More

detailed information about measures to protect data, including audio recordings and computer text files, are described in the Data Collection section below.

Data Collection

Creswell's (1998) Data Collection Circle concept emphasized the numerous activities involved in gathering high quality information in order to answer qualitative study research questions, whether determined prior to or emerging during the course of the study. This idea is applicable to the phenomenological paradigm and influenced the design of data collection in the study. While the data collection cycle could have begun at any point, the researcher identified the most suitable beginning with locating the site/individuals; in the study, this entailed determining how to identify possible participants who experienced the phenomenon.

From there, the data collection strategy continued with gaining access and building rapport, submitting a proposal to the institutional review boards, and securing written permission from qualified individuals to be studied. The Informed Consent Form was reviewed prior to the Interview Protocol to ensure participants understood their role in the study and the researcher's responsibilities to protect their identifying information and interpret the interview data. Participants chose a pseudonym, and all information on audio and written records only identifies the participant according to their pseudonym. The researcher conducted all interviews between April 20, and August 17, 2012. After potential participants were identified using the sampling techniques, e-mail invitations were sent to students' official university e-mail addresses to ask if they were willing to be interviewed in person at their respective campuses or by telephone.

The next step in the process was the identification of forms of data, including interviews, documents, meetings and electronic and print communication. These included interviews (semi-structured, audio taped, and transcribed), documents such as progression requirements and change of major procedures (available online and in academic advising offices at study sites), meetings with academic advisors in selective majors, and audio-visual methods (e.g., e-mail messages and websites with academic program and eligibility information). A single individual interview, average length 18 minutes, was conducted by the researcher. The purpose of the interviews was to collect data about the students' transition, specifically in the context of situation, self, support and strategies, and based on the research questions of the study. Data collection from semi-structured individual interviews with the researcher focused on participants' experiences with coping resources used in the transition.

As part of the data collection process, researchers must be able to anticipate and resolve field issues related to the specific type of study. For interview studies, common field issues interview studies discussed by (Creswell, 1998) included underestimating the taxing nature of conducting in-depth interviews, adequately preparing for equipment issues (always bring extra batteries and have a notebook), asking appropriate questions, and facilitating participants' discussion of their experiences. The researcher had previous experience conducting and recording interviews for other research projects and was aware of the necessary preparation to alleviate issues which could have arisen in the field.

The final element of data collection activities was the storage of data. Interview transcripts were stored using two depositories. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and both the audio recordings and textual transcriptions were stored in

individual files on a password protected computer in accordance with the requirements of the Institutional Review Board and will be erased after three years. The transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software to assist with data analysis.

Trustworthiness

Several of Creswell's (1998) verification procedures, discussed in Glesne (2006), were utilized to increase trustworthiness. A qualitative content analysis of current documents and artifacts used by academic advising offices in the study assisted in providing context and background for interview data collection. Glesne discusses current document analysis as an important source to complement other data collection methods and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Written resources (e.g., policies and procedures, informational handouts, memoranda) and artifacts such as videos available to students on advising office websites were included in the current document analysis. In addition, the research was reviewed and debriefed by several peers during the data collection process to facilitate external reflection and input.

Data Analysis

Possible data analysis strategies were drawn from several resources. Glesne (2006) discusses the importance of engaging in early and later data analysis, and lists additional references for specific types of processes such as memo writing and rudimentary coding schemes. Interviews were digitally recorded by the researcher and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. Several qualitative handbooks (Clandinan & Connelly, 1999; Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) advocate using Tesch's (1990) recommendation of reviewing all transcripts prior to the coding process; the researcher followed that recommendation and read all interview transcripts before

beginning any coding to identify themes in the data analysis process. One of the 27 interviews was judged as not usable because the participant did not identify as a transfer student until after the interview was already underway and thus was not included in the final data set of the study for a total of 26 interviews.

In the event of negative cases or discrepant data, the researcher followed the recommendations of Maxwell (2005). He explained the task as “you need to rigorously examine both the supporting and discrepant data to assess whether it is more plausible to retain or modify the confusion being aware of all of the pressures to ignore data that do not fit your conclusions” (p. 112). By asking others for feedback, the researcher was able to identify bias, or errors in logic or methods.

Given the multi-site research project and number of interviews (26), the researcher was also concerned about managing the organization of data. Maxwell (2005) categorized data analysis options as going beyond coding to include memos, categorizing strategies such as coding and thematic analysis, and connecting strategies such as narrative analysis. He emphasized the importance of using other strategies to think, write, and ruminate about the data, advice to which the researcher adhered. To address coding concerns, in addition to manual coding, the researcher used computer software, ATLAS.ti, to facilitate coding and organization of interview data. The interview transcripts were reviewed for themes and a codebook developed based on emerging themes about the phenomena, as well as coping resources used during the transition of leaving the former major and enrolling a new degree program. As additional interviews were analyzed, the codebook was expanded and new themes incorporated until all participants’ transcripts were reviewed and analyzed. A sample list of codes developed

to organize data related to the support variable is presented in Appendix H. While a computer software program was used to facilitate organization of the data, the responsibility for interpretation of the data rested solely with the researcher.

Summary of Research Design and Methods

Chapter Three provided a detailed presentation of, and rationale for, the qualitative research methods of the study. An outline of the research design and methodology used in the study was discussed, including the qualitative study design, sample, data collection, and data analysis. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews focusing on the transition experiences of 26 students at two state flagship universities. The students were recruited from academic programs with progression requirements and asked to describe their transition experiences of leaving a selective major and enrolling in a new degree program.

This chapter provided a rationale for the qualitative research design and methodology. For students leaving a selective major, a qualitative research study provided the best design to meet the research goals, gathering and sharing students' experiences about the resources they used in managing the transition. The next chapter presents the findings of the study. The results are summarized from data collected during individual interviews with 26 undergraduates from six degree programs at two state flagship universities.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this dissertation study was to investigate how undergraduate students described using coping resources during the transition of leaving a selective degree program and enrolling in a new major. This research project was framed by the following research questions:

- How do undergraduate students previously enrolled in selective majors describe the coping resources involving situation, self, support and strategies they utilized during the transition process of leaving the former major and enrolling in a new degree program at the same institution?
- Which coping mechanisms do students formerly enrolled in selective majors identify as most valuable in navigating the transition process?
- Which coping resources do students previously enrolled in selective majors identify as most influential in their decision to remain at the institution?

This chapter presents the findings of the study in five major sections. The first section provides an overview of the four coping variables and how they were integrated into the interview protocol to answer the research questions. The second, third and fourth sections identify the relationship of Schlossberg's 4 S system framework with each of the

three research questions. The second section introduces and analyzes how participants described using the four variables in their transition between degree programs. The 4 S's are presented in order of frequency as described by students: support, followed by situation, strategies and finally, self. The third section presents which coping resources students identified as most valuable during the transition. The fourth section addresses the third research question, which resources students relied upon in making their retention decision to continue at the same university. Finally, the fifth section reports on additional findings from data analysis beyond the research questions.

Previous research has not incorporated students' perspectives in research about academic major transition. Using data from individual interviews, this chapter crafts a story about second, third and fourth year undergraduates at two large, state flagship universities and the personal and institutional resources they used in transitioning from selective majors to new academic degree programs at the same institution.

Taking Stock of Resources: The 4 S System

The 4 S System, part of Schlossberg's Transition Model (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995), provided a foundation to understand how students managed resources to cope with change. Coping resources can change at any time and may explain why students in similar situations have different experiences (Goodman et al., 2006). By using Schlossberg's conceptual framework, institutional and personal resources were organized into the four variables of situation, self, support and strategies.

The interview protocol questions centered on academic major transition were loosely adapted from Schlossberg and Kay's (2010) *Transition Guide* and with permission from one of the authors (see Appendix E). The protocol explored how

students used coping resources, which resources were most valuable during the transition, and which variables influenced students' retention decisions. A sample question illustrates how the four coping resources were described in the protocol:

Which resources would you say were most valuable during the time you were first dealing with leaving the selective major? Resources might include the help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the situation, or the actions you initially took to deal with the forced change.

In the sample question, support is described as “*the help you had from others,*” self is identified as “*your inner strength,*” situation is inherent in “*how you viewed the situation,*” and strategies is assessed from “*the actions you initially took to deal with the forced change.*” The complete interview protocols, one for voluntary major changers and another for students forcibly dismissed, are available in Appendices F and G.

RQ 1: How Participants Described Using Coping Resources

This section discusses the findings related to the first research question, which was:

How do undergraduate students previously enrolled in selective majors describe the coping resources involving situation, self, support and strategies they utilized during the transition process of leaving the former major and enrolling in a new degree program at the same institution?

Participants described utilizing all four coping mechanisms in their narratives of transitioning from one academic degree program to another. Support was the most important, identified most frequently from the coding of interview transcripts. Table 4.1 displays the frequency of coping resources, the 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006;

Schlossberg et al., 1995) as described by the 26 participants and coded from analyzing their interview transcripts. The results indicate participants used multiple coping mechanisms, but clearly the most important was support from others. The sub-sections which follow outline the major emergent themes for each of the 4 S variables. The order of variables in the remainder of this chapter is presented according to frequency, and variables are listed as support, situation, strategies and self.

Table 4.1

Frequency of Coping Resource Type Described by Participants

Coping Resource Used -by 4S Type	Code	
	Frequency	Percentage
Support	242	39
Situation	177	29
Strategies	109	17
Self	92	15
TOTAL codes	620	100

Support

“Supports” are described by Schlossberg and Kay (2010) as the external resources available to deal with change, including who students could count on and the kinds of support students got during the transition, such as affection and feedback. A major theme of support is that over half the students (54%) used a single resource in navigating the transition between academic programs. For those who relied on one source of support, family and self were the two most frequent factors. The remaining 46% used multiple people and offices and most often included family, more than any other resource.

Study participants most frequently cited support from their families, specifically from parents, during the transition between majors. Support by family members was of paramount importance to students and confirmed across several lines of inquiry. Other

support themes highlighted the role of peers, the university resources offered and used, and a perceived lack of support from the university stemming from obstacles encountered during the major change process. Friends were important, and students relied on their peers as frequently as family during the transition. Of less significance were university resources, in spite of their availability; why students did not fully take advantage of campus resource offices raises several questions which are possible areas for future research. Table 4.2 displays support themes based on analysis of participant responses.

Table 4.2

Themes Related to Support

Theme	Number of Participants
	<i>n=26</i>
Who was first person students told about major change	
Family	20
Other (2 each for friends, scholarship advisor, significant other)	6
Who students leaned on for support during transition*	
Parents	12
Friends	10
Self	8
Academic advisor in new department	5
Other (e.g., significant other-3, scholarship advisor-2, faculty member, peer mentor)	7
Which university resources were offered to students *	
academic advisors, new and previous department	11
student support offices (career center- 5, campus advising office- 5, academic support center- 1)	11
information such websites, online bulletin, printed materials	9
NO RESOURCES offered by university	2
Circumstances influencing perceived LACK OF UNIVERSITY SUPPORT	
Major change process	22
Absence of caring community in selective major	13

**Note: Some participants identified multiple resources*

Family, especially parents. Parents played a primary role in guiding their students through an academic major transition. Results from questions showed students relied on family as their primary support system. The first person most students (77%) told after making the decision to change majors was a family member; of the 21 “family” responses, 19 specifically identified parents. In another support-related question, nearly half of students (42%) reported leaning on parents for support during the transition.

Numerous participants discussed their frequent contact with parents, despite the fact that all participants were living independent of their families. A common theme was the overwhelmingly positive encouragement that students received from their parents and other family members, with few exceptions. Excerpts from Ann and Molly’s interviews illustrate how students continued to seek encouragement and advice from their parents despite living away from home.

Ann discussed her decision to attend the University of the Deep South as an out-of-state student and selected a different sorority affiliation than her mother to insure she had a college experience that was uniquely her own. She wanted independence yet maintained a close relationship and frequent contact with her mother. Ann entered college as a nursing major, but poor performance in a required science class prompted her to consider a different academic path. When asked about the first person she told about changing her major, Ann said:

Oh, my parents definitely...I would call my mom all the time stressed out because I kept telling her that this is my life and I don’t know what to do. I was afraid that if I didn’t do well, I would be kicked out. And I just talked to her constantly about what I should do, so she was my number one fan. She would give me advice. She was the first person I told that I don’t think nursing’s what I want to do and, she was there for me the entire time. (Ann)

Another student's comments further illustrate the continued reliance on their families. Molly entered college as a business major and subsequently changed her major to education, where she spent three terms. At the time of the interview, she had been enrolled in a health-related program for one term. Molly repeatedly mentioned her close relationship with her family and when asked on whom she leaned, quickly responded:

My parents. For sure...No matter what major I was leaning towards that day, they would pick out, the really great things and maybe point out a few of the bad things, but they were overall really encouraging. Like whatever you want to do, you go for it. You need to do something because we can tell that you're not happy in education. (Molly)

The theme of parents continuing to play a supportive role in their college student children's lives is illustrated by Molly, whose sentiments were echoed by almost half of participants (46%) who also relied on family members for guidance.

Friends. While parents clearly provided primary support, friends also played an important role. A major difference existed between who students first told about their major change and who they leaned on for support. For the latter, friends were identified as a close second group. Nearly as many respondents relied on friends as parents during the transition. Forty-two percent of students said they leaned on parents to provide support during the transition, compared to 38% who depended on friends. A theme of positive support emerged with friends as it did with parents, and participants discussed how friends assisted them in considering a program change to complement their academic strengths and career aspirations.

Timothy, a sophomore honors college student at the University of the Southeast, left a selective economics program in the liberal arts college. He chose to pursue the

same major in the business school, also a selective degree program. Timothy described how he consulted with peers in considering program options:

I discussed with fellow students and some friends about the difference in programs, knowing that older students generally have a greater understanding of the different professors, especially, different courses that are going to be required, instead of just referring directly to the suggestions of solely the advisors. I feel that students give a more realistic view of what the program is like.

Timothy preferred to get an assessment of program faculty from other students, in addition to considering academic advisors' recommendations.

Other comments from Richard highlight assistance he sought from peers in weighing whether to switch from a business major to political science. He talked to friends in both majors to "lay out the pros and cons of each... [and they] kind of informally advised me of what classes they took and what professors I would want to choose." Like Richard, students may solicit feedback from peers about faculty expectations or informal program information which academic advisors may not know or be able to share.

Themselves. A comprehensive treatment of the self variable will be presented later in this chapter, but an unexpected finding about self is relevant to the discussion of support. Nearly one fourth of students (24 %) stated "myself" in response to the interview question: "Who did you lean on for support during the transition process of leaving your previous major and enrolling in the new major?" Denny, a student at the University of the Deep South extensively detailed his negative experiences as a former business student throughout the interview. The prescribed curriculum and sequence of courses were, in his opinion, unrelated to preparation for a post-graduation career in business. Denny discussed his overall positive experience as a student and had numerous

friends through his involvement in campus organizations. When asked who he leaned on, however, Denny did not identify anyone in his support networks. He drew upon internal resources during the transition, explaining:

Ultimately I didn't actually lean on anyone. I was so relieved to be out of the business school that my degree of happiness exponentially increased [laughter]... when I changed to political science I was able to take classes that I was interested in, that I chose, and that I could at last see as being practical to pursuing something, as opposed to the business school, where that was not the case. To answer your question, I didn't rely on anyone. (Denny)

Denny entered college with his academic program decision, business, already made. He became frustrated when required to take general education courses seemingly unrelated to a business degree. His remarks serve as a reminder that information, whether from advisors, departmental websites or printed materials, must effectively communicate the value of all degree components so students may understand that a college education integrates courses beyond those in their specific discipline.

About half the students who relied on themselves also used at least one other resource, such as family, friends, and academic advisors. Ann, a former nursing student, had expressed the importance of her family support, but also took responsibility for researching other possible options. She had previously described the support role of her new academic advisor and in these comments, focused on how she took charge:

I really did it all by myself besides my advisor. I did a ton of googling with it and the forms I went to fill out on the [university] website, they explained how to do it. I kind of taught myself how to get released and go to a different [major], so that helped a lot. (Ann)

Students are accustomed to searching online for information. Ann's quote illustrates the important responsibility universities, including academic departments and related

advising offices, have to insure accurate policies and procedures are accessible to information-seekers.

University resources. Participants primarily relied on family but also identified support mechanisms in institutional resources the university offered. Students reported numerous university resources were offered, most often academic advisors, online and print information, and student support offices such as the career center and campus-wide advising office. One third of the responses indicated academic advisors were among the frequent university resources utilized, and several students discussed their experiences relying on advisors in previous and new departments for information and assistance.

Farah, a second-year honors college student at the University of the Southeast, used multiple university resources in making a program change. She is planning a double major in art and business but cannot declare a second major until she earns additional credits. Farah left business because “it wasn’t rigorous enough to keep me going through four years, so I was looking for something that would...require more investment of time and I think art was more suited to that.” To stay on track with her plans, she sought out academic advisors in her previous and new departments and also took advantage of the convenience of online information:

I talked a lot to...the advisor for art. We spoke every day for two weeks [laughter]... she’s actually turned out to be crucial in deciding what was just exactly right for me. And also ... online resources, like the description of courses ...it’s all very clear on the web site. It’s easy to find what you’re looking for, so any time I had questions, I didn’t necessarily have to go see someone. I could just look it up. (Farah)

Farah’s daily contact with her new advisor may have been unusual, but advisors can anticipate several follow-up appointments with new majors. Most students, just like Farah, expect to supplement the program information they glean from advising sessions

by accessing online sources, such as the academic bulletin. It is critical that online resources are regularly updated by departments and programs to develop and maintain a reputation as credible information sources. Several other participants mentioned how helpful information from their new department was to their transition experience.

Other participants discussed meeting with academic advisors so they could settle in quickly to their new degree program. Dana switched out of education as a result of classroom field work for her previous major at the University of the Southeast. She followed an interest in speech pathology and changed into communication sciences and disorders. Dana identified the professional advisor in her new department as someone she leaned on during the transition process:

My advisor was really, really helpful... always giving me advice, what to do, and what classes I should take. I had to plan a lot to make sure I stayed on track so I could get into the program this coming semester, and I had everything ready. My advisor really helped me with the whole planning out each semester and making sure I came for summer and got all those classes finished before I applied.

Dana discussed researching online sources to find out more about communication sciences as a career, followed by an initial appointment with a communication sciences advisor to explore an academic plan. Once she changed her major, Dana immediately started receiving related information:

I got emails regarding a bunch of stuff having to do with speech pathology and clubs... that I could get involved in and did get involved in. I get constant emails about my major and things that are going on. I think that helped a lot, getting emails from my new major talking about ways to get involved.

Dana felt the information distributed via email made her feel more comfortable and allowed her to be “in the loop” about events and opportunities in her new department. Advisors may find students inquiring about a program change have already done preliminary research as Dana did. Students may want to use a face to face meeting to

discuss the nuances of degree program requirements in consideration of their individual academic history.

One third of participants said the university offered student support offices such as the university career center and/or a campus-wide advising office. Clyde, a first generation college student and former business major, had a positive experience using several support offices at the University of the Deep South:

Well, besides speaking with my business advisor about whether this is right for me or not, I took a lot of help from the Career Center about...looking at careers actually after the degree. I went to [academic support office] a lot to see...if this is really what I wanted to do because I was quite uncertain about the future. My goals were to just...graduate with a degree and see where it goes from there. So I took a lot of future building workshops and whatnot to see for careers....(Clyde)

In addition to academic advisors and student support offices, participants discussed the importance of information, particularly online resources, as a resource the university offered them during their transition. Students accessed online information sources such as the academic bulletin, departmental websites and degree planning tools; they also reviewed printed materials available from academic departments.

Emily, a senior at the University of the Deep South went from one pre-health major to another and took advantage of some but not all suggested resources: “When I had questions with the dean, they offered that I could speak with the Career Center if I needed to. But just doing research online of what they provide is what overall meant the most.” Students consulting with an academic advisor may feel they have sufficient information to make a decision and may be unwilling to investigate further options. Students may be unable or unwilling to spend additional time and energy to avail themselves of university resources even though specialized assistance is available.

Emily’s comments, echoed by other students in the study, serve as a reminder to make

information available in a variety of formats through in-person appointments, drop-in consultations, and information available on websites, electronic learning platforms and social media outlets if appropriate.

Perception of inadequate support from the university. A difference between the two previous categories, Family and Friends, and the third category, University Resources, is the presence of negative feedback. Almost all the support students attributed to family and friends was positive. In discussing university resources, however, students felt a lack of support in the major change process and in the selective major academic departments.

A fuller discussion of results related to obstacles will be presented in the Situation section, but a cursory mention is relevant to Support, as a majority of participants (84%) cited the major change process as a barrier or obstacle during their academic program transition. This section will focus on the external resources related to the major change and the selective major academic units, the areas in which the absence of support is concerned.

Inadequate support in the major change process. Participants expressed frustration with conflicting information about the requirements for enrolling in a new degree program and being shuffled from office to office in order to enroll in a new major. Lexie, a student at the University of the Deep South, was shuffled between nursing and pre-pharmacy during her first-year major change, saying “unfortunately I went back and forth. I think I counted seven times.” She went to the advising offices in person because she “didn’t want to just get lost in a stack of papers,” but Lexie still felt lost and

frustrated as she attempted to get advised during advance registration for courses in her new, intended major of pre-pharmacy:

I think the people weren't sure if they could advise me so instead of finding out they'd just send me somewhere else or tell me, 'I can't help you.' I just thought, well someone has to be able to help me...I was just thinking, I know I have an advisor somewhere. (Lexie)

Lexie's persistence enabled her to get her concerns resolved, but others may give up and not display's Lexie's resolve to get her needs met. If advisors are not accessible to provide information about a program change or cannot make effective referrals, students may become frustrated with the university major change process as Lexie did.

Online resources can be a reliable information source to answer many questions, but students may still find the major change process to be confusing. Denny, a former business student, began taking political science courses before making an official change. He expressed a desire for clarification by saying,

What would be nice is...if all of that process had been explained to me by someone in the business school...because my impression of the process of changing majors was laid out to me as infinitely more complicated than it was, which was primarily the reason that it took so long for me to get around to filing the paperwork because I just didn't want to freakin' deal with it. (Denny)

A straightforward explanation of the major change process using simple language may have facilitated Denny's departure from business before he was subject to e-mail and written warnings about failure to be on track for the business major. He described receiving an "almost endless number of letters from the business school on various things they wanted me to do that I didn't do." He characterized the e-mail and written communication from the business program as "being environmentally unsustainable, [and] I found to be incredibly irritating, to have my mailbox polluted with all of that nonsense." Previous information from an academic advisor presenting the major change

process as complex and subsequent written warnings related to lack of progression in the business major contributed to his frustration and his delay in taking the necessary steps to request a program change.

Participants also perceived a lack of support from the university when they were unable to access the new major they wanted. Janice, a student at the University of the Southeast was a second-year education major and through her work experience with children decided that occupational therapy would offer more career flexibility. In order to apply to the occupational therapy accelerated program at her university, students must complete pre-health requirements including chemistry, anatomy, and physiology. She acknowledged the accelerated program was out of her reach due to her late interest in occupational therapy. Her alternate plan was to pursue a graduate degree in occupational therapy, so she chose an interdisciplinary social science program. Janice said the new program was considered to be “more of a relaxed major so that I could do what was in the pre-requisites for the other major while I do this one. So I’m kind of under the table doing both.” She encountered resistance from a pre-health advisor and was told:

It wasn’t a good idea to even apply to what I actually wanted to do, and she really didn’t have a good understanding of how I could do it anyways. It is very hard to understand that you could go to a college and then be told in your second year of school, you’re too old to change your mind. When you come to a school they tell you, you have time, take basket weaving, take underwater whatever and just explore. But on the other side, you know, it’s too late. (Janice)

When Janice met with an advisor in her interdisciplinary social science major, she explained her plan, but recounted that he did not really understand it either. She was frustrated by the lack of support but did not become discouraged, saying, “Okay, well I know what I’m doing, whatever. So it was very frustrating to communicate with the

advisors about what I was trying to accomplish.” What some students may consider to be an uphill battle, others are willing to take on as a challenge and goal.

Inadequate support within the selective major. As students attending large universities, many participants know they must advocate for themselves, particularly as it relates to their academic goals. During a time of confusion, however, students are not always able to negotiate the support they may need. Nearly one third of participants expressed a desire for personal attention from the selective degree program.

Katherine, a student at the University of the Deep South, felt both her previous selective major in nursing and her new selective major program in business could have provided more support to her during her transition. She expressed concern about not having enough information when she was dismissed from nursing; in her case, she said she did not fully understand the implications of dismissal. A poor grade in a required science course led her to expect that she would be forced to change her major but was not sure of what to do next. When asked if the dismissal letter outlined any university resources to assist her, she said: “the notification letter was...I hate to say that it’s not helpful, but...it’s like you just have to change it. It was pretty much me finding out information on my own.” Whether students expect or are surprised to be dismissed from a selective major, they are most likely confused by their change in status. Students may perceive a lack of support from the institution if the method of communicating dismissal does not provide information about possible options.

In Katherine’s case, she had to meet several requirements to gain eligibility for her desired new major in business, also a selective degree program. She expressed frustration with impersonal treatment from the business college because she was a

prospective, rather than a current, business student. When Katherine asked questions, she was referred to the website: “the same website I had been staring at for semesters and months and months because I want to get in here... I already know the answer to that question but I need more details. I’m asking you something else.” Whether Katherine was encouraged to visit the advising center or why she did not seek a face to face appointment with an advisor is unknown. Students calling by phone or other online communication may need to be specifically invited to attend a drop-in or scheduled appointment to have the benefit of an in-depth consultation in reviewing the prospective student’s options.

The lack of support within the selective degree program seemed to permeate the sense of community on several different levels. Lack of community among peers was a phenomenon discussed by Quinn, a former business student. “I didn’t like any of my peers, and I didn’t like the general business environment that I was being exposed to. It was very unfriendly, kind of uptight, so I wanted to switch...to something that was a little more friendly.” He moved out of business after three terms to a specialized economics program in another college and found students with academic values more compatible with his values.

Support was the most frequent coping mechanism indicated, and about half the participants used multiple coping resources in managing the transition. Over three quarters of participants looked primarily to family members, particularly parents, as their support system during the transition between majors. Friends also played an important role in supporting participants during this time of change. A perceived lack of support

centered on the major change process, identified as an obstacle by 85% of participants. Students also identified lack of support to a lesser extent within the selective major.

Situation

After support, situation was the second most frequent variable and a discussion of results related to situation is presented in this section. Students discussed *situation* coping resources, which comprised about one third (32%) of the total responses in participants' descriptions of transition experiences. Situation refers to how participants viewed the transition (Schlossberg & Kay, 2010). Five themes related to situation are presented in Table 4.3: Participants were content with their situation, did not expect to change majors, encountered significant obstacles in changing degree programs, considered the selective major impersonal, and faced other stressors.

Table 4.3

Themes Related to Situation

Themes	Number of Participants
<i>n= 26</i>	
Satisfied with situation as a student	24
Unanticipated major change	22
Lack of interest in major-related courses	10
Academic difficulty	5
Both lack of interest and academic difficulty	7
Obstacles- changing major	22
Impersonal selective major	13
Other stressors	10

Satisfaction as a student at the state flagship university. Participants were satisfied with their situation as a student at the state flagship university. Nearly all participants were students at their first choice university and made their college choice decision based on the institution's reputation and/or the selective major's reputation. Of

the 26 undergraduates in the sample, 92% (24) were enrolled at their first choice university. Clyde explained why he chose to attend the University of the Deep South: “I had aspirations to be a business major. [The university] was local and is one of the top business schools in the nation so it was a win-win in all realms of deciding to come here...It was just an all-around simple decision.” The reputation of the selective major program and location within the state contributed to Clyde’s choice of the University of the Deep South.

Others discussed the high quality of the university as influential in their selection. The choice was clear for Quinn, a student at the University of the Southeast: “I wanted to stay in-state for tuition reasons, and I thought that the University was the best college in [the state].” Financial aid and scholarships were not explicitly expressed as a major factor in college choice but funding considerations were implied as part of the decision to attend an in-state university. College choice by Clyde, Quinn and most other participants (81%) was more directly attributed to a desire to attend the best in-state university, based on its reputation and/or the reputation of the selective major.

A final consideration of situation related to length of enrollment, which ranged from one year to three years. The sample included eight sophomores, 14 juniors, and four seniors. The length of time participants had been enrolled at their university contributed to their familiarity and level of comfort with the institution and its surrounding area. Situation, as it related to institutional familiarity, was influential in students’ retention decision and will be discussed in relation to the third research question later in this chapter.

Unanticipated major change. Eighty-five percent of participants attributed an unanticipated major change primarily to a lack of interest in related courses or academic difficulty. When a transition is unexpected, it may affect how well equipped someone may be to manage the situation (Goodman, et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 2008; Schlossberg et al., 1995). In the study, 22 participants (85%) described changing majors as an unexpected situation. The main drivers for participants leaving a selective major were a lack of interest in major-related courses (64%) and academic difficulty (46%). (Note: Two participants had more than one response).

Lack of interest in selective major courses. About two thirds of the respondents (64%) indicated a lack of interest in courses required for the major. Participants discussed a dislike of the broad scope of courses, a “disconnect” between courses and career, or a discovery that they were not well-suited for the selective major based on field experiences in health care or education settings. Comments from Joe, Lexie and Elizabeth illustrate how participants reevaluated their initial decision after losing interest in classes required for the program.

A change in degree program was unexpected for Joe, who remarked, “I was always good at business. I guess I was good at making up little ideas, I started an online store, so those kind of had me interested in business.” After three semesters in the major and several classes in math, accounting and economics, Joe decided that even though he liked the Introduction to Business class, he was not intrigued with what he was learning:

I had no interest in it, and what I was learning wasn't what I thought I would learn...I was more like those go-getters, start a business, that kind of thing, but it was more about learning how to, get a job and work under somebody and work your way up...it didn't appeal to me...Yeah, 9:00 to 5:00 didn't appeal to me.
(Joe)

Several others echoed Joe's general sentiment that expectations about a degree program concept and future career did not match the specific courses in the curriculum. Joe's comments illustrate the different perspectives students bring that may inhibit understanding the integration of individual courses that comprise a comprehensive degree program.

While practical-oriented courses, clinical or field experiences can confirm a choice of major for students, others may realize they dislike or are disinterested in the application or practice of the degree program. A first-year nursing course presented a realistic picture of a career in nursing, prompting Lexie to look for a different major. The course helped her to understand that nursing involves much more emotional strength than she realized, "just dealing with sick people a lot and it's very hands on and, if they stop breathing and you have to make that quick decision, that's not something that I'm good at and it was already stressing me out." Lexie was surprised that a class early in the curriculum evoked such a strong reaction but she was relieved to know she needed to find another degree program in the first year of college.

Pre-professional skill preparation courses and field experiences are common in teacher education curricula. For Elizabeth, having to give class presentations in her education courses helped her realize a possible mismatch between her personality and teaching. When Elizabeth expressed her distaste for courses that included public speaking assignments, the instructor told her, "Well if you're going to teach you've got to like that." Elizabeth continued, "And I know public speaking is a requirement and I didn't want to take it, so maybe I need to find something else." The advantage of practical-oriented courses offered early in the curriculum is to provide opportunities for

students to explore whether their current major choice is a good fit for their skills and preferred work setting.

Academic underperformance. Less than half (43%) of respondents indicated academic difficulty in courses or other requirements for selective majors. While three participants admitted they were dismissed from their previous major, another 10 (45%) identified significant academic difficulties as contributing to their decision to voluntarily leave a selective major. Participants made the distinction of initiating a major change on their own rather than forced separation, even in circumstances where students were in academic distress and encouraged to consider other options by academic advisors. For many of the participants making a voluntary major change, poor academic performance prompted proactive efforts to choose a new major.

When asked earlier in the interview whether he had difficulty in courses for the business major, Clyde indicated he did not really “have many difficulties in the classes themselves. The workload wasn’t difficult...” Several questions later, Clyde presented a different scenario when asked why he decided to leave business:

Well, my GPA had gone down really low, I was having a really, really tough time keeping my GPA up and it was suggested that I change my major, and I felt that I was already really far into my college career and I wasn’t making much progress on my degree at all. And I didn’t want to become a senior that had the possibility of being required to stay an extra year - and I felt like I should just bite the bullet and go somewhere where I would actually have more success than in the business school. (Clyde)

Clyde had previously taken several elective courses in sociology and done well, facilitating his decision to pursue the sociology major. Academic setbacks students may experience, including underperforming in or failing classes can add additional worries

such as time to graduation or possible loss of scholarships to an already stressful situation.

After graduation from the University of the Deep South, Camille's post-graduate goal was medical school. She started in nursing and a professor told her that other majors, such as biomedical engineering, better prepared students for medical school. Among the required classes for the biomedical engineering major was physics, a course she had never taken. Camille struggled and "ended up getting an F so I explored other majors to see what would provide me with the requirements that I needed for medical school as well as a major that wouldn't prolong my graduation." She chose, and was accepted into, a new health-related major without progression requirements. Camille examined her options and decided on a new major that permitted her to graduate one semester early, providing an opportunity to work for six months before starting medical school.

Obstacles. A majority of participants (85%) also described facing significant obstacles during their transition process in describing their situation. Obstacles predominantly centered on changing majors, including the process itself, restricted access to desirable new degree programs, and additional courses needed to "catch up" in their new major. Participants described the major change process as complex, cumbersome, and frustrating. Students at both institutions discussed the paperwork and required signatures for changing majors as a hassle.

A finding unique to the University of the Deep South participants was the major change process expressed as a frequent concern; almost two-thirds (64 %) of participants at that university identified the program change process as an obstacle. Emily switched

from one health-related major to another and commented that the process was a lot more difficult than she thought it should have been, saying she thought it would be an “easy swap at the beginning, but...you have to walk from one building to get permission and talk first, and then...get forms to sign you out of that major, then go to another building, talk and get them to sign it.” Ten other participants shared Emily’s opinion, including Graciela, a former nursing student. When asked about facing any obstacles, she remarked “nothing I couldn’t handle...just little things.” While there was nothing that prevented her from changing her major, Graciela had to “really go out of your way. I mean, obviously it’s my major, I’m gonna go out of my way...but I felt everything [courses] would be closed and no one would care, no one would try to help me out.”

The major change process at the University of the Deep South is decentralized, allowing individual academic departments to set their own timeframes for accepting major changers, adding to the confusion that students face in seeking a degree program change. Of the 46% of participants who identified the major change process as an obstacle, two thirds were students at the University of the Deep South; their concerns centered mainly on being “released” from their previous program before getting admitted to their new, desired major. Ann’s experience was similar to that of other participants at the University of the Deep South, recounting:

I was so scared about getting out of my major because there was a point where I was released from nursing and I wasn’t in a major yet. I was just trying to get into public health and asked to get accepted. So for a couple days I technically wasn’t in a major, and I think that my original advisor [in nursing] kind of scared me because I didn’t get step by step instructions on how to do that and what paperwork to fill out. (Ann)

Later in the interview, Ann discussed her subsequent major change process as positive and credited her public health advisor for a smooth transition into another health-related degree program.

In addition to the major change process, participants identified two less common but related obstacles, not being able to access their desired new major, and having to accelerate their course load to get on track with their new program. Students described the number and scope of prerequisites as obstacles to their choice of prospective new majors. Twenty-seven percent changed from one selective major to another selective degree program, but five other students were excluded from entering their desired program. After she was dismissed from nursing, Katherine enrolled for one term in retail management, a major that shared several requirements with the business program, but was working towards the goal of transferring into business. She discussed having an academic advisor in her new major even though she planned to leave: “since your transcript is saying retail they’re like, you know, you’re in the retail school but I’m going to business, so you know, it’s pretty much like they advise you as you’re getting a retail degree.” Katherine was accepted to business after one term, and illustrates a phenomenon that Gordon (2007) describes as “Up-Tighters,” a situation that can create problems when students enter a major temporarily while they attempt to gain admission to their desired degree program. While Katherine’s story had a happy ending for her, students are not always successful in gaining admission into their preferred major.

Other students, after leaving a selective major, may decide to enter a program with few or no restrictions in order to avoid uncertainty. Leah was dismissed from nursing. Although her initial new major choice was business, she had to meet several

prerequisites before applying for the program. She decided to avoid future uncertainty and instead enrolled in the Spanish major “because I could just transfer there and still be able to get advised and take classes.” Some major-changing students will take the path of least resistance and make the choice of a new degree program based on whether prerequisites or other restrictions exist.

For students who want to change into fine arts or technical majors such as art, design, or architecture, the barriers may seem insurmountable. For example, when Farah decided she wanted to change to art, she encountered the fine arts college admissions requirement of an art portfolio only required for students who transfer in mid-year: “If you declare your major as art in the fall...there’s no portfolio required. But if you want to transfer between semesters that’s when they require it.” In addition to viewing the art major as an attainable goal, Farah relied on strategies to overcome the obstacle she faced and was admitted to art as a mid-year change of major.

Almost one fifth of the participants (19%) discussed taking heavy course loads in order to get on track in their new program. Molly’s new health-related major encompassed different courses from her previous business and education majors, and she used summer term to get caught up: “Yeah, I’m taking 14 credits this summer... cause I had to get caught up...they have a rule where you have to finish in so many semesters since I switched, like later on.” Students with advanced standing in many majors, not only selective degree programs, face similar situations of limited access and exceeding the typical number of credits as they consider leaving their current major.

Impersonal major. Several participants recommended academic advisors not treat students as a “number” and perhaps ask a few additional questions to determine if a

referral to an academic support office, career center, or other office is appropriate before signing off on a major change. Joe, a first-generation college student at the University of the Deep South, suggested advisors ask a few more questions when talking with students about changing majors. He struggled with the decision to change majors because “growing up I always just thought I was going to be a business major.” After job shadowing and an internship, he chose to move to psychology. He described the major change process this way:

It’s kind of once you say you want to switch...they tell you what to do and you just go do it. They don’t take the time to ask you, well why do you want to switch? They’ll say, you should go to the Career Center and check the Career Center first, because I feel like most students end up with three or four different majors because [students] say they want to switch and [advisors] just let you switch. But [advisors] don’t say, maybe you should go to the Career Center first and look at a career... It’s kind of like you just go in there, okay you want to drop? Okay, you can drop. Now you can switch your major. (Joe)

Joe felt with a little more time and a few more questions, students considering major changes may be able to make well-informed decisions. His observation that advisors provide more personal attention to students seeking a program change is worth considering, especially at state flagship universities where students may feel like a number.

Other students discussed the absence of a caring community among the selective major, including faculty, staff and students. The perception of an impersonal major extended beyond advising to include faculty and peers in the selective degree program. Participants also said large class size aggravated lack of communication with their professors.

Audrey, also a first-generation college student, had a similar experience at the University of the Southeast. In her previous program, social science, most classes had 75

students and were too big for her. She did not feel she had a personal relationship with her professors “in terms of that one-on-one interaction.” Audrey said she felt like she was just “like a very, very small number in that class and I felt like even when I had approached my professor about questions I had... I didn’t feel like my professor really cared.” When she switched to Spanish, “it was a whole different ballgame.” Students like Audrey may initially choose a selective major and find a better fit in a smaller, more personal department within the large university.

Other stressors. Nearly 40% discussed other stressors contributing to their situation, such as family responsibilities or illness, while other participants attempted to balance emerging independence with family pressures. Even though all participants lived away from home, family relationships and situations affected students’ level of stress during the major transition process. For example, when her grandfather became gravely ill, Ann left school for several days. This prevented her from adequately preparing for an anatomy test which resulted in poor performance and negatively impacted her grade. In addition to family illness, Ann said, “I also got sick myself where I couldn’t come to class one time and ...you need to go to every single class, and so my personal life kind of took a toll on that...” Students may have difficulty trying to manage competing school and family priorities. Similarly, Joe struggled to manage family ties with maximizing college opportunities: “I was trying to do too much ahead of time. I was trying to do internships, start a business, I was trying to help family, and I was just doing too many things my sophomore year.” Traditional age students, from which the sample was selected, can feel divided between their responsibilities as a college student and their family roles.

Another stressor was the tug between emerging independence and pressure from family. Quinn said he was distracted by the process of filing for financial independence from his family during the transition between majors. In addition, potential conflict arose when families expressed concerns about students leaving high prestige and/or pay degree programs such as business or nursing. For example, Farah discussed the lukewarm reception she received when talking with her parents about her new major choice, art: “They didn’t really get it...They don’t consider it a profession, which I understand, but for the rest of it, I told them I was continuing with marketing also, but every time I tell them about school they just don’t approve.” Farah’s studio art classes required a lot of time and effort that she wanted to discuss with her parents, but came to terms with the situation that they were only interested in her business courses. Family pressure also affected Samantha, a first generation, low-income student also enrolled at the University of the Southeast. She acknowledged choosing nursing for the wrong reasons, saying she was more focused on “only two more years and then I become a nurse and then I have a job and then I make the money. It wasn’t really my passion while taking my nursing classes. They didn’t really interest me.” She felt pressure to choose a degree program with a steady salary, saying “my family always wanted me to do something that makes a lot of money, so I guess that was distracting that I felt that I need to live up to other people’s expectations.” Considering the major finding of the study that students rely primarily on parents for support during the transition from a selective major to a new program, parental support - or lack of it- can greatly influence coping abilities.

In summary, participants identified five major areas within situation: satisfaction as a student; unanticipated major change, due to academic difficulty or lack of interest in

related courses; significant obstacles related to the major change process; an impersonal selective major; and other stressors. Despite encountering numerous problems, students repeatedly indicated they did not consider leaving the institution and instead changed majors in order to pursue their academic goals at the flagship university.

Strategies

Participants described employing a variety of strategies and skills in managing their transition experiences. Strategies are defined as the actions one takes to cope with a transition (Schlossberg & Kay, 2010). The major change process at a minimum requires students to make contact with university officials in the outgoing and incoming degree programs. Table 4.4 displays the four themes about strategies that emerged from data analysis: participants used a variety of skills and strategies, researched information resources online, sought information from advisors and faculty in prospective departments, and successfully navigated obstacles during the transition.

Table 4.4

Themes Related to Strategies

Themes	Number of Participants
	<i>n</i> =26
Used a range of skills and strategies	24
Researched using online information resources	19
Consulted academic advisors and faculty in prospective departments	17
Navigated major change obstacles with action	11

**Note: Twenty-five participants identified multiple strategies*

Multiple strategies employed. Nearly all participants (92%) used multiple strategies and skills (e.g., negotiating, asserting, reframing, seeking advice from university offices) in coping with the transition. Twenty-four participants identified using

three or more information sources during the transition between majors. Students most commonly identified a combination of online resources regarding program requirements and meeting with a professional or faculty advisor in the new department. At both universities, students were required to gain approval from the new department to complete the change of major process.

Students went beyond the minimum in garnering information about potential new programs. Ninety-two percent of the sample named three or more sources they tapped in making a new major choice in order to simplify a complex major change process, including online information sources, academic advisors, and peers. When Elizabeth, a student at the University of the Southeast, met with an academic advisor in the liberal arts college to switch from education to statistics, she had already researched information about the statistics program online. She described meeting resistance from the liberal arts advisor who originally said she would not allow Elizabeth to transfer in until the end of the term when grades posted. In addition, the liberal arts advisor noted a previous major change from chemical engineering into education, but Elizabeth was set on getting into statistics:

She said I had changed my major already and blah, blah, blah, and I really need to make sure that's what I want, and then I was like, well it is what I want and then I kind of refused to leave until she changed it. And then she changed it [laughter].

Elizabeth's strategy of being assertive worked in her favor in that situation, but often advisors are bound by established policies that require students to submit a petition or to follow other protocols for seeking an exception to policies.

Several participants discussed how they utilized online and human information sources. Jessica, also a student at the University of the Southeast, said her search

included the course catalogue and a listing of all the different majors. She explained, “I searched through each major that I was interested in and then I looked at specific courses and saw which credits I had [that] would change over and which were similar enough to education.” She also used an online degree planning tool and talked with advisors in her previous major, education, and new department, social science. Jessica followed the advice of her new department to find people and classes using online tools that corresponded with the class “so I would go the web site and talk to people from these classes. The classes were so specific I could find out more about the major as a whole from other people that were in this major.” After she registered for a class, the instructor used an online education platform (e.g., Blackboard, Moodle) and a website so students could “communicate with each other on discussion boards and posts and all that kind of stuff, so I would reach out to my classmates and find out more about the major.”

Clyde sought assistance from several student services offices and his previous and prospective academic departments when his academic performance in business had deteriorated. He was uncertain whether he should continue to struggle in business or consider an alternative program, so he took the initiative to get advice about his dilemma:

I went to the Career Center to see if actually changing my major was worthwhile because I’m a very prideful person and I like to stick with things. I went to the Career Center and said I’m struggling now but would it be worthwhile to stay in... after this struggle in the business school or switch over into a major where I could have more success, both personally and in my career... I also contacted [an academic support office] I heard helps students in choosing majors, even if you’re already, a junior or a sophomore, they help you decide on your weaknesses and your skills about what would be best for you. And I told them about what I like to do, what I see myself being in the future, and they suggested a major in liberal arts. They gave me a list and... the one that popped out the most to me was sociology... I actually spent a lot more time in the department speaking with a lot of those professors about how that department was run and what a major was like... (Clyde)

Clyde sought assistance from several academic support offices on campus, as well as the career center to investigate post-baccalaureate job opportunities. He also used reframing skills to explore possible new majors and find the positive in a potentially discouraging situation, academic underperformance in the business major.

A common refrain from participants was drawing upon resources available in a variety of formats. Once Ann made the decision to leave nursing, she used numerous resources to facilitate her major change into public health: meeting with advisors in her current and prospective departments; seeking assistance from the campus-wide advising office; and talking with her former first-year seminar instructor, peers who were former nursing students and women in her sorority. In addition to using a variety of human resources, Ann looked for information online. Using online or in-person resources varied by individual student, but the clear message was that students accessed information from a combination of sources.

Online information. Nearly 75% of participants reported using online resources during the transition of leaving the selective major and choosing a new major. The most frequently mentioned university information sources students reported using were academic bulletin, specific program requirements, degree planning tools, and course descriptions. When asked to identify the most valuable resources during the early part of the transition, Richard responded, “going directly to the web sites and looking at the information available.” He continued:

I found that if I held up the degree requirements for both programs, I looked at them side by side on the same computer screen at the same time, I saw that though the business degree actually requires more of its students and therefore means students will have less freedom to take other classes, the specific classes required for the business program I think are much more advantageous in the workplace. (Richard)

Participants also discussed searching online information sources outside the university to research careers in prospective majors and investigate professional school requirements. In considering whether to stay in a five year pre-health major that included a year-long internship or switch to a four year program, Emily talked with advisors in both programs and also went “online to the medical schools and seeing the classes that are required and are not required and what would look best.” Her research led her to change to a four-year program so she would not have to delay entering medical school.

Academic advisors and faculty. Two thirds (65%) of participants sought information and assistance from academic advisors and faculty in prospective or new major departments. The major change approval process requires students to meet with an academic advisor in the new department, but many discussed seeking information from several departments before making a final decision. When Molly decided to leave education, she sought input from several possible programs, including business, her first major:

I went actually back to business to talk to them because maybe I should give it a second chance...I went to telecomm cause my roommate was in that and my best friend's in that. So I talked to an advisor in there. I talked to a nutrition advisor in that college, and then I talked to the final advisor in the [health-related] college.

Molly explored options based on her friends' interests, thinking if they liked a program, she might find a good fit. She also discussed options with family members who are employed in health and science fields before deciding on her own path, to pursue a health education major.

After Shantelle failed a national teacher education exam twice, she re-examined her options, knowing she wanted to continue on a career path in the helping professions. She researched information on websites, discussed options with her scholarship program

advisor, talked with several friends in the social work major and family members already employed in the field. When asked who she relied upon during the transition, she described cultivating a relationship with her new academic advisor, saying she thought she would need somebody in the major who “would help me and be on my side, so I developed a great relationship with her just to make sure that I was doing things right and to make sure I could get the help that I needed.” Shantelle was aware of the complex requirements for the social work degree and took the initiative to cultivate a relationship with someone she knew could support her in achieving the goal she set for herself.

Navigating major change obstacles or barriers. Participants navigated major change obstacles or barriers most frequently by making a plan and taking action. Eighty-five percent of participants discussed obstacles they faced, including the inconvenience of paperwork associated with the major change process or having to take additional classes in order to get accepted to a new program. A few of the obstacles participants faced, however, seemed insurmountable when they first described them.

Developing a strategy to navigate the obstacles required creativity, initiative and persistence. For example, Farah’s decision to pursue an art major after her first semester of college enabled her to continue developing her interest and skills in photography. However, the mid-year requirement for students seeking a major change into art involved submitting an art portfolio which was a problem for Farah. Farah’s interest and background was in photography, but the art portfolio was comprised solely of sketches. Her reaction was, “I was dumbfounded at first, when [the art advisor] told me I was like, oh gosh, I’m not going to switch, I’ll just do business forever, but [laughter] it turns out, like I got it done.” She explained the challenge of a still life sketching portfolio this way,

“I had never sketched in my entire life so that was a week of watching YouTube videos on how to sketch!” [laughter]. Another obstacle was the disadvantage of taking courses out of sequence. All studio art majors enrolled in a six-credit hour seminar and studio course which was only offered during fall term. Since she started in the spring, Farah approached the faculty instructors to let them know she did not have any background in art besides photography. She explained her situation and “the teachers were really accepting, and open to new ideas, even though I didn’t have the same background or ideas as everyone else in the class, they still appreciated it.” Farah devised strategies such as talking to her instructors and explaining her situation in order to overcome obstacles. Ultimately she achieved her goal of becoming an art major.

While Farah was able to enter the major of her choice, Janice was not able to do so. After Janice decided to leave education to focus on a combined degree pre-health major, she discovered she was ineligible because she could not complete all the prerequisites in the timeframe available. Undeterred, Janice decided on an interdisciplinary social science major which would allow flexibility to take the pre-health courses required for a graduate degree in occupational therapy. She asked both advisors to give her a list of their degree requirements. Subsequently, she identified the courses needed for each program. Once she had gathered the information she needed, she described her strategy in juggling courses for two very different programs:

And then I made my own master list and decided, okay it overlaps, killing two birds with one stone for all of these classes, and then made a list of how am I going to accomplish all of these by the time I graduate. And it actually seemed to work, so that was good. (Janice)

Later in the interview, Janice explained that she continues to have an uphill battle. Even now, because she is not in the health professions major, Janice has a hard time registering

for classes that she needs to satisfy both programs, but she cannot be admitted into the major due to restricted enrollment. “And so when I call and ask for help, they really won’t help me. So I wish someone could help me.” Janice’s problem is not unique, especially for students in other majors seeking pre-health or other limited enrollment courses.

Participants used a combination of strategies and skills in managing their transition experiences. Four strategies emerged: use of online information resources, information from advisors and faculty, navigation of obstacles, and reliance on skills and strategies.

Self

Students described using *self*, the fourth variable in the 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995) in a variety of ways. Schlossberg and Kay define self as the “inner strength that you bring to a transition” (2010, p. 6). The frequency of self was considerably less in the study than support (more than two and a half times that of self) and situation (about twice the frequency of self). Participants revealed a strong sense of knowing themselves and how to adapt to and grow from change. Data analysis also indicated less predominant themes of participants knowing how to meet their own needs and maintaining a sense of control. Table 4.5 presents the themes that students discussed in relation to the self variable.

Table 4.5

Themes Related to Self

Themes	Number of Participants
	<i>n</i> =26
Well-developed sense of self-awareness	14
Resilient in the face of change	12
Know how to meet my needs	9
Take control	8

**Note: Fourteen participants identified multiple themes*

Sense of self-awareness. Over half of the participants (54%) indicated they had a well-developed sense of awareness about themselves. The theme of self-awareness was evident in participant statements about their strengths and weaknesses, having a clear sense of their interests or lack of interests, and identifying their personality traits. Lauren discussed the probability that she would change her major from business, saying she “knew it was probably going to happen because I’m not very good at making decisions or knowing what I want. I kind of knew that it might be coming.” Others, like Graciela, expressed a clear lack of interest in their previous program. She could not imagine herself as a nurse, as she did not like the selective process to gain entrance to the upper-division nursing program or the strict schedule for professional nurses. Even though she was earning all “A” grades in her classes, she did not “have my heart in it, and felt I was judging off the wrong things and I couldn’t see myself as a nurse...I love Spanish, I want to do Spanish. I don’t want to be in a hospital all my life.”

Similarly, Denny described numerous frustrating academic experiences as a business major and was happy with his new choice: “Ultimately I think the field of political science is more intellectually stimulating for me than business ever could hope

to be, but that's probably more a personality issue with me than it is a reflection on the business school." When Quinn was asked if he expected to change his major, his remark indicated a strong sense of self, "I didn't expect to change my major, just because I'm normally a very one track sort of person where I have a singular goal in mind and I stick to it pretty regularly." These comments provide a strong indication of students' awareness and confidence in their knowledge of self.

Resilience. Participants were resilient during the transition, making necessary adaptations to be successful when facing change. Nearly half the participants (46%) discussed flexibility and how they adapted in order to be successful in the transition. For students forced into transition or encouraged to find alternatives due to academic difficulty, an ability to bounce back from disappointment was key to moving forward. After Leah was unexpectedly dismissed at the end of her first year, she had to find something else if she could not do nursing and decided, "I would just have to move on and find something else, another degree that I would be happy with, and that I could get a job in and be happy with." In discussing the most valuable resources she accessed during the major change process, Lauren expressed how helpful the people in her new degree program, public health, were in explaining the public health degree requirements. She also credited herself with taking responsibility for a new content area, "I think the fact that I really wanted to switch to be in something with the medical field and so I think just the desire to do that a lot more than business was helpful." Resilience extended beyond attitude for students who dove into a more technical field, such as Dana did in going from education to communication sciences (speech pathology & audiology). Dana reflected on her experience this way:

One semester I was learning about education and the next semester I was learning about the study of sound and statistics and things like that, which is completely different from what I was learning before, but I actually - once I got over the initial change I actually really enjoyed the content. (Dana)

Students made the necessary adaptations, whether in attitude towards the change or content in the new academic area, in order to move forward towards graduation.

Know how to meet their needs. A less frequent theme, knowing how to meet their needs during the transition, was reported by more than a third (35%) of participants. Participants were able to outline exactly what they thought they needed during the transition. Despite an awareness of university support offices, some respondents chose limited assistance or did not use available resources because they wanted to manage the transition on their own. When Joe was asked what people or information he used, if any, in selecting a new major, he referred to finding his own path: “I would say it was more of a personal thing. I didn’t even use the Career Center or anything. It was more of me realizing that I had this feel for, I guess helping people.” He reflected on finding his passion, counseling and working with youth, and getting involved with campus ministry organization leadership. Joe added, “I’ll be president [of the organization] next year, so I kind of found my love for ministry and counseling and just, I guess, working with youth.” Likewise, as a student leader, Audrey was aware there are a “ton of resources for that, in-between transitioning to a new major, and I guess I didn’t motivate myself or I guess I wasn’t as aware of the resources when I was actually in that transition period.” She explained the reason that she did not go to any of those offices as, “I felt like I needed to make this decision on my own and I feel like they would’ve supported anything I would’ve wanted to do regardless... I just felt like I had to do it by myself.” These

comments illustrate that even though participants were aware of existing resources, they preferred to figure out that part of the transition on their own.

Sense of control. Another less frequent self theme involved participants' sense of control or taking control of the transition situation. Nearly one third of participants (31%) described efforts to gain control during the transition, particularly in situations where some elements were out of their control. For example, Lexie was anxious to leave nursing after courses and labs presented a realistic picture of typical nursing responsibilities, a career for which she quickly decided she was not well-matched. She suggested the university offered more resources during her transition than she used. Upon further probing, Lexie indicated familiarity with both the career center and the campus-wide advising offices as helping students understand what their strengths and weaknesses are. She continued, "But I think I really wanted to find out for myself what I would want to do more so than what I could do. So that's why I didn't use them as much as I should have probably." By limiting her use of outside resources, Lexie maintained control and minimized confusion about what she wanted in a new degree program.

Clyde's experience highlights an example of taking control where possible, even as other factors were out of his control. He reflected on his initial enthusiasm and confidence about business, saying he knew business involved "rigorous coursework, but I was confident in my ability to be able to deal with it, to actually handle the work. So I just felt, whatever would come my way I could handle..." He was aware of academic support offices around campus if he needed help, so "I wasn't worried about actually changing my major at all... 'til recently." Even though self was the least frequent code among the 4 S categories, participants still considered self-reliance important.

RQ 2: Most Valuable Resources in Navigating the Transition

This section will discuss the findings related to the second research question, which was:

Which coping mechanisms do students formerly enrolled in selective majors identify as most valuable in navigating the transition process?

The interview protocol was divided into two sections inquiring about the most valuable resources during the transition. One section focused on the early part of the transition, when students were first dealing with and making immediate decisions related to leaving their selective major. In the second section, near the end of the protocol, participants were asked a similar question preceded by “overall,” which was as follows:

*OVERALL, which resources would you say are **most valuable** during the transition of leaving a selective major and selecting and enrolling in a new major? Just to remind you, resources might include the help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the situation, or the actions you initially took to deal with the change.*

The most common theme was that students used multiple coping resources in both the early part of and the overall transition. The combinations of resources that were most valuable to students switching degree programs varied by phase of transition, as detailed in the sections that follow.

Early Transition: Multiple coping resources most valuable. When participants were asked what was most valuable, 70% identified multiple resources. Both support and self appeared frequently as one variable in the combinations during the early part of the transition from one major to another. The second variable, however, was dispersed, as the sample results in Table 4.6 display.

Table 4.6

Most Valuable Resources- Early Transition

Coping Resource, Listed as 4 S Variable	Number of Participants
	<i>n</i> = 26
Multiple Coping Resources	18
Support	4
Situation	1
Strategies	2
Self	1

The absence of a clear second variable in the combinations makes it impossible to make conclusions about the most frequent combination. Students did, however, clearly identify support and self as one factor in the multiple resources they stated as most valuable.

Dana’s remarks highlight the combination of support, strategies, and self in her assessment of valuable resources. She left the education major to focus on communication sciences and disorders at the University of the Southeast. Dana described the most valuable resources as involving a combination of “my advisors speaking to me and giving me all the information I needed, and it was also me being really excited about something new.” From course content in her previous major, she already knew a lot about special education but was unfamiliar with speech “so I was really excited to learn new stuff. And I looked online about hearing disabilities, different disabilities that I hadn’t really gone into before, so I think that’s really what made it easier and made it a good transition.” Dana relied on her new academic advisor for support, to provide specific program requirements. She said her attitude toward a new major positively affected her transition, and a strategy of doing online research for general information about the field of communication sciences and disorders was very valuable, too.

Ann relied on a campus-wide advising office and her own internal resources in the move out of nursing and into public health after she earned a D grade in a required nursing course. In discussing what she considered most valuable, in addition to her parents' support and advice, she sought frequent assistance from the [campus-wide advising] center at the University of the Deep South:

A lot of times I would go there because I was so lost and I didn't know what to change my major to and...they sat there with me as long as I needed to and went through majors that I thought were interesting and try to decide how many of my credits will go towards it and if I'll graduate on time. That helped me a lot. And then I think my attitude got stronger through all this. I'm happy it happened because I learned how failing something and to get back up and get into something and now my study habits are stronger because of it, because it's something that I actually want and in a way I grew up with this happening. (Ann)

Ann used her family and the campus-wide advising center for support. She also drew upon internal resources to learn and grow from her experience of academic underperformance. Ann learned from her mistake and developed more effective study habits as well as a sense of optimism in moving forward with a major change decision.

Others discussed how they used other combinations of multiple coping resources. Jessica used both situation and strategies in leaving education to pursue an applied social science degree. She wanted to work with children but thought education was "too limiting, and I viewed it [new degree program] as a way that I could use everything that I've learned in my education classes into those new majors; if not, I was completely switching gears." Jessica discussed using "my resources" such as the academic bulletin and talking with an advisor in her new major who she said "helped me a lot. So I think by going in and making a point to find out more about this new major before I switched really helped me." She used her background and foundation from previous education courses in selecting a new major in applied social science.

As previously mentioned, 70% identified multiple coping resources as most valuable during the early transition. Support and self were among the frequent resources, used by about one third of participants. The variable combinations prevent generalizations beyond the frequency of support and self as the two most common variables. It was clear, however, that a majority of students accessed more than one resource during the transition and believed multiple resources were most valuable to them early in the transition between degree programs.

Overall transition: A common theme of support. Students were about evenly split in identifying multiple versus one coping resource(s) as most valuable overall during the transition. Half of the participants (50%) suggested multiple resources were most valuable; the remaining 46% who responded specified a single variable. Table 4.7 displays results for the most valuable resources in the overall transition.

Table 4.7

Most Valuable Resources- Overall

Coping Resource, Listed as 4 S Variables	Number of Participants
	<i>n=26</i>
Multiple Coping Resources	13
Support	8
Situation	1
Strategies	1
Self	2
No response	1

Whether relying on multiple or a single resource(s), students most frequently counted support as most helpful. Janice, who struggled to balance pursuing an official social science major and a second, unofficial, pre-health program, described the value of support:

I think it's good to be able to talk it out and hear perspectives from other people because sometimes you can get tunnel vision. You don't like something, you kind of think the grass is greener and sometimes it isn't. So it's nice to be able to take into account what everyone else thinks and then sort of come back to yourself. [Think about] what's best for me and take into consideration the information that others have provided. (Janice)

Janice could have become overwhelmed and frustrated by her situation in trying to take pre-health courses in addition to requirements for her official social science major.

Earlier in the interview, she had discussed a perceived lack of support from the university when she was unable to access her desired new major choice. Her solution was to design her own graduation plan to incorporate the pre-health requirements in her undergraduate education so she could enter her desired field through a graduate degree program. Nearly every term she encountered roadblocks in the form of special permission or limited enrollment pre-health courses. Janice relied on support from others to continue pursuing her personally designed graduation plan in spite of setbacks and frustrating situations.

Reliance on multiple resources. The multiple resource combinations had a prevalent theme of support. Half of the students used more than one resource, and support was the most prevalent coping mechanism described.

Samantha described the support of academic advisors and program information as very valuable resources. In addition, she prized self-reflection skills “for what you want to do...communicating with yourself about your life and your values and what you want to accomplish is probably the most important to be successful when transitioning, and not freaking out or feeling overwhelmed.” Samantha's decision to leave nursing was difficult because her family had pressured her to choose a career-oriented program with a sustainable income level. After four terms in nursing, she made the switch to education with the realization she would earn a lower salary as a teacher. She confirmed making

the right choice and choosing a field compatible with her values and post-graduate career goals.

Joe articulated support and situation as most helpful in his transition from business to psychology. Initially he suggested that how he viewed the situation was most valuable, and then added a caveat about support:

But sometimes you need that outside influence to help you lean towards where you need to go. So I would say really try faculty. And sometimes you have to seek out the faculty because they're so busy, pick a time to seek them out, ask questions and just be really, really up front about why you want to switch and do your research and talk to a variety of people before you switch. (Joe)

Joe used his network of peers, adult leaders in his campus ministry organization, as well as faculty in prospective majors to gather as much information as he needed to select a new program after deciding to leave business. He outlined the specific strategies he used to arrange meetings with faculty which required advance planning and contact. Joe took a leap of faith that faculty, student organization advisors, and peers would be willing to talk with him about what the psychology department could offer. At the end of the interview, he said he was happy with his decision to switch; Joe's efforts in researching options permitted him to make a sound decision about a new major choice based on extensive information gathered from a variety of sources.

Single most valuable resource. About half the students identified a single most valuable resource; of those, 75% specified a university-affiliated person or office. Timothy consulted academic advisors in both his previous and prospective majors before making a decision to transfer into business at the University of the Southeast. He succinctly explained why the help from others, specifically advisors, was the most valuable resource overall in his transition because "they'll know how to dot your i's and

cross your t's. It's very easy to make a mistake and then realize that you are not on the path to graduation in four years." He added, "...having the advisors there to help you out is incredibly important." Timothy noted that academic advisors assist students in making sure the students achieve their academic goals and graduate. His comments also underscore the pressure academic advisors can face in providing accurate information to students; advisors may have responsibility for hundreds of students at state flagship universities.

For Dana, seeking support from her new advisor was central to her successful transition into communication sciences and disorders, a health-related program with a competitive upper-division admission process. She discussed the value of having an academic advisor she could go to and help map out a strategy for the major, since she did not know if she could get it all finished in time. Dana discussed stress as well as support she received: "it was a lot of pressure to start [the new program] from the beginning. But just having that person [academic advisor] who will sit with you for as long as you want and map out each class you need to take was beneficial." Other support came from "just talking it out with my family and friends. I think that's what really helped the most." Dana sought institutional support from an academic advisor to better understand her new degree program. She relied on family and friends to provide personal support as she negotiated and navigated a new and very technical academic discipline. Others who cited a single resource as most valuable discussed academic advisors as well as offices for academic support, campus-wide advising, and the career center.

Students consistently identified support from others as the most valuable coping resource, which emerged as a major theme in both the early part of the transition and the overall experience. Comparisons between the two points in time showed differences, too. Students used more than one resource, most often support or self, early in the transition. About half identified multiple sources when asked about the most valuable resource overall, and the other half cited a single coping mechanism. Support was a common variable among both groups. A university official was deemed the most important resource overall by students identifying a single resource, about half the sample. This finding has implications for the institution and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

RQ 3: Coping Resources Most Influential in Retention

All participants were undergraduates at the same university they had enrolled in as first-year students. Obviously, participants in the sample had made the decision to remain at their university after leaving a selective degree program, purposely limiting the study to students who remained and did not leave the institution. This section presents data from the third research question:

Which coping resources do students previously enrolled in selective majors identify as most influential in their decision to remain at the institution?

Three of the 26 students self-reported dismissal from selective majors. The remaining 23 participants voluntarily chose to leave their previous degree program. Voluntary major change may positively influence students' decisions to stay at the same institution, but the current study was unable to control for that factor. The following section presents results from data analysis related to whether participants considered transferring to another

institution, why they decided to stay, and the resources participants used in making their retention decision.

An unexpected finding was the small percentage of participants who considered a transfer to another institution. Twenty-one (88%) reported that they did not consider leaving their current university. Five considered transferring, but only three gave it some consideration before choosing not to leave. The researcher made the decision not to include any discussion about the three students who considered leaving in the results, due to the risk of making implications with very limited responses, even in a qualitative study. The results, therefore, are data analysis of twenty-six responses as all students ultimately made a commitment to remain at their university. Table 4.8 displays the results of the coping resources most influential in students' retention decisions.

Table 4.8

Coping Resources Most Influential in Retention Decision

Coping Resource, Listed as 4 S Variable	Number of Participants
	<i>n</i> = 26
Situation	14
Multiple Resources- Situation and Support	5
No Explanation	5
Support	2

Situation influenced students' retention decisions. The most influential variable in the decision to continue at the same university was situation: almost three quarters of participants (73%) specified situation as influencing their decisions to continue their college education at the same institution. In contrast to other findings in which a combination of resources was cited, participants discussed situation singularly as most influential in their decision to stay.

The most common factors related to situation were described as a comfortable environment and the institution's reputation. Over three-quarters (79%) of situation responses indicated participants were comfortable at the university, saying they had friends, knew their way around and/or liked being at the institution (15 responses). Monica had already been at the University of the Southeast for two years when she left sociology and thought "it would be too much of a hassle to try to move because I was already in my junior year, and also I just love the University. I didn't feel like I needed to change to another school." A similar sentiment was echoed by Ann, a student at the University of the Deep South, "I never even thought about going to a different school besides [Deep South] because I enjoy everything about it. It's exactly where I want to be, and so I figured I would just figure out what else was out there..." Richard similarly remarked, "I really love [Deep South], so there was no reason to go anywhere else." Other participants made comments more or less the same as Monica, Ann and Richard, saying they "loved it here," had friends, and they were very happy with their life outside their major.

About 40% of situation responses cited university reputation and state flagship university status as other factors influencing participants' decision to continue at the same institution. Samantha wanted to stay at University of the Southeast, the best university in the state, in her opinion:

...the first reaction was that I want to graduate as a [team name], that was definitely the first reaction. But also I felt the education program here is one of the top ones in the state, as well as one of the top ones in the country. So I feel like it's a very valuable program and I've heard a lot of good things about it, and I wanted to stay here, I was comfortable.

Samantha initially expressed her loyalty to the institution in the context of an athletic team before adding the consideration of her specific academic program's reputation. Affiliation with the university's athletic team was not investigated in this study but three students discussed loyalty to the institution in terms of athletic team, which may be influential in retention as well.

Clyde disclosed he did consider leaving when the business major was not working out, but ultimately decided to stay, discussing both support and situation in making his retention decision. He felt the people are "genuinely interested in seeing me succeed, it's more than just being a statistic or another passing student... they actually care about your career and want you to do well in life and that's ultimately what kept me here..." Clyde's comment is consistent with the construct of "institutional commitment to the welfare of students" proffered by Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) in their revision of Tinto's (1975, 1986, 1993) theory on student departure focused on students at residential colleges and universities. The construct is defined as "an abiding concern for the growth and development of students" (Braxton and Hirschy, 2005, p. 70). The authors argue that initial commitment to the institution affects perceptions of several institutional dimensions, including commitment to the welfare of students. Clyde's subsequent comments indicate that his initial commitment to the University of the Deep South positively influenced his assessment that staff and faculty wanted to see him succeed.

In addition to support, Clyde discussed the influence of situation and traced his affinity to the university long before he entered as a student. Clyde said he had been raised in the state and considered it his home. He said, "...it means a lot that you go to your four year university and you graduate, it's a feeling of loyalty." Affinity to a large

university may develop long before students matriculate, positively affect their level of initial institutional commitment and may play a role in influencing them to remain. Clyde's poor performance in the business program led him to briefly consider going somewhere else before deciding to stay and change his major.

Several other participants mentioned their university was "a good school" in explaining why they did not consider leaving. Students specifically mentioned the quality of the facilities, their high level of satisfaction expressed as "I love it here," and the specialized new degree program offered only at a few other universities. Five participants did not provide any further explanation for their retention decision, including Audrey: "I didn't [consider leaving]. That didn't cross my mind at all." Students were comfortable with their lives as a college student at their state flagship university and didn't want to make additional changes beyond with switching academic programs.

Additional Findings

As the data analysis process began winding down, findings outside the scope of the three research questions emerged. The most significant finding centers on responses to a question in the interview protocol, which asked:

What advice would you give to students who are leaving a selective major and are facing the same transition that you experienced?

Participants offered their wisdom based on the benefit of their transition experience. The main theme of advice centered on strategies, specifically that students in transition do their research before switching majors. Results are presented as additional findings in Table 4.9 and detailed in the section below.

Table 4.9

Themes Related to Participants' Advice

Recommendation	Number of Participants
	<i>n</i> = 26
Do Your Research Before Switching Majors	14
Seek Assistance from University Resources	6
Choose a Major that Makes You Happy	5
Change Majors Sooner than Later	3

** Two Participants Offered Multiple Pieces of Advice*

Over three quarters of participants (77%) suggested students considering a change of major gather information from a variety of sources before selecting a new degree program. Investigating specific course requirements, as well as seeking assistance from offices such as a campus-wide advising office, the career center, or academic support office, were among the participants' recommended strategies to other students considering changing majors. Timothy stayed in economics but went from the liberal arts college to business and offered his advice to others considering a switch:

Information is power, and so be available, be open to the different opinions of not only your advisors, but students. And even speak with other professors if available, because your professors themselves will be able to make some powerful suggestions as well regarding your future career [direction]. So just keep an open mind.

Timothy's comments focused on seeking information from different sources, such as faculty and academic advisors. He recommended a strategy to solicit support from others for future career direction and be flexible in considering all possible options.

Samantha advised having a well-thought out plan. Based on her experience leaving nursing and going into education at the University of the Southeast, she suggested considering the implications of a major change before making a final decision. Samantha

recommended students “definitely think it through and set up all your pros and cons of each thing,” realizing once they leave a selective major, they may not be able to re-enter the program. She added students should follow what they actually think they want their life to be like after graduation, and to “focus on your passions and what you’re good at, rather than the end result of the life of money, certain hours, or... health insurance or something weird like that.” Samantha indicated facing family pressure about her program choice earlier in the interview. By organizing the positive and negative considerations before choosing a new program, she was able to make a well-informed decision. In addition, she was positioned to articulate reasons for her new choice if she met resistance from family members.

Janice urged students to go one step further beyond thinking and take action before making a program switch. She advised students to take advantage of career-related experiences in their field of interest. She recommended they gather information and after compiling their questions, to seek assistance from academic advisors. Janice developed creative problem-solving skills after her experience in being shut out of her first-choice new major and has found a way to achieve her academic goals. She is pursuing an applied social science degree while completing pre-health requirements in preparation for a health-related graduate program at another university. She advised students to do their research, to “look online and make sure the career that you’re changing into has a good path, research what they do. Perhaps [job] shadow someone to really make sure that that’s what you want to do before you do it.” Janice also suggested doing research online about the prospective college and program to find out the specific admission requirements, the application date, “am I too old for it, do I need to transfer...

Get all that information yourself, and then go to the advisor and ask your specific questions.” Janice’s organized approach was crucial to adequately preparing for a graduate degree which requires numerous health-related prerequisite courses. She drew upon her personal experience in formulating advice for students facing a similar transition.

Other participants offered similar advice to talk with peers already in the major, consult with academic advisors, and research course descriptions online to determine if the content areas are a good match for the students’ academic interests. A theme of strategies emerged and within strategies, students suggested a variety of methods to elicit external support.

Summary of Results

The results of the qualitative study indicate that while students at state flagship universities drew upon a variety of coping resources, they relied primarily on external support systems, most often parents, during the transition from one major to another. When asked to identify the most valuable resources, participants identified support from others as most important in the early stages of the process and a combination of support and self as most valuable overall during the transition. Situation was the primary factor in influencing traditional-aged students’ retention decisions to continue at the state flagship university. Similar findings may or may not be found at other types of state universities or among non-traditional aged students. Additional findings emerged in the form of participants offering advice to students facing a similar transition, with the most prevalent recommendation that students do their research before transferring to another degree program.

The dissertation highlights that while students drew upon a variety of coping resources, they relied primarily on external support systems, most often parents, during the transition. Obstacles, particularly the major change process, and the absence of a caring community in the selective major contributed to a perceived lack of support from the institution. Participants expressed a desire for more personal attention from the university during their transition. When asked to identify the most valuable resources, participants identified support from others as most important in the early stages of the process and a combination of support and self as most valuable overall during the transition. Situation assumed a primary role in influencing students' retention decisions. Additional findings were in the area of participants' advice to students facing a similar transition. Advice from participants to students facing a similar transition focused on researching available options before switching degree programs.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this multi-campus study was to investigate the transition experiences of undergraduate students who left a selective major and enrolled in a new degree program at the same university. The study specifically focused on the coping resources upon which students relied during their transition. Schlossberg's 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995), involving variables of situation, self, support, and strategies provided the conceptual framework to examine the experiences of undergraduates from their perspectives. The research questions influenced the decision to conduct a qualitative study design investigating how students described using coping resources during the transition of leaving the former selective major and enrolling in a new degree program, which coping mechanisms students identified as most valuable in navigating the transition process, and which coping resources were most influential in students' retention decisions. The conceptual framework also offered a taxonomy to structure data analysis, identify the influence of individual variables on the transition experiences, and examine emerging themes based on the interview data.

Previous research about students in selective majors is outdated (Gordon & Polson, 1985; Steele, 1994; Steele et al., 1993). More recent research involving major-changing students has focused on factors influencing a program change (Hagstrom et al.,

1996) and time to degree concerns (Micceri, 2001; Berrett, 2012), but has not presented the students' voices or perspectives. This study extends the research by presenting the experiences of 26 undergraduate students at two large, state flagship universities.

An overall theme from the results was that students were savvy in identifying and using resources of all types during their transition from one degree program to another.

Four key findings were identified from data analysis of interview transcript coding:

While students relied upon multiple resources during their transition, they most frequently described support, primarily from family; students perceived a lack of support from the university in the major change process; the most valuable coping resource during the transition was support from others; and situation was most influential in students' decisions to persist at their current university. A common theme was the high level of tenacity with which students sought coping resources. They researched online information, talked with peers in potential new majors, and met with academic advisors. When the major change process presented obstacles, students devised strategies to navigate around the obstacles to get on track with their new degree program. This chapter will discuss the key findings, cite implications for policy and practice, and make recommendations for future research.

Key Findings

The main purpose of the previous chapter was to present the detailed results based on data analysis. This chapter provides an opportunity to highlight the most prevalent themes and discuss implications of the findings as they relate to previous research, the university setting, and future study.

Resiliency involves multiple resources.

I feel like the most valuable resources are who you surround yourself with, how you view the situation and inner strength. I think that's really important. For you to make that decision on your own and not have others switching your mind around. (Audrey)

Like other participants, Audrey asserted that multiple resources were most valuable; for her, those involved support, situation, and self. A common theme from students' experiences was reliance on resources in several areas during the transition between degree programs. Students described the major-change process as complex, so it is not surprising that they drew upon multiple resources, highlighting their resiliency. When faced with change, students mustered as many resources as they needed; this finding is consistent with the 4 S System variable of self (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995). In describing the resources they used, however, the other three variables of support, situation, and strategies were mentioned more frequently than self. Code frequency analysis of coping resource type results indicated students primarily relied upon support from others (39%) and situation (29%); less important were strategies (17%), and self (15%). In contrast, students identified self as the second most valuable coping resource, after support. Additional research is needed to determine the source of "disconnect" between the low frequency of the self variable and its higher rank as the second most valuable coping resource.

The theme of multiple resources was more pronounced for the second research question related to identifying the most valuable coping mechanism. Seventy percent of students identified more than one resource, frequently involving support and self, as most valuable in the early part of the transition. In response to the overall experience, students

using multiple versus a single resource were evenly split. Students relied primarily on external support but frequently in combination with their own positive attitude and deliberate action related to the program change. The most common resource described, support from others, was also identified as most valuable and is discussed in more detail in a later section.

Based on Elliott and Elliott's (1985) investigation of the academic resources students used in making a change of major, the researcher anticipated that students might draw on multiple coping resources. Elliott and Elliott's (1985) results indicated four statistically significant resources: "Word of mouth" from a friend, college catalog, influence of a family member, and summer job or work experience in the field (p. 38-39). The current study is different in design and research questions from Elliott and Elliott's study. The findings, however, share some similarities, including the primary role of family, support from friends, and university information as important resources students used during their change of major.

The major change process is an obstacle.

What would be nice is...if on the forefront, all of that process had been explained to me...my impression of the process of changing majors was laid out to me as infinitely more complicated than it was... (Denny)

Denny was not alone in his assessment; well over three-quarters (85%) of the students identified the major change process as a barrier to their transition. As previously discussed in Chapter Four, participants described the program change process as complex, cumbersome, and frustrating. Among the hassles were forms requiring signatures from the departing and entering academic departments, minimum grade point averages to determine eligibility, completion of prescribed courses, and falling into an in-

between status for students dropped by one program but not yet accepted into their desired major. Nearly one-quarter (23%) of students initiated a program change during advance registration for the next term, adding to their stress when they were unable to register for classes until the program change was approved. Even though students may plan to leave a degree program, they may not initiate the change until planning for next term's courses.

The most valuable coping resource was support from others.

I'd say my help from others [was most valuable]... The people that know me best gave me the best advice. (Molly)

Molly's comments summarize the predominant theme of drawing strength from external support. Support systems helped students to ready their resources to better cope with a program change. Students depended on others, particularly family and friends, more than any other coping resource during their transition between degree programs. They described seeking affection, affirmation and assistance from others, consistent with Kahn and Antonucci's (2008) discussion of the functions of support as: Affection (someone respects, likes, or loves you); Affirmation (someone agrees that your actions are appropriate or understandable), and Assistance (someone provides tangible help necessary to get you over the crisis).

Family, particularly parents, played a critical role in supporting their college student offspring. The first person most students (77%) told after making the decision to change majors was a family member; of the 21 "family" responses, 19 specifically identified parents. In another support-related question, nearly half of students (42%) reported leaning on parents for support during the transition. The findings related to support from parents are consistent with Simmons' (2008) interview study of college

seniors. Parents played an important role in guiding students' decision-making processes about academic and career choices. Participants in his study also described parents as a major source of support and someone students could rely upon for general guidance. As Berríos-Allison (2005) found, the common theme of active family involvement in college students' lives may influence occupational exploration, including the decision to change majors. Family members of first-generation college seniors in Overton-Healy's (2010) qualitative research study were a source of both positive and negative support, whereas students in the current study discussed only positive support from families. Analysis of both frequency of coping resource type codes and identification of most valuable resource show consistent results- support from others was the most critical coping resource students used in transitioning from one degree program to another at the same institution.

Situation was most influential in students' persistence decisions.

I'm comfortable at [University of the Deep South]. I love it here, so I figured, they still have a pretty good program wherever I go. (Joe)

Eighty-eight percent of students shared Joe's opinion encompassing a level of content and comfort with their situation and positive regard for the university's reputation; they were happy with their life as a student and wanted to stay. All 26 students in the study had been at the university for at least one year, but a limitation of the current study is that future departure decisions will not be known. Students in the study may have drawn upon their situation differently than students who left the university but only currently enrolled students were recruited to participate in the current study.

Tinto's Interactionist Theory (1987, 1993) has been extensively tested and cited by scholars (Braxton, 2000; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Braxton et. al., 2004;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) studying student departure decisions since the theory debuted in 1975. Tinto attributed student characteristics (e.g. family background, precollege experiences) as influencing initial commitment to the institution, departure decisions, and a goal of graduation. Students' level of academic and social integration influences their subsequent commitment to the institution and goal of graduation. The data indicated students had a high level of initial commitment to the institution, as evidenced by enrolling at their first choice university and their comments related to a desire to attend the best state school. It is less clear that participants achieved social integration. Participants committed to persist at the same institution, despite their initial lack of academic integration as evidenced by their program change decision.

Relationship of Findings to Existing Literature

While previous research has not examined the transitions of students in selective majors, the findings of the current study illuminate a unique phenomenon and also support the extant literature. One prevalent theme is that students relied on myriad institutional and personal resources during their transition. This finding is consistent with Elliott and Elliott's (1985) study of students in pre-professional majors, which investigated the resources students used in selecting a new degree program. Four resources were identified as significant (.05) from a checklist of 15 resources and included "word of mouth" from a friend, college catalog, family member' influence, and related work experience such as summer job (Elliott & Elliott, 1985, p. 38-39). An unexpected finding in their study was that students depended upon peer contacts in the intended academic programs to make their decision. This use of peers as resources was also a finding in the current study in which students described consulting with peers in

programs of interest while exploring potential majors and after completing a change of major. In spite of more than a 25 year gap between the two studies, students relied on multiple, similar resources during an academic major change.

Students in the current study strategically used a combination of coping resources while navigating the complex major change process; an accurate presentation of results could only be achieved by organizing data around the four variables in order of frequency. Other studies examining transitions of college students using the 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995) conceptual framework have commonly presented the data by individual variable. In accordance with research design using phenomenological or grounded theory paradigms, however, the results do not quantify the frequency of individual 4 S variables from the conceptual framework. Boyenga's (2010) study of theatre students transitioning from community college to a four-year institution found students relied on their peers, both at the new university and their previous community college. Livingston's (2009) investigation of re-enrolling military veterans found they depended on myriad support systems but relied mainly on their peers who had also served in the military, other student veterans. While each of the studies presented results organized by the 4 S variables of support, situation, self and strategies, they do not compare and contrast whether participants used one or multiple resources in managing the specific transition examined in the study.

Self was identified as the second most valuable coping resource for major-changing students, behind external support systems. Schlossberg and Kay (2010) describe self as the inner strength one possesses and can draw upon when facing a transition. Concepts included in the self variable are resiliency, knowledge of self, sense of control,

self-esteem, and realistic expectations (Schlossberg and Kay, 2010, p. 6-7). Students in the current study used a variety of coping mechanisms to take control and repeatedly discussed they knew best how to meet their own needs. Coney's (2012) study of African American football athletes at a predominately White institution found similar reliance on parental support followed by internal resources. The importance of self was more pronounced among student veterans in Livingston's (2009) study; he concluded self was most important to veterans who often navigated the re-enrollment process alone and desired invisibility in the college student community. The current study's results further support previous research involving the 4 S System (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg et al., 1995) and bridges a gap in the recent literature examining students in selective majors. In the next section, study results are used as a foundation for policy and program recommendations.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Braxton's (2000) recommendation of an *integrated design* approach to reduce student departure could be applied to intentionally improve major change policies and procedures. Institutional leaders and academic advisors can draw on themes that emerged from the data and translate the findings into action plans. Several implications can be drawn from the results of the study, including: develop or strengthen family partnerships, improve the major change process, increase personal attention, strategize major retention, and centralize advising for students in transition.

Develop or strengthen family partnerships. Extensive research has documented the higher level of family influence and involvement in college students' lives (Barrios-Allison, 2005; DuBard, 2004; Howe and Strauss, 2003; Simmons, 2008) than in previous

generations. The results of the current study are clearly in line with that research: Students relied on their parents for support. Institutions can work to enable the primary support persons-parents- to be familiar with the many resources available to students in major transition, as a supplement to their primary audience of students. If families can access information about advising processes, they may be able to help their students with a better understanding of the process and encourage students to seek assistance from academic advisors. Academic advising administrators can work with parent program offices to identify and publicize resources for academic support, academic advising, the major change process and other advising-related concerns. In addition, institutions can create website links for families with specific information on how to support their students during a major change and checklists to facilitate the process. Online resources written in simple language may facilitate family members' ability to provide more effective support for their students and alleviate negative perceptions about university resources.

Improve the major change process. Students were dissatisfied with the change of major process at both universities in the study. Nearly 85% of students identified the major change process as an obstacle and as an area in which the university did NOT offer support. In addition, 50% of participants expressed concern about an impersonal major change process. Institutional leaders should think creatively about how to incorporate approaches that increase students' perceptions of university support and more personal attention during the program transfer process. This can be accomplished by examining the process from students' perspective via focus groups, individual interviews with students that are in the transition process, and/or surveys of students. Possible changes

include using standardized communication templates for degree program information to incorporate key facts such as prerequisites, degree requirements, and eligibility requirements for potential major-changers. An online degree audit software program or printed program sheets would allow students such as Richard to compare the degree requirements for multiple programs by looking at them “side by side on the same computer screen at the same time.” Richard was able to compare the programs and decided to change his major. He said, “[even] though the business degree actually requires more of its students and therefore means students will have less freedom to take other classes, the specific classes required for the business program I think are much more advantageous in the workplace.” Degree program communications (e.g., online, print) should strive to keep language about degree requirements and the major change process simple and uncomplicated. If individual academic departments’ timeframes to make program changes are inconsistent across the university (such as the University of the Deep South), institutional leaders should consider establishing one set of deadlines to reduce confusion. Other recommendations are to assess how the major change process can be streamlined and simplified for students. Based on the campus-specific needs identified through assessment, university leaders can implement recommended changes to improve the program transfer experience.

Students access information online, in addition to using other information sources. Institutional leaders should ensure that ample resources for major changing students are available on websites and other online information sources. Information such as change of major forms, links to the career center and/or cross-campus advising office, as well as listings of individual college advising offices with building location, office phone number

and departmental website addresses are commonly sought by students. Compiling and updating lists of contacts and programs for academic advisors may be an appropriate task for a campus advising network group of faculty and professional advisors.

Increase personal attention in the major change process. Academic advising administrators can adopt a strengths-based approach in training their academic advisors. One model is appreciative advising, which promotes a deeper personal relationship between advisors and students by valuing individuals and assisting them in optimizing their educational experiences (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Clyde identified his most valuable resource as an academic support coach in an office where all staff members have extensive training in appreciative advising. His comments capture what so many of the students described looking for, a more personalized major change process:

I think the main thing was the help from the [academic support] coach. It was really personal...They supported my decision. They made me feel not that I was failing at business, but that some people aren't meant for certain things and I could have more potential elsewhere. They did a really good job at making me feel not like a failure; they made me feel like I could actually succeed. And that's what I think was the most important resource in my transition. (Clyde)

Budget constraints may preclude adding additional advising professionals to reduce advising caseloads. One creative solution is to provide training for existing advisors to efficiently address students' concerns while maintaining a personal approach. Many of the students in the current study, all attending large universities, wanted a more personal experience and felt they did not deserve to be shuffled around or treated like a number. Training in strengths-based, appreciative education or a similar advising approach may alleviate an impersonal major perception simply by adopting student-centered advising.

Strategize major persistence. Selective major departments can develop programs and materials to retain students in selective majors. Allen and Robbins' (2008) study of nearly 50,000 third-year students suggested interest-major fit and first-year academic performance operated as separate factors to determine if a student stayed in their major. The findings of the current study support Allen and Robbins' assertion that students who chose majors aligned with their interests were more likely to persist in that major during their third year in college. Retention in major can benefit the institution and individual academic units by maintaining stable enrollments. Students who persist in a major reduce the risk of losing credits that count towards their degree as compared with students transferring degree programs.

Major retention is complicated, as students may have chosen their degree program based on family influence rather than personal interest. Students may also have limited information, as many majors are in academic disciplines that are unavailable at the high school level (Cuseo, 2003). Program-specific first-year seminars provide an ideal forum to communicate informal information and a realistic picture of life as a selective major; panel presentations led by older students in the major can serve to clearly communicate different ways that expectations are translated into the student experience. Another recommendation is to offer experiential learning experiences early in the curricula, providing an opportunity in the first few terms of enrollment for students to assess their interest and fit with the work that their major will prepare them for post-graduation. A first-year nursing course focused on job duties enabled Lexie to decide her personality was not a good match with for a nursing career. She made a program change before she accumulated a significant number of nursing course credits.

As students accumulate additional credits, a change in program decision has more complex implications. Almost one-third of participants in the study discussed time to degree concerns in considering whether to change majors and their new major choice. Institutions should provide resources such as online degree planning tools so students considering a change of major can see what a four-year graduation plan in other programs of interest may look like. Even with online tools, students will seek to use technology in conjunction with personal assistance from academic advisors; graduation planning software must be paired with good advising. For example, at the University of Kentucky, the undergraduate business program has a director of retention who focuses on working individually with students at risk of transferring out of the major. The director of retention works to resolve academic concerns with students who want to stay in business before students are in a situation where they are forced to make a program change.

Promoting awareness of related degree programs for students who are interested in or who are facing a major change could be used to supplement other information students may seek before making a decision. Departments can develop and improve information about related, alternative degree programs for students considering a change out of selective majors.

The University of the Southeast's undergraduate business program has an "Other Business-Related Majors" flyer available as a printed and electronic handout. At the University of the Deep South, the campus-wide advising office has partnered with academic advisors in business and nursing to develop materials outlining possible alternatives in consideration of curricula for those selective majors.

Centralize advising for students in major transition. Lexie’s comment that she “knew I had an advisor somewhere” illustrates the difficulty students may have in navigating a program change. Institutional leaders should consider formalizing responsibilities for existing offices or establish a campus-wide advising office as a place for students considering or forced into making a change of major.

The University of South Carolina established the Cross Campus Advising Office in January 2010 to help students transferring between majors. The staff assists these students in identifying new majors and helping them understand whether and how their previous coursework will count towards other majors. This office also serves students who come in on their own or are referred from academic advisors. The Cross Campus Advising Office has had a meteoric rise in the number of students advised by their advising staff. In the spring of 2010 they advised 43 students and that number increased to over 700 students in the spring of 2012 (Dawn Sizemore Traynor, personal communication, May 1, 2012). One key to the success of this office has been the intentional outreach and fostering of partnerships with other campus resources, including the career center, academic support, and college/department advising offices.

If a major redesign of resources is not possible, small changes can also make a difference. Campus advisors and advising administrators may have suggestions to better meet the needs of students considering or undergoing a change in program based on their personal experiences working with students in academic major transition.

Areas of Future Research

In consideration of the findings of the current study, as well as the limitations, the researcher has identified several areas for future inquiry. These areas include students dismissed from selective majors, sample variation, site selection, and longitudinal study.

Students in forced transition. The intention of the dissertation study originally proposed was to examine the experiences of students forced to transition out of selective majors. The obstacles for this graduate student researcher in attempts to identify and access those students became insurmountable given timeline constraints to complete a study. As a result, the original research project was modified to include students who voluntarily left or were forced out of their previous majors. The original project would be feasible for advisors already working in selective major departments as current employees would avoid the privacy and access obstacles that an outside researcher would encounter.

Site selection involving a different institutional type. Future research using a different institutional type may produce different results. Over three quarters of the participants at the two state flagship university sites were enrolled at their first-choice university (92%), and attributed their college choice to a desire to attend the best in-state university (81%), based on the institution's reputation and/or the reputation of the selective major. Site selection involving a different institutional type such as regional universities or small, private colleges may yield different results and would bridge a gap in the current literature about major-changing students.

Longitudinal Study. The current study design allowed a snapshot of students in their present place of their college career. A study design that followed participants

through their undergraduate experiences would enable collection of data about additional program changes, if any. Further, the benefit of previous transition experience might influence situation and how students cope with future program changes (Schlossberg & Kay, 2010). Whether students would draw upon institutional and personal resources similarly or differently in subsequent program changes could be examined in future research and would allow collection of long-term data, enabling university policy-makers to use additional data in making evidence-based decisions.

Sample variation. While the current study offers a macro perspective of the transition experience with participants from six majors, the sample could be limited in several ways in future studies. Other samples could include students from a single degree program, in-state and out-of-state students, and first-generation college students.

Students from one degree program. Limiting the sample to one major, such as business or nursing, would allow focus on specific program experiences, which may be similar to or different than the findings of the current study. Specific program transfer issues, such as concentration of courses in math or science and ease of applicability to new majors, may vary by individual selective major and could have broader applicability to specific degree programs at other institutions.

In-state versus out- of-state students. In the current study, only two of 26 participants were out-of-state students, precluding any extrapolation of differences between the two groups. In-state students may have additional resources as a result of their physical proximity to their families compared to students whose families live further away. As large, public universities adapt to dwindling state support and consider alternative revenue streams (Fischer, 2011; Olson, 2012), strategies to increase the

number of out-of-state students may also need to consider retention strategies which may involve different needs than those of in-state students.

First-generation college students. Future research is needed to investigate the ways that first-generation students navigate institutional processes, including a change of academic major. The representation of first-generation students in the current study was 30 percent, much higher than the general student body at either the University of the Deep South or the University of the Southeast (4.5% and 11%, respectively). Findings of the current study indicate that students' primary source of support is parents. More research is needed to investigate if parents' level of postsecondary education affects the extent to which students rely on their parents. The small sample size of eight students meeting a criterion as first-generation, low income students precluded making any generalizations. While the eight students shared similarities as well as differences in their transition experiences with their peers, future study is necessary to investigate the extent to which students qualifying for federal programs or similar institutional initiatives which may offer additional academic support services have similar transition experiences to those of undergraduate students who do not participate in such programs.

Summary and Conclusion

The 26 students in the study reflected on their transition as an experience in which they relied on both institutional and personal resources. All participants had thoughtful advice to students who may face a similar change. Shantelle's advice echoed concerns raised by other participants about the challenges of making a program change:

I've heard of some people saying that when they wanted to change their majors their family would be like no, because you would have to stay in college extra-long and all of this. But that's not the big deal. The big deal is do you want to stay and not be happy, or do you want to change and be happy? (Shantelle)

Previous research has indicated that nearly 75% of students change their major during college (Gordon, 2007). Apparently most students want to change, although it remains unclear whether they will be happy as a result. The dissertation study investigated the transition experiences of students previously enrolled in selective majors and the coping resources they used.

The findings suggest the critical role that support from others plays in students' transition experiences, but also highlights the combination of coping resources that students draw upon during the transition process. The current study provides a basis for future research centered on one of many transitions students may face during their undergraduate career and the challenges associated with streamlining their academic experience to graduate in a timely manner. As pressure continues to mount on institutions to provide and for students to earn a degree within financial, job-related, and timeframe constraints from external sources, academic advisors and students must strengthen partnerships so students can reach realistic and attainable academic goals by graduation.

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Appendix A: Undergraduate Student Enrollment at State Flagship Universities in the Southeast*

<u>Name of Institution</u>	<u>Undergraduate Enrollment Fall 2011**</u>
University of Alabama	26,234
University of Florida	32,598
University of Georgia	26,373
University of Kentucky	20,099
University of Mississippi	15,346
University of North Carolina	18,430
University of South Carolina	22,556
University of Tennessee	21,214
University of Virginia	15,762
West Virginia University	22,711

*The U.S. Census Bureau does not define the southeastern region. The Association of American Geographers defines the southeastern United States encompassing Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

** (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, IPEDS Data Center, 2013.)

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter



OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

March 15, 2012

Ms. Helen Halasz
College of Education
Education Leadership & Policies
Wardlaw
Columbia, SC 29208

Re: Pro00015985
Study Title: *Down but not out: Coping Resources of Selective Majors in Forced Transition*

FYI: University of South Carolina Assurance number: FWA 00000404 / IRB Registration number: 00000240

Dear Ms. Halasz:

In accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), the referenced study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on 3/15/2012. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, you must inform this office of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the USC Institutional Review Board. If you have questions, please contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas A. Coggins".

Thomas A. Coggins
Director

cc: Jennifer Bloom

University of South Carolina-Columbia, South Carolina – 803/777-7095 – Fax 803/576-5589

Appendix C: Sample Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH STUDY INVOLVING UNDERGRADUATE MAJOR CHANGING STUDENTS

You will be given a \$20 gift card for your time; the interview will take about 30 minutes. The research study focuses on the resources- people, offices, and/or information- students used in transitioning from one major to another. If you were in a major that had a GPA requirement of 2.6 or higher in Fall 2011 (or a previous semester) and now have a different major at [university], you are invited to participate. All responses will be anonymous.

If you can answer YES to the following questions, you are eligible for the study.

- Are you between 18 and 24 years old?
- Did you enroll at [university] as a first-year student and now are a 2nd, 3rd or 4th year student?
- Did you change your major in Fall 2011 or a previous term? Did your previous major require a minimum GPA of 2.6? Eligible majors include Business, Education, Nursing, and many others.
- Are you currently enrolled in a new major at [university]?

If you have questions or are willing to be interviewed, please contact me **before August 15.**

Thank you!

Helen Mulhern Halasz, Doctoral Student
College of Education, University of South Carolina
e-mail:
cell phone:

Appendix D: Sample Letter of Invitation

LETTER OF INVITATION FOR STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Project Title: Down but not out: Coping Resources of Selective Majors in Transition
Helen Mulhern Halasz, M. Ed., Principal Investigator

Introduction and Purpose

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Helen Mulhern Halasz, a current doctoral candidate in the College of Education at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as a requirement for my Ph.D. degree in Higher Education Administration and would like to invite you to participate.

The study investigates the experiences of undergraduate students at large, public universities like you who have left a selective major (degree program with minimum progression requirements like a 2.6 minimum GPA), such as Business, Education, or Nursing, among others. The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of students' experiences in dealing with the transition of leaving the selective major and enrolling in a new degree program at the same institution. This Letter of Invitation explains what you will be asked to do if you decide to participate in this study. Please read it carefully and feel free to ask any questions before you make a decision about participating.

Description of Study Procedures

As a participant in this study, you will be asked questions during a single interview about experiences related to your former major (Business, Education, Nursing, or others), selecting a new degree program, and your overall transition experience. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym for the purposes of the interview in order to protect your confidentiality. Your interview will be conducted by me on campus or by phone/Skype and be digitally recorded (with your permission). The interview will last approximately 30 minutes.

The researcher will maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of participants and data will only identify participants by their pseudonym. Your recorded responses will remain anonymous with no means to connect to your real identity. The data collected in this study will be used in my dissertation. Data will be shared with my faculty committee and potentially published after it is accepted by my committee.

Risks of Participation

There are no known risks associated with participating in this research except a slight risk of breach of confidentiality, which remains despite steps that will be taken to protect your anonymity. You may experience minor discomfort associated with answering interview questions related to this research. In order to minimize the risk of discomfort occurring, the research is being conducted at least two months after the event to provide some distance. In addition, the interview questions focus on the resources you used to manage the transition from one major to another. If you indicate to me that the transition experience is affecting your ability to function as

a student, you will be provided information and recommended to seek assistance from university student health center professionals who are clinically trained to assist students facing difficulties.

Benefits of Participation

Taking part in this study is not likely to benefit you personally. However, this research may help university faculty and staff understand the experiences of students who transition out of one major and select a new academic major. In addition, the data collected can be used to improve academic advising, programs, and other resources for future students forced to transition to a new major.

Costs

There will be no costs to you for participating in this study, other than minimal expenses for parking or transportation to attend the interview, if it is conducted in person.

Payments

You will receive a \$20 gift card for participating in this study to help reimburse you for your time and transportation expenses incurred as a result of the study. Reimbursement will be distributed in one payment (gift card for Barnes & Noble or Target) and mailed to the address you provide at the end of the interview.

Confidentiality of Records

You will choose a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview. This pseudonym will be used on project records, making all information anonymous, and no one other than the researcher will be able to link your information with your name. Your recorded responses will remain anonymous with no means to connect to your real identity. Study records/data will be stored in locked filing cabinets and password protected computer files at the University of South Carolina. In any sort of report we might publish or present at professional meetings, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify the university or a participant.

Contact Persons

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later or would like more information concerning this research, **you are encouraged** to contact Helen Mulhern Halasz by phone or e-mail. You may also contact my faculty adviser, Dr. Jennifer Bloom at the University of South Carolina by phone or e-mail. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Thomas Coggins, Director, Office of Research Compliance, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208, by phone, fax, or by e-mail.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary. You are free not to participate, not to answer questions, or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason, without negative consequences. In the event that you do withdraw from this study, the information you have already provided will be kept in a confidential manner. Participation is not related to regular course work at the university, and participation or withdrawal will have no impact on grades.

Understanding of participation

You agree that you have read (or have had read to you) the contents of this Letter of Invitation form and have been encouraged to ask questions. You have received answers to your questions. You are willing to participate in this study, although you have been told that you may withdraw at any time without negative consequences. You have received (or will receive) a copy of this form for your records and future reference.

Appendix E: Permission to Adapt Instrument for Interview Protocol

(E-mail communication)

Re: feasibility of adapting the Transition Guide for a qualitative doctoral study
Nancy Schlossberg [nancyks4@gmail.com]

To: HALASZ, HELEN
Saturday, June 11, 2011 7:10 AM
Dear Ms. Halasz:

I am pleased that my work on transitions is giving you the conceptual framework you need for your study. I have a suggestion. Why not order one copy of the guide and see if it would work for you. You can certainly develop your own questionnaire, but then it would not be the guide. I suggest either using the guide or just developing your own but calling it something else.

You can order one copy by contacting Stephanie Kay at Stephaniekay4@gmail.com She could be helpful as you think through what to do.

Best of luck to you,
nancy Schlossberg

On Jun 10, 2011, at 2:03 PM, HALASZ, HELEN wrote:
Dear Dr. Schlossberg,

I am a full-time, second year doctoral student at the University of South Carolina in the Higher Education Administration program and my dissertation study involves college students dismissed from highly selective majors such as business and engineering. The conceptual framework for my qualitative study is the 4 S System and will involve semi-structured interviews with 18 students at 3 large, public, flagship universities in the Southeast. This multi-campus study will explore how undergraduate students dismissed from highly selective majors describe their personal, institutional and other coping resources during the transition process of leaving the former major and selecting a new academic degree program/major; which of these resources students identify as most valuable in navigating the transition; and the support systems that are most influential in the decision to remain at their current institution.

In researching possible questions to include in the interview protocol, I found information on your website about the Transition Guide instrument developed by you and Stephanie Kay. From the information listed and sample questions, I am optimistic the instrument could be adapted for a semi-structured interview format with my college student sample. What is your opinion on adapting the Transition Guide for use in a qualitative dissertation study?

I am certain you have many professional commitments that keep you very busy, but I would appreciate any thoughts you might have about adapting the Transition Guide for a qualitative study.

Thank you in advance for your time. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by e-mail or by phone. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,
Helen Mulhern Halasz

Appendix F: Interview Protocol (Voluntary Major Change)*

SELECTIVE MAJORS STUDY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL* (voluntary change)

The purpose of this research study is to gather information from students like you who left a selective major and selected a new major at the university. I am particularly interested in the resources you relied upon during this change, including what help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the transition, and the actions you took to deal with this change. Please answer each question as it relates to your transition, starting with the decision to change your major, and selecting and enrolling in a new academic degree program. I will be asking questions about both the resources you used in the transition, and the resources you thought were most valuable- which may or may not be the same answers. As a reminder, all responses will be anonymous and confidential.

- *How did you find out about the study?*
- *What would you like your pseudonym to be, as all responses are anonymous?*
- **(Turn on recorder)** *Today is (date) and this is an interview with (pseudonym), a student at the University of _____.*
- *Have you had a chance to read the Informational Letter which gives the details of the research study? Do you have any questions that I can answer now?*
- *Do I have your permission to digitally record your interview today?*

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS (7 questions)

I'd like to start by asking you some background questions about you and your interest in the selective major.

- How long have you been a student here? Did you come to the University as a first-year student or did you transfer in from another institution?
- How old are you? How do identify yourself in re: race and ethnicity? Are you considered an in-state or an out-of-state student?
- Why did you choose to attend this university? Was it your first choice?
- Did you expect to change your major? Why or why not?
- When did you declare your selective major? How many semesters were you in the major?
- How did you decide on the selective major? What people or experiences, if any, influenced your decision to choose that particular major?
- Did you have any difficulties in courses required for the selective major? What assistance from the university, if any, did you seek to help you with difficulties? (meetings with academic advisers and/or instructors, peer leaders, etc.)

INITIAL REACTIONS TO LEAVING A SELECTIVE MAJOR

(6 questions)

We're going to shift gears now, focusing on when you decided to leave your previous major.

- What were the reasons why you decided to leave the selective major?
- What else was going on in your life when you left the selective major?
- How did you identify the choices you had for a new major? What people or information did you use, if any, in selecting your new major?

- What university offices, staff or faculty did you consult with during the transition process of leaving the selective major and selecting a new major?
- Who was the first person(s) you told after you decided to change your major? How did you tell them?
- Which resources would you say were **most valuable** during the time you were first dealing with leaving the selective major? Resources might include the help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the situation, and the actions you initially took to deal with the change of major.

DEALING WITH IMMEDIATE DECISIONS (6 questions)

These next few questions are about your decision to remain at this university and change your major, rather than transfer elsewhere.

- When you decided to leave the major, did you consider transferring to another university? Why or why not?
- If you did consider transferring elsewhere, did you plan to continue pursuing the same selective major at the new university?
- What resources, if any, did you use in making the decision to remain here rather than transfer elsewhere? (family, friends, university staff/faculty, information from the bulletin, departmental websites, etc.)
- Which resources would you say were **most valuable** during the time you were dealing with immediate decisions you had to make after leaving the selective major? Again, resources might include the help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the situation, and the actions you initially took to deal with the change of major.

MOVING THROUGH THE TRANSITION(4 questions)

I'd like to have you talk about the different resources you may have used during the transition of leaving a selective major and selecting and enrolling in a new major.

- Did you run into barriers or obstacles during the transition of leaving the previous major and choosing a new major? How did you navigate those barriers or obstacles?
- Who did you lean on for support during the transition process of leaving your previous major and enrolling in the new major? How did they support you during this time?
- What resources did the university offer you during the transition of leaving your previous major and selecting and enrolling in a new major? What university resources did you use?

WRAP UP QUESTIONS (4 questions)

- What, if anything, could the university have done differently to support you in the transition of leaving your previous major and selecting and enrolling in a new major? What, if anything, could your previous department/college have done differently to support you in the transition?
- What advice would you give to students who are leaving a selective major and are facing the same transition that you experienced?
- OVERALL, which resources would you say are **most valuable** during the transition of leaving a selective major and selecting and enrolling in a new major? Just to remind you, resources might include the help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the situation, and the actions you initially took to deal with the change.
- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your transition experience of leaving a selective major and selecting and enrolling in a new major that I didn't ask?

Thank you again for making time today to talk with me about your transition experience. As a small token of appreciation for your time, I have a gift card to give to you. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about my dissertation study or the information you provided.

Appendix G: Interview Protocol (Dismissed)*

The purpose of this research study is to gather information from students like you who were dismissed from a selective major while remaining in good standing at the university. I am particularly interested in the resources you relied upon during this change, including what help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the transition, and the actions you took to deal with this change. Please answer each question as it relates to your transition, starting with being dismissed from the selective major and enrolling in a new academic degree program.

BACKGROUND QUESTIONS (7 questions)

I'd like to start by asking you some background questions about you and your interest in the selective major.

- How long have you been a student here? Did you come to the University as a first-year student or did you transfer in from another institution?
- How old are you? Are you considered an in-state or an out-of-state student?
- Why did you choose to attend this university? Was it your first choice?
- When did you declare your major as [specific program name]? How many semesters were you in the major?
- How did you decide to major in [specific program name]? What people or experiences, if any, influenced your decision to choose [selective major]?
- What assistance from the university, if any, did you seek to help you with difficulties you were having in courses required for the selective major? (meetings with academic advisers and/or instructors, peer leaders, etc.)
- Did you expect to get dismissed from the major? Why or why not?

INITIAL REACTIONS TO BEING DISMISSED FROM THE MAJOR (6 questions)

We're going to shift gears now, focusing on when you found out you had to leave the selective major.

- What else was going on in your life when you were dismissed from the selective major?
- When did you get the news that you were dismissed?
- How did you find out you were dismissed from the major? (letter, phone call, e-mail, etc)
- What was your initial reaction to having to leave the selective major?
- Who was the first person(s) you told after you found out you were dismissed? How did you tell them?
- Which resources would you say were **most valuable** during the time you were first dealing with being dismissed from the selective major? Resources might include the help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the situation, and the actions you initially took to deal with the forced change.

DEALING WITH IMMEDIATE DECISIONS (6 questions)

These next few questions are about your decision to remain at this university and change your major, rather than transfer elsewhere.

- When you were notified that you had to leave [specific program name], did you consider transferring to another university? Why or why not?
- If you did consider transferring elsewhere, did you plan to continue pursuing the same selective major there?
- What resources, if any, did you use in making the decision to remain here rather than transfer elsewhere? (family, friends, university staff/faculty, information from the bulletin, departmental websites, etc.)

- Once you decided to stay, what university office, if any, did you contact first? Who did you meet with first? Were there other offices you went to after that first office?
- How did you identify the choices you had for a new major? What people or information did you use, if any, in selecting your new major?
- Which resources would you say were **most valuable** during the time you were dealing with immediate decisions you had to make after being dismissed from a selective major? Again, resources might include the help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the situation, and the actions you initially took to deal with the forced change.

MOVING THROUGH THE TRANSITION (4 questions)

I'd like to have you talk about the different resources you may have used during the transition of being dismissed and selecting and enrolling in a new major.

- Did you run into barriers or obstacles during the transition of leaving [specific program name] and choosing a new major? How did you navigate those barriers or obstacles?
- What resources did the university offer you during the transition of being dismissed from [specific program name] and selecting and enrolling in a new major? What university resources did you use?
- Who did you lean on for support during the transition process of being dismissed from [specific program name] to enrolling in your new major? How have they supported you during this time?
- Have you had to deal with a disappointing experience, in the past? If so, how did that previous experience help you deal with being dismissed from [specific program name] and having to enroll in a new major?

WRAP UP QUESTIONS (4 questions)

1. What, if anything, could the university have done differently to support you in the transition? What, if anything, could your previous college have done differently to support you in the transition?
- What advice would you give to students who are dismissed from a selective major and are facing the same transition that you experienced?
- OVERALL, which resources would you say are **most valuable** during the transition of being dismissed from a selective major and enrolling in a new major? Just to remind you, resources might include the help you had from others, your inner strength, how you viewed the situation, and the actions you initially took to deal with the forced change.
- Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your transition experience that I didn't ask?

Thank you again for making time today to talk with me about your transition experience. As a small token of appreciation for your time, I have a gift card to give to you. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about my dissertation study or the information you provided.

❖ (Interview protocol developed with respect to research questions and adapted from Kay & Schlossberg, 2010; Powers, 2010; Rumann, 2010)

Appendix H: Sample List of Codes for Support Variable

(Note: The codes listed below are intended to provide a representative sample of codes used in data analysis and do not include all the codes created and used to assess support or the other variables examined in the research study.)

support- 1st person told re major change
support- 1st person told_how
support- academic support center
support- career center
support- campus advising center
support- former first-year seminar instructor
support- lack of _from university office
support- lack of _ from selective major
support- new department
support- scholarship program advisor
support- self
support- tutoring/SI
support- what university could do differently
support- who leaned on
support-academic advisor
support_campus organization
support_faculty member
support_family
support_peers
support_previous department