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Adapting to Change: Transitional Experiences of Vertical Transfer Students

Anna K. Goldberg

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Abstract

Vertical transfer students, defined as those who transfer after graduating from a community college to a four-year university, are on the increase in the United States. While there are numerous studies on the logistical parts of transferring, there are fewer that have examined the adjustments and transitions that vertical transfer students face. This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews with vertical transfer students at a rural, mid-sized, Midwestern institution to understand these students' experiences. Another important area examined was how student affairs professionals can best assist vertical transfer students. Thematic material was analyzed through the lens of Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory. The results of the study suggests that vertical transfer students need specialized attention, strong communication from student affairs professionals, and less barriers when it comes to active involvement on-campus. The study concluded with a discussion on transitional barriers and meaningful ways student affairs professionals can assist with a successful transition.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all transfer students who are currently enrolled in 4-year universities, including my five thesis participants. You are resilient, strong, and brave. Transferring to a new institution can be scary and full of many unexpected changes. You are doing the best you can, especially during the coronavirus pandemic, which has brought about new challenges. I am confident that you will succeed in the midst of these challenges. Do not be afraid to ask for help in your journey, we all need support in navigating new transitions. I believe you will grow into an amazing person who will make a positive impact on the world.

Being a transfer student is no easy feat; you will learn so much along the way about yourself and your personal goals. It is okay to take a path less traveled and create your own road to success. Working hard will benefit you in the long-term as you pursue your bachelor's degree. Stay true to yourself and realize that it is okay to take a breath when you need it. Stay strong and keep going; you can do it!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Roberts, and my thesis committee members, Dr. Danessa Carter and Josh Norman. Dr. Roberts, thank you for being supportive of my thesis goals and encouraging me to keep writing, even when I felt unmotivated. I appreciate you keeping me on track throughout the thesis journey. Dr. Carter, thank you for listening to me when I was stressed; you reminded me that I am capable and can achieve my goals. Josh, thank you for opening my eyes to current issues facing transfer students today; your insights are appreciated. Thank you everyone, for believing in me and my ability to write a meaningful thesis.

To my parents, Susan and Mark, thank you for loving me unconditionally and believing that I can do anything I set my mind to. Your encouragement has kept me going throughout graduate school and my thesis writing process. I could not have done it without you both. To my brother, David, thank you for always being there when I needed to talk, even though we are physically far apart. I always enjoy our conversations about education and societal issues. To my Grandparents, Roy and Doris Ryan, thank you for all of the phone calls where you said you were proud of me. They mean so much to me, especially when times were challenging. Thank you for instilling a love of education in me through sharing your higher education journeys.

I would like to thank my partner, Jeremy Conry, for the support he has provided me throughout graduate school and with my thesis. Thank you for moving to Charleston with me and taking a chance on our relationship! I am so grateful for all of the talks we have had; you always told me that I could achieve my goals. Thank you for not letting me give up on my dreams. I am excited for our future together and look forward to lots of new adventures with you.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The community college sector of higher education is significant because it encompasses 46% of all United States undergraduates (Hyatt, 2019). Community colleges have students who are talented and ready to pursue a bachelor's degree (Glynn, 2019). Community colleges allow students to figure out their aspirations at a lower price point while living at home. Therefore, it is logical that college students attend community colleges at a substantially lower rate before transferring to 4-year universities. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2018), 1,383,125 transfer students were enrolled in 4-year universities as of Fall 2018. This population, known as vertical transfer students, come from 2-year to 4-year universities (Katsinas et al., 2019).

Evaluating the resources available to vertical transfer students is pertinent. Resources allow students to learn more about collegiate culture (Jabbar et al., 2019). Students who are 18-24 years old and come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds with strong academic mindsets were more likely to transfer and be successful (Wassmer et al., 2004). Another essential resource for vertical transfer students is residence life. About 20% of students at 4-year institutions are transfers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). A portion of these students may choose to live in residence halls on-campus. Living in residence halls can increase persistence and graduation rates (Astin, 1993; Blimling, 1989, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Wolfe, 1993). When universities employ strengths-based plans, then vertical transfer students are more empowered to be successful in their routine (Soria & Stubblefield, 2014). When student affairs practitioners are strengths-based, they can help vertical transfer students learn their strengths and how to cultivate them in order to reach their full potential (Lopez & Louis, 2009).

Two-year community college students are different from their peers who already are attending 4-year universities (Doyle, 2009; Reynolds & DesJardins, 2009). Whereas traditional college students may perform better academically and utilize family financial support (Cohen et al., 2014), transfer students may be older in age and thus financially independent from their parents and responsible for college costs (Wang, 2009). Programming and general educational support is often directed towards freshmen college students (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). College transfer students on the other hand may feel unsupported in social integration because the majority of programs are for traditional first-year students (Hu & Kuh, 2003).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to examine the transitions community college students face once they transfer to 4-year universities. This qualitative study explored the transitional experiences of community college students in order to improve student affairs services. In addition, the study identified variables that led to a successful transition at 4-year universities. As a result, the research questions guiding the study focused on the overall transition experience.

Given the large population of vertical transfer students, understanding their experiences through the transitions they face is essential for student affairs professionals. Vertical transfers are an essential part of the higher education sector in the United States (Taylor & Jain, 2017). This is critical because there are 4-year universities that do not adequately support transfer students. The ways that institutions can be unsupportive include inefficient partnerships with community colleges; this can lead to unsuccessful efforts in outreach and retention of vertical transfer students (Jain et al., 2016). When institutions do not assist students in their pre- and post-transfer process, then students are more likely to experience transfer shock (Taylor & Jain,

2017). Without systemic change to the higher education sector in the United States, student affairs professionals have no choice but to accept that the transfer process will be substandard.

Navigating new transitions is essential for students learning how to adjust to a new campus environment. An important component that can influence student success is feeling uncertainty about belonging in a specific collegiate environment (Walton & Cohen, 2007). “Fit” is an area to be considered in research (Denson & Bowman, 2015). Fit is about finding a sense of belonging and purpose at a collegiate institution. A major challenge for transfer students is dealing with self-doubt about their own personal success at their new institution (Schmertz & Carney, 2013). One statistic emphasizes this doubt: only 21% of students earned a bachelor’s degree within 5 years of transferring to a 4-year institution (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). If students are able to be supported at their community college and their new institution, then they will be better able to gain academic success and work towards their professional goals (Shaw, Spink & Newman, 2018).

In a qualitative study from Chin-Newman and Shaw (2013), transfer students struggled with feeling uncertain about their academic potential and were worried about changes in housing circumstances and childcare. These students were also unsure about their course credits transferring to their chosen institution. Even before students transfer to 4-year institutions, considering what community college student affairs professionals can accomplish is pertinent. If these professionals can actively address student concerns about stigma and transfer-related anxiety, then students will feel more prepared (Shaw, Spink & Newman, 2018). Such methods can include providing successful alumni testimonies and providing a safe space for vertical transfer students to share how they have overcome past struggles. However, a more in-depth analysis is needed to understand the transitional experiences of community college students.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this qualitative study on community college transfer students:

1. How do community college students transferring to 4-year universities experience the transition?
2. What variables influence a successful transition?
3. In what ways do student affairs professionals influence a successful transition?

Significance of the Study

Community colleges are an important sector of higher education institutions; student affairs professionals are working to improve retention rates at 4-year universities (Atkinson & Geiser, 2009). This means that understanding how to prepare students for the transfer process is something that student affairs professionals need to consider. Currently, there is a lack of research on transfer students and their personal adjustments related to the college experience (Tinto 1993; Wyner 2014). According to Braxton et al. (1995), “when students’ expectations and experiences are appropriately aligned and match the reality they encounter, students are more likely to be satisfied with their college experience and to persist to graduation” (p. 32). This is sufficient evidence that understanding the wants and needs of transfer students will greatly enhance their experience at 4-year institutions. This study seeks to aid student affairs professionals in finding ways to support vertical transfer students along with understanding the transitions students face when transferring to 4-year institutions.

Limitations and Delimitations

There are multiple limitations that could affect this study. First, there would be a limit in students to be interviewed since the researcher is focusing on a purposive sample. It is impossible to interview every community college transfer student. This sample also depends on

availability and convenience. Second, there is the limitation of transferability since this study will highlight students from a rural Midwestern institution. This study is limited in the fact that it will not highlight students from a contrasting urban environment. Third, the researcher will not be examining students who are lateral transfer students in this study. Lateral transfer students come from one 4-year university to another (Weiss et al., 2006). Fourth, this study will not focus on non-traditional students who are over 25. These individuals may be part of online programs and are working towards a Bachelor's degree in General Studies. Adult learners may also have children, along with other responsibilities. This study will focus on the perspective of community college students transferring to 4-year institutions primarily due to convenience.

With regard to delimitations, the researcher interviewed newly transferred students at a rural Midwestern university as a specific sample. These students were becoming acclimated to their new collegiate environment through a variety of transitions. These transitions included social, academic, housing, and cultural factors. Interviewing students who were currently enrolled in community college was not logical. Considering sample size is an important part of qualitative research. Sample size in qualitative inquiry can vary based on what the researcher is wanting to learn, as well as the purpose of the study (Patton, 2002). A sample of 2-3 men and 2-3 women was ideal for this study. This allowed me, as the researcher, to limit my sample.

Definition of Terms

These terms are important to consider in relation to community college transfer students. The terms described are sense of belonging, transfer shock, and vertical transfer student.

Sense of Belonging

The ways students feel supported or connected to campus and whether or not they feel like they matter and are important to their peers (Strayhorn, 2012).

Transfer Shock

This involves transfer students experiencing a temporary dip in grade point average (GPA) as a result of the shock in adjusting to a new collegiate environment (Hills, 1965).

Vertical Transfer Student

Students who transition from 2-year colleges to 4-year colleges or universities (Katsinas et al., 2019).

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

When students transfer to another college, their experience can be challenging. Transfer students include individuals who have attended community colleges and 4-year institutions. It is becoming more common for students to attend more than one institution (Shapiro et. al, 2016). Transfer students may choose different paths based on their life circumstances. Examples provided by Wickersham (2020) included vertical transfer students (2-year to 4-year university), lateral transfer students (going between 2- or 4-year colleges), co-enrollment (being enrolled at more than one college), and swirling (going back-and-forth between different institutions).

Transfer students may face other obligations that can interrupt their college experience. It is increasingly common for 2-year college students to encounter interrupted pathways (Cohen et al., 2014; Crosta, 2014). Interrupted pathways include stop-out which is withdrawing and reenrolling at a later time, dropout which is withdrawing and choosing not to come back, and job-out which involves withdrawing from school to enter the workforce. Two-year colleges often struggle with their open access where students can enroll and leave easily (Cohen et. al, 2014).

Community colleges provide opportunities to students who may not have considered or had access to higher education learning (Rosenbaum et al., 2006). Community college students are motivated by different factors in transferring to 4-year institutions. These factors include the payoff of earning a bachelor's degree, how easily credits transfer, career advancement and change, and life goals (Wickersham, 2020). They cope with changes in environment, the challenge of making new friends, and navigating campus resources (Kodama, 2002; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Another area that transfer students may struggle with is balancing family and work (Wang, 2009).

Administrators assume it is normal that transfer students will initially struggle in a new collegiate environment, but they will adapt as time passes (Daltry & Mehr, 2016). When transfer students are first accepted into college, they are required to attend orientation which should provide tools to assist in their transition. This topic is relevant because of the initial struggles transfer students face as well as the ongoing role it plays in their lives. Community college transfer students are learning how to become more independent, adjust to a new environment, and find ways to fit in at their new institution.

Transfer College Student Challenges

Challenges that transfer students face include academic rigor, finding a sense of belonging, transfer credit policies, and a lack of programming options for transfer students (Lester et al., 2013; Walker & Okpala, 2017; Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). When students are supported, they are better able to navigate bureaucratic demands in the transfer process (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Karp, 2011). When students have personal and academic goals in mind, then they are likely to achieve more at their institution (Hulleman, et al., 2010). Transfer students need to feel compelled in order to seek personal help from on-campus resources; awareness is not enough (Fong et al., 2018).

Academic engagement includes positive faculty connections, what transfer students are learning, as well as the challenges they face (Lester et al., 2013). In addition to their academic engagement, transfer students often deal with outside stressors such as family and work (Daltry & Mehr, 2016). Another aspect transfer students need to manage is the “fit” of their new institution. Do they feel like they belong, and can they adjust sufficiently? Adjusting to a particular academic environment can greatly overwhelm students along with the complicated transfer process (Handel & Williams, 2012). The way students deal with participation in

academics has an immediate correlation to finding the right fit. This factor also affects students' goals and graduation rates.

Furthermore, an essential area to consider is transfer students' sense of belonging during their transition to 4-year universities. Sense of belonging has an important influence on transfer students' success at their new institution. In a study by Walker and Okpala (2017), one of the transfer students interviewed explained their perspective:

Traditional students have a head start. They know the lingo that pertains and is used regarding their majors. As a transfer student, I find myself playing catch-up. A large portion of my classmates since my enrollment are well-advanced when it comes to the technological side of my major, journalism. I feel like an outsider. Though I will be graduating next year, I don't feel as if I am getting the full experience of what is offered. I feel somewhat cheated and left out (p. 39).

There is a relationship between service learning and sense of belonging (York & Fernandez, 2018). Receiving advice and connecting with faculty is an important part of this experience. Students feel a sense of belonging in the community when they participate in service-learning classes. This educational experience benefits students personally and academically.

However, there is a lack of support in programming at 4-year institutions made with transfer students in mind (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011). Reasons for lack of support include not having enough university funds and not understanding how to assist transfer students properly (Webster & Showers, 2011; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). College administrators wish to assist transfer students but are unsure what actions to take. One place to start for administrators is speaking with transfer students that can assist in creating programs and initiatives that are helpful

for the population (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). It can be difficult to create programs for transfer students because they come from diverse, nontraditional backgrounds. These backgrounds could include their age, family life, and need to work (Lester et al., 2013; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Transfer students need programs that are not always applicable to retention models used for first-year students (Monroe, 2006).

Transferring can be a difficult process if there is a lack of a partnership between community colleges and 4-year institutions. For example, community college students are likely to lose credits when transferring (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Statewide transfer policies would be one way to help students lose less credits. Having a general curriculum between institutions could also assist in this issue. Creating a central and standard process could make the transfer process easier for students (Bahr, 2013; Roksa & Keith, 2008). This way, it would be a smoother process for students to succeed academically and socially (Kisker, 2007).

Ways to combat these barriers include having peer and university mentors (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Tipton & Bender, 2006; Reyes, 2011). When transfer students are able to access university resources, they are more likely to be successful (Monroe, 2006). It can also be beneficial for transfer students to spend time with college faculty and staff who were previously transfer students (Walker & Okpala, 2017). When transfer students' needs are considered and they are able to easily access resources, then they will have a better experience.

Transfer Students' Engagement

Community colleges serve a diverse population of students as part of their mission (Shaw & Chin-Newman, 2017). They are located close to where students live; however, when students start at 4-year institutions, they may need to move or have a longer commute. This can greatly affect students and will require considerable changes in their life. These barriers to engagement

could include needing to carpool, assistance with childcare, and finding an apartment. Becoming a part of a new campus through student activities is an important part of a transfer student's journey. Involvement in higher education consists of energy output in relation to a student's academic experience (Astin, 1984). It is essential to encourage students to interact with their peers in order to create meaningful campus experiences (Schlossberg, 1989). Students will feel like they belong on-campus when they become involved in the campus community.

When transfer students become involved in diverse campus experiences, their motivation to do well in school will increase (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to Ghusson (2016), "a highly involved student is one who devotes considerable time and energy to studying, spends time on campus, participates in student life on campus, and has frequent interactions with faculty and peers" (p. 35). This type of student is willing to put in the hard work to succeed at a 4-year institution. When transfer students do not seek out resources, they are less likely to become engaged, and their experience will be negative. This is an important idea to keep in mind when discussing engagement as part of transfer students' experiences.

There is a lack of research on transfer students and their engagement on-campus in the literature (Ghusson, 2016). Social integration is an additional area to consider because adjusting to a new climate can be challenging for transfer students. Social integration is about interactions between students and faculty that occur outside of class (Tinto, 1993). When transfer students get to know others and become involved, they are more likely to feel a sense of belonging on campus (Ghusson, 2016).

Considering the social environment at community colleges is important (Hu & Kuh, 2003). The classroom is the primary location for social interactions at community colleges (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Community college transfer students are aware that there will be

social changes they will need to cope with (Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007). It is common for transfer students to experience self-doubt in navigating a new campus and seeking out friendships on-campus (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013). Transfer students may also struggle in a new academic culture at their new institutions (Handel & Williams, 2012). If transfer students are able to connect with their peers, then their sense of belonging will increase.

Social support for transfer students may come from advisors (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013; Lee, 2007), peers (Wang, 2009; Woosley & Johnson, 2006), and family members (Lester et al., 2013, Chin-Newman & Shaw 2013). Students who feel supported and have a sense of belonging are likely to have a higher level of physical well-being (Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005) and stronger self-esteem (Causey, Livingston, & High, 2015). Supported students tend to have a higher level of retention and GPA (Robbins et al., 2004). Emotional support provided to transfer students could be as simple as saying, “You can do it!”. Other possibilities include paying for books and properly learning how to register for classes (Shaw & Chin-Newman, 2017).

Housing for Transfer Students

There are two options for transfer students who are looking for housing: living on or off-campus. Where college students live is an essential part of their success (Strange & Banning, 2001). Living in residence halls can benefit students and assist in their academic performance (López Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Nicpon et al., 2006; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999). If the environment in a residence hall community is positive, then students will have a higher sense of belonging (McCluskey-Titus & Oliver, 2001). Students living on-campus develop psychosocially and tend to have positive views on the social opportunities available (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994; Pike, 1999; Pike & Kuh, 2005). However, if students have small rooms,

unfavorable studying locations, and overall poor living conditions, then they are more likely to live off-campus (Cleave, 1996; Li 2010). On the other hand, when students are able to have meaningful social interactions and opportunities for leadership, then they are more likely to stay on-campus.

One such opportunity is living-learning programs (LLPs) which allow students to be involved academically in a residence hall (Buell et al., 2017). Living-learning programs help engage students through reflective exercises and educational programming. These communities have proven benefits related to student success and persistence (Fink & Inkelas, 2015). Specifically, LLPs are a cohort within the same academic area such as business (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Students involved in LLPs tend to do well academically and are frequently engaged (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Another positive feature is that students are able to cultivate relationships with peers and faculty, leading to a higher sense of belonging (Schussler & Fierros, 2008; Wawrzynski & Jessup-Anger, 2010). LLPs may also apply to specific populations and have had positive results (Buell et al., 2017). One example includes first-generation students as they transition to the college experience (Inkelas et al., 2007). LLPs are beneficial opportunities to provide support to students and they encourage faculty collaboration (Buell et al., 2017).

Students are able to adjust socially when they live on-campus versus off-campus (López Turley & Wodtke, 2010; Nicpon et al., 2006; Terenzini et al., 1999). Obtaining housing may be challenging for all students (DeAngelo & Utter, 2015). Often, students are placed on a waitlist and forced to deal with the looming anxiety of finding a home. DeAngelo and Utter (2015) reported how students felt in upper-division residence halls. One student from their study described her feelings, “Everybody on my floor is pretty much like hobbits. Everybody stays in

their room” (p. 187). It is difficult for transfer students to make new friends when friend groups are already established.

Another area to examine includes 2-year community colleges offering housing for students. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2016), 28% of community colleges in the United States have on-campus housing as an option for students. In 2012-2015, there were 39 community colleges in America that prepared housing options for students. Turk and González Canché (2019) found that on-campus housing at community colleges promote socialization as they do at 4-year institutions. This is a valuable opportunity for community college students to experience housing in a low-cost environment and earn credits while preparing to transfer to 4-year institutions. Providing housing can assist students would normally commute a longer distance to school is beneficial. Housing at community colleges is often more focused in smaller towns rather than at urban institutions. This is a valuable option as community college students have an idea of living in residence halls before transferring to their chosen 4-year institutions.

Additionally, on-campus housing has a positive impact on students’ well-being (Wode 2018). Students were more likely to work out and eat more fruits and vegetables while living on-campus (Small et al., 2012). Students living on-campus also drank less alcohol than those who lived off-campus (Harford et al., 2002; Page & O’Hegarty, 2006). Students who lived off-campus had different priorities than those who lived in residence halls such as cooking independently, having their own space, living there during breaks, and living with roommates (Wode, 2018).

Residence life staff members are a useful resource for transfer students who are living on-campus. Being an outlet for information on academic advising and internships is essential for

any residence life team (Kranzow et al., 2015). Social belonging in residence life for transfer students should be a top priority for residence life professionals and resident assistants (RAs). Living on-campus allows for transfer students to participate in student organizations and attend events on a more regular basis (DeAngelo & Utter, 2015). Community college transfer students place their sense of belonging with their family and living community rather than their collegiate institution (Lester et al., 2013). This is important to understand when it comes to housing for vertical transfer students. Past literature has explained that community college transfer students living on campus become more involved at their new university and it leads to a higher sense of belonging (Chrystal et al., 2013; Flaga, 2006).

Transfer Student Academics

As a whole, academia is an important part of any transfer student's experience. Course learning, academic counseling, and study skills are important areas for transfer students to develop (Lannan et al., 2010). A term to consider is academic confidence. Academic confidence is about students feeling capable in their academic and social lives during college (Sander & Sanders, 2006). Students may have pre-conceived ideas about intelligence and learning based on their previous successful and unsuccessful experiences (Dweck, 2006; Gurin & Gurin, 1970). Through the transfer process, the strongest students are the ones to attend 4-year universities (Jenkins & Fink, 2016).

However, when students go in with the expectation of being unsuccessful, then they will feel unmotivated and will partake in complacent behaviors (Cox, 2009). On the other hand, performance-avoidance students are unreceptive to feedback and tend to avoid work, making them more anxious (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). These students do not like

to show their weaknesses in front of others and do not ask for help. They believe that when they are unsuccessful, it is because of their lack of innate talent.

For transfer students, three areas predict a high-grade point average (GPA). They are teaching, tutoring others, and maintaining a strong relationship with an academic advisor (Pargett, 2011; Pietras, 2010). Academic advising assists students in finding on-campus resources and allows them in feeling empowered to ask questions (Karp et al., 2008). Receiving positive encouragement will set up community college students for success in their transfer process (Lukszo & Hayes, 2019).

However, community colleges do not always prepare their students to succeed at four-year institutions. According to Xu et al. (2018), “many 4-year college faculty and administrators are still skeptical regarding the academic preparation of incoming community college transfer students” (p. 479). Negative advising experiences can greatly impact students as they navigate a new collegiate institution (Ma & Baum, 2016). On the other hand, “good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience” (Light, 2001, p. 81). Each four-year institution has their own style when it comes to academic advising. When students transfer to a university bigger in size, they find it difficult to find the right resources and easily access them. A transfer student in Allen et al.’s (2014) study explained the following:

I... have been told by advisors that I do not need certain classes to graduate – then later on discover that in fact I do...This is most certainly not the kind of conduct I would expect from a major university (p. 361).

Being able to access accurate information is essential for transfer students wanting to graduate on-time. Not meeting deadlines has become an issue for students. Understanding how to best advise transfer students will help them become more adjusted to campus and succeed in

their academic pursuits. Academic advising can assist in raising graduation rates (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; McClenney & Waiwaiole, 2005; Levitz, 2006). Academic advising can have a direct link with student success and can have a positive effect (Cuseo, 2002).

If students are unsure of the preparations they need to make in order to transfer, then they are dealing with information constraints. When transfer students decide they want to earn a bachelor's degree, then there are many decisions to be made. This process is made more difficult when students are not advised properly. Advising is something that needs to feel accessible in order for students to utilize it. Academic advising can lead students to a higher level of persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Being able to explain the advantages of participating in academic advising would greatly help students.

Faculty should consider the ways they provide feedback and allow transfer students to ask questions (Fauria & Fuller, 2015). When in-class experiences emphasize social engagement and interaction, then the experience will be positive (Deil-Amen, 2011). Teachers can help their students succeed by showing them how to properly take notes and study (Bickerstaff, et al., 2017). Student success courses are one way to help students develop their collegiate academic habits such as studying, time management, and knowing when to ask for help. Students are more likely to be successful when they can clearly see how their efforts have paid off. When there is consistent communication between faculty and students, the students are able to perform more effectively. When students are able to receive pertinent feedback on their coursework, then they are better able to problem solve (Bickerstaff et al., 2017).

However, if the feedback is not received in a helpful form, then it is detrimental to the student. Negative feedback on a student's potential success can be distressing for the student and could lead to a lower level of persistence. When students can utilize self-assessments, then they

will be able to understand how to adapt to collegiate academic expectations (Karp & Bork, 2012). Students need to understand that performance should be associated with effort rather than talent (Barragan & Cormier, 2013; Dweck, 2006). Students will feel more confident in taking on challenges and realizing that they can learn from them. Challenging students to learn and grow from their coursework is important for faculty members. When students are able to succeed in their classes, a sense of belonging is developed.

Another area to consider are Honors transfer students. In a study conducted at University of California, Davis, transfer students commented on the strengths of the Honors program (Thomas et al., 2019). Students favored the small and close learning environment, having faculty mentors, and becoming close with their cohort (Thomas et al., 2019). However, being part of an Honors college program can place undue pressure on transfer students. The term *honors* can feel elitist and overly competitive. Utilizing a cohort model fosters a sense of belonging in an honors program. Most transfer students are likely to feel insecure about being honor worthy. Academic challenges are inevitable for transfer students whether in an honors program or not. If faculty and staff can mentor them successfully, then students are more likely to have a higher GPA and get the most out of their academic experience.

Transfer Student Process

The transfer process itself can be difficult for students as they face complex decisions. They have to consider where they will live, what they will study, and how to get involved on-campus. Currently, the literature is primarily focused on community college students transferring to four-year institutions. Most college students come from two-year institutions to public four-year institutions (Glynn, 2019). Public universities enroll more students than private universities; these numbers are 305,730 versus 75,190. Affordability is often better at public

institutions and community colleges are more likely to have relationships with them, making the transfer process easier.

Transfer students need institutional support in order to succeed at 4-year institutions. These institutional supports include advising, financial assistance, resiliency and feeling connected to the university itself (Glynn, 2019). Offices useful to transfer students include Academic Advising, Financial Aid, Counseling Services, and Student Life. A university's technological resources, such as websites, are also an important area of support. Students want to quickly find the information they need (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2016). An example of this may include a virtual or in-person transfer center (Shaw & Chin-Newman, 2017). Institutions would be able to address frequently asked questions, provide information on resources for events, along with emotional and practical support. Having a specific interest in one academic area can also help students create goals and an identity. Eliminating pre-conceived notions about finances make students more open to transferring (Jabbar et al., 2019). Along with the idea of communication, creating easy-to-understand directions for transferring helps students who are in community college (Altstadt et al., 2014).

First Generation Transfer Students

Considering the needs of first-generation transfer students is pertinent to the review of the literature. First-Generation college students make up 20% of the collegiate population in the United States (Bowden et al., 2005; Saenz et al., 2007). Unfortunately, some sources refer to first-generation students as being invisible at universities (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). These students may be the first in their family to attend college. They cope with a variety of adjustment-related transitions. First-Generation students may not know how to properly prepare for college. A common barrier and support for First-Generation college students is money (Soria

et al., 2012). Students may struggle to pay for college but have the potential to earn scholarships. They may have to deal with student loan and credit card debt; this means that they have to work more frequently (Britt et al., 2015). Financial stress can lead to first-generation college students not succeeding academically and feeling disconnected from their campus (Britt et al., 2017). This population may struggle with time management and fitting into the college culture; these factors could lead them to withdrawing from their higher education institution (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Family has a direct correlation with persistence for first-generation college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation students often struggle with balancing their academic demands while dedicating time to their family (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). Their families may feel betrayed or left behind (House et al., 2020). When First-Generation college students attend college, it may cause tension among their families. These students are less likely to be available to attend to family members, leading to neglect. When First-Generation students feel guilty about their educational success, they have higher levels of depression and low self-esteem. They are more likely to hide their accomplishments than non-first-generation college students (Covarrubias et al., 2015). However, a study from Stephens et al. (2012), explained that 69% of the first-generation college population wanted to assist their families through attending college. This population is often motivated to have a meaningful life through their chosen career path (House et al., 2020).

This population also struggles with disconnection to campus life as they try to find purpose in their collegiate journey (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Students are less likely to become involved in the social aspect of being in college and not realize its significance to enjoying the experience (Lightweis, 2014). First-Generation students may have low self-esteem

going into college which has a direct influence on their adjustment (Aspelmeier et al., 2012).

There are support systems in place to help these students. One example is TRIO Student Support Services. According to Miller et al. (2011), TRIO Student Support Services serve “at least 165 first-generation, low-income, or disabled students, about 40 percent of whom are transfer students” (p. 25-26). These statistics indicate that this population is in need of additional mentoring and academic support as transfer students. First-Generation college students are a determined group that can succeed academically and socially, if they feel confident in themselves (House et al., 2020).

Transfer Students and Financial Aid

Financial aid is an important factor in a transfer student’s experience. In community colleges across America, more than 1 million community college students did not receive financial aid for which they may have been eligible (American Council on Education, 2006). As of 2007, the cost of attendance for college continues to rise. Tuition and fees go up by 5.6 percent each year at private universities and 7.1 percent each year at public universities. This can easily hinder community college students from transferring to four-year institutions. It can be a shock to students when their expenses increase because they are used to the lower price of community colleges.

When it comes to finances, transfer students may need to support themselves by working while in school (Fernandez & Fletcher, 2014). Community college students often work full-time jobs and use multiple credits to take care of student fees, tuition, and textbooks. Paying for school can be difficult when there is less time for one to work. Finances contribute to the stress that transfer students face. Taking out loans are seen as a last resort for students after utilizing merit-based scholarships and grants (Ziskin et al., 2014). Considering the needs of community

college students coming from low-income backgrounds is essential. For low-income families, paying for college can be a struggle because attending a public four-year university takes up 60 percent of their collective income versus 16 percent for middle-class families and 5 percent for high-class families (Gladieux, 2004). Income inequality prevents community college students from receiving further educations. Or, if they do pursue college, then their families may struggle due to this factor.

According to Hossler et al. (2009), selection bias can occur more often with loans as opposed to scholarships and grants. Relying on loans to pay for college can relate to support from family members, gender, and the consideration of future graduate schooling (Chudry et al., 2011). Students may be defined as independent however their families may be assisting them with education and cost of living to a certain extent (Fernandez & Fletcher, 2014).

Considering the breakdown of community college student demographics is important to examine. Most community college students are financially independent at 59 percent and 32.4 percent hold a full-time job while in school (Juszkiewicz, 2016). Other statistics to consider include 12.1 percent of community college students being labeled as traditional, 20 percent of students not considering federal financial aid, and 33 percent that choose not to utilize financial aid at all. The Federal Association for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) also plays a role in the finances of transfer students. This application allows students to apply for financial aid loans and Pell grants. Being able to support transfer students during a financial transition is essential to their success.

Transfer Students' Use of Online Resources

Transfer students find out information about higher education institutions through internet use. A term to consider is *Campus Capital*, meaning that they know enough information

about their institution to navigate it successfully (Shaw & Chin-Newman, 2017). Campus capital involves multiple factors such as class registration, credit articulation, and academic advising. Finding support in faculty, staff, and peers help students in locating essential campus resources. Even before coming to campus, considering pre-transfer efforts is essential. *Pre-transfer efforts* involve providing resources for transfer students before they start at their new collegiate institution (Jain et al., 2011).

However, when the information available to students is out-of-date and conflicting, then it can be challenging to navigate articulation agreements (Bailey et al., 2016). This could take place on an institution's website or social media. 11% of community college students utilize their college's website to learn about academic advising (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2018). Usability problems occur when community college students cannot find or interpret information online (Margolin et al., 2013). If colleges can be direct in what they post online rather than sending students to multiple sources, then the process would be more efficient. When students can easily access information online, then they can avoid related hurdles as part of the transfer experience (Schudde et al., 2020). The main information barriers include information that is not public, lacks detail, and is presented in an illogical fashion. Transfer students face a large burden in trying to interpret this information as part of their decision-making process.

As of Fall 2018, many college students were immersed in technology and are considered to be digital natives as part of their generation (Gutiérrez-Portlán et al., 2018; White & Le Cornu, 2011; Prensky, 2001). Students use technological devices daily and weekly (Swanson et al., 2018). Social media provides an opportunity for university employees to interact with transfer students and support them (Nehls & Smith, 2014). Social media can be a useful support system

for transfer students. Students use social media to find friendships, join student organizations, create study groups, and learn about campus events. According to Nehls and Smith (2014), “transfer students can create online communities that build networking and social capital and in turn improve their assimilation and persistence in college” (p. 395).

Social media plays an essential role for college students and greatly impacts the phenomenology of their college experience (Martinez Aleman & Wartman, 2008). Social media can help students make a decision about 4-year institutions (Rogers, 2018). Social media is not initially part of the process until students are interested in diving deeper into a university’s culture. This includes learning about the students and campus environment (Turner, 2017). Social media platforms serve different purposes; Facebook allows schools to talk with parents while Instagram and Snapchat are used to reach out to students (Turner, 2017). Positive engagement on social media stemmed from commenting on posts and posting on event pages (Junco, 2012). Certain posts have more engagement than others. Some examples are “getting to know one another” and “involvement & adjustment opportunities” (Nehls & Smith, 2014). Avoiding formality is something to consider when supporting students on social media. The way student affairs professionals interact with transfer students in this area is crucial.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

When examining the subject of transfer students, one student development theory provides valuable insights. In this section, I examined Schlossberg’s (2011) transition theory. When experiencing transitions, people experience the phases *moving in*, *moving through*, and *moving out*. Schlossberg examined the difficulties individuals face when transitioning to new environments. For college transfer students, they experience the first phases through transferring and becoming acclimated through coursework. According to Schlossberg (2011), “It is not the

transition per se that is critical, but how much it alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions. This explains why even desired transitions are upsetting" (p. 159). Transitions will cause people to react in a multitude of ways.

Schlossberg (2011) wrote about three transitions: anticipated, unanticipated and nonevent. Anticipated transitions may include important life milestones such as getting married, graduation, and starting a new career. Unanticipated transitions involve events that suddenly interrupt one's life. Examples include a new illness diagnosis, an unexpected promotion, and surgery. Nonevent transitions are about life milestones that do not eventuate. This may involve not following through a marriage or being unable to retire. Transitions involve beginnings and endings in one's day-to-day life and can be upsetting, even if they are wanted. Her theory features the 4S's. They are situation, self, supports, and strategies. The 4S's explain how students cope with tumultuous life events and the ways they can receive help. Students can examine their current situation as well as their resiliency, the people who support them and ways to handle transition-related stress.

Situation focuses on current circumstances and stressors that may come with a transition (Schlossberg, 2011). For example, moving to a new college town can be an overwhelming experience. The first "S", Self, focuses on how well someone can handle stressful transitions. How resilient a student is can affect whether or not they stay in college. This area focuses on whether one is optimistic and open to ambiguity in their life. People who accept responsibility for their own happiness will be more successful than those who blame others for their problems. Attitude is key in dealing with any type of transition.

Supports deal with people who are available for someone during a transition. Having supports greatly impacts one's self-esteem and well-being. Examples include parents, friends,

and significant others. Adjusting to a new transition without supports is more difficult and is likely to take longer. Strategies include seeing circumstances in a new way and learning how to reduce stressors in the internal and external environment. Strategies may involve activities such as exercise or journaling. Being able to use a variety of strategies will help one cope more effectively in a transition period.

Schlossberg became interested in transitions when she moved to another state for a job. Figuring out how to change the situation and shifting one's viewpoint can be beneficial strategies. Moving into a new college environment can be an unanticipated transition. Schlossberg's theory is consistent with any type of geographical and/or emotional transition. This theory has guided my thesis on transfer students' transitional experiences.

Summary

This chapter examined current and previous research on issues concerning transfer students. Transfer students are a growing population at American universities: it is essential that we understand their needs. Past and current literature is primarily focused on vertical transfer students. A critical component to a student's successful transition is support systems. Support systems include family, friends, significant others, faculty, and work associates. Living in a new environment and taking new classes may create additional concerns for transfer students. Advisors may sign students up for the wrong courses or not provide adequate support. It is easy for transfer students to become stressed because of the expectations placed on them. There are many areas of concern when it comes to the transfer student experience. Creating informative and helpful resources for transfer students is of utmost priority.

In addition to the issues mentioned above, different student populations need to be studied. These populations include first-generation students, non-traditional students, honors

students, and low-income students. Opportunities for transferring affect students in various ways depending on their circumstances. Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory focus on people transitioning to new environments and how they cope. The 4S's seek to understand how a difficult transition can be eased by different coping mechanisms. Transitions are an essential component of a transfer student's experience.

CHAPTER III

Methods

This study was conducted to examine the transitional experiences of 4-year college students after transferring from community colleges. Transitional experiences include involvement in student life, access to university resources, and academic rigor of a 4-year university setting. The researcher used a qualitative research method to interview community college students. There are two aspects of applicability in qualitative research (Krefting, 1991). Generalizing is less common in qualitative research and is more applicable to quantitative research. The naturalistic setting is where research takes place and therefore, each situation is different and cannot be generalized.

In place of the term reliability in this research study, the term *consistency* will be used. Quantitative research is based on one reality that stays the same while qualitative research has varied realities where change can take place (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Understanding these differences will help the researcher in conducting a consistent study. This chapter will discuss the design of the study, sample, research site, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and treatment of data.

Design of the Study

The literature review highlighted qualitative and quantitative studies on vertical transfer students and the transitions they experienced at their chosen 4-year universities. These studies have provided valuable information to the field of student affairs through in-depth interviews with vertical transfer students. Conducting individual interviews was a logical choice for this research study. The interview questions (Appendix A) were developed by the researcher to record participants' responses. Phenomenological studies discuss experiences related to a

particular phenomenon (Field & Morse, 1985). In this study, the phenomenological design was logical because the researcher investigated vertical transfer students and their personal experiences. It is also important to consider triangulation in a qualitative study. The synthesis of various points of view coming together will enhance research quality (Knafl & Breitmayer, 1989). This will allow for credible results and discussion in this study.

Participants

The researcher held interviews with transfer students living on and off-campus at a rural Midwestern university. The requirement of transferring from a community college was established in order to lead to consistent results. Transfer students participating in this study were in their first semester at this 4-year institution. This specification was created so that students would have a fresh view on their transitional experiences. Basic demographic data regarding the participants was collected in order to understand their educational and personal backgrounds. There were 5 female students and 1 non-binary student who participated in this study and are identified using pseudonyms:

Bridget was a White 22-year-old woman majoring in Elementary Education. Her community college is in the same local area as the 4-year institution she attends. She currently lives off-campus with family.

Layla was a 22-year-old Hispanic woman majoring in Sociology. Her community college is 3 and a half hours away from the 4-year institution she attends. She lives on-campus with suitemates in a residence hall designated for upperclassmen and transfer students.

Katie was a 20-year-old White woman majoring in Sociology. Her community college is 3 hours and 45 minutes away from the 4-year institution she attends. She lives adjacent to campus with a roommate in an apartment complex associated with the university.

Zoe was a 21-year-old White woman majoring in Digital Media. Her community college is 4 hours away from the 4-year institution she attends. She lives on-campus with suitemates in a residence hall designated for upperclassmen and transfer students.

Madison was a 20-year-old White woman majoring in Clinical Lab Science. Her community college is 1 and a half hours away from the 4-year institution she attends. She lives off-campus in an apartment with one roommate.

Taylor was unable to participate in this research study due to sudden illness.

Sample

The study sample included traditional 4-year college students who have transferred from 2-year institutions and are 18 and up in age. These students came from the same state as where the 4-year institution is located. Finding vertical transfer students was essential because the researcher was able to learn about the transitions they faced. It was also important to consider their experiences because of the coronavirus pandemic which led to their experience being different from previous expectations. This sample population was limited to participants at a mid-sized institution in the rural Midwest.

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants in this study. The researcher utilized on-campus resources and worked with Enrollment Management to find participants who fit the sample criteria. The researcher sought to interview participants of various genders, ethnicities, and backgrounds for this study. However, the researcher was unable to interview any male participants due to lack of response and availability. 138 potential participants were contacted through their university email to interview with the researcher. 46 men and 92 women were part of this email list. The researcher sent out an initial email to the entire list and sent two additional emails to potential male participants. That being said, this list was comprised of 33.3% men and

66.6% women. The participants' identities were protected using pseudonyms. With possible changes, flexibility was important to consider. The researcher made the effort to contact her thesis director if any changes arose. Being open to interviewing other or additional students if scheduling did not work out was pertinent in this case.

Research Site

The location of the study was at a mid-sized institution in the rural Midwest. According to U.S. News (2020), the 2019-2020 academic year included 7,526 students. The student body included 59% females and 41% males. 30% of the population lives on-campus while 70% lives off-campus. 34% of this institution's population includes first-generation students. Interviews were conducted one-on-one via the videoconferencing software Zoom due to the current pandemic. This institution was the best location for conducting research because there is a high population of vertical transfer students.

Instrumentation

Researcher

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the most important instrument. According to Creswell (2014), "Qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants" (p. 185). As the researcher, my personal experience had an influence on the data I examined and reported. I was a transfer student and that in turn, influenced the interview questions I created for this study. My experience as a transfer student led me to be invested in the participants and their answers when I conducted interviews. My potential biases had an effect on the analysis I conducted for this research study. Actively listening and being open-minded to my participants was helpful in learning how others'

experiences differ from mine. Understanding meaning in what the participants are saying about the issue is essential for a strong qualitative research study (Creswell, 2014).

Semi-structured Interviews

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted on Zoom with each selected participant. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour. Questions included, “tell me about your college journey?”, “in what ways have you become involved?”, “what has been challenging about the transfer process?” (see Appendix A). To learn more about specific transfer student experiences and challenges, conducting individual interviews provided well-rounded data. Qualitative research is about providing a holistic picture of the phenomenon at hand and should consider multiple points of view; this allows for generalization (Creswell, 2014).

Interviewing multiple individuals allowed for different areas of consideration in this research study. Another important area to consider was member checking. According to Creswell & Miller (2000), “With the lens focused on participants, the researchers systematically check the data and the narrative account” (p. 127). Validity is an important part of any research study and should be considered when conducting semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection

The participants received a message about recruitment for this study. The intent was to seek up to six participants. Interviews were conducted using the questions from Appendix A. Participants were required to sign an informed consent document (Appendix B). The interviews were scheduled, completed, and audio recorded. Transcripts were created for each participant by categorizing their data by a number and pseudonym developed by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Once completed, the interviews were transcribed and printed out. The data was coded. According to Saldana (2013), qualitative coding is, “most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). The researcher created word documents to keep track of the themes that arose from each participant’s interview. Being able to read through each interview 2 times was beneficial in understanding the participants’ personal experiences. This process was repeated for all transcripts. Identifying the themes from each transcript was essential in finding what areas were most essential to report. The theory that assisted in understanding the participants’ and their stories is Schlossberg’s (2011) transition theory. This theory deals with life transitions and is applicable to vertical transfer students and their experiences. In Schlossberg’s transition theory, areas include situation, self, support, and strategies. Understanding how transfer students face academic, housing, and personal transitions was essential for this research study.

Treatment of Data

Participant names were changed to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The researcher and thesis advisor were the only two individuals with access to the participants’ personal information. Transcripts only included the number and pseudonym assigned to each participant. The interview audio files are kept on the researcher’s flash drive, which are kept in a locked drawer for 3 years based on IRB protocol. The audio files will be deleted after that time. The interview field notes will also be kept in the locked drawer for 3 years. The interview field notes will be shredded after that time.

CHAPTER IV

Results

This chapter showcased the reflections of the vertical transfer experience obtained from semi-structured interviews focused on these research questions: 1) How do community colleges students transferring to 4-year universities experience the transition? 2) What variables influence a successful transition? and 3) In what ways do student affairs professionals influence a successful transition? Participants were asked a mix of questions about their collegiate transition to a new institution as well as questions about their pre-transfer experiences. Participants' responses were grouped based on themes that arose during the coding process. Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory was used as a lense in considering significant themes.

Experiencing the Transition

There were two key themes identified that fit within the first research question: Decision-Making and COVID-19. Participants were asked to share their transition experiences from community college to a 4-year institution. The responses were evaluated based on what the participants brought up during their interviews, compared and contrasted. Asking questions about their transitional experiences provided insight into whether the participants had a smooth or difficult transition into college. Participants had a mix of responses, all relating back to their unique backgrounds as community college students from different geographic areas.

Decision-Making

All five participants shared their experiences with decision-making in choosing this university. Participants considered where they wanted to transfer as they embarked on their continuing collegiate journey. Three out of five participants described their college transition as challenging while the remaining two described their transition as smooth. Bridget valued being

close to home, attending a teacher's college, and her family legacy. Bridget stated, "They're one of the best teacher's colleges around the area. I knew if I was going to a university, I would go here. I wanted to transfer here just because it's close to where I grew up. One of the reasons is that my Mom went here." Bridget initially thought she would not transfer after three years at community college and changed her major to Early Childhood Education. She wanted to earn a bachelor's degree to have viable teaching opportunities. Finances were another important area for Bridget, "Since I commute, I don't have to pay for housing. It's not as financially stressful since we don't have to take out loans. I'm also getting married before I graduate, so I don't want to have even more expenses."

Layla, on the other hand, knew she wanted to transfer right away because of COVID-19. Layla detailed her transition so far, "It was really rough to start over. I'm so overwhelmed. I don't have anybody to talk to about it. I don't have a ton of friends here." She valued being closer to home, finances, family legacy, location and size, along with enrolling in an Honors program. Layla's mother went to her current institution for Sociology, and Layla herself is currently a Sociology major. Her mother recommended it, and it helped Layla feel more familiar with the institution. Layla's experience in community college provided her with a strong foundation as she applied to two other public state schools. With finances, Layla explained its importance, "I was not going to pay a lot of money to be lost in a crowd at a university. I have scholarships and my family is helping me out." Layla also considered her future career as she looked into the Honors program, "I do want to get a master's degree so I want to be able to be prepared for that and having that extra work will help me prepare for that. I may keep going for a doctorate to be a professor."

Katie had always prepared for life at a four-year college. However, community college provided her extra time at home with family and she was able to figure out her academic goals after switching her major from Nursing to Sociology. She has had a smooth transition so far; Katie explains an important reason for this, “My roommate is my best friend, so we get along well. It’s almost like having a comfort blanket with me.” She initially was not considering her current institution because her sister is an alumna. However, after looking at two public institutions in-state and one public institution out-of-state, she realized that these colleges were too big and too expensive for her. Katie’s career considerations were an important part of her decision, “I want to get a PhD eventually. I don’t know if I want to do research or not, but I am considering it. I do like school and to get my PhD would be awesome.” Financially, Katie’s parents could help if needed, however, she identified as being financially independent, “I worked full-time throughout the semester and a half before I came here. I was able to save all that money up and so, financially, I’m pretty independent.”

Zoe had a challenging transition and a stressful experience as a whole. She felt rejected while in community college for an extra year, “My transition here felt like it was my only option. I was supposed to transfer last year because I graduated in 2019. It felt like [my community college] didn’t want me there, so it was stressful. I was limited to something that wasn’t my first choice.” In considering her college options, Zoe wanted to attend a Private, Christian university that was out-of-state. She knew other people who went there and appreciated their marketing efforts. Zoe’s Christian values are important to her and she discussed how she feels closed-off at her current institution, “The difference between a Christian college and here is being in a community where I can talk to you about my Christian views. You’re already aware of it. Here, it’s like you might be totally against it and will turn me away if I talk about it.” However, at her

current institution, she appreciates majoring in Digital Media. She explained her reasoning, “I like [this institution] because the digital media program involves web design, it also involves game development, [and] graphic design.”

Madison had a challenging transition in coming to her current institution. She felt overwhelmed during the first week of classes, “Nobody really knew what was going on. I was getting emails from professors like an hour before class.” She looked at a couple colleges of out-of-state but ultimately felt they were too far away from home. In-state, she was not able to fully tour another college due to COVID-19. Madison also considered finding a school where she could continue playing volleyball at the college level. She explained this situation, “There was a college that offered me to play for them down [South] and they did have my program down there, but it wasn’t accredited like it is here so it [didn’t] make sense for me.” She was interested in pursuing Clinical Lab Science as a major. With Madison’s family, her Dad’s experience as a transfer student has been helpful in her journey. Madison valued finding a less expensive college that was closer to home, similar to Bridget and Layla.

COVID-19

All five participants discussed their experiences surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants agreed that they had missed out on a typical college and on-campus experience because of COVID-19 and it greatly impacted their personal well-being. It was an unexpected transition as they navigated their expectations for college versus their current reality. COVID-19 has swept the nation and has had a negative impact on college students across America.

Bridget discussed how she is currently taking a mix of online and in-person classes due to COVID-19 and has cited it as a challenge. She had to take extra hygiene factors into consideration: wearing a mask, making sure surfaces are clean, and additional handwashing.

Bridget explained, “Before a class starts, I’ll go in and wipe off a table or wherever I’m going to sit at. You don’t know who else is on-campus and what they’ve touched or where they’ve been.” Bridget talked about the beginning of when she experienced the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-late March. The lack of social contact had a major impact on Bridget, “I got really depressed and stuff like that. You can’t really talk with anybody because you’re six feet away. I was thinking negative when COVID happened, since it’s so different.” Bridget felt like she missed out on attending open house and in-person orientation. She had a hard time at the start of the pandemic because she did not have much to keep her busy. Bridget cited the most difficult challenge as COVID-19 being so new and no one knew exactly how to handle this public health crisis.

Layla was taking a mix of in-person and asynchronous online classes. Layla discussed why she does not like asynchronous online classes, “You try to remember the material and recite it back. Asynchronous makes it really hard to have conversations and connect with students and teachers. I don’t think anyone really loves online learning over in-person.” Layla also had issues in being able to turn in her final transcripts [to this institution]. Thankfully, with the [state] Competency Agreement, she was able to transfer in as a junior, general education classes taken care of. Like the four other participants, Layla struggled with meeting people during the COVID-19 pandemic. She explained it this way, “You’re six feet away in a classroom and there’s not a lot of chit chat before class starts. I definitely have not met people during COVID. On a zoom meeting, you kind of sit there, wait for the meeting to start.”

Katie had a mix of in-person and asynchronous online classes. She explained her experience with classes, “I did a couple online classes at community college, so it’s not anything I wasn’t used to. It is a bit different because they’re higher-level classes and I would’ve liked to

have that in person experience.” Katie personally got COVID working as a CNA in an assisted living facility. She spoke about her experience getting COVID, “I don’t think I’m immune to COVID but I kind of felt better knowing I already got it and everything.” Katie has been challenged by the lack of socialization on-campus due to COVID-19. Katie provided more details, “With COVID going on, it’s a bit hard socially to meet new people. Having my [friend/roommate] around is great, since we’re not able to go to social events and go out and meet people in the same way.” She talked about how it was difficult to communicate with others when wearing masks. Katie’s orientation experience was negatively impacted by COVID-19. Katie said, “I felt kind of confused and nervous because I wasn’t able to come here and have everything explained to me.”

Before the start of the fall semester, Zoe had three classes in-person she would take. Now, only one of those classes was in-person. She was frustrated by this change, “Let’s just say if my decision for [this institution] was based on it being all online, I wasn’t going to come. I really, really don’t like online classes. I felt burned out before I started.” She found it difficult being in front of a computer screen with her sensitive eyes. Zoe needed to step away more often. She was frustrated with her virtual orientation and student involvement fair experiences. With orientation, Zoe explained more, “I didn’t like orientation because of COVID. I felt lost. It was pretty much just lectures online. I didn’t like the videos because you can’t skip ahead. I had to reload the page and restart the video; I was so close to the ending.” As for the student involvement fair, Zoe said, “No clubs showed up and talked about themselves. I don’t know if the clubs knew if it was going on. The only ones that actually had people there were the ones I already looked at.” On a positive note, Zoe appreciated that on-campus housing was offered during the midst of COVID-19.

Madison's classes were mostly online this semester aside from some lab-related classes. A struggle within Madison's family made her especially stressed. Her family was exposed to COVID-19 and she was not able to see them while they were quarantining. Madison explained this, "I was worried about them. I was thinking about the last possible time I could've been around them. That was kind of a rough weekend because I use my weekends to go home and recharge." It changed her routine and left her with trouble focusing on work. Madison cited the biggest challenge with COVID-19, "The hardest has been making new friends, considering I transferred here and I'm a junior. A lot of other juniors have been here since they were freshmen, so they already have their friends and that's been difficult." She explained that wearing masks made it more difficult to approach others. Madison also faced challenges in getting to know her professors. She lamented over not being around as many college students living off-campus. She felt that living in a residence hall on-campus would have provided an inclusive sense of community. Madison said this about COVID-19, "I feel like it's taken away from the college experience. That's the most trivial part of COVID."

Successful Transition Variables

There were multiple variables that could help transfer students succeed at their new four-year institution. There were three key themes identified that fit within the second research question: Self-Support, Interpersonal Support, and Housing and Community. Participants were asked about the specific areas that influenced their transition experiences and how they coped with challenges along the way. The responses were evaluated based on what the participants brought up during their interviews, compared and contrasted. Asking detailed questions about the variables they encountered, and their experiences provided insight into how they adjusted to a new routine and found their fit at university.

Self-Support

All 5 participants described their experiences with resiliency, well-being, and time management. Participants considered their advantages as transfer students and how they practiced self-care while enrolled in a 4-year university. There were a variety of methods that participants used to feel better in their own time. Self-care allows for transfer students to re-focus and find time for relaxation in the midst of a stressful transition.

Bridget's educational experience so far in Early Childhood Education has given her an advantage over her peers. She explained, "I had a lot of practicums and observation in classrooms. They haven't been in the classroom like I have. I feel like I've learned a little bit more." She is older in age and feels more mature than other traditional students. Bridget has Dyslexia, a learning disability. Bridget detailed her experience, "I flip words when I read, and I don't have the best reading abilities like other people do. It's harder to comprehend, I have to read out loud." Bridget coped with mental health struggles by walking around a local lake. Another important self-support for Bridget was her planner, "My best friend right now is my planner. My planner has helped me throughout this whole thing. I write down when I need to do everything. I circle it and cross it out and it's really what's helped me during COVID." She used her planner to keep track of homework, class dates, and upcoming events. Time management as a whole is an area Bridget was trying to improve upon.

Layla also prioritized time management when it came to self-support. She cited mental wellness as an important part of her life. Layla was mindful of it because she has Generalized Anxiety; it is something that she has dealt with since childhood. Layla described, "I've already gone through 2 years of college, so I know how to structure my time. I know how to manage my time properly so that I'm not super overwhelmed." Layla discussed a concept called the

“Wellness Wheel” that she learned while in community college, “There’s like 9 different parts of wellness. One of them is nutrition, one of them is exercise. Mental health is a huge thing.” She emphasized the importance of knowing your limits and reaching out to seek help. Layla noted a disconnect in the dining areas at the institution. She gave the example of having to choose between hash brown casserole and biscuits and gravy; neither of those being healthy food options.

Like the other participants, Katie valued time management in her routine. Katie explained, “I have a calendar where I write down basically all of my syllabus assignments. All the readings, and that helps me stay organized.” She also created a study spot in her apartment where she could focus. Katie initially started out at this institution without a job so she could have time to adjust to a new routine. Katie described this, “[Not having a job] gave me a bit of extra time to feel out how college classes would be and how heavy the assignment loads would be.” Katie has multiple hobbies that she pursued in her free time: reading books, playing video games, painting, and spending time with her roommate. Katie explained the social time she spends with her roommate, “We have specific shows we watch together. I always try to take a walk-through campus at the end of the night with my friend. The other day, we went to the park and we painted.” Figuring out how to balance free time and study time was important to Katie. Katie felt that she has become more resilient as a transfer student. She said, “I think it has made me more resilient because I’m finally on my own. It’s a bit different having to really plan what you’re spending and make a budget.” Katie was learning how to become more independent as she lives away from home.

Resiliency was an important part of Zoe’s college experience. At her community college, she worked in the Admissions office. She would answer commonly asked questions from

prospective students and provide them with essential resources. Zoe described her experience, “I think being a transfer helps me to understand more. It teaches me to have patience with different offices since working in one. When it comes to classes, I already know how to study. I don’t have to figure that out.” Zoe’s past experiences have helped her adjust to life at a four-year institution.

Madison used a planner to manage her time. She described, “I didn’t use my planner as much in the past as I did this year. I’m trying to keep things organized. That’s the biggest thing I’ve had to do – is to be more efficient and organized with my homework.” Madison has hobbies that kept her grounded: watching her favorite show on Disney Plus, reading, and playing video games on her Nintendo Switch. She explained this further, “[I like] things that don’t have to do with homework that I can do 15 minutes a day.” Madison felt more resilient as a transfer student as she has lived on her own. Madison described this, “I’ve had to be more independent and not rely on older adults to do things as much anymore. I think it has made me more resilient.”

Interpersonal Support

All five participants indicated that interpersonal support from family, friends, and significant others were essential to their success as transfer students. Participants recalled their experiences with encouraging communication and support. Parents assisted with college and living-related on finances depending on the student’s economic class. Parents answered questions about college if they have been as well.

For Bridget, the interpersonal supports most helpful to her were her mom, sister, and fiancé. Bridget’s mom was able to answer questions and helped with any college-related paperwork. Her mom is an elementary school teacher, which is the same profession that Bridget is pursuing. This extra support was beneficial to Bridget. Bridget’s fiancé is supportive, as she

explained, “My fiancé helps me, to make sure I study. He makes sure I’m getting good grades and if I need anything, he says just let me know. We talk about stuff and it’s kind of like he listens about school and stuff like that.” With these combined supports, Bridget felt better equipped to succeed while at her 4-year institution.

With Layla, her friends, family, and boyfriend have all been supportive in her transfer journey. Layla’s boyfriend is also a transfer student at a different institution in-state. He attends a college 1 hour away from where Layla attends college. She explained the significance of her boyfriend’s support, “My boyfriend and I transferred at the same time. We’re kind of going through the same thing. Since we can’t have any visitors [in the residence halls], I usually visit him.” With her friends and family, they provided encouragement as a whole.

For Katie, her mom, dad, and older sister have been her biggest supports. Her parents are there for financial support if she needs it. Her older sister lives nearby and is there for more local, in-person support. Katie discussed the support from her parents, “Whenever I have something important coming up, when we FaceTime, I usually tell them about big tasks I have. They texted me, told me good luck. Whenever I’m stressed out, my Mom, she’s always trying to calm me down.” Katie also discussed that having her parents feel proud of her accomplishments felt good. Katie talked about her roommate and best friend, “We support each other and motivate each other to study.” Katie was glad to know that these support systems are in place for whenever she wants to share her struggles and triumphs.

When it comes to personal supports, Zoe’s suitemates have been an important part of her transition. The two women were friends before they met Zoe and are upperclassmen. Zoe explained, “I was the first one in, and I was like Hi, Hello. We would get food together. They

helped answer questions if I had any.” Having that sense of comradery allowed Zoe to navigate the dining halls and learn more about the campus culture.

Madison’s interpersonal support comes from family, her boyfriend, and a classmate. With her family, Madison described them as being “really helpful”. They are open-minded and listened to what she had to say. Madison explained, “They’re just there for me. I couldn’t imagine having a family that isn’t supportive. That would make everything so much more challenging.” With her boyfriend, she appreciated how he would listen to her and encourage her whenever she felt down. As for her classmate, Madison appreciated having someone to study with at the library where they could talk about class.

Housing and Community

Two participants live off-campus, one lives in an on-campus apartment, and two participants live in a residence hall for upperclassmen. Participants described their experiences in living on-campus and off-campus, along with their pros and cons. Housing plays an important role in the transfer student journey whether on or off-campus. All participants live with roommates or suitemates and shared that aspect of their experiences.

Bridget lives off-campus and is at home with parents and brother. She is near extended family and has found it be helpful in terms of support. For Bridget, visiting her grandma was a source of comfort, “Sometimes, if I need a little break, I’ll go visit my grandma for a bit and ask her if she needs any help or anything like that. It gets my mind off school for a bit.” She appreciates living at home and being at her current institution because it is close in proximity. Bridget talked about how much larger her current institution is compared to her community college. Bridget discussed how living nearby has provided an advantage, “I’ve already been [to this institution] a lot, like I pretty much knew where almost everything was at. I knew where

most of my regular buildings were at [on-campus].” As mentioned earlier, Bridget appreciated being able to save money through not living in an on-campus residence hall or apartment.

Layla chose to live in a residence hall on-campus dedicated to upperclassmen. She explained her reasoning, “[This residence hall] was my clear first choice. I know I didn’t really want an apartment. I didn’t want to cook all the time. I liked the idea of having suitemates, not roommates. [I liked] being able to have a couple people that I lived with, but not necessarily in my space.” She appreciated the solidarity of meeting other transfer students who were new to this residence hall and campus as a whole. This was true when she got food in the dining hall with her suitemates. Layla and her suitemates worked together to learn more about the campus. Layla appreciated how Hall Council went over the rules and policies because of transfer students being a large population. Layla enjoyed having autonomy to make her own decisions as an adult. With living in this college town, she explained her transition, “It was a bit of a transition as far as not being able to go to Target right down the street. It’s hard to have nothing – like I need this specific thing from this specific place, and I’ll order it online instead of going there.” The area she came from is a few hours away and had more shops and restaurants to choose from. Layla’s experience was different as she came from a further geographic distance.

Katie chose to live in an on-campus apartment rather than a residence hall. She explained her reasoning this way, “I didn’t want to be in the dorms or anything because I have the financial ability to afford an apartment and I wanted that space so that led me choose [this apartment]. I [knew] I would have a lot more freedom in what I would be able to do.” She appreciated having extra space and having different places to study in her apartment. Katie is happy to live with her best friend because of the connection they share. They cook dinner and eat together on most nights. Katie reflected on what it might be like if she lived with a stranger, “It would be a whole

lot different if I had someone else because you kind of have to schedule the time, maybe using the bathroom, using the kitchen, and watching TV. It would feel less like home if I didn't have someone that I knew with me." The idea of home is important to consider as transfer students adjust to a new living situation. Katie appreciates living in a new area because she was "meeting the same people for 20 years and so, even though it's a small town, everything is different and it's nice". A change of pace is sometimes needed for transfer students looking to start over.

Zoe lives in a residence hall on-campus dedicated to upperclassmen. Zoe explained why she wanted to live on-campus, "I was looking forward to the university experience. Which is why I wanted to get a dorm. Just so I could experience what it would like to live on-campus and live with people, like my age or whatever." Another part of this decision was Zoe being an introvert and wanting to become more involved as a transfer student. She described, "I'm an introvert. I like being at the party, but I don't have to engaged in the party." She has not been to any hall meetings but has enjoyed communicating with other residents on a community white board. With being on-campus, she has taken the time to walk around and go in buildings to learn more about the surrounding environment.

Madison lives in an off-campus apartment with her roommate. She has lived away from home, so it was less of a transition for her. Madison and her roommate met at community college and decided to live together. She happened to know someone from her hometown who was renting and decided that way. Madison appreciates living off-campus because there were less restrictions than living in an on-campus residence hall due to COVID-19. She is able to save money because of low rent cost. However, she talked about the potential advantages of living on-campus, "I feel like more isolated out here. If you're on-campus, there's other people living around you that are also students. But here, the people living around me are not students, that's

been different. Being around people that are like you, in the aspect of being a student, also, like you came from a different college too, that's great." She appreciates having a kitchen, her own bedroom, and a living room in a two-bedroom setup. That freedom makes living off-campus worth it for Madison.

Role of Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals play an important role in transfer students' transitions. They can make or break their collegiate experience through their influence. There were two variables identified within the third research question: Transfer Guidance and Programming along with Collegiate Mentorship. In general, participants felt that more transfer guidance and programming was geared towards freshmen students. Collegiate mentorship was impactful and made a difference in each participants' experience.

Transfer Guidance and Programming

All five participants discussed their experiences with guidance and programming. They spoke about a mix of negative and positive experiences within this area. These areas included areas of involvement, orientation, student life, and advising. Participants talked about how they felt ignored compared to incoming freshmen students and how they received more support. They also discussed how administrators can be supportive toward transfer students and how to help in their transition.

Bridget's advice to student affairs professionals was this, "They need to help transfer students and encourage them to ask for help. Staff should be attentive to transfer students as a whole." She also emphasized that transfer students themselves should talk to staff about their questions and concerns. That way, they are not alone in the transfer process. Bridget's reasoning was that student affairs professionals are not mind readers and may be unaware of adjustment-

related problems. One area that Bridget struggled with when she transferred was the main technology portal D2L, used to host classes. At her previous institution, she used Canvas for classes. She explained her struggle, “One of my challenges with D2L is I couldn’t find out where the content of the course was. I couldn’t find out where it was initially.” Having technological portals that are challenging to figure out can be unhelpful to new students. More guidance is needed in teaching transfer students how to properly use D2L for their classes.

Bridget did her orientation online because of COVID-19. She did it over the phone with her academic advisor in a 20-minute conversation. She expressed disappointment over the format, “I didn’t have the orientation experience like everyone else has when they transfer [to this institution]. I’ve heard from other friends, who went [to this institution] that the orientation was from 8 am – 3 pm. It wasn’t much you know. It was very different.” She faced a difficult process in submitting a photo for her student identification card. Bridget said it would have been much easier if she could have gone in-person to take the photo and pick up the card. Bridget described, “I didn’t get mine until I picked up books in August because no one could be on-campus and we couldn’t get our photographs taken. It was just a harder process.” Bridget lamented over her experience being “not the orientation that I heard about”.

Layla emphasized the need for transfer students to be supported like Bridget. This is true especially with faculty, as Layla discussed in her interview. She emphasized this idea, “I can tell when people want to help me rather than it being like a job to help me. I’m actually interested in having a conversation with you.” This is important for student affairs professionals to keep in mind as they help transfer students. She also discussed how email communication should be, “For me, getting me to reach out to you is basically like, you’re going to treat me like a human and talk to me and say if you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to [reach out].” Layla did

not appreciate professors who requested short emails that were specific and to the point. She likes being able to communicate more freely whether it relates to class or not. With emails received over the summer, Layla had difficulties in figuring which email was which. She said it was overwhelming as a whole. Engagement with transfer students is of particular importance.

Layla also noted barriers she faced as a transfer student with the Honors program and University Board, a registered student organization. Layla explained, “If I want to graduate in two years, I have to start in the Honors program. It’s been really frustrating to get into that because you need a set GPA first semester [to] get into it. We have to find an honors advisor.” Layla values getting to know her professors and building relationships with them. With the honors program, she was able to gain probationary enrollment, however, she had to reach out directly for this to happen. She graduated with a 4.0 from her community college. With University Board, she vied for a position as a vice-chair. However, she was unable to run for that role. Layla described, “Since I wasn’t a coordinator for the full semester, I couldn’t get that position. There’s like little things, policies like that are hard to get into leadership positions as a transfer student. I had the experience and skills for the vice-chair position. But, since I had only been there for just under a semester, I was not qualified for it.” Barriers like this eliminate opportunities for transfer students to become involved on-campus and leave them feeling left out and disappointed.

Katie recommended that advisors focus on helping transfer students with the logistics of transferring itself. Katie’s advisor made her feel welcome and double-checked to make sure everything was in order. She emphasized that transfer students may still need help adjusting, even if they are older students. Katie explained what was most helpful, “Just answering questions, reassuring [students] that they’re there for you. I feel like maybe [transfer students]

are thought of as being older and more capable which they are but also it's nice to have help.” Katie also recommended hosting events specifically for transfer students, not freshmen. Katie described her idea, “They have a lot of activities for freshmen, but for transfer students, we might need some of those same activities.” She suggested having a meet and greet on zoom and to have more events in-person post pandemic. An area that Katie struggled with, like Bridget, were navigating different online portals for this institution. Katie explained her experience, “I think the website is kind of weird. They use like three different portals. D2L is different from Canvas, which I think is a more efficient program. There's so many pages, it's not as concise as it could be.” Like Bridget, Katie agreed that Canvas was more efficient than D2L.

Zoe focused on how administrators could do better with orientation. She recommended giving each person a schedule for orientation specifically designed for them. Zoe faced confusion during orientation, “I feel like most of the orientation was directed towards freshmen. I didn't know what I was allowed to go to or not.” Zoe's conclusion echoed that of the other participants when it comes to events being more freshmen focused. In her interview, Zoe discussed the advising process and how academic advisors should approach working with transfer students. Zoe said, “It would be helpful for advisors to talk to their student rather than the parent they have with them. We were together but it felt like they were giving me eye contact, but it sounded like they were [directing] all the words to my parents.” She described signing up for classes alone for the first time as “scary”. This emphasizes why transfer students need additional academic advising support.

Madison recommended that administrators, staff, and faculty be “understanding and communicative”. Madison wanted student affairs professionals to recognize that “we may come from a place that's done things differently.” She also discussed how programming is vital for

transfer students. She explained why, “You could see they’re a transfer student also. I could be friends with them, they’re new [here]. [It’s] a way to meet the professors and network.”

Programming should involve faculty, as well as staff, based on Madison’s insights. She also talked about the idea of social media communication. Madison used Snapchat to communicate with her classmates to ask about homework or anything that came up in class. She explained how the user can send messages in a picture or written format. They are able to collaborate and figure out how they did on certain lab assignments. Madison felt more comfortable messaging classmates later at night than emailing her professors. Social media can be an important tool in student learning at the college level.

Collegiate Mentorship

All five participants described their experiences with their collegiate mentors, both positive and negative. Having positive collegiate mentors helped students in their transfer process while negative collegiate mentors hindered them. These individuals included graduate assistants, advisors, directors, and professors.

For Bridget, her collegiate mentors primarily came from her community college. These mentors included her academic advisor and TRIO advisor. They helped create a more seamless pathway for Bridget to succeed at her new four-year institution. She found it most helpful to ask questions and seek counseling for transition issues. Bridget’s academic advisor encouraged her to visit the campus she is now attending to learn more. This advisor prepared Bridget for the challenges in transferring and was not afraid to be honest about the realities. Networking and finding collegiate mentors was important for Bridget as she participated in the Student Education Association (SEA). Bridget is seeking to become a teacher and wants to meet professionals and

other students interested in elementary education. Bridget has benefited from the knowledge of collegiate mentors in her transfer experience.

Layla has found collegiate mentors at her current four-year institution. She appreciates two of her current professors in Sociology. Layla explained, “I love them, they are just so passionate about what they’re talking about. It just kind of reinforces what I’m doing and thinking.” Having support from professors is important to Layla’s academic goals. There are two graduate assistants who have been collegiate mentors to Layla: a GA in her residence hall and a GA for University Board, an on-campus event planning organization. Layla explained the support from the housing GA, “They have really helped me and supported [me], they’re very supportive and nice. I know that’s kind of a lame way of saying it, but I really appreciate them.” As for the University Board GA, she helped Layla learn the campus layout and was around to answer questions. Layla has found support in career advising and attending job fairs. Her career advisor has assisted in helping her find internship and job opportunities.

Katie’s most impactful collegiate mentor has been her sociology faculty advisor. Another helpful mentor was a professional staff member in housing. Katie also cited her professors as being “very understanding of everything”. The housing mentor helped Katie learn about different housing options on-campus and answered her questions. Katie was able to learn about her current apartment virtually, due to the current pandemic. Katie described how her faculty advisor has been beneficial, “Whenever I have questions about classes, he’s very kind and emails me back. You know, questions about grad school and things like that. He suggested a couple different minors that I might like. He really welcomed me and double-checked to make sure I had everything in order”. Networking is also important to Katie as she considers different career options within the field of sociology.

Zoe's advisor made a positive impact on her after a negative experience with a different advisor. She also encountered a Band Director at her current institution and appreciated his friendliness. Zoe wanted to enjoy the experience of college advising but she has previously felt rushed during the process, making her feel stressed. Zoe explained the benefits of advising, "My advisor walked me through what I would need to do. [She told me about] opportunities on-campus and she helped me to get more details. I could visualize it more for myself." Being able to imagine what college will be like is important for transfer students. As for networking, Zoe was uninterested but realized the importance of making connections.

Madison has had a mix of mentors from her community college as well as her current institution. At her community college, Madison's Phi Theta Kappa advisor was a positive influence. Madison described, "She was such a sweetheart and always very helpful. I think she set up some of my better learning habits. She's a great support system overall." Another helpful mentor was Madison's biology teacher. He was willing to go the extra mile to answer Madison's questions even if it was not related to the academic material. Her teacher was prompt in email communication, which has greatly helped Madison. Madison's academic mentors are important as she pursues a clinical experience with her science major. She has encountered difficulties with creating connections with her current professors due to COVID-19. Madison explained, "I wouldn't want to ask a professor that I've had only online send a letter of recommendation for me. I feel like neither of us know each other that well. Trying to find people that would write a letter of recommendation for me is a bit tough." Transfer students are facing more barriers than ever before because of COVID-19.

Summary

Themes focusing on adjustment and transition were identified within the participants' experiences. There were a mix of themes, some were repeated more than others. The themes of COVID-19 and support were acknowledged by participants as being impactful on their transfer experience. All participants are resilient as a whole, whether their transition was smooth, challenging, or a mix of both. The transfer experience is complex and multifaceted as students are deciding on their career path and how to navigate a new campus. The next chapter will examine the results and their impact on the transfer student population, community college, the four-year institution, as well as student affairs professionals.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This chapter will examine the results of the study as well as the impact of personal and academic transitions on vertical transfer students. This study's goal was to discern how community college students experience transitional adjustments in their first semester at a 4-year institution. Facets of this study included how student affairs professionals influenced a successful transition and understanding how to meet transfer students' needs in a higher education setting. Transfer students are a multi-faceted population and understanding their development as students is essential for educators. This study takes an in-depth look at the successes and challenges that transfer students face while in a new collegiate environment.

Adjustment Themes as Part of the Transfer Student Experience

The themes of this qualitative study were considered through the lens of Schlossberg's (2011) transition theory. Schlossberg's theory includes the 4 "S"'s: Situation, Self, Support, and Strategies. All participants dealt with adjusting to a new environment, as posited by Schlossberg (2011). As participants shared their experiences about the transfer process and the adjustments they faced, each story was unique. COVID-19 became a major, overlying theme due to the current global pandemic. Participants' viewpoints were vastly different than if this study had been conducted pre-pandemic. Support was another vastly important theme as students talked about their family, significant others, friends, and roommates. Each individual had to make challenging decisions about college and time management. All participants had one thing in common: resiliency; they were able to get back up and keep going even when times were tough.

Situation

Four out of five participants viewed transferring to a four-year institution as an anticipated transition after graduating from community college. Schlossberg (2011) defined the term anticipated transitions as “major life events we usually expect” (p. 159). On the other hand, all participants dealt with the unanticipated transition of COVID-19, which had a large impact on their housing and community experiences. Unanticipated transitions are “the often-disruptive events that occur unexpectedly” (Schlossberg 2011, p. 159). The situation of these transfer students in their first semester at a new institution was not what one would think of as “normal”.

When it came to COVID-19, there was a collective understanding that all participants’ personal well-being had been negatively affected. The participants thought they had missed out on the typical social and fun campus and college experience. At the time of the study, the participants were enrolled in a mix of online and in-person classes during their first semester. All participants agreed that asynchronous classes made it difficult to stay educationally engaged. COVID-19 had a negative impact on the participants’ academic confidence as they navigated new classes in a different format. Academic confidence is about college students thinking like they can take charge in their academic and social lives (Sander & Sanders, 2006). Socially, it was hard for each participant to find friends on-campus. Social distancing was the new norm and less on-campus, in-person events were being held. The participants already experienced self-doubt in seeking out on-campus friendships (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013) but COVID-19 made the situation even worse. These students felt a lack of control over their situation and how the university directly handled COVID-19 issues; it caused them to lose focus at times.

Housing and community are important themes to consider, whether on-campus or off-campus. Living on-campus allows for psychosocial development and a more positive outlook on

college life (Terenzini & Pascarella, 1994; Pike, 1999; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Two participants lived in a residence hall dedicated to upperclassmen, one resided in a university-associated apartment complex, one lived at home with her family, and one lived in an off-campus apartment with a roommate. Each participant was satisfied with their living arrangements for different reasons. Living off-campus independent of family provided more freedoms and a lower cost of living. Living with family off-campus allowed one participant to commute and save up money for her wedding. For the students who chose to live on-campus, they were limited in terms of involvement: they could spend time with their suitemates and roommates and partake in online zoom events for their residence hall. These students were not able to have the full residence hall experience of being able to meet their floor, spend time with their resident assistant, and spend time in residential spaces with new friends. Participants sought a home away from home away during their remaining two years of college, however, it did not fully meet their expectations.

Self

Decision-making is an essential part of the transfer process; this was the case for all five participants as they considered where to continue their education. The payoff of a bachelor's degree, how easily credits transfer, career advancement, and life goals were essential considerations for the participants (Wickersham, 2020). The participants thought about location, proximity to family, major/program area, public versus private, and cost. Each had their own specific reasons as to why they chose to attend their current institution. Three out of five participants found the transfer process to be challenging as they made important decisions. In turn, making these decisions helped all five participants become more resilient in their educational endeavors.

The theme that echoed most frequently was the idea of staying in-state and living within a reasonable distance from family. Staying in-state allowed participants to save money, whether it was with commuting or with the overall cost of their education. Considering finances was important for participants because the cost of attendance for college continues to rise. Tuition and fees increase by 7.1 percent each year at public universities (American Council on Education, 2006). Also, family influence was prevalent because of some being alumni of the students' current institution. These family members were supportive as their students looked at a variety of institutions. Having family members nearby also allowed for students to feel more supported in their transfer journey. Being near family was also important for these participants because of the current pandemic.

For one participant, faith was an essential part of her decision-making process. She wanted to attend a private, Christian college out-of-state, however, it was too expensive and the major she looked at was not a good fit. Considering religion as part of the admissions process is important because some students may be religiously observant and are looking for a specific college experience. The current institution she attends is a public institution with no religious affiliation. In her case, she felt left out because she is not able to freely discuss her faith without fear of judgment from peers.

University credentials and accreditation were an important part of the decision-making process. Most participants were looking for strong academic programs and collegiate reputation. One participant sought to become part of the Honors College because of her own academic and personal goals. Another participant turned down an opportunity at a Southern college because they were not fully accredited. Two participants were especially passionate about being sociology majors and thought that their current institution was the best option. Other programs

brought up by participants included Clinical Lab Science, Digital Media, and Early Elementary Education. Each participant was looking for opportunities for collaboration in their area of interest.

Career goals were noted by some of the participants. Pursuing networking and professional development opportunities were important to four out of five participants. Two participants were interested in eventually earning master's degrees or PhDs in order to conduct research and potentially teach in a college setting. One participant discussed how being in the Honors College would prepare her for the rigor of a career in the real world. All of the participants are academically driven and seek a bright future for themselves and their family.

Support

Personal support from family, friends, roommates, and significant others was essential to all participants' well-being as transfer students. Whether close in proximity or far away, these personal supports made a world of difference. Emotional support, such as saying "You can do it!" positively impact transfer students (Shaw & Chin-Newman, 2017). When transfer students feel supported, they are likely to be physically sound and have a higher self-esteem (Causey, Livingston, & High, 2015). Support is not an area to be underestimated as transfer students navigate a new collegiate environment and become independent adults.

All participants agreed that family members were vital to their successful journey as transfer students. Family members can act as helpful resources during the college search process and answer questions. This support is especially helpful if they are alumni of an institution that the student is considering. For one participant, her mother is working in the field she wants to be in, so having that expertise has been beneficial. Receiving encouragement from family during challenging times motivated the participants to keep going. Having a dialogue with family about

their lives and what is going on can be helpful for transfer students, as one participant discussed. Being able to share struggles and triumphs with family is significant. Open-minded parents can be beneficial to transfer students who simply need a listening ear. As one participant explained, being a transfer student would be much more challenging without the support of her parents.

Friends and roommates also play an important role as personal supports. For instance, Katie's roommate is her best friend, and she has had a positive experience because of it. Having friends that encourage you to work hard are a great resource. Zoe was able to find friendship through her suitemates by getting food together in the dining hall. Small moments like this are easy to overlook but are the most important part of making friends in college. This allows for transfer students to learn about the campus culture through time spent with their roommates or suitemates. Madison enjoyed having a classmate to study with at the library; being able to make friends on-campus makes for a more pleasant college experience.

For three out of five participants, significant others made a positive difference in their transfer experience. Their significant others help keep them on track with studying and encourage them to do their best. These participants found it helpful to have a supportive partner who was willing to listen when they were struggling. Layla's boyfriend is at a college one hour away and is also a transfer student, so they have been able to support and confide in one another. Madison and her boyfriend live about two hours away from each other and visit on weekends in their hometown. Even with the distance, her boyfriend was always available to talk whenever she needed encouragement.

Strategies

Self-support is an important aspect of creating successful strategies to navigate college life, especially for transfer students. Ghusson (2016) described this idea, "a highly involved

student is one who devotes considerable time and energy to studying, spends time on campus, participates in student life on campus, and has frequent interactions with faculty and peers” (p. 35). With utilizing these strategies, each participant has become more resilient. Personal well-being and effective time management were part of the participants’ success strategies. Self-care was an important part of this process as the participants navigated their way through going to college during a global pandemic. Finding a balance between relaxation and schoolwork was important for this group of women. Self-support also involves the knowledge that these transfer students come in with from their community college experiences.

Three out of five participants discussed using a planner to effectively manage their time. Using a planner has helped participants in keeping track of homework assignments, class days and times, as well as personal and social obligations. Another participant talked about how she writes down all of her syllabus assignments and readings. It helps her stay on-track and that way; she does not forget to complete anything on her to-do list. Bridget appreciated her planner during the chaos of the coronavirus pandemic; it helped her during the transfer process. She specifically liked to circle and then cross out items in her planner when they were completed.

Being community college students first greatly helped the participants in adjusting to academic life and being in a collegiate environment. Having practicum and classroom experiences helped set these students apart from their peers academically. Most participants were knowledgeable in time management as they had to keep track of their academic life while in community college. One participant worked in the Admissions office at her community college and was able to gain insight into the work that student affairs professionals accomplish. It taught her to have more patience with college offices. One participant had lived on her own while in community college, so she has had more time to become independent.

Two out of five participants dealt with mental health issues: Dyslexia and Generalized Anxiety. They had to work with their mental health issues in adjusting to college life. Bridget described Dyslexia as causing her to flip words and making it more difficult to read and fully comprehend her homework. Bridget found a positive outlet of walking at a nearby lake to gain perspective. Layla's Generalized Anxiety has been heightened because of the global pandemic and societal issues currently taking place in the United States. Layla has coped with mental health issues by practicing good nutrition and exercising in her free time. However, she found being healthy was difficult when the dining hall only seemed to offer unhealthy options. Two out of five participants discussed hobbies they take part in during their personal time. Having fun television shows to watch and playing videogames on the Nintendo Switch were mentioned. One participant mentioned painting as a creative hobby she enjoyed doing with her roommate. These fun hobbies allow for relaxation and self-care in a hectic season of being a transfer student.

The Value of Transfer Students and their Development to Student Affairs Professionals

Student affairs professionals are important to discuss, specifically in how they can assist transfer students with the vast adjustments they face. If professionals at community college are not able to prepare transfer students for success, then there will be negative outcomes. Four-year student affairs professionals have a skeptical attitude toward the academic preparation of community college students (Xu et al., 2018). Institutional support is vital to transfer student success. These areas are advising, financial aid, and connection to the university (Glynn, 2019). Considering accessibility to websites and social media is important for students as well (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2016). Student affairs professionals from all different areas need to come together in order to make the transfer experience a smooth one.

Collegiate mentorship as an essential transfer experience

When discussing transfer students, collegiate mentorship needs to be part of the conversation. If transfer students do not have collegiate mentors, then they are less likely to adapt to the campus environment and enjoy their experience. Mentors can include a variety of people, but not limited to academic advisors, faculty, graduate assistants, and community college professionals. The idea of pre-transfer efforts is important in developing collegiate mentorship (Jain et al., 2011). Transfer students need mentors who can help them navigate campus resources successfully.

Academic advisors and faculty members assist with helping transfer students adjust to life as a college student. These individuals often inspire students to achieve more in terms of their personal and academic goals. Participants found it helpful to ask questions and seek out their opinions on college-related matters. Seeing faculty do what they love has been inspiring to two participants, specifically who are Sociology majors. Having individuals who are understanding and take the time to actively listen are vital to transfer student success. However, a bad advisor can diminish a transfer student's experience as we saw with Zoe. Career advisors can also assist transfer students as they seek out potential job and internship opportunities.

Graduate assistants are also helpful and sometimes more relatable, as they are closer in age to the students themselves. Some of the participants mentioned GAs who worked in housing or were involved in registered student organizations. They were there to provide encouragement and answer questions about college life as needed. Multiple participants talked about staff from their community colleges being useful. Staff members helped guide these individuals through the transfer process and made sure they had everything they needed in order to be successful. On the whole, these mentors are there for students when they need assistance or someone to talk to.

Providing meaningful guidance and programming for transfer students

When it comes to transfer guidance and programming opportunities, student affairs professionals sometimes fall short. An overall sentiment from the participants was that more attention was given to programming for freshmen; they felt ignored as a population. Another area of note is that the participants struggled to identify resources beneficial to them. COVID-19 has made it more difficult for students to feel connected to on-campus resources, especially off-campus. If transfer students are not able to find useful resources, then their adjustment will suffer as a whole. As a whole there is a lack programming options for transfer students (Lester et al., 2013; Walker & Okpala, 2017; Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Being aware of resources is positive, but transfer students need extra motivation to seek guidance (Fong et al., 2018). When transfer students receive helpful guidance and fun programming opportunities, then they are more likely to have a higher sense of belonging on-campus. The current pandemic had a major impact on programming for transfer students at this institution due to having to be fully online.

The participants were asked about how student affairs professionals can best assist their needs. They offered feedback as follows: 1) student affairs professionals should be fully attentive; 2) they should make technological resources easier to navigate; 3) they should express a desire to help beyond their job classification; 4) they should be prompt with email and phone communication. Due to COVID-19, participants expressed a disappointment in their orientation experience. The participants had an idea of their expectations and then the reality did not line up with what they wanted in an orientation experience. A suggestion offered was hosting a meet and greet for transfer students on Zoom.

Another participant felt overwhelmed registering for classes by herself without parents or an advisor available. These students wanted opportunities where they could meet with other transfers and seek out potential friendships. With advising, academic advisors need to specifically address and make eye contact with the student rather than the parents, according to Zoe. Bridget talked about how having three online portals is too many: one is for email, one is for D2L Brightspace, and the other is for logistical paperwork related to admissions records. Considering barriers that transfer students face and working to eliminate them is vital to their success a student population.

Implications

When discussing transfer students and the adjustments they face, there is extensive research, yet a lack of clear evidence of changes being made in programming and general educational support (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Also, there are some concrete ideas as to how student affairs professionals help transfer students reach their full potential, however we need to hear these insights from the students themselves in order for change to occur (Lopez & Louis, 2009). It is clear that not enough is being done to assist the needs of transfer students in higher education. Although transfer students may have been through some college, they need specialized assistance in meeting their needs for programming and guidance.

In this study, the participants provided doable, smart ideas as to how student affairs professionals can assist them. General advice included encouraging transfer students to ask for help, realizing that transfer students may have done things differently at their previous institution, and making sure that student affairs professionals are genuine in their communication with students. In terms of technology, finding ways to help students understand specific portals would be beneficial. Two participants appreciated Canvas over D2L Brightspace. With

orientation, one participant said that having an individualized schedule would have been useful. Participants suggested having events exclusive to transfer students in order to meet their specific needs. During the pandemic, this could include meet-and-greets on Zoom. In academic advising, making sure that the advisor pays the most attention to the student rather than the parents is pertinent. Transfer students are resilient, smart, and looking for a brighter future; their success should be of the utmost importance to university administrators. The collegiate environment should provide opportunities for transfer students to come into their own, learn new things, build lasting friendships, and cultivate mentorships with faculty and staff. Four-year institutions are where transfer students are able to figure out their career path and future goals.

For transfer students, finding the right “fit” is important when searching for a potential college to attend. It is about feeling purposeful at their new collegiate institution (Denson & Bowman, 2015). If transfer students feel self-doubt, then they will be more challenged in their journey to adapt to their new environment (Schmertz & Carney, 2013). This idea is important to student affairs professionals because within five years, only 21% of transfer students earned a bachelor’s degree (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). This is a low retention rate; more efforts need to be put in by student affairs professionals in meeting transfer students’ needs. If colleges are not able to consistently retain transfer students, then that is a large problem for admissions professionals.

The current COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the lives of transfer students at universities globally. In the words of Schlossberg (2011), this is a highly unanticipated transition. However, if students are able to develop their own well-being strategies to take care of their mental health, then they are more likely to succeed even in challenging times. This study emphasizes the idea that there is a high amount of value to the physical on-campus experience

and socialization. Transferring to four-year institutions has value because students are able to learn, grow, and figure out their personal and professional goals in a fun, inclusive, and challenging environment. Community colleges continue to do valuable work in creating intelligent and respectful students who will contribute to the future workforce. For student affairs professionals who do not fully understand the pressure transfer students face, this quote from Schlossberg (2011) explains that idea, “It is not the transition per se that is critical, but how much it alters one’s roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions” (p. 159).

Suggestions for Further Research

Previous research on transfer students primarily focused on the logistics of the transfer process and community college resources. This study, along with studies from Walker and Okpala (2017) and Shaw and Chin-Newman (2017), are essential to fully understanding the holistic transfer student experience and the personal experiences of transfer students. This study was limited to a single institution over a short period of time and five participants. Repeating this study at public and private institutions of different sizes, along with male participants would provide more insight into the findings as part of this study. The results may be different, but there could be commonalities with this study.

Additional research could be longitudinal in nature and examine these students before they enter into their chosen four-year college or university, and closer to graduation from the four-year institution. It would be useful to understand more about how transfer students fully adjust and adapt to college life after their first year. Their strategies and ideas about success may shift and change over a longer time period. Also, considering the resources they seek out over time would be interesting; are they more or less willing to reach out to student affairs

professionals? Also, post-pandemic, this study would be interesting to replicate as the responses could be vastly different if campus life is primarily in-person rather than online.

Summary

This study examined the adjustments that vertical transfer students faced during their first semester at a four-year university. These students experienced transitional adjustments as they entered into a new, unfamiliar environment. Additionally, this study pointed out how student affairs professionals can better assist transfer students during their transition. Encouraging transfer students to seek help is important; they may not seek it out on their own.

Communication is vital; student affairs professionals need to be genuine and positive in their in-person and virtual responses and demeanor. Dismantling barriers transfer students face in getting involved is also a priority. Providing programming for transfer students to meet one another is essential; they will feel more included as part of the college environment. Being mindful that transfer students are older is important, but also, they may need extra help like freshmen. Student affairs professionals need to be fully aware of the adjustment issues transfer students face.

Transfer students and their personal development is vital to their success as a population. The transfer student experience and process is essential in continuing the conversation about how to best support the transfer student population as part of higher education.

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Appendix A
Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Tell me what your college transition has been like so far, what factors led you to consider transferring to a 4-year institution?
2. What led you to choose this university and what was your decision-making process if you applied to other institutions?
3. What has been challenging for you about the transfer process so far? What has been the easiest part about the transfer process?
4. As a transfer student, have you received support from others? Has your experience made you more resilient?
5. As a transfer student, what kinds of strategies are you using to cope with a new collegiate environment?
6. Do you live in a residence hall or off-campus? What are some of your reasons for this choice?
7. Which offices do you feel have been the most helpful to you as a transfer student?
8. Is there a faculty or staff member here that has been a positive role model for you? If so, how have they assisted you in your transition?
9. In your opinion, how can faculty, staff, and administrators best support transfer students?

Appendix B
Sample Recruitment Email

Sample Recruitment Email

Hello,

You are invited to participate in a study about the experience of vertical transfer students and the adjustment transitions faced upon transferring. You have been invited to participate in this study because you have been identified by EIU Admissions as a vertical transfer student. This study is being conducted by Anna Goldberg, a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program at Eastern Illinois University, and is being advised by Dr. Richard Roberts of the Department of Counseling and Higher Education at EIU.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Each participant will receive a \$10 Starbucks gift card. If you are interested in participating, please contact Anna Goldberg at akgoldberg@eiu.edu or (815) 404-3490 to schedule an interview time. Interviews will take place via Zoom starting (Insert Date). Participants will be asked to sign an informed consent form at the time of the scheduled interview. Interviews will last approximately and will not exceed one hour. Please direct any questions and/or concerns about this study to Anna Goldberg. Thank you for consideration in participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Anna Goldberg
Eastern Illinois University
M.S. Candidate in College Student Affairs
Graduate Assistant in College Student Affairs
Pronouns: She/Her/Hers

Appendix C
Informed Consent Form

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Adapting to Change: Transitional Experiences of Vertical Transfer Students

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Anna Goldberg and Dr. Richard Roberts, from the department of Counseling and Higher Education at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are a transfer student who came from a community college to attend Eastern Illinois University.

- **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to explore the transitional experiences of community college students attending a 4-year university in order to improve student affairs services. The study will identify perceived variables that influence the student in transitioning to a 4-year university.

- **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer for this study, you will be asked to participate in an individual semi-structured interview with the principal investigator, Anna Goldberg. The conversation will be virtual, using a password protected Zoom meeting. As such, it will be videotaped/or audiotaped and transcribed, if the participant allows. You will be asked 10 or more questions in an individual semi-structured interview that will last approximately 30-60 minutes.

- **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There should be no real risks or discomforts that arise from participating in this study. The only potential risks or discomforts could include possible emotional feelings when asked questions during the interview. These risks are not more pronounced than one might experience in everyday life.

- **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Participants may benefit from developing self-awareness about their challenges and experiences related to being transfer students. The study may help administrators at Eastern Illinois University and other institutions better understand the challenges and experiences of community college transfer students. This population is ever-growing which is why this study is beneficial.

- **INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION (*Optional*)**

The subject will receive a Starbucks gift card amounting to \$10. This will be given to the participant upon completion of the individual interview.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of identifying speakers using pseudonyms to transcribe the notes, and in written reports as well. Any materials (notes from interviews or audio/video recordings of interviews) will be secured by the research team. These materials will be erased 3 years after the study is complete.

- **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer, and you may request that the audio/video recorder be turned off if you become uncomfortable with a conversation. All such requests will be honored. There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study.

- **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact: Anna Goldberg or Dr. Richard Roberts. Anna Goldberg can be reached at akgoldberg@eiu.edu or 217-581-2400. Dr. Richard Roberts can be reached at rroberts@eiu.edu or 217-581-2400.

- **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

In addition, I agree to be audio/video recorded with the understanding that these audio-visual recordings will be used for the purposes of this research study and transcribed using pseudonyms to protect my confidentiality.

_____ I agree to be audio/video recorded.

_____ I do not agree to be audio/video recorded.