PATHWAYS TO THE BACCALAUREATE: EXPLORING GRADUATING TRANSFER STUDENTS’ INVOLVEMENT AT A FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTION

by

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ABSTRACT

The community college has long been touted as a democratizing force for American higher education, and one of the primary ways that America will reach its degree attainment needs to compete globally. However, in recent decades, community colleges have come under scrutiny for producing lower than desired success rates in terms of transfer and degree attainment. While research has addressed the factors that may cause lower attainment rates at the community college, less has been focused on the role the four-year institution plays in the degree attainment pathway for transfer students. Additionally, while the literature regarding best practices in supporting freshman student transition and retention is strong, fewer studies have focused on supporting the success of transfer students and even less on the involvement experiences they have at four-year institutions and what role those experience play in degree attainment. The current research used an instrumental case study approach to highlight the experiences of transfer students who were in their final semester prior to graduation at a four-year institution. Through nine collective case studies, a more complete understanding of participants’ definitions and descriptions of involvement and whether or not these experiences shaped their journey to achieving the baccalaureate degree was uncovered. The implications of this research can inform four-year institutions regarding ways to better serve incoming transfer students and support their degree completion post-transfer.
I first and foremost want to acknowledge that this achievement is far from my own. I have been blessed by a loving God who has given me the desires of my heart and a passion to love those whom He loves. I would not be who I am, or where I am, without His faithfulness and plans. “Not to us, LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.” (Psalms 115:1)

Secondly, I have been supported every day of my life by an incredible group of people—my family. Some I was born into and some have chosen me along the way, but for each and every one of them I am thankful. Mom, from the moment I was born I knew you believed in me. How deeply I cherish our friendship and your example of persistence and hard work that has been the model that brought me to this point in my journey. No words can express how thankful I am for you. Dad, I cannot thank you enough for taking a chance on that eight-year-old because you loved her mom so much. God knew what He was doing when He put us together. You taught me how to take on the world with confidence and wit (and of course a healthy dose of sarcasm). You also brought in my life two amazing grandparents that have loved me like their own from day one. I am incredibly thankful for their belief in me and support that made this dream possible. Finally, to my loving husband and son, you two have cheered me on daily through this process and as I cross this finish line I am crossing it holding your hands.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the two people who have made my life the substance of dreams.

To my precious husband, Danny:

When we met, I told you getting this degree was the priority and nothing else mattered. Luckily, you knew better. Over the last decade you have taught me how to love, grow, and most pertinently, to believe in myself because of how much you believed in me. Every time I have wanted to give up or thought that I could not do it, you have been there; holding my hand, brewing another cup of coffee, and waking me up after my ten-minute power naps to get through the long nights. Your love and belief in me is the reason I have made it here. You have taught me a great lesson: you really can have it all. I love you more than I will ever know how to tell you.

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You have been life’s biggest surprise! I never knew I could love something so much until I had you. Holding you all hours of the night, knowing I had a list of things to get done and deciding I did not even care, made me realize just how much you had changed me. I have not wanted to miss a minute of your life because being your mom is my greatest joy. Your zeal for life and love of learning inspires me. Thank you for choosing me as your momma and teaching me every day what it means to love unconditionally. I hope you dream big dreams, and are not afraid to leap for the moon, because remember even if you miss you will land among the stars.

I love you both infinitely!
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The productivity of the American higher education system has come under increasing scrutiny due to growing concerns regarding the nation’s global competitiveness and access to education both educationally and economically (United States Department of Education, 2015). Recent estimates suggest that the United States must produce 25% more Associate’s degrees and almost 20% more bachelor’s degrees to meet the workforce demands of 2025 (Handel, 2013). The community college plays a large role in this process because almost half of undergraduates enrolled in postsecondary education in 2014 were enrolled at community colleges (Ma & Baum, 2016). Furthermore, the focus on the community college in this larger policy discussion is driven by the role these institutions play for historically underrepresented and disadvantaged groups and the need to provide access to these groups to change U.S. global competitiveness (Hagedorn, 2010). Additionally, the focus on access and affordability in American higher education has further highlighted the role of the community colleges in the larger higher education policy discussion (Romano & Wisniewski, 2003). The community college remains the most accessible institution in terms of entrance requirements and financial cost, enrolls the most diverse student population, and has the potential to create a pathway to other postsecondary education opportunities (Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2013; Handel, 2013).

Though popular support has favored the community college and its role in the democratization of higher education, in reality it has delivered mixed results (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Several authors have suggested that attendance at community colleges can have disparate
outcomes on students’ baccalaureate degree attainment and labor market outcomes (Alba & Lavin, 1981; Doyle, 2009; Leigh & Gill, 2003; Rouse, 1995). However, the actual focus of the work to understand the community college and transfer function is not solely dedicated to its operation, but rather to answer the ultimate question, which is how to affect baccalaureate attainment outcomes for all students entering higher education institutions (Bahr, Toth, Thirolf, & Masse, 2013).

Much of the extant literature has focused on the role of two-year institutions in degree completion rates; however, this focus is beginning to shift. Recent data suggest that nearly half of graduates from four-year institutions transferred from another institution, making it clear that transferring is an increasing trend and one that is affecting four-year institutions at an exponential rate (National Student Clearinghouse, 2015). Increasingly, the success of four-year institutions in graduating transfer students is coming under scrutiny (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017). Bahr et al. (2013) purport “Unless these students’ academic endeavors can be supported and sustained in the four-year institution, the success of the community colleges in transferring students to the four-year institution will have little impact on baccalaureate degree attainment” (p. 461). This statement directly calls out the role of four-year institutions in supporting the transition and degree completion of community college transfer students and highlights the increasing responsibility of receiving institutions.

In a critical perspective of the role four-year institutions can play in the transfer process, Jain, Herrera, Bernal, and Solórzano (2011) provided a conceptual framework for a transfer receptive culture. The authors defined this as “an institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully—that is to…successfully earn a baccalaureate degree” (p. 252). The characteristics of establishing this
transfer receptive culture to support transfer student success include: (a) making transfer students an institutional priority for access, retention, and graduation; (b) providing resources to compliment the transfer process from the community college; (c) offering transfer-specific financial and academic support; (d) acknowledging the lived experiences of transfer students and how they may differ from native students; and (e) evaluating and enhancing transfer programming to create scholarship about this population (p. 258). The authors suggested that to affect transfer student achievement at the four-year institution these elements must permeate the culture of the receiving college or university. While this research provides a high-level prescription for campuses, more research is needed to understand the transfer student’s experience and how each part of the transition process can be addressed using these elements.

While the research is scant regarding what four-year institutions can do or have done to respond to this increasing responsibility for transfer students, one of the barriers cited for transfer student success at four-year institutions is a second transition period moving from the two-year institution to the four-year institution (Glass & Bunn, 1998; Laanan & Jain, 2017; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). The fact that transfer students have to go through two adjustment periods can be an additional deterrent to their success in achieving the baccalaureate degree (Dougerty, 1987). An increasing number of studies have started to address this second adjustment period through by exploring what has been termed transfer adjustment at the receiving institution (Laanan, 1998, 2001, 2007; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Owens, 2010). Essentially, transfer adjustment represents the process and experiences of students before coming to four-year institutions that influence how they adjust to the new institution and the factors that have influenced their experience (Laanan, 2001; Laanan & Jain, 2017). This concept is easily linked to the expanse of existing research for first-year students and their adjustment experiences;
however, it has been consistently found that transfer student experiences and the way they adjust in the transition vary from traditional first-year models and definitions (Lester, Leonard & Mathias, 2013; Wang & Wharton, 2006).

However, the relationship of student engagement, involvement, and/or integration, depending on the theoretical framework, and its effect on positive student outcomes is one of the most robust findings in higher education literature (e.g., Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While each student’s college experience differs, the connection between student engagement and academic performance remains consistent across student variabilities and groups (Carini, Kuh, & Klein 2006). Thus, several scholars have looked at how transfer students are experiencing transfer adjustment through engagement or involvement experiences at four-year institutions (e.g., Ellis, 2013; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Laanan, 2007; Townsend & Wilson, 2009).

While general findings support that transfer students engage in some of the typical forms of involvement at four-year institutions, such as working with a faculty member (Lopez & Jones, 2017; Moser, 2013), no consensus has been reached regarding the mechanism for this involvement or the significance of involvement that affects degree attainment. Some research has shown overwhelming endorsement by transfer students of involvement as important to their college experience and success (Lester et al., 2013). Others, such as Kuh et al. (2006), found that when using traditional conceptualizations of involvement transfer students had fewer interactions with faculty, were less engaged with extracurricular activities, and gained less from college than native students gain. While some have seen this finding as transfer students being less interested in engagement at four-year institutions (Townsend & Wilson, 2009) or having less time to be involved (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Terenzini et al., 2004), another possible explanation is that
the ways in which transfer students experience involvement varies enough from traditional
definitions that it requires reconceptualization to be effectively described and measured.

As previous research has suggested, transfer students may esoterically define academic
and social engagement in similar ways as native students, but when asked about the ways in
which they actually engage in the constructs the findings vary substantially from traditional
definitions of involvement in the literature (Lester et al., 2013). The only agreement that the
extant research provides is that transfer student engagement differs from native student
engagement and more research needs to be done to uncover how involvement affects the transfer
student collegiate experience (Wang & Wharton, 2006). Some researchers have tried to compare
engagement quantitatively between the two groups to garner a deeper understanding of its impact
(Ishanti & McKitrick, 2010); however, if transfer student experiences of social and academic
involvement deviate substantially from the extant understanding of these constructs, these
research findings may have limited utility. The current research aims to revitalize and refocus the
exploration of involvement by transfer students through a qualitative inquiry of experiences by
allowing them to define the meaning of those experiences.

**Statement of the Problem**

Historically, higher education has been seen as a public good that was measured by “the
extent to which individuals were socially mobile and experienced a better quality of life as a
consequence of their education” (Sanchez & Laanan, 1998, p. 10). However, in recent years
there has been a growing body of literature suggesting disparate outcomes for those pursuing
different pathways through higher education. Specifically, there is a significant gap in
baccalaureate degree attainment for students who start at a two-year institution versus a four-year
900,000 students who began their postsecondary education at a community college in 2010, less than one-third transferred to a four-year institution (Shapiro et al., 2017). Of those who did transfer, just over 40% achieved a bachelor’s degree in six years (Shapiro et al., 2017). Additionally, there remains a large gap of almost 15% in degree attainment between higher and lower income students (Shapiro et al., 2017).

Some research has pointed to the differences in student profiles entering the community college versus the four-year college as a potential cause for this gap. The National Educational Longitudinal Study supports cohort differences noting that students entering community colleges are more likely to be Hispanic, lower socioeconomic status, and lower academic ability (Alfonso, 2006). However, much work has been done to statistically address these innate differences in student profiles through instrumental variable or propensity score matching approaches. Despite these advanced statistics to control for individual student variances, the gap of degree attainment in the low-twenties persists (Xu, Jagger, & Fletcher, 2016).

Additionally, while previous assumptions regarding the choice of community colleges over four-year institutions were based on ability to gain entrance at the more competitive institution, recent research has shown that students choose two-year institutions for a variety of reasons including: time to explore career/major interests before committing to a university-education, following the path of friends, and a more affordable option for those with financial need (Chrystal, Gansemer-Topf, & Laanan, 2013; Laanan, 2001).

If we are to address this gap in degree attainment for student who begin their collegiate education at a two-year institution, it is imperative that we better understand the full scope of their journey from the community college to the four-year institution and ultimately to graduation. While much research has focused on the community college environment and its
possible role in completion gaps (Alba & Lavin, 1981; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Doyle, 2009; Leigh & Gill, 2003; Miller, 2007; Rouse, 1995), there is a need for greater investigation of the four-year institution as transition to the new institution and completion of a degree are also critical points in the student’s journey.

As suggested by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005):

[i]f, as it appears, individual effort or engagement is the critical determinant of the impact of college, then it is important to focus on the ways in which an institution can shape its academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement. (p. 602)

The question of how transfer students engage at four-year institutions remains opaque and in need of further investigation as it differs from current understandings of student involvement (Wang & Wharton, 2006). If the role of four-year institutions is to better serve transfer students and support them to degree completion, then a better understanding of what involvement, engagement, or quality of effort look like for this population and how institutions can support what is most critical for degree completion is critical (Bahr et al., 2013). The current research addresses the knowledge gap regarding transfer student involvement to inform institutions regarding policies and practices to support transfer students’ progress to the baccalaureate degree and close the gap to meet our educational attainment demands required for the future.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to uncover the post-transfer involvement experiences that are significant for successful degree completion of transfer students. Aragon and Perez (2006) suggested
The first impulse of research is to examine how the community college fosters transfer process; consequently, they overlook a vital facet of the transfer process - that is, the pivotal role four-year institutions play in the recruitment, transition, retention, and eventual graduation of these students. (p. 83)

The literature supports that there are several factors occurring at the community college that can affect a student’s likelihood of transfer, such as social and academic integration at the two-year institution (Nora & Rendon, 1990). However, this study moved beyond the point of transfer and looked at the academic and social involvement of students in this population. While facilitating the transfer function from the two-year to four-year institution has primarily fallen to community colleges in the past, at an increasing rate four-year institutions are also being investigated for their role in the process. Though many efforts have focused on the retention and success of first-year students, far fewer have focused on retaining transfer students after entrance into the four-year institution (Kuh et al., 2005).

Research has found that four-year institutions play a larger role in the transfer adjustment process than two-year institutions, which calls to action the receiving institution to address what is happening once the student transfers (Laanan, 2007). This study sought to understand the meaning of social and academic involvement for transfer students and what behaviors these students undertake as part of their involvement. Specific attention was paid to social involvement and how transfer students experienced and defined this construct at the four-year institution because previous research has addressed the impact of university social experiences and found non-confirming results of their significance (Moser, 2013). However, several scholars have suggested that transfer students may define social involvement in different and more-
academically based terms so additional exploration is needed (Lester et al., 2013; Wang & Wharton, 2006).

The goal of understanding the social and academic involvement experiences of transfer students is to improve policies, programs, and practices at the four-year institution so that transfer students can achieve greater student success outcomes and ultimately close the current degree achievement gaps. While engagement is a strongly supported construct within the student success paradigm (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), what this looks like for transfer students requires more investigation (Lopez & Jones, 2017). Specifically, this investigation needs to be qualitative to better understand the experiences of transfer students and specific behaviors and actions they attribute to their success (Lopez & Jones, 2017).

Research Questions

This study explored transfer students’ understanding of their academic and social involvement post-transfer and the meaning making of how four-year institutions can support their success to degree attainment. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do transfer students describe their involvement experiences at the four-year institution?
   a. How do transfer students describe their social involvement experience(s) post-transfer?
   b. How do transfer students describe their academic involvement experience(s) post-transfer?
2. What experiences do transfer students describe as contributing to their success (degree completion) post-transfer?
3. What can four-year institutions do to support transfer students to degree completion?
Rationale

My interest in the study of transfer students at four-year institutions stems from several years of professional practice with retention, persistence, and graduation initiatives that focused on populations that were less likely to attain the baccalaureate degree of which one was transfer students. In my previous role, I worked at a large, four-year institution that enrolled a larger percentage of transfer students than freshman students, and spent considerable effort in shaping an institutional culture that was receptive and supportive of students who transferred. However, in my experience elsewhere and from a simple scan of the literature, considerably more effort is focused on first-year retention and native student graduation rates than transfer student success.

In addition to this professional investment, I also have a background in sociology with a focus on social inequality and an interest in economic development via education. I have long admired the community college for its role in democratization of higher education not only as an access point, but in the recent decades’ efforts to increase degree completion and transfer. I think the rhetoric has focused significantly on the success of two-year institutions in producing transfer students, but has not focused enough on the role that four-year institutions can play in the success of students who begin at a community college. Given both of these attributes, I have a vested interest in studying the efficacy of the community college as a pathway, but since my professional work is at a four-year institution I am also interested in the ways that the receiving institution can affect the success of those students who do transfer from the community college.

Significance of the Study

Studying the transfer student transition to a four-year institution is significant because of the increasing size of the transfer student population. Recent estimates suggest that almost one-half of bachelor’s degree recipients transferred to their degree-granting institution (National
Student Clearinghouse, 2015). This statistic, paired with increased demands for “success” measures for higher education including degree completion rates (Chrystal et al., 2013), means that research addressing how to be more effective at turning current students into graduates is a worthwhile effort in higher education research. A recent report by the American Talent Initiative highlighted the need to expand transfer efficacy and research to address the current status of the community college pathway to the baccalaureate, which loses significant numbers of high achieving students who aspire to the baccalaureate degree but never achieve it due to lack of institutional support (Fresquez, LaViolet, Maxson, & Wynder, 2018).

Most institutions currently lack an understanding of how to support transfer students because they operate under an assumption that transfer students represent a more cross-sectional and diverse student group than first-year students and do not know how to facilitate the same engagement experiences (Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007). Since the literature has well validated student engagement as a pathway for student success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), understanding the specific mechanisms of transfer student engagement will allow institutions to better receive and respond to the increasing transfer student populations in transition. Furthermore, a qualitative understanding of student experience can inform future quantitative hypotheses and eventually lead to a larger, national-level examination of involvement experiences of transfer.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Similar to other recent literature regarding the study of transfer students, the current research used Astin’s (1999) Theory of Student Involvement as a theoretical framework. Laanan and Jain (2017) supported the fit of Astin’s model for studying transfer students and specifically the significance of the university environment to include academic and social experiences. The
broad framework of involvement derived from Astin’s (1999) definition of a student’s physical and psychological effort invested in the college experience provided a guide to understanding participants’ experiences at the four-year institution. The research allowed study participants to define and describe their experiences in college that required investment of their time or energy and how those investments may or may not have influenced their progress to degree completion. This research did not define academic or social involvement for participants, but rather focused on their experiences and allowed them to make meaning of how those experiences influenced their degree attainment.

Tentative Presuppositions

As required in qualitative research, it is important to provide an overview of assumptions about the research topic. My first assumption was that transfer students at this institution are not provided several structured ways to find involvement opportunities on campus and may express frustration with this or are provided a definition of involvement that is very externally motivated because of the lack of extant offerings for this student population. My second assumption was, as previous research has suggested, many transfer students use the academic environment for social involvement on campus as they feel as though their time and opportunities for connection outside of class with peers is limited. I believed the participants would primarily focus on academically-related involvement experiences (e.g., study groups, undergraduate research, honor societies) when asked to describe their involvement in college. However, when asked about experiences that helped them persist to graduation, they may not offer the involvement experiences previously described and may focus on experiences external to their college experience or individuals and support systems not found within the university. A third assumption from professional practice was that transfer students may not desire a distinction as transfer students.
to be noted as any different from native students and may be hesitant to address discrepancies in their involvement experiences from peers due to this designation.

**Context of the Study**

This research study took place at a large, research university in the Southeast. For the purpose of this study, the institution will be referred to as Southeastern University. In 2017, Southeastern University enrolled 38,563 students including 33,305 undergraduates and 5,258 graduate and professional students. The racial composition of the students was the following: 4.5% Hispanic or Latino, .3% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1.2% Asian, 10.6% Black or African American, .1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 76.6% White, 3% two or more races, and 3.6% Unknown/Resident Alien.

Specifically, the transfer student population accounted for 17.2% of the incoming undergraduate enrollment in Fall 2017. Of these transfer students, 42% were out-of-state transfers and 53.3% were in-state transfers coming from 45 different institutions in the state. This residency breakdown differs significantly from the first-time undergraduate out-of-state percentage, which was 66.9% for the same semester, showing that a larger percentage of transfer students were coming from in state. Additionally, when considering graduation cohorts, approximately 1,705 students graduated in Fall 2017 with 15.7% of them being designated as a transfer student with either an Associate’s degree or 60 hours earned at a two-year institution prior to transfer (Institutional Data). Though this proportion of graduates is small in comparison to the total graduation cohort, transfer students represent an area of growth for Southeastern University in the future and is still a considerably sized population that warrants investigation regarding success at the institution.
Definition of Terms

One of the weaknesses in the current literature on community college transfer students is the conflation of terms used to describe student experiences post-transfer (Bahr et al., 2013). Integration, engagement, and involvement have all been used interchangeably to describe both the perceptions and behaviors of students post-transfer. While the findings provided later in the review of the literature cite the construct the authors used in the manuscript, even if incorrectly labeled, the intent of this research is to address the specific behaviors that indicate “the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” that are a part of Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement (Astin, 1999, p. 592). The definitions below were used throughout the study as key variables or factors affecting the research questions. As such, the following specific definitions are provided:

Transfer Students. This study specifically defined transfer students as those students who started their postsecondary education at a two-year community college and transferred to a four-year institution. This type of transfer is often called upward or vertical transfer and is the most researched type of transfer (Bahr, 2009) and most common transfer student pathway (Peter & Cataldi, 2005).

Involvement. Astin (1999) defined involvement as “the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience” (p. 523). Essentially, involvement comprises the actions students take or decisions they make related to their college experience. A key feature of involvement is that it is student agency-focused recognizing that an individual’s choices in how they spend their time and energy during their college years represents tradeoffs between academic involvement, social involvement, and non-college factors such as employment and family responsibilities (Bahr et al., 2013). Two related,
but less defined components of involvement, are the concepts of Academic and Social Involvement, which are explored below. Though Astin (1999) provided examples of these constructs, the author did not delineate or operationalize specific definitions for these terms in previous work (1975, 1993, 1999), and thus specific definitions used in the current study were drawn from a myriad of researchers.

**Academic Involvement.** Astin (1999) provided examples of an academically involved student such as “considerable energy studying” and “interacts frequently with faculty members”, but did not specifically define the term (p. 518). Thus, to understand the operationalization of academic involvement that guided this study, Laanan’s (1998, 2004) work on LTSQ was used. In Laanan’s (2004) work, the university experiences that could be attributed as academic involvement included items such as participating in class discussion and several faculty interaction variables such as visiting faculty and seeking their advice on class projects and/or research. All of the items in the LTSQ related to behaviors or actions a student could take to exhibit involvement in their academics were used as guideposts in understanding transfer students’ definitions and experiences of academic involvement. Finally, the current research used the only qualitative study that has previously attempted to define social and academic experiences of transfer students post-transfer. Following an in-depth qualitative analysis, Lester et al. (2013) suggested that transfer students “viewed academic engagement as a strict focus on academic activities that include meaningful connections with faculty members as well as academic challenge and learning” (p. 213). This broad definition was the framework for academic involvement; other definitions acted as examples from the extant literature when comparing findings from the current studies qualitative analysis (Astin, 1999; Laanan, 2004).
Social Involvement. Similar to Academic Involvement, Astin (1999) provided examples of social involvement including “spending time on campus” and “participates actively in student organizations” (p. 518), but did not provide an operationalization of all activities that may be included in social involvement nor did the author’s research address the common findings that social experiences vary greatly for transfer students from native students (Wang & Wharton, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). Though the work of Laanan (2004) in the development of the LTSQ factors included measures of social support, many of those factors were largely not operationalized as behaviors or actions taken by the student (the definition of involvement per Astin, 1999), but instead were more cognitive or affective dimensions related to belonging or feelings regarding friendships. Thus, the guiding definition for transfer student social involvement came solely from the work of Lester et al. (2013) who suggested:

The transfer students viewed social engagement as interacting with others broadly both inside and outside the university...Those structures consisted of family, mentors, colleagues, church, and other community-based groups, not peers, faculty members, and student affairs professionals who are traditionally conceptualized as sources of social engagement in the literature. (p. 211)

It is this broader conceptualization of social involvement that calls for additional research and operationalization because it does differ so substantially from current definitions of social involvement in the quantitative and qualitative work (Lester et al., 2013). However, the work of this qualitative study allowed participants to freely conceptualize this construct as it is the more nebulous of the two forms of involvement.

Engagement. A closely related term to involvement, engagement was also used in this study at times due to its alignment with involvement. Engagement is built on the work of Kuh
(2001, 2003, 2009) and comprised of those involvement behaviors or activities that have been shown to be empirically associated with student success. Hu and Kuh (2001) defined engagement as “the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes” (p. 3).

Chapter Summary

The trend of community college enrollment accounting for a large proportion of overall postsecondary enrollment has been well-validated (Ma & Baum, 2016). However, if we are to address the need for degree attainment to meet workforce demands, the research agenda has to move beyond access to address the success of these entering students. Substantial research has looked at the community colleges role in baccalaureate degree completion. However, more investigation is needed on the role of the four-year institution in the success of students once they transfer. What we know is that transfer students must mediate a second transition to the four-year institution, and this frequently acts as a second barrier to success (Dougherty, 1987). While much research has focused on how administrators affect the persistence of first-year students at the four-year institution, fewer studies have looked at the transfer student transition to the four-year institution. This was the focus of the current research: What experiences do transfer students have at the four-year institution that influence their eventual success; defined as achievement of the baccalaureate degree? This research study relied on the theoretical framework of Astin (1975, 1993, 1999), but also used qualitative methods to allow students’ perspectives to guide the inquiry.

The following chapters will review the evolution of research to date regarding the understanding of the transfer function, transfer adjustment, and specific experiences that have been found to be influential for this population. From this review, the existing gap in the
literature that undergirds this study is highlighted with a specific focus on the extant qualitative understanding. Following acknowledgement of the gap, the research methods are outlined in Chapter 3 to form a clear understanding of the approach and procedures that were used to address this gap. Following the methods, individual cases are presented with the findings in Chapter 4 and then the cross-case analysis of merged findings is presented in Chapter 5. Finally, Chapter 6 addresses the research questions as well as implications that inform policy, practice, and future research.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

While community colleges serve a diverse set of needs, their success is often measured by their ability to facilitate students’ transfer to four-year institutions, and in recent years, community colleges have become an increasingly important pathway to the baccalaureate. (Long & Kurlander, 2009, p. 1)

While this quote rings true of the ideal of the community college institution type, research showing a penalty for starting at the community college has questioned how viable this pathway is. With several points of attrition including adjustment to the community college, transfer to the four-year institution, and then adjustment at the four-year institution this pathway is one that requires further investigation (Dougherty, 1987).

Along this pathway, several potential graduates are lost due to a variety of factors. Recent reports emphasize that those lost are not only those that struggle to perform academically or commit to their education like previously assumed, but that each year 50,000 high-achieving community college students fail to make the transition (Fresquez et al., 2018). This overview of the literature will provide historical context of the transfer function, the community college pathway and the historical patterns of transition into a four-year institution. This brief history will set the stage for the process of transfer and the areas of weakness that may lead to less than ideal outcomes for this pathway. The review will then narrow to the focus of the research regarding the experiences and actions that are taken (social and academic involvement) that lead
to the achievement of the baccalaureate by transfer students. The full understanding of what
these experiences look like post-transfer remains underdeveloped (Laanan, 2007), but the
literature fully supports the significance and even predictive power of social and academic
involvement on transfer student adjustment and success (Wang, 2009). This literature review will
illuminate remaining gaps in the understanding of this process and significant experiences of
transfer students post-transfer will be summarized to lay the groundwork for the current study.

Figure 1 presents a literature map that illustrates the rationale and process to undertake the
review of the literature. Since the aim of the overall research project is to address degree
attainment gaps for those that start their educational journey at a community college, extant
literature regarding known deficits in that process were first reviewed. These included the
transfer function itself and its historical evolution as well as the current state of transfer rates and
role of the student background affecting the likelihood of degree attainment. Then the literature
narrows to explain those more recent areas of investigation at the four-year institution and how
the transfer student’s adjustment is critical in their eventual degree attainment. This area of
research also includes the well-studied concept of Transfer Shock, but goes beyond that lens to
include specific experiences that affect a student’s adjustment post-transfer. Finally, the literature
narrows even further to focus on those social and academic involvement experiences that
influence a transfer student’s success at the four-year institution. These experiences are the focus
of the current research to elucidate a better understanding of the functioning and importance of
these involvement experiences with the ultimate goal of providing recommendations and practice
guidelines to increase the likelihood of success for transfer students at the four-year institution.
By the 1920s, the system of higher education as we know it today had its initial outline; one that would provide education for both the wealthy leaders and the rags to riches story (Brint & Karabel, 1989). The addition of the community college to the educational hierarchy was the one that made the latter possible. “The creation of ‘ladders of ascent’ through education thus gave new life to the American ideology of equality of opportunity” and is what made the community college a uniquely American institution (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 5). Within the two-year institutions, the transfer function was integral in offering this opportunity as it created a pathway to further economic and personal development at the four-year institutions. However, the original mission of the junior college was tripartite including transfer education to prepare
students for transfer to a college or university, general education purposes, and finally terminal education that would prepare for “semiprofessions” that graduates would move into upon graduating from the junior college (Koos, 1970, p. 20). While the institution simultaneously had three missions, the transfer function after the early years started to become secondary to vocational or terminal programs aimed at job skill training (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

The mission of the community college continued to expand in the mid-1900s with the introduction of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944; colloquially known as the GI Bill. This legislation provided funding to all returning veterans for higher education benefits and led to an unintended result of a much more diverse student body requiring diverse educational options (Perkins, 1998). In response to the rapid expansion of higher education enrollments in this period, President Truman tasked a Commission on Higher Education in 1947 to study the effective and efficient methods to facilitate higher education in America. The crux of this report was the imperative to expand higher education opportunities to develop and protect our democratic society, and primarily this should be done through what would now be termed the community college (President’s Commission on Higher Education, 1947). By the late 1950s, community colleges enrolled a quarter of the new freshman entering higher education and 75% of them were enrolled in transfer programs (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Furthermore, the proportion students actually transferring to a four-year institution increased from one-quarter in the 1940s to over one-third in the late 1950s (Medsker, 1960).

However, due to several historical events and philosophical ideologies of this decade, by the end of the 1950s, the four-year institutions had become increasingly selective diverting a growing proportion of college-bound students to the community colleges (Brint & Karabel, 1989). In the following decade, higher education policy in particular focused on democratization.
and access and relied heavily on community colleges for meeting these aims (Richardson & Bender, 1987). Specifically in 1965, the community colleges received earmarked funds under Title III of the Higher Education Act to develop higher education institutions dedicated to supporting the egalitarianism of higher education (Diener, 1986). The community colleges in this decade were particularly noted for enrolling large populations of minority students, however, these students were not engaged primarily in the transfer pathway (Richardson & Bender, 1987).

It was this fact and similar stories like it that prompted a brandishing critique of the community college and its contradictory nature published by Clark (1960). The article highlighted a significant issue with U.S. Higher Education system: an “inconsistency between encouragement to achieve and the realities of limited opportunity” (p. 569). From this sociological perspective, the community college was created for a cooling out effect that would take a student’s high aspirations for a Bachelor’s degree and diminish them to a vocational program or drop out. Clark suggested this was a critical function of community colleges as access to a four-year degree and the benefits it offered could not be provided for all. The community college itself was created to be a mediator of socioeconomic success and thus the myth of the transfer function was never meant to be realized by the full number of students who aspired to complete it (Clark, 1960). In fact, during Clark’s writing, two-thirds of transfer-aspirants never made it the four-year institution.

In the time following the growth in access of the 1960s and early 1970s, students’ course-taking patterns changed significantly (Cohen, 1982). While in previous generations students had completed programs of study in a linear fashion, students in this generation were more likely to take a few courses, stop out completely, and return at a later time. They also were more likely to take more than two years to complete their degree (Cohen, 1982). This period also saw an
increase in part-time and female students coupled with the increased urbanization and open door policies there was a significant influx of underprepared students in need of remedial education (Cohen, 1982). In one study, it was found that in a span of 30 years from 1950 to 1980, the percentage of students who graduated with a bachelor’s degree that had transferred from a community college had decreased 48 percent attesting to this decrease in transfer (Cohen, 1982).

Brint and Karabel (1989) suggested:

In just a decade, then, the community college was transformed from an institution primarily devoted to its traditional function of providing transfer programs to one whose identity and curricular offerings increasingly revolved around occupational training (p. 103) …[and] the vocationalized community college was particularly inhospitable environment for transfer. (p. 130)

In addition to the economic and social factors, the vocational mission of the community college was further supported by philanthropic groups such as the Carnegie Commission. Prestigious foundation support provided legitimacy to the institution and funneled funds into strengthening the vocational mission (Brint & Karabel, 1989). However, the most critical source of material support in this decade was the federal government. In the period of the late sixties into the early seventies, federal financial aid increased 15 fold, meaning that access to a college education was becoming increasingly affordable and accessible via community colleges specifically (Brint & Karabel, 1989). This led to almost half of the students enrolled in higher education in the 1980s attending a community college (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

In 1990, the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges claimed it ‘The Year of the Transfer’. However, the status of the transfer function in this most decade remained precarious. With reports suggesting over 80% of community college students desiring to transfer
and complete a Bachelor’s degree (Horn & Skomsvold, 2012), but many scholars finding a 20% to 30% gap in four-year degree completion between students who start at a community college and those that start at the four-year institution the transfer function is far from a model of success (Monaghan & Attwell, 2015).

Compounding the paradox were the economic conditions in the 1990s and early 2000s that caused the mission of the community college to be challenged. With declining financial support, the capacity of community colleges started to come to a breaking point, and the institution that used to offer free and/or low-cost education opportunities started to run out of options to serve more students at the current cost (Beach, 2011). However, it is this effort to continually serve an increasing number and diversity of students that has brought the community college some notoriety in this era of educational reform and institutional effectiveness (Beach, 2011). Though it has won in providing open-access to higher education, it has not realized the pathway in translating the access to success in transfer to the four-year institutions at the same rate. In fact, Beach (2011) suggested that the achievement gap between white and minority students specifically is widening. Though a greater percentage of minority students are enrolling in community colleges, their success in transferring to a four-year institution has lagged behind that of their white counterparts and the gap has grown throughout the 1990s (Beach, 2011).

In our current era of increasing accountability and declining funding, it has become imperative that community colleges strengthen their relationship with the four-year universities (Dougherty, 1994). The transfer function in this era has tried to focus on the creation of direct articulation agreements to shore up the transfer pathway. Research began to address the barriers to transfer and ways to mediate them. One of the strongest arguments has been for articulation agreements that would remove the credit loss, physical and mental barriers of transfer, and
increase the likeness of the community college and four-year curriculum (Dougherty, 1994). However, articulation agreements have yet to solve the gap in aspiration and achievement of four-year degrees for those who start at a community college (Anderson, Sun, & Alfonso, 2006). While in previous decades a typical community college student was a high school graduate that had decided on a course of study and pursued the first two years of their program at the community college before transferring, today’s typical student is much more likely to be part-time, low-income, minority, working, older, and other factors that impact their interest in and use of the transfer function (Knoell, 1996). It is in this climate that we begin to explore the transfer transition process from the two-year to four-year institution.

**Overview of Transfer**

Investigation of the transfer function and student outcomes are essential for higher education (Laanan, 2001; Laanan & Jain, 2017). Previous research has found an 11% gap in stopping out of transfer students versus native juniors, showcasing a significant group difference in likelihood to persist post-transfer (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). However, other research has shown that there is negligible difference in graduation rates of students post-transfer when compared to their junior peers (Melguizo, Kienzel, & Alfonso, 2011). This contradiction of findings is important to investigate further because if we are relying on this pathway to increase the democratization of higher education and produce the needed number of graduates for our future workforce, we need to elucidate its true success rate (Handel, 2013; Melguizo et al., 2011).

In an exploratory study of the transfer student transition, Gard, Paton, and Gosselin (2012) found that the main factors that affected the transfer process were academic advising, access to financial aid, and social/cultural issues. The literature finds that financial issues are a
recurrent theme in the transfer process as is the importance of academic advising for transfer (Dougherty, 1987). However, many factors affect the transfer process, transition, and ultimate integration into the receiving institution. This section will specifically address the rates of transfer and the role of the student background on likelihood for transfer student success.

**Current State of Transfer**

Melguizo et al. (2011) suggested that the barrier to increasing degree attainment for students who start at the community college is not only addressing the community college itself, but also the transfer process. Transfer students must transverse from one intuitional culture to another, and undergo a second adjustment period at the four-year institution (Dougherty, 1987; Glass & Bunn, 1998). It is this process that seems to be most pertinent to address since these students who have begun the process of transfer have indicated a clear desire to attain the bachelor’s which separates them from the other potential student groups at the community college (Long & Kurlander, 2009). Vertical transfer, or transfer from the community college to a four-year institution, is the most common type of transfer (Peter & Cataldi, 2005). However, the rate of students traversing to the four-year institution remains low, around 33% (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Even more staggering is the rate at which these students who transfer complete baccalaureate degrees. The most recent estimate of degree completion is 42% of those who transfer complete a baccalaureate degree, which represents only 14% of those who started their educational journey at the community college (Jenkins & Fink, 2016).

Research by Turner (1992) further suggests that relationships built between two-year and four-year institutions in terms of transfer are self-perpetuating. Those with strong partnerships continue to strengthen and increase transfer pathways, while those with smaller numbers of
students or lower transfer rates fail to strengthen. This work highlights the importance of not leaving the analysis of transfer at the individual level, but rather elevating it to the institutional role in supporting transfer student success (Turner, 1992).

However, these statistics of transfer and ultimate degree completion are not without critique. Bahr (2009) suggested that the single-college framework is highly problematic in measuring transfer and degree attainment rates. It is suggested that using this framework may overstate observed differences in sociodemographic variables for degree completion while also having the potential to suppress important findings related to patterns of transfer and student success. The extensive work undertaken by Cohen and colleagues on the Transfer Assembly Project has highlighted the significance of a consistent reporting mechanism and definition to properly assess student outcomes for the community college system. After a decade of research, Cohen & Sanchez (1997) reported a consistent rate of transfer between 22-25 percent for those starting at a community college. Furthermore, Glass and Bunn (1998) suggested that students who transfer from community colleges do graduate from the four-year institutions, but that sufficient time must be given for them to achieve the same degree outcomes as native students. Thus, while gaps in degree attainment have been shown in several previous studies, there are critiques on the singular-institution framework being used and the timeframes in which comparisons of degree attainment are made.

In addition to a review of the productivity of the transfer process at the organizational level, some research has suggested the importance of student background and its effect on persistence of students post-transfer. The extant research regarding this interplay of student inputs on achievement outcomes will be reviewed in the following section.
Role of the Student Background

Bragg (2017) suggested that in the next era of research on transfers, special attention must be paid to how individual characteristics affect how groups gain access, experience, and benefit from the transfer process. Previous research has shed light on several aspects of the individual student that have been found to influence their likelihood for success via transfer and ultimate graduation from the receiving institution. Examples of attributes that have been found as significant mediators of transfer outcomes include: previous academic achievement, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, gender, parental education, college expectations/aspirations, self-confidence, and locus of control. Each of these individual characteristics will be reviewed regarding their relationship to transfer student success.

Academic achievement. The impact of academic achievement can be viewed at multiple points in a student’s academic career. First, at the entrance into college such as the impact of high school grade point average (GPA) first related to the achievement of an academic credential at the community college prior to transfer and then later its impact on baccalaureate degree completion. For an example of the pre-college impact, Kinnick and Kimpner (1988) found that high school GPA and rigor of high school curriculum was strongly associated with eventual degree completion of transfer students. This finding was further supported by Laanan (2001) that found a strong influence of high school preparation on the propensity for aspirations to transfer to a four-year institution, which are known to impact degree attainment. A recent analysis by Turk (2018) further illuminated the importance of high school GPA and earning dual-enrollment credits on eventual degree completion in an extensive longitudinal study.

In the transfer phase, Wang (2009) found that the single strongest predictor of baccalaureate degree attainment by community college transfers was community college GPA.
The importance of community college performance pre-transfer was also validated by Laanan (2007) and shown to be predictive of academic adjustment. Furthermore, Mourad and Hong’s (2011) study of over 3,000 transfer students and the predictors of their baccalaureate attainment also supported the significance of cumulative GPA prior to transfer. Then, a recent study by Lopez and Jones (2017) found that obtaining an Associate’s degree before transferring, transfer GPA, and number of transfer credit hours all successfully predicted a student’s cumulative GPA post-transfer highlighting the strong and dynamic relationship of previous academic performance on future propensity for success. However, other research has found less significance regarding completion of an Associate’s degree, but still strong agreement with GPA as a predictor of baccalaureate degree attainment (Turk, 2018). The importance of academic performance, whether it be before matriculation at the community college or at the community college prior to transfer, is well-validated in the literature for its impact on eventual degree completion and other student success outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Wang, 2009).

However, it is also important to note recent research that has illuminated a “Talent Blind Spot” for students at community colleges where on average 50,000 high-performing students in middle or lower-income levels do not transfer (Fresquez et al., 2018). While research has shown that academic performance in high school and at the two-year institution is important, the reality of intersectionality of student characteristics remains significant for understanding student success outcomes. One the most significant mediating variables for transfer student success is socioeconomic status.

**Socioeconomic status.** A national study of higher education found that 44% of low-income students enrolled at community colleges versus four-year institutions indicating that future transfer students are highly likely to include large numbers of lower SES students
(National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011). However, research has suggested that students in higher socioeconomic quartiles are more likely to transfer to a four-year institution, persist, and ultimately graduate (Wang, 2009). In fact, for every quintile increase in SES the odds that the student earns a baccalaureate degree increases almost 1.3 times (Wang, 2009). These strong findings support the importance of socioeconomic status in researching the baccalaureate degree attainment of transfer students and suggest more research is needed to understand its specific importance for transfer students.

**Race and ethnicity.** Wang (2009) did not find that race or ethnicity were predictive of differences in persistence post-transfer or ultimate graduation from the four-year institution. However, Mourad and Hong (2011) found ethnicity to be one of the strongest predictors of degree attainment by transfer students. Specifically, they found a 32% attainment gap between African American and White students when comparing only vertical transfers directly from the community college to the four-year institution. This large gap in attainment cannot be ignored or explained away by confounding variables according to Mourad and Hong (2011). This finding is similar to other studies that found gaps in persistence from the first-year literature as well (Berger & Milem, 1999). This inequality of education attainment across student populations is particularly troubling because community colleges are known to enroll a higher percentage of minority students (Ma & Baum, 2016). Thus, if their likelihood of attainment is lower by starting at the community college and lower still after matriculation (Mourad & Hong, 2011), this incites the need to further explore if race/ethnicity affect transfer student outcomes and if so in what way.

**Gender.** The previous decades have seen dramatic change in the way gender is quantified in higher education enrollment showing a reversal trend of women outnumbering men at every
institution type (Buchman & DiPrete, 2006). However, research has only started to look into how that reversal plays out in degree outcomes for transfer students of different genders. Wang (2009) found that women were more likely to persist and ultimately graduate with a four-year degree than men transferring from a community college. This finding is similar to Moumouris (1997) who found that the majority of transfer students that persisted to graduation were female and that they had a higher overall GPA than male transfer students. However, Reynolds (2012) found that women were disproportionally affected by family income/SES in degree achievement and could be less likely to persist. This shows the intersectionality of student characteristics and importance of reviewing each dimension of a student and its impact on success. Further exploration is needed regarding gender and degree outcomes for transfer students to better understand its role in degree attainment.

**Parental education.** Research by Terenzini et al. (1994) on non-traditional and transfer students found that in particular for first generation students, that the college transition posed as a disjunction because they were not following a traditional path for their family and this required more support. Research regarding the prediction of academic adjustment and student success (measured by cumulative university GPA) post-transfer found that father’s educational level successfully predicted the likelihood of adjustment and graduation for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) students in particular (Lopez & Jones, 2017). The higher the status of parental education of the student the higher the level of adjustment (Lopez & Jones, 2017). While there is not a great deal of research regarding transfer student outcomes and parental education, there is initial evidence that it can affect their degree attainment outcomes.

**College aspirations and motivation.** Previous research has shown that a student’s expectation to graduate with a bachelor’s degree at the start of their college career significantly
affects their likelihood of transfer to the four-year institution and ultimate graduation (Ishanti, 2008; Wang, 2009). A recent longitudinal review of factors that influence upward transfer found that college aspirations were directly associated with higher rates of transfer (Turk & Chen, 2017). These findings regarding transfer students agree with the vast amount of literature on the importance of collegiate expectations for student success in general (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Furthermore, Ellis (2013) qualitatively studied transfer students that had positively adjusted to the four-year collegiate environment and found that self-motivation was a common characteristic of those students who were successful. Relatedly, other research has shown that the main driver of drop out by transfer students was the lack of motivation to complete the degree (Kinnick & Kimpner, 1988). Even still, some research has suggested that university GPA can be predicted by a transfer student’s level of motivation and their intentions to graduate from a four-year institution clearly emphasizing its importance (Moser, 2013). The importance of motivation and aspirations is a clear factor in degree attainment and important to consider when evaluating completion of transfer students.

**Self-confidence.** Laanan (2007) found that social self-confidence is a significant predictor of social adjustment. Essentially, students who feel more competent socially are more willing to engage in social opportunities and become more integrated at the four-year institution. This can have strong implications on transfer student outcomes if, as it has been exhibited, social adjustment and engagement are important for persistence of transfer students (Wang, 2009).

**Locus of control.** Wang (2009) suggests that the path to the baccalaureate for transfer students is more arduous and may require more motivation and tenacity to be achieved. Due to this, having a higher perceived degree of control may support their decision to remain enrolled
and persist (Wang, 2009). Additionally, Laanan (2007) showed that intellectual self-control predicted academic adjustment at the four-year institution indicating that a student’s ability to regulate their actions in regards to academics was important to their eventual adjustment to the four-year institution.

While the research regarding student characteristics and their influence on degree attainment help to build predictions of who may succeed in achievement of the baccalaureate degree, it does little in the way of addressing what institutions can do to affect the likelihood of degree attainment. This is where the emphasis of research has moved more recently, recognizing the importance of looking at how students are mediating their experiences at the receiving institution and what students are doing to increase their likelihood of success. Additionally, an extension of this inquiry is looking at what institutions can do to support or increase the effect size of those experiences we know to be important to a student’s likelihood of success. This new emphasis is summarized well by Kuh (2009) who suggested that student engagement (or involvement) is “the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities” (p. 683). It is this process of how transfer students adjust to the four-year institution and what involvement experiences seem to be important for their success post-transfer that the review will turn to next.

Transfer Student Capital

Transfer Student Capital is a term first coined by Laanan (1998); it is defined as the accumulation of knowledge and skills required by transfer students to be successful at the four-year institution. Much like the accumulation of social capital related to the work of Bourdieu (1986), Laanan’s work (1998, 2004; Laanan et al., 2010) focuses specifically on the acquired
information, relationships, and abilities that a student can acquire at a community college pre-transfer that will support their success post-transfer. For example, it is suggested that both the environment and habits of the community college influence the transfer student’s behavior at the receiving institution (Laanan, 2004). In Moser’s (2013) revised model of transfer student success, Transfer Student Capital was expanded to include academic counseling, faculty/staff validation and interaction, financial understanding, mentoring, coping style, learning and study skills, and motivation (p. 62). While not all of the added components were found to be significant, interactions and experiences with faculty and motivation were predictive of transfer student success (measured by GPA post-transfer). Furthermore, other studies regarding the importance of Transfer Student Capital have found that those with higher learning or study skills acquired at the community college experienced higher levels of academic transfer adjustment at the four-year institution (Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010). While the focus of this research was on post-transfer experiences, it is valuable to consider the accumulation of Transfer Student Capital by students and the effects of it on their understanding, definition, and description of their four-year experiences. Additionally, it is important to consider how that pre-transfer accumulation influences their ability to be successful in adjusting and graduating from the four-year institution.

Transfer Adjustment

Transfer students have the unique experience of adjusting to the community college environment and then being challenged to adjust once again to the institutional policies and culture at the four-year institution (Glass & Bunn, 1998; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). Laanan (2001) summarized the effects in this adjustment process to be: transfer shock (initial dip in grades upon transfer), social adjustment struggles to become engaged at the new campus, and
academic struggles to adjust to a new level of rigor required. Each of these aspects has been reviewed by various authors and confirmed or disconfirmed to a variable extent leaving the literature somewhat divided on the importance of each area.

Additionally, much of the extant research regarding transfer adjustment or engagement focuses on comparison of transfer students to native students who started at the four-year institution to discern differences (Ishanti & McKitrick, 2010). Another approach is using quantitative methods to identify an individual-level focus on personal, demographic, and environmental characteristics that might predict the success of transfer students at the receiving institution (Laanan, 2001). Previous research has used three approaches to study transfer adjustment including examining the psychological, educational (including faculty-student interactions), and the campus climate environments including campus diversity and student experiences across groups (Laanan, 2001).

As mentioned previously, a significant area of focus in transfer adjustment experiences have centered on understanding the academic adjustment or more specifically, Transfer Shock, a phenomenon first coined by Hills (1965). This construct remained the focus of transfer student literature for several decades, but remains debatable in importance in the literature (Bahr et al., 2013). The following review of transfer adjustment literature will briefly review Transfer Shock as it is an engrained area in the extant literature, but it will move beyond this concept into more broad aspects of adjustment postulated by Laanan, Townsend and Wilson, Owens, Flaga, and others.

**Transfer Shock**

One of the most prominent research agendas in the transfer adjustment literature is the measurement of “Transfer Shock” first suggested by Hills (1965). Transfer Shock “describes the
relative decline in grade point average that community college students predictably experience upon entering a four-year institution” (Bahr et al., 2013, p. 465). Bahr and colleagues (2013) suggested that while this concept is an essential piece of the post-transfer literature, it has perhaps overstated and may have received more attention than necessary comparative to other less obvious phenomenon. Several researchers (e.g., Diaz, 1992) found that transfer shock is often only for the student’s initial transition period (one to two semesters) to the four-year institution and the dip in GPA is modest. Xu, Jaggars, and Fletcher (2016) found evidence of an academic shock period, but indicated that transfer students’ GPAs equalized within one semester to be almost equivalent to native student GPAs and Auluck and West (2017) found no evidence of transfer sock at all in post-transfer grades.

While the evidence of academic difficulty in the transition is a generally supported theme in the literature, it is explained most consistently by the finding of the four-year curriculum being more arduous than the community college (Chrystal et al., 2013). The important question remains if this temporary negative academic indicator is associated with more long-term effects such as attrition. Only a few studies have shown a connection between initial transfer shock and the decreased persistence rate of transfer students (Dougherty, 1987; Ishanti, 2008). While the concept of transfer shock has been well studied, its actual impact on baccalaureate degree attainment remains in question. Furthermore, research that is more recent has suggested that the components of transfer shock may extend beyond the initial academic decline and the psychological and environmental aspects may be more significant (Laanan, 2001). With this broader conceptualization, it brings the concept of transfer shock in line with more recent literature that looks at several facets of a transfer student’s adjustment period.
Researchers such as Terenzini et al. (1994) have used qualitative methods to uncover the process of how students transition and get involved in the collegiate environment. Using a cross-sectional focus group method, over 100 participants were interviewed at four different institution types to understand their transition to the four-year institution. Ultimately, the authors surmised “a successful transition for any given student is a cooperative activity, involving the individual and the will to succeed and a variety of other people willing to make success for that student possible” (Terenzini et al., 1994, p. 72).

Specifically, students in Terenzini et al. (1994) expressed a need for validating experiences in their transition:

Validation is empowering, confirming, and supporting. It is a series of in- and out-of class experiences with family, peers, faculty members, and staff through which students come to feel accepted in their new community, receive confirming signals that they can be successful in college and are worthy of a place there, have their previous work and life experiences recognized as legitimate forms of knowledge and learning, have their contributions in class be recognized as valuable. (p. 66)

These validation experiences, and in particular validation of their previous higher education and life experiences and those experiences in concert with faculty members were found to be critical to their successful transition (Terenzini et al., 1994). Then, building on the critical importance of validation experiences, Barnett (2010) proposed measures of validation as a critical component of involvement for community college students and found that these interactions with faculty were significant for persistence and degree attainment as well.
Other research has focused specifically on the first year of transition for community college students such as the work of Flaga (2006). Using qualitative inquiry, five points along a continuum of transition emerged: Learning Resources, Connecting, Familiarity, Negotiating, and Integrating. Essentially, the model suggests that transfer students acquire basic information (Learning Resources) and then use those that provided the resources (advisors, peers) to develop deeper relationships labeled as Connecting. After Connecting, students are motivated to change their behaviors to be successful, which is a marker of the Negotiating stage-critical for successful adjustment. Finally, a student develops Familiarity, which “foster(s) a sense of being a part of the 4-year university community” (Flaga, 2006, p. 9). After a student feels this sense of belonging, Integrating, which signals a “shift in perception or identity” occurs and signals the final step in their transition process to the receiving institution (Flaga, 2006, p. 9). This theoretical model of transition is newer, but does offer an outline to studying the critical points along a transfer student’s adjustment process including the social engagement’s influence on successful transition.

Some research has also addressed the impact of the student variables on student adjustment and success. Laanan (2007) found that post-transfer, the impact of sociodemographic characteristics was no longer significant to either type of adjustment. This finding suggested that while demographics influence the access to higher education and propensity for transfer, post-transfer, the success of the student was more determined by the actions that the student took on campus (academically and socially).

While there has been investigation of the role student characteristics and students’ actions play regarding success post-transfer, very few studies have addressed the role of the institution in the process. The findings that do exist primarily focus on the impact of institutional size related
to transfer students’ ability to socially and academically integrate (e.g., Townsend & Wilson, 2009). While the research on transfer adjustment is not fully developed, Laanan (1998) endorsed the concept that involvement and quality of effort contribute to positive adjustment for transfer students. Thus, examining transfer students’ involvement (both academic and social) is significant to understanding their successful transition to the four-year institution and eventual attainment of the baccalaureate degree. Previous research on the transfer adjustment process to the four-year institution has shown that the students perception of a successful transfer would require academic adjustment to the new institution including the level of rigor of the new curriculum as well as finding a way to fit in socially in the new environment (Owens, 2010). It is this dual-requirement of academic and social adjustment that is the focus of the following section.

Transfer Student Involvement

The literature on transfer student involvement at the four-year institution is difficult to address due to the ambiguity in using integration, involvement, and engagement (Bahr et al., 2013). Because these terms are used so interchangeably in the literature, this review will attempt to parse out those findings that are pertinent to involvement based on Astin’s (1999) concept of involvement. The review will also include articles that may have used other terms, but the findings detailed behaviors that can be described as involvement. For example, Bahr et al. (2013) found several studies in the transfer research that were framed on Tinto’s (1993) integration concepts, but measured behaviors not perceptions of fit. It was thus suggested that a review of the literature would need to accept this conflation of terms to understand the true experiences of students’ post-transfer.
While the literature may use terms interchangeably, the findings that support the impact of involvement on positive transfer student outcomes is less hazy. Several researchers have examined involvement and the resulting impact it has on college student outcomes such as persistence and degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, it is well cited that transfer student involvement differs from traditional student involvement and requires different paradigms when quantifying and describing it (Wang & Wharton, 2006).

The significance of exploring this difference for transfer students is further highlighted when considering the basis of Astin’s (1999) framework that involvement represents a finite construct of time and effort and how students use this investment of time in college represents their agency in the college experience (Bahr et al., 2013). Previous research has supported the idea that transfer students have several other draws on their time including work and life responsibilities (Dougherty, 1978) so their choices of involvement may differ substantially from a first-year student. If transfer student involvement differs significantly from first-year student involvement on which many persistence models are based, then further exploration of transfer student involvement is necessary.

In a large, multi-institutional comparison, Ishanti and McKitrick (2010) compared the engagement of transfer students post-transfer to native students at the four-year institution. Using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the authors compared the two populations’ levels of engagement in academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments. The authors also delineated community college transfers who matriculated as sophomores versus juniors to see if timing of matriculation affected student engagement outcomes (Ishanti & McKitrick, 2010). The findings were conclusive that transferring as a sophomore did have more
negative outcomes than transferring as a junior and overall, the results of the study showed significantly higher engagement by native students than transfer students in active and collaborative learning, student faculty interaction, and enriching educational experiences supporting the thesis that transfer students are less likely to be engaged on campus. The impact of this engagement gap is significant as “Enriching Educational Experiences” are positively correlated with institutional GPA illuminating a relationship between on-campus engagement and traditional student success outcomes that is less prevalent for transfer students (Ishanti & McKitrick, 2010).

Many studies of transfer student engagement have focused on engagement prior to matriculation in comparison to post-transfer or emphasized academic engagement versus social engagement at the four-year institution (e.g., Lopez & Jones, 2017; Moser, 2013). However, Flaga (2006) examined transfer student engagement holistically and defined both the academic and social dimensions. Academic engagement included activities such as “interactions with faculty (both in and out of the classroom), with study groups, advisors, and seeking information on career opportunities” (Flaga, 2006, p. 6). Social engagement included “formal and informal interactions with other students outside of the classroom, through student organizations, parties, residence halls, apartment complexes, common areas on campus, and other contacts” (Flaga, 2006, p. 6). The importance of both forms of engagement have been well validated in the literature and as Strage (1999) suggested, the degree to which a student is successful in the transition to the four-year institution is highly dependent upon their comfort and connection in their new environment which is facilitated through their academic and social engagement experiences. The following section will explore both the academic and social dimensions of engagement.
Academic Involvement

Lester et al. (2013) found through qualitative inquiry that transfer students’ definition of academic involvement aligned closely with the work of Kuh et al. (2005) including connections with faculty members and academic challenge. While the definition was aligned with previous conceptions, the participants still did not report high levels of academic engagement anywhere but in the classroom. While connection with faculty and peers outside of the class was limited, they did enjoy challenging coursework and purposefully sought out challenging academics to feel more academically engaged (Lester et al., 2013). The authors also found that transfer students found a sense of belonging through their academic engagement and a sense of purpose that led to them feeling no different post-transfer from their native peers (Lester et al., 2013). Similar research has provided examples of this academically based social engaged including in-class collaboration and study groups formed through their academic coursework that created a social community to engage with (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). It is possible that this finding also aligns with Flaga (2006) that addressed the possible intersectionality of academic and social engagement.

Flaga (2006) showed that transfer students navigated their academic environment for social engagement purposes also using the classroom to develop relationships with peers and expand their social network. This finding of defining social engagement in terms of academically based experiences has appeared several times throughout the literature (Owens, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). This is an important differentiation to make, as previous studies may not have accounted for the intersectionality of academic and social engagement for transfer students when measuring either dimension of engagement. Tinto (2000) explained this academically based social engagement:
Engagement in the community of the classroom can become a gateway for subsequent student involvement in the academic and social communities of the college generally. Thus it is easy to understand the frequent observation that if students, especially those who commute, do not get engaged within the classroom, they are unlikely to get engaged beyond the classroom. (p. 82)

Tinto further suggested that academic engagement in the classroom leads to the development of a peer group and social engagement while working on academic tasks. This initial academically based engagement can then permeate the out-of-class experience as continued social engagement (Tinto, 2000). Though less work has been done to look at this intersection of involvement types, the research of Deli-Amen (2011) surrounding socio-academic integrative moments provides an initial exploration of what this kind of involvement may look like. More research is needed to see if this phenomenon is common among transfer students post-transfer.

Though the conceptualization has differed, research has explored which components of academic engagement are predictive of transfer student adjustment. Specifically, Lopez and Jones (2017) found that interaction with a faculty member at the four-year institution successfully predicted a student’s level of academic adjustment showing the importance of faculty integration with transfer student initiatives. However, Townsend and Wilson (2006) found that some transfer students shared the perception of being a number and feeling as if a faculty member’s priority (specifically at large research universities) was their research over the investment in an individual student. This speaks to a misalignment that may affect transfer students positive adjustment experiences if they require positive academic interactions with faculty to support their success, but are unable to achieve these experiences do to faculty’s divided priorities.
Relatedly, Moser (2013) found that experiences with faculty at the university including utilization of office hours, career guidance, and communication related to coursework were all significant predictors of coping ability for transfer students. While coping ability is not a traditional measure of student success such as GPA or graduation rates, it does show an important relationship between academic engagement and other known correlates to positive student success outcomes.

Social Involvement

While much of the extant research has focused on first-year student’s social engagement, there is a growing body of literature to explore how transfer students mediate social involvement as well (e.g., Townsend & Wilson, 2009). However, several studies have found that social engagement for transfer students differs significantly from traditional student definitions of involvement and requires more investigation (Wang & Wharton, 2006). Interestingly, in the studies that do exist, the significance of social involvement for transfer students is more contested than the academic involvement dimension and found to be less pervasive than the academic involvement (Lester et al., 2013). Ishanti and McKitrick (2010) offered a possible explanation for the gap in engagement by transfer students when compared to native juniors, which highlights the dual process required for transfer students to adjust to the new institution while trying to seek out new opportunities. It is this divided attention and added stress of adjustment that may cause transfer student engagement to lag behind native students at the four-year institutions.

However, the benefits of social involvement in for transfer students are supported. Some research has suggested that students are more likely to be satisfied with their university life when they are actively engaged with peers and in social activities (Berger & Malaney, 2003). Though
the students benefit, there are several barriers to social involvement as suggested by Dougherty (1987). Dougherty’s work found that transfer students lack of social engagement due to several factors including the requirement to work, increased pressure to validate their admission to the four-year university, and most pertinently to this study, many of the social involvement opportunities are geared towards the recruitment of first-year students and neglect transfer students. It is this feeling of isolation or being forgotten that drives a deeper divide for social involvement for transfer students.

Despite the difficulty that transfer students may face, social involvement is important to their success at the four-year institution. Participants in Davies and Dickmann’s (1998) study shared that they used extracurricular opportunities to balance and relieve stress they felt in the academic arena. Furthermore, in work by Flaga (2006) on the process of transfer transition and adjustment, the author found the dimension of Connecting, the most socially bound construct, to be focused on the development of relationships on campus. One of the key behaviors in this construct was transfer students developing their social circle at the four-year institution by connecting with current students who act as gatekeepers to involvement information and opportunities (Flaga, 2006). This finding shows the significance of not only engagement for the transfer student’s social purposes, but also the mechanism that leads the socially engaged transfer student to be successful through gaining access to more information and additional opportunities. The author also found that specifically involvement outside of the academic environment was critical for moving transfer students through Connecting towards Familiarity and their ultimate successful transition to the receiving institution (Flaga, 2006).

In a qualitative study of transfer student’s adjustment, Owens (2010) found that one of the most common themes in initial transition included feeling out of place, like a number, or
simply lost at the new institution. Some studies have suggested that social involvement does not affect the persistence of transfer students because they “come from an institution where the stereotypical forms of social integration... are not prevalent or particularly desired” (Townsend & Wilson, 2009, p. 418). The line of thought is that they did not come to expect social engagement during their community college years and so they are less likely to be looking for those opportunities post-transfer. However, it is clear from other studies, that students still desire this kind of involvement, but may not know how to mediate the four-year institution to achieve it (Townsend & Wilson, 2009).

Townsend and Wilson’s (2006) qualitative inquiry further supported this sentiment with transfer students expressing difficulty with social integration and particularly reflecting on how the native students had time to form relationships and that they struggled to find a place in the already established community. Other scholars have looked at “sense of community” formed by transfer students which means the “individual’s view of whether he or she feels included in the college community” (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 327). Findings of one study suggested that transfer students have a greater desire for sense of community at the post-transfer institution versus the community college, but that the level of need remains unmet for most students (Townley et al., 2013). This lack of community was further exacerbated by the lack of social community within the academic environment that transfer students were accustomed to at the community college (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). As discussed previously, several studies point to the potential intersectionality of navigating the academic environment for social engagement, but the conceptualization remains understudied (Flaga, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Another reason given for the lower incidences of social involvement have pointed to transfer students having to reduce other commitments so that they can focus on their academic
success (Berger & Malaney, 2003). In one study, when transfer students where probed about traditional definitions of on-campus social engagement they shared sentiments of that type of engagement being a distraction from their true purpose of attending college: academics (Lester et al., 2013). In other studies, transfer students appeared to be “deferring involvement in the non-academic activities and life of the campus until they felt they had their academic lives under control” (Terenzini et al., 2004, p. 64). Similar to the zero-sum game suggested in Astin (1999), Townley et al. (2013) found that students who did exhibit high social involvement experienced larger post-transfer GPA declines showing a tradeoff of academic involvement for social engagement. However, contrary to both of these findings, other literature has shown the importance of student’s social involvement on campus and the positive effects it can have on their adjustment, institutional commitment, and ultimate persistence (Flaga, 2006; Laanan, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Wang, 2009).

Another factor that seems significant regarding social engagement of transfer students is preparedness. Studies such as Chrystal et al. (2013) found that given the comparison between academic and social transfer of the participants it was the readiness factor, which differentiated them. While transfer students expected the academic obstacles of the transition, the struggles of social adjustment came as a shock. Specifically, those that did not readily get involved in Greek Life, live on campus, or have a previous connection on campus with faculty struggled to feel a sense of belonging on campus (Chrystal et al., 2013). These students reported feeling isolated leading to a lower level of satisfaction for the overall university experience. Due to this, many regretted not seeking out opportunities to be engaged early in their transition and hoped to be more engaged the following year to build social community while balancing their primary focus on academics (Chrystal et al., 2013). This points to importance of post-transfer reflection to
address barriers to success for transfer students. While a first semester transfer student might not express a regret for lack of social engagement, when asking a cross-sectional sample that includes transfer students later in the adjustment process can provide insight for the importance of social engagement to transfer students.

Research has also shown that timing of transition is particularly important for social engagement and specifically a negative effect for sophomore students (versus junior transfers) in developing their own peer network post-transfer (Ishanti & McKitrick, 2010). The findings suggest that these early transfers miss the freshman community building experiences and did not spend significant time at the community college to build a pre-transfer community. Other research has also suggested the potential importance of timing as a factor in measuring transfer student’s social involvement (Townsend & Wilson, 2009). Mannan (2007) found that social engagement opportunities were more important to lower-division students than upper-division students and considering that most community college transfer students are considered upper-division when they come into the four-year institution this could be another factor affecting their social involvement.

A final reason for the debate regarding social involvement of transfer student stems from work by Lester et al. (2013) that found evidence of social engagement by transfer students, but the involvement was far different from the traditional conceptualizations in the literature. This and other work highlights the need to critically review the experiences that are being considered social involvement and what definitions are underlying those experiences. For example, Chrystal et al. (2013) found that transfer students’ social integration and engagement stemmed primarily from previously existing relationships with family members or friends who had already attended the institution and not from new relationships formed post-transfer. This signals their definition
of social involvement to be an external social involvement whereas current definitions specifically address on-campus social involvement.

Supporting this finding, Lester et al. (2013) reported that transfer students often defined social engagement in terms of external community versus university community activities. Family support, church groups, and non-profits offered social support, opportunities to build community, and practical support for life events such as caring for their dependents. Interestingly, they did see these social engagement and support experiences as learning opportunities and suggested an importance to their commitment to their collegiate experience, but these definitions are not what is typically described for social engagement. This finding is consistent with some other education literature that suggests that support outside of the college environment is most important for this more non-traditional aged group (Kember, 1999). These findings of transfer student experiences being influential to their success, but not falling into traditionally used understandings of social involvement requires further investigation.

Despite the commonality of obstacles and varying definitions of social involvement, research continues to find that social involvement experiences have a significant positive effect on persistence post-transfer and degree attainment (Wang, 2009). Specifically, participation in one of the following categories of student involvement proved significant in their student success outcomes: performing arts, college newspapers, student government/politics, social clubs, and fraternities (Wang, 2009). While more work needs to be done to better understand how transfer students themselves define social involvement, it is clear that it can be an influential factor in their progress towards achieving the baccalaureate degree.
Involvement Summary

Despite the conflated terms surrounding transfer students’ involvement at the four-year institution, the literature has validated its importance for transfer student success. However, the actual function and impact of both academic and social involvement remains unclear and requires more investigation. While Terenzini et al. (1994) found that students expressed more difficulty in the academic transition versus the social transition, Britt and Hurt (1999) found that transfer students were able resolve many of the academic issues in their first year of transition, but the social engagement issues remained. It is clear in just the comparison of two studies, in addition to the several others in the previous literature review that the true mechanism of academic and social engagement requires more research. Future work should look at the intersection of the recently emerging socio-academic integrative experiences suggested by Deil-Amen (2011) and seek to better understand how transfer students define and engage in social involvement that is not just mediated in the academic environment. Due to the nebulous understanding, qualitative research on the topic provides an excellent opportunity to understand the experience of transfer student involvement and create “hypothesis-generating research” that could then drive future quantitative work through creating a clear understanding of the constructs for transfer students (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, p. 4).

Summary of Qualitative Findings Related to Transfer Student Involvement

In light of the choice of qualitative methodology for this research, a review of literature as it relates only to qualitative findings is needed to contextualize the current study. While Townsend (1995) undertook some of the earliest qualitative work on the experiences of transfer students post-transfer, the interest and expanse of authors has grown significantly in the last twenty years. The following sections represent the commonalities (and dis-commonalities where
appropriate) regarding themes that emerge from the extant qualitative work on transfer student experiences and involvement at the four-year institution.

**Institutional Agents**

The first common thread among current qualitative findings is the importance of institutional agents. While the definition may vary from focusing more narrowly on faculty interaction (Fee, Prolman, & Thomas, 2009; Miller, 2013; Rodriguez & Kerrigan, 2016; Starobin, Smith, & Laanan, 2016; Townsend, 1995; Townsend & Wilson, 2009) to the importance of all actors at the institution including administrators, staff, and even peers (Ellis, 2013; Flaga, 2006; Gard, Patton, & Gosselin, 2012; Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017; Packard, Gagnon, LaBelle, Jeffers, & Lynn, 2011), the role of others at the institution is important related to transfer student involvement and success. Flaga (2006) particularly emphasizes in her model of transition for transfer students the importance of ‘Learning Resources’ that connect transfer students to the institution and critical information. Additionally, these actors may end up being the agents that move students to the ‘Connecting’ phase where they develop deeper relationships that ultimately help transfers students get comfortable on campus and acclimate to the new environment.

Relatedly, one of the barriers to success that some transfer students cite is the inaccessibility of faculty members (Townsend, 1995). However, several qualitative findings show the significance of that faculty-student relationship from assisting with STEM persistence (Starobin et al., 2016) to helping them get engaged and feel connected to the four-year institution (Packard et al. 2011; Rodriguez & Kerrigan, 2016). In light of this significance, several researchers suggest the importance of transfer students engaging with faculty early in their transition to build those relationships (Packard et al., 2011).
Self-Reliance and Aspirations

The second cluster of findings related to transfer student involvement and success is the importance of self-reliance. While this finding is found in a smaller subset of studies, it is still relevant to the current study, as it seems to be more common in experiences of those who have achieved the bachelor’s degree. In one of the seminal studies of transfer students, Townsend (1995) looked at students who had graduated, were still enrolled, or had dropped out to discern the variation in the experiences of students across those categories. The author found overwhelmingly that those who had graduated were highly self-reliant to be successful.

More recently, in Wilson’s (2014) study of African American transfer student graduates, he identified aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) as one of the most important attributes to their success. Participants commonly shared how their desire to complete their degree and the onus on them to do so for themselves was a main driving force in their success. Furthermore, Ellis’s (2013) study of transfer students sought to identify attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge of successful transfer students. In this case, successful students were those that had made significant progress towards their degree post-transfer. Again, the findings highlighted the importance of being highly motivated and self-reliant to become engaged and succeed at the university. In a finding of those students who were not as successful, Davies and Dickmann’s (1998) found that transfer students on academic probation post-transfer noted their frustration with the university for not communicating that “they are expected to be highly motivated” to succeed as transfer students (p. 553). This finding highlights that possibly those students who are less likely to persist post-transfer may be those who are less motivated to begin with. From the extant findings, one can surmise that to be successful in progressing towards degree attainment that it will require a high level of aspiration and self-reliance to do so.
Academic Achievement, Involvement and Fit

In line with the previously discussed concept of Transfer Shock (Hills, 1965), several qualitative researchers have sought to understand how transfer students perceive the academic environment and challenge of the four-year institution and how the academic transition affects them. Several authors have found that transfer students do perceive the academic challenge of post-transfer more arduous and requiring of additional effort or support to be successful (Chrystal et al., 2013; Lester et al., 2013; Miller, 2013; Townsend, 1995).

In addition to the academic challenge, there is also a theme of significance related to the classroom environment and academic fit of the institution for transfer students. Classroom experiences seem particularly important for women in STEM (Starobin et al., 2016) and in the early transition phases as students acclimate to the new institution (Owens, 2010). Additionally, alignment of career goals with majors and the ability to realize those goals at the institution seem particularly important for this population. Chrystal et al. (2013) found through their inquiry that participants’ decisions to transfer to a specific institution was based on the availability of a desired major or field of study and Packard et al. (2011) found that one of the ways transfer students mediated obstacles post-transfer was by changing their major to find a better fit. An added layer of complexity to this fit is a transfer student’s ability to realize these academic goals at the institution. This finding is consistent across time of studying transfer students ranging from Townsend (1995) to Nunez and Yoshimi (2017) that both included transfer students who did not persist to the baccalaureate and found that one of the main drivers was their inability to realize their academic goal for a variety of reasons (GPA related, major offering, etc.). It is clear that the perceived fit, through either major selection or classroom environment, coupled with the student’s ability to achieve their intended goal is significant for their success post-transfer.
The final theme identified in the literature related to academic involvement is the very pronounced pattern of transfer students mediating the academic environment for social involvement purposes. Several authors have found evidence of this behavior either evidenced by describing academic activities as social involvement (e.g., study groups, supplemental instruction, honors programs) or by student’s explicit comments regarding the importance of the academic environment for them to identify and connect with peers (Ellis, 2013; Flaga, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). This pattern of navigating the academic environment for social engagement is one that they may bring from their experience at the community college where social engagement opportunities may be more limited (Townsend & Wilson, 2009). Due to this expectation it is possible that the competitive nature of the four-year academic environment in the last two years of a degree program may create barriers to this engagement (Townsend, 1995) and leave them without strong ties to the institution, affecting their likelihood of persistence (Miller, 2013).

**Variability of Social Engagement**

While several studies have found that transfer students are ready for the academic challenges and increased rigor of the four-year institution, one of the factors the students seem less prepared for is the social transition (Britt & Hurt, 1999; Chrystal et al., 2013). The level at which this was a barrier for transfer student success at the receiving institution varied based on the importance they placed on social engagement and their perceptions regarding existing social support.

For example, participants in the study by Chrystal et al. (2013) discussed ways of identifying social support through existing relationships with family or friends who had attended the institution versus attempting to create new relationships at the four-year institution. Other
research has highlighted the external definitions transfer students use when discussing social support or involvement listing family, friends, or their community versus a traditional definition of on-campus sponsored involvement opportunities (Lester et al., 2013; Townsend, 1995). The off-campus support function is also a factor in students’ success on-campus and was found consistently within a cross-section of transfer students with varying times at the four-year institution (Lester et al., 2013).

Conversely, others did not feel as though they were struggling socially post-transfer because they did not place a high value on social involvement (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). In some cases that was in comparison to academic involvement which transfer students seem to place a higher value on, but other times it was a general lack of interest in ‘typical social engagement’ (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017). In other cases, studies that specifically focus on transfer students on academic probation post-transfer they feel the social involvement opportunities played a role in their academic weakness as the opportunities were overwhelming and distracting (Davies & Dickmann, 1998). While those findings are based on a choice to participate, some research has suggested that transfer students do not engage as much socially due to time constraints external to their education such as family obligations or work (Miller, 2013). Still others to note the pressure to achieve so much in a compressed amount of time at the four-year institution that social involvement is less of an option (Rodriguez & Kerrigan, 2016). If students are made to choose between involvement opportunities due to their finite resources of time, it seems as though social involvement is the less important of the two in the extant literature.

A final and smaller subset of findings related to social engagement highlight contrary findings related to this attribute. For example, Fee et al. (2009) found in their case study of
almost 100 transfer students that were at the senior level, that the consensus was that social involvement was important to be successful in degree attainment at the four-year institution. Starobin et al. (2016) also found that female transfer students in STEM reported feeling that they benefitted from involvement in student organizations to build community and that the more social capital that they possessed the more successful they were in the transition process. Some research has even highlighted transfer students desire for more intentional social engagement opportunities on campus (Ellis, 2013) and specifically with other transfer students to create their own support network and more comfortability on campus (Rodriguez & Kerrigan, 2016; Wilson, 2014).

One possibility for the variability in findings related to social engagement post-transfer could be the variation at which the participants are asked. While some qualitative studies have asked participants during their first semester or year of transition (Britt & Hurt, 1999; Flaga, 2006; Owens, 2010; Packard et al., 2011), others have waited until the students are closer to graduation or have graduated (Ellis, 2013; Fee et al., 2009; Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017; Townsend, 1995; Townsend & Wilson, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Additional research that looks at timing as it relates to the students perception of importance may be helpful in clarifying this pattern in the literature.

**Qualitative Findings Summary**

From the extant qualitative findings, the main takeaway is that transfer student involvement and experiences on campus vary significantly from native student experiences (Townsend & Wilson, 2009). However, the agreement of the findings related to importance of institutional agents, requirement of self-reliance/aspirations, significance of academic involvement and fit, and finally the more contested, but still valid social involvement construct
lay a qualitative foundation for further inquiry and practice. Transfer student needs at the four-year institution are different and thus require further research and specific interventions to support their success at the institution (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). The current research added to the extant understanding of what is significant for transfer students in order to inform future interventions.

**Theoretical Framework: Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement**

Several extant theories and/or frameworks have been used in the study of transfer student experiences at four-year institutions. Tinto’s Student Integration Theory (1975, 1987, 1993) and Astin’s (1985, 1993, 1999) Theory of Student Involvement are among the most cited and relevant (Bahr et al., 2013). Others have used more sociologically driven theories such as Bourdieu’s (1986) Theory of Social Capital (e.g., Packard et al., 2011; Starobin et al., 2016). Additionally, Kuh’s (2001, 2003, 2009) concept of Student Engagement is not explicitly used as a theoretical framework as extensively (for exception see Lester et al., 2013), but it is discussed in several articles as they relate important experiences for transfer student success and use those definitions as guides.

Still other research such as Rodriguez and Kerrigan (2016) used a distinct blend of theories to include Chickering (2010), Keagan (1994), and Perry (1970) in trying to address both behaviors, identity, and involvement in one study. While there are several approaches for the study of involvement of transfer students, the current research used Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement (1985, 1993, 1999) as a basis for exploration. This is in line with other contemporary work that has suggested Astin’s theory as a good framework for studying transfer students (Laanan & Jain, 2017).
Astin’s theory focuses on students’ behavior and actions taken while in college versus their perceived fit (Tinto). This is important because it gives more empowerment to student self-efficacy and does not include the more controversial aspects of Tinto’s model related to acculturation. Additionally, Astin’s work is broader than Kuh’s, which narrowly defines the behaviors, or practices that count as engagement and may limit the variability that is possible in transfer student behavior. Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement is also observable and measureable which makes it easier to apply as a research framework than more affective constructs such as integration (Bahr et al., 2013). Laanan (2004) supported the use of Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement with transfer students because those students who had social and academic involvement at the four-year institution were more likely to experience positive adjustment post-transfer, which is linked to positive degree outcomes and it is a straight forward framework in looking at student actions or behaviors.

Specifically, Astin’s (1984) five postulates for involvement suggest:

1. Involvement has both physical and psychological aspects that occur along a continuum where students manifest different levels of involvement, in different areas and at different times

2. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features

3. The amount of learning/development a student achieves is proportional to the quality and quantity of their involvement in a given program and,

4. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the any increase/decrease in student involvement. (p. 298)

These principles underscore the importance of looking at involvement as behaviors or actions that students take and that the measurement of those actions are significant predictors of their development and success as a student. Further revision of the Theory of Student Involvement
emphasized student agency as part of involvement meaning that students decide how to invest their time among several options (Astin, 1999). This provides validity for the findings that transfer students may see social and academic involvement as a trade-off between each other or other commitments (Berger & Malaney, 2003) and this agency is an important dimension to consider in understanding transfer students’ involvement experiences as they denote priorities of the student as well.

Astin’s (1993) Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) model provides a strong framework for understanding how involvement experiences at the four-year institution influences student outcomes (Ghusson, 2016). The model acknowledges the significance of student characteristics as the ‘Input’, but alleviates the black box phenomenon of previous persistence models by highlighting the importance of the collegiate environment/experiences on the eventual outcomes (Astin, 1999). This model is particularly relevant for transfer students because the Input and Environment variables may differ largely from the assumptions of a traditional, full-time, first time in college students leading to significantly different experiences that can be accounted for using Astin’s framework (Ghusson, 2016).

Additionally, the work to expand Astin’s IEO framework in the study of transfer students by Laanan and Jain (2017) to include the full breadth of the transfer student’s environment to include both the two-year and four-year environment highlight its applicability for this population. The authors advanced the Conceptual Model of Studying Diverse Transfer Students and Organizational Context (Laanan & Jain, 2017). In their revised model for future exploration, the community college environment focuses primarily on academic performance and accumulation of Transfer Capital pre-transfer that will impact their likelihood of success (Laanan et al., 2010; Moser 2012, 2013) coupled with the importance of the university environment.
including institutional characteristics, academic performance post-transfer, and social experiences (Laanan & Jain, 2017). The student’s inputs combined with the two-part environment model are then translated into outcomes which can be measured cognitively (e.g., GPA), affectively (self-efficacy), or student success outcomes such as retention or graduation. This four-part model is a holistic approach to study transfer students and offers a strong endorsement of new directions for the field of inquiry using Astin as an undergirding framework (Laanan & Jain, 2017).

Though Astin’s framework has been used for several studies to understand persistence and degree attainment, critics have suggested that too much research has focused on the quantity of effort (quantitative research) and more needs to be done to address the quality of involvement experiences to understand their influence on student success (Bahr et al., 2013). This research study aimed to add to the qualitative understanding of involvement of transfer students using Astin’s framework theoretical guide. While the specific methodology will be reviewed in the next chapter, it is important to note that the use of this framework will guide the exploration of student experiences, but their description of experiences will not be limited to extant definitions. This is because the actual mechanisms of both types of involvement remain understudied and unclear post-transfer (Ghusson, 2016).

**Gap in the Literature**

A review of literature on the university experiences for community college transfers post-transfer shows us “how little has been gained in the last several decades” but this knowledge is critical if we are to affect the baccalaureate degree attainment of this growing population of students (Bahr et al., 2013, p. 461). Owens (2010) concluded that there remains a lack of research addressing actual student experiences relevant to their post-transfer adjustment.
Furthermore, several authors have suggested that future research needs to address what the four-year institutions can do to facilitate successful integration of transfer students to influence their eventual outcomes (Laanan, 2001; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Some of the research that does exist finds a lack of predictive value for university experiences on transfer student success (Moser, 2013), which could be because definitions of involvement being used to measure engagement are not appropriate for use beyond the traditional freshman college student (Lundberg & Sheridan, 2015).

The specific endorsement of qualitative methods to uncover more of the nuances of the university experiences post-transfer have been supported by several researchers in the field (Chrystal et al., 2013; Laanan, 2007; Owens, 2010). Lopez and Jones (2017) specifically called for future qualitative assessment to understand the involvement of transfer student and its influence on their success. Additionally, Nunez and Yoshimi (2017) suggested:

…there has not been enough study to understand the experiences and engagement of transfer students after they arrive in their new institutional environments, how these might be distinct from those of students at the institution, and the associated implications for best serving these students. (p. 176)

Thus, this research specifically addressed this gap in the literature, aiming to allow transfer student experiences at four-year institutions to drive the conceptualization of involvement experiences and define how those experiences influence their success post-transfer. The importance of these findings are their potential implications for four-year institutions to serve the growing population of transfer students.
Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the extant literature related to the role of the community college, the growing onus on the four-year institution in the effectiveness of degree attainment, and an overview of the current knowledge related to social and academic involvement experiences of transfer students post-transfer and their significance. This body of literature sets the stage for the current research.

While there is existing research regarding quantitative measurement of transfer student adjustment and success, the qualitative inquiry remains sparse (Laanan, 2007). For the four-year institution to be able to best support this burgeoning population, a deeper understanding of the “quality” of involvement described by Astin (1999) and not just the ‘quantity’ must be addressed (Bahr et al., 2013). This research added to the current literature by examining how social and academic involvement experiences, as defined and experienced by transfer students, influenced their journey to the baccalaureate degree. The following chapter will detail the methods for the study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore transfer students’ social and academic involvement experiences post-transfer to better understand how participants defined involvement experiences and what impact they felt those experiences had on their success at the four-year institution. A limited number of research studies on community college transfer students have attempted to tease out transfer student involvement definitions or the influence of involvement at the four-year institution (Bahr et al., 2013). It is this important oversight that lays the foundation for the methods of the current research. To address these knowledge gaps, qualitative methods were used to understand the experiences of transfer students at the four-year institution. This chapter provides an overview of the philosophical assumptions, research approach and methodology, data collection and analysis procedures, trustworthiness, delimitations, and limitations of the study.

Issue Statement and Guiding Research Questions

_Issues are not simple and clean, but intricately wired to political, social, historical, and especially personal contexts...Issues draw us toward observing, even teasing out the problems of the case, the conflictual outpourings, the complex backgrounds of human concern._ (Stake, 1995, p. 17)

Stake (1995) suggested that issues, not research questions, drive instrumental case studies. As described in the aforementioned quote, issues are more complex than singular
research questions can address, and point to the larger purpose for a case study: the in depth exploration of an issue within a given environment (Stake, 1995). The issue statement that guided the current research is as follows:

*How do transfer students define involvement experiences at the four-year institution and how are those experiences related to their success?*

A sub-issue to tease out through this research was to discern if the ‘lower levels of involvement’ shown in the extant quantitative research are indicative of lower levels of interest in engaging in the collegiate environment, a definitional issue of what constitutes involvement for this population, or potential barriers that are not accounted for in existing research. The central issue of this research is a lack of understanding regarding transfer student involvement. The importance of this issue is that it provides an unclear pathway to affect student success at the four-year institution via involvement if the true value of specific involvement experiences is unknown. It is unclear if there is a need to address the lower levels of engagement or if students’ levels of engagement are high, but qualitatively different from traditional measures of involvement.

To understand the post-transfer involvement experiences of community college transfer students, the following questions guided the research. While not required for an instrumental case study, research questions can provide direction for the data collection process (Stake, 1995).

1. How do transfer students describe their involvement experiences at the four-year institution?
   a. How do transfer students describe their social involvement experience(s) post-transfer?
b. How do transfer students describe their academic involvement experience(s) post-transfer?

2. What experiences do transfer students describe as contributing to their success (degree completion) post-transfer?

3. What can four-year institutions do to support transfer students to degree completion?

**Methodological Approach**

The current study used a qualitative research design to study the involvement definitions and experiences of successful transfer students. Methodologically, qualitative research should be “aimed at investigating the way in which people make sense of their ideas and experiences” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 11). In this study, the qualitative inquiry centered on understanding how transfer students who had made it to their semester of graduation mediated their experiences post-transfer with a specific focus on their social and academic involvement (as defined by participants) and how participants felt those experiences contributed (or not) to the achievement of their baccalaureate degree.

The choice of the qualitative approach stems from a lack of consistent significant findings and/or definitions related to the involvement experiences of transfer students, and specifically social involvement (Lester et al., 2013; Moser, 2013). The issue with existing definitions and theories is that we know that transfer student involvement differs from native student involvement (Wang & Wharton, 2006), yet the common quantitative instruments are still founded on the more traditional definitions of involvement and/or engagement. For example, Lundberg and Sheridan (2015) found that standardized measures of engagement such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), do not address students who fall out of the typical first time in college student, such as online learners.
If research continues to use definitions that are not inclusive of transfer students’ constructions of involvement, it can be no surprise that the disparity of quantified involvement between native and transfer students remains high (Ishanti & McKitrick, 2010). Currently, only a scant number of studies have addressed these disparities to understand how transfer students experience involvement post-transfer and what impact those experiences have on their success as a student (for some exceptions see Ellis, 2013; Ghusson, 2016; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Lester et al., 2013; Owens, 2010).

Because the findings and definitions remain nebulous regarding transfer student involvement, this research sought to illuminate student experiences to better define what transfer student involvement is and how it affects participants’ educational journeys at the four-year institution. The choice of a qualitative approach over quantitative is important as quantitative research would restrict the ways in which students could convey their involvement experiences to preconceived definitions or options (i.e., survey research). As Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) suggested, qualitative research is key for “hypothesis-generating research” (p. 4), which was the aim of this study: to generate a hypothesis for transfer student involvement experiences and how those experiences influenced their eventual degree attainment.

This research allowed transfer students to openly define their involvement experiences and the extent to which they found them as contributing to their overall success as a student at the four-year institution. This allowed the research to tease out the definition, experiences, and level of significance for experiences of involvement (academic, social, or otherwise) in their post-transfer experience. A qualitative approach allowed student experiences to guide the conclusions and merged findings from the research.
Philosophical Assumptions

Creswell (2013) emphasized the importance that philosophical assumptions have in the process of qualitative research. This research used a social constructionist lens to clarify how transfer students defined both social and academic involvement experiences and attempted to decipher what influence these experiences had on student success at the four-year institution from the student perspective. Crotty (1998) defined constructionism as the creation of reality through human-bound, socially-oriented processes that rely on the interactions of human beings with each other and their world to create the reality. This definition was further honed through research in higher education settings by Broido and Manning (2002) who suggested that in social constructionism:

1. The research-respondent relationship is subjective, interactive, and interdependent.
2. Reality is multiple, complex, and not easy quantifiable.
3. The values of the researcher, respondents, research site, and underlying theory cannot help but undergird all aspects of the research (p. 436).

Furthermore, Creswell (2013) suggested that the use of constructivism allows the individual’s understanding and subjective meanings surrounding the area of inquiry to be illuminated. This paradigm also relies on how an individual’s development/experience is situated within the context of a group of others (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This was an ideal approach for studying the organizational context of a university or college that encapsulates all of its experience within social interactions.

Thus, social constructionism is an appropriate paradigm for the research as it allowed the experiences of individual transfer students to define involvement in their collegiate experience and allow them to develop their understanding of the importance of those involvement
experiences to their eventual success. By using social constructionism, the researcher engaged in
dialogue with participants that allowed them to construct their own definitions and allowed for
the representation of several definitions of involvement provided by each participant included in
the study. This philosophical approach is also consistent with the chosen research approach
(Instrumental Case Study) that relies heavily on an understanding of the environment and the
interaction of participants within the environment and the issue under investigation (Stake,
1999).

Research Approach

Several methodologies have been used to study transfer students at four-year institutions
including: Phenomenology (Chrystal et al., 2013; Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017; Owens, 2010;
Packard et al., 2011; Starobin et al., 2016; Walker & Okpala, 2017); Grounded Theory
(Rodriguez & Kerrigan, 2016); Case Study (Fee et al., 2009; Lester et al., 2013; Miller, 2013),
and numerous studies using a general qualitative method. For the current research, a case study
design was chosen. A case study was the appropriate research design because it attempts to
“explore an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97).
The issue of the current study was a need to better understand transfer students’ involvement
experiences that they viewed as significant to their success post-transfer. Thus, this collective
case study focused on the experiences of successful students to see what types of involvement
they experienced and how they described them as influencing their attainment of the
baccalaureate degree. This approach is further supported by Hartley (2004) who suggested that
case studies are useful when the research seeks to understand how the environment and
organization are “influencing social processes” (p. 325).
The choice of a case study as a research methodology has been contested. Nevertheless, scholars such as Yin (2009) and Merriam (1998) supported it as a “comprehensive research strategy” (Creswell, 2013, p. 97). The benefit of a case study is that it allows the researcher to investigate underlying themes from participants that can also guide future work (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) delineated specific features of a case study including:

1. Identification of a specific case or set of cases that are bounded by a common description or time (transfer students who have been successful in achieving the baccalaureate degree),
2. Intent in conducting the case study (to understand the transfer student involvement experience),
3. In-depth understanding of the phenomenon or issue (several in-depth interviews along with demographic data was used),
4. Specific unit of analysis for the cases (transfer students),
5. Produces a description of the case and themes to be analyzed/presents a theoretical model (to be developed after research is complete) (p. 99).

Each of these characteristics of the case study were addressed in the research process to ensure that it met the standard of case studies in the extant research.

The specific type of case study chosen for this research was an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995). Before addressing the specifics of the chosen approach, it is also important to address why this method was chosen over other prominent case study approaches; particularly Merriam (1998) and Yin (2002). While all three methodologists offer valid approaches to case studies, Stake’s method (1995, 2006) was primarily chosen because of its alignment with philosophical underpinnings of the researcher. For example, in an analysis of the three
approaches, Yazan (2015) highlighted how Yin (2002) in particular came from the most positivistic tradition focusing on aspects of the research such as construct and external validity that are not congruent with the philosophical assumptions of social constructivism that guided this study. As Stake (1995) suggested, qualitative researchers believe that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered which is more consistent with the researcher’s orientation. Additionally, Yin (2002) was much more concerned with the tight definition of cases and structured design, whereas Stake (1995) advocated a more flexible design that can allow emergent themes and questions to be illuminated in the process of research. Again, this aligned with the researcher’s desire to allow participants’ experiences and voices to guide the inquiry and was open to revision as emergent findings were illuminated.

Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995) agreed on the importance of constructivist paradigms in qualitative research and several other similarities in the way data should be collected, what should count as data, and how data should be analyzed for case study. However, where Stake (1995) and Merriam (1998) diverged is Stake’s (1995) definition of the instrumental case study. By emphasizing the issue in the instrumental case approach, the research inquiry and analysis becomes much more focused on the issue under study versus the phenomenological experience of an individual, which is more of what Merrian (1998) emphasized. Additionally, in their definitions of a case, Stake (1995) was more intentional to see the case as “an integrated system” (Stake, 1999, p. 2) versus Merriam’s (1998) definition of a “unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27). Stake’s (1995) approach emphasizes the context surrounding the issue under study and the issue itself versus the description of a phenomenon for the case. Though these are small differences, they do lead to different approaches to the data analysis process and aim of case study research.
Thus, given these differences, Stake’s (1995, 2006) approach for an instrumental case study was used. Instrumental case studies start with an issue and study the case or cases to address a larger need for general understanding regarding the issue (Stake, 1995). The issue addressed in this study was a lack of or convoluted understanding of involvement experiences of transfer students at four-year institutions. In Stake’s (2006) term, this is referred to as the quintain or “object of phenomenon to be studied’” (p. 6). The reason this issue is significant and thus requires a larger understanding is that more accurate information pertaining to how transfer students experience and benefit from involvement may inform four-year institutions regarding best practices to support transfer student success and increase the success rate of this population.

More specifically, this research was a collective case study that used “multiple cases to illustrate the issue” (Creswell, 2013, p. 99). Collective cases within an instrumental case study are crucial because they allow collective understanding of the quintain (Stake, 2006). Stake (2006) stated:

Multicase research starts with the quintain. To understand it better, we study some of its single cases-its sites or manifestations. But it is the quintain we seek to understand. We study what is similar and different about the cases in order to understand the quintain better. (p. 6)

Because each transfer student’s experience may vary, it is better to look at participants across and within cases to get a more in-depth understanding of the issue under exploration. Though generalization is not necessarily an aim of qualitative research, doing a collective case study does allow for more rigorous study of an issue (Stake, 1995).
Participants

Stake (1995) purported that the selection of participants for an instrumental case study should be guided by the question, “…which cases are most likely to lead us to understandings, to assertions, perhaps even to modifying of generalizations?” (p. 4). The three guiding questions to be used in the case selection process are:

- Is the case relevant to the quintain (binding definition for the issue)?
- Do the cases provide diversity across contexts?
- Do the cases provide good opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts? (Stake, 2006, p. 23).

While efforts should be made to select cases that will add to the understanding of the research premise, an instrumental case does not “rest on the ability to defend the typicality of [the chosen participant]” (Stake, 1995, p. 4). Thus, in an instrumental case study there is flexibility in choosing participants as long as they are bounded by the same experience, definition, or experience of a phenomenon (Stake, 1995). In this case, the bounding factor was that all of the participants in this study were vertical transfer students (from a community college) in their final semester at the institution and had applied for graduation. Students who applied for graduation at this institution were in their final semester of their degree and had met all of the qualifications to graduate pending successful completion of their current coursework. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that these students were appropriate examples of successful completion of the baccalaureate.

In the previous five years, the size of this group graduating in the fall semester has ranged from 183 (Fall 2013) to 267 (Fall 2017). These figures were restricted to those that transferred from a community college to the institution under study to ensure the research was focused on
upward transfer students only. Additionally, participants who were candidates for selection were individuals who transferred in with 60 or more credit hours and/or with an associate’s degree credential. The reason for this specificity is that previous research has shown discrepancies in students’ experiences and success post-transfer depending on the timing of transfer (Ishanti & McKitrick, 2010). By removing the potential difference between groups of transfers coming to the institution at different points in their postsecondary career, the research focused more intently on the experiences of ‘traditional’ community college transfer students. Though the population from which to select was small, the researcher was able to obtain the sample needed for the research and achieve participant diversity. In total, 137 students fell into the selection criteria for graduation in Fall 2018. Of those, 20 completed the pre-screening questionnaire and nine participants were selected to participate in the study.

**Recruitment Process**

To recruit participants for the study, a list of students who were in their semester of graduation, transferred in with at least 60 credit hours or an earned associate degree, and had transferred from a community college was solicited from the university registrar. An email detailing the study and requirements for participants was sent directly from the researcher to students via their email accounts (See Appendix A). To increase potential participants for the study, after one week an email was sent out on behalf of the researcher by the three largest colleges on campus to all students who met these parameters. This partnership with the institution was critical for participant response.

In the call for volunteers, a short questionnaire was included asking about participants’ demographics, field of study, residency status, and general information regarding involvement on campus to ensure diversity of cases would be included in the research (See Appendix B).
Purposeful sampling was then used to ensure variability of student characteristics and experiences related to the phenomenon in order to best understand the quintain (Stake, 2006). While “balance and variety are important; relevance to the quintain and opportunity to learn are usually of greater importance”, thus each case was selected because of its uniqueness related to the quintain (Stake, 2006, p. 27).

The original aim of the researcher was to recruit between six and 10 cases to be included in the study. Stake (2006) suggested “The benefits of multi-case study will be limited if fewer than say, 4 cases are chosen, or more than 10” (p. 22) due to the possibility of providing too little or too much interactivity to be able to analyze the issue across and within the cases’ contexts. The final number of participants selected for the research was nine.

Additional students who were interested in participating were placed on a waitlist in case other students did not follow through or provide enough data to use in the research, but none of them were needed as all originally invited participants completed both in-person interviews. All participants completed two, one-hour interviews at the student’s convenience from the research period of October 2018 through November 2018.

**Site Selection**

The site for the current research was a large, public research university in the southeastern United States which will be referred to herein as Southeastern University. This university is a traditional, residential campus with a large undergraduate population that has seen exponential growth in the last decade. With an average transfer population of over 1,500 admitted students each year, the institution provided a large enough sample size from which to select for the study. Additionally, though a large proportion of the growth has been through out-of-state freshman students, there is a current institutional emphasis on increasing the number of
transfer students attending in future semesters and improving their graduation rates to be close to that of first time in college freshman rates. Currently, the graduation gap exceeds 10% between first-time freshman and transfer students attending the university. Thus, this institution has had some success in recruiting transfer students to attend. However, in measures of success in the form of baccalaureate degree attainment of transfers there is potential for improvement.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to enrolling a participant in the study, a demographic questionnaire was sent to individuals who responded to the call for participants to ensure variation in the sample (See Appendix B). Data collected in the pre-survey questionnaire were also important to illuminate differences that emerged across and between cases during the analysis process. After the participant was selected for inclusion in the study, an informed consent was secured (see Appendix D).

Data for the current research project were collected through a series of audio-recorded semi-structured interviews based on a formal interview protocol and guided by the issue statements described above (See Appendix C). The interview process was an adapted version of Siedman’s (2006) three interview structure. The first aims of the first two interviews in Siedman’s (2006) structure, life history and details of experience, were combined into the first, one-hour interview. This interview focused on understanding students’ postsecondary journey starting at high school graduation until current as well as any important experiences participants felt influenced their educational path. Then, definitions and initial experiences of involvement were explored for participants’ post-transfer. In the second, one-hour interview, I focused on participants’ reflection or meaning of those involvement experiences. The aim of the second interview was to specifically discern the significance of their involvement on their achievement
of the baccalaureate and success post-transfer. Additionally, participants were asked to reflect on any barriers they may have faced post-transfer that influenced their involvement or overall ability to excel after coming to the four-year institution.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as they allowed for open exploration of the issue at hand and encouraged participants to respond in their own words, in essence, leading the interview process and unfolding of results (Esterberg, 2002). Each audio recording was saved on a password-protected laptop. After all interviews were completed they were transcribed verbatim and also stored on the password-protected laptop. After transcription, individual Word files were sent to participants to validate. In addition to audio files, I also collected field notes during the research process to highlight any recurrent themes as they emerged in the discussion or follow-up questions that I had for participants. Finally, I kept a journal of thoughts regarding the research and emergent themes that I reflected in after each interview and also wrote notes along the way as connections were made between interviews and participants. Any physical data that were collected were stored in a locked file cabinet. All participant files (audio and physical) were renamed using pseudonyms so that confidentiality was assured for all data collected.

Research with Transfer Students

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) addressed the duality that is required of a qualitative researcher to “be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others…and at the same time to be aware of how one’s own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand” (p. 123). This quote sets the stage for contemplation regarding the role of the research as an insider or outsider to the population under study. The debate as to whether it is better to be an insider or outsider is not a definite answer, but with each perspective it requires a
certain approach to address any potential weaknesses in the research design (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000).

In the research study, I was an outsider. I began my postsecondary education at a large, public four-year institution and completed by baccalaureate degree in three years from the same institution. Thus, I never experienced any version of transfer between institutions nor do I share the common experience of attending a community college like the participants in this research.

One of the potential drawbacks of being an outsider to the population under study is that participants may not have afforded me the same level of trust and openness they would afford someone who they felt could more readily relate to their experiences and thus with whom they would share a common distinction (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This may be particularly problematic given findings regarding transfer student stigma (Laanan, 1998; Laanan et al., 2010) that may affect their desire to want to be identified as transfer students or talk about their transfer experience with someone who did not experience the same phenomenon. Research has also shown a common experience among transfer students transitioning to the four-year institution includes feeling out of place at the new institution and the struggles that relate to that experience (Owens, 2010), which is one with which I could not relate.

However, being an insider also comes with its own set of unique challenges to consider. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) suggested the following about researchers who are insiders:

It is possible that the participant will make assumptions of similarity and therefore fail to explain their individual experience fully. It is also possible that the researcher’s perceptions might be clouded by his or her personal experience and that as a member of the group he or she will have difficulty separating it from that of the participants. This might result in an interview that is shaped and guided by the core aspects of the
researcher’s experience and not the participant’s. Furthermore, its undue influence might affect the analysis, leading to an emphasis on shared factors between the researcher and the participants and a de-emphasis on factors that are discrepant, or vice versa. (p. 58)

Due to my outsider status, I was not able to make assumptions of similarity or focus on how the student’s post-transfer experience compared to mine because I had no grounds for comparison. In this regard, the research approach with transfer students had the potential to yield results that were not directly influenced by my postsecondary experiences because mine were different.

While it is important to address insider/outsider roles, it is also relevant to acknowledge that objectivity in qualitative work is generally not an assumption one makes and that it is paramount “that the core ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one’s research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 59). Thus, though I was an outsider in research with transfer students, I used that perspective to intentionally allow participant experiences to dominate the research process and analysis. I feel confident that I was able to gain access to the population and worked to establish trust with participants by sharing my reason for interest in their experiences and how the research will be used to potentially improve future transfer student experiences.

**Data Analysis**

Qualitative inquiry and analysis is likely to bring the insight of patterns related to the issue under study in a single case and between multiple cases (Stake, 1995). Stake (1995) suggested, “…analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations” (p. 71). For an instrumental case study, researchers use the interpretation of the individual case and then through aggregation of codes or occurrences seek to say something
about the collective cases together (Stake, 1995). Data analysis in this type of research methodology relies not only on transcription of interviews, but also on interpretative field notes captured during the interview with a review by the respondent to ensure meaning and context. Speaking to this process, Stake (1995) noted “…it is better to list, to take a few notes, to ask for clarification. Perhaps the most important thing is to insist on ample time and space immediately following the interview to prepare the facsimile and interpretative commentary” (p. 66). The essence of data analysis in an instrumental case study is to look for confirming and disconfirming incidents at the same time, and to grapple with breaking apart the cases and piecing the data back together through synthesis, which will lead to a deeper understanding of the issue (Stake, 1995).

Additionally, it is important to complete the analysis of each case individually in addition to cross-case analysis to ensure that the findings and interactivity of each individual case are not lost in cross-case comparison (Stake, 2006). However, if the goal of the research is to search for generalizations across cases, the method of “merging case findings” is used (p. 58). This was the aim of the current research. To accomplish this task, each case was evaluated after data collection for its uniqueness among other cases, prominence of themes (data related to guiding research questions), and expected utility of the case. This method ensures that in the final analysis process, the researcher has a clear understanding of each case separately and then can easily analyze their findings across cases to merge commonalities (where applicable).

The specific cross-analysis procedure used by Stake (1995, 2006) is called triangulation. In the process of triangulation, “we assume the meaning of an observation is one thing, but additional observations give us grounds for revising our interpretation” (Stake, 1995, p. 110). This process is possible through observing cases in different settings or identifying cases with
different experiences and then completing the analysis process considering the commonalities and differences across cases to reach some level of generalization (Stake, 1995). Stake (2006) recommended triangulation of at least three confirmation occurrences before it is considered validated. However, not all data should be triangulated unless they are needed for the phenomenon under study. Stake (2006) provided the following rules for triangulation:

- If the description is trivial or beyond question, there is little need to triangulate.
- If the description is relevant and debatable, there is some need to triangulate.
- If the data are critical to a main assertion, there is much need to triangulate.
- If the data are evidence for a controversial finding, there is much need to triangulate.
- If a statement is clearly a speaker’s interpretation, there is little need to triangulate the quotation but not its content. (p. 36)

Given these guidelines, the following analysis process was used: During participant interviews, the researcher took field notes regarding the participant’s experiences and responses to draw out themes in the interview process in addition to the audio recording. After the completion of all participant interviews, the data were transcribed. Each case was then reviewed looking for data related to the guiding research questions and issue statement, collecting both specific quotes to be used as evidence/triangulation as well as notes regarding the significance or importance of the evidence in the case’s context. The specific coding method used for this analysis was holistic coding. Holistic coding is ideal when the researcher has an idea regarding the broad topic areas that will be found in the data and that the data are already primarily comprised of “vignettes or episodes” (Saldaña, 2009, p.119). This choice of coding methodology fit well with the instrumental case study since each case was its own story that was analyzed.
individually regarding the quintain and then collectively across the research questions for the
dimensions of involvement and significance for participants.

Before coding or analysis, however, it was essential that I become immersed in the data
as required with holistic coding (Saldaña, 2009). Dey (1993) suggested “time spent becoming
thoroughly absorbed in the data early in the analysis” is essential to the holistic coding process
(p. 110). Thus, I spent considerable time listening to the interviews over and over again, re-
reading transcripts, and highlighting poignant quotes or examples. Additionally, I challenged
myself to think about and reflect on the emerging themes each time I worked with the data. This
considerable attention to the data holistically and challenging the connections between cases
prior to the actual process of coding, ensured that I was able to fully understand participant
voices/meanings before I began coding. In this coding method, the researcher is attempting “to
chunk” text into broad categories (Bazeley, 2007, p. 67). I did this for each case individually.
First, I created a short narrative of their life history as it pertained to the quintain. Then, I
analyzed their vignettes as they related to the research questions, isolating specific examples or
quotes that illuminated their involvement experiences and significance. Finally, after this was
completed for all cases individually, a table was compiled of merged findings from all cases with
the preservation of special findings that may have disagreed with the other cases (see Appendix
E). This document then guided the analysis of findings into general assertions or conclusions
from the study that both aligned with the research questions and those findings that emerged
through the research process and were unintended.

Trustworthiness

The crux of qualitative research, and even more so qualitative research driven by social
constructivism, must remain focused on the participant’s voices and experiences, not the
researcher’s (Creswell, 2013). This is an important tenant for qualitative studies so that credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability are all ensured (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The main emphasis should be conducting the research in a way that ensures through the selection, description, and analysis of the cases that these values are preserved.

To ensure this was the case, first the process of purposeful sampling was used to ensure that selected cases were representative of a diverse set of perspectives and provided maximum analysis of the issue at hand (Stake, 2006). This method of sampling assisted in the establishment of credibility as related to the formation of the study. Credibility was also achieved during the data collection and analysis processes by seeking disconfirming cases and testing rival explanations for findings. Trying to discern alternative assertions from the data can be done by organizing the data in new ways, seeking to disprove alternative explanations, and other methods to challenge first-round assumptions (Patton, 1999). Seeking negative cases ensures that findings that do not simply support researcher suppositions or other patterns found elsewhere in the study (Patton, 1999). Additionally, through the process of member checking, transcriptions of all interviews were sent back to participants for validation and any additional feedback or data that participant wished to share upon reflection of the account was added (Patton, 1999). Maxwell (2005) suggested that this process is the most reliable way to ensure validity of constructed representations of participants.

Additionally, as it is common in qualitative research, case studies were individually written in summary form using thick, rich description that allowed the portrayal of the individual case to the highest possible level so that others reviewing the findings will be able to understand and grapple with the cases themselves (Creswell, 2013). This analysis process ensured transferability to other cases and contexts and supported the creation of external validity (Lincoln
& Guba, 1985). For example, other researchers could reasonably decide if it is appropriate for them to extrapolate the findings of this qualitative work to other institutional contexts and student populations. Because the participant narratives were written to include personal life details and background matter that influenced their post-secondary journey, the individual case findings and merged themes can be weighed by others for their applicability in other settings. Though generalizability is not an aim of qualitative research, transferability was focused on in this study so that the use of the findings would be as useful as possible beyond the context of this single study.

Finally, confirmability of the findings was bolstered through the analytic method of triangulation that requires the replication of findings within and across cases to emerge as an assertion from the case study (Stake, 2006). By seeking multiple data sources (participant interviews, field notes, journal reflections, and recurring themes across cases) for corroboration, it ensures that the findings are robust, comprehensive, and less prone to bias (Patton, 1999). Purposeful sampling is also a tool that can be used to bolster confirmability of findings (Patton, 1999). Finally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested ensuring confirmability and dependability by constructing the research study based on an audit approach ensuring that all of data, observations, notes, and comments are recorded and available if others desire to review the findings.

**Ethical Considerations**

To ensure the ethical application of research methods and processes and that all methods were ethical and risk was minimized for all participants, an application to the site’s Institutional Review Board was submitted and approved (see Appendix F). All attempts were made to limit any potential negative impact of participation in the study. Additionally, the aims of the study
were clear upon the outset with participants so they were able to freely choose to participate or not. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before beginning the research process (See Appendix A), and each participant was told they were free to ask questions regarding this process at any time during the research. Upon consent, a pseudonym of the participant’s choosing was assigned to ensure confidentiality for the participant, and all files (audio and physical) pertaining to the research were kept in a locked filing cabinet (physical) or on a password-protected laptop (audio).

Positionality

Stake (1999) suggested that the role of the researcher can take many forms: the teacher, evaluator, biographer, or the roles I most align with, the advocate and interpreter. In speaking about both of these specific roles as a researcher, Stake (1999) stated, “often it is better to leave the wrappings of advocacy that remind the reader: beware” because qualitative research “recognizes that invalidities and advocacies are ever present and turns away from the goal as well as the presumption of sanitization” (p. 95). Thus, it is in this vein of thinking that I positioned myself as the research, advocate, and interpreter for the transfer student population. In this multi-faceted role, I hope to highlight the variety of definitions and experiences that transfer students had at the four-year institution and in particular seek out the experiences that seemed to be the most influential for their successful degree outcomes. In response to the findings of this research, I hope to advocate for more opportunities for transfer students that meet their needs at the four-year institution with the goal of closing the degree attainment gap for students who start their educational career at the community college.

Specifically, as an administrator at the institution under study, I have a professional interest in the success of students attending this university, and the findings of this study may
help inform the institution of better ways to serve transfer students in the future. However, the students who participated in this study were not involved in any program for which I am responsible on campus and thus I did not have any personal relationships that may have affected their ability to be honest or open regarding their experiences. Additionally, because they were in their semester of graduation there was no chance for future interaction in one of my programs.

I do hold a personal and professional interest in this population because of my work in the area of student retention over the course of several years and have always been very passionate about the transfer student population in general because of the opportunities that the community college pathway affords underserved student populations. However, I was not a transfer student, and in my current role, I have limited interaction with transfer students. Thus, I feel as though I can use my knowledge of student success to frame the study, but because our knowledge of transfer student involvement is so scant, my personal work or knowledge did not influence the research or findings of the current research.

**Delimitations**

The research allowed the open exploration of transfer students’ involvement experiences and allowed them to guide the evaluation of significance related to degree attainment. However, certain delimitations have to be used to create a research study that is manageable and practical. First, students included in this study were only those who applied for graduation in Fall 2018, which limited the sample to one semester of participants. Additionally, participants were limited to only those who transferred in from a community college with at least 60 credit hours or an associates degree, as previous research has shown timing of transfer to be a factor in attainment of degree. The research was limited to one large, research university in the Southeast so that all interviews could be conducted face-to-face.
While population-level generalizations may not likely stem from a single case study, the cases together can generate findings that are consistent or relevant to the bounded set and represent generalizations within the study (Stake, 1995). Additionally, Stake (1995) suggested that “valid modifications of generalizations can occur in a case study”, meaning that findings from the research product can offer alternative explanations to extant research findings or new directions for research that would modify current understanding of transfer student involvement (p. 8). This was the goal of the current research, to modify current understanding. Given the methodology of this research, new knowledge was found regarding student experiences and those experiences were then compared and challenged against extant understanding in the literature. Since it was qualitative in nature, this research did not aim to produce overarching generalizability, but did offer an exploration of student experiences at one university that added to the extant understanding of how transfer students experience involvement at the four-year institution.

Limitations

While efforts were made to ensure the sample represented a variety of student viewpoints, the study was conducted at a single institution in a large research university setting, so student experiences may vary greatly in comparison to a smaller four-year institution or a private institution. Additionally, participant recruitment yielded a much larger number of female participants than males so the male experience is less emphasized overall in the case studies and findings.

Summary

In this chapter, the methodology and research design were reviewed showing a clear connection between the issue at hand and the chosen approach of a qualitative instrumental case
study. The focal issue of this research was to garner a greater understanding of transfer student involvement and a specific focus on those experiences at the four-year institution that students viewed as significant for their successful degree completion. Using the philosophical assumption of constructivism, I sought to clarify participants’ reality related to involvement and construct a more sophisticated view of those experiences through intense investigation (Stake, 1995).

Finally, researcher positionality and possible delimitations and limitations of the research were cited to make clear the scope of the research design as well as any researcher influence that may be pertinent to the current study. In the following chapter the results from the instrumental case studies will first be shared case-by-case and then merged findings across cases will be discussed.
CHAPTER 4

INDIVIDUAL CASE FINDINGS

Stake’s (2005) multiple case study method emphasized that to stay true to the case study tradition, each case must be assessed and written up separately before any cross-case analysis or merging of themes can be attempted. As such, the following section will introduce and analyze each case individually. Within each case is an overview of the participant’s postsecondary experience beginning at the point of choice to pursue education beyond high school, their experience at the community college, their initial transition experience into the four-year institution, and ultimately their specific involvement experiences and the importance of those experiences on their degree attainment pathway. Throughout student narratives, the barriers they faced to involvement on campus and other factors that contributed to their successful degree completion are also discussed. Those areas provide some of the most critical insight into the transfer student experience and will be highlighted for each case and then merged across cases.

The nine cases represented in this study were selected using maximum variance sampling among 20 students who responded to the recruitment email. The table below summarizes the selected participants along with their demographic data, working status on campus, and major. For the sample (n=9), the demographics were 77.8% female, 66.7% white, with an average age of 27.3. Additionally, though a comparison for the population was not made available, it is interesting to note that over 44 percent of the case study participants were first generation college students. Comparatively, for the population that was invited to participate in the study and met inclusion criteria (n=136), students were 54% female, 75.7% white, with an average age of 26.5.
The sample of participants was more heavily female, had a higher proportion of non-white students, and was slightly older that the full population. While the aim of the research was not generalizability, these statistics do provide context for both the population under study as well as the way the sample represented in this research reflects that population.

Table 1

*Summary of Case Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity (Self-report)</th>
<th>Residency</th>
<th>Work Status</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>She</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Out-of-State</td>
<td>On-Campus (20 hours)</td>
<td>News Media &amp; Communication Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>He</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>In-State</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Marketing &amp; Computer Applications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egbert</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>He</td>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>In-State</td>
<td>Off-Campus (25-30 hours)</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genevieve</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>She</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>Out-of-State</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hadley</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>She</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>In-State</td>
<td>Off-Campus (25 hours)</td>
<td>Public Relations &amp; Hospitality; Minor in Event Planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>She</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>In-State</td>
<td>Off-Campus (20 hours)</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>She</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>In-State</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Accounting &amp; Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skyler</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>She</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>In-State</td>
<td>Off-Campus (40 hours)</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>She</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Out-of-State</td>
<td>Off-Campus (5 hours)</td>
<td>Business Management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Audrey

Audrey is a 22-year old white, female transfer student majoring in News Media and Communications Studies. Originally from California, her higher education journey began at a local community college less than 20 minutes from her hometown with less than 10,000 students and four total buildings on campus. Her intent in high school was to go to a four-year institution in California, but her parents persuaded her to stay local for both financial and proximity reasons for her first two years of college. She completed her associate’s degree in exactly two years at the same community college before transferring to Southeastern University.

In speaking about her community college experience, she had overwhelmingly positive things to say, “It was really small, I had no problem getting classes and I made friends pretty easily.” She also described the community college by commenting on her classmates’ interest in learning and that the community college she attended had a very “welcoming and take initiative learning environment” that allowed her to be surrounded by people who were committed to their education and wanted to be there which in turn supported her interest in persisting and being successful. The coursework at the community college offered not only general education courses, but also allowed her to explore her major through communication courses which she said she really enjoyed. She attributed her strong sense of preparedness to her instructors at the community college and in particular her major classes that allowed her to explore and find connections that were helpful for career exploration.

When asked about her student experience she described herself as “very involved.” She actively participated in her community college speech and debate team which she described as the best part of her community college experience and included traveling with the team throughout the state of California and nationally to compete. Though she was involved on
campus she said she felt as though the two-year institution did not prepare her socially for the transition due to a lack of social engagement options and student interest in engaging at the community college in comparison to her experience post-transfer.

While she maintained the idea of transferring to a University of California school after completion of her first two years at the community college, she did not get into her chosen schools or the decisions were deferred until very late in the summer. Realizing that her dream transfer school may not become a reality she “got on the internet and Googled ‘who’s still accepting applications’ and that is when she found Southeastern University’s application deadline had not passed. She ultimately applied to several schools in the Southeast. A few weeks later she was accepted into one of her choice schools in the UC system, but had already committed in her mind to the idea of moving away and experiencing something different so she ultimately decided to come to Southeastern University.

When asked to describe her first year at the four-year institution she could really think of only one word: overwhelming. She mentioned the size of campus, number of people, and how intimidating she felt it was. In reflecting on the differences between her community college and four-year institution she said she felt as though the largest was the social aspect and the variety of options to do and be, from majors to choose to clubs to join, she felt an overwhelming sense of opportunity post-transfer. Due to credit loss she also straddled the line of completing lower level general education courses and taking more of her major-specific courses in her college. Her first semester at the four-year institution she did not perform well academically due to distractions, adjustment to responsibility, and learning to prioritize between her newfound social opportunities and her academics.
After transferring, Audrey decided to immediately engage in the active Greek life community at Southeastern University and rush a large Panhellenic sorority on campus. One of her first realizations was how much older and different she felt from her pledge class and later described it as a disappointment that led her to drop the organization in her second year at the institution. However, when asked about her involvement on campus she mentioned how her sorority preoccupied all of her time, from mandatory study hours to parties she spent all of her time with her sorority sisters because she “didn’t know a single soul here.” She admitted that in her first year she spent more time with her sorority than in her classes showing her level of commitment to that piece of her involvement on campus.

**Defining Involvement and Personal Experiences**

When asked to define what involvement is in college, Audrey’s immediate response was “Obviously being a part of an organization: Are you a part of a club? Do you play a sport? Are you in a fraternity or sorority?” She said that she also felt that at this particular institution that involvement included school spirit that included participation in sporting events.

**Academic involvement.** When the question was narrowed to defining academic involvement, Audrey’s responses included participation in undergraduate research, honor societies, or clubs that “have something to do with your academics.” As she thought about it more she also added actively trying to study and talking to your professors.

In terms of experiences where she personally felt academically involved she mentioned studying, homework, class participation, and study groups “for classes that need it”; meaning those that provided academic challenges for her and her peers. She added to those experiences, involvement with major-specific academic support services including making use of the on-campus speaking studio, writing center, and communication-related academic resources.
Relatedly, she also noted that she enjoyed being in class and particularly discussion-based classes where everyone is engaged and feels as though they are responsible for their own learning. Peer interaction in and out of class was an important part of her academic involvement, and she expressed that this was likely due to her major that relies heavily on projects that are often done in groups and the cohort-like feel of her upper-level courses where she had the same peers in several classes that allowed them to form a community. She described the ways they socially connected in and out of class using texting platforms to stay connected even months after courses ended.

Finally, she mentioned specific details related to building relationships with professors out of class through attendance at office hours and setting up additional meetings with professors to build deeper relationships with them. She even described a specific instructor who went out of his way to make connections with students in class, build rapport with them, and genuinely seemed invested in their success which made her excited to go to class and encouraged to engage with the material and learn.

When asked if academic involvement experiences influenced her progress towards degree, she said she felt very strongly that both the validation of her professors and their willingness to engage with her in addition to her peer interaction through coursework “created a better learning environment” and was one of the reasons she was able to be successful.

**Social involvement.** When asked to define social involvement, Audrey began with “Now that is something that people do a lot of here!” and went on to talk about date parties, tailgates, swaps, band parties, and going to bars as ways to be socially involved. She admitted that she would struggle to talk about “G-rated” social involvement on campus. However, she did acknowledge that there are university-sponsored alcohol free events that are tailored in her mind
for people who do not want to be a part of Greek life on campus and who do not want to be part of the “bar scene”.

In regards to her social involvement experiences, they centered on her sorority for the majority of her time at the institution. She described the impetus to get involved in Greek life on campus as a transfer student as a search for friends and social connection at an institution that was so far from her home. In her words, “I wanted to give myself every opportunity to enjoy it here. I didn’t want to come and not know anyone.” However, her memory of that social involvement was now jaded by her experience of difference from the rest of her sisterhood. The feeling of difference started early. Her rush experience was dominated with questions about her transfer status and why she was transferring. She suggested that she did not get the same opportunity to connect with her future sisters or share who she was.

*I wanted to get asked quality questions. You want to get to know me, not where I transferred from...ask me about what philanthropy I was involved with... or what I think about academics and how important they are and they just wanted to ask where I transferred from...*

Once in the organization, she described how she was never given privileges according to her actual class standing (a senior at the time) and instead was treated like a sophomore in her second year and consistently felt different. The privileges she missed out on, such as cutting in lines for events for example, she said may seem trivial but it was a status symbol for senior members in her organization, a status she was never able to attain. She lamented, “I wasn’t going to get that privilege because I wasn’t a senior-technically,” even though by credit hours and age she was. She said she was constantly made to feel younger/lesser than other members.

After leaving her sisterhood, she identified a friend group that she spends most of her time with and described their social involvement as “more mellow” and primarily centered on sporting events and concerts in the local community. She also engages more with peers from her
classes as a form of social involvement including lunches with her classmates and even professors. She described this tight knit group of her significant other and close friends as her “family” and intimated that the quality of her relationships are much stronger now.

Finally, in reflecting on her social involvement at Southeastern University in comparison to her community college, she highlighted how many more relationships and social involvement experiences she has had at the four-year institution because in her mind at the community college “people didn’t go to school to make friends and hang out with people, they went and they left” and the four-year university was a “social setting” where she had more opportunities to connect with peers in and out of class.

When asked to reflect on how her social involvement experiences related to her ability to complete her degree she quickly agreed that it was very important. She shared an example of friends who did not get engaged on their four-year campuses. “The fact that they didn’t make friends was a big impact on whether they stayed or not” and “that would have been me, if I wouldn’t have made any friends-I would have been miserable, I would have been lonely, and I probably would have left…so definitely having these relationships makes a huge difference.”

She also talked about the importance of having peers who pushed her to study and were similarly committed to academic things, which has kept her on track to be successful and graduate.

Factors That Affected Involvement

Audrey named her sorority as the major factor that affected her involvement in college. At first Audrey saw it as a vehicle for strong social involvement, something she was afraid she would not find. However, she also described it as a deterrent to other ways of getting involved because of the time commitment. She said that she did not feel encouraged to branch out beyond her sorority involvement so she did not, which is something she said she regrets as she nears
graduation. However, in her semester of graduation she has joined her first club on campus centered on social issues she finds to be important and has really enjoyed that experience. In addition to the barrier her Greek life participation created, she also indicated that not living on campus and her age were barriers to involvement that made her less likely to feel like involvement was “meant” for her on campus or that she would make connections with other students through campus-sponsored involvement opportunities. Even though she had her sorority, she still viewed her lack of involvement in other things on campus as one of the parts of college she wished she could change.

Additionally, Audrey faced specific involvement barriers related to her transfer status in her college. She shared that her “biggest disappointment has been the opportunities in my major.” She described examples of news media internships on campus that excluded upper-level students because of a preference for longevity of interns. “For me coming in it was really discouraging...someone who wasn’t here when I was younger that was an opportunity that was just taken away.” While she said she understands why opportunities like internships desire students who have more than two years to commit, she also reflected on how these opportunities may have provided more career direction earlier during her time at the institution and helped her with post-graduation. “I feel like I missed out on something that could have been really beneficial,” she shared.

What Affected Degree Attainment?

Even though she identified both academic and social involvement experiences as significant for her impending graduation, Audrey also attributed her achievement of a bachelor’s degree to what she called an “epiphany moment” towards the end of her first year in the sorority. After receiving less than stellar midterm grades, she said she realized she was at a place where
she was not happy with her friend group and did not feel like she was genuinely committed to her academics. She changed mindsets in that moment and decided that school was her job. She said that ultimately her success came from “me holding myself accountable” and discussed several changes she made to get back on track.

**Barriers and Recommendations**

Audrey described her biggest barriers as a transfer student as related to a lack of institutional knowledge and not having the traditional on-campus experience of freshman upon which to build community and learn about the institution organically. She suggested “You just don’t learn as quickly as a transfer student that you do as a freshman.” Though she acknowledged that she possibly could have done more to learn about campus, she also noted that she did not even know what questions to ask because the institution was so different from where she had come from.

To address these barriers, she strongly recommended making changes to the orientation process for transfer students. “At [Orientation] they could have done a better job. I didn’t know about anything.” Though she participated, she walked away from the experience not knowing what she considered “basic information on campus” like how to use the dining halls and where classroom buildings were located on campus. She only learned what she considered to be “vital information” through her student employment in housing and residence life on campus where she interacted with more freshman students who seemed to know more than she did and through the required training about campus resources.

**Carlos**

Carlos is a 28-year-old male student majoring in Marketing who transferred from an in-state community college just over an hour from Southeastern University. Carlos had two stints at
his community college punctuated by serving several tours of combat duty in the military. However, he shared that there were many facets of his life experience that led him to this point in his educational career. He described the town where he grew up and attended community college as “not the richest of towns” which he suggested influenced his pathway. He stated, “you grow up in [my town] and you see enough people working in coal mines…being 35 and looking 45… you don’t want to do that.” In addition, when asked why he chose Southeastern University, he said “…basically everybody that I saw that was rich came from [Southeastern University] and they all told me to go to [Southeastern University] … basically everybody who was anybody went there.” This experience created a goal for Carlos to not only pursue his bachelor’s degree, but earn a degree specifically from Southeastern University.

In reflecting on his community college experience the first time he admitted that he was not taking his education seriously and spent more time with friends and partying than focusing on his education. He also mentioned the strong emphasis on vocational programs at the college for students estimating that “at least half of the people there were in vocational programs,” and in his experience “Ten percent of those were going to go on to higher education and 40% of them were going to fail.” In his first year at the two-year institution he did not perform well so the decision to leave was made easy when another pathway became available.

Carlos described his initial stint at the community college as “for a while there I was kind of running out of money, I didn’t really know what I wanted to do…so I joined the Marines and did that for five years.” His track into the Marines resulted from a cold call asking him if he wanted to join. Seeing that his options and financial ability to finish college were limited, he saw it as his best option. While the break from his postsecondary journey may have seemed like a break, he said that he felt as though his work in intelligence analysis was directly related to his
future career path in market research. Carlos said he made this revelation in his senior year after taking a class in market research and realized “I learned I have five years of market research and didn’t even know it.” Thus, while some may view his resume with breaks in college, he saw it as an off-campus internship of sorts that made achieving his degree possible.

After returning from two tours in Afghanistan, Carlos used his GI benefits to return to his two-year institution and raise his GPA. In reflection of his second time at the community college he discussed how tightknit of a community he felt at the community college due to the small town in which the college was situated and the positive experiences with his faculty members that he appraised to be equal in quality to those at the four-year institution. He also said that he found that the academic challenge of the community college to be equal to that of the four-year institution, which he said he did not expect. Carlos expected to struggle more after transferring, but in reality, he maintained the same academic performance. While he said the community college provided the opportunity to get a desired degree, you “shouldn’t expect any extracurriculars—it’s just a straightforward college—all classes, that’s it.”

In his transition to Southeastern University he noted that everything was rushed since he was still in courses during summer at his community college and then a few weeks later he was living in a different city and trying to get comfortable at the new institution. This influenced his transition experience as he never got the chance to feel settled at Southeastern University; this feeling continued throughout his time at the institution. When asked about any involvement his first year he said he “sat at home and did school work.” In comparing his experience at the two-year and four-year institutions he said was really a matter of “economies of scale” and that everything seemed to be “bigger and better” after transferring, but that he was still not interested in engaging.
Defining Involvement and Personal Experiences

When asked to define involvement, Carlos said, “I would think it would be participating in clubs and activities across the university.” Later in the interview, Carlos also mentioned that involvement in community service was something everyone could do as a way to get involved and that he had found some interest in that himself working with off-campus organizations to volunteer.

Academic involvement. When asked to be more specific regarding academic involvement, he said it would be “trying to get in with whatever college that you have because they have programs that are for academic involvement.” Carlos further shared examples about places on campus, like the “hub” in his college that offered opportunities to get connected with people and events happening in his major.

When asked about his personal academic involvement Carlos mentioned courses that he took specific to his major and an internship experience in his major that he found via social media. In regards to the courses he took, he said he felt like they offered him the opportunity to work with information and companies in a real way and showed him “how ambiguous real-life work is.” Conversely, some of his academic experiences in the upper-level courses had been negative due to competition in the classroom environment. In one specific course students are put into company-like teams where they must compete against each other to be successful. He proposed that this experience had removed the collaboration that he most liked about business school classes.

Relatedly, he did not see faculty as important to his academic experience at the four-year institution and said he had not interacted with faculty outside of class since before transferring to Southeastern University. He suggested that faculty at his community college seemed to really
care about students and were more friendly than his experiences at the four-year institution. He also saw faculty as more participatory at the community college attending events and being involved with students. However, ultimately he regarded faculty relationships as “nice to have, not an essential thing” for his academic experience.

Carlos also shared his experience in group projects where he felt like his age made him the minority and situations in which his ideas were shut down because he was older than his other group members. On the opposite end of experience, he observed that other groups frequently relied too much on older students “to put everybody on your back and do it, but you’re just a student too.” He said that he was tired of “being the old granddad, bringing the troops back to life,” and this sentiment has disproportionality affected his academic experience at Southeastern University.

His most positive academic involvement experience had been his internship experience with a club sport team on campus. Carlos said that the internship came to him through happenstance, but he believed it had a great deal of promise for future career opportunities. In his words, “I am just doing it for the resume at this point.” However, describing the types of activities he was able to do at the internship, the ideas he had to make the marketing and promotion better, and the community of students and professionals he has built because of the internship was the most excited he was throughout both hour-long interviews. It was clear that this experience had brought to life his passion for the field and he was enjoying feeling involved in this way.

It is no surprise that when asked if any of his academic involvement experiences were important in supporting his progress to graduation, he mentioned important experiences to prepare him for his career like the internship. However, his complete assessment was that these
experiences were not important for him to graduate. In summary, Carlos does not see academic involvement as an important component to achieving his bachelor’s degree.

**Social involvement.** When asked to define social involvement, Carlos struggled to come up with examples at first, but then suggested volunteering for career-related opportunities where you could gain experience and then the Greek community and how that was probably the obvious social involvement on campus. He said he felt as though there were social “involvement opportunities everywhere” like the watch parties in the student center, but in his experience those activities were “a little young for me.”

When asked about his personal social involvement he stated “that is a tough question” and struggled to identify experiences he had had socially after transferring. He even shared that to him “this question is geared towards people who are younger and kinda haven’t found a way to find their niche, and I have found my niche.” For Carlos his niche meant focusing Monday through Friday on his academics solely, with a little more social interaction on the weekends with “people he had met along the way,” primarily combat veterans and hospitality industry co-workers. He did mention some involvement in the Veterans and Military Affairs (VMA) office on campus early after transferring, but still identified a lack of similarity with this group. He explained:

...it’s a great organization, but when you look at it they have 3,000 people total and 300 of them were actual veterans, and of the 300 I’d say 100 of them were in actual combat arms and of that 100 I’m sure about 50 of them actually deployed.

He suggested that the group of people he could relate to was so small that it really was not a resource for him to create community on campus.

His connections were three veterans who were also in the Marines who he met in random encounters on campus by wearing military-related clothing and being able to identify them by their battalions. He described those few students plus his co-workers at the restaurant he used to
work at as his social community and the only ones he felt “involved” with. He later added that in his current internship he had found some social community with other students who were in his marketing field, which he was enjoying. However, the internship was a very limited time experience since he was graduating in a few months and did not feel as though the relationships would be long-term.

**Factors That Affected Involvement**

For Carlos, the major factor that affected involvement on campus was his age difference from most students on campus. He explained:

_Hardly, I mean not really. I mean when you just look at my situation. Kinda like picture yourself at 18 years old, expecting to go to college, and just being really happy that it's going to be great. You walk into your first day of class and everybody in your class is 14 years old. That's where I'm kinda at. They're still five years younger than me everywhere._

He said this difference made him “less sociable” and he “definitely didn’t want to hang out with anybody after class because it felt like hanging out with children.” Even in the advertisements of campus events he evaluated them to see if they looked “very freshman…appeared to be young, I didn’t touch it really.”

Overall, Carlos described his experience at the institution as being “ostracized,” even though it was from a “bigger group” (not just all veterans or classmates), mostly due to his age. He also suggested that the large Greek life presence on campus created more factions and barriers for everyone to get involved or feel a part of the campus. He said, “I guess if you are not in that you are already kinda missing out on the ‘premium [college] experience.’” This feeling, though not specific to transfers, was still a factor he felt was important for college involvement at Southeastern University in general. Finally, when asked if he felt like his transfer student status had any impact on his experience on campus he said “the veteran one takes the cake on that,”
meaning that although he did feel different from others it was more his status as a veteran that created that feeling of “difference.”
What Affected Degree Attainment?

When asked what made Carlos reach graduation and achieve his bachelor’s degree he immediately said it was his solely his “…persistence-coming back and doing it again.” Ultimately, he said he felt like it was his commitment to achieving his original goal of getting his degree and breaking out of the mold of his town that made him successful. According to Carlos, he reached this goal despite the time away from his education and ostracizing social environment once he transferred to the four-year institution. He did not feel as though any social or academic experience made him more or less likely to succeed post-transfer. Whether he succeeded or failed was based on his effort.

Barriers and Recommendations

In summary of his experience, I asked Carlos what barriers he faced at the four-year institution and what recommendations he would offer to help make future transfer students successful. Carlos said his biggest barrier was the short period of time he had to adjust from the community college to the four-year institution because he only had a few weeks in between the summer courses at his two-year institution to starting at Southeastern University. He indicated that something could be implemented to “soften that blow” and help transfer students transition more smoothly in terms of figuring out living arrangements, adjusting to the campus environment, registering for classes, and other things that have to be done before the start of classes in August.

Additionally, Carlos identified a barrier that existed to his success after graduation was the career support services offered on campus. In his experience, the people in the career center were not equipped to help students like him who have more experience than a traditional-aged graduate. He said, “the 19 year old at the desk” is not the one who should be offering career
advice to students like him. Additionally, the career fairs were targeted towards entry-level positions for which he had been told several times he was overqualified. He said that he was currently struggling to find employment with the extant resources and career support on campus. His recommendation to help students like him feel more successful would be a “little more personalization” in career support. He suggested that there were not many students like him and it would mean a great deal to that group if the institution took the time to help them feel successful at the institution and beyond.

**Egbert**

Egbert is a 32-year-old male of Native American descent whose first language is not English, but instead the native language of his people, the Choctaw. He transferred to Southeastern University from a community college about an hour and a half away from the four-year institution but is considered an out-of-state-transfer student since the community college is across state lines. Egbert said that his dream of attending college started in the 10th grade, and even though he did not know what he wanted to do, he knew he wanted to further his education beyond high school. However, he only ever considered the community college as a first step due to his academic achievement. Scoring a 16 and then a 14 on the ACT Egbert said he felt like community college was probably his only option. He chose his community college because it was the one his father and brother attended to receive their automotive certificates. He started his career at the two-year institution in 2006, but did not graduate with his associate’s for 10 years due to “a lot of roadblocks and detours” in his life. During that time, he entered the workforce and took occasional classes when he could, but he said he never gave up on achieving his associate’s degree because he would be the first in his family to do it and this motivated him to continue.
In reflecting on his experience at the community college he seemed most emphatic about the lack of things to do and opportunities around his institution. However, his community college did offer dorms and he lived on campus for the first three semesters which provided some opportunities for social interaction. He also praised his experience with instructors at the community college as more personal than at the four-year institution and one of the main reasons he was able to be successful. He reflected, “If I would have gone straight to the university after high school I wouldn’t have made it.” He indicated that his high school experience underprepared him for postsecondary education and his instructors and education at the community college were the bridge he needed to get prepared for the academic rigor of the four-year university: “they [instructors] were like guidance counselors and I needed that.”

During his time at the community college, Egbert faced a number of personal challenges with his family that required him to take semesters off of school to support them. He also shared how he and his family were financially struggling, so he needed to prioritize working. Due to the community college’s location he said that working at the casinos nearby was his best option for employment, but the hours made going to college and working almost impossible. However, he said one thing about the community college was that he knew “…it is there and if I need to restart, or need to revert back to it, I know it’s there and I can go back and continue.”

Egbert said he felt mostly comfortable as a community college student because while there were a few people who were right out of high school, there were also people his age who were on his same level which led to a sense of belonging for him. He regarded the institution as truly embodying their slogan “With You in Mind” because the campus was “not judgmental…they are not making it easy, they are challenging you, but at the same time they aren’t leaving you to fend for yourself.” While the institution supported his academic success, he identified
social involvement as less of a priority. The campus did offer activities such as movie nights and recreational activities, but Egbert did not engage very often in those because he was very focused on his academics and studying and did not find time for a lot of those experiences. One thing that he was very involved with at the two-year institution was a Native American Heritage Club. He was very active in the organization and this was something he said he wished the four-year institution had more of since that is an important community for him. Overall, he characterized his experience at the community college as very positive and a place where he grew tremendously as a student and individual.

In the final year before he graduated with the two-year degree he was not sure if he would continue in his education, but realizing that the criminal justice field was no longer for him through career experiences as a security guard, he reevaluated what his interests were and decided to pursue a bachelor’s degree in History. He ultimately decided on attending Southeastern University because he regarded colleges in his state as not prominent enough and that his current institution had a tradition of academics that made him want to be a part of it. However, the ultimate decision to pursue his bachelor’s degree was not an easy one. He had to leave a full-time job and move across state lines to attend the institution. Nevertheless, he said that he “…definitely doesn’t regret his decision…if I didn’t do it I would be sitting there thinking ‘What if?’”

In his first year of transition to the four-year institution the best descriptor he could give was “overwhelming.” He said he felt immediately like he was “out of his league.” He stated: “I was 30 years old and I was…just now transferring to a university, I’m not sure where I am going.” The academic rigor and amount of work was one of the most surprising things for him because in comparison to the expectations at the community college he viewed it as significantly
more post-transfer. He was a late admit for transfer to Southeastern University and was not able to get into many of the courses he wanted. This led to being “thrown into” a 400-level, writing intensive course that severely challenged him. Despite a difficult academic transition, he suggested that the community college prepared him: “I give them credit for showing me all of [the things I needed].” When he compared his academic performance in terms of grades to the community college he had actually performed better at the four-year institution improving from a 2.0 at the two-year institution to almost a 3.0 in his semester of graduation.

**Defining Involvement and Personal Experiences**

When asked what involvement in college is, Egbert described it as “not only about being involved in clubs, that’s part of it, but it’s a wider range.” He continued, “…like using your time to be a part of the school…immersing yourself into things that you contribute to… like whatever resources they have…for benefitting for your future.”

**Academic involvement.** In terms of defining academic involvement, Egbert said that it is something he thinks about a great deal, and if you are academically involved “it shows...you get what you put into it.” He did not have a specific definition of what it is other than just prioritizing your academics in your daily decisions. Personally, Egbert said that he felt academically involved due to his heritage and knowledge of two languages and his tribe’s history. This knowledge had opened doors to work with professors and departments on campus for research and outreach projects related to Native American history and culture. He also extended this academic involvement into the community through local Native American outreach experiences related to the university’s academic departments of history and anthropology. He said, “I have an advantage with some things” because of this cultural knowledge, and he used it to be able to engage both on and off campus.
Egbert described his academic involvement as “80% of my time, maybe 90%” with his head in books, preparing research papers, and reading history books to be ready for his academic coursework. That first semester experience in a writing-intensive course required the composition of a 20-page research paper that challenged him greatly, but also gave him confidence in future semesters. He attributed his focus and dedication to his academic coursework based on that experience because he quickly learned what it would take to be successful and had modeled that work ethic and focused during his time at the four-year institution.

He also made strong connections with his faculty at the four-year institution due to advice from instructors at the community college to do so. He often went to office hours for advice, to have a discussion with faculty about course content, and occasionally stopped by just to “say hello” because he believed building rapport with them personally was an important part of his academic success. He also interacted with his peers academically, mostly in group projects. However, these experiences had been strained due to age differences. He observed that they may have assignments in common, but that was really where the common ground ended. He had not established any out of class relationships with peers and noted that the way the coursework in history is with a reliance on papers and individual coursework that it did not necessarily require those relationships.

In assessing whether or not his academic involvement experiences had been important for his degree attainment he was not sure how important they were. However, he did note that he had been able to be successful academically because he had taken the lessons he learned in his first semester and applied the skills to future semesters. He noticed the scaffolding of information and skills needed to be successful as he progressed through his degree and felt as
though figuring out what it takes to be successful early in your college career helps you maintain that success. However, that knowledge is not something the university provided him but rather stemmed from his work ethic and commitment to completion.

**Social involvement.** With regard to social involvement, Egbert said “just the name [of the college] and being a part of it…it’s something… I can’t pinpoint it, but there is something there… like a connection with everybody.” He could not define what social involvement was, but suggested that everyone on campus was united because they were a part of the institution and that was their social connection.

While he could not define social involvement, Egbert did engage socially in his courses within his major, research in his discipline, and connections he had made with professors and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) out of class. He defined his social connections as “broader” to include his co-workers unrelated to the University. When asked about his social network Egbert named only people who were external to the institution: his wife, father, brothers, and other family members. He also noted a few interactions with GTAs in an informal setting to connect with them on a personal level. He ultimately said “my school work is my social life.” The social connection for him happened through finding people who had similar interests, and that was where he was able to create common ground.

When asked about social involvement with fellow students he commented that it really did not occur often due to age differences and not feeling like he could connect with them. He summed up his social involvement saying, “I basically just do things myself…try to keep myself busy.” As far as activities he would consider as social involvement he said the only thing he really did was going to sporting events which he identified as part of the culture of the institution. Due to these factors, when asked about the importance of his social involvement for
his success to degree completion, he mentioned professors and relationships with GTAs as significant. For him, these two groups had supported his academic success and provided the guidance he needed to be successful at Southeastern University along the way. They were not, however, the reason he has been successful.

Factors That Affected Involvement

Egbert said the biggest factor in his limited involvement after transferring was his academics. He expressed feelings of being overwhelmed with coursework and not feeling as though he had much time to do things outside of class work and reading. Even though his academics were his focus, he said he was more likely to do things after transferring because there were always opportunities to do something even if he did not actually participate. At his community college and in that community he observed few social engagement opportunities or events, but being at the four-year institution there was always something to be involved with whether he took advantage of it or not.

Egbert also mentioned his age difference was a barrier to him socially engaging with students. He said he felt older than most students on campus who thought he was “not in that peer group” and wanted to let the students “have y’alls time…I don’t want to be the older person to spoil what ya’ll have at this school, let me do my thing and let you do your thing.” It was clear to Egbert that his age created a strong demarcation between himself and his peers at Southeastern University.

What Affected Degree Attainment?

Egbert stated:

*If you asked me 10 years ago if I would be at this point I would have said it never would have happened, but now that I reflect back…I really think it was more of a mindset- you can do it, but there are steps involved…that you have to follow through.*
When Egbert summed up his educational pursuit he said at first he wondered if he could even achieve an associate’s degree and then he did. Next he wondered if he could achieve a bachelor’s, and here he is. Now he wonders, “how far can I go?” He said, “Academically I am not the smartest, but I tend to work hard” and that is what makes the difference. When he talks to students in his home community he puts it this way “you don’t have to be the smartest, you just have to keep your mind focused to what you really want to do…you have to prioritize and stay committed.” He identified two mantras that have guided his path to success at the four-year institution, “fake it till you make it” and “just keep swimming.”

**Barriers and Recommendations**

One of the biggest barriers Egbert identified at the institution was feeling like he was lost and like he was a minority in terms of his ethnic heritage which meant a loss of community from what he had experienced at his two-year institution. He wondered aloud, “Am I the only one here? Am I the only one going through all of this?” Even though people at his community college told him to expect being lost among the sea of other students, he said he still felt lost in some ways on campus and had to take the responsibility on himself to learn about the resources and support for students.

When asked about recommendations to better support students, Egbert said he “doesn’t expect the university to spoon feed kids.” Furthermore, he suggested that facing adversity and challenges in college builds a life skill and that the university should not do anything additional to support students. He saw all of the challenges he faced as part of the experience and he would not change any of it. His pathway of starting at the two-year institution and then transferring to the four-year institution was still “the best choice I made…and I am pretty proud of the journey I have made.”
Genevieve

Genevieve is a 22-year-old African American female transfer student majoring in Social Work at Southeastern University. She began the explanation of her postsecondary journey with “I always knew I was going to go to college.” She said she felt as though it was never an option in her home to not go to college. Though her family also encouraged her to consider the military in tandem with her college career, she ultimately decided that pursuing her bachelor’s degree only was the best fit for her.

Genevieve transferred from a community college in a neighboring state after completion of her associate’s degree. Her decision to pursue community college stemmed from a local emphasis in her community on attending two-year institutions. She noted that it is the “blue-collar nature” of her home state that leads to the rhetoric of community college first before attempting to go to a four-year. She was also offered a scholarship to her local community college which led her to choose that route over other two- and four-year institutions to which she was accepted.

When asked about her experience at the community college, she said, “I didn’t have much of an experience,” which meant that there was not really anything to get involved with. According to Genevieve, she basically “went to class and went home.” She compared her experience of the community college to what Southeastern University has to offer observing that at the community college there was not a student center to connect with other students, there were no dorms on campus to live with other students, and the number of events offered on campus was much smaller. Her only interaction with peers at the community college was driven by in-class assignments and group work that forced the collaboration with others. Her
experiences with professors at the two-year institution were very positive, and she enjoyed her educational experience there.

She proposed that the academic rigor at the community college was much more difficult than it had been post-transfer. She attributed this to possible transition difficulty in her first two years at the community college, but overall described the classes as simpler at the four-year institution. In light of this, she shared that the community college definitely prepared her academically for her transition to the community college, which was the reason she was able to do so well post-transfer. In contrast, her social experience at the community college was greatly lacking: “They never really had any social events…I never really talked to anybody.”

She said she knew after only one year at her two-year institution that she wanted to transfer to Southeastern University because her best friend from high school had chosen to attend there and she spent a great deal of time visiting the campus and building a community before she ever applied to transfer. While the consideration of out-of-state tuition was a concern at first, she soon learned that with her father’s GI benefits would allow her to attend without a large, negative financial impact on her family. She also suggested that Southeastern University had strong support for veterans which made her more interested in attending.

Her passion for kids originally led her to elementary education, but she realized at orientation for transfer students that the best fit for her was social work and she changed her major during orientation. She said that this was an important change for her because finding a major that was a good fit for her was important for staying in school. In her first year at the University she jumped into classes in her major, became involved with the Black Student Union, and identified a major-specific organization in which she would later garner a leadership position. She also went to several events on campus run through University Programs where she
met other students and started building her social network. However, she described her first year at the four-year institution as “different” because she was having to adjust to not living at home for the first time while her friends had already made that adjustment.

The size of campus was another factor that required adjustment. She described how she felt like a “fish in a big ocean”, but that her experience led her to “feel like a college student—for real.” While her experience at the four-year institution had overall been positive, she acknowledged a sense of difference in being a transfer student: “A lot of my friends here have been going here since freshman year so they have all these freshman year stories...that’s how a lot of people got close was their freshman year, they stick to those people.” This sentiment signaled a realization which she came back to several times throughout the interview that even though she tried to establish a community she would always feel slightly out of place.

**Defining Involvement and Personal Experiences**

Genevieve described involvement as “getting involved in different organizations and things according to your major, things you are just interested in and being proactive with your academics.” She continued, “… office hours with professors... and trying to make the most of your time here.”

**Academic involvement.** In terms of academic involvement, Genevieve mentioned ensuring that a student is “on top of their academic studying” which she saw witnessed by going to the library. She also mentioned group projects and the need to stay connected to group members so that students can be successful. Finally, she discussed scheduling office hours with professors if a student has an academic concern.

For her own personal experiences of academic involvement, she talked about the amount of time she devoted to her coursework both at home and in the library. She also shared two
specific course-related examples of being actively engaged in the coursework. First, she described her group counseling class in which she was able to role play with other student to become comfortable with counseling scenarios in both the patient and counselor roles. She specifically appreciated the applicability of the course and now uses that experience in her internship where she runs group counseling. Additionally, she discussed a course in her major related to outreach. For the course, she planned an event to serve a high-need community in the area which required researching community organizations and event planning with a group. She said she felt successful in the assignment and enjoyed the experience working with her peers and community partners.

When asked to appraise the value of her academic involvement experiences in relation to her progress towards degree completion she struggled to decipher how important each component had been. Ultimately, she decided that the supportiveness of the faculty specifically in the School of Social Work was a key factor in her ability to be successful post-transfer.

**Social involvement.** In her definition of social involvement, Genevieve focused on “…attending events that are hosted on campus If you are into parties- going to parties- and also joining organizations of things you are interested in or according to your major.” While not in her formal definition, she later mentioned the importance of sporting events on campus and how that was an essential part to being involved at this institution in particular.

For her personal involvement on campus, Genevieve mentioned attending several of the on-campus events hosted by University Programs and said she participated in almost all of the tailgates for home football games with friends during her time at the University. Her highlight of social involvement on campus centered on her leadership role in a diverse student organization within her major. In this role she attended the on-campus involvement fair, met several students
in the organization, and interacted with them regularly at organization meetings. She also went on a trip with her organization to Selma, Alabama, to experience the bridge crossing which she described as a significant event for her. In addition to these experiences, she was also a contestant in the Miss Omega pageant hosted by a National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) organization that allowed her to grow close to the other contestants as well as the members of the fraternity.

While she was able to list several experiences of social involvement, it was actually the only area in which the University did not meet her expectations. She suggested that the clique-like nature of people on campus kept her from being as socially involved as she desired to be. In her assessment, “…people just aren’t open to making new friends.” Upon deeper reflection, it was the experience of racial division on campus that affected her social involvement. She shared:

- My overall experience in meeting people was never a problem. I will say though that the black population at [the University] can be very divisive at times. I feel like the rest of the University is centered on fraternities and sororities, but especially in the black population it’s really cliqued up

She explained that while she did have social connections at the four-year institution she felt as though there could have been many more or much deeper relationships if it were not for the divide within the black community on campus. In her experience, this divide was primarily Greek/non-Greek, but also centered on responses to racial issues on campus and politics that led to division.

In addition to her connections and involvement in the black community and Black Student Union, she described strong social connections with her classmates in her senior year of her Social Work degree as they took the same classes every day of the week. She portrayed this group as her “class friends.” She regarded those in her internship, the local “social work community,” as part of her network that were not just students, but professionals with whom she
was building connections. When asked why she became involved in the specific ways she did, she expressed a certain ‘fit’ or interest in those things. She chose major-heavy involvement because “…obviously that’s what I’m here for…not just have it be my major but be involved in things that dealt with it.”

Though she shared that her social network overall was strong on campus and she had been involved in various ways in her major, she appraised those involvement experiences and their importance for her degree attainment as not very influential. For her, social involvement was something she enjoyed but not related to her success on her pathway to the baccalaureate.

**Factors That Affected Involvement**

Genevieve indicated that the university “does a pretty good job” at offering ways to get involved and observed that one of the main barriers to her not doing more on campus was her lack of interest or motivation to do any of it. Essentially, the opportunities existed, she knew about them, but she just did not care to always participate in that way. Additionally, she seemed keenly aware of her status as a transfer student and how her absence at the institution during her freshman and sophomore years affected her ability to get connected with others. “I was a transfer and they didn’t know me and they were like ‘Oh, who is she? Is she a freshman?’” and that made her instantly feel isolated in a way from other students on campus and less likely to build new relationships.

Additionally, she mentioned the sorority/fraternity divide on campus that limited her involvement. She noted, “there were certain events that I felt like…my presence wouldn’t be as appreciated” because she was not a part of one of the formal NPHC organizations on campus. Even though she later competed in the Miss Omega pageant hosted by an NPHC organization, she never became part of the community and always felt the divide in her experience socially.
What Affected Degree Attainment?

When asked about achieving her bachelor’s degree, Genevieve identified one strong factor that she believed made her successful: her parents. Whether it was their financial support to attend college full-time and not have to work or their continued encouragement to pursue whatever field she desired, she noted that this was not a support system everyone had and that it had made all the difference for her throughout her pathway to achieving her degree.

Barriers and Recommendations

In reflecting on her experience post-transfer, Genevieve shared how her initial major of elementary education would have set her back quite a bit due to credit loss; she estimated that it would have cost her an additional year to graduate had she remained in that degree plan. She reflected that the credit loss from an out-of-state institution was probably also a factor in looking for another major, and while it was not a negative change in her experience, it was something to consider as a barrier for other students.

Finally, in her recommendations to better support transfer students, she recommended having conversations earlier about post-graduation plans such as licensing for social work or graduate school options. She suggested that preparation for graduation and beyond had started too late and she could have benefitted from more time to prepare. Nevertheless, she commended the university overall for doing a decent job of supporting students on campus and she did not have any other recommendations for change.

Hadley

Hadley is a 23-year-old Caucasian female who is majoring in Public Relations and Hospitality Major with a minor in Event Planning. She transferred from a local community college less than 30 minutes from Southeastern University and had grown up living near the two
institutions her entire life. She explained, it was “pretty much decided for me that I was going to
start at [her community college]” because several of her family members worked at the college.
Therefore, she was essentially “raised in the college,” so the decision to start there was not much
of a choice. In addition to the connection to the community college through her family, she also
realized that financially going out-of-state or even moving out of her parent’s home was not feasible. To this end, the community college was the right choice for her as she was quickly able
to find a work-study position on campus and balance her coursework with her need for
employment. Her work-study position also afforded her some of her only peer interaction at the
two-year institution in her role administratively supporting the ambassador group that worked for
the college. Outside of this position, however, she did not get involved in any extracurricular
programs or other involvement on campus other than going to class.

In describing her experience at the community college she stated, “it’s a great place to
start for freshman, I’m glad that I did start at a community college before transferring here,
especially growing up in a small town.” Both the size difference of a large university like
Southeastern versus her community college and the academic rigor that is expected at four-year
institutions were reasons she felt it was best that she started at a community college first. She
noted that her high school did not prepare her for college academically and so the opportunity to
slowly transition was beneficial for her. She also took full advantage of the tutoring resources on
campus to gain some needed academic ability to be successful. She characterized the two-year
institution as welcoming and noted she that there was always someone there for you when you
needed them. Ultimately, while she described the community college as the right choice for her,
she did not feel fully prepared for her transition based on this experience. The lack of classes in
her major before transferring made it more difficult to know about her future path and how to be successful in those courses.

Even though she had grown up with the four-year institution nearby, when she was at her community college she had not thought a great deal about what would come next until she decided on a major in Public Relations and discovered that Southeastern University had a respectable program. She described her transition to the four-year institution as the most frustrating component of her higher education experience. Communication between the institutions just down the road from each other was not effective, and the alignment of her curriculum between institutions was difficult: “I took a lot of extra courses that didn’t transfer in that weren’t even needed.”

In her first semester post-transfer she was “extremely nervous coming in” due to the institution’s size. However, she quickly adjusted to prioritize her academics to compensate with her academic difficulties that first semester. After her first semester, she gained confidence, and in her second semester she joined the honors society for Event Planning, took extra summer courses that allowed her to have an experiential learning opportunity in event planning, and joined a student organization in events. In her Public Relations major she joined the Student Initiatives Club of which she later became president. In a reflection on why she chose those specific involvement experiences, she explained, “I was very career-focused.” In her first semester after transferring she made the decision to only devote time outside of class to things that were going to be applicable to her future career. This career focus also belied a difference she felt between herself and her peers who were native students at the institution. She described herself as more mature than other students and more driven to achieve her career goal because
she was a transfer student and had to take on the responsibility to make her way through her college experience, which was something she did not feel most native students had had to do.

In comparing her experience at the community college to the four-year institution she mentioned how the faculty at the community college were much more available and willing to connect with students. She also noted how many more organizations, events, and opportunities there were to get involved in at the four-year institution. She found the academic rigor of her courses at the four-year institution to be much higher, and she had to work harder particularly in her Public Relations courses. However, she found the hands-on coursework at the University to be much more engaging. Her academic performance in her first year at Southeastern was better than she had done at the community college, particularly in her last year prior to transferring where her motivation had waned and she had dealt with some medical issues. In preparing to graduate with honors in both of her majors, she said she is proud of her ability to accomplish this.

Defining Involvement and Personal Experiences

When asked to define involvement in college, Hadley said, “The first thing that comes to mind is student organizations, getting involved either in your major or in a social aspect if you need to meet new people and of course building your resume.” She elaborated, “if you need to meet new people,” explaining that she did not have a problem connecting with people or being extroverted on campus, however, she felt many students did and that they needed that type of involvement whereas she did not and thus did not get involved in those ways.

Academic involvement. Narrowing the involvement definition, Hadley described academic involvement as “honor societies and I guess jumping into the coursework?” She was not overly confident what it would look like, but when asked how she was academically involved
she talked about her participation in a major-specific honor society and how members hosted volunteer events and meetings. However, she followed up those thoughts with “really, it’s just getting inducted into the honor society and having that on the transcript” that she felt made it worth it.

Additionally she shared how in her coursework she often had group projects that led to academic involvement. Currently, she was serving as the CEO for one of her public relations course projects and believed she was able to get that leadership role in the course because she had established a relationship with the professor in previous courses. She stated, “building relationships with the teachers and letting them know how dedicated you are can definitely help that involvement.”

Finally, she shared what she would consider to be her best academic involvement experience, an intensive summer course in Public Relations Writing. The course required attending and submitting large-scale communications projects almost every day. As part of the experience she was able to write a full campaign for the Boys and Girls Club which involved requests for proposals, launching events, and fundraising for the organization. She did very well on the project and appreciated how relevant the work was for her future career.

Though she did have some negative course experiences, she said overall she was satisfied with her academic involvement experiences. She went out of her way to make relationships with her instructors early on in each course to ensure a positive experience stating:

I’m not gonna say I am teacher’s pet, but I want to have that relationship with my instructors and let them know I do care-a lot-and I am all in….and hopefully I am able to rely on them for a future reference.

When asked if academic involvement experiences were important to her progress to degree, she described a commitment she had made to herself to perform at the top level academically. She said it was not specific experiences or faculty, but her own drive to do well and outperform
herself in high school and at the community college after she transferred to show herself she could do it. She added that she was the first in her family to go to college and believed that “that was more pressure added to it.” She further noted that her drive had carried her to where she was now, graduating with honors in both colleges alongside a high level of academic involvement within the college.

**Social involvement.** When asked about social involvement on campus Hadley highlighted the large-scale event programming that was offered by University Programs saying that these events were a “way for students to come and meet new friends and get more involved in campus.” However, she said she was not interested in attending those events often as a student, but for her major had helped with some of the event planning.” Essentially, she described those events not as a participant, but as a way to practice the skills she needed in her future career. She later shared that she thought “on a career-level” and when making decisions about what to join she asked herself “is that really going to look good on my resume or is it just going to be there as a sentence of what I did as opposed to working with [major specific] departments?” According to Hadley, participation in traditional student events on campus were “freshman targets since they do live in the dorms and live right on campus their goal is to get those students involved and out of their dorm room.” She said that she did not feel like the events offered were aimed at engaging her on campus.

She later added to the list other examples of social involvement possibilities list including the large Greek life presence on campus, on-campus jobs to build community, and connecting with an advisor so “he or she can help you determine the options for you whether its events on campus or academically, you know, major focused.” She thought the advisors on campus at the
four-year institution had a pulse on what was happening on campus and could essentially act as a
guide to students who were looking for ways to get involved and succeed in college.

In terms of her own examples of social involvement, Hadley shared her experience
attending an Event Leadership Conference in her junior year and the professional networking
opportunities that it had brought. While her involvement was centered on the conference, she
talked about the importance for the group work in classes and projects that prepared her to
mediate those professional conference situations and added these to her list of social involvement
as well.

She attended several of the hospitality “meet and greets” held a few times a semester to
connect with other classmates or peers with whom she might not otherwise interact and would
occasionally go to organizational meetings even if she did not plan to join the organization just
so she could interact with others on campus. Additionally, in her other major-specific college
major they offered social events in the advising hub where she would frequently “go and hang
out and see if I could meet somebody… I just lived here and didn’t hardly know anybody so I
wanted to build a relationship with both the faculty and the students.” It seemed as though she
used the spaces she could to navigate finding relationships on campus.

Her best social experience was serving as president of one of her major-specific student
organizations. In this role she often met with new students, faculty, and college leaders to make
the organization better. She said the reason she liked this opportunity was that “I do like to feel
accomplished I guess? Just having someone listen to me and want to listen and engage and
communicate, that is what I enjoy.” This leadership position provided her the opportunity to
receive validation she sought from both peers and academic leaders on campus.
When asked about the importance of these social involvement experiences she said that the choices she made for involvement were related to her major and based on her natural interests and strengths to decide how to spend her time. While she was not certain the social involvement experiences helped her graduate, they did provide motivation and a feeling of fit with her majors which did keep her on track and motivated to continue.

**Factors That Affected Involvement**

When asked what factors may have influenced her level of involvement, she started with what made her want to get involved: getting experience and leadership roles. Hadley explained that by coming from the community college she had not had the opportunity to get many of those opportunities so when she transferred she was actively seeking ways to make up for that. She was also looking for things that were “resume builders” because her main focus was on what was coming after graduation.

Additionally, she mentioned a few times throughout the interview process how working was a barrier to doing things she may have wanted to do, but she could not afford the missed hours at work. She provided two specific examples of organizations in her major that she desired to be a part of, but which required time commitments to be a member that were significantly more than she could afford. For the one she most wanted to join related to her future career goal she explained:

...*they are meeting several times a week…anytime they are not in class they are working that agency and I support myself so I couldn’t do that so I do feel like some of these opportunities ask for way too much time for students who are trying to balance school and work.*

Finally, in discussing her experience as a transfer student on campus, Hadley shared how she had been treated differently as a transfer student because she was not overly interested in Greek life, and she sensed a real divide on campus between those who were in the Greek
community and those who were not. She also noticed how native students who started at the university together often created cliques to the exclusion of those who did not. She explained, “I don’t want to say they do it on purpose, but it does feel like I am different than they are.”

She also saw many of the involvement opportunities and particularly social involvement as targeted towards freshman students who were younger than her or needed help in getting socially connected which she did not feel she needed. She mentioned how she saw a lack of anything targeted towards transfer students or to help transfer students get involved. While she was content overall with her level of involvement due to her requirement to work and focus on career, she did say “they could do a lot more for transfers.”

**What Affected Degree Attainment?**

Hadley was very clear that the reason she was graduating was her dedication to being successful in college. Overcoming being a first generation college student, having to work, and a lack of academic preparedness in high school took a great deal of dedication, but she said she had the drive to do it and knew what it took to achieve her goal. While the involvement experiences were helpful for her career preparation, she did not feel as though they were integral in her path to graduation with her degree.

**Barriers and Recommendations**

Hadley’s recommendations for the institution centered on her personal academic experiences. She noted several times in which communication between colleges and academic departments clearly created barriers to her success. As a double-major she suggested that the colleges were too decentralized that they did not communicate expectations well enough to complete both degrees which cost her an added semester and almost delayed her graduation another semester if she had not petitioned. In her opinion, if the institution is going to offer dual-
degrees then communication between colleges should be clear so that expectations for students are clear.

She also recommended more targeted outreach and events for transfer students so that they can build community with each other. Even though she was local to the area and only lived about 30 minutes from Southeastern University, she said she only knew one student on campus when she came in: “one instead of 10, more to relate to would have been nice.” Ultimately, she observed that the four-year institution had not tried to help transfer students build community. She added, likely because of her major concentration in public relations and events that her suggestions for improvement centered on developing marketing campaigns specifically for transfer students. She said this was needed to help transfer students differentiate from the more general freshman-targeted events and break the age and difference barriers that she believed kept transfer students from getting more involved on campus.

**Jennifer**

Jennifer is a 21-year-old white female majoring in Marketing who transferred from a community college less than 30 minutes from Southeastern University. She was homeschooled until high school and then had private tutors in a community co-op environment in high school. When she was deciding on where to go to college, she said she felt as though there really was only one choice since her entire family had been legacies at an in-state rival institution to Southeastern University. While she was ultimately accepted to the other institution, her test scores were not high enough to be awarded a scholarship to attend.

While her parents were supportive of her attending regardless of financial award, she personally realized that it would have been a significant financial burden on her family. She had seen how expensive the institution had been for her parents to send her brother who did have a
scholarship and stated: “I will make it 10 times worse since I don’t have a scholarship…I decided I didn’t want to do that to them.” After coming to this realization, she applied to several local community colleges and smaller colleges where she was able to meet the scholarship requirements. She was offered waivers of in-state tuition and other small scholarships to attend all of these second-choice schools, but chose the community college that was in the town in which she was raised for both comfort and financial reasons.

A major factor in her choice was being selected as a college ambassador and given a full-ride scholarship for two years which meant “for two years I paid $13 to go to school.” In this role she worked for the college by hosting events, offering tours, performing outreach with the local elementary school, and supporting college promotional events. She suggested that attending this community college was a smart economical choice and she still planned to transfer to the institution where her family had attended after completing her associate’s degree. However, not long after starting at the community college she met her now fiancée who was a full-time student at Southeastern University. In addition to this relationship, she was an active officer in Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) at her community college which led to a half-tuition scholarship to Southeastern due to their partnership for PTK students. Together, these two factors led to her decision to transfer to Southeastern rather than continuing her family’s legacy at the rival institution.

In describing her experience at the community college, she was clear about how positive it was saying, “Honestly, if they offered a bachelor’s degree I might have wanted to stay behind.” The atmosphere, she said, was very welcoming and she felt a sense of community due to her involvement and relationships on campus. The relationship with her Phi Theta Kappa advisor was one of the most significant at her community college, as she would frequently sleep in his office, have meals with him, and connect with other officers in his space. A sense of
community was also created in the design of the campus with a central hub for students to eat and connect with each other.

She also had mostly positive academic experiences with professors, but said that the academic rigor of her courses at the community college was more difficult than she had anticipated. Though it challenged her, she expressed appreciation for the experience and suggested that she felt very prepared transitioning to the four-year institution. While the amount of work was more post-transfer, the difficulty of the coursework at both institutions seemed to be comparable to her. In her year and a half at Southeastern University she has been able to maintain a high GPA, nearly 4.0, which was significantly higher than she had achieved at the community college.

In transitioning to the four-year institution Jennifer originally came in with many students she knew from the community college, but those relationships, she said, quickly faded. She did, however, reconnect with a few childhood friends who had primarily started at Southeastern, and these students became her new community. However, she described the four-year institution as “impersonal” and “not as warm” as her two-year institution. She noted that establishing community post-transfer has been much harder because students seemed less likely to want to engage and the size of the campus created fewer opportunities for organic relationships and conversations to form. She also suggested that everyone on campus has their group, like Greek-related or clubs, and “it’s kinda hard to break into that…especially if you are not already a member or have known those people for a while.” For example, Jennifer said that she did not disclose that she was a transfer student except in situations where others asked her if she remembered when a particular event happened and it was one that occurred before she was a
student at Southeastern University. It was in those moments that she said she felt the most distant from her fellow students at the institution.

Some of the largest transitions for Jennifer were the size of the campus and the intensity of the workload. She said she struggled to find places on campus, and even at the end of semesters would still feel lost in the same campus buildings. She also did not get involved in activities that first year because she said she was “just trying to survive.” She indicated that she had so much to stay on top of related to her coursework and off-campus job that she did not feel that she had time for anything else. For her, these factors were a large reason that she felt less engaged after transferring than before.

**Defining Involvement and Personal Experiences**

Jennifer defined involvement in college as “there’s a bunch of different ways you could do it: involvement in your classes or your department maybe? Then there’s student life involvement where you are in a Greek club…or some other club.” She talked about how many of her friends and fiancée’s friends were involved in things on campus and she thought about also getting involved in that way, but with her off-campus job she felt as though she could never put in the time that would be required.

**Academic involvement.** For academic involvement, Jennifer struggled to specifically define what it would be, but said “I think it would be a lot of out of class work.” She gave examples of group work or collaboration on assignments that provided her opportunities to engage with her peers. As compared to her community college, she mentioned how Southeastern University required a great deal of out of class work to complete course objectives. While meeting with group members was required for some of this work, she also met with the members of her group projects for non-group related things, such as studying for other classes or simply
getting to know these students as friends. She summarized, “through academics I have gotten to know people…and through academics you can get involved in other things, which is great.”

She also mentioned how active her professors had been in trying to get students to be academically involved, such as providing opportunities to do research with them or incentivizing academic-related activities out of class like workshops, career fairs, and similar events. Her most valued academic experience was a consumer marketing class in her junior year in which her instructor started the class by saying: “I am never going to do anything to hurt you.” For Jennifer this meant that the instructor was willing to work with and support students to achieve the grades they desired even if it took multiple attempts. Jennifer appreciated this faculty member’s investment and in turn was more likely to read for the course, enjoy her homework, and engage in class and other positive academic behaviors. This course, along with other experiences connecting with faculty through office hours at the four-year institution, were some of the most positive experiences Jennifer encountered post-transfer.

Conversely, she also experienced negative academic involvement experiences, related to large class sizes. She described the large classroom environment as impersonal which was a dramatic shift from her classes at the community college. She indicated that she found it hard to concentrate in these large classes to be successful. In one specific large class, which she considered to be the worst academic experience, her faculty member was very monotone and not interested in engaging with students. Jennifer stated, “The homework didn’t make sense, it was really difficult, it was really time consuming, it had no like applicable information for the tests.” These considerations, in addition to what appeared to be a disengaged faculty member, led Jennifer to do the worst she had ever done in a course and barely achieve a passing grade.
Finally, Jennifer shared how she interacted with peers a great deal due to her major’s emphasis on group work. She also considered teaching assistants for her classes as peers and sought to engage with them out of class. Even the graduate students seemed to be appropriate peers to her because “they are kind of just out of the same boat as me so I would think of them as my peer.” She shared how invested the graduate students were in her academic success, discussing how one specific student would walk several miles from his apartment to tutor her several times a week. She said she clearly felt invested in by his actions and this further strengthened these relationships with graduate students in her courses.

When asked if Jennifer felt like these academic involvement experiences influenced her path to the baccalaureate she answered quickly, “not really.” Jennifer expressed a belief that these experiences were helpful for her, however, it was mostly her own commitment to academics that propelled her to get to her current level of achievement. She then shared a few experiences regarding courses that were overly difficult, which created barriers for her. She concluded that these barriers were part of the process, and she was satisfied with her ability to overcome these challenges.

Social involvement. For Jennifer, social involvement at Southeastern University could be summed up in one word: football. She identified other sports that seemed to unite the campus, and “clubs…and socializing with my advisors and professors” as examples of social involvement on campus. Jennifer’s social involvement had been very limited as compared to her time at the community college. She was the only participant to say that she had more social connections and involvement at her previous institution. When asked for examples where she did feel socially involved on campus she talked about tailgating with her fiancée and his family as the best example. “If I knew more people I would go to their tailgates too, but…. I work a lot.”
In her estimation, she limited the time she invested in making friendships at the four-year institution because “there is really no point in… growing close to those people when they are going to move away pretty soon.” It seemed as though a cost-benefit analysis for Jennifer led her to believe that the investment of time might not pay off.

She did, however, describe the role the community within the business school and how it helped to mediate the lack of social involvement after transfer by connecting with peers and her academic advisor in the college. Group work and strong academic advising in the college were her primary connections to the institution. However, she primarily viewed her social involvement as related to her academics or family outside of the college. Finally, when asked about the importance of social involvement for her successful completion of her degree she immediately dismissed any importance of those experiences or lack thereof to her success. She added that students who are involved in sororities or on team sports may be negatively affected by social involvement, but because she was focused just on school and work she did not experience those negative side effects.

**Factors That Affected Involvement**

In talking about her lack of involvement at the four-year institution Jennifer mentioned how Greek life in particular was a typical form of involvement on campus but that sororities did not want juniors or transfers, “they prefer freshman.” She said she “got that vibe from talking to a couple of girls I was friends with” at the four-year institution that “rush is for freshman and sophomores because you’ll have longer [at the institution].” She added that she probably would not have been able to afford participation in Greek life, however, it was clear that she felt that the involvement opportunity was not for students with a transfer status like her own.
Additionally, at various points of attendance at Southeastern Jennifer held two part-time jobs working almost 40 hours a week while attending school. When she learned about opportunities to be involved or was even invited to some of organizational meetings she always weighed it with her limited availability to commit or engage. She suggested that it “wasn’t really fair” to the organization or people because she could not fully invest. She did participate in the institution’s large student organization showcase event at the start of her first semester and was excited about all of the opportunities. She noted how enthusiastic students were in wanting her to join them which made her want to, but her work schedule made it all but impossible to make club meetings or be involved in anything outside of class.

She added that while she received a large number of emails about clubs, many had high fees to join and she just could not afford them. “Even though I am a college student and I work a lot, I am super poor…. those fees were kind of a big deterrent: I don’t have $85 to spare this week.” Due to the cost she said she felt it was never a realistic option for her to be in those more exclusive organizations. She also said it was a cost-benefit analysis. If she had been at the four-year institution longer it may have been worth it for the high fees, but with only a year left when she received the invitation it just did not seem feasible or worth it to her.

**What Affected Degree Attainment?**

For Jennifer, there were three primary reasons she had made it to her semester of graduation: family expectations, requirement to get a job, and her own drive to succeed. First, Jennifer described the role of family pressure. It is “… family history…. and parent’s expectations” that drive her to work so diligently. Everyone in her family has a degree. She said she feels the pressure to also achieve her degree to conform with the norm of her family. Additionally, she observed that it is “harder to get a job without some kind of degree,” and she
has seen friends who started at the community college with her and did not continue struggle to secure gainful employment and a livable wage. She noted that bachelor’s degrees are becoming the minimum criteria for many jobs and because she wants a secure future she regarded it as a requirement to complete her degree. Finally, Jennifer said, “It’s my work ethic and how much I put into it.” She indicated that she had struggled in courses, worked several jobs, and had to make hard decisions along her pathway to graduation, but felt as though her commitment to achieve the degree for herself has kept her motivated along the way.

**Barriers and Recommendations**

Jennifer’s barriers as a transfer student at the institution centered on academic advising and the lack of important knowledge related to her transfer of credits and pathways to transfer to Southeastern University. She had a situation in which she almost did not transfer because she was missing one course, and had it not been for an observant college advisor at an on-campus transfer recruitment event she may not have ended up at Southeastern. She suggested that her transfer was left to chance because she did not understand a great deal about the process. Had she not met that advisor she may not have stayed on track with her degree. She said more communication and clarity should be created for transfer students in the transfer process to not only show them the value of the bachelor’s degree to encourage them to transfer and stay committed, but also to understand the process so they are not intimidated.

Jennifer said she felt compelled to share a very negative experience with a transfer recruiter who came to her honor society at the community college. When she approached the recruiter after the presentation and asked about potential scholarships the recruiter asked for her GPA and told her that since it was below a 3.8 she really was not a competitive applicant. She shared, “it was really discouraging.” The recruiter then stopped talking to her for the rest of the
event even though she had other questions. Though Jennifer ended up getting half-tuition to attend through her role in the honor society and ultimately transferred to Southeastern University, she expressed discouragement that the institution did not really want her to transfer.

With regard to other things that could be improved, she pointed out how limited the transfer orientation experience was as compared to the freshman orientation. She said she would have appreciated more opportunities to tour campus and get comfortable there. Additionally, she said she wished that housing options were made available to transfer students so they could live on campus like the freshman students. Additionally, she had a specific recommendation to address the need for more informal social interaction with faculty on campus. She said transfers would benefit from “meet and greets with various departments in the college” to help students be more certain of their academic and future career paths by learning more about specialties and majors in each college. She was clear to add that what she was looking for was “… not a club, just more interaction with students and faculty” to help clarify pathways and options at the four-year institution.

Madison

Madison is a 22-year-old white female student majoring in Accounting and Mathematics. She transferred from a community college about an hour and a half from Southeastern University. According to Madison, her path to higher education was ambiguous as she was not sure what she wanted to do or be as her high school graduation neared and she decided to apply to several smaller in-state schools as well as the community college in her hometown to have as many options as possible.

Her dream was to attend Southeastern University immediately upon graduation. She shared experiences as early as eight years old of experiencing the campus, and she kept a
memory book since middle school with dreams about attending the four-year institution and pictures from each of her visits building to her senior year when she realized the dream was not a reality. Her desire to be a student at the institution was very strong, but with her ACT score only ranking her in the 74th percentile she realized that she would not receive enough scholarship funds to attend as an in-state student. Though her father was a veteran and did have GI benefits, those had to be split between her and her sister, so each was told they had two years of school to be supported by her family. Luckily for her, she was valedictorian of her high school class so the local community college offered her a scholarship to attend. Her father promised that if she went to the community college for the first two years “then we can get you to [Southeastern University].”

When asked to describe her experience at the community college Madison’s first reaction was “I didn’t really have an experience there… I don’t want to ‘dis’ community college … but people are just there to go to school and work.” She did get involved in Phi Kappa Theta (PKT) because, as she stated, “I needed resume boosters, I can’t look like I am not involved in anything.” However, she said that she did not really experience community in the organization. While the involvement opportunities were not a highlight of her experience at the community college, she did have very positive interactions with faculty and staff. She said the following about community college:

...definitely changed my perspective of college because everyone was like your professors don’t care... but everyone was so personable there, it didn’t matter if it was the president all the way down to the teachers and it was a lot less threatening.

She said she appreciated the way the two-year institution provided her a “gradual progression” from high school acting as a mediating step before the University.

Madison started at community college as a Biology major, but quickly changed her career trajectory to a chemical engineer right before transferring to the four-year institution. This
change had a profound impact on her, particularly in her academic transition. She described her first semester at Southeastern University as

...a rude awakening because I was making like C’s and B’s which was something I was not used to... and that contributed to the “I don’t need to be here... I was not made for this... I am not smart enough to be here”

It was this mentality that almost led her to dropping out after her first semester at Southeastern University. Madison reported struggling academically with a significant dip in GPA the first semester in a field of study she was not enjoying. She grappled with the process of switching several majors and relied on career aptitude tests to guide her in career exploration, in almost complete isolation. Finally, after taking several tests, she changed her major to Accounting. At first, she did not connect with the suggestion, but now, in her semester of graduation with a secured post-graduate internship she said could not be more excited for her career in the future. She explained how finding the right fit of major was critical to her persisting at the institution.

In addition to the process of major exploration and change as she transitioned to the four-year she described the overall first year at Southeastern University as “miserable.” She discussed how difficult it was to be away from family and friends for the first time and how she sensed that “no one was willing to make friends because everyone had their friend group.” She attempted to get involved in intramural sports, but was not able to because the institution requires the formation of a team of people to play and she knew no one. She indicated that she wanted to get involved because the culture of the four-year institution was much more focused on involvement and that was manifested in how many more ways there were to “express yourself as a student.” She also mentioned Greek life on campus as an indicator of how important connection and engagement with other students was valued on campus. While she was never able to reach the level of involvement she had hoped for on campus she maintained that it was still a positive experience overall.
In addition to the gap in her ability to get involved outside of class, Madison also shared how much information she was lacking related to her major and the formal process through which jobs are secured in her program. In her second semester at the institution she took an upper-level course where “the recruiting process started and I had no idea.” Staff in the college started telling her she needed to turn in a resume for “Meet the Firms” and she was not even sure what the event was or what she needed to do. Without a comparable major-specific class that is required of all freshman in her major, she had missed out on a large part of career preparation and support required to be successful at the upper-level. “I didn’t know what I was doing…I had no idea that I was supposed to keep connections with these people… and I felt very in the dark.” Madison described this as how she felt during most of her college experience post-transfer.

**Defining Involvement and Personal Experiences**

When asked to discuss involvement in college, Madison responded “…it’s how many activities you are doing… it’s just your volunteering, the clubs you are involved with, your organizations.” Madison said she knew what involvement was even if it did not look that way from her list of activities. As previously discussed, her desired level of involvement was not achieved at the institution, but she had attempted to engage in all of the ways she knew how to on campus.

**Academic involvement.** Narrowing the topic to academic involvement, Madison described the business-specific fraternity that many students were involved with and study groups as ways a student could be involved. She admitted; however, that it was harder for her to think of being involved as academic. When asked about her personal experiences for academic involvement she identified a study group for one of her upper-level accounting classes that met daily over summer due to the intensity of the course. She expressed appreciation for the group
and its academic support, but also acknowledged enjoying the social engagement with her peers and became “acquaintances with them.” Study groups were her favorite academic experience on campus and through her participation she said, “I actually felt like I was in college.” When asked why she enjoyed them so much she shared “I was just tired of being by myself.” It was clear that Madison was searching for a social connection in her academic environment.

She also used common spaces on campus such as the library to encounter other students in her classes with whom to connect and study. However, these one-time encounters never materialized into friendships or community on campus and remained just temporary study sessions that occurred by happenstance. She also discussed her involvement in an honor society on campus, but was unable to remember the name of the group and admitted that it was really her mother’s idea to join. According to Madison, “you don’t hear about these [honor societies], you don’t hear about people doing anything with them so my point was, what is the point in paying the money and not doing anything with them?” However, because this one was the cheapest of several honor society invitations she received she paid the fee to join, but had never been to a meeting or event and was not even sure what the organization had to offer.

Alternatively, Madison did establish very strong relationships with professors in her discipline. While she said she did not feel comfortable being vocal in class, she did make use of office hours regularly to connect with instructors out of class. Madison indicated that her plan was to maintain those connections for possible graduate school recommendations and support in the future. One particular professor with whom she had a professional relationship specializes in her desired career area of tax accounting. She said she felt as though he would be a critical connection for her future after graduation.
Finally, when asked to evaluate if anything related to academic involvement had supported her pathway to the baccalaureate, she responded: “nothing sped me up, nothing held me back, just myself.” Her academic involvement had mostly been attempts to create social connections on campus with either students or faculty, but neither made much of an impact on her degree attainment in her view.

Social involvement. With regard to social involvement, Madison said, “I am guessing that’s more like intramural sports, going to the bars with your friends… literally just getting out with friends and doing what you all enjoy.” When asked about her social involvement she noted that she had finally found enough students to create an intramural sports team after she had connected with enough transfer students who had come from her two-year institution and were willing to participate. She said she also frequented the recreation center in hopes of joining an ongoing game of basketball and attended sporting events on campus to participate in that part of community on campus.

Though her social involvement had not been what she had hoped, she did support the notion that it had supported the achievement of her degree. She explained:

*if I didn’t have these people, my friends, to hang out with I don’t know if I would have stayed here... I don’t know if I would have just gone back to a smaller university that was closer to me and cheaper*

Therefore, even though her social involvement had been far from what she dreamed of when she first wanted to transfer to SEU, it remained an important part of her college experience. She reported that the few relationships she was able to create on campus made her feel as though she belonged.

Factors That Affected Involvement

Madison desired to be more involved on campus because she was hoping to have more entries on her resume. She stated, “employers are looking at my four-year involvement versus
my two-year institution,” which meant that she needed to show involvement at Southeastern to get employed. She noted that while her plan did not work out, she was making the best of it. Some specific barriers she identified were age differences between herself and her peers who may be in student organizations. It was not that she was substantially older, but those students who had started at the four-year institution had more experience than she did “so I felt like I didn’t really stand a chance.” She further explained, “…they aren’t going to pick me just because my time here is short and I haven’t been involved with to begin with so they aren’t going to pick me... so I will just save myself some heartache.” This feeling of difference created a barrier for her in attempting to get involved in organizations, and she ultimately decided “I will just stay away from that.” In summary, Madison expressed a sincere desire to be involved on campus and tried to seek out opportunities, but “it just didn’t work, I don’t know how else to put it.”

**What Affected Degree Attainment?**

According to Madison, the main reason she was on the cusp of graduation was her own desire to achieve the degree. She indicated that her success had nothing to do with the institution because “I didn’t really have a whole lot of experiences” that had been supportive. She further noted, “basically a requirement to get a college degree to get a good job.” She added that through this interview process she was thinking through what that meant to her. She concluded:

*I don’t want to be struggling in the future financially... I don’t my kids to miss out on things because I don’t have money or because I am worrying about month to month with bills, I want to be financially stable.*

For Madison, the only way she would be able to achieve this level of comfort was to achieve her bachelor’s degree.
Barriers and Recommendations

The biggest barriers for Madison were a lack of knowledge on campus and a community to belong to after transferring. First, she described how she lacked information about how to be a student at the institution: “I didn’t really know all my resources, I didn’t know what was available to me.” She shared several experiences of conversations with students where they would talk about a place, event, or experience for which she had no context which made her feel both excluded and frustrated by her lack of knowledge. She said she had to learn things from other students who started as freshman at the institution or by being observant to what others did on campus. For example, she had no idea that her identification card on campus could be used to buy food until she saw several students using it in that way. She then tried to and was pleasantly surprised to find out she had funds on the card. To address this barrier, Madison suggested the creation of a guide to basic resources and knowledge on campus that could be shared at orientation to catch students up as they transitioned to the institution.

She also discussed how different she felt from the freshmen on campus who “knew where to go and how things work and here we [transfer students] … just going at it by ourselves.” Her suggestion for both of these barriers was the development of a transfer-specific community on campus. “I would have liked to have a transfer community... I am sure I am not the only one that has just stayed in their apartment because I didn’t know where to go or what to do.” Specifically, she suggested the University be more intentional during transfer orientations to build connections among students. She emphasized how important it is to build relationships with students as they transition from their community college to the four-year institution. Additionally, she suggested that by not offering transfer students the option to stay on campus for their orientation experience it was just another missed opportunity to connect with peers before they arrived on campus. She
noted that transfer orientation is “… not enough time. You are constantly listening to information sessions… I definitely think that they could give more time to develop relationships.”

Additionally, when asked about getting involved at the four-year institution, Madison expressed a strong desire to get involved, but felt like there was a lack of information shared with transfer students about how they could find opportunities and engage. By the time she had learned about opportunities she expressed feelings of exclusion because “there are already people who have that experience in that club or what you are wanting to do and you aren’t really going to get picked or it’s just too late.” Once again, Madison recommended more intentionality with messages for transfer students and opportunities at orientation or early in their transfer process so that their already limited time on campus did not become too limited to engage in clubs and organizations that would benefit their experience. Another recommendation stemmed from the lack of emphasis she experiences as a transfer student. She specifically identified Greek life and how they had a presence and office on campus to support them, but she had seen nothing like that for transfer students on campus. She simply asked: “Why can’t there be a transfer center?” She expressed frustration with the lack of visible support from the institution for transfers.

With regard to the academic focus, Madison reported experiencing a large gap in knowledge related to her future career field and requirements to be successful. This knowledge was passed on to freshman in a required introductory course, however no course exists for transfer students. This gap in knowledge left her not understanding many of the events and terms instructors and others used regarding career-specific requirements and missing out on internships and summer leadership opportunities because she was not aware of their existence. Her recommendation was to be intentional to bridge gaps in majors like Accounting so that all
students would be aware of the expectations and have an equal chance at those competitive opportunities for advancement.

**Skyler**

Skyler is a 40-year-old African American female majoring in Interdisciplinary Studies at Southeastern University. She transferred from a local community college less than 30 minutes from the four-year institution. Skyler’s path through higher education has not been linear, however, a pervasive theme for her journey has been perseverance and dedication to a better life for her family. Starting in high school Skyler did not think about college as an option for herself nor did anyone else, family and guidance counselors never encouraged her to consider pursuing postsecondary options. Her motivating factor to begin her pathway to the baccalaureate was being in an environment and workforce in which several of her colleagues had college degrees. She saw it as a way to “be more competitive” in the workforce.

Though she took a long hiatus between high school graduation and community college, once she started at the two-year institution she was able to complete her associate’s degree fully in two years. Her choice of community college was an easy decision, she explained, because she needed something close to her work so she could make it to classes after working all day. In addition to her requirement to work, she was also raising four children while balancing her new role as a college student. She said she was thankful that federal financial aid such as Pell Grants were available to her so she could pursue her education without a large cost to her family.

As a student at the community college, she said she felt comfortable in her class environment. Additionally, due to the all-night schedule she took she was surrounded by peers of the same age and life stage as her. She described the community college as “a good place to start out” with several resources to help support students like herself who may “be out of the groove
and the routine of being a regular student.” She mentions how important tutoring and academic support services were and how getting the fundamentals at the community college helped her be prepared for the transition to the four-year institution. Outside of the use of those on-campus support services though, Skyler did not get engaged at her two-year institution due to the time barriers with family and full-time work.

After graduating with her two-year diploma Skyler re-entered the workforce for three years, but said she still felt unsatisfied with the career options available to her without a bachelor’s degree. What eventually attracted Skyler to begin her four-year degree was learning about the hybrid program at Southeastern University where she would be able to work full-time and take classes around her schedule. This program is designed for adult learners to be able to take courses on the weekends or at nights with other adult learners and incorporates professional experiences into the curriculum. Regarding her student experience at the four-year institution she stated, “This program is for non-traditional students and I met that definition to a ‘T’. Because I am not a traditional student I did not want to have to be in a college party life.” She suggested that this program allowed her to engage in ways she was comfortable and that met the needs of her personal life.

In her first year at the institution Skyler said she felt very welcomed on campus which was something she was not sure about being a non-traditional student. Additionally, while academically her first semester was not her strongest, she adjusted to the academic rigor of the four-year institution and was able to earn all A’s in her coursework after that. While she knew to expect a higher level of academic challenge after transferring, she still did not anticipate the increased workload, particularly the number of papers required in each class.
When asked about differences between student experiences at each of her higher education institutions she shared that she really did not know. She was often not on the four-year campus when other students were and did not participate in traditional ways such as clubs, organizations, and events at either campus. In retrospect, she said she was more engaged like a “typical” student at the community college because all of her classes were in person and did require attendance on campus when other classes were being held. For the classes in her baccalaureate degree they often met on Saturdays when no other students were in classes and did more online engagement versus face-to-face.

Once Skyler committed to the degree pathway she was able to complete the remainder of her coursework needed for the bachelor’s degree in three years. She described this pathway as the right fit for her, and now as her children near high school graduation she is encouraging them to take the same path. She indicated that the community college was more economical and provided a needed bridge to adjust to what is required in college. She also emphasized the importance of advising in the process to ensure staying on track with degree goals and not losing credits in transfer.

**Defining Involvement and Personal Experiences**

Skyler defined involvement in college as “me taking part in whatever the class had to offer whether it’s on or off-site depending on the curriculum.” It is likely that her experience of the hybrid degree program, with a large proportion of online course components and then limited in-class interaction with her peers during times when other students were not on campus, influenced her evaluation of what involvement in college looked like. However, in discussing her involvement at the four-year institution she expressed nothing but positive regard for the interactions she had and how they impacted her learning experience.
Academic involvement. When asked about academic involvement, Skyler discussed the research required for writing the many papers in her program. She commented on the number of papers required, lamenting that she was not sure how career-applicable all of the research and writing was. She acknowledged feeling academically involved with research and writing, but said she did not enjoy them as the primary methods of assessing her learning. She also added the importance of participating in course discussions and being prepared to engage with assignments in class and with peers. She spoke about being in academic groups and organizations as ways other students could be involved, but she was not aware of any of those specifically nor had she participated in them.

Skyler said that she personally felt academically involved when she was presenting speeches to her class or sharing ideas she had crafted for papers required in her coursework. Additionally, her degree program required a capstone project centered on community, the theme of her degree concentrations. In this project, she was hands-on in the community several times a week working with at-risk teens in local high schools. For this project, she was doing both observations and interventions in the high school alongside a non-profit agency and saw how her coursework was applied in practice and then evaluated and written up for consumption. She expressed great appreciation for the practicality of the experience in her field.

She also participated in a few class projects that she described as both academic and social involvement. When she was required to interact with peers outside of class, but on course-related assignments, she expressed appreciation for the experience and described it as a time in which she felt the “most involved.” She stated, “the hands-on [experience] and the interaction made it more fulfilling and I wanted to learn more...” While she experienced several positive academic involvement opportunities throughout her time at the four-year institution she
suggested that she did not feel as though they influenced her on her degree pathway. She mentioned how her academic advisor set out a track for her at the start of her time at Southeastern and she was confident she would get there as long as she stuck to the plan, however, there was nothing special she needed or experienced to get to that end goal.

**Social involvement.** In terms of social involvement, Skyler discussed personal examples in which her coursework required her to engage with peers and her community. The instructor required students to attend First Fridays, an art gallery exhibition in town as a cohort. Students in the class were required to attend, analyze the art with others, and then write about their experience. While Skyler appreciated the assignment, she also enjoyed the opportunity to both connect with her peers and her local community in meaningful ways.

Skyler also experienced social involvement via the social community she had built in her face-to-face classes. Because the program is relatively small and somewhat cohort-based she often had class with the same students each semester and had continued those relationships into subsequent semesters engaging with them about other courses and assignments. In some courses, students used breaks in the weekend courses to bond over meals together and build a strong community atmosphere. Finally, Skyler added the importance of technology for student involvement using email, instant messaging (IM-ing) within the learning management system, and other methods to connect even when she was not able to meet those peers in person.

The remaining examples related to social involvement for Skyler were related to non-students and the extant community in which she had made friends locally that she considered her social network. She said that she did feel as though during the times she was in school, this part of her community was not as active since her time was more limited. “Because I was in school I really did not have a lot of social time because I am trying to finish [the degree].” However, the
friends she included in her inner-circle were the social group she was looking forward to reengaging with after graduation.

When asked how social involvement may or may not have influenced her path to graduation, Skyler actually endorsed the idea of its importance. She said, “It helped because having people that you can reach out to that are going in the same direction that you’re going it’s helpful because you can bounce ideas and thoughts about papers and different career paths.” She also identified staff and peers she had met along the way who encouraged her to completion.

Factors That Affected Involvement

Skyler was quick to list all of the factors that limited her involvement in what may be considered “traditional” forms of involvement. For her, age was a big reason she did not participate in activities. However, this was compounded by her life stage when she started college and completed. She had more responsibilities than most traditional college students, such as raising four children, being married, and working full-time. She said, “I don’t really have the time to do what the 20-year-olds are doing because I am too busy trying to raise 20-year-olds…I don’t have that leisure to be as free as a younger person.” However, she said she still did get involved in ways that she could such as the art gallery project and another project involving historical landmarks on campus. In both instances, the professor had made the course engaging and required hands-on experiences and peer interaction which she said improved her involvement in the course.

What Affected Degree Attainment?

Skyler identified her peers in courses who supported her in completing assignments or just acting as a sounding board as important for her degree attainment process. Additionally, she found supportive faculty in her program to be important and that both faculty and students
together acted as a cheering squad for her to continue on and be successful in the degree program. However, she also mentioned how critical her own personal motivation was to achieve her goal. It was clear from Skyler’s personal journey that her tenacity and commitment to her goals allowed her to achieve her bachelor’s degree within five total years of college while working full-time and raising a family. She summarized the significance and her drive for completion:

*It is really going to help me, my family, and my career... just having my degree means a lot- to not just me but to my kids who are my audience who are looking at everything I do and so I feel like this completion would just motivate them to be more successful and continue their education as well*

**Barriers and Recommendations**

When asked about barriers and recommendations for the institution, Skyler could not identify any areas of her experience that she would change or for which she would recommend changes for future transfer students. She said, “I felt included... I felt like a regular university student… and they did everything they needed to do as far as I know.” While her student experience may have been different from a traditional on-campus student, she said she did not feel any different, which is a positive message for the institution.

**Sue**

Sue is a 26-year-old white female who transitioned to Southeastern University from the Community College of the Airforce where she was a distance student for the completion of her Associate’s degree while also serving in the armed forces. Sue’s exploration of postsecondary education began in high school when she aspired to be a veterinarian, but she was discouraged by her parents due to the extremely small size of her town. Despite the discouragement and unclear career path, she decided to apply to Northwestern University in Illinois and was ultimately accepted. However, around this same time she saw her older sister struggling in her
first year of college and Sue began to doubt that she could be successful. Additionally, her parents did not have the financial means to support either of them through college, and Sue saw that the only way her sister was able to attend was to co-sign a loan with their grandfather. Sue said, “that just wasn’t something I wanted to do”.

After realizing that her alternate options were limited, Sue joined the military and was assigned to the security forces division. This area fit her experiences well as she participated in a criminal justice work program in high school that substituted for one of her courses and gave her experience with the field. While her job in the military was a good fit with her previous experience it did not fit her future career interests. However, Sue explained that in the military students can accrue credits for the job they are assigned through the Community College of the Airforce, so she started a path towards earning her degree to take advantage of the free and accessible way to earn college credit for something she was already doing. In addition to that experience, she also started taking various online classes through American Military University in addition to taking College Level Examination Program (CLEP) exams to make as much progress towards her degree as possible. Breaks from coursework often occurred during periods of longer deployment when taking courses was not as feasible, but she picked them back up upon return and recommit to completing her degree.

Her experience at the community college was a combination of online and in-person classes that could be taken on base at an education center that offered satellite campuses. The education center was frequently a conglomerate of institutions that offered a few classes; Sue took courses with whichever institution was offering the classes she still had to complete. While it was an accessible option for her, it also meant that she was earning credit from a multitude of institutions which made transferring to a four-year institution a very frustrating process.
She also expressed frustration with the variance in instruction and learning between institutions. In fact, she was not sure she had ever had an instructor in-person or online who was truly engaged with students. As such, she suggested that her community college experience did not prepare her at all for her education at the four-year institution. Additionally, when asked to characterize the community college she attended she remarked “I didn’t know anything about their culture or their values to be honest with you. All I knew was that it was easy, that’s how I would describe it… It was just lots of going through the motions.” Despite the poor learning experience and bouncing between online and in-person courses, she persisted. She noted that the greatest impetus for completion at that point was the opportunity for promotion once she earned the two-year degree in the military.

As she was working on completing her Associate’s, she also met someone and got married. This was an important turning point in her journey as he soon decided he wanted to leave the military and complete his bachelor’s degree and she decided to follow. Her spouse at the time was the one who chose to apply to and attend Southeastern University. Since the relationship was important to her she also applied and transferred. Soon after starting their four-year degrees, however, they decided to get a divorce. Sue said, “…it was a definite challenge for me because I was not motivated to come here at all.” In light of the changes and desire to not be at the institution longer than she needed to be, she communicated a motivation to “get it done faster” and move on from the memories with which she began her career at SEU. In retrospect, she said she is thankful for the journey:

Wow! I am about to get my bachelor’s degree and I thought I would still be in the military right now... I would have just continued doing online classes... and I know that the education I am receiving here is much better... so it’s kind of a silver lining there.
In her first year at Southeastern University, Sue tried to get involved in all of the typical “first-year experiences,” as she described them, such as the major student organization fair held on campus. She said she was overwhelmed with all of the extracurricular options that were offered to students “like you almost have to make it a point not to do activities on campus because there is so much going on.” Though she explored a few options, she ultimately found her place in the Veterans and Military Affairs office as a student worker and working with the VITAL program that supports returning veterans as they transition back to civilian life. In addition to involvement on campus she expressed concern about the coursework in her transition to the four-year institution and expected it to be much more challenging. In her first semester at Southeastern her GPA did drop from the 4.0 she had earned in her community college classes, but only by a small margin.

**Defining Involvement and Personal Experiences**

Sue defined involvement as “attending class, every class, engaging while you are in class, and then finding specific student organizations that complement your course work, and then I think it’s really important that students have on-campus jobs.” She emphasized the importance of on-campus jobs because it helps students understand how the campus works, provides students with a mentor or advisor who has institutional knowledge and can support their education, and gives students applicable experience while in college.

**Academic involvement.** More specifically, academic involvement for Sue meant “being present at every single class and being specifically engaged in class, shutting your laptop, taking hand written notes, and every student should talk to their instructor at least once.” For Sue, academic involvement included behaviors or actions a student could take while in class to
engage and get the most out of their classroom experience, including building relationships with instructors.

Sue’s personal experience of academic involvement often included connecting with professors and peers in class whom she relied on if she was struggling with a course or needed to catch up with material she missed. As far as her engagement in class, Sue expressed mixed feelings. She suggested that her military experience, with its emphasis on leadership, had changed the way she approached the classroom. She viewed the learning environment as yet another opportunity to be a leader and in turn was never shy to volunteer to read in class or answer a professor’s questions. While this was natural for Sue, she suggested that it was one of the many ways she was unlike her fellow students at Southeastern University. In her opinion, she had very little in common with any peers on campus because of her military experience, stating:

I think it isolates me because I don’t identify with my peers and its kept me from participating in organizations and student activities… the disconnection from my peers is still there as it was in online college, but I definitely feel more connected to my instructors.

While the academic interactions with her peers had not been a highlight of her experience post-transfer, she described very positive interactions with her faculty members. She particularly appreciated the practical experience that several of them had in business and how they shared actual scenarios in the course to make the material seem more relatable. She also observed that faculty members at the four-year institutions made an effort to get to know students and took an interest in supporting them in their future career success. She said she felt valued as a student in her college and that the education she was receiving was very strong.

In addition to her classroom experiences, Sue also became involved in the Faculty Scholars program where she was paired with a faculty member to get involved in undergraduate research. Together with her mentor, she worked on a project focused on millennials in the
workplace. However, this experience only lasted one semester as she needed to quit the program and spend that time working for financial reasons.

When asked if her academic involvement experiences had been significant to her pathway to graduation, she mentioned a particular professor she had who had been an advocate for her. This specific professor provided her with guidance and opportunities such as an internship to earn academic credit that allowed her to stay on track to graduation while gaining even more experience for her resume. Had it not been for his involvement, her graduation would have been delayed an additional semester. However, it was more than just this one opportunity, Sue viewed his advocacy as an investment in her which was an important factor to her.

Social involvement. For Sue, social involvement meant being involved in student organizations. Even though she was not currently a member of a student organization, she still endorsed the significance of them and engaging with events and activities that the University offers so that students can get “out of their shell”.

For Sue, tailgating was one of her main involvement experiences. She often tailgated with peers who were also members of the VMA Center. She said she was not very interested in the sporting events themselves, but she did find enjoyment in the community of people who she considered peers. In addition to sporting events, Sue also spent time with peers from VMA outside of the University participating in local events off-campus. She also got involved in the Veterans Campus Association (VCA) which brought together other veterans across campus. Through this involvement she participated in bake sales, fundraisers, and traditional student organization meetings with other veterans. She also became a member of the Student Human Resources Management group to gain more connections to her major and potential career-related opportunities. Finally, she found a major-specific organization, Veteran’s in Business, which
allowed her to connect to both of her strong identities on campus, both being a veteran and her future career field.

She did not get involved in other forms of social involvement because she explained “there is just such a difference in maturity and outlook on life and opinions about things are not formed as much yet at the first-year level or people I had classes with.” In addition to this feeling of difference, Sue also worked a considerable amount and did not feel as though she had the time to invest in other forms of involvement.

When asked how important social involvement experiences were for her pathway to the baccalaureate, Sue shared how the Veteran’s and Military Affairs office did act as a motivation for her to spend more time studying which kept her on track; however, she said she felt as though the relationships she created there also pulled her away from her academics: “It seems like when I have more friends and I am doing more things I am not studying as much... that would start to hinder my progress.” So, while the center offered her additional resources to succeed in her academics, the social aspect that was a by-product of the VMA may have detracted at times from her focus on graduation.

Factors That Affected Involvement

Outside of managing her divorce early on in her transition, Sue said that feeling different than her peers was one of the main reasons that had kept her “from participating in activities and student organizations because I just don’t feel any sort of connection.” She further described these feelings of difference:

*When you have been out in the world, and I am going to try not to sound like better than anyone else-I am not, but when you have been out in the world and have communicated with a lot of different people, and had responsibilities, and worked yourself out of your shell... these students just don’t have the capacity or maybe the motivation that I may have...*
From her point of view, traditional-aged college students who came straight from high school were often still self-conscious and worried about what others thought whereas she, having lived more life and matured, was going to college for herself and less likely to regard peer acceptance as important. Nevertheless, she expressed feeling overwhelmed by how involved other students were on campus and at first felt pressured to get involved with everything to the detriment of her focus on school work. Specifically, she said she was affected by the “rat race for everyone to get a job or internship” and all of the activities students undertake to be competitive for those opportunities. Realizing that it was causing her to be overwhelmed, she decided to completely withdraw and focus on her school work.

In response to the overwhelming opportunities at the University, her decision to focus on her school work was also a very intentional choice for her future:

*When I made the decision to quit my job and my whole career and be a student I decided I don’t need any other distractions from being a student... I am a student first and I just felt like if I join a sorority or co-ed fraternity... I just didn’t feel that I had the time or energy to devote to that and stay true to my school work.*

It was clear that her level of involvement was a calculated choice that would allow her to balance her priority of school and preparing for her future career first and foremost.

Another reason Sue was less likely to get engaged on campus was that she did not “feel nearly as invested in this college, if someone said you have to transfer to a different college, all of your credits will transfer perfectly and it was a comparable college I would have no problem doing that.” She also lost her connection with the VMA office after her first year due to negative experiences with faculty and staff at the Center which only distanced her more from the community she had built or any future connection with the institution.

Despite all of the reasons she was not likely to be involved, she did find community built with other veterans and especially opportunities to support other veterans as they transitioned to
be a draw towards being more engaged on campus. She stated, “connecting with people who were like me made me more likely to be involved.” Finally, Sue expressed appreciation for the encouragement of professors who talked about important events or clubs on campus that would benefit her. She said she was more likely to look into the opportunity if a professor encouraged her to do so and she appreciated how accessible the institution’s website was for finding information on events or other involvement if she was interested. Overall, her involvement ebbed and flowed, but regardless she appreciated all of the opportunities that were available to her.

**What Affected Degree Attainment?**

When asked why Sue felt she was successful in making it to graduation she simply replied, “Well, I just have too much I want to do… I don’t like being in academics… so I just have a drive to be employed and being working towards achievement related to employment versus achievements related to academics.” According to Sue, the University had fueled that drive to graduate by showing her what career success could look like in her field, and this motivated her to persist and ultimately graduate. She said she was looking forward to that next step.

**Barriers and Recommendations**

Sue’s greatest obstacle in transitioning to the four-year institution was navigating campus. She suggested that the campus was difficult to navigate and while she was aware of the online map and the app that is available to students, she said it was still a steep learning curve first coming to campus. Additionally, Sue encountered issues with her Veterans benefits and in particular issues with the financial aid office. Based on her experience, the University is not communicative enough about the process of transitioning to education for veterans in terms of options for institutional financial aid and federal aid. She said she learned very necessary
financial information from peers at the VMA which saved her thousands of dollars. She suggested, however, that the office on campus responsible for that processing should be more proactive in reaching veterans and helping them navigate the transition.

In addition to the logistical and knowledge gaps on campus, Sue also recommended more intentionality in helping transfer students build community on campus. Specifically, she thought there should be a transfer-specific organization or something for older students to stimulate social connection. She stated:

*I can’t imagine if I wasn’t a veteran, how would I seek out other students and even now I am not active in the student veteran community and I have no idea how I would find students in my age group because I really can’t socialize with... student who are like five and six years younger with me.*

Sue recommended the institution put more effort into creating opportunities for engagement of transfer students specifically since they are more likely to be older than traditionally-aged students.
CHAPTER 5
MERGED FINDINGS FROM CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

Stake (2005) emphasized the significance of viewing each case for its own merit towards understanding the quintain, but also provided a framework for producing merged findings from the cases to elucidate common understanding about the issue from consistent themes. While more weight should be given to the analysis and write up of each case, the merging of findings across cases provides greater understanding of the quintain in various contexts and for different individuals (Stake, 2005). The following section highlights the common themes that were identified across several cases that relate to the central issue of this research: to better understand involvement experiences and the significance of those experiences for successful degree completion for transfer students.

The cross-case analysis was completed using Stake’s (2005) Matrix for Generating Theme-Based Assertions from Merged Findings (see Appendix E). This process requires a holistic review of each case, but also uses triangulation across cases to elucidate the most common or remarkable themes (Stake 2005). The themes that emerged from the analysis include: “Us Versus Them”: Feelings of Difference, “This isn’t what I expected”: Missed Opportunities and Barriers to the Desired College Experience, “Finding My Community”: Carving Out an Involvement Identity, “It’s What I Am Here For”: The Importance of Academic Involvement, and “Fake It till You Make It”: Self-Reliance for Success. Each of these themes will be discussed with triangulated data and direct quotes provided across cases to highlight the strength of the merged findings.
“Us Versus Them”: Feelings of Difference

One of the most prevalent themes that permeated the qualitative analysis was the sense of difference as a transfer student on campus. Several students acknowledged that more of their friends were native students, they often did not disclose that they were a transfer student to anyone, and most did not feel particularly stigmatized as a transfer student. Despite a lack of overt cues to their difference, all participants discussed a sense of difference from others on campus. The theme centered around two central tenants that coalesced to create the feelings of divergence from native students. The main tenants were age differences and the Greek Life presence. Both of these sub-themes will be discussed to highlight the strength of this theme.

Age differences. Whether the participant was 22 or 40, age differences were deeply entrenched in their perception of themselves among their peers. This age difference created a perceived barrier to feeling as though they belonged on campus and/or that they could get involved post-transfer. For many, this was not a barrier they were used to experiencing; most shared that they did not feel that age was an important factor to them when they were at the community college, which enrolled a wider-range of students. Egbert said he missed the community college environment where “…you still had folks that were older, around your age. You had like 40-year olds in the same class. So I felt like I was on the same level as the students.” Skyler also shared this feeling noting “Because the classes I took were at night…pretty much everybody that was in my classes were around my age, because they typically were working too. So I felt comfortable.” For both of these non-traditionally aged students this sentiment changed after they transferred to the four-year institution, and the age discrepancy became very pronounced.
Carlos was one of the most vocal participants about the age barrier on campus. As this 28-year-old stated, “It made me less sociable. I definitely didn't want to hang out with anybody after class because it felt like hanging out with children.” Further, he further described his perceptions of involvement opportunities on campus, “I mean if any of those advertisements look like freshman, like just appeal to the young. I didn't touch it really. You know like at all.” Age clearly created a barrier in his mind to wanting to establish relationships with peers on campus as well as attending events or getting involved in college-related experiences due to his perception that activities were not for students his age. This age barrier even permeated academic experiences for Carlos as he shared how other students in group projects perceived transfer students who were older differently:

[The native students] just think that the masterful old guy knows all or they are just going to be in the groupthink concept where they're the majority and you're the minority. So, even if you come up with a good idea, they'll shut it down. That's like with all my group stuff.

Interestingly, while some of participants were older, over half were of traditional college-age, students between 18-24 years, and would not presumably not experience involvement in college as any different based on age; however, this was not the case for any of the study participants. Madison, one of the youngest participants in the study who had just turned 22, described the institution by saying “…you have a lot of younger people here. That's the majority,” which is interesting considering age range for a graduating senior. However, she did not see herself in “the majority” and considered age to be a significant barrier to her involvement on campus.

Furthermore, many participants shared the perspective that a large number of involvement opportunities centered on getting freshman involved; they expressed disappointment at the lack of attention to transfer students. Audrey summarized it this way: “it's
hard because you almost feel a little alienated first getting here because a lot of the things that we
do for new students is geared towards freshman.” Additionally, Sue suggested that had it not
been for her veteran community she would have been lost in creating connections on campus due
to age:

\[ \text{I can't imagine if I wasn't a veteran how would I seek out other students...I have no idea how I would find other students who are in my age group because I really can't socialize with- or it's very difficult for me to socialize with students who are like five and six years younger than me.} \]

Whether the age difference was a perception or a real difference between participants and
traditional-aged students at the institution, it was clear that age was a factor that impacted the
way these transfer students perceived involvement opportunities at the four-year institution.

**Greek influence.** Of the nine study participants only one (Audrey) participated in Greek
life at Southeastern University. However, almost all of the participants mentioned the influence
of the Greek community on campus and how their presence created feelings of difference for
them as transfer students. Specifically, several shared how the Greek presence on campus
signaled to them that they were not really a part of the “full college experience.”

For example, when asked if she had ever been treated differently by any group on
campus, Hadley very frankly shared about how members of the Greek community had made her
feel different. She identified the Greek community as the single group that made her feel most
stigmatized as a transfer student:

\[ \text{Greek life. I'm not into the sorority thing. I'm not into that. So I think we're just not the same person. We don't have the same morals I guess. But since I also live here I feel like I don't know as much as they do.} \]

She explained that students who participant in Greek life were having a different college
experience than she was. She suggested that this difference felt exacerbated because she is a
“local” while she perceived most of these students to be from out-of-state. Similarly, Jennifer
described her self-perceptions as a transfer student on campus and disclosed that she felt different from others on campus, particularly the Greek system. She stated:

... because the whole Greek system. Most of the school I can't remember, like 83% of the school is Greek... I don't feel like I really missed out on anything because I had such a great experience at [my community college], but I can see how somebody transferring from a smaller school would think that they had missed out on a lot of stuff...also if you're a gigantic [institutional] fan you know you don't necessarily get the whole [college] experience...

She also shared that it was made clear to her that even if she wanted to join the Greek organizations as a transfer student that it was not really meant for her:

I didn't ever try to rush or anything. I just got that vibe talking to a couple of the girls I was friends with that rush is kind of for freshman, sophomores, because you'll have longer there and I mean, I understand that..

Carlos shared a broader perspective of the role the Greek community plays on campus and how they hold the power to shape the student experience:

Didn't expect it to be exactly like this. There is definitely, I mean I didn't feel this is much because I felt like I was ostracized from a bigger group, but I think that the Greek factor is probably big if I had to guess. Because we have the biggest Greek community in the nation. We've all seen them at the football games and how they can be, and all that. I guess if you’re not in that you are already missing out on a little bit of the premier [college] experience because before everybody comes in they have those rushes and the pledges and all that. I really feel they are the ones kinda driving the [institutional] experience.

Carlos’s comments pointed to the fact that the Greek community not only had a pre-established community that he struggled to find on campus, but also how he felt he could not play a role in shaping the student experience because he was not part of the group in power on campus.

Madison echoed this sentiment of feeling slighted by comparing the Greek experience to her own, “...they have the Greek life [office] here, and it's just like, ‘Okay, cool.’ Why can't there be a transfer one?”

In addition to the broad sentiments of exclusion or difference from the Greek community, Genevieve shared how she experienced isolation and division within the Non-Panhellenic
Council that governs organizations such as the historically Black fraternities and sororities. She explained, “I feel like the rest of the university is centered a lot around fraternities and sororities too, but especially in the black population, and it's really clicked up.” She further disclosed how she had tried to establish a connection with members of those organizations as friends, but without an interest in joining them, her presence was “less appreciated” at events. This experience jaded her overall perception of social involvement on campus and left her with a lower level of involvement post-transfer than she had hoped.

Even Audrey, who did get involved in Greek life post-transfer had a negative experience. She explained that as soon as she started the rush process she was made to feel different because she was one of the few transfer students. She said everyone would ask her questions about transferring versus the questions her fellow freshman peers were getting.

“That's the only thing they would ask, you know, "Oh, why are you rushing as a sophomore?" I'd be like, "I transferred." "Oh, where did you transfer from?" "A community college." "Why did you do that?"

She said she just wanted to be treated the same as the other students, but even after being selected for a Greek house on campus, the feeling of difference remained:

_I was older than my pledge class, two years older. When you're a senior, you get privileges. Like, you don't have to get Greek points. You don't have to, you know, go to events as long as everyone else does. Like, when you're a freshman, we had to go [a service event], the entire day, and it's like 12 hours. The seniors had to go like two or four hours. You know, being that I was a senior, I was like, "Hey, I'm a senior, you know, do I need to be getting Greek points? Do I need to be doing what the sophomores are doing?"...They were basically like, "Yeah." I was like, "Okay, but I know people in the junior pledge class that are seniors, and they don't have to do any of that."

Her status, however, did not matter. She was expected to do everything based on her pledge class year; she said she felt like the exceptions were not made for her because she was a transfer student and not considered one of the “top girls” in the house. This negative experience and the
social divide in the house led Audrey to deactivate from the Greek organization in her second year and try to seek out other communities where she would not be made to feel as “less than.”

While this section centered on the differences participants felt from native students on campus, the barriers they faced are just as compelling in light to those differences. The following section addresses the missed opportunities that participants experienced based on their transfer status and the barriers they faced in achieving the college experience they had hoped for.

“This Isn’t What I Expected”: Missed Opportunities and Barriers to the “College Experience”

Even though transfer students shared overall positive appraisals of their involvement on campus, there were still sentiments that lingered as they prepared to graduate that they might have missed out on opportunities to get more out of their college experience. Audrey explained:

I just never really thought about, "I should join a club 'cause that's going to look good on my resume and it's going to enrich my personal life, and I'm going to make friends that I wouldn't have normally made." And I wish I would have thought about those things because that's probably one of my biggest regrets.

Similarly, Madison noted:

I wanted to get involved here, but I really didn't know how. I didn't think there was a whole lot of information that was given out. I didn't really hear about a lot of the things until about my fall, my last fall- like last fall. And so by then, it's too late because... there's already people who have that experience in that club or in what you're wanting to do, and so then, you're really not gonna get picked. Or then, it's just too late....

The missed opportunities were not always a lack of knowing the value of involvement or how to get involved. Several students suggested that they missed out on opportunities because the campus community was established prior their arrival, that they did not live on campus and thus did not have the central draw to events and people, and finally, that there were major-specific barriers to involvement that either disqualified them or required too much of their
limited time on campus. Each of these sub-themes is addressed with participants’ perspectives to highlight the experiences.

**The established community.** Several participants described feelings of not belonging or not feeling like they could become a part of the campus community because the community had already been established prior to them transferring. Many of them observed that native students who had started at the institution as freshmen had been building relationships and memories for years before and that there was no way they could interject themselves into that community.

For several participants, these feelings were exacerbated by a lack of community at their two-year institutions; they were looking forward to the transition in the hopes to connect with other students post-transfer. However, this simply did not happen for most of them and led some of them to describing their social involvement experience at Southeastern University as “miserable.” Genevieve was one of the most vocal participants about her lack of social connections on campus. She described scenarios in which students started conversations that immediately left her feeling excluded:

“**Oh, I remember how it was, just like our freshman year,” something like that. That’s how a lot of people got close was their freshman year and they kind of stick to those people... so, I feel like that may be another reason why I wasn't able to make as many friends as I thought I should be because I was a transfer. They [native students] didn't know me, it's like, "Who is she? Is she a freshman? We're not going to hang out with a freshman." I'm not a freshman, but yeah, whatever.**

Madison echoed these same frustrations stating, “I didn't really have any friends here. And again, like coming in, really no one else was kinda willing to make friends because you know everyone else has their friend group.” From these common experiences it was clear that transfer participants were seeking opportunities for social engagement, but felt as though the campus was not open to their participation.
Living on-campus. Prior to the current semester at Southeastern University, transfer students did not have space to live on campus. Thus, even if students wanted the traditional live-on experience it was not an option for them. Several participants described how not living on campus created a barrier to their involvement in events or being able to connect with peers at the four-year institution. When asked what factors that may have affected her ability to get involved in the way she had hoped, Audrey said:

*I think living off-campus was a big impact. Because I feel if I was a freshman and I went to [the student involvement fair] and I saw all these great clubs, I'd be like, "Oh yeah, I want to go to these meetings." And if I'm right there on campus, I'm going to go. And this is the closest I've actually ever lived. I live 10 minute walking distance, which is great. But before that, I lived 2.5 miles away. And so I always had to drive, always had to find parking. And so it was always a hassle. I never came to campus unless I had to. And that really I think limited me and my willingness to branch out.*

She also discussed how living on campus not only made students more likely to get involved in organizations, but also build relationships with peers on campus:

*...it's kind of scary to get involved, especially when you're not in a dorm room with someone else and you're not meeting a ton of new people. Because I feel dorms are a great way to get to know people. They're right across the hall, they're in your room with you.*

Audrey noted that she was isolated most of the time, first living alone and later with her boyfriend, but still not in an environment where she was being pushed to meet new friends.

Sue also shared how she felt as though she had missed out on the essential college experience because she did not live on campus:

*You miss out on the true first year immersion experience. Even though they have the transfer programs, I think that the experience of living in the dorms, the experience of eating at the dining facilities ... I mean, you have to make friends. Where when you're a transfer student and you live off campus and you don't eat here, you don't get the same experience and I don't feel nearly as invested in this college.*

In fact, Sue shared that if given the opportunity to have all of her credits transfer to another institution she would have quickly left Southeastern University because she felt no connection to
the institution. It was not that she had a negative experience, but it was the absence of what she thought the college experience and connection would be like that made her ready to leave.

**Major-specific opportunities.** In addition to the more socially-focused barriers, some participants also discussed obstacles they faced within their academic majors that excluded them from valuable learning experiences and further created a divide between the transfer and native student experience at SEU. Audrey was particularly vocal about not being eligible for on-campus experiential learning opportunities due to a preference for native students who had more years to invest in the experience:

*I think the biggest disappointment was I feel there were a lot of opportunities for my major like the on-campus radio station...When I found out, "We don't want upper-level students because we don't want to take the time to train [transfer] students, "which I understand why they don't do it. But it still sucks for those of us who transfer and expect all these things out of our college. And especially when I came here for [orientation] and they're talking up all these opportunities, it was kind of disappointing.*

Audrey said she felt as though she had been “sold” a career-relevant college experience that she was not ever going to receive. She also noted that as she neared graduation she had decided that the major she was in was not the right career field for her. This only exacerbated the issue. She said, “I think I maybe would've figured it out a little bit sooner if I was able to get that internship opportunity sooner. And I think maybe it would have changed my perspective...” She was now going to graduate in two months without a clear career direction which she said could have been avoided if barriers to transfer students had been removed.

In addition to exclusion of transfer students due to residency preferences/requirements, there were also barriers related to time required for major-specific involvement. Jennifer shared how there were several student organizations within her major that she wanted to join, but when they talked about the time commitment she knew it was not an option for her. She worked almost
full-time most semester, so spending the time required to be in one of the major-specific organizations was never a real option for her. Hadley shared a similar experience:

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Some of the organizations are very committed. Like with the Ad Agency and PRSSA [Public Relations Student Society of America] in the communications department, they are meeting several times a week. Anytime they're not in class, they're working that agency. And I support myself, so I couldn't do that. And so I do feel like some of these ask way too much time for students who were trying to balance school and work and a social life.
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In addition to student organizations, other participants suggested that their majors had overlooked transfer students in relation to post-graduation involvement while in college. Genevieve observed that was not until very late in her Social Work program that instructors and advisors started to talk about licensing requirements, graduate degrees, and other required steps to be successful after graduation. She said she felt as though she had missed something which, upon reflection, she may have due to not starting at the institution as a freshman.

Likewise, Madison mentioned a specific course that is required for all freshmen in the Business school, but is not required not for transfers. She suggested that this one course could have helped her transition and feel prepared for her time at SEU and beyond. For her accounting major, the College of Business has an extremely tailored recruitment process to ensure all graduates are placed in internships that lead to jobs post-graduation. However, coming in as a transfer student Madison said she had no idea what she was supposed to be doing to get prepared for the process that started in her junior year, the year she transferred. She recounted:

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Well then I got to like [Accounting] 310 and that's where your recruiting process started, and I had no idea. And they're like, "You have to turn in a resume because Meet the Firms is like two weeks into like school." I'm like, "Well okay, what's Meet the Firms? I don't know what any of this is." And so, I was just thrown into the mix and so I didn't know what I was doing. First of all, I didn't know what I wanted to do in the accounting world. And so, I was just talking with all these firms. I had no idea that I was supposed to keep connections with these people and just keep talking to them. I had no idea like what this was for and so I just felt really in the dark. And like, my roommate [who is a native
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[student], she's known, because they talk about it all the time, what they're getting ready for, what you're supposed to be doing, etcetera.

While Madison ended up in an internship placement post-graduation, she said she missed out on so many other experiential learning opportunities post-transfer simply because she was not informed about them and was not sure she was even eligible. These major-specific opportunities are important student experiences while in college, but many participants described missed opportunities that they perceived as negatively affecting them after graduation. That is where their real concern lay, the disparity of information and accessibility of experiences that would most impact their lives after college.

**“Finding My Community”: Carving Out an Involvement Identity**

For several participants, their limited involvement in campus centered on academic engagement in and outside of the class, which will be discussed in the next section. However, for four participants, their involvement experiences were different and centered instead on identities they felt were more salient than their ‘student’ or specifically ‘transfer student’ identity. Carlos, Sue, Egbert, and Genevieve, mediated their other identities to carve out a community on campus that was their primary form of involvement at the four-year institution.

**Veteran identity.** Two participants, Sue and Carlos, were veterans. Both discussed how their military experience impacted their approach to transferring and more specifically their approach to involvement. Both struggled to find communities on campus in which they felt they could connect with other students. However, they eventually found their connections with other veterans on campus. Sue did so through the Veterans and Military Affairs Office on campus, and Carlos through more happenstance, random encounters with other veterans on campus. Carlos explained:
So, I did find a group of Marines, randomly. I was wearing a unit shirt. One of my buddies is I don't know I guess we can call him “Andy.” He just asked me if I was in the Marines and he was a Marine in Hawaii that was in the infantry battalion. My old roommate was actually a scout sniper in the army and he is now going to [another university] ... I kinda made my own group... There is also one other Marine that was in my actual unit he transferred my second year here. Actually he called me this morning. I should probably give him a call.

While the relationships were not strategically developed and were often casual friends with whom Carlos spent limited time, he said he felt as if they were the only community he could identify with on campus.

Sue’s time spent in the military really created a distance for her from other students who did not have that experience. She noted:

*I think it isolates me, because I don't identify with my peers and it's kept me from participating in organizations and student activities, 'cause I just don't feel any sort of connection... The disconnection from my peers is still there as it was in online college, but I'm definitely more connected to my instructors.*

The one place she was able to find a connection on campus was through her involvement with the VMA. Sue both worked at VMA during her first year transitioning to the four-year institution, and then also was involved as a student participant in tailgates, fundraisers, and community service events during her time at SEU. She expressed appreciation for the social connection the VMA provided stating, “…it was just a good way for a lot of acquaintances to feel more like your friends and feel more like you're part of something and were around people that were like you or were like me, also veterans.” In addition to the VMA, Sue joined a student organization in business primarily because it was created for veterans as well. Through her involvement in Veterans in Business Sue was able to connect her past military experience with her future career goals, and it was essentially the only student organization that she was regularly involved with outside of the VMA Office.
For both Carlos and Sue, the general student population at Southeastern University and the involvement opportunities the University offered were not a good fit, they preferred to mediate social involvement solely with other veterans. Both noted that their veteran identity was more prominent than their identity as a transfer student and that led them to making choices and connections that centered on their veteran status.

**Racial/ethnic identity.** For Egbert and Genevieve, their social involvement centered on their racial/ethnic identities. This was the case for Egbert’s academic involvement as well. Both participants sought out communities that shared their Native American and Black identities, respectively, to feel a sense of belonging. For Egbert, this experience was almost completely lost in the transition to the four-year institution:

*One thing they did have [at the community college] that the [four-year institution] didn't have was a significant type of club, which was the Native American Club...They would do stuff there in Novembers, which was Native American Heritage month...With that, I feel like I was part of something.*

He described how he had participated in social and cultural events with the student organization at his community college and had not been able to find that social community post-transfer. He even commented, “Am I the only one here? Am I the only one that's going through all this?”

Even though the social connection to his ethnicity was missing, Egbert was able to delve into research projects and community outreach related to his heritage both at SEU and in the local community. He worked on research projects with both history and anthropology faculty. He also volunteered in the community with the local Native American history site to share his story with visitors. While this did not replace the sense of community he felt at his community college, it did allow him the opportunity to study his peoples’ history and share something that was so integral to his core with others.
For Genevieve, one of the reasons she decided to attend Southeastern University was because she knew people, particularly those in the historically Black Greek organizations, who she would provide her an immediate connection and friend group on campus. However, this community did not feel open to her post-transfer and she often experienced feelings of division within the Black Greek community. This was one of the primary factors she identified for not having the college experience she had anticipated. Genevieve elaborated:

*I would say I'm pretty social, but I expected it to be a lot more social like I said. People that I've seen hang around, they tend to be very clicked up according to maybe a sorority you're in or just some people just aren't very open to making new friends. That's another thing. I imagined myself being a lot more plugged in, doing a lot more things, hanging around a lot more people than what my experience has actually been like 'cause it hasn't necessarily been like that.*

Because she was not able to cross into many of the Greek organization spaces that are prominent on campus, she became involved in two other organizations on campus: The Black Student Union and the Social Work Association for Cultural Awareness (SWACA). Both of these organizations also focused on her racial identity, and she was able to establish more relationships by participating in them.

When asked about her social experiences Genevieve described how important her leadership role in SWACA had been and how one of the experiences that was most important to her was travelling to Selma for the “Bloody Sunday” walk with fellow Black students and sharing that racially-relevant experience. In SWACA she was able to mediate both her major/career-focus as well as her racial identity, both of which were important to her. She credited SWACA as her most impactful involvement experience post-transfer.

For both Genevieve and Egbert, their hopes for involvement centered on their racial/ethnic identity were not realized. However, both had found small pockets of involvement which satisfied them. Their proclivity to seek, but not find these connections may have important
implications for practice for this population. Clearly their identity as a transfer student was less salient than their other identities, but finding ways to mediate multiple identities (career/academic and racial/ethnic) seemed to be a pathway for greater involvement.

“It’s What I Am Here For”: The Importance of Academic Involvement

Participants were asked to discuss both social and academic involvement throughout their college experience. While Madison and Audrey attributed social involvement to their persistence and satisfaction post-transfer, most participants strongly endorsed the importance of academic involvement above all else. This preference for academic involvement centered on two sub-themes: a focus on life after graduation and the necessity to use the academic environment for social connections. These two findings are illustrated below to demonstrate the value of the academic experience for transfer students.

Post-graduation focus. For some participants, the condensed time they were at the four-year institution made them driven to find experiences that prepared them for their career. Others noted that the whole reason they had pursued college in the first place was a career, and so anything outside of career-related involvement was extraneous. Sue described her feelings regarding non-academic involvement:

So when I made the decision to quit my job and my whole career [in the military] and come be solely a student, I just decided I don’t need any other distractions from being a student. If I’m not working or at home like cultivating friendships, I’m a student first. And so that’s why I just felt that if I joined a sorority or I know that there’s a co-ed fraternity or I thought about some of the activity groups like outdoor rec and I just didn’t feel that I had the time or the energy to devote to that as well as stay true to my schoolwork.

Sue’s preference for academic involvement was a prioritization choice, she viewed it as a tradeoff between spending time on academics and social involvement on campus.
Similarly, Genevieve stated:

*Well, I always wanted to make sure when I came here that I was really involved in my department and my major because obviously, that's what I'm here for. And so I feel like that played a part in it as well, just me wanting to be a part of it. Not just having it be my major but also be involved in things that dealt with this.*

Genevieve specifically discussed how being a social worker was almost like an identity to her and she had even broadened the parameters of her social circle to include local professionals in the field who were supporting her career development. She had also built a strong network of peers in her major-specific classes and spent most of her time with them because they were experiencing the same things and had the same passion for the field as she did.

Several students exhibited very pragmatic decision-making in terms of how they chose their involvement activities at the four-year institution. Madison said she tried specific types of involvement like honor societies because she was looking to build her resume:

*Well, I definitely wanna be more involved so I can have more things on my resume because I feel like people I guess ... what's the word I'm looking for? Like employers are looking more at your four-year university like involvement rather than like my two year institution, and so I didn't really have anything. So, I tried to get involved. Didn't really work out but, it's okay.*

Hadley described the cost-benefit strategy she took to measuring every involvement decision:

*I definitely think on a career level. Is joining [a student organization for volunteering] really gonna look good on my resume? Or is it just gonna be there as a sentence of what I did opposed to working with the AD/PR department on their specific organizations? I guess that's the mindset that I had when I went in it. I want to be involved specifically within my majors to get more experience there and to have that listed on a resume.*

This strategy led Hadley away from involvement activities that were outside of her college.

Nevertheless, her level of involvement was the highest of all study participants. Hadley was President and Vice President of two different organizations, a member of an honors program for one of her majors, and she worked on several internship and practicum projects in addition to her off-campus job, which was also in her major. For Hadley, each of these experiences were getting
her closer to her goal: a strong career outlook after graduation, and anything that was not directly related to this goal was not worth her time.

**Mediating academic involvement for social involvement.** One other reason that transfer students had a strong proclivity for academic involvement was that it provided them some of their only social engagement opportunities on campus. For students like Skyler it was simple: “I never interacted with other students on campus, besides the ones in my class because I wasn't involved in any academic groups or anything like that.” Skyler was working full-time, raising four children, and had a full life outside of the university. If she did not interact within the confines of her class or class-related assignments she did not have opportunities to even talk to fellow students.

Egbert had similar social experiences. When asked for examples of how he was socially involved he described almost exclusively what traditional students would consider academic involvement:

...archeology lab...classroom settings, the courses that I've taken, the connections that I've made with GTAs, professors, projects that I've done, just things like that, and not just school in general, workplace that I've worked. There's people that I've met, co-workers....It's just broader, you know?

Even though Egbert was one of the least engaged participants and had struggled to establish social connections on campus, he used his academic interactions to establish community. He defined his involvement on campus in terms of his academics:

*Well, I guess my schoolwork is my social life. I've managed to make connections with people that have the same interest as I do. They learn about my background because being a Native American I have a different background than they do so their interest in what I know ...At the same time I'm learning things from them. I guess my studies and all that is making a connection with the other folks within the department or other students. My studies are my social network.*
Even though Madison was a traditional-aged college student and was not working nor did she have the family obligations, she still found that mediating academic involvement for social connection was one of her few options. She said, “Sometimes it'd be by myself…and you can find people in the library that you have classes with and you can be like, "Hey, can I study with you? Do you wanna study together?" She seemed to truly crave social engagement and for the most part only found those experiences through academic spaces such as the library or study groups. When asked about her best academic experience post-transfer, she shared the following:

Even though I didn't do well in the class... I ended up getting a C plus in that class. But I actually felt like I was in college, 'cause I was in a study room with two other people pretty much every day, all day. And I was like, "Okay, so this is what college is actually like, this is what it really feels like." 'Cause we were working things on the board, we were talking things out... I don't know, I guess I was just tired of being by myself. 'Cause that's how I spent a lot of my time here, at least my first two years. That's pretty much doing things by myself. So, I actually had other people to study with and to bounce things off of, and to just have a good time.

While these three participants mediated academic involvement out of necessity for social involvement, two other participants had more robust social involvement experiences but still grew their social networks through academics. Both Jennifer and Audrey described how they found several connections via study groups and group projects which had added peers to their social circle. Jennifer said:

I guess I'd say I'm friends with all my groups now.... [and I found friends through] group work a lot. A lot of the TAs are like Grad students, so they're kind of like, just out of the same boat as me. So I would like think of them as my peers...

Identifying with graduate students was also a strategy described by Egbert and Madison as they felt a commonality with them due to their age and class standing. When asked who Jennifer considered to be in her social network she quickly responded, “Obviously everybody in my groups. I talked to them multiple, multiple times a week, usually over GroupMe.” Audrey also
described the use of GroupMe, a text messaging platform, to stay connected to her class-related friends:

_We make GroupMe’s, which is great. I actually still keep in contact with the people that I was in my lab with that I didn't like because, you know, we all bonded [over the bad experience]...We still talk in our GroupMe. We’re like planning to go out to lunch and stuff. You know, a lot of the same people are in my classes, so it's easy to keep in contact with them because I see them all the time. You know, now we're friends and stuff, so it's nice._

Genevieve reiterated the benefits of the cohort-like classes in her major, “When I really started intensely in my [major-specific] courses…the people that I was in class with, we all got really close to each other because we were all basically in all the same classes every day of the week.” She emphasized the importance of those peer relationships in her major classes and even differentiated the group in future contexts by calling them her “class friends.”

It was evident from participants’ narratives that the academic environment was critically important to their student experience on campus. For some, the academic experience was the only experience they sought on campus as their sole focus was career-related. For others, who struggled to make social connections on campus, academic environment provided opportunities to cross paths with peers and feel socially engaged on campus. Finally, some participants said they enjoy the opportunity to build connections with peers in their classes because they found community among those who shared common interests and appreciated those types of relationships in addition to their other communities on campus.

_“Fake It Till You Make It”: Self-Reliance for Success_

The final merged finding across case studies was the attribution for their educational success. All but one student talked about self-reliance being the key to success along their pathway to graduation. Several participants endorsed the importance of social relationships and academic involvement in limited capacities, but overall it was their own perseverance that had
led them to this point. While many shared how they were the first in their families to go to college or how they had overcome poor preparation in high school to succeed academically, it was Egbert’s narrative that exemplified this theme.

Egbert poignantly shared how he had overcome many obstacles along his postsecondary track, but that it was a mindset and perseverance that helped him keep pace:

...I've went through all these years and I've managed to get this far... I'm not stopping now... I was like basically fake till you make it and that's what I've been sticking with...And just keep swimming, no matter where you're at, just keep swimming...I really think it's in the mindset. You have to [convince] yourself that you can do it. I would say, if you asked me 10 years ago if I would be sitting at this point, I probably would have told myself that would never happen...I put it this way, you can do it, if you really want to do it you have to prioritize...I've spoken to younger kids and to this day they still going to school because of what I told them, if it was easy everybody woulda had it, basically everybody would have a degree if it was easy. So that's what makes it more, I guess, sweeter I guess you could say. I just keep that mindset.

For Egbert, this mindset made all the difference. He had overcome great obstacles of not speaking English as a first language, being underprepared in high school, not performing well academically, taking time off due to financial and familial constraints, and yet he persisted. He was not only the first in his family to achieve a bachelor’s degree, but also one of the first from his tribe to do so. While several participants shared stories of perseverance and reliance on self to achieve their bachelor’s degree, Egbert’s story combined all of their narratives into a shining example of what transfer students frequently face and brilliantly overcome to achieve their postsecondary goals. The following chapter will share suggestions for institutional improvement to support transfer students more effectively; however, it is important to reiterate- all of the participants expressed an ownership of their success. While their journey may have been supported by a few relationships or experiences, they continually communicated that their primary factor for success was their own aspiration and commitment to complete their degree.
Summary

In this section, all nine participant experiences were analyzed individually to highlight findings related to their involvement experiences and the significance of those experiences post-transfer. Each case provided unique insight into the quintain, but several themes emerged across cases that provide a more generalized understanding of how students navigated involvement on campus and experienced barriers to involvement. Student accounts also highlighted common threads they acknowledged as important for their successful completion of their degree. In the following chapter, the cases and themes will be used to address the research questions and provide implications for future application and research.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This study focused on understanding transfer student involvement at four-year institutions to more accurately define involvement for transfers and provide recommendations to support the types of involvement that are impactful for those students along their pathway to a baccalaureate degree. Using an instrumental case study, nine cases were chosen to highlight the diversity and commonalities of transfer student involvement experiences. The following section will articulate the findings related to the research questions using individual cases, merged findings, and relevant extant literature to highlight similarities and dissimilarities from current understandings. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for practice, policy, and future research regarding the significance and place of this research within the larger higher education context.

Research Questions

The following section highlights the study findings related to the research questions. Each question draws from individual case narratives, highlighting themes regarding the quintain to better explain post-transfer involvement. While the merged findings did not address the research questions directly, emergent themes speak to the involvement of transfer students and are incorporated where appropriate.

*How do transfer students describe their involvement experiences at the four-year institution?*

The crux of this study aimed to explore transfer student definitions of involvement as quantitative studies have shown under-involvement using extant definitions as compared to
native students at four-year institutions (Ishanti & McKitrick, 2010). Moreover, transfer student involvement has been shown to be different from native student involvement (Wang & Wharton, 2006). This research question allowed participants to openly define involvement in college without specific prompting. Most of the participants responded with a definition similar to Audrey’s:

*I think involvement is obviously being a part of an organization. Are you part of a club? Do you play a sport? Are you in a fraternity or sorority?...But I also think here, I would also define involvement as school spirit...Students go to games. Are you involved? Are you going to games? Are you attending things on campus?*

These transfer students frequently highlighted common types of involvement that focused primarily on social involvement, and almost all included Greek life in their definition of involvement, even though Audrey was the only one who participated in it.

Clearly, transfer student conceptualizations of what involvement is in college is very similar to definitions by native students. However, when asked about how they experienced involvement in college, the answers coalesced to a much lesser degree. Participant responses ranged from an acknowledgement that they were not involved in college to explanations of why they were not involved in the typical ways. Frequently, transfer students described their involvement in terms of academics: going to class, working on assignments, and so forth. This finding resonates with findings by Lester et al. (2013) which established that transfer students defined involvement in very similar ways to first-year student conceptualizations, but experienced involvement in multiple and varied ways.

Though transfer students acknowledged what involvement on campus could look like for them, many suggested that traditional involvement experiences were either not open to transfers due to barriers (real or perceived) or not available to them due to age, work responsibilities, or lack of fit. Transfer students in the study indicated that most of the involvement opportunities
were either geared towards freshman students on campus or inaccessible to students without established roots, like their native peers. Both of these factors have been previously captured in the research literature (Dougherty, 1987; Townsend & Wilson, 2006), and both point to the pervasiveness of these barriers to transfer student involvement.

Overall, the sentiment of participants was that they were more involved post-transfer than at their community college due to sheer volume of opportunities at the four-year institution, but their conceptualizations or definitions of what involvement in college could be and their experiences on campus were vastly different. Townley et al. (2013) found similar incongruences between transfer students’ desire for involvement and their actual involvement post-transfer and pointed to these discrepancies as areas of opportunity to impact transfer student experiences at the four-year institution.

An interesting finding related to involvement on campus that emerged in both Madison’s and Jennifer’s case studies was financial barriers to certain types of involvement, such as the Greek system or academic honor societies. Both students cited receiving information about opportunities to join clubs or organizations on campus but having to weigh these opportunity against their limited financial means. Relatedly, several students also identified time as a finite resource that limited their involvement: work obligations or time requirements for certain experiences were limiting factors.

Bahr et al. (2013) highlighted the role that student agency plays in involvement choices between academic, social, and other non-college related opportunities; in this research, both money and time were real barriers to student agency. Previous research has demonstrated that money acts as a barrier to social involvement in particular, and suppresses student participation (Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990). Transfer student involvement post-transfer regarding
limited time due to other responsibilities has been well supported in the research literature (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Miller, 2013; Rodriguez & Kerrigan, 2016). The impact of both factors should be considered in all future work that explores the involvement experiences of transfer students. In this research, it was not a sense of agency that led transfer students to be less involve, but barriers that precluded their desired involvement.

After asking participants broadly about their experiences of involvement, Astin’s (1984, 1999) framework for involvement was used to hone in on specific experiences for both social and academic involvement that could be important for students’ achievement of the baccalaureate. The conclusions drawn for each of these areas is explored in the following two sub-sections.

*How do transfer students describe their social involvement experience(s) post-transfer?*

Overall, social involvement was much more difficult for transfer students to define than the general involvement definition. Many struggled to define the type of involvement, or if they did, it was primarily focused on mediating academic involvement for social connection, such as participation in study groups, active engagement in course discussions, or group work. Most of the participants described social involvement experiences that occurred outside of class for group projects or difficult courses that required study groups, and student approaches differed. Some used these experiences to build longer-term relationships with peers that would turn into regular lunch dates and communication outside of class. Others, however, saw these experiences as fleeting connections in which they attempted to connect with others on a time-limited basis. Regardless of approach, the use of the academic environment to become socially involved is highly supported in the extant literature.
Like Tinto (2000) suggested, students who are not native, live-on students are more likely to mediate the classroom as a “gateway for subsequent student involvement” (p. 82). This finding is also similar to the work of Deil-Amen (2011) which focused on socio-academic integrative moments and how the intersections of these involvement experiences impact students. Finally, in the study most similar to the current research, Lester et al. (2013) found that transfer students often described social involvement in terms of academic involvement. The findings from this research further support findings from previous studies and assist in further establishing this pattern of transfer student involvement.

For transfer students who were socially involved in more *traditional ways*, such as student organizations, involvement primarily centered on an identity they held (veteran or race/ethnicity) and their interest in creating a community with others whom they felt a common connection with regarding life experiences. There is limited work on identity-based involvement-seeking for transfer students, but the work of Wilson (2014) does describe how African American transfer students emphasized the importance of connecting with other minority students on campus to be successful in degree attainment as well as the significance of those connections. This is a potential area of future research to address among other student sub-populations within the transfer student body.

For others, involvement was confined to their field of study, and they only connected with peers because they were in the same field or had similar career aspirations. This was certainly the case for Hadley as all of her examples for social involvement centered on career-related organizations or conferences as her primary focus: her future career. In all of the cases in which students became socially involved post-transfer, students were seeking others with whom they could best relate or share a common interest.
One interesting case that stood out among the others is based on Egbert’s social involvement. He shared a sense of deeper social connection despite his lack of social involvement on campus. When asked about his social involvement he said “my school work is my social life,” and when asked about social relationships on campus he only included professors and graduate teaching assistants as connections. For all intents and purposes, Egbert had virtually no peer-to-peer connections on campus, but he expressed feelings of social involvement and connections on campus. When prompted, Egbert described his social involvement in the following way:

*Just the name [institution] itself, being part of it, it's just something. I can't pinpoint it, but... There is a connection with everybody. I guess that's one reason why I wanted to come to this school.... I really can't put a word to it...but socially I think everybody is connected in some way as being part of something....even though there's no clubs for me per se that I can join, at least with this [institutional connection], I know I'm involved with something. I'm connected with something, with everybody else who is going to the school or who I guess loved the school...*

This statement highlights an interesting finding regarding a sense of affiliation and connection to the institution without participating in social experiences or having a defined social group on campus. In Egbert’s case, even though all of the people he considered to be in his social network were external to the institution, the social environment of the campus was enough to lead him to feel socially connected to the institution. This is not a theme of transfer involvement that has been previously identified in the extant research literature; it may be a topic for further exploration in future studies.

In addition to the variability in social involvement experiences among participants, the significance of these experiences for degree attainment also varied. For example, Audrey emphasized how important social relationships were to her and how she felt that if she had not found a social community on campus early on post-transfer she would have transferred back
home to California. Even Madison, who reported less than desirable social involvement and connection on campus, emphasized how the few connections she had made with other transfer students from her hometown and classmates were essential to her staying at the large institution. She summarized, “I would’ve gone back to a smaller university that’s closer to me and that’s cheaper. I don’t know if I would have stayed here.” Both participants intimated that their retention at the institution and ultimate degree attainment was influenced by the formation of social relationships on campus. These findings are consistent with the work of Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004), who highlighted the importance of social integration for transfer student success at the four-year institution. Braxton and colleagues emphasized how integral social integration is for student success and how it can even act as a mediator for student entry characteristics.

However, as previously noted, there was not consensus among participants regarding the importance of social involvement. For example, when asked to describe a social experience that Carlos enjoyed post-transfer his response was “I'm not even really sure if I can. I have no idea.” In a later question regarding social involvement he added, “…just feel like it's geared towards people who a little younger.” Once again, Carlos suggested that age was a barrier that precluded him from being involved socially on campus. Carlos’ lack of interest in involvement related to his evaluation that these activities were not significant for student success post-transfer which supports previous research that alluded to social involvement of transfers potentially being a distractor from their academic success (Davies & Dickmann, 1998). While Carlos’ case may be an extreme example of non-involvement, there were other students who did get involved on campus but still felt as though the significance of their involvement was minimal. For example, Genevieve was involved in her major and with organizations related to her racial/ethnic identity,
but she still indicated that none of her social involvement was influential for her degree attainment. This is similar to other findings that have found social involvement to be less integral for transfer students (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017; Townsend & Wilson, 2009).

Finally, in a third grouping of cases, three participants regarded social involvement as something that would have been nice to have at the four-year institution but was not a reality for them due to external work obligations. Hadley, Jennifer, and Egbert all expressed a desire for social involvement post-transfer, but due to other life responsibilities were not socially involved. However, all three indicated that social involvement had not played a role in their pathway to the baccalaureate because they were able to be successful without any participation.

In sum, findings regarding social involvement among transfer students were equivocal. While some engaged in typical ways and highlighted the significance of this involvement, others got involved socially, but did not see its positive value. Yet others dismissed its importance and altogether. The variability of findings from this study support the divergent findings from previous studies regarding the importance of social involvement for transfer students. This leaves room for deeper exploration of social experiences and their significance among the transfer student population in future research.

*How do transfer students describe their academic involvement experience(s) post-transfer?*

As compared to social involvement experiences, participants seemed to find it much easier to define academic involvement, and there was significantly less variability between cases. This is similar to previous research by Lester, Leonard and Mathias (2013) that found similar patterns of clarity for academic involvement and more variable definitions and importance of social involvement. Most students suggested that their time at Southeastern University was
primarily academic; and therefore, provided many more examples. For example, Audrey defined academic involvement in the following way:

_Definitely research because I know a lot of students are involved in research. I would think are you a part of a honor society or are you a part of a club that has something to do with academics or education? And that would be the first thing that comes to mind. But I think academic involvement is are you involved in your academics? Are you actively trying to study? Are you actively trying to talk to your professors and learn more? Do you go to the library? Do you read books?_

Despite Audrey’s in-depth definition of academic involvement, when asked what ways she felt involved academically, her response, after an extended pause and no examples, was “Well dang, that's kind of sad.” Audrey’s story is not characteristic of all participants as most listed more than four ways they were academically involved.

When asked about academic involvement, several participants described their undergraduate research experiences (Sue and Egbert), class participation, or time spent doing homework and studying for tests. Additionally, group assignments or projects emerged as the most important academic involvement experience and were emphasized by every participant except Egbert. Overall, it seemed as though participants’ experiences aligned with Astin’s (1984) concept of investment time as it related to their academic involvement. Students suggested that their investment in academics was much richer than in social involvement. Nevertheless, the line between social and academic involvement was blurred at times as students discussed peer interactions in class as both academic and social involvement.

When asked about the importance of academic involvement for participants’ degree achievement, appraisals were mixed. Some identified important roles, especially faculty relationships, they experienced on campus (which will be expounded upon in the following section). For the most part students did not view academic involvement as critical to degree attainment. Participants showed a preference for academic challenge in their coursework and
found it easier to engage and be successful when they felt challenged, but few identified academic involvement as significant to their overall success. This is an interesting finding considering that many of these students used studying, going to class, and completing group assignments as examples of academic involvement. It is possible that students viewed these tasks as requirements for everyone, and not significant enough to influence degree attainment. This may be another possible avenue for future research: to better understand how students appraise the value of their academic involvement and how this affects their progress towards degree.

*What experiences do transfer students describe as contributing to their success (degree completion) post-transfer?*

Due to the anticipation that the endorsement of involvement would be mixed by study participants, all participants were also asked to reflect on their impending graduation and what experiences or factors they felt supported their success post-transfer. The overwhelming response, as discussed in the merged themes, was their sense of self-reliance as the key determinant in their success. Several students shared how they had overcome personal obstacles, institutional barriers, and more to achieve their bachelor’s degree, and they attributed persistence to a strong commitment to their education and the motivation and work ethic to achieve their degree. These findings are very similar to the work of Ellis (2013) who also looked at successful transfer students and found that self-reliance was critical for success post-transfer. This engagement of self-motivation and desire can also be likened to the work of Yosso (2005) and the concept of aspirational capital. It is important to reemphasize that almost half of the students in the study were first generation college students and thus their emphasis on aspirational capital is in line with the work of Yosso (2005) and highlights the importance of this piece of their identity for their persistence. Finally, these findings reaffirm the work of Wilson (2014) who found that for African American transfer graduates the significance of their own desire to
complete their degree was a driving force in their completion. For study participants, their own grit and aspiration were the salient factors for their degree completion.

Additionally, though to a lesser extent, endorsement of the role of faculty in degree attainment for transfer students was also discussed by participants. Several participants described their best academic involvement experiences as centered on interactions with professors, often in less formal settings such as office hours or more general connections outside of the classroom environment. Sue described her interactions with a particular professor and how this connection was so integral to her degree achievement and future success. In her case, the professor connected her with an internship experience over the summer and helped her problem solve a course sequence issue that nearly barred her from completing an internship after she had secured it. Similarly, Genevieve endorsed the support system that she found among faculty in her college. She noted that faculty support was exhibited through their willingness to meet outside of class, be hands on with students, and willingness to answer questions regarding any aspect of a student’s experience in or after college. For her, knowing that she had a support system at the institution was significant, and she acknowledged it as one of the factors that helped he be successful.

Emphasis on faculty relationships is consistent with previous findings regarding transfer student success. Moser (2013) described the importance of faculty member relationships for transfer student adjustment and re-emphasized the value of faculty validation for this population. Similar observations can found in the work of Terenzini et al. (1994). Relatedly, Lopez and Jones (2017) reinforced the critical role of faculty members noting that even regular interaction with a faculty member post-transfer was an indicator of successful transfer adjustment and supported other student success outcomes. Thus, this research adds to the extant body of
literature by highlighting how important the role of the faculty member can be. In particular, this research established the value of class engagement and even out of office hour engagement for transfer student success.

*What can four-year institutions do to support transfer students to degree completion?*

Of all the research questions, study participants were most vocal and united regarding the gap in support provided by the four-year institution for transfer students. The only students who did not offer concrete areas of improvement for the four-year institution were Skyler and Egbert. Interestingly, these two participants were also the oldest participants included in the study and the only two who had family obligations and work outside of their college experience. Skyler said she felt as though the institution had done everything she expected, which centered on not getting in the way of her completion. While Egbert identified areas he wished would have been different about his transfer experience, he stated:

*I don't expect to have the university spoon feed kids. To me that's against my own creed. I feel like you have to put work I for you to get to graduation or whatever. It's basically life skill. After you leave here you're gonna end up facing some adversities, you're gonna end up facing challenges.*

For him, the adversity and challenges he faced while at Southeastern were a part of the experience and therefore did not think that anything should be changed to address those challenges.

However, the other seven participants were very outspoken about ways the institution could better support their success. While they all had different recommendations based on their own obstacles, themes generally focused on the need for the to (a) create community for transfer students on campus, and (b) be more intentional about information sharing during the transfer process for incoming students. Student recommendations were captured by Madison:
I would definitely like to have had that little transfer community because I'm sure I'm not the only one... that has to stay in their apartment because I didn't know like where to go, what to do because you know, everyone here, they know what to do... as freshman, they come in. Just because everyone’s talking about it, they know where to go, what to do, like how things work. And here we are, like we don't know, we just don't know. So, we're just going at it by ourselves.

Even though all of the participants were in their semester of graduation and had essentially completed their degrees, almost all of them shared experiences or reflections about not continuing at Southeastern University due to adversity, lack of community, or the perception of not belonging on campus.

Based on lack of support and poor return on investment, Sue even shared how, if given the opportunity, she would have transferred at any time to another comparable institution. This sentiment may account for the increased trend of ‘swirling’ within higher education, or students transferring from one institution to another (McCormick, 2003; Shapiro et al., 2018.). In response to this trend, Handel (2011) emphasized how critical it is for institutions to signal a receptive and supportive environment for transfer students prior to transfer and an intention to continue supporting their success post-transfer.

In light of participant experiences of involvement, and more specifically barriers to involvement on campus, several participants suggested the creation of a transfer center, transfer student organization, or other type of intentional transfer student connector at the institution. This recommendation is similar to the findings of Townsend and Wilson (2009) who highlighted the transfer student population’s desire to connect with other transfer students. The establishment of a transfer space on campus would encourage students to meet and bond with other transfers students and establish their own community. Based on feelings of difference from native students on campus and/or because of age or perceptions of exclusion from the extant community on
campus, participants requested transfer-specific spaces and marketing that would signal that they too belonged on campus and were not *the only one*.

In addition to the facilitation of community, one of the most common phrases in this section was “I just didn’t know what I didn’t know” or “I had no clue.” These phrases referenced a wide array of topics such as the use of dining halls, campus transit system, academic support services, major-specific requirement and opportunities, and even involvement opportunities. According to several study participants, lack of knowledge was a barrier to integrating on campus, establishing connections, and feeling prepared for the future post-graduation. Students’ suggestions for addressing these barriers included expanding transfer orientation to be the same length as orientation for incoming freshmen, creating transfer-specific informational packets about the campus and its resources, and promoting intentional events centered on transfer students throughout their first year to build campus knowledge and key connections. These transfer students were extremely vocal about their desire for the four-year institution to be proactive in determining key information needed to navigate the institution and then providing it in different modalities so that transfer students could encounter it *all at once* and on an *as needed* basis during their transition.

This section has summarized student recommendations based on the research questions and addressed how students experienced involvement, the significance of those experiences, and how institutions can respond to better support transfer student success at the four-year institution. The following section will address the implications of these findings for practice and policy.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

This research has achieved the aim of better understanding transfer student involvement and the barriers transfer students face as they mediate the four-year institution in terms of
involvement experiences. However, this added knowledge is not enough to make a difference. The following section provides key implications for practice and policy that make this new knowledge applicable to improve the post-transfer pipeline. Ultimately, these findings should increase transfer student satisfaction and achievement of the baccalaureate degree.

**Implications for Practice**

All of the participants in this study made it to their semester of graduation; however, there were clear barriers and experiences in student cases that highlighted potential areas of improvement for the four-year institution. Recommendations including establishing a transfer student center, making changes in transfer orientation, and addressing major-specific involvement barriers.

**Transfer Student Center.** The one common thread among most transfer student accounts of social involvement was the desire for community on campus. While many of the participants acknowledged events and clubs on campus that were technically accessible to them, the barriers of age, time, and the pre-established community created real and perceived barriers. Thus, the first recommendation for practice is the establishment of a Transfer Student Center.

A transfer center would address several of the barriers to success and satisfaction for transfer students on campus. First, it would acknowledge the existence of transfer students at Southeastern University and their importance at the institution. This concern was best addressed by Madison who explicitly stated, “…they have the Greek life [office] here, and it's just like, ‘Okay, cool.’ Why can't there be a transfer one?” As previously discussed, the Greek presence on campus had a clear effect on transfer students’ sense of belonging and fit within the institution, because they were not a part of that culture. Participants also suggested that the Greek community was allowed to drive the student experience and therefore their experience was less
significant. By establishing a transfer center, the institution would acknowledge the significance of transfer students and provide them a place, and therefore voice, into what the transfer student experience should be at Southeastern University.

Second, a transfer center would provide students an opportunity to build a community in which they are comfortable. Throughout the narratives, students wondered if they were the only one, stating, “Surely I cannot be the only one.” These types of questions capture the sense of seclusion and ostracism that transfer students often feel. Several participants described feeling more comfortable at their two-year institution due to age, finding other students who were more like them. It was clear that transfer students wanted to build a community with other transfer students.

Within a transfer center, students could assume a sense of commonality with others who use the center, and some of those preconceived barriers to building community could be lessened. The center would also allow for more intentional relationship building for transfer students, which a few students requested. They expressed a desire to know who the transfer students were on campus and recognized at the start of their transfer journey how important making early connections would be for them. The transfer center would be a space where students who are seeking to build a community post-transfer could go to identify similar-minded students.

Finally, the transfer center would provide a hub of information and relevant involvement opportunities for students. All of the participants spoke about a lack of knowledge to better navigate the institution. Without a central office on campus dedicated to bridging the knowledge gap for transfer students, they had to rely on a one-day orientation experience that all of them characterized as underwhelming and not informative enough. A transfer center could develop a
guide for students, potentially written by transfer students, about knowledge they gained along the way and narratives with which incoming transfer students could connect.

Additionally, the transfer center could be the hub on campus of involvement opportunities for transfer students. While it may not be necessary to offer a full suite of programming, it was clear that transfer students wanted more from their educational experience to prepare them for their future careers as well as opportunities to engage more deeply with their peers on campus. Once again, the transfer center could develop programming with transfer student input to ensure that engagement opportunities fit the needs and interests of this specific population.

The transfer center is the first practice recommendation because I feel as though it is the most needed on this institution’s campus. Study participants primarily identified themselves as the reason they persevered and in some cases that perseverance was in spite of obstacles put in place by the institution. Establishing a transfer center would validate the importance of transfer students on campus, provide intentional spaces to build connections, and bridge the gap for incoming transfer students to be successful at the institution. Establishing this center would address some of the main barriers for this student population. Additionally, it has the potential to increase baccalaureate achievement rates for future transfer cohorts.

Herrera and Jain (2013) supported the provision of pre-arrival initiatives such as orientation (to be discussed in the following section), as well as post-transfer initiatives that primarily focus on creating a community and services/programs at the new institution to support student success. Additionally, Handel (2011) highlighted the critical nature of communicating to transfer students even before they matriculate how the institution is inclusive of transfer students and supporting their efforts to build cultural capital in the transfer transition. A transfer center
would address these best practices to support transfer student success signaling that transfer students are an institutional priority prior to transfer and continuing that commitment post-transfer through targeted support and sharing of information critical to their success and satisfaction. As an exemplar, the University of California Los Angeles Transfer Center could be used to benchmark and provide innovative ways to construct and implement a transfer center at Southeastern University.

However, if a transfer center is not possible in the immediate future, there are smaller ways that this institution could start to address the gap in transfer student support. First, it is essential to use anytime that transfer students are a captive audience to be intentional about building community and sharing information. While changes in the structure and intentionality for orientation will be discussed in the next section, it is imperative to use transfer orientation to speak about any programming specific to transfer students on-campus. Currently on this campus, the First Year Experience office is the only known resource that is offering programming tailored to transfer students so it is essential that information is shared at every transfer orientation. It should also be incorporated into any recruitment materials and shared widely with advisors at partner community colleges. This upcoming year the FYE office hopes to initiate a transfer mentoring program pairing incoming transfer students with graduating transfer students to start that community early in their transition and create a sense of community and commonality between different cohorts of transfer students. It is hoped that while there is still no physical space on campus that the creation of more intentional programs that the transfer profile will be elevated on campus and they will feel more supported at Southeastern University.

Another potential change could be highlighting the opportunity to live on campus for transfer students that would address their on-campus community barriers. Though the option to
live on campus as a transfer student started in the last year, many transfer students are still not aware as incoming students. It would behoove both campus housing representatives and admissions to get the change in option to community college advisors through all mechanisms possible and make it a regular part of the communication plan after admission. It may even be worthwhile to add prompting to secure housing on campus much like the freshman if we know this is a known involvement barrier to transfer students and would be a simple change administratively to nudge them to live on campus if it was feasible for them.

A final small step to build transfer community and presence on campus would be to address the involvement barriers discussed by several participants. A closer look at both the academic and student life involvement requirements as they relate to transfer students is warranted. It is possible that the honor society or student organizations managed by student life need to be audited to ensure equitable access by transfer students. Alternatively, college-specific opportunities such as internships in departments, leadership positions in major-specific organizations, and the like should be audited to ensure that all wording for participation does not exclude transfer students. Additionally, to go step further towards inclusion, the creation of transfer-specific positions on student advisory boards or on leadership groups for colleges could lead to more inclusive programming and policies while communicating to transfer students that their presence and opinion matter. While a transfer center should be the eventual goal for Southeastern University, these smaller, more manageable steps could start the process of creating a supportive and inclusive atmosphere on campus.

**Changes in orientation.** Orientation for transfer students is the second recommendation for practice. Study participants’ orientation experiences were among the most consistent narratives among students. Nearly all participants viewed orientation as a missed opportunity to
support transfer student success. The overall complaint with the existing orientation was that it did not do enough to bridge the knowledge gap for transfer students coming to the institution.

Audrey’s description of her experience was one of the best examples of this discrepancy:

*I feel like at [transfer orientation] they could've done a better job because I didn't know about anything. I didn't know about dining dollars. I had no clue, which is essential…I didn't know how the bus system worked. I didn't know where my classes were. I got lost on campus trying to find [the orientation]. It was just very overwhelming coming here, and I feel I didn't really know a whole lot when I first got here.*

Even though she specifically identified resources or knowledge that she lacked coming in, others simply observed that they did not know what questions to ask. Several participants said they spent most of their first semester or year feeling out of place and clueless on campus. It was clear that the information being covered at orientation was not extensive enough or not presented in a way that participants could understand and use.

One possibility for the disconnect might be the amount of time dedicated to orientation for “normal” students, as Jennifer called freshman students, as compared to transfer students. At Southeastern University, freshman orientation is two full days whereas transfer orientation is only one day. While the assumption was that transfer students had already been college students before and may need less information or orienting, participants in this study did not agree with this assumption. The collective narrative was that students wanted a longer orientation that was more extensive about how to be a student at Southeastern University. Students emphasized that they had no prior experience at the institution and wished it had not been assumed that their experience at the four-year institution was the same as their two-year institution experience.

A final change recommendation to the current orientation was related to the facilitation of relationship building, which these students suggested was a missed opportunity. Since almost all of them were graduating with a perceived deficit in what they had hoped for their social
involvement, many suggested that orientation could have been an opportunity to connect with other transfer students. Madison said, “I wish they kinda would have stressed to the transfer students to, you know, make friends like at orientation.” Many students recognized orientation as an ideal place to connect with similar students, but in the moment they did not realize how important that fleeting time was. Students described being rushed from one session to the next and never remembering a time where they were asked to even turn to their neighbor and greet one another. This runs parallel with the time issue. If the orientation were extended, then more time could be added for facilitation of connections among incoming transfer students that may extend past orientation and into their transition to the four-year institution.

The necessity of a transfer-specific orientation is well-validated in the literature (Foote, 2018; Marling & Jacobs, 2011). Transfer students are different from first-time freshman, but they are also diverse as a student population requiring deeper analysis of their composition to craft a fitting orientation experience. As such, transfer orientation should be thoroughly evaluated to ensure that it is providing critical knowledge about the new institution and exposure to high impact practices and other experiences integral to student success (Finley & McNair, 2013; Foote, 2018). Additionally, Poisel and Joseph (2018) suggested that orientation programs for transfer students should involve the larger campus community to “help transfer students feel a part of the larger community” (p. 130). While most transfer orientations are occurring in one full-day or less, a needs assessment of transfer students may be appropriate (Foote, 2018). Based on participant experiences, the current model of transfer orientation is not meeting student needs; therefore, adjustments to the model, content, and delivery methods all seem warranted to better support student success at the institution. One cost-efficient and easy way to supplement what is happening now is the infusion of online resources that could be accessed by transfer students.
providing a roadmap from admission to the institution up through their first year. It is imperative that more information is shared with incoming students about resources, key information, and ways to connect to the institution and others to support the success of this population.

**Importance of the faculty role.** While not all participants in the study endorsed the significance of a faculty-student relationship at the four-year institution, those that did highly emphasized how critical those relationships were for their success. It is important to reemphasize the significance of student validation by faculty as well as the critical nature of simply engaging with faculty members outside of the classroom for transfer student success (Lopez & Jones, 2017; Moser, 2013; Laanan, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1994; Barnett, 2010). Additionally, two of the student participants emphasized both graduate assistants and professors as some of their only social engagement opportunities. Knowing that some transfer students are experiencing close to social isolation outside of those faculty and academic relationships magnifies the importance of the faculty role even further.

Since many of the students who had ambivalent experiences with faculty felt as though the faculty did not know they were transfer students nor did they feel invested in by those faculty, it is possible that a potential solution could center on better information regarding transfer students on campus. Specifically, some form of an informational campaign by the institution regarding the presence of transfer students on campus and how to best support them in and outside of class may be beneficial. It may also be fruitful to add transfer status as an identifier on the class roster so that faculty could be aware of those students who may be in junior or senior level classes, but potentially be experiencing the campus for the first time. The role of faculty cannot be understated for any student, but for those that are experiencing a
compressed time at the institution and mediating a second adjustment period like transfer students are, faculty can be even more critical to their success.

**Addressing involvement barriers.** The final recommendation from study findings is the need to address barriers to involvement on campus for transfer students. Specifically, the most commonly identified barriers included policies that disadvantaged student selection for involvement as well as barriers related to time and cost. While there is no single solution to address these barriers, practitioners need to consider transfer students when they are establishing and implementing involvement opportunities on campus. For example, several students described experiences of being ineligible for certain internships, on campus jobs, and organizations on campus because they were transfer students. In some circumstances, the opportunity required a certain number of years at the institution before being eligible to apply, which transfer students did not have, or they favored students in the selection process who had a certain number of years left before graduation, which also negatively impacted transfer students. While time at the institution and institutional knowledge may play a role in selection for opportunities, the accessibility of opportunities by transfer students should also be taken into consideration. It may be possible to add positions that are specifically for transfer students or change the requirements from two years at Southeastern University to junior class standing by credit hours. While none of the students suggested that the institution was actively trying to exclude them, it was evident that they felt overlooked based on their eligibility status.

Even if they were eligible to apply for specific opportunities, there were still barriers that transfer students experienced at disproportionate rates. Specifically, time and cost barriers were common themes in participants’ narratives. Several students, particularly those in the business and communication schools, discussed how they wanted to be involved in certain major-related
experiences like running a student-run advertising agency or participating in a business case study competition. The time requirements, however, were extremely high and did not allow for any outside jobs, which all but two noted they had to hold to be able to afford their living expenses. Students said they wanted to participate and would have been willing to reduce their work hours at their primary place of employment, but were unable to not work to devote the time required of these high impact experiences. Therefore, it may behoove practitioners to look at the time requirements and consider the possibility of exceptions for those students who have to work or even potentially get creative with work-study funds so that involvement in the experience could be accessible but also meet students’ financial needs. While investment of time is required for transformational educational experiences, if that involvement is exclusionary of those who have to work, it may need to be reconsidered.

Finally, a few students mentioned the cost of involvement on campus. Because all of the participants cited cost as one of the reasons they chose the community college pathway, it is clear that financial factors played a significant role in their postsecondary choices. Cabrera et al. (1990) found that financial factors played a large role in student participation within social communities, especially on campus. With the hidden costs of college, such as honor societies, student organizations, and even fees for background checks for some volunteer positions, money was often viewed as a barrier to student participation. While this finding may be extrapolated to other student groups such as low-income students, it is important to consider ways that financial requirements create barriers for these students. One possibility would be an involvement fund that could operate out of the aforementioned transfer center. These funds would be accessible to transfer students who showed financial need and wanted to participate in a specific curricular or co-curricular experience to enrich their education.
The transfer students in this study expressed feelings of missing out on the college experience they had hoped for at Southeastern University. Their lack of involvement was not necessarily attributable to a lack of interest, but often to barriers they faced barriers, barriers that can and should be addressed. In some ways these barriers to involvement can be extended to other students on campus who must work due to financial constraints or have other personal requirements on their time such as family responsibilities. Regardless, it seems critical that steps be taken to ensure that knowledge about opportunities and how to be successful post-transfer are more intentionally shared. It may also be important to examine transfer student representation and transfer student services to aid improve transition experiences and social involvement. Finally, and most related to the following section, it is crucial that the transfer student population is considered when making decisions about opportunities, programs, and policies at the institution so that barriers are not unnecessarily created to their involvement and ultimate success. It is from this perspective that the following policy recommendations are proposed.

**Implications for Policy**

To achieve desired outcomes for student success it takes both students’ investment of time and effort as well as actions by higher education institutions to support and encourage student participation in the right things (Kuh, 2009). Given study findings, the gaps in accessibility for transfer students to involvement experiences on campus and their dissatisfaction with their social involvement in particular, the primary policy implication focuses on addressing student concerns with data-driven solutions. Specifically, it is suggested that the institution conduct a deeper assessment of the transfer culture on campus, revisit the definition of student success on campus, and related to both recommendations, disaggregate institutional data to focus specifically on transfer student involvement post-transfer. Fruitful transfer involvement requires
an institutional commitment to transfer student success (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011). Each of these policy implications will be addressed in this section with relevant literature to situate the recommendation.

**Assessing the Transfer Culture on Campus.** Herrera and Jain (2013) highlighted the key factors in establishing a transfer-receptive culture, one in which the four-year institution acknowledges its role in transfer student success and takes intentional steps to support those students. Specifically, the model emphasizes the need for four-year institutions to make transfer students an institutional priority, provide outreach and resources to support student transition to the four-year institution, provide academic and financial support post-transfer, acknowledge students’ individual experiences and needs, and finally, commit to systematic evaluation and enhancement of transfer student services.

If one were to use the findings of the current research to evaluate Southeastern University on its transfer-receptive culture, it would not be a promising outlook. Students indicated that they did not feel as though they were a priority, outreach and resources (e.g., orientation) were not meeting their needs as they transitioned, many struggled financially due to a lack of transfer-specific funding, students frequently felt overlooked at the institution, and finally, there was very limited programming and resources post-transfer to evaluate and enhance current services. If Southeastern University wants to grow its transfer student population or even simply support the transfer students it has already, commitment to these issues is essential to address the transfer culture on campus through intentional assessment of their experiences. Poisel and Joseph (2018) suggested “Institutional assessment efforts can help identify specific needs among transfer students, which in turn should drive the development and deployment of transfer support services and the removal of potential barriers to access and success” (p. 128).
This research took an initial step towards assessment by providing case studies of students’ experiences, but a broader climate study is needed to identify other improvements to the transfer student climate. Study findings focused on involvement experiences post-transfer, but more work could be done to better understand and unpack transfer students’ sense of belonging, academic achievement, and several other facets of their experiences at the four-year institution. A strong starting point would be the use of the L-TSQ instrument along with mixed methods approaches to further explore the transfer student experience on campus. While this could be simplified to just a future direction for research, in reality, the commitment to study the transfer experience/climate and then apply those findings to creating a transfer-receptive culture on campus takes more than just research.

According to the experts, “Strong support from top administrators is critical, as is support from across the campus...[and] a key component of the success of experienced is having an office dedicated to the transfer function that can coordinate these efforts” (Herrera & Jain, 2013, p. 57). Without a central unit on campus to unite the campus in support of transfer students and offer resources and support to students as they come to the four-year institution, progress in establishing a transfer-receptive climate is going to be limited. This first policy recommendation and the remaining two would be much more achievable if an office like this were established on campus.

**Defining Student Success for All**. The second policy recommendation, based on study findings, calls on this institution (and others) to redefine student success to be more inclusive of transfer student outcomes. One of the confounding factors for why transfer student success is not as emphasized as first-year freshman success is because accountability measures, such as retention and graduation, frequently exclude transfer students. Because transfer students are left
out of key success indicators for an institution, Moser (2018) noted that their concerns are less heard and their barriers seem less problematic. Recent national estimates suggest that over half of graduates have transferred at some point in their educational journey (National Student Clearinghouse, 2017), which means that institutions are leaving out a large portion of the higher education student body when talking about trends, needs, and, most importantly, student success outcomes.

While federal reporting and other required metrics for state funding are not in the purview of institutions to change, it is possible to tie transfer student success to institutional priorities so that they are not overlooked (Brown & Rhodes, 2016). This could take the form of strategic priorities and goals established by senior leadership intended to hold the institution accountable for its support of transfer students by establishing student success goals that are inclusive of both native and transfer students. At SEU, graduation rates between native and transfer students exceeded 10% in some years. This is troubling considering that native student graduation rates account for first-year attrition whereas transfer rates are only inclusive of students who have successfully completed at least some college prior to coming to the institution. The practice of redefining student success on campus to be inclusive of all students on campus would not only highlight transfer student needs but would also lead to more campus awareness regarding transfer students and their unique experiences.

**Disaggregation of Involvement.** The final policy recommendation in response to this research is the disaggregation of involvement data by student type (transfer versus native). As Poisel and Joseph (2018) suggested, “…assessment efforts help institutions address questions related to accountability, affordability, and access” (p. 129). It was clear from study findings that opportunities for transfer students were not provided with equal access as first-year students;
there is a need for accountability related to their experiences on campus and how those experiences affect their student success outcomes.

This suggestion is consistent with the work of Finley and McNair (2013) who suggested that all engagement data be disaggregated so questions of equity in participation for different populations can be addressed. Furthermore, Marling and Jacobs (2010) suggested that the only way to get an “accurate portrait” of the transfer student population and their engagement is to disaggregate the data (p. 74). If we as practitioners in higher education know what experiences are impactful and important for student success, then it is incumbent upon us to be sure that all students at the institution are aware of those high-impact experiences and can gain equal access to them.

It is possible that the reason transfer students had to be so self-reliant for their success post-transfer was that the institution was not offering enough support for them to engage in the most impactful experiences. Though it may be an institutional shift, parsing out involvement data to highlight how transfer students participate (or not) in some of the key high-impact practices such as internships, undergraduate research, and service learning, these data would provide direction to the institution of where to focus energy to achieve greater access and equity for key involvement experiences. Disaggregating data requires a policy shift by the institution, but it is one that would assist institutions in meeting their accountability and access aims (Poisel & Joseph, 2018).

**Future Research**

One of the most interesting findings of the research was the way in which students chose the type of involvement they were engaged with (if any) on campus, such as the identity-based involvement for veteran and minority student participants. All four of these participants, noted
that these identities were more prominent than their identity as a transfer student, and they sought ways to engage with those communities on campus. However, the other five participants primarily described a process of continuously searching for involvement on campus (without success) or involvement centered on their major. While previous research has shown a propensity for academically/career-based involvement for transfers (Nunez & Yoshimi, 2017), the findings of this research suggest a possibility that involvement seeking was less about the actual career and more about an identity. In some of the interviews, participants explained that they sought out specific clubs, organizations, or events because “they were an [insert profession].” It is possible that because they could not identify other areas of involvement fit on campus, that they were using the career or college as their avenue for community identification.

Future work should address this possibility and explore how and why transfer students choose specific types of involvement post-transfer. It may also be helpful to better understand the career identification process of transfer students since their involvement was frequently focused on their career path. With regard to the identity component, potential frameworks could include social identity theories from the higher education literature. Social identities are a “central organizing concept for understanding self in society” (Patton et al., 2016). It seems as though transfer students in this study were seeking that understanding of self through identifying communities with which they could find commonality at the four-year institution. Since students faced significant barriers to their involvement, such as age and pre-established communities of native students, the forms of involvement they did connect with warrant additional research to understand the decision-making process and possible connection with identity.

Another area of additional exploration is the variability of social involvement and its importance for transfer student success. Previous literature is equivocal regarding the importance
of social involvement for transfer students (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Davies & Dickmann, 1998, Townsend & Wilson, 2009), and this research did not provide much clarity on the relationship. Lester et al. (2013) suggested the significance of social involvement for transfer students was more contested than the academic involvement dimension and found social involvement to be less common than academic involvement. While it is possible that social involvement is individually-driven, participants in this study often shared a feeling of missing out on the social experience because they could not find the right community.

Most participants did not endorse social involvement as significant to their degree attainment or success, but many said it was something they were unsatisfied with post-transfer. This is consistent with the findings of Townley et al. (2013) who showed transfer student desire for social involvement post-transfer but also a pattern of unmet need for those opportunities. Interestingly, the two participants who did share positive social involvement experiences were also the only two who endorsed its importance for success. Social involvement could be an important factor in transfer student experiences at the four-year institution, but as it stands, social involvement opportunities were not meeting students’ needs. Further examination of how social involvement could meet the needs of transfer students and which outcomes are influenced by social involvement of transfer students would help practitioners better understand how to plan programs, market opportunities, and support transfer student engagement for success.

Potential future research questions could focus on the following areas that were illuminated, but not fully explored through this study:

- How do transfer students make decisions about getting involved; what factors do they consider important in the decision-making process?
• How do transfer students make decisions among various opportunities for involvement and what factors are most important for their decision?
• What role do other identities (race, age, class) play in involvement decisions of transfer students?
• Is social involvement important for transfer student success?
• How do transfer students experience and establish community post-transfer?
• How does involvement of transfer students post-transfer impact longer-term outcomes such as career satisfaction and success?

Additionally, other qualitative designs should be considered to compliment this instrumental case study and expand the qualitative work on this student population. It is possible that additional qualitative work could drive towards a grounded theory of transfer student involvement that incorporates the current research findings along with the deeper consideration of the future research questions. While the interest in studying transfer students is growing, it is still a research focus area that holds great promise for impacting students and institutions in the future with additional exploration.

Concluding Thoughts

In concluding this research journey, I find an incumbent responsibility to reflect on what this process and the stories that emerged mean for higher education. While this research adds to the literature, there is still a large void to be filled in understanding transfer student experiences post-transfer and the ways in which four-year institutions can play a role in facilitating the success of transfer students. I began this research because I believe in the transfer mission and the economic and personal impact that successful degree completion can have for any student, but in particular, the opportunities that are opened via the community college pathway.
In reviewing the findings, I think it is clear that there is a great deal of work that needs to be done at the four-year institution to provide recognition, validation, and support of transfer students in the same ways that we do for incoming freshmen. The message in higher education should be that all students matter—regardless of a student’s matriculation point into the institution. As transfer becomes a larger reality in our higher education landscape, so too should the programs, support services, and, perhaps most importantly, the research on transfer populations to elucidate how we as institutions can best lay the foundation for their success in degree attainment.

It is my hope that by sharing these participant narratives and highlighting the similarities of their experiences despite the dissimilarities of their identities or pathways through higher education, that the central message of “there is work to be done” rises to the surface for all practitioners and policy makers in our higher education community. Just as one of my favorite lines from the student engagement literature states:

*Students are placed at a risk for dropping out of college when educators are negligent in customizing engagement efforts that connect them to campus. While some may enter with characteristics and backgrounds that suggest they need customized services and resources, we maintain that student affairs educators and faculty should be proactive in assessing those needs and creating the environmental conditions that would enable such students to thrive.* (Harper & Quaye, 2015, p. 11)

This is our call to action: we as educators and practitioners take the research and recommendations centered on populations that may require targeted intervention and then make proactive changes to customize our institutions to support these students. This is what I hope this research supports and for which it becomes a catalyst. Changing our institutions to support transfer students is a change to support the access and success of *all*-something I believe higher education promises and many students count on us to deliver.
REFERENCES


postsecondary institutions, Fall 2011 Cohort (Signature Report No. 15). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.


September 10, 2018

Dear <Insert Name>,

Congratulations on your achievement and prospective graduation this semester from The University of Alabama! My name is Amelia (Amy) Bickel and I am a doctoral student at The University of Alabama. For my dissertation, I am focusing on the experiences of transfer students after transferring to a four-year institution and how those experiences may or may not support the completion of their degree.

I am conducting research this semester (Fall 2018) with students who transferred to The University of Alabama from any 2-year/ community college who had at least 60 credit hours upon transfer OR completed an Associate’s degree before transfer. I believe you may qualify to participate in my study given these criteria. Participation will require an estimated one-hour interview with me in a location/time of your choosing in the next two months.

If you are willing to participate, please complete the short attached questionnaire and return to me via email by Friday, September 28. Only 10 participants are needed for this study and everyone who is selected to complete the in-person interview and does so will be compensated with a $25 SupeStore gift card.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions and I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Amelia (Amy) Bickel
Doctoral Student
Department of Educational Leadership, Policy, and Technology Studies
The University of Alabama
Abbickel@crimson.ua.edu
APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Information on this sheet will assist the researcher in understanding the background of potential participants in the study. Completion of this questionnaire does not obligate you to participate in the formal research study if selected. All of your responses to the following questions will be kept confidential and if results of the demographic data are used in findings it will only reported in aggregate form (e.g. “All of the male participants shared a sentiment of…”) or through the use of a pseudonym that will not allow individual participants to be identified.

1. Name:
2. Preferred Gender Pronoun (He/She/They):
3. Email Address:
4. Telephone Number:
5. Age:
6. Race/Ethnicity:
7. Please check one:
   _____ in-state student
   _____ out-of-state student
   _____ other (please explain)
8. Major/Minor:
9. Semester of Transfer to the Current Institution (e.g. Fall 2016):
10. Name of Previous Institution:
11. City and State of Previous Institution:
12. Planned Semester of Graduation (e.g. Fall 2018):
13. Do you attend college: _________ part-time  OR  _________ full-time
14. Do you currently work?
   a. If so, how many hours on average per week?
   b. If so, on or off campus?
15. Have either of your parents completed a bachelor’s degree?  ____ yes  ____ no
16. Please list all activities or organizations you are involved within and/or external to the university (if any). Include work, clubs, organization, volunteering, internships, etc.

If selected for the study, it will require an in-person, audio recorded interview. Please check all that apply and respond accordingly.

_____ I am willing to be audio recorded for my interview (data will be kept confidential)
_____ I can conduct the in-person interview on campus or within a two hour driving distance

If selected, the best interview times for me would be the following:
(e.g. Mondays 9am-11am, Saturdays 1pm-3pm)
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences as a student with me. This purpose of this research is to better understand transfer students’ experiences after transferring to a four-year institution and how those experiences may or may not have affected your progress towards graduation. In the interview today I will ask you about your experiences leading up to transferring to this institution and then really emphasizing your experiences after transferring.

Part 1 – Postsecondary Experience and Transition

Let’s start off by walking through your higher education journey up to this point.

1. Can you talk me through your pathway in higher education starting with graduation from high school?
   a. Listen for time to initial matriculation, institutions attended, types of transfer, and any experiences shared.

2. Can you talk about your experience at the community college before you transferred here?
   a. How would you describe that institution? What was your experience like as a student there?
   b. Do you feel as though your experience at the community college prepared you for your transition to this institution? In what ways?

Next, let’s talk about your transition to this institution.
1. What was your first year like as a transfer student at the institution?
   a. How is this university different from the community college?
   b. How has your experience here differed from your expectations of what it would be like?
   c. How did your academic performance your first semester/year here compare to your performance at the community college?
   d. Do you think about your status as a transfer student as any different from other students on campus?

**Part 2- Defining Involvement**

In this part of the interview, I am going to ask you to define a few terms and what they mean to you. There is no right or wrong answer, I just want to understand your thoughts based on your experiences.

1. How would you define “Involvement” in terms of college experiences?
2. How would you define “Academic Involvement”?
   a. What are some examples where you feel you were “Academically involved”?
3. How would you define “Social Involvement”?
   a. What are some examples where you feel you were “Socially involved”?
4. Is there another way you think about involvement in college that I did not ask you about?
5. Were there are factors that affected your level of involvement (higher or lower)?

**Part 3- Academic Involvement Experiences**

Now, let’s talk more about your academic involvement. For these questions, think about times or experiences related to your academics.
1. Can you share with me all the examples you can think of how you spent your time academically after transferring?
   a. Why did you choose those ways to spend your time/be involved?
   b. What was your best academic experience?
   c. What was your least favorite academic experience?

2. Can you talk to me about your interactions with faculty members at this institution?
   a. Listen for in class and out of class interactions

3. Did you interact with peers related to academics?

4. In a review of all of the experiences we have talked about in this section, do you feel like specific experiences affected your progress to degree completion?
   a. Listen for: Any at all? Some more than others? Specific examples?

**Part 4- Social Involvement Experiences**

Now, let’s talk more about your social involvement. For these questions, think about times or experiences related to your social experience.

1. Can you share with me all the examples you can think of how you spent your time socially after transferring?
   a. Why did you choose those ways to spend your time/be involved?
   b. What was your best social experience?
   c. What was your least favorite social experience?

2. Talk to me about your social network. Who is in it and how often do you interact with them?

3. What about your social network at this institution specifically?
a. Listen for: new relationships versus previous institution, strength of social relationships at the institution, connected with other transfer students or native students

4. In a review of all of the experiences we have talked about in this section, do you feel like specific experiences affected your progress to degree completion?
   a. Listen for: Any at all? Some more than others? Specific examples?

Part 5- Recommendations to the Institution

Now that you are nearing the end of your career at UA and about to graduate, I want to ask you reflect back over your experience here and think about how the institution could have better supported you.

1. What barriers did you face as a transfer student at the University?

2. Did you experience any instances where you felt stigmatized as a transfer student?

3. What could the university have done to better support your progress towards graduation?

Part 6- Wrap Up

Thank you again for your time and thoughtful responses to my questions. Your insight and experience is invaluable to the research, but also to helping institutions better serve transfer students. Is there anything else that I did not ask you about related to your experience that you want to share with me?
APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT

Study: Pathway to the Baccalaureate: Exploring Graduating Transfer Students’ Definitions and Experiences of Involvement at a Four-Year Institution

Investigator: Amelia Bickel (Doctoral Candidate, Higher Education Administration)

INTRODUCTION
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Please take time to review the following information to decide if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator at any time.

This study is called Pathway to the Baccalaureate: Exploring Graduating Transfer Students’ Definitions and Experiences of Involvement at a Four-Year Institution. The study is being done by Amelia Bickel who is a graduate student at the University of Alabama. Ms. Bickel is being supervised by Professor Laanan who is a professor of Higher Education Administration at the University of Alabama.

This study is being done to find out more about the experiences of transfer students at four-year institutions. Specifically, the research aims to better understand the ways transfer students are involved after they transfer from a community college to the four-year institution and how those involvement experiences may be related to their completion of the bachelor’s degree.

This knowledge is useful because transfer students are a growing proportion of students in higher education, but in some cases experiences lower rates of degree completion. Research has addressed the role the community college has played in this pathway, but more research is needed to understand how student experiences at the four-year institution may be related to their degree completion. The results of this study will help college administrators better understand the experiences of transfer students and how to better support future transfer students to completing their degree through involvement experiences.

PROCEDURES
You have been asked to be in this study because you meet the desired criteria for participation in the study which is to be a transfer student coming from a community college who is in their semester of graduation. Additionally, you responded to our advertisement and expressed interest in this study.

If you meet the criteria and agree to be in the study, you will be asked to do these things:
- Complete a pre-screening questionnaire prior to being selected for participation

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- Complete two audio-recorded interviews with the researcher
- Provide any written or non-written documentation relevant to your involvement on campus that may benefit the investigator’s understanding of your experience

The minimum time requirement is the completion of at two (2) 60 minute interviews with the possibility of additional follow up communication in the future. Due to the nature of the research, the interviews will be audio recorded. Consent to being audio recorded is required for participation in the study. All files will be protected and the use of pseudonyms will ensure anonymity in the reporting of results

COSTS AND COMPENSATION
The only cost to you from this study is your time spent speaking with me about your experiences. In appreciation of your time, all interviewees will receive a $25 gift certificate to the on-campus SupeStore.

RISKS
Participation in this research study comes with minimal risk. It is possible that sharing your experience may bring up unpleasant memories about your transfer experience and adjustment to the University, but no serious negative side effects from participation are expected.

BENEFITS
Although you will not benefit personally from being in the study, you may feel good about knowing that you have helped other transfer students.

This study will help higher education administrators to be more helpful to future groups of transfer students. The large benefit is that by better supporting transfer students to degree completion both benefits to the person graduating as well as societal benefits will occur at increasing rates.

PRIVACY
Participants’ privacy will be protected by conducting interview in a site of your own choosing. You are also not required to answer any question you do not feel comfortable answering.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law and will not be made publically available. Participants’ confidentiality will also be protected by separating signed consents from interview materials, using pseudonyms for participant in reporting the results, keeping both audio files and transcriptions in a locked drawer, and the destruction of recordings a year after the study has been completed. Additionally, the only persons with access to the study documents or recordings will be the investigator, Amelia Bickel, and Dissertation Chair, Dr. Frankie Santos Laanan who will be overseeing the research. If any results are published your identity will remain confidential.

PARTICIPANTS RIGHTS
Taking part in this study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. There will be no effect on your relations with the University of Alabama. The alternative to being in this study is not to participate.
The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board ("the IRB") is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

**Who do I call if I have questions or problems?**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study right now, please ask me. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study later on, please call the investigator Amelia Bickel at 205-348-8404.

If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at [http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html](http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html) or email the Research Compliance office at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

I have read this consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions. I agree to take part in it. I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

_________________________________________________________________
Signature of Research Participant       Date
_________________________________________________________________
Signature of Investigator       Date
## APPENDIX E

**EXAMPLE OF A MATRIX FOR GENERATING THEME-BASED ASSERTIONS FROM MERGED FINDINGS RATED IMPORTANT**

(ADAPTED FROM STAKE, 2005, p. 59)

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</table>
APPENDIX F

HUMAN SUBJECTS APPROVAL

October 3, 2018

Amy Bickel
Director
First Year Experience & Retention Initiatives
The University of Alabama
Box 870399

Re: IRB # 18-OR-354-A “Pathway to the Baccalaureate: Exploring Graduating Transfer Students’ Definitions and Experiences of Involvement at a 4-year Public Flagship University”

Dear Ms. Bickel:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has reviewed the revision to your previously approved expedited protocol. The board has approved the change in your protocol. You have also been granted the requested waiver of documentation of informed consent.

Please remember that your protocol will expire on September 25, 2019.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the assigned IRB application number. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Carpentato T. Myles, MSM, CM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office of Research Compliance