

Experiences of Students Transferring from
Community and Technical Colleges to a Private Nonprofit University

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Dedication

To my family: Without your love and support nothing is possible.

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Abstract of Dissertation

Experiences of Students Transferring from Community and Technical Colleges to a Private Nonprofit University

The purpose of the study is to learn about how students who transfer from community and technical colleges to a private four-year research university experience the transfer process at both institutions. The study followed Merriam's (2009) basic interpretive qualitative design. A sample of 20 participants was recruited for the study. Semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Data in the study is presented using Merriam's (2009) narrative analysis format. In the narrative analysis of the data, themes identified through the analysis are described at length including exemplar excerpts from the interview transcripts. Long quotations from the participants and rich description of the interview context from the researcher create the narrative. Quotations from various participants are organized in a way that demonstrates to the reader how the participants' responses form a theme. Aspects of the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005) were applied by the researcher to the analysis of the experiences of the study participants. These findings can be organized into an institutional strand and a student strand. The institutional strand of findings includes threads related to the institutions' role in engaging students both academically and socially as they travel between the institutions throughout the transfer process. The student strand of findings includes threads related to aspects of the students' experiences

that demonstrate how the act of transferring changes how they participate in the academic and social environments of the institutions. The findings of this study have implications for students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private universities as well as for transfer students in general. Recommendations are offered by the researcher to improve future policy, practice, and research related to these student populations.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide background information to support the need for the current study exploring the experiences of students who transfer from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year postsecondary institutions. This chapter will serve as an overview of the study including a statement of the problem, description of the research purpose and research questions, conceptual foundation and potential significance of the inquiry as well as limitations, delimitations, and definitions of key terms used in the study.

Background

As noted by Labaree (1997), historically there have been competing goals of in the American education system: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. The democratic equality and social efficiency goals reflect the idea that the purpose of education is to benefit society. The social mobility goal reflects the notion that the purpose of education is to benefit the individual, increasing their social status by improving their economic position. But one can argue that increased educational attainment brings benefits to individuals and society. According to the College Board (2010), the median hourly wage for individuals who have reached the 16th year of schooling is 6% higher than that of individuals who have only reached the 12th year of schooling. As noted by the College Board (2010), those who have earned at least a bachelor's degree pay almost \$6,000 more in taxes annually than those who have earned only a high school diploma. Generally, the more an individual earns in wages the more

that individual pays in taxes. Increased tax revenue provides society with more money to spend on various programs.

The cost to the individual of increasing educational attainment is rising. Charges for tuition and fees and room and board at public four-year institutions have increased by 27% and those at private four-year institutions have increased by 13% over the last five years (College Board, 2012a). The average published annual charges for tuition and fees for full-time undergraduate students at public two-year in-state postsecondary institutions in the 2012-2013 academic year was \$3,131 as compared to \$29,056 for students at private nonprofit four-year institutions (College Board, 2012a). Although attending a private nonprofit institution can be more expensive, earning an undergraduate degree from one of these institutions has been shown to have positive effects on students' likelihood of attending graduate school and earning a professional degree or credential (Eide, Brewer, & Ehrenberg, 1998; Kingston & Smart, 1990). But the rising cost of tuition at these institutions makes attending them challenging for many students.

Transferring from a community or technical college to a private nonprofit institution provides students with a more affordable pathway to the benefits of earning a bachelor's degree from a private nonprofit institution. As noted by Brint and Karabel (1989), despite being created as a means of diverting potentially educationally disadvantaged populations from attending four-year higher education institutions, community and technical colleges gained popularity because of their link to these higher education institutions creating an alternative pathway and increasing access to bachelor's degree attainment. Research on students transferring from community and technical

colleges to public four-year institutions exists in the literature. Some research emphasizes the contribution of student characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race, degree expectations, as well as educational and career aspirations to the transfer student experience (Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Wang, 2010; Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006). Institutional factors such as transfer student enrollment levels, articulation and transfer agreements, as well as explicit and implicit structural, cultural, and environmental aspects of the transfer process from public two-year to nonprofit four-year institutions have also been studied (Cheslock, 2005; Bensimon & Dowd, 2012; Dowd et al., 2006; Dowd, Pak, & Bensimon, 2013; Morphey, Twombly, & Wolf-Wendel, 2001; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Shaw & London, 2001). While the academic and social experiences of students transferring from community and technical colleges to public four-year institutions have been explored by Townsend and Wilson (2006) as well as Lester, Brown Leonard, and Mathias (2013), these experiences have not been studied in students transferring from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit four-year institutions.

As noted by Dowd et al. (2006), more and more academically capable students are attending community and technical colleges. It stands to reason that many of these talented students intend to use the community or technical college as a pathway toward a bachelor's degree. But, Dowd et al. (2006) also note that access for these students, particularly those from lower-socioeconomic status communities, to enter elite private four-year postsecondary institutions is becoming more limited. There is also evidence that the diversion effect noted by Brint and Karabel (1989) is working. According to the

National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), in 2009 approximately 31.7 percent of undergraduate students transferred from their first institution. Of those students transferring from two-year to four-year institutions, 69.9 percent transferred to public institutions as compared to 10.6 percent who transferred to private nonprofit institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Therefore, this population is worthy of further study to maximize efficiency within the higher education pipeline. The current study will attempt to provide information about the academic and social experiences of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit four-year institutions that can help policymakers and practitioners improve this pathway to baccalaureate degree attainment.

Statement of the Problem

Educational attainment is a critical means for those from low-income upbringing to raise their socioeconomic status. According to Wise (2013) and others, the global economy in which we now live requires that those who wish to achieve the “American Dream” obtain at least some education after high school. As noted by Duncan and Murnane (2011), the United States has shifted from a manufacturing to a knowledge economy. The website of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2005) defines a knowledge economy as one that “trends... towards greater dependence on knowledge, information and high skill levels, and the increasing need for ready access to all of these by the business and public sectors.” The shift toward a knowledge economy has changed the ways in which individuals attempt to achieve the “American Dream.” In today's economy there is a need for educated and skilled workers.

According to the Pew Charitable Trusts (2013), those with a bachelor's degree are about seven times more likely to hold a college-level job than their counterparts with only a high school diploma and employers are willing to pay more for workers that hold bachelor's degrees. This means that workers with college degrees earn more income. Over a lifetime, individuals who hold a bachelor's degree earn more than those who only have a high school diploma. According to the College Board (2010), bachelor's degree recipients typically earn 66% more than high school graduates during their working life. This income advantage continues to increase with the more years of education an individual has after high school. And the advantages are not only in lifetime earnings but also in hourly wages. The median hourly wage for individuals who have reached the 16th year of schooling is 6% higher than that of individuals who have only reached the 12th year of schooling (College Board, 2010). With increased earnings comes increased purchasing power, which benefits the individual and society.

Completing some level of education after high school also provides individuals with mobility by giving them the option of continuing to move up the educational and income ladders. Earning a certificate or an associate's degree after high school gives individuals not only immediate earning power, but also affords those individuals the option of continuing in their education to earn a bachelor's degree. Earning a bachelor's degree increases individuals' earning power and provides them with a required credential necessary for earning a graduate degree. Every year of schooling after the 12th pays off more and more for the individual. The lifetime earnings of individuals with professional and doctoral degrees is significantly higher than those of individuals with only bachelor's

degrees, just as the lifetime earnings of individuals with bachelor's degrees are higher than those of individuals with only a high school education (College Board, 2010). Not only does going to college increase an individual's earning power but it also affords those individuals the option to continue on to the next level of education. Almost half of individuals whose parents are in the bottom quintile of income earners make it to the top two quintiles of income earners if they attain a college degree (Haskins, 2008). As noted by Haskins (2008), "high educational attainment can make a difference by boosting the fortunes of poor children and allowing them both to earn more than their parents and even to surpass the income of many of their peers from wealthier families" (p. 6). With higher levels of educational achievement individuals are able to increase their income, wealth, and mobility.

There are other benefits to increased levels of educational attainment for individuals and society in general. For example, there are health benefits gained by individuals who obtain a bachelor's degree or higher. According to the College Board (2010), individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher are almost 20% less likely to smoke than individuals with only a high school education. And according to the College Board (2010), across all age ranges those with a bachelor's degree or higher are more likely to exercise than those with only a high school education. These benefits have an impact on individuals' earning a bachelor's degree or higher that also extend to society as a whole. Healthier individuals create a healthier society. With a healthier society, healthcare costs from Medicare and Medicaid could be reduced. These lower healthcare costs could reduce the amount of tax revenue being used to subsidize medical expenses

for individuals leaving a greater amount of tax revenue available to spend on other programs to help grow the economy.

Another societal benefit of increased levels of educational attainment is the increased tax revenue generated from individuals with levels of education beyond high school. Individuals who have completed some college but received no degree pay approximately \$1,600 more per year in taxes than those with only a high school diploma (College Board, 2010). Individuals with an associate's degree pay approximately \$2,200 more per year in taxes than individuals with only a high school diploma (College Board, 2010). And those who have earned at least a bachelor's degree pay almost \$6,000 more in taxes annually than those who have earned only a high school diploma (College Board, 2010). The higher the level of education attained by an individual the more they earn. It stands to reason that the more someone earns in wages the more that person pays in income taxes. Therefore, it is in the best interest of the nation to increase the number of taxpaying individuals who have a bachelor's degree or higher. Increasing the number of these taxpaying individuals will increase the amount of tax revenue generated to fund various aspects of the government and encourage growth within the economy.

Even critics of the idea that every student should attend college recognize the wage premium placed on those with college degrees. Vedder (2011) concedes the point that employers pay more for employees with more education. Not only do jobs that require bachelor's degrees or higher pay more than those that require only a high school education, but employers are willing to pay more for employees with bachelor's degrees or higher even to fill jobs that do not require that level of education. As noted by

Carnevale (2011), the pace of individuals earning bachelor's degrees is not keeping up with the employer demand for workers with these levels of education. Whether the employer demand is a result of a real need to fill jobs that actually require this level of education or if employers are simply using the bachelor's degree as a screening tool is irrelevant.

But earning higher levels of education beyond high school comes with a cost. The total of student loans disbursed between 2001 and 2012 doubled (College Board, 2012b). The cost to the individual for gaining more years of schooling beyond high school is increasing. Over the past five years, tuition and fees and room and board charges at public four-year institutions have increased by 27% and those at private four-year institutions have increased by 13% (College Board, 2012a). According to the College Board (2012a), the average published annual charges for tuition and fees for full-time undergraduate students at public two-year in-state postsecondary institutions in the 2012-2013 academic year was \$3,131 as compared to \$8,655 for public four-year in-state institutions and \$29,056 for students at private nonprofit four-year institutions. The College Board (2012a) notes that a quarter of full-time undergraduate students enrolled at private nonprofit higher education institutions are at institutions with published annual tuition and fees of \$38,450 or higher. More than half of those students attend private nonprofit higher education institutions with published annual tuition and fees between \$42,000 and \$44,999 (College Board, 2012a). Although tuition and fees at public four-year institutions is generally lower than that at private four-year institutions (College

Board, 2012a), there are reasons that an individual might choose a private institution over a public one.

According to Eide, Brewer, and Ehrenberg (1998) earning an undergraduate degree from a private nonprofit higher education institution has a positive effect on the likelihood that students will attend graduate school at a major research university. Kingston and Smart (1990) found that graduating from an elite private undergraduate institution has a positive effect on the likelihood of individuals earning a professional degree or credential. Fox (1993) found that the rate of return on the investment in private nonprofit colleges and universities is comparable to, if not greater than, that of public nonprofit colleges and universities. And, according to Dowd et al. (2006), the selectivity of the four-year institution that students transferring from community and technical colleges attend has a positive effect on those students' successful degree completion. Given this evidence, it stands to reason that some students and their families may choose private education as their pathway toward a bachelor's degree despite the higher cost of tuition.

In the coming years, the demand for jobs requiring some education after high school will grow faster than the sector of jobs requiring only a high school diploma (White House, 2013). It is critical that enough individuals are earning credentials beyond high school to meet the demand in the labor market. Therefore viable and affordable pathways must be cultivated to assist students in achieving levels of education beyond high school. There are multiple means by which to reach this end.

One approach is to increase financial support for students pursuing education

beyond high school. A report by the New America Foundation (2013) suggests that the federal government should increase the maximum award of Pell grants. The federal government awards Pell grants to students from families who have a demonstrated financial need. These awards do not have to be repaid like student loans. Increasing the amount of the maximum award of Pell grants would potentially reduce the amount that students and their families borrow to pay for the remaining costs of attending college.

While reducing the levels of educational debt being held by individuals is a possible advantage to New America Foundation's (2013) policy proposal, there are disadvantages that must be considered. First, not every student who is eligible for federal student loans is eligible for Pell grant awards. Therefore, increasing the maximum Pell grant award would not benefit students and families who are not eligible for these grants. Second, there is no guarantee that students and their families will borrow less if the maximum amount of the Pell grant is increased. It is also possible that students and their families will reduce their contributions to the cost of college and continue to use loans to finance the difference.

Another approach to consider is to maximize efficiency within the postsecondary education pipeline by promoting combined use of two-year public institutions and both public and private four-year institutions. With the average tuition and fees at community and technical colleges being less than half that of in-state tuition at public four-year institutions and less than an eighth of average tuition and fees at private four-year institutions, pathways in which students complete at least some of their schooling after high school at these types of institutions are more affordable than entering a four-year

institution directly. And if plans to make attending community college free for everyone, as proposed by President Barrack Obama in his 2015 State of the Union address, are successfully implemented then this pathway will likely become more popular (State of the Union, 2015).

The affordability of the public two-year to public or private four-year postsecondary institution pathway is only one side of the coin. In addition to affordability, the public two-year to public or private four-year postsecondary institution pathway must be a viable one if students are to achieve their academic goals. Information about how students experience this postsecondary education pathway can help to increase its viability. Through increased understanding of the academic and social experiences of students who engage in transfer from public two-year to public and private four-year institutions, practitioners and policymakers can gain insights valuable in the enhancement of this pathway at both the student and institutional levels.

The experiences of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to nonprofit four-year institutions have been addressed in other studies. Some researchers (Dowd et al., 2008; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Wang, 2010; Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006) have focused on how student characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race, degree expectations, educational and career aspirations contribute to these students' successful use of this pathway to higher education. Other researchers (Cheslock, 2005; Morpew et al., 2001; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Shaw & London, 2001) have emphasized the importance of institutional factors such as transfer student enrollment levels, articulation and transfer agreements, as well as explicit and implicit

structural, cultural and environmental conditions contributing to the experience of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to nonprofit four-year institutions. Townsend and Wilson (2006) note that cultural and structural differences between community and technical colleges and public four-year institutions influence students' perceptions of the transfer process. And Lester et al. (2013) provide information about academic and social perspectives of students from community and technical colleges experience the process of transferring to public four-year institutions. But, a gap exists in the literature regarding the experiences of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit four-year institutions. If pathways from high school to postsecondary education are to be optimized, then research must offer further insight into the experiences of these students.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the study is to learn about how students who transfer from community and technical colleges to a private four-year research university experience the transfer process at both institutions. The research questions guiding the study are:

1. How do students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit universities describe and understand the transfer process?
2. How do these students describe their academic experiences at each institution?
3. How do these students describe their social experiences at each institution?

Potential Significance

The findings of the study are potentially significant for both higher education policy and practice. An increased understanding of the experiences of students who

transfer from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit institutions will be gained from the study. Through inquiry into the academic and social experiences of students who transfer from public two-year to a private nonprofit university the learned about how students make this transition. The information acquired through this inquiry will be useful to both policymakers and practitioners who can apply this information in the development of policies and programs that can improve the pathway to baccalaureate degree attainment for this population of transfer students.

Policy implications for the findings of the study include expansion of transfer or articulation agreements between public two-year and private nonprofit four-year institutions and improved alignment between the curricula of these two types of institutions. With a better understanding of the academic experiences of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit four-year institutions, policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels can create new policies or make adjustments to current policies that will position students to succeed in this transition. Transferring from a public two-year to a private nonprofit four-year institution is an important pathway for students to understand. This pathway provides students with a more cost effective means of attaining a bachelor's degree from a private university. As noted by Eide et al. (1998) as well as Kingston and Smart (1990) earning a baccalaureate degree from a private institution can influence a student's likelihood of completing graduate studies which can influence their lifetime earnings. Therefore, it is critical that the pathway from a public two-year to a private nonprofit four-year institution be understood and made more smooth through programmatic and policy changes. These

policy changes could create financial and other incentives for students and institutions utilizing this pathway. For example, students who pursue this pathway may be awarded more federal grant money to apply toward tuition at the private nonprofit institution or the private nonprofit institutions may receive more federal work-study funding in exchange for admitting greater numbers of transfer students from community and technical colleges.

The findings of this study also have implications for higher education practice. Programs aimed at both the academic and social experiences of students transferring from public two-year to private nonprofit institutions could be influenced by the findings of the study. Practitioners at either institutional type may use the findings of this study to improve academic advising for students pursuing this pathway to ease the academic transition for these students. In addition, practitioners at community and technical colleges may use the findings of this study to identify particular academic and social experiences to be replicated inside and outside the classroom at community and technical colleges to better equip students for transfer to private nonprofit institutions. Similarly, practitioners may use the findings of this study to identify interventions that might ease the social transition of students transferring from public two-year to private nonprofit institutions.

Conceptual Foundation

The theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005) have been applied in studies about students transferring from community and technical colleges to four-year

institutions (Barnett, 2011; Berger & Milem, 1999; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Crisp, 2010; Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Lester et al., 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Astin's (1984/1999) theory of involvement is a time-on-task theory regarding the amount of physical and psychological energy students spend on educationally purposeful activities. Tinto's (1993) theory of integration describes how students become acculturated to what Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) call the institution's "norms, attitudes, and values" (p. 54) and has been used to understand students' voluntary departure from an institution. Engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005) relates to both the time and effort students expend on educationally purposeful activities inside and outside the classroom as well as how the institution expends resources in support of students engagement in these activities. There are both student and institutional components to all three of these theories that have been applied primarily in contexts with traditional college students. While these theories represent the evolution of a construct over time (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009), they all share the common thread of students' academic and social experiences in higher education institutions.

The focus of the current study is the student experience without a particular emphasis on the institution, therefore the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005) are not on their own appropriate lenses through which to interpret these experiences. Also, the participants in the current study do not qualify as traditional college students by virtue of being transfer students from community and technical colleges, therefore the theories of

involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005) are not entirely applicable. Therefore, the current study applied a conceptual framework which combined student-level aspects of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005) such as in- and out- of classroom experiences. Specifically, the conceptual framework used in the current study was an analysis of the experiences, both academic and social, of students transferring from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year institutions. Through this lens, the researcher attended to student-level constructs without emphasizing institutional factors and while remaining open to the influence of entities outside the institution such as parents, family members, and friends.

Summary of the Methodology

The study followed Merriam's (2009) basic interpretive qualitative design. A sample of 20 participants was selected for the study. A semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interview was conducted with each participant. The semi-structured interview format was selected because of the flexibility it provided to probe and retrieve more detailed information from participants (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2009). The face-to-face interview format was selected because it allowed the researcher and participant to exchange audio and visual cues (de Leeuw, 2008). The researcher created an audio recording of each interview. Upon completion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings. The researcher reviewed and coded each interview transcript (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Saldaña, 2013). Between case and

within-case analysis was conducted by the researcher to develop themes emergent from the data (Creswell, 2013).

Multiple methods of ensuring the trustworthiness of data collection and analysis were employed by the researcher. An audit trail was kept outlining each step taken by the researcher during the data collection and analysis phases of the research project (Merriam, 2009). Member checks and respondent validation of the data collected were conducted by the researcher to allow participants the opportunity to give feedback about the data collected and analysis (Merriam, 2009). And, data was collected until the researcher has reached the point of data saturation (Merriam, 2009). That is, the researcher collected data until no new information was offered by adding new participants to the sample.

Limitations

As with any research, the current study has limitations. The study was limited by the boundaries of the case and units selected. Being conducted at one university, the results of this study are not generalizable. The results of this study must be considered within the context of the site of research. Transferability (Merriam, 2009) of the results to similar contexts is possible. However, the boundaries of these cases and units are a limitation to the current study.

Another limitation of the study is that other phenomena, which are not explored in the current study, may have an impact on the results. For example, students who choose to transfer from community and technical colleges to private four-year nonprofit institutions may share similar characteristics that predispose them to participate in the

transfer process. Likewise, students who volunteered for the current study may share similar characteristics that made them more inclined to participate in this research. It is impossible to understand or account for every construct that might influence the phenomenon of study making this a limitation of the current study.

Finally, researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013) is a limitation of research designs including the current study. The researcher's direct knowledge of students from community and technical colleges who transferred to the private nonprofit university serving as the site of research as well as his professional experiences at both types of institutions created a link between the researcher and the participants. The researcher might have been less inclined to probe participants regarding some of their responses about topics with which he may have been familiar. This past knowledge and experience may have also influenced the researcher's interpretation of the data collected.

Delimitations

The institution serving as the site of research for the study was selected because it is has the largest undergraduate student population of any of the private, nonprofit colleges and universities in the metropolitan area. Students from community and technical colleges in the region and around the country attend this large, private, nonprofit university. By selecting this institution as the site of research, the researcher increased the pool of potential participants in the study. An increased pool of potential participants contributed to increased diversity of experiences included in the sample.

The scope of the study was limited to currently enrolled undergraduate students at the university who began their postsecondary education at a community or technical

college. The rationale for including only currently enrolled students was to include individuals in the sample who were still experiencing the transfer process. Only individuals who completed at least one semester at the community or technical college prior to transferring to the university were included in the sample. This delimitation increased the likelihood that participants had had meaningful academic and social experiences at the community and technical college prior to transferring to the university.

Definition of Key Terms

Community and technical colleges are defined as institutions of higher education which award associate's degrees or certificates including community colleges, vocational, technical, or agricultural institutes in which the locus of control lies with state or local government.

Private nonprofit institutions are defined as institutions of higher education which award bachelor's degrees or higher, are classified as tax-exempt by the Internal Revenue Service, and in which locus of control lies with a board or other body within the organization.

Transfer is defined as the act of leaving one institution to continue study at another institution. At least some credits earned at the initial institution are applied toward class standing at the new institution.

An *academic experience* is defined as an educationally purposeful activity associated directly or indirectly with an academic course of study.

A social experience is defined as an activity associated directly or indirectly with acculturating someone to the norms, values, and attitudes of the institution or its members.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of the study is to gain understanding of the experiences of students who transfer from public two-year higher education institutions to private nonprofit four-year higher education institutions. The theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005) have been applied by researchers (ex. Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008) to the study of transfer students. Transfer students experience the constructs of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999) and engagement (Kuh, 2001) at both the institution they transfer from and the institution to which they transfer. Involvement (Astin, 1984/1999) and engagement (Kuh, 2001) relate to the amount of time and energy students spend on educationally purposeful activities. Transfer students undertake educationally purposeful activities at both the postsecondary institutions that they leave and the postsecondary institutions to which they transfer. Therefore, involvement (Astin, 1984/1999) and engagement (Kuh, 2001) are useful concepts to aid in the understanding of the experiences of transfer students. As a theory of student departure, Tinto's (1993) theory of integration posits that a lack of academic and social acculturation into a postsecondary institution leads students to leave that institution. This theory is also relevant to the study of transfer students who leave one postsecondary institution to enter another postsecondary institution. Despite the emphasis on the institution's role in involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), engagement (Kuh, 2001), and integration (Tinto, 1993) noted by critics such as Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009), these theories are useful in the study of how students experience the transfer process. While

various permutations of the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001) have been applied to the study of students transferring from community and technical colleges to public four-year institutions (Barnett, 2011; Berger & Milem, 1999; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Crisp, 2010; Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Lester et al., 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006), these theories have not been applied to the study of students transferring from public two-year higher education institutions to private nonprofit higher education institutions. With the rising cost of higher education (College Board, 2012a) and positive gains from earning a bachelor's degree from a private nonprofit higher education institution (Eide et al., 1998; Fox, 1993; Kingston & Smart, 1990), the public two-year to private nonprofit four-year institution transfer pathway is an important one to explore and understand in order to maximize efficiency and affordability in the postsecondary education pipeline.

Introduction

The experiences of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to four-year institutions are manifold. Student characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race, degree expectations, educational and career aspirations comprise a critical component of this experience (Dowd et al., 2008; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Wang, 2010; Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006). Institutional factors such as transfer student enrollment levels, articulation and transfer agreements, as well as explicit and implicit structural, cultural, and environmental conditions also contribute to the experience of these students (Dowd et al., 2008; Cheslock, 2005; Morphew et al., 2001; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012;

Shaw & London, 2001). The transfer experience of community and technical college to four-year college and university transfer students is a function of the interaction of student characteristics with institutional factors first within the community and technical college context and then within the four-year context. At each institutional level these students engage in academic and social activities that comprise their transfer experience. The experience of students who transfer from two-year to four-year institutions has not been studied as much as the experiences of transfer students in general. And, the experiences of students transferring from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit four-year institutions have been studied even less. The literature review that follows attempts to shed light on student characteristics and institutional factors influencing the educational attainment and transfer experiences of public-two year students to support the need for further research on the experiences of students transferring from these types of institutions to private nonprofit four-year institutions.

Student Characteristics

Student characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race, degree expectations and aspirations, self-authorship and self-regulation contribute to the experiences of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to four-year institutions (Dowd et al., 2008; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Wang, 2010; Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006). In addition to contributing to the student experience, these characteristics influence students' educational attainment (Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010). To understand the experience of students who transfer from community and technical

colleges to private four-year institutions one must understand the characteristics of this student population.

Using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) High School and Beyond Sophomore Sample (HS&B/So) and National Longitudinal Study (NELS:88/2000) Dowd and Melguizo (2008) found that middle-class (particularly upper middle-class) students became a smaller proportion of the community college transfer student population during the 1980s and 1990s. Through investigation of changes in socioeconomic composition of the community college transfer student population during this period, Dowd and Melguizo (2008) discovered that, contrary to findings of other researchers, middle class students did not make up the majority of this transfer student population. These findings are important because they demonstrate that the socioeconomic inequity in transfer admission to four-year institutions may in fact be exacerbated rather than mitigated. While Dowd and Melguizo (2008) did not examine the correlation between racial and ethnic backgrounds and transfer access from community college to four-year institutions, the socioeconomic disparity highlighted by their findings indicate that further research into these connections is warranted.

Wang (2010) conducted quantitative analysis on data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS: 88/2000) and the Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS) to study a sample of approximately 1,400 community college entrants with aspirations for a bachelor's degree or higher. Through this analysis Wang (2010) examined how psychological perspectives and motivational factors, such as locus of control, self-concept, and aspirations for a graduate degree, influence student transfer

from two-year to four- year institutions. Wang (2010) found that Black students were less likely to transfer to four-year institutions and confirmed a positive correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and probability of transfer to four-year institutions. Additionally, Wang (2010) found that students with a stronger sense of self at the community and technical college level were more successful transferring to four-year institutions.

Similarly, Wawrzynski and Pizzolato (2006) created a model of self-authorship development to illuminate how student input characteristics predicted self-authorship. Through linear regression Wawrzynski and Pizzolato (2006) analyzed data from a sample of students in a range of undergraduate courses from various colleges and academic disciplines at a large, public, research university in the Midwest. Wawrzynski and Pizzolato (2006) found that being a transfer student was a greater predictor of self-regulation in students' second experience of a challenging situation than in their first experience of a challenging situation. Adjusting to college can be a challenging experience for many students. The findings of Wawrzynski and Pizzolato (2006) are particularly relevant to the experiences of students transferring from community and technical colleges to four-year institutions who experience adjustment at both institutions.

Other student characteristics such as race, age, parents' level of education, and enrollment status are also important predictors of educational attainment particularly as it relates to students at community and technical colleges. Porchea et al. (2010) found that high academic self-confidence at time of matriculation was a strong predictor of transfer without obtaining the two-year degree. Older students and African-American students

were found to be more likely than White students, according to Porchea et al. (2010) to obtain the two-year degree without transferring. Parents' level of education also serves as an indicator of the educational attainment of students at community and technical colleges. According to Porchea et al. (2010), community college students with parents holding bachelor's degrees were more likely to transfer and to be enrolled at the fifth year. Students' intended enrollment status and degree expectations were also predictors of educational attainment. As Porchea et al. (2010) found, students who planned to enroll full-time were more likely to obtain the two-year degree and students with higher degree expectations (AA/BA/MA/JD/MD/PhD) were less likely to drop out. In addition to the impact of student-level characteristics, Porchea et al. (2010) found that institutional factors such as enrollment size, cost of in-state tuition, and number of full-time faculty were strong predictors of student transfer from community and technical colleges to four-year institutions without degree attainment.

Critique of Student Characteristics Literature

The literature on student characteristics and community college student transfer to four-year institutions is overwhelmingly quantitative and focused on students at public four-year institutions. While these studies offer evidence that student-level attributes such as socioeconomic status, race, degree expectations and aspirations, self-authorship, self-regulation, and academic self-confidence can be predictors of community college students' likelihood of transfer to a four-year institution, the quantitative methodologies employed in these studies provide little to no information about how these constructs contribute to the experiences of these students throughout the transfer process. It is

important to understand what student-level characteristics have an impact on the experiences of students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions. But, to gain a fuller understanding of these students' experiences, it must be understood how these characteristics contribute to students' experiences.

Institutional Factors

A gap exists between public and private as well as highly selective and less-highly selective institutions' enrollments of transfer students (Cheslock, 2005). Cheslock (2005) analyzed data from the College Board's *Annual Survey of Colleges* and the U.S. Department of Education's Higher Education General Information System (HEGIS) and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) surveys for institutions categorized as Research, Doctoral, Comprehensive or Liberal Arts in the 1994 Carnegie classification scheme. Through this analysis, Cheslock (2005) found that transfer students made up a smaller portion of the incoming classes at private versus public institutions during the period between 1984 and 1997.

While elite higher education institutions enroll transfer students at different rates than other institutions, the enrollment levels of transfer students from community and technical colleges at elite four-year institutions illuminate other patterns. Dowd et al. (2008) investigated the extent to which elite institutions enroll transfer students, the number of these transfer students coming from community colleges, and the number of community college transfer students coming from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds. Through analysis of institution and student level data from the Department of Education's National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88/2-000), Dowd et al.

(2008) found that elite institutions admit a small number of community college transfer students and were able to create a profile of predictors of transfer admission to elite colleges (as defined by *Barron's Profile of American Colleges 2003*). According to Dowd et al. (2008) community college transfer status was found to be most advantageous for students from middle-income families. While less selective four-year institutions were found to have higher numbers of low-socioeconomic status transfer students, according to Dowd et al. (2008), the overall number of transfer students at elite private institutions remained low. With greater attention being paid to community colleges by President Barack Obama and others, elite higher education institutions, especially private universities, will have to do more to matriculate transfer students who began their postsecondary education in the community college sector.

Differences in enrollments of transfer students from community and technical colleges at private four-year institutions might be explained, at least in part, by transfer agreements and other arrangements between institutions. In a case study of transfer agreements between community colleges and a private institution, Morpew et al. (2001) learned about the benefits gained by each institution and key factors for success of these agreements. Morpew et al. (2001) found four key factors to the success of transfer agreements between these institutions. First, the establishment of transfer agreements created a win-win situation for both the community college and the private institution; each institution benefited from being a party to the agreement. Second, Morpew et al. (2001) found that faculty involvement in the creation of the transfer agreements and establishment of agreements through written documents also added to the success of

these agreements. Third, Morpew et al. (2001) found that the institutions shared a high level of attention to and communication with one another throughout the transfer agreement development and implementation phases. Finally, Morpew et al. (2001) found that the institutions involved in the transfer agreements attend to the needs of transfer students. Morpew et al. (2001) clearly demonstrated the viability of transfer agreements between public two-year and private institutions, but did not offer insight into institutional culture and norms that might influence the effectiveness of public two-year to private four-year institution transfer. Because community and technical colleges exist in a public sector of higher education often separated from the sector occupied by private research universities, it can be more challenging for students to transfer and for administrators to negotiate articulation and transfer agreements between these sectors. More needs to be understood about how students navigate between the community college and private nonprofit segments of the higher education landscape.

Shaw and London (2001) used ethnographic data to study how the concepts of ideology and culture relate to institutional commitment to the transfer function over vocationalism and comprehensiveness at community colleges. Through analysis of over 2,000 interviews, observations, and documents from three urban community colleges, Shaw and London (2001) created portraits of these institutions that illustrated the value each institution placed on the transfer function for different specific ideological reasons. According to Shaw and London (2001), differences in ideology were apparent in the formal and informal cultural norms surrounding the transfer function at each college. Presidential and faculty leadership were found by Shaw and London (2001) to be

important to institutional commitment to transfer students at all three institutions. Shaw and London (2001) also found that the ideological culture of the campus created a complex environment including decentralized programs and services intended to assist students in the transfer process.

As noted by Bensimon and Dowd (2012) and Dowd et al. (2013), institutional agents, such as faculty and staff, are critical to the success of students transferring between community and technical colleges and elite colleges and universities. The role of these individuals can have a particularly positive or particularly negative impact on students of lower socioeconomic status who embark on this pathway toward bachelor's degree attainment. The actions of institutional agents do not have causal effect on the success of these transfer students, however; these individuals play an important role in validating these students' experiences, influencing their identity development, and connecting them with resources to support their success.

While understanding the implicit institutional culture and norms influencing the transfer function, explicit policies, practices and structures also affect the experience of students transferring from public two-year to private four-year institutions. Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) examined how institutional structures and policies, personal perceptions and interventions, as well as internal and external environmental conditions impact institutions' efforts and abilities to facilitate successful student transfer. Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) found that students noted a variety of preconceived notions and expectations developed at the original institution and brought to the transfer institution, often leading to mistakes in navigating the system at the receiving institution. In addition to lack of

formal structures, concerns about articulation agreements, and environmental challenges to assisting transfer students in their transition, Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) cited structural impediments to successful student transfer such as the short timeline between admission and matriculation for transfer students. There are many hidden challenges that threaten the success of transfer students whether these students originate at two-year or four-year institutions. While faculty and staff may want to better facilitate the success of transfer students, these structural and environmental impediments to success must first be identified, understood, and mitigated.

Critique of Institutional Factors Literature

While the literature concerning institutional factors in the two-year to four-year institution transfer process includes studies which employ qualitative methodologies, these studies offer limited information about how students experience these institutional factors throughout the transfer process. The research in this area focuses on institution-level factors such as institutional control, selectivity, existence of transfer agreements, institutional culture, structures, policies, and environmental conditions that contribute to the institution's facilitation of successful student transfer. But, these studies offer little insight into how students' experience of these institutional factors contributes to their transfer experience overall. Although the studies focusing on institutional factors add to the understanding of the differences between institutional factors which impact the transfer process at public versus private four-year institutions, these studies do not add to our understanding of how students transferring from community and technical colleges to

public versus private four-year institutions may experience this process differently depending on the locus of institutional control.

Educational Attainment

The number of community college students transferring to private four-year institutions is small (Dowd et al., 2008; Cheslock, 2005). Those students who do transfer from community colleges to private four-year institutions must deal with implicit and explicit institutional challenges (Morphew et al., 2001; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Shaw & London, 2001). Student characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race, degree expectations, self-concept and self-regulation contribute to the transfer experience of community college students (Dowd et al., 2008; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Wang, 2010; Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006). These student and institutional factors also contribute to the educational attainment and preparation as well as cognitive gains of this student population, although the scope and magnitude of the impact, particularly in relation to transfer students from institutions other than community and technical colleges, is debatable.

Long and Kurlaender (2009) used state-level data to determine if community colleges provide viable pathways to baccalaureate degree attainment. Using longitudinal administrative data provided by the Ohio Board of Regents (OBR), Long and Kurlaender (2009) analyzed student outcomes including baccalaureate degree completion (after 4, 6, and 9 years), total credit hours completed, and stop-out behavior (within 1, 2, and 6 years) to compare these outcomes for community college entrants with similar 4-year institution entrants. Long and Kurlaender (2009) found that community college students

dropped out or stopped out at higher rates than their counterparts who started at 4-year institutions. According to Long and Kurlaender (2009) only about a quarter of community college students who had aspirations of obtaining 4-year degrees did so within 9 years of starting postsecondary education. And, Long and Kurlaender (2009) found that students who started postsecondary education at community colleges were less likely to receive a bachelor's degree, more likely to earn fewer credits, and more likely to stop out without earning a degree. Long and Kurlaender (2009) term these differences in degree attainment, credits accumulated, and risk of dropping out a “community college penalty” (p. 37).

Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Institutional Research and Improvement, and the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, Alfonso (2006) analyzed educational expectations, college selection, and decisions to obtain a bachelor's degree as these factors relate to educational attainment of four-year college and university students who attended community college. Accounting for non-traditional pathways, educational expectations, and college selection Alfonso (2006) found a large negative impact of 2-year college attendance on baccalaureate degree attainment. Overall, Alfonso (2006) found that by enrolling in a 2-year institution rather than a 4-year institution a student's likelihood of attaining a baccalaureate degree was decreased by up to a third. While Alfonso's (2006) findings highlight a baccalaureate degree attainment gap between students who begin their postsecondary education in two-year versus four-year

institutions, the use of a national dataset does not allow for analysis of institutional factors contributing to this gap.

Similarly, Christie and Hutcheson (2003) found that enrolling at a two-year college reduces the probability of baccalaureate degree attainment by approximately ten percent. But, Christie and Hutcheson (2003) did not find institution type (two-year versus four-year) to be as significant of a predictor of baccalaureate degree attainment as first year college GPA, socioeconomic status, on-campus employment, and high school GPA. Of even less importance to successful baccalaureate degree attainment than institution type, according to Christie and Hutcheson (2003), are cognitive test scores, institutional control, and high school extracurricular activities.

While Christie and Hutcheson (2003) found that attendance at community college made it less likely that a student would attain a bachelor's degree, Leigh and Gill (2003) found no diversion effect of community college attendance on students' educational aspirations or baccalaureate degree attainment. Through analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) Leigh and Gill (2003) found that students' desired years of education has the most influence on their choice of postsecondary educational track. According to Leigh and Gill (2003), attendance at a two-year institution only added between .1 and .2 years to students' average years of schooling. And, Leigh and Gill (2003) found that for those students who desired a bachelor's degree, community college attendance increased overall educational attainment by up to one year.

Although Alfonso (2006), Christie and Hutcheson (2003), and others identify a bachelor's degree attainment gap between community college transfer students and students who began college at four-year institutions, Carlan and Byxbe (2000) found no significant differences in the cumulative upper division GPAs between these two student populations. While Carlan and Byxbe (2000) found lower division GPA, college major, and race to have significant impact on upper division academic performance for both populations, lower division GPA had a significantly greater impact for community college transfer students. Carlan and Byxbe (2000) found age, lower division credit hours and gender to be less significant indicators of academic performance for both populations. Although obtaining the associate's degree had a slight positive effect on the GPA of community college transfer students, Carlan and Byxbe (2000) did not find that earning this credential was a significant indicator of academic performance for these students.

Similarly, Dietrich and Lichtenberger (2015) found no "community college" penalty exists for baccalaureate degree attainment of students who begin their postsecondary career at community colleges compared to those who begin at four-year institutions. Using propensity score matching Dietrich and Lichtenberger (2015) found groups of rising juniors at four-year institutions with a similar distribution of characteristics (precollege and environmental factors) to groups of community college transfer students. The study analyzed a statewide (Illinois) longitudinal dataset including data from the National Student Clearinghouse, IPEDS, and Barron's. Propensity score matching enabled the researchers to identify whether attendance at the community

college was the characteristic causing the community college penalty. Without accounting for pre-college and environmental characteristics a small but statistically significant community college penalty was found. However, after holding pre-college and environmental characteristics constant through propensity score matching no community college penalty was found. Additionally, when college selectivity was taken into account, no statistically significant community college penalty was discovered.

Attendance at a community or technical college can have a positive impact on the quality of four-year institution attended by students who transfer from these institutions. Hilmer (1997) studied patterns in university quality choices for community college transfer and direct to four-year institution path students accounting for various student characteristics such as family income, scholastic aptitude, and high school grades. Through analysis of data from the National Center for Education Research's High School and Beyond (HSB) survey, Hilmer (1997) found that students attend higher quality universities after attending community college. According to Hilmer's (1997) findings, the increase in university quality is especially pronounced for students from low income families as well as those with low scholastic aptitude and poor high school performance.

According to Melguizo, Kienzl, and Alfonso (2011) community colleges are preparing students academically for a successful transition to the four-year institution. Substantial differences exist between community college transfer and non-transfer students in terms of high school academic preparation, socioeconomic demographics, and financial support received in the forms of grants and loans, and Melguizo et al. (2011) found these differences to be more significant than differences in degree attainment.

Although the educational outcomes of community college transfer and non-transfer students are similar, Melguizo et al. (2011) noted the number of students transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions or obtaining two-year degrees or certificates was low. The dearth in community college students transferring to four-year institutions or obtaining two-year credentials is exacerbated in low-socioeconomic status and minority groups (Melguizo et al., 2011).

While only a small number of students transfer from community college to four-year institutions, those who do receive cognitive benefits at the community college level. Pascarella, Bohr, Nora, and Terenzini (1995) estimated the net effect of two-year versus four-year college attendance on students' reading comprehension, math, critical thinking, and composite achievement during the first year of postsecondary education and identified differences in the extent of these effects for students from various backgrounds with varied pre-college characteristics. Although Pascarella et al. (1995) found relative cognitive impacts in the first year to be more or less the same for students at two- and four-year institutions controlling for pre-college academic preparation, this was not the case when considering every pre-college characteristic. Of particular note was that Pascarella et al. (1995) found non-White first year students experienced greater cognitive gains from first year attendance at two-year colleges than their White counterparts, while White students experienced greater cognitive gains in first year attendance at four-year institutions when compared to non-White students completing the first year at four-year institutions. The findings of Pascarella et al. (1995) provide evidence to support

community college, not only as a viable pathway to baccalaureate degree attainment, but also for increased cognitive development, particularly for students of color.

In addition to increasing cognitive gains, Pierson, Wolniak, Pascarella, and Flowers (2003) found community college attendance to impact specific learning dimensions. Through longitudinal analysis of a random sample from the National Study of Student Learning (NSSL) Pierson et al. (2003) found that two-year college attendance had a positive impact on students' openness to diversity, learning for self-understanding in the second year, and internal locus of attribution of academic success in the first year. While the impact of two-year college attendance on openness to diversity and learning for self-understanding was higher for male students than female students, these differences were influenced by conditional factors such as socioeconomic status and race (Pierson et al., 2003). According to Pierson et al. (2003) learning for self-understanding was highest for White students, although non-White students exhibited more growth in their preference for higher order cognitive activities. Pierson et al. (2003) found socioeconomic status to be negatively related to preference for higher-order cognitive activities; therefore, the lower a students' socioeconomic status the greater impact two-year college attendance had on their preference for higher-order cognitive activities.

Despite perceived or real differences in educational attainment or cognitive development, community college transfer students and native four-year college and university students experience similar socioeconomic gains. According to Whitaker and Pascarella (1994), two-year and four-year college entrants were found to have virtually identical earnings after 13 years. These socioeconomic impacts, according to Whitaker

and Pascarella (1994) were virtually identical for students regardless of their ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic background.

Finally, Li (2010) compared bachelor's degree attainment rates for transfer versus non-transfer students using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01). According to Li's (2010) analysis, transfer students were less likely than non-transfer students to obtain a bachelor's degree within six years. Despite a gap in degree attainment for transfer versus non-transfer students, Li (2010) found that transfer students' level of academic and social acculturation into the new institution influenced degree attainment. The more students felt socially and academically acculturated to the institution, the greater chance they had of completing the degree (Li, 2010).

Critique of Educational Attainment Literature

The literature regarding the educational attainment of students who transfer from public two-year to four-year institutions emphasizes both student-level and institutional factors contributing to the educational attainment of these students. Studies in this body of literature employ quantitative methodologies to understand the relationship of student-level and institutional factors to the educational attainment of students transferring from public two-year to four-year institutions. Although these quantitative studies offer evidence that attendance at a community or technical college has a positive effect on the educational attainment of students transferring to four-year institutions, these studies do not provide information about how students experience the transfer process. Deeper understanding of the public two-year to four-year institution transfer process would be gained through inquiry into how students experience this process. Such inquiry could

provide valuable insight into ways to account for student-level and institutional factors in the transfer process and increasing the educational attainment of these students.

Theoretical Framework

As noted by Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009), the student development theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005) have evolved over time. Pace (1980) was the first to hypothesize that the amount of effort that a student puts into his college experience is an indicator of the amount that student will get out the college experience. In 1984, Astin expanded on the work of Pace (1980) when he presented his theory of involvement. Involvement, according to Astin (1984), is a time-on-task theory relating to physical and psychological energy expended. According to Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009), Astin (1984) described involvement as "both qualitative and quantitative...related to learning, and [to] be encouraged by institutions to enhance educational effectiveness" (p. 410). Astin (1984/1999) defines involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 518). In addition to time and energy, involvement takes into account the impact of the environment. Astin's (1984/1999) Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) model of involvement is commonly cited in the literature. Central to Astin's (1984) theory is the institution because "the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement" (p. 298). The institution is also a critical component of other student development theorists in this area.

Tinto's (1993) theory of integration attempts to rationalize the role of the student and the institution in students' voluntary departure from the institution. Academic and social integration, according to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), is “the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community” (p. 54). According to Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009), integration is critical in the student’s first year at the institution. Tinto’s (1993) theory of integration is used to understand student departure from the institution, using levels of acculturation to the institution as rationale for student departure. This aspect of Tinto’s (1993) theory makes integration an appropriate lens through which to view the experiences of transfer students who depart one institutional culture only to enter another.

The theory of engagement put forth by Kuh (2001) and advanced by Kuh et al. (2005) captures constructs of both involvement and integration. Engagement relates to both the time and effort students expend on educationally purposeful activities inside and outside the classroom as well as how the institution expends resources in support of students engaged in these activities. Institutional improvement is central to Kuh’s (2001) engagement theory. As noted by Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009), “the concept of student engagement is about encouraging institutional reflection and action on effective practice” (p. 414). Engagement is about determining the time and effort students put toward educationally purposeful activities so that institutions can make adjustments to increase levels of student engagement.

While the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005) are applied in the literature (Barnett, 2011; Berger & Milem, 1999; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Crisp, 2010; Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010; Kuh et al., 2008; Lester et al., 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006) these theories are not without their critiques and limitations. Although all three theories acknowledge both student and institutional components, as noted by Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009), a critique of these theories is their emphasis on the institution with less emphasis on the student's role in actively involving, engaging, and integrating. Another critique of these theories is that they have been primarily studied in traditional college students (Barnett, 2011; Berger & Milem, 1999; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Crisp, 2010; Kuh et al., 2008). As noted by Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) these theories have been used to understand the experiences of "traditional age students [as opposed to] the full spectrum of college students" (p. 412). A key limitation of these theories is how the constructs are measured. For example, being in the Spanish Club may not be that meaningful to a particular student. While being in a fraternity or sorority might require a lot of time and energy from students, but may or may not be the best representation of involvement, integration, or engagement for that student. As noted Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) by Determining an accurate measure for these constructs is challenging.

Researchers such as Guiffrida (2003) and Rendón (1994) have applied integrationist approaches to minority and non-traditional student populations finding that modifications for these populations are appropriate. Guiffrida (2003) studied how membership in African American student organizations played a role to the integration of

African American students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs). Through this inquiry, Guiffrida (2003) found that membership in such organizations contributed to these students' feelings of connection to faculty and opportunities for involvement at the institution. Rendón (1994) posited that nontraditional students face challenges with integrating academically and socially on traditional two-year and four-year college campuses. Structural and cultural factors play a role, according to Rendón (1994), in validating and invalidating students' experiences at the institution. For example, Rendón (1994) cites the expectation that students get involved in campus activities and organizations as potentially counter to the culture of nontraditional students whose family or other obligations may discourage or hinder them from participating in this aspect of campus life. Rendón (1994) also found that nontraditional students believe the institution has a role in asking students to get involved rather than students proactively engaging in campus life. According to Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2001), nontraditional students must manage the interaction of their primary culture with that of the majority culture on campus. Therefore, Rendón et al. (2001) suggest that more research is needed to understand how aspects of students' primary culture such as race, socioeconomic status, gender and other issues play out for nontraditional college students, particularly those on nontraditional pathways to higher education including transfer between institutions. As noted by Yin (2014), these types of "how" questions are best understood through qualitative methods.

The common thread between the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005), regardless of

the student population to which they are applied, is the experiences of students in higher education institutions. These experiences are both academic and social. Students' academic and social experiences both inside and outside the classroom contribute to their understanding of the institution and themselves within the institution. Students who transfer from community and technical colleges to nonprofit four-year institutions have academic and social experiences at both institutions. Through the process of transferring from one institution to the other these students have academic and social experiences that affect their understanding of themselves and of the institutions of higher education.

In the next section, applications of the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005) in higher education research will be reviewed. The application of these theories leaves research open to many of the critiques outlined above including imbalance in student versus institutional roles and measurement limitations. Analysis of experiences, both academic and social, is the lens through which the current study will examine students who transfer from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year institutions. Application of this broad perspective can help to mitigate some of the challenges inherent to previously applied theories.

Application of Theory

Applying an early version of Tinto's (1975) model of student attrition, Chapman and Pascarella (1983) found that students' academic and social integration into the institution varies significantly based on institutional type. Students at liberal arts colleges are most likely to be integrated academically into the institution, while commuter

students at four-year institutions and students at two-year institutions were found to be the least academically integrated (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983). Chapman and Pascarella (1983) also found that some personal characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, are positively related to social integration to the institution. Minority status, socioeconomic disadvantage, and status as a first generation college student can impact the social and academic transition for students, particularly for Black and Hispanic students (Fischer, 2007). Although Fischer (2007) found that academic connections were not strongly related to student satisfaction with their transition to college, formal social connections were found to have a positive impact on academic performance for Black, Asian, and Hispanic students but not for White students. Students with different characteristics and at different types of institutions exhibit different levels of academic and social integration.

As Kuh et al. (2008) found, student engagement in educationally purposeful activities, such as asking questions in class, communicating with an instructor outside of class, or joining study groups, has a positive effect on student GPA and persistence between the first and second year regardless of students' racial or ethnic background. While transfer status has a negative effect on persistence, the positive effects of engagement on academic outcomes are greater for students with lower abilities and students of color when compared to White students (Kuh et al., 2008). As many public two-year higher education institutions serve students from these populations it is important that these institutions pay special attention to programming that encourages these students to engage in educationally purposeful activities. Having these types of

academic and social experiences will benefit the student at both the two-year and four-year institution.

Berger and Milem (1999) examined the direct and indirect effects of student involvement and integration as they relate to persistence in four-year college and university students in general. In addition to the impact of gender, high school, and family background, Berger and Milem (1999) also found that student involvement during the fall term was a strong predictor of their involvement during the spring term.

According to Berger and Milem (1999), students who did not get involved early in the fall semester were less likely to persist. Moreover, Berger and Milem (1999) found that students who persist share values, norms, and patterns of behavior in line with those prevailing on campus.

Academic integration and experiences with faculty contribute to community college student persistence. According to Barnett (2011) faculty validation experiences and academic integration were both found to be strong predictors of community college student persistence. While Barnett (2011) found that academic integration had a direct effect on student persistence, the effect of faculty validation on persistence was indirect. Persistence, faculty experiences, and academic integration are particularly salient to the experiences of students transferring from public two-year postsecondary institutions. These students must persist at both the community or technical college and baccalaureate degree levels. Additionally, these students have experiences with faculty and academic integration at both the community or technical college and four-year institution which influence their overall persistence.

Ishitani and McKittrick (2010) investigated how community college students who transfer to four-year institutions integrate both socially and academically to the receiving institution. Data was collected from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) for this study which analyzed responses of 535 seniors at a doctoral-intensive university with total enrollment of approximately 11,000 students, with about 700 transfer students being admitted to this institution annually. Ishitani and McKittrick's (2010) sample included 417 native students and 118 transfer students from community colleges. Using regression analysis, Ishitani and McKittrick (2010) created a model that used variables such as gender, ethnicity, age, parent's education, matriculation timing, enrollment status, and GPA to predict native and community college transfer students' scores on the selected NSSE benchmarks. Ishitani and McKittrick's (2010) findings were consistent with their hypothesis that community college transfer students were less likely to be engaged at the four-year institution, although timing of transfer was found to be a moderating factor.

Synthesis of Application of Theory

Research applying the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), engagement (Kuh, 2001), and integration (Tinto, 1993) to traditional college students has confirmed much of what these theories posit. Kuh et al. (2008) found that engaging in educationally purposeful activities has a positive impact on student persistence and academic performance. While Berger and Milem (1999) found that lack of involvement in these types of activities has negative effects on student persistence. Similarly, Barnett (2011) found that faculty members play a key role in validating the experiences of students in

ways that are critical to student persistence and performance.

When the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), engagement (Kuh, 2001), and integration (Tinto, 1993) are applied to special and nontraditional student populations the results differ. For example, Chapman and Pascarella (1983) found that integration (Tinto, 1993) varies by institutional type and by students' socioeconomic status. Minority status was also found by Fischer (2007) to have an effect on students' perception of their transition to college. And, Ishitani and McKitrick (2010) found that community college students were less likely to be engaged in educationally purposeful activities after transferring to four-year higher education institutions.

As noted by Guiffrida (2003) and Rendón (1994), theories such as involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), engagement (Kuh, 2001), and integration (Tinto, 1993) have different implications when applied to populations other than traditional college students.

Although some research outlined in the previous section has included special and nontraditional student populations (Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Fischer, 2007; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010), this research offers limited information about how the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), engagement (Kuh, 2001), and integration (Tinto, 1993) should be applied to nontraditional populations. Quantitative research such as that of Berger and Millem (1999), Barnett (2011), Chapman and Pascarella (1983), Fischer (2007), and Ishitani and McKitrick (2010) can identify that differences in outcomes related to involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), engagement (Kuh, 2001), and integration (Tinto, 1993) exist for students with different personal characteristics and attending various institutional types. However, qualitative research is needed to gain insight into

how students experience these differences.

Research Gap

Student characteristics, institutional factors, as well as students' academic and social experiences contribute to the transfer process for students transferring from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year institutions. Student and institution level attributes impact the experience of these students. The impact of these attributes on the experiences of students at public two-year postsecondary institutions, including those transferring to public nonprofit four-year institutions, has been studied extensively. But, there is a research gap in the literature on the experiences of students transferring from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year institutions.

According to Cox (2009) community college students perceive their degree attainment as integral to the achievement of their long-term professional goals. As noted by Cox (2009), community college students are often balancing school and work responsibilities, putting their intention for obtaining the degree (career advancement) in conflict with their current financial and work obligations. There is a desire amongst community college students to earn a career-advancing credential in as an efficient a manner as possible; however, sometimes students forgo matching their coursework with career goals in order to achieve maximum efficiency in time to degree (Cox, 2009). This is problematic for community college students, in particular those who want or need to transfer to four-year institutions. According to Cox (2009), many community college students earn credentials with few transferable credits even though their ultimate career goal requires baccalaureate degree attainment.

Crisp (2010) studied the impact of mentoring, social and academic integration, as well as institutional and goal commitment on community college student persistence. Amongst community college students, gender was found to be a key predictor of the mentoring experience, with women perceiving greater gains from the mentoring experience than men (Crisp, 2010). Majority and non-Asian students perceived similar levels of psychological, degree and career, academic, and role model support from the mentoring experience (Crisp, 2010). Of particular note is that part-time students perceive more mentoring support than full time students (Crisp, 2010). These findings are significant because they provide evidence that academic and social experience can encourage student success, particularly at the community college level.

Townsend and Wilson (2006) studied the perceptions that community college transfer students have about institutional factors that played a role in their transfer process and adjustment to the receiving institution. Townsend and Wilson (2006) concluded that cultural and structural differences between the community college and university play a large role in community college students' perceptions of the transfer process. Community college transfer students need more support for academic and social integration at the receiving institution as well as additional support from the community college regarding the transfer process (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Townsend and Wilson's (2006) study prioritizes the role of the institution over the role of the student in the transfer process.

Lester et al. (2013) also approached the subject of community college transfer student engagement at the four-year institution. Lester et al. (2013) sought to shed light

on how transfer students perceive and experience social and academic engagement at a public four-year institution. Lester et al. (2013) conducted interviews with 31 transfer students at a public nonprofit university in the Mid-Atlantic. While some participants were engaged in social activities (clubs, residence halls, Greek organizations) on campus, most participants in the study described family and friends and off-campus community organizations as their primary means of social engagement. According to Lester et al. (2013) the participants found social engagement activities to be learning opportunities. Participants described academic engagement as "strict focus on academic activities that include meaningful connections with faculty members as well as academic challenge and learning"(Lester et al., 2013, p. 214). Although participants in the Lester et al. (2013) study did not consider attending faculty office hours or communicating with faculty via email to be forms of engagement, participants did consider faculty feedback on assignments to be academically engaging. According to Lester et al. (2013) participants tended to prioritize academically engaging activities over socially engaging activities, citing the latter as potentially distracting and not central to their purpose at the institution. Academic rigor and challenge were also found by Lester et al. (2013) to contribute to the transfer students' sense of belonging at the institution. Although Lester et al. (2013) place more emphasis on the role of the student in the transfer process than Townsend and Wilson (2006), the role of the student is viewed in terms of how the student perceives the institution academically and socially.

While studies such as those of Cox (2009), Crisp (2010), Lester et al. (2013), and Townsend and Wilson (2006) contribute to the understanding of the experiences of

community college students who transfer to four-year institutions, these studies only provide a partial picture. Another important part of the picture is comprised of the experiences of community college students who transfer to private nonprofit four-year institutions. As found by Eide et al. (1998) earning an undergraduate degree from a private nonprofit higher education institution positively impacts the likelihood that students will attend graduate school at a major research university. Other researchers such as Fox (1993) have found that the rate of return on the investment in private nonprofit four-year education is comparable, if not greater, than that of public nonprofit four-year education. These are just some of the reasons that it is important to understand the experiences of community college students who transfer to private nonprofit four-year institutions. The current study attempts to fill this gap in the literature by providing information about the academic and social experiences of students transferring from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year institutions. This study will add to the current literature regarding community college transfer students by exploring these students' academic and social experiences throughout the transfer process. The study will take an integrationist approach (Tinto, 1993) to the participants' involvement (Astin, 1984/1999) and engagement (Kuh, 2001) in academic and social activities. Integration (Tinto, 1993) is salient to the analysis of the academic and social experiences of students transferring from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit universities because this theory of student departure relates to why students decide to leave a postsecondary institution. Students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit universities make a decision to depart the two-year institution and a

decision to attend the private nonprofit university. The aspect of student departure central to Tinto's (1993) theory of integration adds important nuance to the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999) and engagement (Kuh, 2001) when analyzing the academic and social experiences of students who transfer from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year postsecondary institutions.

Conclusion

The experience of community college students who transfer to four-year institutions is multifaceted. Student characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race, degree expectations, educational and career aspirations comprise a critical component of this experience (Dowd et al., 2008; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Wang, 2010; Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006). Institutional factors such as transfer student enrollment levels, articulation and transfer agreements, as well as explicit and implicit structural, cultural, and environmental conditions also contribute to the experience of these students (Dowd et al., 2008; Cheslock, 2005; Morpew et al., 2001; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Shaw & London, 2001). Researchers have applied the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al. 2005) to studies focusing on community college students transferring to four-year institutions. While these theories acknowledge a student component, the emphasis of these theories is the institutional role in involving, integrating, and engaging. As noted by Townsend and Wilson (2006), cultural and structural differences between the community colleges and universities influence community college students' perceptions of the transfer process making them desire more support for academic and social integration at both institutions

throughout the transfer process. Lester et al. (2013) provided information about the ways in which community college students transferring to a public four-year institution experience academically and socially engaging activities. The current study attempts to fill the gap in the literature related to the experiences of community college students transferring to private rather than public nonprofit four-year institutions. The study analyzes the academic and social experiences of these students throughout the transfer process.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

A critique of the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), engagement (Kuh, 2001) and integration (Tinto, 1993) is that these theories overemphasize the role that institutions play in how the constructs manifest on campuses (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Also, the theories have been applied primarily in the study of traditional undergraduate students. Although some researchers have extended these theories to specific student populations, for example minority students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Guiffrida, 2003) and culturally diverse student populations (Rendón, 1994), many of the studies applying these theories focus on traditional college students. Transfer students, in particular those that transfer from public two-year to four-year institutions, do not fit the mold of traditional college students. Therefore, further study is warranted to better understand the application of constructs related to the theories in the experiences of these transfer students.

Chapter 2 outlined the research on students who transfer from community and technical colleges of higher education to other postsecondary institutions. Specifically, the literature highlights student characteristics and institutional factors as well as the impact of transfer student status on overall educational attainment. Although the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001) are applied in the literature to the experiences of students who transfer to public four-year institutions (Barnett, 2011; Berger & Milem, 1999; Crisp, 2010; Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010; Kuh et al., 2008; Lester et al., 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006), there is a dearth of research on the experiences of students transferring from community and

technical colleges to private nonprofit institutions. The rising cost of higher education (College Board, 2012a) and the benefits of earning a baccalaureate degree from a private institution (Eide et al., 1998; Fox, 1993; Kingston & Smart, 1990) make the public two-year to private nonprofit four-year institution transfer pathway one worthy of study.

As noted by Creswell (2013), qualitative research seeks to create knowledge from the study of individual experiences. Therefore, to gain a better understanding of the experiences of students who transfer from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year institutions qualitative research was an appropriate approach. This chapter will outline the methods of qualitative inquiry that were employed in the study to answer the research questions.

Epistemology

The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the experiences of students who transfer from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year postsecondary institutions. To achieve this end the researcher needed to involve the participants in the research to understand their perspectives. Because the goal of the current study was to understand, what Guba and Lincoln (1994) identify as constructivism was an appropriate epistemology for the research. Constructivism as defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994) is a subjectivist epistemology that accounts for the interaction between the researcher and the participants. Crotty (1998) offers a more nuanced version of this interpretive epistemology.

In particular, what Crotty (1998) terms social constructionism was the appropriate epistemology for the current study. Social constructionism is similar to what Guba and

Lincoln (1994) term constructivism, however, a key distinction drawn by Crotty (1998) is an emphasis on meaning-making as an individual experience in constructivism versus a collective activity in social constructionism. Like constructivists, social constructionists believe individuals construct knowledge and meaning from the context of the situations and from their own past knowledge and experiences. As noted by Crotty (1998), social constructionists do not believe “there is [an] objective truth waiting for us to discover it, [but rather] truth, or meaning, come into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities of the world” (p. 8).

Social constructionism related to the purpose of this study because it “emphasizes the hold that our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 58). This approach was appropriate given the purpose of the current study: to learn about the academic and social experiences of students transferring from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year postsecondary institutions. Academic and social experiences do not occur in a vacuum but rather are functions of individuals’ interactions with each other and with their environment (Kuh et al., 2005). Social constructionism allows for these interactions to be explored in ways that could not be achieved in the same way through other epistemological approaches. As noted by Guba and Lincoln (1994), “human behavior, unlike that of physical objects, cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities” (p. 106). Social constructionism, unlike objectivist epistemologies, allows for each individual involved in the research to be a participant and to make meaning of the

knowledge generated by the research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As a social constructionist, the researcher participates in the research just as much as the individuals being interviewed or observed.

This social constructionist epistemological perspective informed the methodology of the current study. For this study, 20 individuals who transferred from public two-year postsecondary institutions to a private nonprofit university were interviewed. The method of interviewing participants was in line with the “interactive nature of the inquirer-inquired into dyad” inherent in research with a social constructionist epistemological perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.107). As a social constructionist, the participant-researcher interacted with the participants in the study who had the experience of transferring from public two-year postsecondary institutions to the private nonprofit university. Through this interaction the participant-researcher reconstructed the meaning that the participants made of their experiences by constructing meaning from what was conveyed about the experiences during the interview. The participant-researcher did this through analysis of interview transcripts and identification of themes. This hermeneutical methodology is, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), in line with a subjectivist or social constructionist epistemology.

Conceptual Framework

The theories guiding the study were involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005). None of these theories on its own provided an appropriate lens through which to analyze the experiences of students transferring from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year institutions.

Each of these theories incorporates institutional and student aspects. Involvement (Astin, 1984/1999) is a time on task theory, which equates the amount of energy expended by a student in educationally purposeful activities to the amount that a student gets out of their college education both academically and socially. Integration (Tinto, 1993) is a theory used to understand why students voluntarily depart an institution. Tinto's (1993) integration theory centers on the level of acculturation to an institution's norms, values, and attitudes contributing to a student's decision to leave a higher education institution. Engagement, a theory put forth by Kuh (2001), is used to help institutions better understand what can be done to increase the amount of energy students put toward educationally purposeful activities.

Involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993) and engagement (Kuh, 2001) emphasize institutional aspects over student level factors in ways that were not appropriate for the current study which focused on the student experience (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Also, the population of the study was transfer students from community and technical colleges attending a private nonprofit university. This population did not meet the criteria of traditional college students typically studied using the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993) and engagement (Kuh, 2001). Therefore, the study applied a conceptual framework that used student-level aspects of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005) to analyze the academic and social experiences of students transferring from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit four-year institutions. This

conceptual framework enabled the researcher to explore student-level constructs without providing unnecessary exploration of institutional factors contributing to these constructs.

Problem Statement

The cost of achieving higher levels of education beyond secondary school is on the rise. According to the College Board (2012a), tuition and fees and room and board charges have increased by more than 25 percent in some segments of postsecondary education. The cost of attendance at institutions in various segments of postsecondary education is disparate. At community and technical colleges, in-state students in 2012-2013 paid an average of \$3,131 per year for full-time enrollment (College Board, 2012a). At private non-profit four-year institutions, students in 2012-2013 paid an average of \$29,056 for full-time enrollment (College Board, 2012a). Despite the high cost, earning an undergraduate degree from a private nonprofit institution has benefits such as positive effects on students' likelihood of attending graduate school and earning a professional degree or credential (Eide et al., 1998; Kingston & Smart, 1990). These benefits may be unattainable for many students who cannot afford to pay the high cost of tuition for four years of attendance at a private institution.

Completing at least some postsecondary education at a community or technical college can reduce the cost of earning a bachelor's degree. Transferring from a community or technical college to a private nonprofit institution can be a more cost-effective means of attaining the benefits of a bachelor's degree from a private nonprofit institution. Therefore, the use of a community or technical college to private nonprofit four-year institution transfer pathway to baccalaureate degree attainment must be

explored. Higher education practitioners and policymakers will benefit from increased understanding of the experiences of students who utilize this pathway.

Methodological Approach

The study followed Merriam's (2009) basic interpretive qualitative design. A sample of 20 participants was recruited for the study. Semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant. Each interview was audio recorded. Upon completion of each interview, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings. The researcher reviewed and coded each interview transcript (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Saldaña, 2013). Between case and within-case analysis was conducted by the researcher to develop themes emergent from the data (Creswell, 2013). The researcher employed many of Merriam's (2009) methods of ensuring the validity of data collection and analysis including keeping an audit trail, member checks, and data saturation.

Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to learn about how students who transferred from community and technical colleges to a private four-year research university experienced the transfer process at both institutions. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. How do students who transfer from community and technical colleges to a private nonprofit university describe and understand the transfer process?
2. How do these students describe their academic experiences at each institution?
3. How do these students describe their social experiences at each institution?

Methodology

Site of Research

The site of the study was a large, private, nonprofit, four-year research university in a major city on the East Coast. Convenience was the primary rationale for selecting this site. The metropolitan area in which the university is located is home to a number of highly ranked community college systems. The city in which the university is located draws individuals to it from around the United States and the globe for its cultural and economic diversity. While other private colleges and universities are located in the city, the site of research was selected because with approximately 10,000 undergraduates it has the largest undergraduate student population of any public or private college or university in the city. The university has almost 350 new transfer students each year from over 300 different two-year and four-year postsecondary institutions. The university is located in the downtown area of the city. The campus of the university is almost seamlessly integrated with office buildings and residences in the neighborhood. Many of the students at the university live or work off-campus. Involvement is highly valued at the university, which has over 250 registered student organizations. Holding internships is very common amongst the undergraduate population at the university. Many students complete internships in areas of the city that are not adjacent to the neighborhood in which the university is located. The university also emphasizes public service and civic engagement. Students conduct service projects throughout the city. The integration of the campus into the surrounding city and the culture of interning and community engagement mean that student life at the university is not bound by the

physical confines of the institution. Students at the university have academic and social experiences throughout the city as well as on the university campus.

Sample

The sampling procedure followed the purposeful model (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). With permission of the institution's Office of Academic Planning and Assessment and Office of Survey Research and Analysis, the researcher acquired a list of the names, email addresses, and phone numbers of currently enrolled undergraduate students who transferred to the institution from a community or technical college. A total of 160 individuals were included on the list. Using a random number generator the researcher assigned each individual on the list a random number. The researcher then sorted the list of potential participants by the assigned random number. The researcher then divided the list into three groups. Groups 1 and 2 each consisted of 53 potential participants. Group 3 consisted of 54 potential participants.

The researcher contacted all of the potential participants in Group 1 using the email format included in Appendix A. After one week had passed, a follow-up email, included in Appendix B, was sent to potential participants from Group 1 who had not responded to the original message. Using the email format included in Appendix A the researcher concomitantly contacted potential participants from Group 2. After one week had passed, a follow-up email (Appendix B) was sent to potential participants from Group 2 who had not responded to the original message. Data collection began as soon as the first participant was recruited to the study. As suggested by Merriam (2009), the number of participants included the final sample may vary depending on when data

saturation, or the point of maximum understanding of the phenomenon, is reached. In the current study data saturation (Merriam, 2009) was achieved prior to completion of initial and follow-up contacts with individuals in Groups 1 and 2. Therefore individuals from Group3 were not contacted by the researcher. Participants who volunteered for the study were sent a reminder email with the interview time, date, and location using the format included in Appendix C.

A sample of 23 participants was initially recruited to participate in the study. Three of the participants recruited for the study did not meet the selection criteria. The data for these participants was eliminated from the sample. The final sample for the study was 20 participants. This sample size is in line with the samples sizes suggested by qualitative research methodologists such as Creswell (2013) and Merriam (2009). In order to be included in the sample, participants had to meet all of the following criteria:

- Be a currently enrolled undergraduate student at the university,
- Be 18 years of age or older,
- Completed at least one semester at a community or technical college prior to transferring to the university.

The rationale for selecting these criteria was to include as many students as possible that attended community or technical colleges as a pathway to a four-year institution to ensure a diversity of experiences within the sample. Incidentally, the participants recruited for the study only attended community colleges rather than technical colleges. Therefore, only community colleges will be referenced in the findings and discussion of this document.

Table 1

Participant information

Pseudonym	Age	Gender Identity	Location of Community College	Associate's Degree Earned	Major at PU	Family's Highest Level of Education
Adam	20	Male	Non-Local	No	Arts & Sciences	Master's degree
Amanda	23	Female	Non-Local	Yes	International Relations	Bachelor's degree
Angela	28	Female	Non-Local	Yes	History	Bachelor's degree
Anthony	38	Male	Non-Local	Yes	International Relations	Unknown
Antoinette	23	Female	Non-Local	Yes	Criminal Justice	Master's degree
Carl	22	Male	Local	Yes	Computer Science	High School
Chloe	20	Female	Non-Local	Yes	Organizational Sciences	Master's degree
George	29	Male	Non-Local	No	International Relations	Bachelor's degree
Iris	20	Female	Local	No	Political Science	Master's degree
Jake	26	Male	Local	Yes	Accounting	Master's degree
James	23	Male	Non-Local	No	Biology	JD
Joe	24	Male	Local	No	Finance	LLM
June	25	Female	Local	Yes	International Relations	High School
Kandace	26	Female	Local	Yes	Speech & Hearing	Master's degree
Kim	26	Female	Local	Yes	Biology	High School
Melissa	22	Female	Non-Local	Yes	International Relations	PhD, JD
Mike	26	Male	Non-Local	Yes	Computer Science	PhD, MD
Rachel	21	Female	Local	No	International Relations	Bachelor's degree
Rebecca	23	Female	Local	Yes	Accounting	Master's degree
Ross	21	Male	Non-Local	No	International Relations	Pharm.D.

Table 2

Summary of sample

Proximity of Community College to PU	Community or Technical College	Self-Identified Immigration Status	Racial Identity
9 Local	20 Community College	12 Domestic	7 White/Caucasian
11 Non-Local	0 Technical College	8 International	3 Black/African/African American 3 Asian/Pacific Islander 1 South Asian 3 Hispanic/Latino 1 Multiracial 1 Other

Data Collection

Interviews. The study followed Merriam's (2009) basic interpretive qualitative research design. The primary data collection method for this study was interviews. As noted by Merriam (2009), "interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe the behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (p. 88). Therefore, when events, behavior, or phenomena occurred in the past, interviewing is an appropriate technique to employ. Merriam (2009) indicates that when "we are interested in past events that are impossible to replicate" (p. 88) interviews can be used to capture information about these events. This was the case with the research topic and purpose of the current study. It is also difficult to pinpoint one specific time and place in which students have academic and social experiences, making observation of the phenomenon difficult to achieve. Therefore, interviews were an appropriate way to learn about the

academic and social experiences of these students at the private university, even as these experiences were occurring.

A 60 minute, semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interview was conducted with each participant. As noted by Merriam (2009), a "decision to use interviewing as the primary mode of data collection should be based on the kind of information needed and whether interviewing is the best way to get it" (p. 88). Although interviews are subject to bias and reflexivity, the ability of this data source to focus directly on the topic of interest and provide information about participants' "perceptions, attitudes, and meanings" outweighs these potential weaknesses (Yin, 2014, p. 106). Therefore interviews were selected as the method of data collection. Interviews allowed the researcher to gain insight into the participants' experience of the phenomenon of transferring from community and technical colleges to a private nonprofit university.

The semi-structured interview format was selected because of the flexibility it provides to probe and retrieve more detailed information from participants (Mack et al., 2009). As noted by de Leeuw (2008), the face-to-face interview format allows for the researcher and participant to exchange both aural and visual communication cues. It is these nonverbal cues that Dillman (2008) suggests are critical to maximizing the participant's understanding of the interview questions. If a participant indicates verbally or non-verbally that the question is unclear, the semi-structured, face-to-face interview format allows for the researcher to clarify or restate the question.

Interviews were conducted in spaces such as conference rooms, classrooms, and lounges at the site of research that were mutually agreed upon by the researcher and

participants. The space selected for the interview provided the privacy and quiet necessary to protect participants' anonymity while not requiring participants to go off-campus. Upon completion of the interview, each participant received a \$5 coffee gift card from the researcher as a token of appreciation for his or her participation.

The interview protocol for the current study is included in Appendix D. As suggested by Dillman (2008), the initial questions of the interview protocol were designed to draw the participant in without being overly intrusive. These warm-up questions were followed by the core set of questions regarding the participant's academic and social experiences and the transfer process at the community or technical college and the private nonprofit university. After giving the participant an opportunity to add any additional information not captured by the researcher's questions, the participant was asked to share some demographic information including age, gender identity, racial identity, and family background. The researcher digitally recorded the audio of each interview.

The study was concerned with the experiences of students who transferred from community and technical colleges to a private nonprofit four-year institution. At the time of data many aspects of these experiences occurred in the past. The participants had already had academic and social experiences at the community or technical college and had already experienced transferring to the private university. Because these aspects happened in the past, interviewing was the best way to capture information about these phenomena, events, and behaviors. While participants in the research were in the process of having academic and social experiences at the private university, the nature of these

experiences are such that other modes of data collection, such as field observation, would be inferior to interviewing. The questions in the interview protocol were structured in such a way as to encourage participants to reflect on their past experiences and think about experiences they may currently be having. Through this process the researcher attempted to capture both past and present experiences and sense making.

Pilot interview. A pilot interview was conducted by the researcher with an individual who met the criteria but was not an ideal candidate for the study due to impending graduation from the institution prior to the time of data collection. The goal of the pilot interview was to test the interview questions and data collection methods for accuracy and effectiveness. According to Maxwell (2013) and Creswell (2013), it is important to conduct a pilot test before collecting qualitative interview data. Through the pilot interview for the study the researcher confirmed the veracity of certain aspects of the research design and learned about areas to improve the interview protocol.

Upon completion of the pilot interview the order of the questions in the interview protocol was confirmed as appropriate. Questions 1 and 2 (see Appendix D) allowed the individual to warm-up before getting into the core questions that require more thought and recall. Also, the 60-minute timeframe estimated for the interview was confirmed as sufficient. The individual was able to provide full responses to all of the researcher's questions during the allotted time.

Some elements of the interview protocol were changed based on the pilot interview. For example, the researcher rephrased some of the questions to have a more conversational tone and to include fewer technical terms such as "public-two year

institution.” Also, the researcher decided to incorporate some previously identified probes into the actual interview questions. By conducting the pilot interview the researcher was able to fine-tune the interview protocol to maximize its effectiveness in addressing the research questions.

Data Management

The researcher used Merriam’s (2009) suggested methods of data management in the current study. Digital files of audio recordings, transcripts, memos, and field notes of each interview were created and coded with a file name that anonymously matched it to the appropriate interview. An inventory of these files was kept in a spreadsheet on the researcher’s password-protected computer. One digital copy of these files as well as the inventory spreadsheet was saved on a password-protected USB drive in a locked drawer in the researcher’s desk. This served as the backup file for safekeeping. Another digital copy of these files was uploaded to the Atlas TI data management and analysis software program on the researcher’s computer.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interview, the audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher. Transcription of each audio recording provided a written document of what transpired in the interview. The transcripts were reviewed and coded using Coffey and Atkinson’s (1996) method in which both inductive and deductive codes were identified. According to Saldaña (2013), a code is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based...data” (p. 3). Coding was therefore an appropriate means to begin data

analysis in the study. Inductive codes were derived from the words used by the participants. Deductive codes were developed through the lens of the conceptual framework. Inductive coding was completed prior to deductive coding. First, the data was coded applying Creswell's (2013) method of open coding in which broad classifications of codes are created. Based on the open coding of the data, the researcher employed axial coding by selecting open codes to serve as the main phenomena and recoding the data with categories related to these phenomena (Creswell, 2013).

As noted by Saldaña (2013), "coding is only the initial step toward an even more rigorous and evocative analysis and interpretation" (p. 8). The next step in the data analysis process was to develop themes based on codes that answered the research questions (Saldaña, 2013). To develop themes, the researcher used both within-case and cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2013). Through within-case analysis, the researcher analyzed and interpreted each participant's responses to the interview questions individually. Within-case analysis allowed the researcher to understand each participant's experiences separate from the sample. By first completing within-case analysis, the researcher was equipped with deep knowledge of each participant's experience with the phenomena of study prior to beginning cross-case analysis. Through cross-case analysis, the researcher compared responses to the interview questions across participants in the sample. This cross-case analysis provided the researcher with an understanding of how the phenomena were represented throughout the sample. Cross-case analysis contributed to the researcher's development of themes that cut across the data from the sample and answered the research questions.

Memos were another important source of data collection and analysis for the current study. Using memos, the researcher documented his perceptions and reflections about the circumstances of each interview. Upon completion of the interview, the researcher took time to reflect on how the interview went as well as what was noticed about the participants' attitude and demeanor. The researcher also began to make sense of the content of each interview through the process of memo writing (Saldaña, 2013). When all of the interviews were completed, these memos were a valuable resource during data analysis providing context for the interviews and the progression of the researcher's thinking during the data collection process.

Data Presentation

Data in the study is presented using Merriam's (2009) narrative analysis format. In the narrative analysis of the data, themes identified through the analysis are described at length including exemplar excerpts from the interview transcripts. As noted by Merriam (2009), exemplar excerpts are a critical component of narrative analysis which "uses the stories people tell, analyzing them in various ways, to understand the meaning of the experiences as revealed in the story" (p. 23). For each theme identified, the researcher uses long quotations from the participants to demonstrate how the theme answers the research questions. Long quotations from the participants and rich description of the interview context from the researcher create the narrative. Quotations from various participants are organized in a way that demonstrates to the reader how the participants' responses form a theme. In conjunction with the researcher's rich description of the interviews, the reader will be able to understand how the participants'

words and the research context contribute to the particular theme. The researcher interpreted the narrative through the lens of the conceptual framework described in the literature review and summarized previously in this chapter. Specifically, the researcher analyzed the academic and social experiences of the participants to determine if connections were made between these types of experiences throughout the transfer process. Although the researcher used the conceptual framework to guide data analysis, the researcher allowed the data to lead to interpretations outside this framework, if appropriate.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a means of validating qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). As noted by Merriam (2009), there are many means by which to increase the validity of qualitative research findings. In the current study, multiple techniques were utilized to ensure trustworthiness of data collection and analysis.

An audit trail was kept outlining each step taken by the researcher during the data collection and analysis phases of the research project (Merriam, 2009). The researcher documented each step in the data collection and analysis processes. Creation of this audit trail assisted the researcher in accurately documenting the research process. An accurate written description of the data collection and analysis processes will enable other researchers to apply the researcher's methods in future studies of similar contexts.

The researcher also used Merriam's (2009) trustworthiness techniques of member checks and respondent validation of the data collected. The researcher provided participants with copies of the verbatim transcripts to ensure accurate representation of

the data. Participants were given 7 days to read the transcripts and provide any feedback or changes to the researcher. No response from the participant within 7 days indicated that the participant validates the data in the transcript. While a few of the participants affirmatively indicated to the researcher that the data was accurate most participants did not respond to the request. In addition to participant validation of the raw data, the researcher sought participant validation of the data analysis. To this end, the researcher provided participants with the written draft of at least one theme emergent from the data analysis. As noted by Johnson (1997), interpretive validity is increased “by sharing your interpretations of participants' viewpoints with the participants and other members of the group [to] clear up areas of miscommunication” (p. 285). After preliminary data analysis a written theme was provided by the researcher to participants. Participants were allowed 7 days to respond to the researcher with feedback about the written theme. If the participant responded with feedback in the 7-day timeframe, the researcher would consider whether changes to the theme are warranted. If the participant did not respond with feedback in the 7-day timeframe, the researcher considered this as participant validation of the written theme. Only one participant responded with positive feedback confirming the analysis in the themes. The researcher also recruited fellow researchers familiar with the theories of the conceptual framework to verify the voracity of the data coding. The researcher provided each individual with an interview transcript to code independently. Upon completion of the independent coding the researcher conferred with each individual to verify that the coding was appropriate. While the specific codes varied

amongst individuals, the concepts and constructs identified by the codes were the same among all three individuals.

Finally, data was collected until the point of data saturation was reached (Merriam, 2009). Data saturation was reached when after 20 interviews no new information was contributed by adding additional participants to the sample. Reaching the point of data saturation increased trustworthiness because the researcher had drawn out all of the information about the phenomenon available from the sample.

Employing the aforementioned trustworthiness techniques increased the validity of the research findings of the study. Increasing the validity of qualitative research findings increases what Merriam (2009) terms the transferability, reliability, confirmability, and credibility of these findings. Transferability, according to Merriam (2009), is the ability to apply the research findings in other contexts. While it is virtually impossible to replicate the context of a qualitative study, it is possible to find other settings with similar contextual factors. Use of multiple trustworthiness techniques increases the likelihood that the findings of the current study can be applied in other contexts. Reliability and credibility, according to Merriam (2009), refer to the ability for the reader to rely on the accuracy of the research findings. These aspects of trustworthiness were increased in the current study through the use of member checks and participant validation (Johnson, 1997; Merriam, 2009). Finally, the confirmability (Merriam, 2009) of the results of the study was increased by the researcher's use of an audit trail outlining the step-by-step methods of data collection and analysis. Other

researchers will be able to follow these steps to reach similar results in other similar contexts.

Limitations

Although multiple trustworthiness techniques were employed to increase the validity of the findings of the current study, this research is not without limitations. The limitations outlined here do not invalidate the potential findings of the current study. These limitations are not uncommon in qualitative research. Using the trustworthiness techniques outlined in the previous section, the researcher attempted to mitigate the limitations of the current study.

Context was the primary limitation of this study. Because the study was conducted at one university, the results are not generalizable to the population. While the participants were all be students at one university, many of them transferred from different community colleges. This diversity of experiences was a limitation of the study because the characteristics of each of the participant's community college may have been different. While this limitation could not be eliminated, the effects of this limitation were mitigated by conducting both within-case and cross-case analysis (Maxwell, 2013). These methods of analysis allowed the researcher to verify identified themes by comparing responses within each case and across the responses of all participants.

A secondary limitation of this study was researcher bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher's personal knowledge of community college students who have transferred to a private nonprofit university as well as his professional experience at both types of institutions created a link between the researcher and the participants. This link

may have influenced the researcher's interpretation of the data. Also, the researcher may have been less inclined to probe participants regarding some of their responses about topics with which the researcher may be familiar. The limitation of researcher bias and reactivity was mitigated by collecting what Maxwell (2013) calls rich data. By retrieving in-depth responses from participants and probing for more information, even when the researcher was familiar with the topic, the impact of the researcher's subjectivity in the research findings was diminished.

Another limitation of the study was that other phenomena that were not explored in the current study may have had an impact on the results. For example, students who choose to transfer from community colleges to private four-year nonprofit institutions may share similar characteristics that predisposed them to participate in the transfer process. Likewise, students who volunteered for the current study may share similar characteristics that made them more inclined to participate in this research. It is impossible to understand or account for every construct that might influence the phenomenon of study making this a limitation of the current study.

The sample for the study was not a precise cross-section of the population of community college students in the United States. As compared to the demographics of the population of community college students presented in Table 3 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015), the sample for the current study was more or less representative of the population in terms of gender and age. Females accounted for 55% of the sample and males accounted for 45% of the sample. The average age of individuals in the sample was 24, the same as the median age of the population. But,

international students were overrepresented in the sample and first generation college students were underrepresented in the study. Socioeconomic status was not used as an identifying characteristic of individuals in the sample; however, if parents' highest level of education is used as a proxy for socioeconomic status it stands to reason that individuals of lower socioeconomic status were also underrepresented in the sample for this study.

Table 3
Summary of community college population

Age	Gender	Racial Identity	Immigration Status	Family Education History
Average 28	Women 57%	White 50%	Domestic 93%	At least some college 64%
Median 24	Men 43%	Hispanic 21%	International 7%	First generation to attend college 36%
		Black 14%		
		Asian/Pacific Islander 6%		
		Native American 1%		
		2 or more races 3%		
		Other/Unknown 4%		
		Nonresident Alien 1%		

Source: American Association of Community Colleges, 2015

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide valuable information about the experiences of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit universities. While the results are not generalizable to all transfer

students from community and technical colleges at all universities, the results are transferable to some of these students at some institutions.

Researcher Subjectivity Statement

Maxwell (2013) cites attention to a researcher's possible biases as an essential component of qualitative research. In addition to influencing topic selection, researcher bias influences researcher writing (Creswell, 2013).

My own professional experience in higher education administration provided motivation for engaging in this research. As a former student affairs practitioner at a community college, I have known numerous community college students who went on to transfer to four-year institutions. Many of these students transferred to public institutions. But others transferred to private institutions around the country. When I left the community college to work at a private nonprofit four-year institution two students with whom I had worked closely through co-curricular activities at the community college transferred to that very same private nonprofit four-year institution.

As an alumnus of a private nonprofit four-year institution myself, the concept of community college students transferring to private four-year institutions had only been theoretical to me until I witnessed these students actually do it. Having worked with these students as a student affairs practitioner working in student activities and knowing that these students were involved in honors programs and service learning, I wondered how they made sense of these experiences throughout the transfer process. More specifically, I became interested in how community college students who transfer to

private nonprofit four-year institutions describe and understand their academic and social experiences at both the community college and the receiving institution.

As a qualitative researcher I am the instrument through which data is collected and analyzed. I brought to the research my past experiences, values, norms, and attitudes. This is inevitable in qualitative research. But being aware of how my subjectivity may appear in the research process allowed me to attend to this subjectivity and position myself within the research project.

Human Participants and Ethical Precautions

The potential risks to humans who participate in this study were minimal. Participation in this study was completely voluntary. All participants were free to share as much or as little about their experiences with the researcher as they felt comfortable doing. Participants could skip any question in the interview protocol that they did not feel comfortable answering. Also, participants could stop the interview at any time if they became uncomfortable. If a participant in the study had become upset or needed emotional support as a result of topics brought up in the interview, the researcher was prepared to stop the interview and refer the participant to the university's counseling services.

Informed Consent

Prior to each interview, the researcher provided the participant with information about the research study necessary to inform the participants consent to engage in the research. Information in the informed consent disclaimer included: the purpose of the study; a summary of the research procedures in which the participant would engage; the

total amount of time the participant would spend involved in the research; possible risks or discomforts from the research and ways to mitigate these; and, benefits of the research to science and human kind. Participants' informed consent to engage in the research was implied if the participant proceeded with the interview.

Conclusion

Although the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001) are applied in the literature to the experiences of students who transfer to public four-year institutions (Barnett, 2011; Berger & Milem, 1999; Crisp, 2010; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Kuh et al., 2008; Lester et al., 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006), there is a lack of research on the experiences of students transferring from public two-year to private nonprofit four-year institutions. The rising cost of higher education (College Board, 2012a) and the additional benefits that can be gained from earning a bachelor's degree from a private institution (Eide et al., 1998; Kingston & Smart, 1990) give credence to the need for more research on this pathway to baccalaureate degree attainment.

Much of the research applying the theories of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), engagement (Kuh, 2001), and integration (Tinto, 1993) to transfer students is based on quantitative methodologies (Berger & Millem, 1999); Barnett, 2011; Chapman & Pascarella, 1983; Fischer, 2007; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010). These types of studies do not offer evidence about how transfer students experience the transfer process. Although Lester et al. (2013) and Townsend and Wilson (2006) have used qualitative methods to study the experiences of students transferring from community and technical colleges,

these studies to not include the experiences of students transferring from community and technical colleges to private nonprofit universities. Further qualitative research was needed to include the experiences of these students. The current study sought to fill this gap in the literature.

This chapter outlined the epistemology guiding the study, the methodology, research questions, site and sample selection procedures, as well as methods of data collection, analysis, and presentation. Techniques for ensuring trustworthiness inquiry were offered in addition to exploration of limitations to the research design. Using the methods described in this chapter the researcher was able to gain insight into the academic and social experiences of students who transfer from public two-year to private nonprofit postsecondary institutions.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter outlines the findings of the interviews with the 20 study participants. The findings are presented in the form of themes identified from the data that answer each of the three research questions. Each theme is described and then supported with quotations from the study participants. While some analysis and interpretation of the data is inherent in its presentation in qualitative research, the discussion of the data will be conducted in Chapter Five. This chapter provides a broad overview of the findings answering each of the three research questions.

Findings for Research Question 1: How do students who transfer from community and technical colleges to a private nonprofit university describe and understand the transfer process?

The first research question sought to gain insight into how study participants broadly described and understood their experience as transfer students from community colleges at Private University. This research question provided information about the general experiences of study participants throughout the process of transferring from one institution to the other. Participants drew on their experiences at both their respective community colleges as well as at PU to describe four themes that provide a general framework for how these students describe and understand their transfer experience in general. The themes answering this research question were the following:

Table 4

Themes answering Research Question 1

Efficiency in terms of money, time and administrative functions contributes to how participants get through the process in a cost effective manner

Sense of agency exercised by students throughout the transfer process

A key individual was integral to the transfer experience by reinforcing the decision to attend institutions or helping the student move forward through the transfer process

Decisions to attend the community or technical college or Private University were informed by real or perceived prestige

The themes identified as answering the first research question were significant because they provided information about how participants in the study moved through the transfer process from the decision to attend the community college to their matriculation to Private University. It was evident from these themes that the study participants saw themselves at the center of their experiences. But, these themes also demonstrated how multiple constructs and various individuals factored into the experiences of the study participants.

Efficiency in terms of money, time and administrative functions contributes to how participants get through the process in a cost effective manner

The theme of efficiency in terms of money, time, and administrative functions of application, admission, and credit contributed to how participants described and understood the process of transferring from a community college to a private university. Efficiency contributed to the experience both at the community college and at the private university. Participants described how their decisions to attend both institutions were informed by financial considerations as well as by the amount of time that would be required of them to move through the experience. The participants also described how the level of efficiency within the administrative functions of application, admission, and articulation of credits at PU contributed to their overall experience.

Efficiency was a construct of significance in the study as it related to the amount of time and effort that students expend throughout the transfer process. The conceptual framework for the study recognized the importance of time and effort expenditure on students' understanding and successful transition through academic and social experiences within higher education institutions. The theme of efficiency adds to the knowledge of how students make meaning of their expenditures of time and effort throughout the transfer process.

As noted by Joe, concerns such as the "proximity and financial package" of the community college and the private university inform students' decision to attend both institutions. Money was a consideration for many participants throughout the process of transferring from community colleges to Private University. Some participants described how they decided to attend a community college because it was a cheaper way to explore their still-percolating interests than attending a university straight after high school.

Attending the community college first allowed the students to spend less money earning their bachelor's degree from Private University. As noted by Kandace:

I didn't know what I wanted to do after high school. And, I actually tried out...I tried the nursing program [at the community college]. I tried...and I just did general studies, just to kind of get my foot in the door in different areas and try to figure out what I wanted. And I think the community college is good at that. You're not just...It gave me the option...So I don't know...I think that's what's good about it. And it's much cheaper to start at a community college. I've only had to pay for 2 years [at community college]...2 and a half years [at Private University].

Antoinette agreed:

Even though I kind of just settled for a [community college], I felt like I did it for the right reasons, because if I went to another university it would be a waste of money, it would be a waste of time. You know. I would feel pressured to you know figure out what I wanted to do right then and there. And I don't want to make the wrong decision that can affect my entire future. Because as a young adult what you do now will affect everything, you know. So I decided to do that.

Money was also a significant consideration for participants as they decided to attend PU. The cost of attendance at PU is high, at more than \$50,000 per year in tuition and fees. This cost played into how participants, like Mike, moved through the institution after transferring from community colleges:

You're taking this huge risk...Because I'm taking out loans, and my parents are helping me and you know they're getting older. So I feel like I have to get this done so they don't have to worry about it. So they can retire and things like that. It's just terrifying having that kind of responsibility on your shoulders you know.

While participants stated their desire to get through PU in an efficient manner, they also described the desire to get the most out of the experiences. The high amount of money that participants perceived themselves to be paying to PU was a reason that

participants gave for wanting to maximize the efficiency of their education in this respect.

George elaborated:

I come to school, and I pay my debt because I want to. And I want to get my money's worth. But it's not about money. It's about my time. I'm here not just to hear what you have to say. Or read what you want me to read. I'm going to ask all the questions I have. I'm going to get my money's worth, my time's worth. Most students are not like that.

While the ease of use of the administrative functions, such as application and admission to PU, was generally described positively by participants, the length of time that it took participants to successfully make it through the process of matriculating to PU was described as inefficient by virtually every participant. As George described, the process for applying to PU was made easier by the use of the Common Application:

[The application process was] fairly simple, very simple actually. Because there's Common App...If you're transferring, then there's a lot of stuff you can't submit online. You just put it in an envelope and you send it. You follow through and see if they got everything. If they didn't get something, you call them. "Did you really not get it? Or is [the] website not [updated]?" Just make sure they got everything. And that's it. And you wait. And then you get an email saying you got accepted. A few days, weeks or months later you will get your financial aid. And that's it.

But the “days, weeks, or months” that participants waited to learn if they got into PU were critical. In many cases participants had applied to multiple universities in addition to PU. Having a long wait time before learning of their acceptance to PU cost them not only time, but also money paid in deposits to schools they were not going to attend. Even those study participants that were accepted to PU relatively quickly still were affected financially by the PU admission timeline. Chloe’s story illuminated this issue:

So I applied on...April 1st and I heard back on May 31. Which doesn't seem like that long of a time. But I had already been accepted to 3 other schools that were, you know, giving me my deadlines. And they were like you need to let us know right now and submit a deposit. And I actually had to submit like a \$600 deposit to a school to hold my place and I didn't end up going there. And some people don't have that luxury to submit deposits to schools. So it was very frustrating. And I was lucky I heard back May 31 because there were some students this year especially, that didn't hear back until like July. So, and I didn't hear back from [Other City Private College] until...June 25. But I had already submitted my deposit to [PU] and another school [laughs]. So at that point I was like, sorry [Other City Private College]. I'm just going to go to [PU]. So I heard back on May 31. And, I submitted my deposit. I got my financial aid award like a week later. And it was good enough that I decided I could come [to PU] [laughs]. And then I applied for housing I think on like June 20 something. And I got my housing assignment the second week of July...maybe the first week of July. Which some students...this incoming class you know just got their assignments a couple of days [before the semester started]. And I know that was very frustrating for them. But I was lucky enough to get it in the beginning of July. I was set. I knew I was coming [to PU]. I knew where I was living. I knew with whom I was living. I had everything set up and I was ready to come on August 20th or whatever it was. Some people's [matriculations] you know, don't go as smoothly. Because a lot of it is on a rolling basis. You know they'll accept people on a rolling basis, they'll issue housing on a rolling basis. People are waiting to hear back from financial aid. They're waiting to hear back from credit evaluations and it's not like...I lucked out kind of. And it was still very stressful for me because I had to place deposits at other schools. But it was definitely less stressful than some people.

Iris was one of the students who had to wait a long time before she found out if she was admitted to PU. She explained,

...So, you have to prepare all these things by March. Then other universities they let you know whether you got in by May. But like [PU] it got delayed until...mid-June. So I had to pay some deposits to other universities just in case I don't get into [PU]... They said it was like...They got lots of applications. So, like the homepage said it would be by May 1. But then it got delayed, and then delayed, and then delayed. I had to wait until like mid-June.

Melissa also described how time and the administrative functions of matriculating to PU played out in her experience transferring:

But then you actually have to see like your package, and you have to see how much you're going to get, and the living situation, and how you're going to get there. And it's going to be in a month and you have to think about moving there and this stuff. And it's different. So, it is a very small window of time. And every transfer goes through this. Where like you graduate, and some of them did like early decision...which is great. But if you didn't, by the time you graduate you still don't know where you're going. So you're still like, "Yeah. I applied to all these great places but I still don't know where I'm going."

In addition to the length of time required to complete the process of matriculating to PU, participants described the efficiency with which credits they completed at community college transferred or did not transfer to their record at PU. Participants described taking classes at the community college that did not end up meeting requirements at PU. Some participants also described having to retake certain classes at PU which they had already taken at their community college. This contributed to the theme of efficiency because participants described this as adding to the amount of time they had to spend at PU pursuing degree completion. Kim explained:

[My advisor and I] planned on getting me out of [PU] 2 years. This is my 4th year. [laughs] So, it didn't really work out like... But it's just due to not taking the classes I should have taken during those 2 years. I mean I was a general studies major [at community college]. Obviously you can't catch up that quickly credit wise. Maybe if I would have been on the right path from day one in community college [for] my biology major maybe then I would have been done already. But because they didn't, I mean. I started with biology, like the gen biology 2....so that's like from, you know, that's what you would take in your second semester as a freshman. So really I started from scratch. So, community college was a waste of time [laughs]. In terms of my major.

The lack of efficiency in the credit articulation process was attributed not only to PU but also to the community college. Kim continued,

...There also were some classes which [the community college academic advisors] told me I needed which I didn't. So some classes they were specifically for their program, for nursing specifically it was prerequisites for their nursing program which would not transfer to other universities in their nursing programs.

So, you know, and they had the same classes, like biology classes, they're the very same. Same content, same lab, but different labs. Which makes no sense to me anyway...but one of them transferred and one of them didn't. So I retook the same class, twice, 6 credits, each time. And, you know, it's kind of upsetting. So, by I mean, I finished let's see. It's 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 semesters, I did summers always full summers, so after 6 semesters I was just upset that I'm not really getting anywhere. You know I'm just adding credits, spending money and time for something that might not transfer, so I transferred out and came here.

Other participants noted that the feeling that they were not making progress toward their degree with the efficiency of time that they desired contributed to their reasoning for transferring to PU. As noted by Adam he explained that he did not earn a degree from his community college because “I didn't want to spend any more time there. And I would have to stay there another semester and I really didn't want to do that.”

Participants stated that there was a lack of knowledge of how credits from their community college would transfer to PU during the admission process. This lack of information was a contributing factor to the lack of efficiency with which participants described the process of credit articulation between their community college and PU. As explained by Joe this lack of information had a negative effect on participants' decision-making process:

Yeah. But like I said earlier, if the transferring process had been more transparent [then PU] would lay out the credits they would take. I guess [PU] and the School of Business, if they were on the same page as far as what credits [they] were willing to accept from this student's previous institution, I think students would just have more information to make the best decision possible. Instead of me...My information was very limited. I, partially my decision was made in the dark

Having more information about the way credits would transfer to PU was seen by participants as something that could help to improve efficiency throughout the transfer process. This information could help students select classes to take at the community

college and to know what classes they would still need to take upon transferring to PU.

Iris explained:

...It would be better if you know which university you're going [to] when you start from community college....You might want to check with the university which course are going to transfer as which course. Because some [universities] do not transfer courses that are below something. So, like in my case. Mine was like I took 2 math classes at [community college]. But I couldn't transfer because it was not like upper level math class.

The theme of efficiency relates to money, time, and administrative functions.

Throughout the process efficiency contributed to how participants described and understood their experiences as students transferring from community colleges to Private University. Participants described the desire to move successfully through the transfer process in a manner that cost them the least amount of time and money, not only at PU but also at the community college. The efficiency with which study participants wanted to move through the transfer process had an impact on the amount of time and energy they were willing to expend on their participation in the academic and social environments of the institutions they attended.

Sense of agency exercised by students throughout the transfer process

Study participants described the sense of agency they carried with them throughout the transfer process. Agency related to self-direction, due diligence, and self-advocacy exercised by the participants during the process of transferring from community college to Private University. Participants described high levels of effort that they took it upon themselves to exert through the processes of selecting schools to which to transfer, applying and matriculating to PU, and making sure they were making successful academic progress while attending PU.

Agency was a significant theme because it captured the responsibility that the students had in their academic and social experiences as transfer students. Study participants had to consciously decide to transfer. They did not automatically transfer from community colleges to Private University. They had to exercise agency to make it successfully through the process. The theme of agency related to how study participants saw themselves at the center of their experiences as transfer students. Their desires, behaviors, and actions as individuals contributed greatly to their experience as transfer students by adding to the sense of agency they felt throughout the transfer process.

The process of transferring from community college to Private University was multifaceted and complex. As Iris described, there were many steps in the transfer process:

So you go to [the] homepage of every university you're applying. Then you check the requirements. Then you have to write the application. And then you have to send the transcript. And then...you have to write some essays. And then for some universities you have to have some recommendation letters. And then they give you, like after that they give you acceptance letter. And then you have to send them final transcript. After that you have to let them know whether you're going or not. After that then you pay your deposit.

Many study participants described how they managed most aspects of the transfer process including research, selection, application, and admission to PU and other schools on their own. Antoinette talked about the amount of research that she put into looking for a school to which to transfer:

You know doing research on the schools. And, you know figuring out "Oh, what school's best for me for my major? What classes do they have?" I always looked at every single class whether I was interested in them or not. The location of these places. You know. In every different state, town, there's different type of people. You know. Just everything that I wanted in school. And it's like "Well, what do I want in a school." You know figuring that out and dissecting it.

Because you know, yeah I want to go there for my classes but on my down time I want to have fun, you know. I want to go to like games and stuff like that. So it was that. It was filling out application after application after application. You know. Making a good solid essay. Just selling myself to these schools.

In addition to using the Internet to research universities to which to transfer, some participants' sense of agency in the transfer process inspired them to visit the institutions to which they were interested in transferring. Kim was one of these participants. Not only did she visit the campuses but she also met with advisors and visited offices that offered services she anticipated utilizing. Kim explained:

Yes. I did all of that by myself. I mean I wasn't happy with my [community college] advisors anyways. I didn't really believe them at that point...anything they said. So I did everything myself. I went to all the schools the schools myself. Well I just went to [Regional Public U] and [PU]. But, I did go to these schools and enter, you know, had meetings with advisors, and people in the registration office that would do that transfer. The international student offices that were responsible for my visas to figure out how the whole process would be working with my visa, does it get extended or do I have to go back. I didn't know. So, that whole process I did everything by myself.

While some participants such as Antoinette and Kim voluntarily exercised agency in the transfer process, others exercised agency as a reaction to structural challenges faced during the transfer process. Study participants noted that they were encouraged by PU to exercise agency throughout the process of learning about and applying to the institution. According to Jake,

I just look up the [PU] homepage. And there's like undergraduate admission. And I just see the checklist. And I did everything by myself. And they say they require official transcript and blah, blah, blah, visa things...But every time I have questions I call them and they say "Just look up the Internet. They have all the information." But I look up the Internet but it wasn't enough.

Participants were directed to the PU website to help themselves navigate the application and admission process. But study participants commented that despite the

agency they exercised to make it through the admissions process on their own using the Internet, they sometimes needed additional help. Carl explained how he and other participants had to exercise agency by contacting PU directly to make sense of the transfer application, admission, and matriculation process:

And also the [PU] website they don't have a clear information for transfer credits. This is the main point. You have to, even before you apply to transfer the school you have to call them. "Ok...what kind of credit are you accept?"

June also described how she had to exercise agency and do research on her own to make it successfully through the transfer process because she was not getting the support she needed from advisors at her community college:

When I was in [community college] and tried to meet...I mean, I met counselors and talk about graduation and all the transitions. But the information that I got was so limited. And every different counselor [talked] about [it] differently, [and gave] me different information. So it kind of [made] me [confused]. So the best way was to check by myself through the website. Or sometimes I just call to school information center or academic office. So that was the more challenge. And then...since I'm an international student, so I need more papers or I need something other than domestic students. But if I go to the website, like in this school, the website is divided into international students and domestic students. But, the international student section is mainly focused on international students coming to the US from outside, not the ones already in the US. So, that was like another thing. So I just called them and talked to them.

There were many steps to the application process to PU. Study participants described how they had to be meticulous about managing the paperwork and steps of the application process to avoid any mishaps on the part of PU. Carl explained,

You have to make a copy for all your information before you send it to the admission office. Make sure you can have a backup. Because my friend's application got lost until she called them...same as my time, around June or July. And they [said] "Oh. [We lost] your application. Can you send it [again]?" And you know the financial statement that kind of stuff, it takes maybe a couple of weeks from our parents from our home country to get it here. And so make a copy.

And once study participants matriculated to PU they continued to exercise agency over their successful navigation of the institution. According to James,

I feel like it's realizing that, you know, I'll never get to where I want if I don't, you know, do something about it. And if I don't give the responsibility to myself and say, "You have to be able to ignite your own flame and drive yourself, because sometimes people aren't going to be around. You know, those people that you need aren't going to be around to, you know, ignite anything or whatever." That, and I also just want to finish. I just want to finish my education, my undergrad at least. And I want to go onto the next step.

In order to successfully navigate PU, study participants described how students transferring to PU from community colleges should take responsibility for themselves.

James explained,

I guess, in a way...it's very vague, I wish I could narrow it down. But, look out for yourself because no one will...academically. So when I say look out for yourself, I mean figure things out for yourself. Figure out what you need to do, before...Don't rely on your advisors.

Making sure that degree requirements at PU are being met is something that study participants took upon themselves. According to James,

But here, they'll tell you to take one class. You take that class but it doesn't count for anything. So you literally have to, I literally have to go class by class requirement by requirement, prerequisite and all this stuff, on your own to figure out how you're going to graduate.

Kim agreed,

I would say the only thing that changed because of that interface was myself double checking what they're telling me. And, for myself thinking "is this correct?" But other than that, I mean, they were very available just like the administrators here. They were nice. You know, they were trying to help. There was nothing that was off-putting in that regard but it definitely taught me a lesson that you need to, no matter if you're trusting someone or not you always need to double check their work, if you're serious, if you don't want to waste money and time. You need to always double check you are in the right classes.

Kandace also took it upon herself to make sure she was on track with degree requirements at PU:

I mapped out how to... So I looked at the concentration that I was interested in. And then looked at the [PU Schedule of Classes]...and went through and kind of made a map of like what I would take each semester. Which proved like helpful then...I had like a piece of paper, I had written it all out.

Even those participants who sought the help of advisors at PU described the experience in terms of the agency they felt over their success in the transfer process. Rachel described how even though she felt she had the tools at PU to figure out what classes she had left to take on her own she still used her academic advisor for help.

And even if I didn't go to my advisor...I just felt like it was the right thing to do. I could have just, you know, signed onto [the portal]. That's like pretty much a system that gives you all the information you need too. Like it'll show you what credits they were able to transfer, what classes were able to fit requirements, and everything.

George described how surprised his advisor was that he sought her out when she arrived at PU. He wanted to make sure he had all of the necessary information for the transition.

I am very OCD and anal person, so I immediately scheduled an appointment with my advisor to draw out, to get all of the information I can get. And with her...she was surprised. She said that usually people don't do that. She said "People usually just start school. And then we convince them to use advisors." And with her [I] went over the credits that were not accepted. Made a few appeals. They got accepted.

For some study participants exercising agency was different from what they were accustomed to when it came to navigating their education. Adam described how going to PU was an adjustment for him in terms of his independence as compared to his time at community college:

Adjusting to this independentness and not having like your mom or dad being like "Hey. You've gotta do this. Or like you've gotta do that." You've gotta be able to do this on your own. I mean I'm used to that because like I spent summers at sleep away camp. But it's like different because you're with authority figures at all times. So you're kind of by yourself.

Adam continued,

Because like I was just like...Because I'm like adjusting to the whole process. So like I wasn't used to like, I guess, how college really worked. And I wasn't used to being on my own and doing all that.

While some participants described agency as a new construct for them, others discussed how community college prepared them for the transition to PU. Study participants' prior experience navigating a higher education institution such as their community college made them feel comfortable exercising agency in the transfer process.

As noted by Mike,

I mean I kind of took it on myself a lot. And again that was what was a big drawback was me trying to do it on my own...You know, there wasn't, there's not a whole lot of people that I relied on during that process. It was just kind of "Oh this is pretty straightforward. I just need to register for classes." And since technically I had been in school for almost 6 years straight I was kind of used to the bureaucracy of it all. And how to register and pay for everything. In hindsight, yeah it would have been nice to reach out for more help than I did. It's just not something that comes naturally to me.

Those study participants who exercised lower levels of agency throughout the transfer process expressed regret. For example, Rebecca wished that she had asked for more help from experts during the transfer process. She explained,

If I had knew that I wanted to transfer I would have contacted like an advisor or someone from [PU] and asked them like "Ok. I'm in [community college] now. I want to transfer to [PU] in like next year or next semester. What class do you recommend I take?" And I will have just taken the classes that can transfer. But, unfortunately, I wasn't like...I feel like I should have maybe talked to more people to know how the process is and what are the risks of classes falling through.

But, study participants stated that the level of agency they exerted throughout the transfer process was high but worth the effort. Antoinette explained,

Because all the work and the hours in the library and the assignments, just all the effort has finally paid off. And it's paid off for something great. Something you know that I didn't even see myself; I didn't see coming at all. You know. Like my expectations were here and I was able to exceed them. And exceed them of even like what my parents thought. Like other people. You know. And I'm like "Yeah. You know. Screw you. I'm here."

Study participants described a sense of agency that they felt throughout the transfer process. Prior to matriculation to PU, study participants exercised this agency to collect information about PU and other institutions to which they were interested in transferring. Participants exercised agency during the process of applying and matriculating to PU for both voluntary reasons and as reactions to structural challenges they faced at both the community college and PU. Participants' sense of agency continued after being admitted to PU through the process of transferring credits and making sure that degree requirements at PU were met. The sense of agency that participants felt during the process of transferring to PU was a new feeling for some participants, while other participants described how their time at the community college gave helped them to feel a sense of agency and independence when navigating higher education institutions. Those participants that exercised lower levels of agency throughout the transfer process expressed that they wished they had exercised more agency during the transition, in particular because this may have helped them move through the process more efficiently. The high levels of agency exercised by other participants were described as being worth the effort.

A key individual was integral to the transfer experience by reinforcing the decision to attend institutions or helping the student move forward through the transfer process

This theme was pervasive across participants. In virtually every case, the study participants described a key individual who was integral to their transfer experience by reinforcing the decision to attend community college or Private University and helping the student move forward through the transfer process. The key individual varied from participant to participant. In some instances the key individual was a friend or family member of the participant. In other instances the key individual was a faculty member or advisor who assisted the participant in meaningful ways in the decision to transfer or the successful completion of the transfer process.

The significance of the theme of key individuals being integral to the transfer experience was that this theme demonstrated that the participants did not go through the transfer experience in a vacuum. There were other individuals who were important to the overall experience of the participants in the transfer process. This theme was also significant because it showed how individuals not only within the community college or private university were integral to the transfer process, but also that individuals outside these institutions were important to the participants' successful completion of the transfer process. This theme extends the idea that student interaction with the institution and its constituents contributes to their overall experience by including the importance of interactions with individuals outside the institution but close to the individual student.

Friends, primarily those who were also transferring or already attended PU, were mentioned as key individuals who helped participants navigate the transfer process. For example, June's friend from her community college helped her with the transfer process to PU:

My friend...He was registered in community college and we were taking the same classes, and we had the same major. So we definitely had similar interests. And at the same time he transferred to some schools too. So we actually searched together about the schools.

Study participants discussed how their family members contributed to their experiences. Parents were the family members most frequently mentioned by the study participants. Kim talked about how her parents in her home country did not want her to go to college:

Yeah they didn't want me to go to [college]. They thought that I should be getting a job and start working, get married, have kids. It's kind of what my parents did. And, they didn't really like the idea of me spending more time in school, wasting time that I could be working. And they were like, "If you don't want to go to university, then this is a waste of time." Because only people who want to go to university should be going to that school. And back then I just wanted to keep my doors open. I didn't know if I wanted to go to university or not. But I knew that times were changing. I know that jobs require more and more like higher degrees, more information that you need to know. So, I just wanted to keep that option open. Because I knew it was going to be so much harder after I graduate to go back [to college]. So, that's why they didn't really agree at first. And even now, I mean it's not that they're completely unhappy with me. But, me being 26 and still going to school for my bachelor's and trying to figure out what I want to do later. They're just very [unhappy] with that overall situation.

Many participants described how family members influenced their decision to attend their community college. Amanda shared her story:

When I came here obviously I wasn't speaking English. And I was with my family here. And we lived with my aunt for like the first 6 months until we got settled. And, she went to [the community college]. She got her major in

psychology and her Associate's degree. So she told me that it was like a good school. So we went there. I got some information. And it was close by home.

Participants also indicated that family members influenced their decision to attend PU.

Melissa learned about PU because her cousin attended:

...My cousin [Larissa] when I was in 8th grade she was a senior [in high school]. Actually, no when I was a freshman she was a senior [in high school]. When she came to visit college we went and I came with her to [PU]. And I was like "This is where I want to be."...But she came to [PU]...And I came for her graduation and I still was in love with [PU]. I...when I was a senior in high school, I never finished my application [to PU]. I did start it. But I never finished it. So [PU] was always in the back of my mind.

In Jake's case his parents influenced his decision to attend PU over other universities. He shared his story, "Actually I wanted to go to New York. Because, like [Other City Private College], I got acceptance letter from there. But, my parents, they [said] no. [laughs]. Because they pay money. So I have to follow them. [laughs]"

Participants also described faculty members at the community colleges as key individuals who were integral to reinforcing their decision to transfer to PU and helping them successfully move through the process. These faculty members took special interest in the participants and went above and beyond to assist the participants in the transfer process. As Angela described, the key faculty member's influence in the transfer process had meaningful impact on the study participants:

There was...I had a professor [at community college] who really...she was my English professor. She really believed...like she really thought that I was a strong student...and she really believed in me. And she like, I applied. So I applied to like 3 different schools. I applied to [Other Private U], [PU], and [State U]. And [State U] has like a weird thing where if you've been in community college for more than three years you're not eligible to transfer. And, so when I found out that I didn't get into [State U], like I told her...And she immediately got on the phone and was like wanting to like talk to people. And they wouldn't talk to her. So she started sending emails. And basically was like, she was like "I am a

student who got a rough start." She was like "Now I have my PhD. I failed like, I was on academic probation when I was in undergrad. This is someone I know..." like referring to me..."This is someone I know will do well. Don't look at like her prior record is not good. But neither was mine. Now I have my PhD." So he basically said, "I put my career on the line. Like I vouch for her 100 percent." And...in doing that just really gave me the confidence I needed. Because I think that that was really the biggest thing I lacked was just having the confidence. Growing up, honestly, I barely graduated high school. Most of that was because I was very social in high school. And that was all I cared about. So, I mean, I had a great...high school was a blast. But it doesn't transfer to good grades [laughs]. And so like you know I just never had a very high like value on like my own like intelligence in a way. It was like "I'm good a lot of things. School isn't one of them." And so it wasn't until...honestly, it wasn't until that professor that basically was like "You're the best in the class. Like I haven't seen someone like you come in..." And so basically just gave me this sense of confidence that I think pushed me over the edge. And gave me the..."Ok. I'm going to apply to these schools." Even though on paper I shouldn't have. I shouldn't have gotten in anywhere. Like it wasn't good. But it gave me the confidence to say like "I am capable of doing. It's just in the past I never tried." And that was like where I had to, I really like learned that.

Some faculty members who were integral to participants' experiences had more formal roles at the community college to help students navigate the transfer process. The formal relationship between these faculty members and students sometimes blossomed into a lasting connection. As Melissa described, her community college had faculty members who served as "Transfer Masters." She explained how one of these faculty members remained an important connection for her after transferring:

Actually [my community college] has...Because [my community college] is a feeder for a lot of the Ivy Leagues like Columbia, Harvard, Stanford, Chapel Hill, [and PU]...We do have professors that are Transfer Masters. And they sit with you, they tell you, "Ok. If you want to transfer this is what you have to do." I wish I would have met him my freshman year, I didn't. I met him halfway through my sophomore year, my summer. Once I met him it was like I met the light. He knew it all. He knew everything. He knew how your essays should be. Reading...he sat there with you. He wrote your recommendations letters. Told you who you should get it from. Because that's a huge part...recommendation letters. So, [my community college] did...I mean, because [my community college] is a huge feeder they do have transfer...We call them Transfer Masters.

So every campus has like at least 2 or 3. So you would go to that person. And that's kind of...like we call it your advisor for life. Because he is so good...maybe it's just him...But I got him. And he would still write your letters even when you're off [community college]...Til this day he will still write my letters...Yeah. I still meet with him for coffee. He comes to [this city]. He's well-travelled, he's well known. [My community college] college does keep good faculty that connect them and network them a lot. He comes to [this city]. He comes to New York. And I did a lot of projects with him I was close with him. But, other students got the same advantage from him as well.

Chloe had a similar experience with a faculty member at her community college who served as an informal key individual to her successful completion of the transfer process.

She described her experience:

So I had an advisor who was also my intercultural communications professor. And he went to [Other Private University]. And I think he was one of my greatest mentors. He wanted me to go to [Other Private University]. But he supported me wholeheartedly in every school I applied to and ultimately in coming to [PU]. He was great. He really helped...told me what classes I should be taking at [my community college] to graduate on time...He was great though. He...um you know.... I'm trying to think of other than just saying he was a mentor...He um, you know, he really gave me good advice. And he encouraged me to get involved on campus. He wrote my recommendation for [PU]. And I got a chance to read it and it was just wonderful. And recently...I've visited him since coming to [PU]. I've gone back and met with him...He just really was consistently supportive of my decisions. And he definitely helped me a lot.

Non-faculty advisors at both PU and the community colleges were described by participants as key individuals to the study participants' decision to transfer and successful completion of the transfer process. At PU the participants described non-faculty advisors as key individuals integral to their success moving through the transfer process, usually in terms of transferring credits and making sure requirements at PU were met. Angela described her experience with her advisor at PU:

But there was...now I'm forgetting her last name, but her first name's [Kristine]. And she was my like I guess transfer like advisor something like that... She was really great. She's like "We'll make sure you get as many as you can." Which of

course, like I said, I probably had almost 100 [credits]. So you max out at 60 is how many you can bring [laughs]...but I brought 60. And then she helped me make sure that every one that could count toward a requirement did. And we even petitioned a few that didn't seem to be a direct...that didn't seem to transfer directly, but we got like a syllabus. And she kind of helped me. And she petitioned I think one or two she petitioned to make...so that my [general education requirement], I believe it's called, was completely filled. I think based on all my transfer. So I think I came here with like all my general stuff done.

At the community college the non-faculty advisor was sometimes seen as a key individual who played a negative role in the participants' successful completion of the transfer process. As Melissa explained:

Unfortunately, one of the things it does lack a lot in the community college system is that sometimes the people that are there to advise you which are your advisors, will limit you because they are used [to] like that type of student. Which is really bad. So when I was planning, like my 2 year plan, there was a lot...They're supposed to ask you, "Where do you see yourself transferring?" In order to see which classes you were going to take. And my advisors were like, "Oh, but realistically where do you see yourself transferring?" Like every time I would say "Oh no I really want to go to [PU]" they would say "But, no, realistically where do you see yourself transferring?" So that like would always dis-motivate people from transferring to other places other than their state school or whatever school was in the city.

But overall study participants described their non-faculty advisors at the community college in positive ways demonstrating the key role these individuals played in the participants' transfer experience. Joe described his experience with his non-faculty advisor at community college:

She prepped me for interviews. Well, I mean [PU] didn't [need] one, but I applied to some other schools. So, she prepped me for interviews like I said. She gave me a whole bunch of information. She developed a pros and cons list on each school. And when I found out a lot of my credits went fall through she walked the extra mile and reached out to the college there. And then try to talk to my advisor here who is [Bob].

And James also had a non-faculty advisor who was a key individual who supported his successful completion of the transfer process. He explained:

This advisor. She was very...So you know it began a year and a half after I had already taken classes. So I had been at [community college] for a year and a half. And it wasn't really working for me in terms of the advisors. You know a lot of them were giving me false classes to take to transfer, classes that didn't count towards anything. And I would take them and I would find out later that I wasn't supposed to take that class. Granted I was still on track to transfer when I needed to transfer. But, then I met her after this year and a half. And she said, "Ok." And she looked at my schedule. She walked me step by step. You know, "These are the classes you have right now. These are the amount of credits you have right now. To transfer you need this amount of credits." She would say, "Ok. To transfer you need to take this many more semesters. These are the classes you need to take. You know, if you're looking to go to medical school you need to take this, this, and this that should transfer to any colleges or universities in California and some out of state colleges." She would give me advice. If she didn't have an answer she would say, "Ok. Go talk to this university. Call them. Ask them what they need..." You know, if it was out of state. Usually if it was in state she had all the answers. So she would provide resources. If she didn't have the resources in front of her she would contact someone that did. She wouldn't allow you to leave the office until she had the full answers for you, until she gave you a play by play or an entire outline of what you needed to do to become successful in transferring, to become successful in graduating, whatever it may be. She was open; she was there for you whenever you needed her. If I needed to call her, obviously she wouldn't answer, as most advisors don't.... But you would leave a message. She would get the message. She would call you right back. So, she was very...she was a very hard worker. She was there for her students. As long as you showed that you were determined. As long as you showed that you were not just there to...what's the word I'm looking for.... just to mess around or whatever. Then she was very good. She was very, very hardworking. She'd work hard for the students. And she'd go out of her way to help us. And if we had a question, she'd answer it. And so yeah...She helped me see which classes I needed and which classes I didn't need. If there was ever a semester where... You know I'd go and I'd say, "Ok. I'm taking this class, this class, and this class, and this class." I'd go to her and tell her this. And she'd say, "Ok, this class you don't need because of this." And she'd explain in detail why I didn't need it. She'd explain why I need this class. Yeah...I felt like she was a big help in transferring. And I feel like advisors it's in their name. They're there to advise you. They're there to help you, to guide you, to tell you what's wrong, to tell you what's right. At least I feel like that's their job. And I feel as though that's what should be their job. I've never read their formal job title so I don't know what it's

going to say. But, yeah, I just feel like the advisor I had actually did her job. She advised. And she answered all of my questions that needed to be answered.

Across the study participants key individuals were described as integral to the participants' decision to attend either PU or the community college and their successful completion of the transfer process. Friends and family members usually were integral to study participants' decisions to attend either PU or their community college. Faculty members and non-faculty advisors were key individuals at both the community college and PU who helped the study participants move forward through the transfer process. These individuals reinforced the study participants' decision to transfer and supported their success in navigating the transfer process.

Decisions to attend the community or technical college or Private University were informed by real or perceived prestige

Prestige, real or perceived, informed the decision of participants to attend their community college or Private University. Participants frequently described the community college in terms that elevated the prestige and quality of the institution as their rationale for attending that institution. When describing PU participants also did so in terms that highlighted the quality and caliber of the institution. Participants described feelings of pride they had for attending such a prestigious university. They also described the faculty at PU in terms that indicated their attribution of real or perceived prestige to the institution. In many instances the reason that participants decided to attend PU was because of the prestige they perceived the institution to hold.

This theme was significant because it gave insight into why students decided to attend their community college as well as PU. Prestige of the institution and its faculty

was an indication that participants were aware of the real or perceived status of the institution they attended. This status, as intimated by the participants, had implications for their future prospects. This theme demonstrated that study participants saw how their experiences would be understood by others. Study participants understood the hierarchy of higher education institutions and how their experiences fit within this hierarchy.

Many of the study participants described the community college they attended in terms that highlighted the prestige of the institution. As noted by Chloe:

[The school that I transferred from] it's a two-year, community college. It's one of the better ones in the area. I actually went out of county to go there because it's better than the county that I was in. So I would say academically, it wasn't a walk in the park...But, I definitely enjoyed my classes and felt that I learned quite a bit [there].

She went on to describe her community college:

They [call it] "Harvard on the hill." Because our community college is like actually like a really good community college. But, I don't think that anybody...I still don't own that [community college's] shirt. But I don't think that anyone's really like super pumped about going to [that community college].

Like other participants in the study, Chloe, Melissa, and George applied to universities other than PU that had real or perceived prestige and status. As noted by Chloe, "...I applied to [Near Private University], [State College], [Far Private University], [Other Private University]], and [PU]. And I think that's a good mix of different types of schools and different ranking levels."

Melissa explained that her community college was "a feeder" for a number of Ivy League schools. Even though she received full scholarships to other institutions Melissa decided to go to PU:

I had gotten into [Home Private University]. They were offering me a full, full ride. I had gotten into [Home State] University, full ride as well. [Other Private University]. And I'd gotten [into Near Private University]. Full ride as well.

George talked about the schools that he and his friends from his community college applied to:

My applications were...if you look at the schools...were from the bottom, meaning [community college], to the top. All of the people, all of my fellow students applied to Ivy League and to like schools that are of that [level]. And they got accepted. [I applied to] [Other Private University], [PU], [Local Private University], [Midwest Private University], [two New England private universities], [two big city private universities], [Ivy League University], [and] [West Coast Private University].

But Melissa and other participants described a sense of pride they feel attending PU because of the real or perceived prestige of the institution. Melissa explained what it meant to her to attend PU:

Even when you're in another program, that program is prestige and people are like, "Yeah. I'm from here and I go to school here." And you say "No. I go to [Private University]." And they're like "Oh, wow! Like you go to [Private University]." And you're like "Yeah." And like that feeling that you get that other schools don't get is still like, "Oh. Ok. I do. I go there. Yeah. I forget, but I go there."

Kandace also felt a sense of pride about attending PU:

I applied to [Private University], I applied to [Other Private University]. And I applied to [Public University]. [Other Private University] had an education program in a bachelor's. And [Public University] also did. But I think that having the associate's in education, I wanted to see like a different avenue. Also, [PU's] just a great school. So when I got in I was kind of proud of myself.

Prestige informed participants' decisions to transfer to PU. June decided to attend PU because she thought it was better for her major. She explained her rationale for choosing PU:

At that time when I was in [community college], I was thinking about [trying] to send my, like....I thought about actually applying a lot of schools since there is no guarantee where I'm going to be. So, let's try a lot of schools. But, [this city's] a really good place for my major. So I decided to stay here, around here. So, I only applied...so my plan was only to apply to 3 schools. So one is [Religious College], one is [Public University], and one is [PU]. And then, [Religious College] I didn't make it. And then [Public University], I made it but I think [Private University] is better in terms of my major. I guess it's more famous here.

Rachel decided to attend PU because of the network she would gain access to but also

because of the background of the faculty. She explained:

[I came to PU because of] location, availability of resources, and connections and networking opportunities that would help me career wise...Just the fact that a lot of the professors come with a background in pretty impressive career fields that were related to what I wanted to do. And also I think the university within itself has I guess ties with agencies and NGOs. I mean, it's recognized by companies and I guess employers who I would potentially want to work for.

When asked why they selected PU study participants, like June, indicated “reputation of the school...location, reputation...” as their reasoning for making the choice to attend PU.

PU faculty members' educational and professional backgrounds were also described by participants in terms of prestige and status. Carl described how impressed he was with the educational background of professors at PU. He said, “academic based on the professor, they graduate really, really good school: Princeton, MIT, or [PU].”

Kandace was also impressed with the educational background of her professors at PU.

She said “...I think that like being...because your professors are like really highly educated and are like the ones that really know their stuff. So that I've enjoyed.”

Not only was the educational background of the faculty at PU seen as contributing to the prestige of PU but also participants saw the professional experiences of faculty members as impressive. Chloe described the impressive resumes of the professors at PU:

And having professors that, you know, have worked on such high level projects is just, you know, that's [PU]. And they didn't just work on those projects; they're still working on it. So my, you know, one professor who taught the intro to the major...he would talk about things that he was working on in his spare time, like different consulting jobs with different Federal agencies. And just hearing about that is, you know, it's exciting and it makes you more interested because you see how what you're studying applies to different professions. And it's just cool to know that you have professors who are so, you know, I don't know, prestigious on a certain scale. And I think a lot of my professors have accomplished really cool things and are very interesting people...some of the stuff they've done is just kind of like, you know really incredible. And I said before you get a lot of professors at schools like [PU] or any schools like this...big research universities...that aren't always interested in their students because they're just more interested in their research. But you do get those professors who are interested in creating their students into the next generation of, you know, themselves. Creating the people who are going to follow in their footsteps. You do get those professors too. And that's a huge advantage.

Prestige, whether real or perceived, was a consideration for participants in deciding to attend both their community college and Private University. Participants described the community colleges they attended in terms that related the institutions to prestigious colleges and universities, such as Harvard, and highlighted the quality of the institutions in their descriptions. When discussing their decision to transfer to PU participants referred to the prestige of the institution as a contributing factor. The educational and professional background of PU faculty members were noted by participants as reasons for their decision to attend PU in part because of the opportunities and networks to which these faculty members would give them access.

Conclusion to Research Question 1

There were four themes revealed by the data which answer the first research question: “How do students who transfer from community colleges to a private university describe and understand the transfer process?” The themes answering this research question highlighted both the individual aspects of the study participants’ experiences transferring from community colleges to Private University. The themes of “Efficiency” and “Agency” demonstrated that study participants put themselves at the center of the transfer experience. But these themes also brought to the fore how study participants saw their individual experiences in relation to others throughout the transfer process. The themes of “Key others” critical to the transfer process and “Prestige” showed how study participants viewed the actions or perceptions of others as significant to their experiences transferring from community colleges to Private University. All four themes that answer Research Question 1 provide valuable insight into how study participants described and understood their experiences transferring from community colleges to Private University. The themes identified in response to Research Questions 2 and 3, respectively, drill down more specifically into the study participants’ academic and social experiences.

Findings for Research Question 2: How do these students describe their academic experiences at each institution?

Through the second research question, the researcher sought to understand how participants described their academic experiences at both Private University and their respective community colleges. During data collection study participants spoke frequently about their academic experiences and the academic environment at both institutions they attended. In doing so, study participants described their academic

experiences in ways that revealed four themes. The themes and corresponding codes contributing to the themes answering Research Question 2 were the following:

Table 5

Themes answering Research Question 2

Primacy of teaching and learning

Level of academic rigor is more challenging at PU

Transfer experience guided in whole or in part by career ambitions

Hallmark academic experiences share interactive and practical attributes

The themes identified as answering the second research question were significant because they provided information about how the study participants described and made meaning of their academic experiences at the community college and at Private University. The themes of “Primacy of teaching and learning” as well as “Level of academic rigor is more challenging at PU” highlighted important differences between the academic experience at the community college and that at PU. But, the themes of “Transfer experience guided in whole or in part by career ambitions” and “Hallmark academic experiences share interactive and practical attributes” represented similarities between the academic experiences of study participants at both PU and the community college.

Primacy of teaching and learning

Study participants frequently discussed differences in the primacy of teaching and learning at Private University as compared to their respective community colleges. The primacy of teaching and learning theme relates to the level of importance that faculty members and students attribute to the tasks of teaching and learning at the community college versus at PU. Participants perceived faculty members at the two institutions to have different perspectives on their primary role at the institution. And students at the two institutions prioritized learning differently at the two institutions.

The “Primacy of teaching and learning” theme is significant in that it highlights differences that the study participants perceived in their academic experiences at their respective community colleges and at PU. Not only did study participants perceive differences in how faculty members understood and exercised their primary role at the institution, but study participants also reflected on differences in how they themselves prioritized their activities as students at both institutions. The “Primacy of teaching and learning” theme demonstrates important nuances to the academic experiences of students transferring from community colleges to Private University; differences which showcase the varying roles that faculty members and students play in teaching and learning at the two institutions.

Because class sizes at the community college were smaller than classes at PU, study participants described how they received more personalized attention from faculty members before they transferred to PU. In addition to the smaller class sizes, study participants cited differences in the primacy that faculty members at the community colleges assigned to the task of teaching. Chloe explained:

... I was able to get a little bit more personalized interaction with my professors. But I still wouldn't say it's the same level. You know, I have some of my professors from [community college]...I have some of their numbers in my phone. Because I think that people who teach at community colleges a lot of times, they're not there because of the salary. They're there because they love what they're doing. And some people not...some people [laughs] they just can't...that's all they can do. But I think you get a lot more people who, you know, they love interacting with students. Which you get at [PU]. But you also get a lot of people who are here doing research, and the teaching is just part of the requirements or something like that. So they don't care as much about their students. They're more just doing it is as a requirement.

Similarly, Antoinette described her experience with faculty at her community college:

Like having the professors know me by my first name really helped me. And I felt like at the end of the day I could just ask them anything about [my major] and they would try their best to help me out.

Carl explained the differences he perceived between faculty at his community college and

PU:

And like they're so nice and they spend much more office hours than here. Like in [PU] they have limited office hours. For example, like you may only meet the doctor or professor before class. If you have some assignment due by that day, the only way you can email the professor at [PU]. But at [community college], most professors, they put their heart to teach. And they would rather spend their Saturday morning or early class like to spend some time with us and study. And we have study group with professor. But in [PU] it's kind of like a little bit difficult.

Carl goes on to describe an experience he had with a faculty member at his community

college:

Like for example, my accounting class...even my professor had a full time job in the morning and he only teach at night from 6 to 9 something. And he would spend time, maybe on Saturday once a week. We had class twice a week. But you know with accounting, somethings like if you're stuck on it you cannot move forward. And, for example, my math professor, he has like, she's a teacher in the middle school, and he only teach like at night also. And I spent time over there, and she would bring like, after class maybe 9pm she would stay late, maybe for an hour, she would tutor me math. They'd rather spend more time. Because like

in community college, they told me the salary is not too high, but like, but they have a heart to teach the student and to contribute to society in the future. They want to do that...what I see.

Kandace described how she felt like she received personalized attention from faculty at her community college. Like other study participants, Kandace attributed this personalized attention to the emphasis that community colleges place on teaching versus research. She explained:

I just love how personal it was. It just felt like...I just felt like they wanted you to do well. I felt like they cared. I felt like they...they really...just things like remembering where [you were working]. Like...I just felt like it was a more personal experience. It was a very personal experience...I guess it was just the demeanor. Yeah. I don't know. And you know community college isn't focused on research. So there's much less of an emphasis on...So there's...Like coming here I feel like there's...All the teachers here have big demand to do research. And I feel like that's their focus. Whereas there, I feel like all of the teachers, like their entire focus is teaching to the students and making sure that the students understand and...Yeah.

Antoinette described what this personal attention looked like for her at her community college:

They gave me praise...And some of them...I don't want to brag or anything. But it was nice to feel that praise in front of the class, for them to say that. Or to speak with me after class. Or to sit there and say to me "Oh. I think you might be interested in this. Maybe you should try this out. You should go on this website." You know. It was nice things like that.

Adam described how he felt professors at his community college were there to help him:

Well I mean if I had trouble with like studying or...Which I don't know if happened very often. But if I had like trouble, say for an assignment or project...I'd go to them for help and ask them certain questions. And they'd be happy to help with whatever I needed. So I mean they're there to help you. So...which made it great.

Jake had a similar experience with faculty at the community college he attended:

[The faculty] were very friendly. Actually the classroom, at the biggest I think it was like 50...And it was easy to contact the professor if I just walk into his or her office. They were friendly. And they just give me more ideas. It was easy to talk with them. And if I don't understand the lecture and I went there...they just give me more online [resources] and things.

James agreed,

I got more out of this community college that I was coming from that I paid \$6000 per year for, the tuition. I got a lot more in terms of the equipment, in terms of the professors, the personability...I mean the level of personal interaction between the professor and the students. The professors I felt were a lot more clear...I felt like the teachings of the professors back at the [community college] were a lot more understanding and clear. And they put things in perspective so that anyone can understand these things. And they took their time to assist and to help and to guide each student that came to them. And I feel like a lot of the professors here aren't here at [PU] for that. I feel as though they're here to teach second. Second to research. And so, I feel like that leaves a lot of the students, whether they're transferring from a college...You know, I was coming here expecting, expecting the same that I had over there if not better. And, so, I felt like I didn't really get that.

Kandace agreed that it was less common at PU to find professors who were as focused on teaching as they were on their research. She explained:

Some [faculty members at PU] are highly specialized in one area. If I have them for a class and it's something that they don't necessarily specialize in then I find them kind of at a loss for words sometimes. Um...I think that, again I think a lot of them are focused on research. And I see a lot of the TAs doing grading and things like that. I've seen that once or twice. But then I've come across some really...I guess professors that are less focused on research and integrate different acad...Like different ways of teaching in the classroom.

Jake was one of the students at PU who was directed to teaching assistants when he reached out to professors for help. He described his experience:

...Actually if I don't understand the lecture a little bit [at PU] I just go to the office hours of the professors. And they are not friendly. I mean, they are just like give me...They just teach me not the details. They just give me general ideas. But I want detail...They say [Pause.] Last semester, accounting class, they say "Just go to TA. Not me."

And, Melissa described the way that she felt some professors at her community college provided opportunities to learn both inside and outside the classroom:

So you could tell the professor [at community college] was engaged by the way he was in class and how he would stay longer hours. And even though some of them were full time and some of them were part time, you can tell that they had other things to offer like clubs, and they also participated in other activities that the college was part of. Where other professors just walk in and out, probably were there to give you office hours, but were only there to do their jobs, teach you the stuff. If you learn it, oh well. If not, you had the resources of the college to figure it out on your own.

James described his perspective on the primacy of teaching at PU versus the community college he attended. He illuminated his point using a story about one of his PU professors who had out of date information in his presentation slides:

So I was taking a class, a parasitology class, in my first semester here. And I noticed that this professor's slides were out of date; scientifically, and there were a lot of misspelled things, misspelled species, and there was a lot of out of date things in regards to the science world. He admitted to not having [up to date slides]. And he just brushed it off, he just didn't care. He was like "Yeah. I haven't changed these slides since 5 years ago." And so to me it's like you know all this...And that's all he did. He used his slides to, what is it? He used his slides to present his lecture to the class. You know, there was no new information. There was no interaction between the class and him. And everybody sat quiet the entire time. And there was no interesting anecdotes about his life. You know, you didn't really get to know the professor. And, you really didn't...So I feel like not knowing the professor and not adding in these anecdotes. You know, I feel like that disables or keeps us from actually from...I might be wrong, you know making the experience fun and memorable and all of this I feel like helps to memorize this stuff and helps to keep you interested. And my interest just died down because I felt like this guy wasn't putting any time into us. And I know that the professor they do research. And that's what they're here...they're getting paid to do. He was part of the medical school; he was doing research for the medical school. And I know that he was not here to teach...I mean obviously he's here to teach. But that's not his official title. As opposed to the community college, they're teachers first and then they do whatever they want on the side....But they've chosen to be teachers first. And so I feel like [PU], and maybe...I don't know what the rest of the schools of the four year universities out there are like, but I feel like a lot of them probably lack that because the professors, their motivation is not to teach. It's to do the research and to find new things. And to

be the leading research school. You know if you look at these Forbes' top universities or whatever, it's all based on the research. It's not based on the academics. It's not based on the quality of education received by the students. Um...it's all based on the research. At least what I've found in the mainstream. Maybe somewhere out there you'll find something based on the quality of education. But I have yet to find it. I was actually expecting, it's disappointing, because I was expecting a better education from this community...I mean this university.

George described how he only had one professor at PU who he felt a connection with similar to the connection he felt with his community college professors outside of class:

There has only been one professor here who, my experience with him was very similar to my experience in community college, in which he's like, "Come to office hours." We...Our conversations, on topic, off topic, are engaging. So, I would just come to office hours and we would talk. Either about curriculum, either about other academic topics, or just about our personal lives. And I still every once in a while do that. And his field is...I wouldn't say the opposite...But it is far from my field of interest. But that was a very singular incident.

At PU learning was more primary to the experience of study participants than it was for them at their respective community colleges. Many study participants, like Rachel, described making more of an effort to ask for help from professors at PU than they did at their community colleges:

I mean, I feel like I just don't think I valued it enough to even remember if they were as helpful at community college, the professors. But I think that every professor that I talk to here, they're genuinely out to help you. So they'll email you. If you reach out to them, they will respond as much as they can. I don't know why I was surprised. [It's] just that that, you know it's a private, four year institution, so they're just getting paid more.

Antoinette described what reaching out to professors at PU looks like:

It's emailing them or asking questions about things related to outside of class. Pretty much just getting their attention. And being like "Well oh! This student is really intrigued by this topic." You know. "Let me see what I can do for her or him." Or anything like that.

As Angela explained, reaching out for help from professors at PU was an important aspect that increased her learning. She explained:

I went to office hours. So, pretty much probably annoyed most of my professors like [laughs] with like drafts. So I would like write it and I would have like a draft and I would go in like a couple of weeks before. And then I had a few professors who were excellent, and they were like "Bring in your drafts we'll kind of go over it." And basically just taught me a lot about like proper writing styles that I had never really heard before. So I learned a lot here through office hours. Every paper I think I've...almost every paper I think I've ever turned in at [PU] I like, prior to turning it in went to office hours and had the professor read it...So, I think that was like, that was just hugely beneficial to me, because it was very like, the[*pause*] ok, I mean had some...especially in the beginning...professors who it was just like "This is horrible." Crossing it out like "Erase this. Like what are you thinking?" [laughs]...Like you know like very, like "Whoa!" Um, but that was really helpful for me, like it was like "Ok. So now I know." I was able to like sit there while they graded it, kind of watching it. And for me at least, learning why...That is what I need them to see. Areas where they were struggling. Areas where they were like "Ok. I want you to remove this." Instead of just getting it back and being like "Well, I don't know why they didn't like this paragraph." It was like "Ok. This needs to change because of this." And so I was able to associate my mistake with like a reason why it wasn't like ok. And so that really helped me. So, like, even from like this time last year...The start of my first semester to like now, like my writing has significantly changed. More so like my research writing. Because like I have always, I've always loved writing and enjoyed it. But it was never like um...it was always just a little more abstract and like creative writing. And I always did kind of well in that. But I never really did much as far as a research paper goes. So kind of like learning where to, how to incorporate more like abstract creative writing and like research paper, that was like an interesting way that I needed to, and still working on, like mending the two in a way that works.

The "Primacy of teaching and learning" theme brings to the fore critical differences in how study participants perceived their academic experiences at both the community college and at PU. Study participants perceived faculty members at their respective community colleges as teachers above all else. This perceived primacy of teaching at the community college seemed to have left a profoundly positive impression on some study participants. By contrast, other study participants described faculty

members at PU as having the primary role of researcher rather than teacher. The perceived primacy of research over teaching at PU seemed to have left study participants with feelings of neglect and isolation from faculty members at PU. Study participants also reflected on differences in the primacy of their own role as learners at the community college versus at PU. At community college study participants described themselves as attributing less value to learning than they did at PU. Study participants also described reaching out to faculty members for help more frequently at PU and this act contributing significantly to their academic experience.

Level of academic rigor is more challenging at PU

The level of academic rigor at Private University was described by study participants as more challenging than the level of academic rigor at the study participants' respective community colleges. At PU study participants described the amount of reading and the type and quantity of writing assignments as more intense than at their colleges. Study participants indicated that at the community college there was not as much homework, both reading and writing, as there was at PU. At the community college study participants described having to do very little preparation for class in order to get good grades. Study participants described having to put more effort into managing their time and getting good grades at PU than they did at college.

This theme is significant because it highlights key differences in the academic experiences of study participants at PU versus at their respective community colleges. Attending community college did not seem to prepare study participants for the level of academic rigor they experienced at PU. The amount of reading and writing at PU was

more challenging than study participants experienced at their respective community colleges. The difference in the levels of academic rigor experienced by study participants at the two institutions proved to be a significant challenge for study participants navigating the transfer process.

The level of academic rigor experienced by study participants at their respective community colleges was low. As Rebecca explained, “Academically, well...I felt like [community college] was less of an academic drive. There were like less...they weren't really pushing us to do our best.” Many study participants shared Rebecca’s sentiment and frequently referred to their community college being “like high school.” Iris explained:

Academically it was more like high school than college...So, the topic they talk about it's more...like it's easier. Then it's like high school...So the level of the lecture wasn't really like challenging...Like the economics class I took. I took macro- and microeconomics class. It was like the things I learned from high school. There was nothing new.... It was like high school. You don't really do anything. But you get credit for it...So you just go to classes. And then like, even if you don't do any of the assignments you can pass the course if you go to classes...And then like the professors, they know that you're trying to transfer to different universities. So they try to give you good grades.

Kim described how professors at her community college gave her good grades:

A lot of professors, I thought, at the community college sometimes they would even ask you "What grade do you need?" Like when you get upset "Oh, I have a bad grade!" They would say "Oh, don't get upset. What do you need? What do you need for later on?"...And they would give it to you...I mean not everyone. But there were a couple that took that into consideration. If you did good but then you blew one exam. But then you told them "Well, oh, I was sick" or something happened. And they see you're a good student, even though this one grade maybe would pull you back to a B, just as an example. If he knows your history, and he's like "Oh well you've been always a good student, I believe you. Something must have happened. Maybe you got sick, or at work something happened." You know he would be generous. And then he's putting you back up to an A.

Study participants described the academic environment of their respective community colleges as “straightforward” requiring little to no preparation for classes or exams. According to James,

They didn't, there was no assignments. There was no...The exams were given...let me think here...let me think one second...They were just straightforward. Everything was just very "This is what's going to be on the exam. This is what you need to know." Like all of the exams were multiple choice. Some of them were essays. But the ones that were essays were very short and straightforward. It was nothing too abstract about it. It was nothing that made me think to critically. I took a few philosophy classes there, and it just wasn't...I mean it was fun and it was entertaining and I learned...but it wasn't challenging. So, I usually did well in those classes, as everyone else did. Yeah...I would say it's a lot easier than the humanities at [PU], 100%.

Study participants, like Antoinette, described needing to do less to prepare for class at the community college than they did at PU:

Like compared to a community college it's like [at community college] You don't even need to look at the syllabus. You don't even need to prep yourself for everything...I felt like the teacher would just kind of announce it. Or you would find out like the moment before and just kind of get it done.

Rachel also described how little she had to do for homework at her community college:

And quite frankly, there wasn't a lot of homework involved [at my community college]. And if there was, I don't think I gave it too much attention just because I didn't feel as if it were as important as I do now. Because if like I'm not completing the readings, obviously at [PU] it's completely different than there. Like there you can just slide by, I felt like.

Rebecca also noted the difference in the level of preparation for class that was required of her at her community college versus at PU:

[At PU] I wasn't expecting...you have to be really prepared when you come in class. Like you have to...the material is to be covered that day...it's not like the professor is going to go through it with you. You have to know the material and ask questions about what you learn, what the professor said was going to be talked about that day. So yeah, being prepared is important I think...You can get away with it at [community college] way easier than here. For example, if you

don't like...do your reading before classes at [my community college], some of the reading, some of the material and the reading will be covered in class. So the professor will actually give a lecture and say about this subject, ok this is how you do it and this. Here [at PU] you come to class. They have an exercise. The professor has an exercise that's ready for you to do. Meaning that he's assuming that you've already done the reading. And you are just supposed to come and ask question of what you don't understand and do the exercise. As opposed to [community college] where you can go to class and the reading will...the professor will go through the reading a little. And then you can go back to the library and read about it some. Just a bit. And you will still have a good average in the class. A good grade. So I think...like in [community college] you're more lazy in a way that you assume the professor will cover some of the reading and you don't have to understand it by yourself. Where here you have to try to understand it and then ask questions where you don't understand.

Study participants described the academic environment at PU as more challenging than that at their respective community colleges. Kim's story illuminated the different level of rigor at the two institutions:

[PU is] a lot harder! So much harder. I mean when I first transferred I was like blown away how big that difference [laughs]. I mean I had some classes that transferred over which I think is not even comparable to the class that they offer here. I was a straight A student on the community college with no problem. I mean I was working full time, multiple jobs. I was doing only night classes and somehow I still aced all of my classes pretty easily. Here [laughs] it's a whole different story. I have to study a lot for my classes to get good grades. And I got, you know, it's not like in community college anymore where you can just fly through class. Especially the science classes...I mean academically. I took, the first semester I came here I took chemistry, general chemistry. The first part I took at the community college, the second part I did here. And the same for biology. The first part I did at the community college, the second part I started here. And so for both of those classes, I went into those classes with the expectation that the first part was easy. I sort of flew through those labs like a piece of cake. And then, especially with chemistry...especially that chemistry class I um, it's just like all that work that we had to do. Like in community college the best example is that when you had an exam no matter what class you got like a study sheet, like a study guide which the professor prepared which was like a 4 page, you know document. They give it to you. You literally memorize all of whatever is on those 4 pages and this is what they're going to ask you. So my chemistry class [at PU]...oh no, you don't get the study guide. [laughs] If she says we went through 5 chapters this what you need to know. If that's 400 pages, then you need to know those 400 pages. You need to know all of the formulas.

You need to know everything that we discussed in class that we calculated through. You know, there is no additional help. They assume that you study everyday with your classmates being on the same route I guess. There's no catch up because there's so much material that's being covered, you can't make it up on the weekend, which I did a lot at the community college. During the week I worked, on the weekend I did my homework. And it wasn't like that here. I had to do it every day because otherwise I would get so behind that it's impossible to catch up on all that material...So it was like the volume of information that you need to remember. That they were not very specific of what they were going to ask, so you needed to know everything. Community college they were very specific because they know you're working full time, you might have a family, you might be busy with a lot of other things juggling a lot of other situations. So they made it kind of easier for you. They pinpointed exactly "This is what's going to be asked. This, this, this, this. These are the calculations we're going to do. Know them." So it was a lot less to memorize and study for... I mean I knew [PU] was going to be harder. I didn't think it was going to be that hard.

June had a similar assessment of the level of academic rigor at PU:

But, since I transferred here, I notice that this school, [Private University], is more demanding, and requiring more compared to my previous school...Um, first I notice about the readings...I have so many readings from each class. The reading is really a lot. And, because students are expected to [have] read when they are coming to class so they just jump into the participation. So, without reading you are probably not able to get 100 percent from the lecture.

As compared to their experiences at community college, the higher level of academic rigor at PU required study participants to make adjustments to how they managed their time and approached assignments at PU. Angela explained:

I mean I knew like [PU] was like you know exponentially harder. So I mean, like my [first] semester...I had summer in between from my semester at the community college so spring to fall, I mean it was exponentially more difficult. Which I was expecting it to be more difficult but I wasn't expecting the amount of like reading. I wasn't expecting the amount of time it would take me to put into to get A's. So um, it was...yeah...it was an adjustment just to manage my time in a way...I was like "Ok. I'm going to need 5 hours today of just reading." And so, though I was expecting it to be like hard, I guess maybe...I don't know, I guess it's probably what I was expecting. I knew it would be harder and it was.

In addition to having more reading assigned at PU than at their respective community colleges, study participants also cited more writing assignments as contributing to the higher level of academic rigor at PU. As noted by Carl,

I would say [community college] class is much easier than [PU]. Because at [community college]...mostly you don't have to write paper. But at [PU], the difference between [PU] and [community college], we have to write a lot in [PU]. And this is the most difficult part for me. Like once a week I need to write a 5 page paper. And at [community college], maybe I only need to do it like 5 page paper in the semester. So this is the most difficult. Like for every single class I have to write paper. And also I have to like volunteer at work in the morning, I have to do my paper in the weekend. I study much more [at PU] than I do in [community college].

Like Carl, Angela found the level of writing required of her at PU to be more challenging than what she experienced at community college. She explained:

I've had like 2 semesters [at PU]. And many of the classes are like very challenging as far as you know a lot of reading and writing. And um especially like the writing was on a very...Granted I came here and started taking kind of like upper level classes. Where like over there it was kind of like intro to stuff. You know it was all the lower level. So the writing was probably the biggest struggle [for me at PU]. I had never really written a paper that was longer than like 3 pages [before transferring here]. And I had never used...I had never used any; I had only...I had used MLA. But even with that it was like most of the professors [at community college] kind of just told you exactly what to do. And so I had no experience with writing research papers, pretty much at all. So when I came [to PU], that was kind of one of the hardest things was kind of figuring out how to go about like writing a proper research paper and how to do the citing and how to do all of that. It was pretty much totally foreign to me.

Rachel's story illuminates the increased amount of effort that study participants felt they had to put into the academic experience at PU in order to meet the higher level or academic rigor:

Like I knew I was missing the challenge [at community college]. But I didn't know it was going to slap me in the face kind of thing [at PU]. [Laughs]...I think it was actually like 2 or 3 weeks in the [first] semester when I started falling behind on readings. And I felt like I could kind of slide by without doing them.

And I'm sitting in discussion and I'm just looking like an idiot basically. And that was just like... "Ok. I can't continue doing this. It's not the same." But at that point it was a little too late as far as like the readings. So... I started reading. But I still felt like I was behind all the time. Yeah... [And in the next semester] I definitely did the readings. Yeah. And, I think every semester I got different kind of like difficulty. I faced a different difficulty. So the first one was falling back on the readings. The second semester, I was actually doing the readings and participating in class discussions but it was a matter of not knowing how to study and writing papers... And I still, honestly, I still don't have like a clear-cut way to do it. Because I'm still failing some classes. I'm still failing papers... I'm hoping incorporating more office hour time is going to help with that. And just sitting down with the professor and finding out "What are your expectations as far as writing this paper? Or what do you expect and how can you recommend me to study for your tests?"... Yeah. Because at this point, like obviously reading the books and the articles is not the problem. It's about understanding the material and applying it so that I can prove to the professors that I do know what this says.

Study participants described the level of academic rigor at PU as more challenging than what they had experienced at their respective community colleges. According to many study participants the community college was "like high school" in that it was not academically rigorous. The level of preparation that was required for study participants to be successful in class at the community college was significantly lower than what was expected of them at PU. At PU study participants discussed the increased amount of reading and writing that was required of them for classes. Also, study participants described an increased level of effort that they had to expend in order to be successful in their classes at PU. This increased level of effort took the form of reaching out to faculty members for help with assignments, writing assignments in particular, and spending more time reading to prepare for class. The increased level of academic rigor at PU as compared to the community college was a significant difference that study participants noted about their academic experiences throughout the transfer process.

Transfer experience guided in whole or in part by career ambitions

Study participants indicated that their transfer experiences were informed in whole or in part by their career and professional ambitions. At the community college level, career ambitions of study participants may have influenced their institution and major selection to a certain extent. But these factors informed study participants' decision to attend Private University and their major and course selection after transferring in more pronounced ways. Career and professional ambitions were cited by many study participants as contributing to their experience as transfer students at Private University.

The significance of this theme is that it demonstrates how study participants considered their academic experiences at their community colleges as well as at PU in a holistic manner framed by their future aspirations. From the time that study participants entered the community college many of them were thinking about their future career goals. This theme shows how study participants viewed their time academic experiences at community college and at Private University as part of their career preparation.

Some study participants thought that the community college would be the only higher education institution they would need to attend for their degree. But when they learned more about the career they wanted to pursue the study participants realized that they needed degrees higher than what could be awarded at the community college.

Rebecca explained:

I believed that I would have been done at [community college]...Like it was 4 years and then I could pass the CPA. But I learned that you cannot get...you can only do the Associates at [community college]. And to have a CPA you have to

have a Bachelor's degree. So when I learned that I was like “Oops. I have to transfer.”

Kim had a similar realization at her community college when she learned more about the health profession that she hoped to enter. This information about how higher education affected her job prospects in her chosen field influenced Kim’s decision to pursue the transfer pathway. She explained:

Well I wanted to get my bachelors. And I knew the 2-year institution was not going to give me that. I wanted to work in healthcare field and I know most jobs, most higher jobs like nursing, doctors they all need the bachelor’s first and you can go from there. So, I mean, I knew once I figured out I’m at a 2-year institution [laughs] I knew I’m going to transfer no matter what to get a bachelor's degree...And I told [my advisor] I wanted to go to nursing school. And I know that that community college they have their own nursing program but you don't get your BSN it would just be RN. And I know a lot of hospitals they require a BSN. So we started talking about getting a bachelor's degree in nursing and how the program there is structured. And how I would have a hard time in the first place getting in since I was an international student and it was a community college...where it's not so much about your grades and extracurricular activities. It's more about if you're from that state or not...which I was not...and I would never be. [laughs]. So, she told me you know I would have a better chance of getting into a nursing program, transferring to a 4 year university, getting my BSN and then competing only with grades and not with where I'm from.

Although Joe did not have specific professional aspirations when he was at his community college, career ambition informed his decision to pursue baccalaureate education. According to Joe:

I mean if you have a 2-year degree and you have a 4-year degree and you have the same job, promotion available. I mean on paper, I think the recruiter would, without a doubt, take the person with the 4-year degree. That's what I think. I think education is the key to you know find a decent job. I just think...I didn't think so when I was in high school, when I was a kid. But now I do. Now I get a feel of it.

Upon transferring to PU, career ambitions continued to inform study participants' experiences. Chloe described how PU attracts ambitious students and how the culture of the institution inspires high career aspirations:

I think [PU] students are some of the greatest students out there. I think they're better than students at schools that are ranked way higher than [PU] because we kind of live in an atmosphere that breeds competitive, like high performance students. We are in a [city]; you know everything you could want is here. And students come here and they take advantage of that. And they're very self-motivated. And they're very dedicated to whatever it is they're interested in. Whether it's becoming the next congressman or studying finance or I don't know, starting a nonprofit that helps people. You know, they're very, very motivated individuals. You know, I know people here who turned down opportunities at better schools ranking-wise...because they wanted to be in this type of environment. In a city... And the opportunities that you have at [PU] you just don't have at other schools. You know going to a different school...you know the name recognition might get you a better job. But I always like to say that [PU] students once they get that job will be able to perform better once they get that job. Because everyone here has an internship before they graduate. It's just the nature of the school.

For example, Kim decided to attend PU because of her long-term career goals:

Well, so I knew that there is a contract between the community college and [state] colleges to have a guaranteed transfer to one of these schools if you have a certain GPA. Since I had a 4.0 I mean it didn't really matter. So I first started talking to [Public University] a lot. I went to their offices to see which classes to transfer and all that, just to gather some information. But, I found out pretty quickly that, while they have a good nursing program, they did not have their own hospital, they did not have their own like pre-med program per se. Yeah they offer pre-requisites for pre-med students; obviously those are like regular classes you can take if you major in biology or chemistry. But, since I wasn't really sure at that point. I was thinking about going into medicine instead of nursing because I found out...I wanted to be a nurse midwife to deliver babies and then once I started volunteering at a hospital they told me "You know here in the US a lot of times it's not the midwife delivering it's actually [an] OB-GYN. And you need a medical degree for that, you need to be a doctor." And so, since I wasn't sure that that was should I do nursing or maybe medical school, I was trying to find a school that supports medical, that career path, a little bit more. And I felt like [PU] does a better job for that. I mean they have pre-med advisors, pre-med groups, they have a pre-med blog. They have their own hospital. I felt like they just offer a lot more for people who are interested in that career path. And so I

applied here. I mean at the same here I applied at [Public University]. But since I got in here [laughs] I came here obviously I'm here.

Study participants' selection of a major at PU was also informed by their career ambitions. As noted by Kandace, she picked her major because of its application to her job:

So when I finished [my Associate's degree] I knew I wanted to stay local so I just looked at colleges that were in the area. Because that was something that was [of] interest to me. So basically I just looked at the classes that were offered. And I found the [early childhood] program here at [PU] and thought it looked good. I work with kids now and can apply what I do...what I'm learning here to my job. So that's how I came up with [PU].

Career ambitions also influenced Angela's selection of a major at PU although in a more circuitous fashion. Angela explained:

Well, I've actually liked [history] from as a child...like actually really, really young. And I've always had, like...so I'm studying like 20th century European history. And I've always been interested in that since as early as I can remember. But I just never looked at it as far as like a job. Because I didn't want to teach...I didn't want to teach like high school or [elementary school]...That wasn't really anything I ever wanted to do. So I didn't consider it an option. Like I said, I mainly just considered things that brought like a paycheck...that would have like a good sustainable job at the end. So when I kind of removed that I was like "Well, what do I love?" I love reading history. So it was kind of like a no brainer. Might as well just do what I love to do.

Angela went on to describe how her passion for her major inspired her career aspirations. This professional passion influenced how Angela navigated her experience at PU. Because of her career ambitions Angela put more effort into her major. She continued:

Yeah. I mean I'm definitely; I'm very, very interested in [my major]. I mean, obviously, I mean this is the summer, but I've been spending my like days at the [library] in like the reading room at the museum, and like meeting with a lot of the staff there. And trying to like ask questions and like get to know a lot of the scholars that are at the museum. And try and like hopefully make connections. I

mean they're already helping me out so much with my research and showing me things that I would never have known existed. And so helping, like showing me also, just different opportunities that are there, that I would never have known. And so hopefully, too, like my becoming friends with a lot of these people will help me in the future get like jobs and internships and research assistant jobs.

Career ambitions informed study participants' transfer experiences in various ways. At the community college career goals and aspirations influenced why study participants selected their institutions and majors. Career ambitions also played a role in study participants' decision to transfer to Private University as well as their major selection at PU. The influence that career ambitions had on study participants' transfer experiences demonstrated that these individuals considered their long term goals throughout the various stages of their postsecondary education. Professional aspirations informed study participants' decision making throughout the transfer process. At Private University, study participants also considered the implications of their choices, actions, and behaviors at PU on their long-term career goals.

Hallmark academic experiences share interactive and practical attributes

Study participants cited hallmark academic experiences that shared interactive and practical attributes. The hallmark academic experiences that study participants described included field trips, assignments, and discussions that allowed students to interact with each other, faculty members, and experts in the field. These hallmark academic experiences, according to study participants, provided opportunities for classroom learning to be applied in real world settings and put into practice.

When asked to describe academic experiences that stood out for them at both the community college as well as at Private University study participants recalled

experiences in which classroom learning had practical or hands-on applications. This is significant in that it demonstrates a sense of utility that study participants felt their postsecondary education should have. Academic knowledge that could be utilized in real and practical applications characterized the hallmark academic experiences that stood out for study participants, not only at Private University but also at their respective community colleges.

Study participants noted the use of teaching methods at PU that applied classroom learning to real life situations as an important component of their hallmark academic experiences at the institution. Rebecca realized the importance of these real life applications of her academic learning at PU and recounts her recognition of this link using a story involving one of her classmates:

I took one class last semester, this past semester, it was business law. I think. Business law. Yes. And I liked that class because I think the professors way of teaching it was really effective in a way that we...it wasn't focused on the material. It was more focused on application of the material. But at the end of the day we knew what was the material. Like she was teaching us by giving us an example. But we ended up knowing the material without like having to sit down and just read it. We remembered that like "Oh. We did this and that." And that's like what she taught us. For example, like one of my friends who took the class with me had an internship this summer and it was unpaid internship. And they...so he applied. He got the position. And they worked out the schedule perfectly. He was supposed to start on a Monday. The Friday before that they sent him a contract to sign. So he was like "What is this?" You can't sign a contract for an unpaid internship because a contract is invalid if it's not paid. So that's something we learned in that class. And it was like [snaps] business law. [Laughs] So he emailed her. And she was like "You're totally right. You don't have to sign a contract." So he ended up like not doing the internship because he felt like it was somehow fraudulent. And he finally worked something else.

At their respective community colleges study participants recalled hallmark academic experiences that also shared practical application of classroom learning and

interaction between students and faculty members. There was a hands-on application of knowledge that prevailed in the hallmark academic experiences of study participants at the community college level. Melissa shared her story of putting her classroom learning into practice in meaningful and memorable ways:

So, I did one project...with the United Nations, which was a human rights project. It was initially to create awareness about the declaration of human rights...And, um, it's just basically, every student would get like a page. Because part of the reason that [my community college] has the problems it has is because a lot of people are not educated in a lot of like issues. And they didn't know that they had human rights. So we just threw this campaign for the month of October. And everywhere that you would go you would see a human right. And then professors would give you a sheet of paper with the right and you could write or you could draw whatever that right brought to you. So at the end of the month we had a lot of [submissions]...like way more than we had ever done. Big books. And we were not expecting that. And one of the [professors] he was so good he was able to [connect] us with UNAUSA in [local] chapter. And I did this project with one of my friends. It was just me and her. [And the professor] he contacted the one in New York and they were like "Look. We think it's a great program and we just talked to some people we know at the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights and he wants to meet with you...the Secretary of the High Commission. He wants to meet with the three of you. Come in December." So we went to the UN. Like VIP. Talked to the Secretary. He goes, "I love it. I'm going to put one in the Security Council, send one to Vienna, and keep one in my [office]." So the books are travelling around...Yeah. They were big. It was fantastic. It was like really good. But we never really thought it was going to be that big. You're still thinking, "Well, I'm at a community college. How big is it going to be?" And it wasn't until we saw like how great our students could be. And we pushed them. And we were like, "Hey. Do you know you have the right to rest?" "Yeah right." And I'm like "No, no, no. It's a human right. How do you feel about that?" And some would like write poems on it. It was so visually impressive that we took them to the United States Mission to the UN. So we took them to a lot of places. And it was really fast trip to New York. But it was impress...it was really good. And those are experiences that not everybody at [community college] gets. But you have to really, really push to get those.

Hallmark academic experiences at the community college were ones that not only gave study participants the opportunity to apply what they learned in the classroom to real life situations, but also opportunities for study participants to connect with their

faculty members and classmates outside the classroom. Amanda's story illustrates this particular aspect:

So I took that comparative politics class. And we had some like readings to do. And the case studies were on some different countries like France, Brazil, and Iran. I didn't know about that. They did not put that on syllabus until I got it in class. So when I saw that we were about to learn about France I was like, "Oh my gosh! This is like, so great! Because I'm always interested into debating the regime over there." And I saw some people who were also interested in that too. So it was great. And the teacher was really outgoing. He wasn't hesitating from like telling people to give their opinions and kind of create that kind of debate in class. And also it was like a small class. It was like 16 to 20 students in the class. So it was great. And I remember during the semester we went to watch *Argo*. So it was interesting because we were studying Iran. And we could see...Like some students are more interested into like, for example...So like some people are interested into like learning through videos and movies because you better understand it. And *Argo* was mostly about those hostage they had in Iran but also about the revolution. So it was pretty interesting. And like going like for a class trip, you get to know your fellow classmates. And it was amazing. So we had that relation with the teacher, but also with like classmates.

Hallmark academic experiences of study participants at both the community college and at Private University shared common traits of practical and real world application of classroom knowledge. This theme demonstrates the desire of study participants to be able to utilize what they learned in the classroom in real world situations. At the community college hallmark academic experiences involved taking what was learned in the classroom into the field for application. While at Private University these hallmark academic experiences involved the use of real life examples in the classroom as well as application of what was learned in the classroom to real life situations outside of the classroom.

Conclusion to Research Question 2

The themes answering Research Question 2 highlighted important similarities and differences between the academic experiences of study participants at their respective community colleges as compared to Private University. At both institution types study participants were driven by their career aspirations and revered academic experiences that involved applied learning and interaction. However, study participants noted differences in how teaching and learning were prioritized by faculty members and students as well as in the level of academic rigor at the two institutions. These themes showed how study participants navigated the academic environment of the community college and the private university during the transfer process. All four themes that answer Research Question 2 provided valuable insight into how study participants described and understood their academic experiences transferring from community colleges to Private University. The themes identified in response to Research Question 3, in the following section, provided comparable insight into the study participants' social experiences.

Findings for Research Question 3: How do these students describe their social experiences at each institution?

The third and final research question allowed the researcher to drill down into the social experiences of study participants throughout the process of transferring from community colleges to Private University. It is important to understand how individuals are socialized to institutions of higher education as this socialization can affect the academic experience. Study participants expressed opinions and anecdotes about their social experiences at both the community college and at PU throughout data collection. Five themes were identified from the stories that study participants shared about their

social experiences during the transfer process. The themes answering the final research question were the following:

Table 6

Themes answering Research Question 3

Academic aspect to formal social experiences

Housing viewed as critical component of social environment

Differing primary locus of social experience as internal or external to the institution

Age contributed to perception of social environment

Entering established social networks at Private University was challenging

The themes identified as answering the final research question were significant because they provided information about how the study participants described and made meaning of their social experiences at the community college as well as at Private University. Some of these themes spanned the social experiences of study participants at both institutions, while others are specific to study participants' social experiences at Private University. The themes of "Academic aspect to formal social experiences" and "Housing viewed as critical component of social environment" highlighted similarities between the social experiences of study participants at the community college and at Private University. The theme of "Differing primary locus of social experience as internal or external to the institution" emphasized an important difference between the social experiences of study participants at each institutional type. Finally the themes of

“Age contributed to perception of social environment” and “Entering established social networks at Private University was challenging” spotlighted specific aspects of the social experiences of study participants at Private University. While the themes answering the third research question may appear to be more straightforward, they represent important aspects of the study participants’ social experiences at community college and PU. The world of a college student might seem small when viewed by an outsider. But the themes answering the third research question demonstrate how seemingly small facets of social life at an institution can have great impact on students’ experiences.

Academic aspect to formal social experiences

Study participants described an academic aspect to most of their social experiences at both their respective community colleges as well as at Private University. At the community college the social experiences of study participants were in the form of interactions with classmates or professors inside or outside of the classroom. The academic component of social experiences at Private University came in the form of formal participation in academic-related student organizations and professional fraternities.

This theme was significant because it demonstrated that study participants made connections between their academic and social experiences at both the community college as well as at Private University. In many instances, study participants described their social experiences concomitantly with their academic ones. Study participants saw their social experiences as ways to advance their academic interests at both institutions.

At the community college, study participants were part of programs offered by the institution outside of the classroom that supported the academic mission of the institution.

These were social experiences that had academic components. For example, James participated in such a program at the community college that he attended. He explained:

And there was this center, this program that I was a part of called MESA: Math, Engineering, and Science Achievement Program. And that program would allow students like myself who were interested in sciences to gather in one specific location and basically do what they pleased, whether it was study, whether it was talk about science, whether it was study science, whether it was study for homework...whatever it may be. And that kind of also helped to, I guess, a lot of the professors would also meet there. And the interaction between the students and the professors kind of it all happened in that one room. And so you got to, I felt as though I was getting these privileges to getting to know these professors, to getting to know all of these smart kids, these ambitious kids...Every month MESA would host a series, a lecture series. And the lecture series revolved around whatever topic the professor giving that lecture wanted to talk about, so their field specialty, their field of specialty or whatever. And so the person would come in. Let's say their field of specialty was earthquakes or geology, or whatever. They'd come in and they would talk about a specific topic within their field. And so if it was geology they would talk about earthquakes. If it was structural engineering they would talk about bridges, and bridges capacity to hold certain weight, or whatever it might be. And so, there was that social aspect where they would host these once a month. And it would really cater and it would also stimulate a lot of new ideas. And I would feel like as though it had an influence. 'Cause they would invite anyone who even weren't in the MESA program, to come and listen to these lectures. So I felt like it did a good job of exposing these young kids, these people whose minds were being molded into going into these fields, and going into the science field. And I liked it because I felt like there were new people, new faces every single month, coming in. And it would only grow.

Other study participants were part of honors programs and honors societies at the community colleges that they attended. Through these types of academic programs and student organizations, study participants accessed the social environment at their respective community colleges. George explained:

So your social encounters would usually be in class. And since, and that means it's based on discussion. You will find. If you're in honors you will know other honors students. You're not, you won't know any. You will not engage, you will not be engaged with other students, generally speaking. However, clubs were a big part of it. So I was the president of the honors society. So I was surrounded

with honors students, honors professors... Which, I mean now I'm friends with a lot of honors students and some professors. So socially I was happy because I met like-minded folks that definitely helped my progress there and beyond.... My best friend and I, we had similar concepts for research and our professor just connected us. As part of our honors society we had an office and next to us was another honors group. And just being in the same space and having the same, going through the same procedures technically, of transferring to another school and yada, yada, yada. We combined forces. We talked a lot. We were physically close. Spending time together, inside of class and outside of class. And that just allowed us to know each other better.

Those study participants that took part in other formal involvement opportunities at their respective community colleges did so in ways that connected to their academic major or interest. Ross, an international relations major interested in government and politics, took part in student government at his community college. He described his experience:

I did student government the whole 2 years I was [community college]. I was extremely involved in that. I was vice president and legislative chair, acting president for a while, and a bunch of other things, and then head of the club program. And I really got involved in what student life there was... And so that's why I involved myself in the student government... There was a little bit of campus life. Like we'd have activities and the clubs were pretty involved. You know you'd have like Latino Student Alliance, they'd do stuff for whatever holiday they're celebrating. And so there's limited social and like campus activity. And we tried to foster that as much as we could. And I think that really helped me at least stay motivated while I was there.

Upon transferring to Private University study participants' continued to join formal involvement opportunities that had academic components. At PU, academic and professional student organization participation was popular amongst study participants. For example, Chloe was a member of a professional fraternity at PU that related to her major. She explained:

I'm personally involved in a professional fraternity. It's a business fraternity. And I'm the vice president of marketing now. And I was the director of networking

last semester. So it was really easy for me to go in, and take on a leadership role and really get involved. And that was a good way to create a social environment that's also professional. And we share a common interest. I mean there's a lot of those on campus. I mean there's community services sororities, fraternities. There's the engineering fraternity, like pre-med. There's a lot of options in terms of that. So, I think that those are great resources for students. As well as obviously, we have like 400 and plus, student organizations that represent every single diverse group of people we have on campus. And to me that's great. I knew I wanted to come to [PU]. And it's kind of not failed my expectations of what I was hoping from it.

Rebecca, a business major, also was a member of a professional fraternity at PU.

She described how and why she became a member of this organization:

Well I am, uh, I am a member of Alpha Kappa Psi, the fraternity. And how I joined that is because I saw a lot of posters. And I think it was [in the business] building. And that's how I joined AKPsi. And before joining AKPsi, I was part of the Finance...it's called FIC...It's a finance club, Finance and Investment Club. So what we do is...they take stock investments and we have portfolios and we do virtual investments and portfolios. Kind of activities.

Kim was also a member of a professional fraternity at PU:

And I joined a fraternity too. Those people...it's the same as like a professional fraternity. And so, everyone was very goal oriented. You know, they're very much into like, this is what I want and so I'm going to work hard for this. They have a lot of extracurricular activities. So, every once in a while we get together and have some fun times. I mean we do go out too. But, it's not that often. And so, I think it's a good fit. Yeah. Whereas other social groups here, they do that every day or every weekend. But that's not...I mean, I didn't expect to join those kinds of people anyways.

And study participants that were not yet part of formal involvement opportunities with academic components hoped to seek opportunities for participating in the social environment at PU in ways that would coincide and support their academic and professional interests. Rachel explained:

I definitely would like to be part of something that's not a sorority but something that's going to help me transition to adult life and career wise. Something that's helpful in that sense...something professional. I was looking into some student

organization about like the United Nations. So I think that would be cool because I'm an [international relations] major so it would [be] related to what I'm interested in.

Through their participation in institution-sanctioned co-curricular academic programs, honors societies, and professional fraternities at both the community college as well as at Private University study participants demonstrated a desire for their formal participation in the social environment of both institutions to have an academic component. While these formal participation opportunities allowed study participants to access the social environment of the institution, they also allowed study participants to advance their academic and professional interests. These experiences allowed study participants to make connections between their academic and social experiences. Study participants were driven by their professional aspirations. Engaging in formal involvement opportunities that combined academic and social experiences allowed study participants to further advance their career ambitions through strategic participation in the social environment of the institution.

Housing viewed as critical component of social environment

Study participants cited housing as a critical component of the social environment. Living off-campus often limited study participants' active participation in the social environment of the community college and Private University. On-campus housing was viewed by participants as integral to acculturation into the social environment at Private University. Study participants viewed housing as an essential means of socialization at PU.

This theme was significant because it highlighted the connection that study participants drew between physical space or location and their social experience. This

theme demonstrated how the social experiences of study participants were not occurring in a vacuum but rather how physical space, location, and other individuals in those environments influenced them. Study participants described how they perceived their housing location to play a significant role in how they partook of the social environment at both their respective community colleges as well as at Private University.

Study participants noted that living off-campus while attending their respective community colleges versus living on-campus or near campus at PU had an impact on their participation in the social environment at each institution. Rachel explained:

Making friends is probably, I guess a little more difficult, just because your main goal there is just going to class, getting your work done and leaving. Whereas here social life is more an active involvement because you're living with the same people that you're going to class with. So it's a little bit more involved. And you're doing more things with your classmates. Like, if I was to go to the gym when I was back at home and commuting, it was just going to be me. Whereas here, I always ask around and like have like a work out buddy.

Even study participants that did not live on-campus at PU saw housing as an important aspect of the social environment at the institution. According to Carl:

I think because I live off-campus you cannot expect that much [from the social environment]. Because most people, they live on-campus. So they are easy to hang out with, with organizations...So I would like to spend more time [on-campus] to join the organizations. I can tell you maybe after this semester.

Joe had a similar experience. He explained:

Well I don't live on-campus, but I feel like I've made more friends here at [PU]. And it seems to me that you know people [are] constantly on the go. It's always, I mean I understand that when you, I think when you and your friends, or even your classmates, people you don't even know. When you're confined in the same place, you know, so like same dorm, same apartment building, I think it's easy for them to connect. Whereas me being a commuter, it's just mostly I meet friends through friends. So my social circle isn't that broad maybe compared to other students. I'm not saying that I don't have any friends. But I'm just saying

compared to other students who live on campus. I mean that might be quite a big difference as far as the social life goes.

Living off-campus created an experience similar to that of community college for study participants. According to Ross:

But still when you're living in the suburbs, not in the city...It almost felt like community college again. Commuting to school. And originally, obviously, I didn't know anybody. So I felt, probably more out of place than I did at community college because it wasn't even...I mean I was in a foreign, a distant land practically. Strange weather. Different people. And just everything was different. And it was really off-putting at first.

Study participants like Ross who lived off-campus when they first transferred to PU noted a difference in how they accessed the social environment after moving on-campus. Ross explained:

And also, when I moved I lived off campus, and then the semester after I moved on campus, and for the first time I had some roommates. And they had been having roommates, you know, for years. And here I am just for the first time getting used to that. And I met one of my best friends...he was my roommate. And so that...I had always heard about people talk about that like "Oh you might meet one of your best friend moving in" I never thought I would, and then I did. And he even ended up coming to California to visit [my home], even though he's from the East Coast. So I mean that really...I mean, that was really fun. And I think that made the experience of being in school really enjoyable. Being able to live with someone and actually be able to hang out and become friends and all that. Just socializing experience was a lot different than I expected.

James had a similar experience when he moved on-campus at PU. He described his experience:

First year I didn't [live on-campus]. I lived [off-campus] with my brother. I didn't like that at all. I didn't meet anybody. Because I literally...There's not one person I know, that I befriended from the first year that I still know, at all. Because I just never interacted. But last year I stayed on-campus. I met a really good friend. He graduated. His name is [Chad]. He's a really, really good guy. But he moved. But there was him. There was my roommate. So the other suitemate [John]. But they were all really cool people. We would stay up late at night. And we would talk and just talk about bull crap, nothing really interesting, but just fun. It was

just pure fun. And I mean it's memorable...I mean those instances where we would stay up late just talking. Where would stay in the living room just hanging out were very fun times.

Study participants described the importance that housing played in their ability to make friends at PU. Melissa explained:

Most of my floor...If like, let's say its 10, 15 rooms, 7 of them hated [PU] for their like first semester...could not stand it at all. Hated everything about it. Didn't like it. Complained about everything. They didn't understand why they were placed with people who didn't know anything about the school. Would have preferred different housing because would have liked someone else to guide them.

Housing was a factor which study participants frequently noted as contributing to the social environment at both their respective community colleges as well as at Private University. At the community college, study participants commented that living off-campus, usually at home with their families, limited their participation in the social environment of the institution. At Private University study participants noted that participation in the institution's social environment was enhanced by living in on-campus housing. Study participants that did not live on-campus noted a desire to live on-campus to increase their participation in the Private University social environment. While housing may seem like a basic necessity for students, the study participants' comments showed how they viewed their housing as integral to their social experiences, specifically at PU. Living on-campus at PU shifted how study participants experienced the social environment at PU as compared to their community college. Those study participants who lived off-campus at PU noted that students who lived on-campus participated in the social environment in different ways. They either moved on-campus or expressed a

desire to do so. This showed that changes in housing had the potential to greatly shift how study participants experienced the social environment of the institution.

Differing primary locus of social experience internal or external to the institution

Study participants described the primary locus of their social experiences as either internal to the higher education institution or external to the higher education institution. The primary locus of the social experiences of study participants varied between the community college versus Private University. At the community college study participants described their primary social experience as external to the institution, while at Private University the primary locus of the social experience became internal to the institution for many study participants.

This theme highlighted a key difference between the social experiences of study participants at the community college versus at Private University. The physical location of where study participants perceived their main social environment shifted from outside the institution to inside the institution. Study participants noted specific reasons why this shift occurred as they reflected on their experiences at both institutions.

At the community college study participants reflected on how their primary social experiences were outside of the institution. As noted by Iris:

Socially, I wasn't really involved in any like social activities [at community college]....No not really. So it's like you just come to class and then you go. And then you go to work. Or you go home. Yeah. That was it. I wasn't [working]. But other students were working. Most of them were working. So, I go to class and then after class, I go to another class. So after all my classes are finished I go home. Or sometimes I hang out with my friends from different universities. But that was it.

Ross described the social environment at his community college in similar ways:

I'm sure [the social environment was] much different than here because it [was] a commuter school. You may have 20,000 students but nobody really cares about what is going on. They just go, take their classes, go home to wherever that may be. So there wasn't really a social scene. And you felt really disconnected going, which I'd say is the hardest part about going to community college. Because at least here you're, it's easy to be motivated when everything's around you. But there, you have to travel 45 [minutes] to get there. And by the time you get there there's really no draw or social scene pulling you in. So that was kind of hard.

Some study participants went to community colleges attended by their friends from high school. Joe, for example, relied on his high school friends for his social connection at his community college. He explained:

The social atmosphere is like...There so in that community college there wasn't any on campus housing. So. Mostly students just come and go and take classes. And there was a lot of adult students as well. Yeah. I had a few friends taking some classes with me...friends from high school. So, yeah. The social life there was pretty limited as far as my experience goes.

Other study participants did not feel as committed to their community college as they did to Private University. This level of commitment influenced how they participated in the social environment of the institution. Rachel explained:

I don't think that I was that involved in any kinds of clubs at [community college]. Yeah. Yeah. There were clubs. And I'm sure they enjoyed it because they were still around [laughs]. But it was just not on my priority list. Because I feel like when you become a part of like a student organization or a club at your university, there's sort of a patriotism involved or like school spirit. And I didn't have that there. I just didn't care. I didn't even make my student ID. That's how much I just didn't care. [laughs]...Never had a student ID. Never used their printers. Never used their bathrooms. [laughs] I didn't use anything. So it's like...sure I went to the bathroom. But I mean like...I don't know. I just didn't care though... I mean I keep my circle small...always. So, yes. And then. Because I was big into travelling. Even when I was at [community college]. So like in the summer times I wouldn't be there. I wouldn't be even in the country. Winter break. Spring breaks. All that.

Study participants noted that the primary locus of the social environment at their respective community colleges was outside of the institution. Angela described her experience:

I don't think many people...there really wasn't much going on. I never heard of anyone talk about going to a game, like a sporting game, or like student body stuff. Like it wasn't very involved. It was kind of like, you did...There was a university that was like, I don't know, 5 miles away. And so if students everyone going to this community college was hoping to get into that school. So I feel like there was more like I had friends who were going to my community college but still wore all the sweatshirts and went to all of the games of the university. So it was kind of like there wasn't much like rallying behind your, behind the community college as far as like an identity in the school. For that, and at least in the town, it was more for the university next door.

At Private University study participants described the social environment as internal to the institution. Study participants described different activities in which they participated at PU that made them feel a part of the social environment. According to Ross:

And I always feel like there's something going on, if I want to get involved. I mean even here in the [International Relations School] they have different experts coming in, talking about what's going on in the world. There's always something to do. So I think that also motivates me to make sure I'm doing well. Because I'm living it. Where at community college I have to seek it out on my own. I feel like I'm living the experience here, 24/7.

Study participants noted that they were drawn into the social environment within Private University. They stated that they were encouraged to participate in the PU social environment. Rebecca explained:

Like here, I feel like they call us more [to participate]. Like "Oh, come to this fair. Come to this event. Come and do this." Where at [community college] they don't have that. Like here you have the newsletter that comes weekly. We don't have that there. So, I feel that's a difference. Where here I'm being called on to be engaged in activities where maybe if I was looking for more activities [at

community college] I might have found them but I wasn't being called on to doing it.

The primary locus of the social environment shifted for study participants from outside of the institution at the community college to inside the institution at Private University. Study participants noted that their social environment at the community college consisted mostly of their friends and family and other relationships they had prior to matriculating at the institution. At Private University study participants described how their social environment was part of the institution itself. Different factors such as housing and being called on to participate in the social environment in different ways at PU contributed to the shift of the primary locus of study participants' social environment. Study participants adjusted the focus of their social environment to fit with the norms of the institution they attended. What worked for them socially at the community college was not necessarily what worked for them at the private university because the culture of the institution was different. Therefore, study participants had to make adjustments to how they participated in the social environment of the private university.

Age contributed to perception of social environment

Study participants identified their own age as an influence on their perception of the social environment. At their respective community colleges, study participants noted that they were younger which influenced how they perceived and navigated the social environment at that institution. At Private University study participants described real or perceived age differences between themselves and the rest of the student body. These real or perceived age differences changed their perception of the social environment and how they would fit into it at PU.

This theme demonstrated how study participants perceived themselves in relation to other members of the social environment. Age was a significant factor in how study participants understood themselves and the social environment, particularly at PU. These real or perceived differences in age between study participants and other members of the PU community had an impact on how study participants chose to participate in PU's social environment. Age differences were cited by study participants as disincentives for participating in the social environment at Private University.

Real or perceived differences in age were described by study participants as influencing their perception of the social environment at Private University. This perception had an impact on study participants' access to the PU social environment.

Angela explained:

Well, I mean to be honest because I'm like a lot older than most of my classmates, I haven't really like, I mean I've made a few friends that I hang out with. But the majority of my like social, people I mainly hang out with are I've met out of school. So, I mean, I live off campus. And I work at like...I work two jobs...at like a restaurant and a bar. So I mean I meet people. And most of my friends are older from I've met outside of school.

Kandace also described how the age difference between herself and the students at PU affected her perception of the social environment:

So socially I have the same kind of like setup where I have a lot of friends that are in the area...that I've grown up with, that I've met since. I'm also, like coming here, I came in much older than much of the, than the [other] undergrads. So, and like even my first semester here, you start talking to people and like I was over 21. So like, simple fact I felt like I couldn't be like "Let's go out on Friday night." Or "Let's go grab a drink." Because I just wasn't trying to...I mean, I just felt like that was inappropriate. I don't know. So I feel like as being older makes it a little more challenging. But because I still have friends that are separate, I just keep my...I keep social relationships here all about the academics basically, and my social life is separate.

Similarly, George felt that his status as an older student made it difficult to connect with most other students at Private University. He explained:

They make me feel old, but not in terms of like "Oh my god! I feel like a grandpa." As in someone who's been in those conversations 20, no 15 years ago. And it's just like talking to my very, very young cousins. I enjoy talking to them. But very rarely will we find a topic that we would want to like, I don't know...spend the night talking about. There would not be, there's no, there's nothing that engages me. It's just me, personally. I've yeah...It's either superficial, or it's either things I just don't relate to. Superficial is judgmental to say its things that I don't relate to. Because I am not, again, it might come off as judgmental or hating or something. It really isn't. I chose to come here assuming, knowing what it will be like.

For Kim, her age meant that she also had different roles and responsibilities in her life compared to the many of the other students at PU:

And then I think I'm also a very atypical student because I'm working 2 jobs full time, I'm married, and so I think because of that I'm still a lot more busy than other students because I have so much still going on besides school. And, my involvement in labs too, still some people just work a couple of hours during the week. But when I joined the lab, at first it was like that but then I took on a lot more responsibilities. I started taking on the job as the lab manager. And now I'm working there full time, and not just a couple of hours during the week doing my research, and you know due to time I would say I don't have as many friends as others. I don't socialize as much as others.

Real or perceived differences in age between study participants and students who began their college careers at PU had an impact on how study participants felt they could access the social environment at PU through formal modes of participation. As noted by Antoinette:

I think I'm too old [to rush a sorority]...Because I'm 23. And that's old...Because it's like I don't think that me trying to gain the acceptance of another group of girls that are like 2 years younger than me is like [cool], that's my personal opinion.

Chloe elaborated on the experience of rushing a sorority at PU as a transfer student from a community college:

But it's very awkward going to like a sorority recruitment which I don't even know how to begin to explain to you what that even is...But as a transfer student you're kind of looked at as a little less desirable because they want you to come in as a freshmen. But coming in as a sophomore you're even a little less desirable. So coming in as a junior transfer student. And some juniors lie and say that they're sophomores just so they look more desirable. But that for me, it was kind of just a disappointing experience. You know, they weren't as receptive to transfer students, as they were freshmen. Because Greek life is so big on campus...I think it would be better if they were a little more conscious about transfer students. And they were kind of like "These students want the [PU] experience. And, they want to join your sorority...just like let them." I did [rush]. I actually dropped out after I got a bid...which is like the acceptance...from a professional fraternity. Because I decided that I couldn't do both. And I'd rather do that. But the 3 days that I spent going through sorority recruitment, it was very weird you know, being a transfer student there. And it's completely understandable that the majority of people are going to be freshmen. But you kind of feel a little bit like you're not wanted as a transfer student. And I know people who were in sororities and were on the recruitment committees and were like "No. We are only taking freshmen. We don't take anyone else. Unless maybe a sophomore here or there, if they're just like wow."... So, you know, there are certain social barriers between transfer students and [other] students.

Age contributed to the social barriers between study participants and the remainder of the student community at PU. This discouraged participation in student organizations at PU from study participants, like Mike:

You know the social thing is pretty much nonexistent. I didn't really go to any of the clubs or anything like that that they said for transfer students just because when I first came in I was about 25 or so. And it was about a year or 2 ago. So when I first came in, I was like "Ok. I'm a little bit older. I'm not going to go eat pizza and root beer. That would be a little strange."

As noted by Anthony, being an older student had an impact on how he felt he fit into the social environment inside the classroom as well. He explained:

Oh the academic is very challenging. I haven't taken a history class in like 20 years because it's been 20 years since I've been in high school, right...I haven't had a history class in forever. So that was very challenging. And my first history class was 1500 to present day. What a history class to start after not having a history class for 20 year! And 200 people, 199 other people in the classroom. I haven't been in a lecture hall like that for again 13 or 14 years. So, the

environment of all these people in the classroom. Discussion groups...I don't think I've ever been in a discussion group... But I definitely felt, like I was in a new world and not really sure about how to go about doing everything.

Real or perceived differences in age between study participants and other students at Private University had an effect on how study participants took part in the social environment. These age differences were cited by study participants as contributing to the difficulty they experienced making friends when they transferred to PU. Also, study participants felt that their age excluded them from participating in certain aspects of the social environment, for example clubs or sororities, in the same way as other students. Study participants either saw themselves as older than other PU or felt that they were perceived by other PU students as being older and therefore ineligible for full-participation in the social organizations and activities of the institution.

Entering established social networks at Private University was challenging

Study participants indicated that it was challenging for them to enter the established social networks when they transferred to Private University. They describe making friends as being difficult at PU because their classmates had already made friendships and were no longer in the initial stages of making friends at the institution. Because social networks had been established by students who began their postsecondary career at PU study participants found it challenging to enter the social environment.

This theme was significant in that it represented challenge faced by many study participants throughout the process of transferring from community colleges to Private University. Study participants found it difficult to become members of the social networks that had been established by students at Private University while the study

participants were at their respective community colleges. This increased level of difficulty of accessing the Private University social environment influenced how study participants made friends and perceived their experience at PU in general.

Making friends was important for study participants to do when they arrived at PU. As Joe explained, arriving at PU meant that study participants needed to reestablish their social network:

When I first came I didn't know anybody actually. Because [my community college] was in [another state]. So most of my friends that went to [my community college] transferred to [State University]. So yeah, so all of my high school friends they went to [State University]. So, yeah, I was the only one who decided to come to [PU].

In contrast, study participants, like Antoinette, found students at PU “to be more... guarded, more to themselves. You know, more ‘Let me get my stuff done before I help you.’” This could be the result of Antoinette and other study participants attempting to enter social networks at PU that had already been established by students who began their postsecondary careers at the institution. James explained:

For transfer students, rather, it's a lot more difficult to meet new students. Because you come here as a junior and everyone has already established their group of friends. They've already established their group of friends who they have common interests in. And so people are comfortable in that. So they're not really looking for new friends. So when I come here as a junior, I'm looking for new friends. And yet the people at my level are not looking for new friends. And so it's like a very difficult transition in that sense. You have to really put yourself out there. And I tried, but I'm not very good at it. I'm good at starting from the beginning where everyone starts. And then building on those friendships. And so, what is it... Yeah, so I feel like I haven't succeeded well enough because I have yet to establish the same kind of relationships that I had [at community college].

Ross also experienced difficulty making friends when he first arrived at PU after transferring from his community college in another region of the country.

I would say within my first month of going to [PU] and I'd see people talking to friends. Or I'd hear people...overhear people saying oh they're going to this event or party or this and that...And not only was I just new to the university experience in general, which was already concerning...But then I knew nobody. And I'd just...You know, I'd see the dorms and all this and I just had no idea what was going on. I didn't know anybody. And I'd say in the first 2 weeks I just felt really disillusioned. It was hard to even stay motivated with classes and everything. Because on top of it I was 3,000 miles away from home. So just right from the get go. Coming here. I felt more out of place than I expected to.

Iris also struggled with making friends at PU. She attributed this to having to try to enter social networks that had already been established at the institution. She explained:

Because it's like the social life it's really big here. And then like when I first got here, it's really hard to make friends. Because they all, like they already have their own group. So it's really hard to go into their group. You make some friends. But it's not like you always hang out with them. And then you have your own group of friends. It's not like that...So it's like I made some friends. They're really good friends. But it's not like we hang out with them all the time. It's like some days I hang out with this one. And then the next day I hang out with different friends. But they have their own group of friends who they always hang out with.

June described how her living situation at PU highlighted the social networks that were already established. She explained how she experienced trying to enter the established social networks in her residence hall at PU:

...The first semester I lived in...a dormitory...that is for the senior and junior building. Even though I live with other transfer students, the building itself is full of like third or fourth year, like juniors and seniors. So it was; all of us complained that it was hard to make friends there. Because we can hear the other freshmen buildings or like sophomore buildings, like how they are really cool and being chill to each other because all...they don't have any really friends here. Like everyone is in the same position. So like easy to have a conversation because everyone's trying to make friends. But in [my] building, they already have friends, they already have experience here. Like probably they don't need like feel the need to make conversation with others probably. So it was hard to make friends. Do you understand what I mean? Making friends. Yeah social [groups]...they are close.

Study participants noted the difficulty they faced trying to enter the social networks that had been established at Private University prior to their transferring from their respective community colleges. These social networks were apparent to study participants in various aspects of the social environment at Private University including the residence halls. Study participants cited the challenge of entering PU's established social networks as a barrier to their immediate full participation in the institution's social environment.

Conclusion to Research Question 3

The themes answering Research Question 3 illustrated both similarities and differences between the social experiences of study participants at Private University as compared to their respective community colleges. There was an academic aspect to the social experiences of study participants at both institution types. And the location of study participants' housing at both institution types influenced how they participated in the social environment of the institution. An important difference between the social experiences of study participants at each institution type was where they perceived their primary social environment; external to the community college versus internal to Private University. Finally, age and entering established social networks presented study participants with challenges in the Private University social environment. All five themes that answer Research Question 3 provided valuable insight into how study participants' described and understood their social experiences transferring from community colleges to Private University. These themes showed how study participants' navigation of the social environment changed as they moved through the transfer process.

Their participation in the social environment at the private university differed from their participation in the social environment at the private university.

Summary

In this chapter, the results of the interviews with study participants were outlined. Themes answering the three research questions were defined, described, and supported using rich and thick quotations from study participants. The themes represented both similarities and differences between the overall experiences as well as specific academic and social experiences during the transfer process from community colleges to Private University. These similarities and differences occurred at both the student level and institutional level. Analysis and interpretation of the findings are included in the discussion in the next and final chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Overview

In the previous chapter the results of the 20 semi-structured interviews were presented in the form of 13 themes answering the three research questions for the study. These themes were developed through an analysis by the researcher of codes and code categories that appeared throughout the data. In qualitative inquiry the researcher serves as the instrument through which data is analyzed (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Themes in the current study were developed through an interpretive process undertaken by the researcher. The iterative analysis of the data by the researcher revealed the emergent themes answering each of the three research questions. This chapter provides an introduction reviewing the themes identified in the previous chapter, existing literature relevant to the research topic, and theories contributing to the study's conceptual framework. The findings of the study are discussed in relation to previous research and in the context of the conceptual framework. Implications of the findings for transfer students are offered along with recommendations for higher education policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. The chapter ends with concluding thoughts regarding the entire document.

Introduction

The themes answering the first research question provided evidence of how study participants broadly described and understood their experiences during the transfer process in terms of efficiency and a sense of agency as they moved through the transfer process. These students also saw their experiences as being influenced by other

individuals such as faculty, non-faculty advisors, family members, and friends. Study participants were also aware of the perception of others of the institutions they attended. The themes answering the second research question highlighted similarities and differences between the academic experiences of these students at the community college versus the private university, specifically in terms of the primacy of teaching and learning, level of academic rigor at the institution as well as the influence of career ambitions on the transfer experience and practical nature of hallmark academic experiences throughout the transfer process. And the themes answering the third research question addressed the social experiences of these students at both institutions, particularly related to the academic nature of social experiences, the role of housing, the primary locus of the social experience in relation to the institution, the influence of age on study participants' perception of the social environment, and challenges of entering established social networks at the private university.

The literature regarding students who transfer from community and technical colleges to four-year institutions can be organized into a handful of categories including institutional factors, student characteristics and educational attainment. The literature shows that institutional factors such as transfer student enrollment levels, articulation and transfer agreements, and explicit and implicit structural, cultural, and environmental conditions play a role in the experiences of students transferring from community and technical colleges to four-year institutions (Dowd et al., 2008; Cheslock, 2005; Morpew et al., 2001; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Shaw & London, 2001). Prior research also shows that student characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race, degree

expectations, as well as educational and career aspirations comprise a critical component of the experience of these students (Dowd et al., 2008; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Wang, 2010; Wawrzynski & Pizzolato, 2006). The literature regarding students who transfer from community and technical colleges to four-year institutions also highlights educational attainment as an important aspect to understand about these students' experiences. But the categories of literature most salient to the results of the current study were the institutional factors and the student characteristics.

The theories undergirding the current study were those of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2005). Each of these theories on their own did not provide a sufficient lens through which to interpret the experiences of students transferring from community and technical colleges to private research universities. These theories comprise institutional and student aspects and have mostly been applied to traditional student populations. As a time on task theory, involvement (Astin, 1984/1999) compares the amount of energy expended by a student in educationally purposeful activities with the amount that a student gets out of their college education both academically and socially. As a theory regarding why students voluntarily depart from an institution, integration (Tinto, 1993) on its own was not a sufficient theory to use in the current analysis. Finally, engagement (Kuh, 2001) is a theory applied to institutions to help them understand what can be done to encourage students' participation in educationally purposeful activities.

Findings

A review of the themes for the current study reveal important findings regarding the experiences of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private universities. These findings can be organized into two strands, or broad categories, which examine the results of the study through the lens of the conceptual framework. The first strand of findings includes three threads related to the institutions' role in engaging students both academically and socially discovered as students travelled between institutions throughout the transfer process. The threads in the institutional strand of findings are: engagement follows the institutional mission; the community college system is not designed to support students transferring to private universities; and at private universities freshmen status matters. The second strand of findings includes three threads related to aspects of the students' experiences that demonstrate how the act of transferring changes students, especially in regard to how they engage in the academic and social environments of the institutions they attend. The threads in the student strand of findings are: students exhibit self-awareness throughout the process; there is a layering of academically and socially engaging behaviors into a fluid and interconnected construct throughout the transfer process; and students adapt their expectation of engagement to match the environment of the institution. Both the institutional and student strands of findings are discussed in relation to the conceptual framework and existing literature for this study in the following sections.

Institutional Strand

Engagement Follows the Mission

The mission statements and goals of community and technical colleges differ from those of private research universities. Community and technical colleges seek to prepare students to either enter the workforce or to transfer to other institutions for further study. The curriculum at these institutions emphasizes general education and vocational training. These institutions are commuter rather than residential campuses. Private research universities also prepare students for the working world but emphasize a liberal arts curriculum and development of the “whole student” both inside and outside the classroom. These institutions value the creation of knowledge through the prioritization of faculty research and the awarding of advanced degrees. There is often a residential aspect to these institutions. The findings of the current study demonstrate how differences in the institutional missions of community and technical colleges versus private research universities influences how students engage academically and socially with the institution.

At the community college conducting research was not a priority for faculty members making it easier for study participants to gain instructional support. Study participants felt that professors at the community college prioritized teaching and were willing to help students inside and outside of class. The mission of the community college was not to create new knowledge, so study participants benefited from increased engagement with community college faculty members. But at the community college study participants described their social engagement with the institution as limited by the institutional mission. Because their community colleges were not residential campuses, study participants stated that their primary social environment was outside of the

institution. Many study participants attended community colleges in the community where they attended high school or where their families were living, so the bulk of their social experiences occurred outside of the institution. Those study participants who noted particularly engaging experiences at their respective community colleges had social experiences that were in some way related to their academic experiences. These types of experiences provided study participants with some social interaction at the community college, but that social interaction was bounded by the students' academic interests. In this way the community college's mission as a non-residential institution designed primarily for workforce rather than student development limited study participants' social engagement with the institution.

By contrast, study participants described their social engagement at the private university with more depth and nuance. Study participants stated that their engagement at the private university was primarily within the institution. This shift was in line with the private research university's institutional mission valuing residential learning communities and formal involvement opportunities. Although there remained an academic aspect to study participant's formal social experiences at the private university, study participants described more informal opportunities for social engagement at the private university that were unrelated to the academic environment. Social interactions with roommates and friends on-campus yet outside of the classroom were added to study participants' engagement at the private university. But study participants' academic engagement with the private research university was limited by the institution's mission to create new knowledge. Faculty members at the private university were seen by study

participants as more focused on research than on providing students with academic and social support. And non-faculty advisors provided study participants with mixed levels of support to overcome the challenges posed by articulating credits and navigating the curriculum at the private university.

System Not Designed for Them

The findings of this study showed that the community and technical college system is not designed to support students who want to transfer to private research universities. Study participants noted classes taken at the community college did not match with courses offered at the private university. Articulation of credits, or lack thereof, was cited by study participants as a hindrance to their speedy completion of degree requirements and a threat to their academic engagement at the private university. Advising services at the community college and the private university were cited by study participants as compounding the challenge of articulating credits between the two institutions.

There were some faculty members and non-faculty advisors at the community college who were particularly helpful during the transfer process. These individuals took special interest in the success of study participants in transferring to another institution, which enhanced the students' engagement with the community college and encouraged their engagement at the private university. But other individuals within the community college had a more negative influence on study participants' engagement during the transfer process. Lack of information about the private university was cited as the

primary reason that these individuals within the community or technical college presented challenges to study participants.

The community and technical college system is designed to feed the local workforce and to prepare students to transfer to four-year institutions which are usually part of the local public higher education system. Faculty members and non-faculty advisors at the community and technical college are not trained to support students who want to transfer to institutions outside of the system, particularly private research universities. This structural reality makes it challenging for students at community colleges who want to transfer to private research universities to get the support they need.

Freshmen Status Matters

Upon transferring to the private university, feeling like freshmen without actually being freshmen was a sentiment expressed by study participants. They described various social experiences which demonstrated the importance that private universities attribute to freshmen. Study participants described housing and student organizations as ways in which the private university encouraged students' participation in the institution's social environment. Their non-freshmen status limited how study participants were able to benefit from these experiences.

Unlike freshmen, study participants were not required to live on-campus at the private university. Those who did live on-campus were housed in buildings not central to the campus or in single rooms without roommates, increasing their feelings of isolation from the campus community. Because they were not required to live on-campus during their first year, like freshmen at the private university, study participants who lived off-

campus felt disconnected from the institution's community. If they had been required to live on-campus and to have roommates, like freshmen, study participants may be able to more easily access the social environment of the institution.

It is evident from the findings of this study that students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private universities want to feel membership in the institutions they experience during the transfer process. Student organizations, particularly those with academic or professional orientations, were viewed by study participants as encouraging to their membership in the private university's community. But joining other social groups at the private university as a non-freshman proved challenging for study participants. Social sororities were virtually inaccessible to study participants. These organizations stated that they only wanted to recruit freshmen. Study participants also had difficulty entering established social networks of non-transfer students on campus.

Student Strand

Self-Awareness

An important thread to the student strand of findings in this study is that students exhibit self-awareness throughout the process of transferring from community colleges to a private university. This self-awareness is demonstrated by their ability to reflect on their experiences and recall specific examples of how they were affected by the transfer process. Study participants were aware of not only how they perceived the institutions they attended but also of how others perceived them within these institutions.

Study participants' self-perception was evidenced by the way that age, career ambitions, and agency contributed to their experiences. Upon transferring to the private university study participants' self-awareness of their age in comparison to that of other undergraduate students at the institution influenced how they participated in the institution's social environment. The career ambitions that contributed to study participants' academic and social experiences at both the community college and the private university are examples of how study participants self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses inspired their long-term professional goals. And the sense of agency that study participants exhibited throughout the transfer process illustrated that study participants had the self-awareness to understand the responsibility they had for their success in transitioning from the community college to the private university.

The self-awareness exhibited by study participants throughout the transfer process also manifested in their understanding of how they were perceived by others. By describing both their respective community colleges and the private university in terms that emphasized the prestige of the institutions, study participants demonstrated their awareness of how others viewed them and their institutions. Prestige is a perception of individuals about the status of a person or an institution. Whether the prestige described by study participants was real or perceived, the use of language highlighting prestige illustrated that study participants understood the importance of individuals' perception of status in the hierarchical postsecondary education.

Layering of Engagement

The findings of this study also demonstrate that students experience a layering of engaging experiences as they move through the transfer process. Engagement at the community college looks different than engagement at the private university. As the students progressed through the transfer experience their engagement increasingly enhanced or augmented their academic experience. And, as they move through the process of transferring from the community college to the private university, students' engagement becomes deeper and more nuanced.

At the community college study participants described minimal engagement with the academic and social environment outside of the classroom or interactions related to their academic experience. Study participants stated that their primary social environment was outside of the institution. Because study participants attended community colleges in the area where they attended high school or where their families were living, most of their social experiences occurred outside of the institution. Those study participants who noted particularly engaging experiences at their respective community colleges had social experiences that were in some way related to their academic experiences. Some study participants described social interactions they had with classmates or professors related to coursework. But study participants' engagement at the community college was rather limited, with most of their social experiences occurring outside of the institution or related to their academic experience.

At the private university study participants described engagement with the academic and social environment in formal and informal ways that were both related to and separate from their experiences in the classroom. Study participants stated that their engagement

at the private university was primarily within the institution. This marked a shift from what they experienced at the community college, a shift resulting from study participants living on-campus at the private university as compared to off-campus at their respective community colleges. At the private university study participants described “living” their academic and social experiences in different ways than they had at the community college. And study participants’ engagement in the academic and social environment was further enhanced by their career and professional goals as evidenced by the importance that they attributed to involvement with professionally oriented student organizations and other opportunities for involvement at the private university. But, social interactions with roommates and friends on-campus yet outside of the classroom were added to study participants’ engagement at the private university.

Students layer more and more engaging experiences during the process of transferring from the community college to the private university. While engagement at the community college may be more limited and tied to the students’ academic experiences, at the private university students add more layers of social experiences, particularly those related to housing and student organizations. There is an intricate interconnection between the academic and social experiences of students who transfer from community colleges to a private university. This interconnection increases as students move through the transfer process from one institution to the other.

Students Adjust

In the same way that students’ engagement becomes more layered as they move through the transfer process they adjust their expectations of engagement to match the

academic and social environment of the institution. What academic and social engagement looks like at the community college is different than what it looks like at the private university. As these students move between the two institutions they adapt their own concepts of engagement to fit with the norms and values that each institution holds about academically and socially engaging activities.

When study participants attended the community college they engaged in the academic and social environment of that institution in ways consistent with the values and norms of that institution. Their primary social environment was outside of the institution, which was the norm at the community college. Study participants that had formal involvement experiences at the community college did so in ways that were connected to their academic experience. By taking part in these academically related social experiences at the community college study participants began to acculturate themselves to values and norms consistent with the private university. This preparation proved to be worthwhile once study participants transferred to the private university where academic rigor and formal involvement opportunities were valued. Study participants modified their expectation of what involvement in the academic and social environment of the institution was as they transferred from the community college to the private university. The study participants' expectation that their social experience would be separate from and outside of their academic experience at the community college shifted; the expectation became one that the academic and social experience were interconnected and within the private university.

As students move through the transfer process from the community college to the private university they adjust their expectations of engagement to match the norms of the institution. At the community college their expectation of engagement is primarily limited to academic experiences within the institution. This is in line with the norms of engagement at the community college where students do not live on campus and their primary social environment is outside of the institution. When students transfer to the private university they adjust their concept of engagement to fit with that institution's culture of engagement. At the private university students' academically and socially engaging experiences occur primarily within the institution. Students transferring from community colleges change their expectation of engagement as something that occurs outside the institution to something that occurs inside the institution when they transfer to the private university. This shift in expectations demonstrates that students are aware of each institution's values, norms, and culture surrounding academic and social engagement and change their behavior to match their own involvement with the values and norms of the private university.

Findings in Relation to Prior Research

Shaw and London (2001) found that differences in ideology as well as formal and informal cultural norms exist surrounding the transfer function at each college. The current study highlights how these ideological and cultural differences relate to the differences in institutional mission of community colleges versus private universities and how these differences affect students' engagement with the institution. Because community colleges and private universities have different institutional missions,

students transferring from community colleges to private universities experience structural challenges. Private universities are focused on freshmen which causes delayed admission timelines for transfer students. And community colleges are designed to feed the public higher education system that leads to insufficient advising for students transferring to private universities.

The community college system is not designed for students who want to transfer to private universities. Community colleges and private universities are different sectors of the higher education system. The curricula of these institutions do not always match seamlessly without the existence of transfer agreements outlining the articulation of credits between the two institutions. Therefore, communication between these two sectors is essential. Morpew et al. (2001) found that the community colleges and private universities with successful transfer functions had high levels of interaction and communication with each other during the transfer agreement development and implementation phases. This interaction and communication is particularly important to mitigate the challenges inherent from community colleges and private universities being separate systems.

According to Dowd et al. (2008) highly selective private institutions admit fewer transfer students and particularly fewer from community colleges. The admission of fewer transfer students, including those from community colleges, contributes to the culture at private universities emphasizing the importance of freshmen over other first-year students. The importance that private universities put on freshmen over other first-year students is a contributing factor to the structural impediments highlighted by

participants in the current study and cited by Tobolowsky and Cox (2012); impediments such as the short timeline between admission and matriculation for transfer students. Because private universities prefer to have freshmen rather than transfer students, these institutions wait until as many freshmen as possible have accepted admission to the institution. Waiting for more freshmen to matriculate delays the timeline for admitting transfer students, who are used by private universities to backfill enrollments (Dowd et al., 2008).

The findings in the student strand of the current study relate to and extend the findings of other studies in the literature. Wang (2010) examined how psychological perspectives and motivational factors, such as locus of control, self-concept, and aspirations for a graduate degree, influence student transfer from two-year to four-year institutions. The current study adds to the knowledge gained from Wang's (2010) study by finding that that students exhibit self-awareness throughout the transfer process. The psychological and motivational factors assessed by Wang (2010) did not include self-awareness or how students perceive themselves in relation to others. Where Wang (2010) found that student characteristics were predictors of student transfer from two-year to four-year institutions, the current study found that student characteristics such as self-awareness contribute to the transfer experience.

According to Wawrzynski and Pizzolato (2006), self-regulation is a student characteristic that is enhanced for transfer students. Wawrzynski and Pizzolato (2006) found that in students' second experience of a challenging situation self-regulation had a stronger impact on overcoming the situation than it did in their first experience of the

challenging situation. This is particularly important for transfer students who experience adjustment to college multiple times, first at the community college and again at the private university. The current study extends the findings of Wawrzynski and Pizzolato (2006) by demonstrating that not only is self-regulation an important characteristic for transfer students but that transfer students are able to use their self-regulation to adjust their expectation of engagement to match the norms of the institution.

Bensimon and Dowd (2012) and Dowd et al. (2013) found that institutional agents, such as faculty and staff, play a critical role in the success of students transferring from community and technical colleges to elite universities. Their findings had particular importance for students of lower socioeconomic status. The current study did not use socioeconomic status as a criterion for sampling, but the findings add to those of Bensimon and Dowd (2012) and Dowd et al. (2013) in other ways. Most importantly, the current study found that the concept of institutional agents must be extended to individuals beyond the faculty, staff, and administrators of the institution to include peer students as well as other friends and family members affiliated with the institution. As evidenced by the current study, these key other individuals play an important role in how students transferring from community colleges to private universities make decisions throughout the transfer process.

Townsend and Wilson (2006) found that cultural and structural differences between the community college and university play a role in community college students' perceptions of the transfer process. The findings of the current study highlight how these structural and cultural differences influence students' engagement with the institution.

Academic and social engagement at the community college looks different than it does at the private university in part because of the differences in mission and culture of the two institutions. Lester et al. (2013) found that student characteristics influenced perceptions of the transfer process. Findings of the current study demonstrate that self-awareness is a student characteristic that is critical to students' understanding of their transfer experience. The current study shows that students are able to make adjustments to their concept of engagement as they move between the differing cultures and norms of community colleges and private universities. The current study also extends the findings of Townsend and Wilson (2006) and Lester et al. (2013) by showing that students experience a layering of engagement as they move through the transfer process. Engagement in the academic and social environments of an institution is not a stagnant constant but rather a level of involvement with the institution that ebbs and flows to match the culture of the institution.

Theoretical Connections of Research Findings

The conceptual framework of the current study included aspects of involvement (Astin, 1984/1999), integration (Tinto, 1993), and engagement (Kuh, 2001). These theories share the concept of time and energy expended by students and institutions in the effort to incorporate students into the culture and academic activities of the institution. The findings of the current study show how students experience this acculturation and shed light on the role that community colleges and private universities play in this process.

Involvement (Astin, 1984/1999) is a time on task student development theory that states that the amount of time and energy a student devotes to the educationally purposeful activities of the institution is directly related to what the student will gain from the institution. Because time is such an integral part of the theory, involvement may manifest differently at institutions, such as community colleges and private universities, with academic programs of differing lengths. Students who attend community college for one or two years have less time at the institution than students who attend a private university for four years. At the community college the primary locus of students' social environment is external to the institution further limiting the amount of time that the students have at the institution to be involved with educationally purposeful activities. Upon transferring to the private university from the community college students do not have time on their side. While their primary social environment may shift to be internal to the institution, these students have missed one or two years to become involved academically and socially at the private university that focuses involvement efforts, such as orientation and student organization participation, on freshmen.

An important aspect of Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration is the acculturation of students to the values and norms of the institution. Students who transfer from community colleges to private universities experience acculturation to two institutions. The values and norms surrounding academic and social engagement at the community college differ from those at the private university because these two institution types have different missions and purposes. Integration is eased for students who transfer from community colleges to private universities because they are able to

adjust their expectations of the academic and social environment to match the cultural norms of the institution. The ability of students to shift their expectations of engagement to match the culture of the institution also contributes to the layering of engagement that students experiences as they transition from the community college to the private university.

While Kuh's (2001) theory of engagement is one regarding student development, it centers on the institution's role in putting its resources into practices that encourage students' engagement in the academic and social environment of the institution. It is apparent from the findings of the current study that the role of the institution in drawing students into the academic and social environment is one that students see as critical. Study participants described structural components of the higher education institutions throughout the transfer process that both encouraged and threatened their academic and social engagement with the institution. Admission processes and advising were seen as either structural impediments or enhancements to student engagement. And individuals within the higher education institutions were also described by study participants as both helping and hindering study participants' engagement in the institutions' academic and social communities during the transfer process. The findings of this study demonstrated how community colleges are designed to feed the local workforce and public higher education system. This makes it difficult for students who attend community colleges with the intention of transferring to private universities because the curriculum and human resources at the community college are not generally equipped to align with those of private universities. Private universities' focus on freshmen makes them less equipped

to engage transfer students, particularly those from community and technical colleges, in the institution's academic and social environments.

Implications for Transfer Students

The findings of this study have implications not only for students who transfer from community and technical colleges but also for transfer students in general. Transfer students experience involvement (Astin, 1984), integration (Tinto, 1993) and engagement (Kuh, 2001) at both their original higher education institution and at the institution to which they transfer. The findings of this study demonstrate how transfer students' engagement in the institution becomes more layered with interconnected academic and social experiences as they move from one institution to and through the next institution. Understanding the institutional structures, individuals, and practices that can help and hinder students' full participation in the institutions' academic and social environments can help transfer students move through the experience successfully. Similarly, being aware of how academic and social experiences become increasingly intertwined throughout the transfer experience can help students who undertake the transfer pathway to baccalaureate degree attainment make the most out of their experiences, particularly at the institution to which they transfer.

Recommendations

One of the purposes of higher education research is to inform education policy, practice, and future inquiry. The findings of this study have important implications for students transferring from community and technical colleges to private universities and for all students in American higher education institutions. Given the problems of higher

education policy and practice outlined in Chapter One and what was learned from study participants, it is necessary to offer the following recommendations to policymakers, practitioners, and for future researcher.

For Policymakers

The findings of the current study draw particular attention to needs that those responsible for setting policy related to higher education must address. Policymakers can play an important role in smoothing the pathway between community and technical colleges and private universities. This smoothing could ease the transition for students moving from one institution type to the other and may encourage more students to follow this pathway toward baccalaureate degree attainment and making more efficient use of the entire higher education system.

First, policymakers should improve articulation programs between community and technical colleges and private universities. In the current study, students frequently noted challenges they faced articulating credits taken at their respective community or technical college into the curriculum at the private university. Sometimes students lost credits in the process of transferring to the private university. Some students had to retake courses they had taken at the community college when they transferred to the private university. Many of the community colleges from which the study participants were transferring had extensive articulation and transfer agreements with local public four-year colleges and universities. But similar agreements with private universities were less prevalent. Creating articulation agreements between the community and technical college sector of the higher education system and private colleges and universities would

make it easier for students to move between these two institution types without losing credits or having to backtrack in their course progression. Increasing the number and effectiveness of articulation agreements between the public and private sectors of the higher education system could increase efficiency within the system allowing more students to move through the system successfully.

Second, policymakers should create policies to make attending higher education institutions more affordable for students. Although tuition at community and technical colleges is lower than that of many private universities, the cost of attending any higher education institution is not negligible and to which students are sensitive. As evidenced by the results of the current study, students want to move through the higher education system in an efficient manner. They want to spend as little time and money earning their degrees as possible. After transferring to the private university these students are particularly interested in moving through the institution with minimal temporal and financial cost. If it cost students less money to attend higher education institutions, particularly private institutions, students might be able to emphasize effectiveness over efficiency when considering how to navigate their postsecondary education. The results of the current study demonstrated that there is much for students to learn both academically and socially throughout the process of transferring from community and technical colleges to private universities. By the time students reach the private university their academic and social engagement in the institution has become more layered and nuanced. The higher education experience of these students could be enhanced if they were able to focus more time and energy on academically and socially

engaging activities and less time and energy on figuring out how to move through the system in the most quick and cost effective manner.

For Practitioners

Practice for higher education administrators can also be informed by the findings of the current study. Practitioners play an important role for students transferring from community and technical colleges to private universities. At each institution practitioners can use the findings of the current study to implement programs on the campuses of community and technical colleges as well as private universities that will help students transferring between the two institution types.

First, at the private university practitioners should pay special attention to the importance of housing to the experiences of students transferring to their institutions, particularly those transferring from community and technical colleges. It is important that transfer students are housed with non-transfer students at the institution. This can reduce feelings of isolation amongst the transfer students and help them become acculturated to the academic and social environment of the private university.

Practitioners at private universities may also want to consider whether it is feasible and appropriate to offer low-cost or free on-campus housing for students transferring to their institutions from community and technical colleges. This practice could encourage these students to engage in the institutions' academic and social environments in ways in which they may not have grown accustomed at their respective community and technical colleges.

Second, practitioners at community and technical colleges as well as at private universities should provide specialized support to help students transitioning between these two institutional types. Faculty mentors and non-faculty advisors proved to be critical to the experiences of students in the current study. Higher education practitioners at community and technical colleges as well as at private universities could put resources toward offering special training for faculty and staff who want to work with this population of transfer students. At the community or technical college these individuals could learn about the curricula and admission processes at various private universities to which their students frequently transfer. At the private university these faculty and staff members could learn about how to create more opportunities, through housing and formal involvement in academically related social experiences, for students transferring from community and technical colleges to participate in the private university community.

Third, practitioners at both community and technical colleges as well as at private universities should create better synergies between academic affairs and student affairs units to foster more social experiences on their campuses that have academic components. The findings of this study demonstrated that students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private universities are drawn to social experiences within both institution types that share an academic aspect or are related to their professional aspirations. The more that faculty members can collaborate with student affairs practitioners to interconnect students' academic and social experiences within the institution the more these students will be engaged with the institution.

Finally, faculty members at community and technical colleges should do more to increase the level of academic rigor expected at their institutions to match what students might encounter upon transfer to a private four-year institution. As noted in the literature, achievement gaps exist in higher education (Alfonso, 2006; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Christie & Hutcheson, 2003; Long & Kurlaender, 2009). There is robust and ongoing debate as to the level of exaggeration of these achievement gaps for men of color and other students of color as well as students of lower socioeconomic status. While some researchers have found that community and technical colleges are preparing students for success upon transferring to four-year institutions (e.g. Melguizo et al., 2011; Pierson et al., 2003), the findings of the current study highlighted how these students can be shocked by the distinct differences in the level of academic rigor required at the community college as compared to the private nonprofit university. Faculty members at community and technical colleges would serve these students well by better preparing them for the level of academic performance expected at private four-year institutions.

For Future Research

The findings of the current study demonstrated that students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private research universities are a population worthy of further inquiry. More could be learned from continued research about this population and the phenomena associated with their transfer experiences. Future research could include a larger study including other private universities with different characteristics and demographic profiles. Conducting a similar study at other institutions could show whether the phenomena manifest in similar or different ways across institutions. A case

study could also be conducted to learn about the experiences of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private universities from additional perspectives including that of faculty members, non-faculty advisors, and family members. Future researchers on this topic might also consider the application of alternate theories in their conceptual frameworks. The findings of the current study demonstrated that other theories such as those derived from cultural and social capital concepts (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In the current study, the finding that students demonstrate self-awareness throughout the transfer process, particularly as it relates to students' perceptions of prestige, begs future research questions that could provide insight into how subpopulations of students, for example from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds, experience the transfer process. A conceptual framework applying cultural and social capital theories would provide an appropriate alternative lens through which to analyze how individuals from various subpopulations within society navigate and make meaning of their transfer experiences. These theories emphasize the interconnectedness of networks in society and can capture the aspect of cultural signaling inherent in constructs like prestige and self-awareness identified by the current study. Finally, further inquiry is needed to investigate the academic aspect of the social experiences of students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private universities. Qualitative methods could be employed to gain further insight in to the nature of these experiences throughout the transfer process.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand how students who transfer from community and technical colleges to a private university describe and make meaning of the experiences. In addition to gaining insight into how these students broadly understand their experiences at both institutions, the study sought specific understanding about these students' academic and social experiences at each institution. The research methods employed in this study followed Merriam's (2009) basic interpretive qualitative design. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with study participants who transferred from community colleges to the private university serving as the site of research. Upon completion of the interviews the researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the data using the participants' own words to identify themes which answered the research questions. The findings of this study revealed an institutional strand and a student strand of threads that contribute to the experience of students who transfer from community colleges to a private university. The threads in the institutional strand include engagement follows the institutional mission; the higher education system is not designed for students transferring from community colleges to private universities; and at private universities freshmen matter. The threads in the student strand show how students transferring from community colleges to private universities exhibit self-awareness throughout the transfer process; a layering of engagement occurs as students move through the transfer process; and students adjust their expectation of involvement to match the culture of the institution. The institutional and student strands become more intertwined and interconnected as these students move from the community or technical college to and through the private university. The academic and social experiences,

which were once separate experiences at the community or technical college, become a more tightly woven singular experience at the private university.

The findings of this study show that students transferring from community and technical colleges to private universities exhibit self-awareness. This self-awareness contributes to the interconnection of their academic and social experiences as they progress through the transfer process. The literature on transfer students, particularly those from community and technical colleges, does not address the importance of the self-awareness construct to the transfer experience. It is also apparent from the findings of this study that transfer students face many institutional and structural challenges during the transfer process. Of particular interest from the findings of this study are the challenges that transfer students from community and technical colleges face in regards to the different ways in which teaching and learning are prioritized at private universities. This study clearly demonstrated that students who transfer from community and technical colleges to private universities learn both academically and socially from the experience. Therefore, this population of students is worthy of further attention from higher education policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

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Appendix A
Invitation Email

Dear Student Name,

My name is Justin Bernstine and I am a graduate student in the Higher Education Administration program in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

I am conducting a research project and I need your help.

The study that I am conducting is about the experiences of students who transferred to this institution from community and technical colleges (community colleges, technical schools, vocational institutes, etc.). As someone who fits these criteria, I would like the opportunity to speak with you about your experiences.

The interview should not take more than 1 hour and your responses will be kept confidential. Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary and you can opt-out at any time. Upon completion of the interview, I can offer you a \$5 coffee gift card to thank you for your participation.

Please respond to this email within the next week to let me know whether or not you are willing to participate. We can schedule the interview for now or for when the semester starts. Feel free to forward this message to other students you know who might have also transferred from a community or technical college.

Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you soon,

Justin Bernstine

Appendix B
Follow-Up Email

Dear Student Name,

My name is Justin Bernstine and I am a graduate student in the Higher Education Administration program in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

I emailed you about a week ago to ask for your help completing a research study.

I still need your help with the study that I am conducting about the experiences of students who transferred to this institution from community and technical colleges (community colleges, technical schools, vocational institutes, etc.). I would like the opportunity to speak with you about your experiences for no more than 1 hour.

Your responses to my questions will be kept confidential. Your participation in the interview is completely voluntary and you can opt-out at any time. Upon completion of the interview, I can offer you a \$5 coffee gift card to thank you for your participation.

Please respond to this email within the next week to let me know whether or not you are willing to participate. Also, feel free to forward this message to other students you know who might have also transferred from a community and technical college.

Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you soon,

Justin Bernstine

Appendix C

Interview Reminder Email

Dear _____ ,

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me to talk about your experiences as a transfer student from a community or technical college. This is a reminder that we have scheduled our meeting for the following date, time, and location:

[Insert date, time, location]

If you have any questions or concerns before the interview, please contact me via email to justb@gwu.edu. I look forward to meeting you soon.

Thank you,

Justin Bernstine

Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Thank you for allowing me to interview you about your experience as a transfer student. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes. Your participation in this interview is voluntary and you can opt-out of the interview at any time. Your responses will be kept confidential. The information you provide will be used solely for academic purposes.

Do you have any questions?

Is it okay if I record this interview so that I can make sure I have an accurate record of what we discussed?

Ok. Let's get started.

1. Tell me about the institution you transferred from. How would you describe the academic and social environment?

Probe: How did you come to the decision to attend this institution? What did you like most about it? What did you like least about it? How long did you attend that institution?

2. Tell me about the institution you attend now. How would you describe the academic and social environment?

Probe: How did you come to the decision to attend this institution? What do you like most about it? What do you like least about it?

3. What motivated you to transfer from the community college to your current institution?

4. Who, if anyone, helped you make this choice? This may include school personnel, family, peers, or others.

Probe: What role did they play? How did they help you?

5. Walk me through the transfer process.

Probe: How did you utilize various human and other resources (school personnel, family, peers, and others) to help you successfully transfer from the community college to this institution? What were some of the challenges you faced in the process? What were some of the triumphs you experienced in the process?

6. Think back to your time at your previous institution...Describe an academic experience at that institution that really stands out for you.

Probe: What was the academic environment like?

7. Describe a social experience that really stands out for you at that institution.

Probe: What was the social environment like?

8. Now think about your time at your current institution... Describe an academic experience at that institution that really stands out for you at your transfer institution.

Probe: What is the academic environment like? 9. Describe a social experience that really stands out for you at your current institution?

Probe: What is the social environment like?

10. How well did your expectations of the academic and social experiences you would have at your current institution match with what you have actually experienced here after transferring?

11. Now that you have been through the transfer experience, how would you advise a student at your original institution to prepare for the experience?

Probe: Aside from the logistics of transferring, how should this student use their academic and social experiences on that campus to serve them best once they have arrived on campus at this institution?

12. Is there anything about your experiences that you would like to add?

13. What is your age?

14. What is your gender identity?

15. What is your racial identity?

16. Describe your family constellation.

Probe: Who makes up your family? What is each of their highest level of education?

17. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you for your time and for sharing your experiences with me. That is the end of the interview.