

COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT STORIES OF LATERAL TRANSFER

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by  
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## **Abstract**

### COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT STORIES OF LATERAL TRANSFER

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As calls for accountability intensify and funding is increasingly tied to institutional performance, community colleges are shifting focus from access to completion. Additional scrutiny on student outcomes has uncovered surprising findings on student mobility, including the prevalence of lateral transfer among community college students. Longitudinal studies of attendance patterns and mobility provide insights into rate, timing, and outcomes of lateral transfer, but they do not address why students transfer or the effects of transfer on their lives. This study examines lateral transfer from the perspective of community college students to inform policy and practice so institutions may better support student learning and success. Drawing on the epistemology of social constructionism and Perna's (2006) model of student college choice, this narrative inquiry seeks to understand the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally and the impact of lateral transfer on their lives. Using interview data from six participants who transferred laterally to one North Carolina community college, this study proposes interrelated contextual considerations influence students' college choices and decisions to transfer. The author proposes a model of lateral transfer motivation and recommends reforms related to advising, instruction, financial aid, and funding.

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Staff and students at the research site made this study possible. The president granted permission for me to conduct research at the institution. The institutional research department provided numerous reports and facilitated communication with potential participants. Study participants welcomed me into their lives, shared their stories, and inspired me with their persistence and will to achieve.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In a time of declining enrollments, increased focus on graduation rates, and greater reliance on performance-based funding and accountability measures, retention is a primary concern for institutions of higher education. The need to retain students is felt perhaps most acutely at public community colleges. After peaking in 2010, enrollment at community colleges declined as the economy recovered from the recession of the late 2000s (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015). For community colleges funded by full-time equivalent enrollment formulas, counts of students directly correspond to institutional funding. For community colleges funded at least in part by performance on outcome measures, retention and graduation are usually key elements of the performance-based funding calculation. However, enrollment trends are inconsistent among institutions, even in the same geographical region. As some institutions lose students, others add them. Not every student who leaves a community college enters the workforce or transfers to a four-year institution. Some students leave one community college and transfer to another for reasons that have gone largely unexplored. The conventional view that community college students attend the institution in closest proximity and then attend a different institution if they relocate (Mitchell & Grafton, 1985; Townsend, 2001) does not seem to apply to the patterns of lateral transfer witnessed among this student population.

Degree completion is a national issue, and community colleges have been in the spotlight since former President Barack Obama's announcement of the American Graduation Initiative on July 14, 2009. The American Graduation Initiative was promoted as a program to build on community college strengths, to increase effectiveness, and ultimately, to increase graduation rates (Brandon, 2009). In 2014, the latest year for which data are available, the United States ranked 9th in the world for college graduation rates, with 54.2% of the population graduating from postsecondary educational programs with a duration of at least two years (OECD, 2017a;

UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012). At 46.5%, the United States is 12th in the world for percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds with at least an associate degree (OECD, 2017b). To cultivate an educated citizenry and a skilled labor force, and to maintain global standing as an economic leader, more Americans must earn college degrees. To help achieve President Obama's goal of five million new graduates by 2020, state governments, foundations, and nonprofit organizations introduced ambitious initiatives with a goal of community college completion. The so-called completion agenda has gained traction with policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and philanthropic organizations.

Earning a college degree is good for more than the nation's reputation. In addition to individual gains in critical thinking skills (Huber & Kuncel, 2016) and civic engagement (Besser, 2012), higher education benefits the public at large through higher tax revenues, lower dependence on public assistance programs, and lower incarceration rates (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Higher education provides better-trained workers and a college-educated population has positive impact on the labor market (Cohen et al., 2014). As postsecondary education increases, workforce participation increases and unemployment declines (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Though there is scant evidence earning a short-term certificate has much impact, earning an associate degree is related to increased earnings (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Jepsen, Troske, & Coomes, 2014; Liu, Belfield, & Trimble, 2015; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and students who earn a degree fare better than students who accumulate the same number of credits without being conferred a degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although earning an associate degree positively impacts wages for women and men, women show greater economic returns (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Jepsen et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The benefits of earning an associate degree apply to adults enrolling in college later in life as they do to students entering

college right out of high school (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, not all programs of study are equally beneficial (Jepsen et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2015; Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013); health-related careers yield particularly strong returns on educational investment (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015; Liu et al., 2015; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). It is in the economic interest of the local community, the state, and the nation to educate citizens.

### **Accountability**

Despite the benefits of earning an associate degree, graduation rates for students in community college associate degree programs have remained stagnant, hovering around 20% from 2000 to 2013 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017d). Accountability became a focus in higher education in the 1960s as the number of colleges increased and trust in institutions declined (Cohen et al., 2014). As state governments try to increase graduation rates and incentivize improvement, accountability policies have gained more traction in higher education. Burke's (2004) conception of accountability involves six demands on officials or agents in public service, including those in higher education: (a) they must demonstrate they have used power properly, (b) they must show they are working to achieve the organization's mission, (c) they must report on performance, (d) they must show efficiency in the use of resources and effectiveness in the achievement of outcomes, (e) they must ensure quality programs and services, and (f) they must demonstrate they meet public needs.

Focusing on outcomes to make colleges and universities more accountable can take multiple forms (McLendon, Hearn, & Deaton, 2006), though a common strategy is to fund institutions based on performance. Funding state postsecondary institutions based on outcomes rather than inputs ostensibly incentivizes colleges to help meet state workplace, economic, and educational goals (Hurley, Harnisch, & Parker, 2014). Performance-based funding shifts the conversation about educational objectives, contributes to an increase in the use of data in

institutional planning, and leads to changes in institutional policies, practices, and programs designed to increase student success (Dougherty & Reddy, 2013; National Association of State Budget Officers, 2013).

Performance-based funding is both popular and volatile (Burke & Modarresi, 2000), and has a mixed history at best (National Association of State Budget Officers, 2013). The first performance-based funding system for higher education was established in Tennessee in 1979 to address dissatisfaction with funding formulas driven by enrollment and growing public concern regarding institutional performance. Twenty-four other states had adopted performance-based funding systems by 2001, but many of those states subsequently discontinued their performance-based funding programs (McLendon & Hearn, 2013). Performance-based funding has recently made a comeback as government officials, members of the business community, advocacy organizations, and foundations promote performance-based funding as a way to increase accountability and productivity in higher education (Cohen et al., 2014; Tandberg & Hillman, 2014). As of November 2015, 33 states employed performance-based funding for higher education (Dougherty et al., 2016), though this number may vary as states establish, discontinue, and then reestablish performance-based funding (Dougherty & Natow, 2015). Performance-based funding accounts for 85%-90% of state allocations for higher education in Tennessee and the entirety of state funding for public postsecondary institutions in Ohio (Dougherty et al., 2016). As revenues decline, it is likely states will show a renewed interest in funding higher education based on outcomes (Harnisch & Opalich, 2017).

In a performance-based funding model, selection of indicators drives institutional action, which impacts outcomes and affects funding. Performance indicators are limited by the availability of data, the possibility of conflicting goals, bias toward quantitative indicators, and a lack of clarity among inputs, processes, and outcomes (Layzell, 1999). Performance measures

related to retention are popular across the United States (Layzell, 1999; McLendon & Hearn, 2013; McLendon et al., 2006), though the only performance indicator common among all states is degree completion (Tandberg & Hillman, 2013). Despite the availability of new tools to track student mobility, outsiders pressure higher education to continue traditional calculations of degree completion (Cohen et al., 2014), the bottom line in terms of institutional purpose and accountability (Adelman, 1999). A focus on completion rate as a performance measure supports the idea that students belong to institutions and should be retained (Goldrick-Rab, 2009). Other common performance-based funding measures include transfer rates, scores on licensure exams, job placement rates, faculty productivity, and campus diversity (Cohen et al., 2014; Tandberg & Hillman, 2013). As funding formulas increasingly emphasize output measures, institutions must meet performance benchmarks to sustain consistent operation.

**Funding of North Carolina community colleges.** In North Carolina, each community college is allocated funds according to a formula that includes a base allocation, enrollment allocation, and performance-based allocation (State Board of Community Colleges Division of Finance and Operations, 2017). While not as large as the enrollment allocation, the performance-based allocation is an increasingly important component of an institution's budget. The performance-based allocation for North Carolina community colleges is tied to seven measures, two of which are related to student retention. *First-year progression* is measured by the percentage of first-time fall credential-seeking students attempting at least 12 hours within their first academic year and successfully completing at least 12 hours. *Curriculum student completion* is defined as the percentage of first-time fall credential-seeking students who graduate, transfer to a four-year institution, or are still enrolled with 36 non-developmental credit hours after six years (North Carolina Community College System, 2017b). Because the measure of completion includes only students who graduate from their first institution attended, it does

not account for the contributions of multiple institutions to a student's attainment of a credential (Adelman, 1999; Bahr, 2009; Tinto, 1975). Students who transfer to another community college before earning 12 credit hours in their first year, and students who transfer laterally within six years of enrollment reflect negatively on the institution in which they initially enrolled.

Of the three allocations discussed above, the enrollment allocation has the biggest influence on a college's budget. Student transfer from an institution does not necessarily equate to an enrollment decline; a greater number of students may transfer in or enroll as first-time students than the number of students who transfer out. However, when students leave, the origin institution loses funding associated with the future enrollment of the students who depart. By definition, transfer students continue their education at an institution other than where they started college. In the case of lateral transfer, students may be able to accomplish their goals at the origin institution, but elect to enroll somewhere else. The loss of lateral transfer students and the funding related to their enrollment may be preventable by the origin institution.

**Reputation.** In addition to a loss of funding, a loss of reputation is a concern to colleges. The North Carolina Community College System publishes annual reports of institutional performance on the seven measures used for the performance-based funding budget allocation. Colleges are assigned red, yellow, green, and black dots to indicate how they compare to a baseline calculation, the system average, and the institution's goal (North Carolina Community College System, 2016). Though my search of the literature resulted in no studies regarding the effects of performance measures, it is reasonable to assume an institution with lower ratings would be held in lower regard. Among stakeholders within the North Carolina Community College System, performance measures are linked to professional esteem and college reputation (W. Beddard, personal communication, June 22, 2017).

Although vertical transfer to a baccalaureate-granting institution is a key component of the community college mission (Cohen et al., 2014), lateral transfer is not an outcome institutions desire. In fact, students are increasingly dissuaded from transferring either vertically or laterally without a credential. Community college students who earn an Associate in Arts or Associate in Science degree prior to transfer graduate with a baccalaureate degree at a rate of 10% higher than students who do not complete (Kopko & Crosta, 2016). Students who transfer laterally to another community college are neither completing a program at their initial institution nor transferring to a four-year institution. Transfer rates negatively impact graduation rates, and low graduation rates may motivate students and families to choose other institutions. Poor performance due to transfer could hurt an institution's reputation and bottom line. Institutions do not want students to transfer before earning a credential, especially when they transfer laterally to a similar institution. Most faculty members and administrators want to keep students enrolled until they meet their degree or program goals (Cohen et al., 2014).

### **Retention and Graduation in Community Colleges**

Public two-year community colleges are the most common point of entry in higher education (Bentz, Radford, Lew, Velez, & Ifill, 2016), but they have graduation rates much lower than other higher education sectors (McFarland et al., 2017). The standard timeframe used in calculations of graduation rate is 150% of the expected time for a full-time student to earn a degree (NCES, 2016b), which equates to three years for an associate degree and six years for a baccalaureate degree. Among public institutions in the United States, four-year colleges and universities graduated 58.9% of students within six years (NCES, 2017c), while community colleges graduated only 23.6% of students within three years (NCES, 2017d). However, the standard measure of graduation rate does not account for the complex enrollment patterns of students (Adelman, 1999, 2006; McCormick, 2003) because it includes only those students who

graduate from their first institution attended (Adelman, 1999; Bahr, 2009; Cohen et al., 2014). From an institutional perspective, all students who leave the institution are considered dropouts (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2001). However, from the perspective of students and the higher education system, transfer students persist at another institution (Adelman, 1999; Berkner et al., 2001; Tinto, 2015). Measuring completion from the perspective of a single institution compromises the analysis and fails to acknowledge the contributions of multiple institutions to a student's credential attainment (Adelman, 1999; Bahr, 2009; Tinto, 1975).

### **Problem Statement**

As enrollment declines and calls for accountability increase, community colleges are under heightened pressure to register, retain, and graduate students. Because proximity is a key element of community college enrollment, (Cohen et al., 2014; Hillman, 2016; Jepsen & Montgomery, 2009), it is logical to presume students attend the closest community college that offers the program they want to pursue and leave when they complete the program, transfer to a four-year institution, relocate, or withdraw from higher education. However, about 15% of community college students nationwide transfer to other community colleges (National Student Clearinghouse [NSC], 2017a). Little is known about community college students who transfer laterally, and there is no concrete evidence about why community college students transfer from one community college to another (Bahr, 2012). If students leave a community college because they relocate, or because their program of choice is not offered, lateral transfer among community college students may not be a pressing concern for institutions. However, if students leave for other reasons, they may have encountered problems at their first institution. Through their policies and practices, community colleges may drive students away. When community college students transfer laterally, the origin institution loses an opportunity to contribute to students' educational success and may withstand a loss of funding and reputation. Attendance

patterns have been researched extensively, but few studies have sought to learn more about the students who transfer laterally, including their reasons for transfer, educational goals, and life circumstances.

### **Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally and the impact lateral transfer has had on their lives. To that end, this study will address two broad research questions with related sub-questions:

1. What are the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally?
  - a. How do lateral transfer students make college choice decisions?
    - i. How do lateral transfer students choose which colleges to attend?
    - ii. How do lateral transfer students decide to leave an institution?
  - b. How do experiences at the community college and experiences outside the college influence students' decisions?
2. How do community college students understand the impact of lateral transfer on their lives?
  - a. How do lateral transfer students make sense of their decision to transfer?
  - b. How do lateral transfer students understand the influence of their transfer decision on subsequent events?

### **Methodology**

A qualitative study about the experiences of students who transfer laterally between community colleges would fill a gap in our understanding of student mobility. Qualitative methods are best suited to research problems that involve an investigation of meaning and a deep understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2005; Merriam, 2002). This study will be conducted with qualitative methods because I seek to understand meaning from the perspective of research

participants, I intend to maintain flexibility and openness to ideas, and I will use an inductive rather than a deductive approach.

In this research, I aim to understand the meaning lateral transfer community college students make of their experiences in higher education. Because reality cannot be measured directly, the social world should be understood from the perspective of the people studied (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative research enables investigation of how people make sense of their experience (Merriam, 2002). I will use a flexible approach to data collection to ensure I hear the experience of the research participants rather than confirm my own beliefs and assumptions. Being open to the other's experience, meaning, and reality is a hallmark of qualitative research. Rather than impose expectations of social reality on participants, qualitative researchers employ limited structure to allow participants' meanings to be revealed (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative research is inductive rather than deductive. The goal in this research is to understand, not to predict, the experiences of students who transfer laterally between community colleges, and I will generate findings from student experience rather than test the applicability of a theory or construct.

### **Significance of the Issue**

This study fills a gap in the research literature about student mobility. There have been no in-depth qualitative studies of lateral transfer among community college students. Most transfer research focuses on vertical transfer of students from a two-year to a four-year institution (Bahr, 2012; Goldrick-Rab, Carter, & Wagner, 2007; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007; Li, 2010; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Utter & DeAngelo, 2015). Taylor and Jain (2017) advise, "Given the diverse transfer types, researchers and practitioners need to understand reasons for transfer and mobility outside of vertical transfer patterns" (p. 287). Longitudinal studies of attendance patterns and student mobility (Bahr, 2009, 2012; Crosta, 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009;

Gross & Berry, 2016; Hossler et al., 2012; Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015) comprise most research on lateral transfer. Quantitative studies with large data sets describe rate, timing, and outcomes of lateral transfer, but the student voice is missing from these accounts. This study seeks to learn from community college lateral transfer students why they transfer, how they experience lateral transfer, and the nature of their understanding of the impact of these transfers on their lives. If institutional stakeholders want to learn why students are leaving their community college to attend another community college, they need to talk to students. Students may transfer for reasons beyond the institution's control, but they may also leave for reasons the college can address. Understanding the lives and experiences of community college students who transfer laterally may guide reforms to help institutions better serve students.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **Transfer**

Although it may seem a straightforward concept, there are many operational definitions of transfer (Bahr, 2009, 2012; Berkner et al., 2001; Gross & Berry, 2016; McCormick & Carroll, 1997). Conventional definitions of *transfer* involve a student discontinuing enrollment in one institution and subsequently enrolling in a different institution (Berkner et al., 2001; D. Kim, Saatcioglu, & Neufeld, 2012; McCormick & Carroll, 1997). A definition of *transfer* used by the Department of Education (Peter & Forrest Cataldi, 2005; Radford, Velez, Bentz, Lew, & Ifill, 2016) requires a student to be enrolled in another institution for four or more consecutive months, presumably to exclude the many students who pick up a class at a different institution over the summer. Department of Education reports also frequently reference *direction of first transfer* because some students transfer multiple times and between sectors. The National Student Clearinghouse, a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that collects enrollment and attainment information on 98% of college students in the United States (NSC, 2017b), defines

*transfer* as any change in a student's institution of enrollment, including movements that occur over the summer months (Shapiro et al., 2015). Bahr (2009, 2012) classifies summer enrollment shifts as transfer and considers concurrently enrolled students to have transferred if their concentration of coursework shifts from one institution to the next. Department of Education and NSC researchers do not include concurrent enrollment in definitions of transfer (Radford et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2015). Researchers should carefully consider assumptions about student behavior implied in the operational definition they choose (Bahr, 2012).

### **Lateral Transfer**

*Transfer* can be further categorized by the level of the origin and destination institutions (McCormick & Carroll, 1997). *Lateral, horizontal, and parallel* transfer occurs between two institutions at the same level, such as from one community college to another community college. *Vertical, upward, or forward* transfer occurs from a lower-level institution to a higher-level institution, such as from a community college to a four-year college or university. *Reverse or downward* transfer occurs in the opposite direction (McCormick & Carroll, 1997). In this paper, I will use the terms *lateral, vertical, and reverse* transfer. I am primarily concerned with lateral transfer of community college students. My definition of lateral transfer for this study is a discontinuation of enrollment in one community college and subsequent enrollment at another community college with a lapse of no more than one year between enrollments.

### **Swirling**

Another attendance pattern frequently referenced in the literature is *swirling*, which connotes a churning, fluctuating educational path (Rab, 2004). Originally referring to student movement among various colleges and universities (de los Santos & Wright, 1989), *swirling* has been defined as “nomadic multi-institutional attendance behavior” between four-year and two-year institutions (Adelman, 2006, p. xxi), as “back-and-forth enrollment among two or more

institutions” (McCormick, 2003, p. 14), and as attending “multiple institutions, sometimes concurrently, en route to a degree or certificate” (Cohen et al., 2014, p. 70). Though *swirling* often refers to movement across sectors of higher education (Adelman, 2006), *swirling* is also used for other forms of transfer (Bahr, 2012; Cohen et al., 2014; de los Santos & Wright, 1989; Townsend & Dever, 1999), and for multi-institutional course-taking (de los Santos & Sutton, 2012; McCormick, 2003). Goldrick-Rab and Pfeffer (2009) caution against using the term *swirling*, as the label obscures variations in motivation for changing institutions and different processes of social stratification.

### **Organization of the Study**

Following this introductory chapter, a literature review in chapter two provides an overview of research related to student attendance patterns and outcomes and characteristics of community college students who transfer laterally. A discussion of the epistemology of social constructionism and a theory of student college choice follows the literature review, and I briefly consider my personal connection to the topic. The third chapter characterizes the research setting, outlines narrative inquiry methodology, and details the research design of this study. Additionally, the third chapter describes data collection, participants, data coding and analysis, and my efforts toward trustworthiness. The fourth chapter presents narrative accounts of the college experience of six study participants followed by an interpretation of those accounts using a theory of college student choice. Finally, the fifth chapter relates research findings to the literature, reviews the conceptual framework, discusses implications of the study, and recommends areas for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature and Conceptual Framework**

### **Literature Review**

Lateral transfer is a common attendance pattern among community college students. Although we have a preliminary understanding of the educational outcomes and characteristics of community college students who transfer laterally, this literature review will demonstrate there is a gap in knowledge on community college lateral transfer. Student transfer between community colleges has implications for equity and for funding, and research about lateral transfer may benefit students and institutions.

Higher education institutions and policies are designed for students engaged in traditional attendance patterns (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Li, 2010), yet patterns of attendance at postsecondary institutions have become increasingly complex (Adelman, 1999, 2006; McCormick, 2003). To understand educational patterns and outcomes, the Department of Education tracks nationally representative cohorts of first-time students through Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Studies (BPS). The current BPS tracks students for six years, surveying them after one year, three years, and six years (NCES, n.d.). These studies provide the most complete information available about enrollment and attendance patterns in American higher education (Adelman, 1999). Nearly 60% of undergraduates attend more than one institution (Adelman, 2006), and of multiple attendance patterns, transfer is the most common (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Berkner et al., 2001; McCormick, 2003). A report from data collected as part of the 2012/14 BPS indicates 17.9% of all undergraduates who began their studies in the 2011-2012 academic year transferred by the end of three years (Radford et al., 2016). Of first time students who entered college in the fall of 2008, 37.2% transferred at least once within six years. Nearly half of the students who changed institutions transferred more than once within that same six-year

period (Shapiro et al., 2015). Students also concurrently enroll in multiple institutions, though concurrent enrollment is less common than transfer (Crisp, 2013).

Community college students are mobile. Within six years of initial enrollment, 24.4% of students who began postsecondary education at a community college in the fall of 2008 transferred to a four-year institution while 15% transferred laterally to another community college (NSC, 2017a). Of all students who transferred from two-year public institutions, 39.2% transferred to another two-year public institution (Shapiro et al., 2018). Within three years of initial enrollment, 20.2% of students who began postsecondary education at community colleges in 2011-2012 transferred (Radford et al., 2016), and 6.4% of community college students transferred to other community colleges (Ifill, Radford, Bentz, Wu, & Velez, 2016). Lateral transfer among community college students is surprisingly common (Bahr, 2012), in part because open admission policies simplify the enrollment process for both new and transfer students (Bahr, 2009; Cohen et al., 2014).

### **Outcomes of Community College Lateral Transfer Students**

Across two-year and four-year institutions and all directions of transfer, students who do not transfer are less likely to be enrolled three years after their initial enrollment than students who transfer (Ifill et al., 2016). Community college students who attend more than one institution are more likely to attain a degree or to still be enrolled in higher education than students who attend only one institution (Peter & Forrest Cataldi, 2005). Viewed from a system perspective, transfer students have higher rates of persistence than students who do not transfer. When faced with the decision of whether to enroll in college, students who transfer enroll, just not at the institution they formerly attended. That said, students whose first transfer is from a two-year institution to another two-year institution are more likely than all other transfer students to be unenrolled after three years (Ifill et al., 2016).

The Department of Education provides information about persistence and attainment of postsecondary students, including community college students who transfer laterally (Bentz et al., 2016). Compared to students who started at a public community college in 2011–2012 and did not transfer, students who transferred laterally as their first transfer move were more likely to have earned a certificate, to be enrolled at a four-year institution, and to be enrolled at a less than four-year institution. Lateral transfer community college students were less likely to have earned an associate degree and less likely to be unenrolled. Compared to community college students who first transferred to a four-year institution, lateral transfer students were more likely to have earned a certificate, less likely to have earned an associate degree or to be enrolled at a four-year institution, and more likely to be unenrolled (Bentz et al., 2016).

From an institutional perspective, lateral transfer distorts observed rates of credential completion when only the first institution attended is considered (Bahr, 2009). In his study of California community college students, Bahr (2009) found an 18% underestimate in the rate of credential completion; nearly one in five students who completes a credential is not counted when completion is tied to only the first institution attended. Student outcome data may be skewed due to disproportionate rates of lateral transfer of different groups. Because Black students transfer laterally more than White students and completions are underestimated as a result of lateral transfer, the estimated completion rate for Black students is more prone to error than the completion rate for White students (Bahr, 2009).

### **Characteristics of Community College Lateral Transfer Students**

We know little about the characteristics of community college students who transfer laterally. Lateral transfer is correlated to certain traits, even after controlling for duration of enrollment. In one study (Bahr, 2009), Black and Asian students were more likely to transfer laterally than White students, and Hispanic, Filipino, and Native American students were less

likely to engage in lateral transfer. Female students were less likely to transfer laterally than male students, and older students were less likely to transfer laterally than younger students. Students who receive grant aid were less likely to transfer from one community college to another, and generally, the more grant aid students receive, the less likely they were to transfer to another community college (Bahr, 2009). Of the subset of community college students who transfer, those who transfer laterally had greater financial need than students who transfer vertically. Nationally, over half of community college students who transferred to other two-year colleges received Pell Grant funds, while 37% of students who transferred to four-year institutions received Pell Grant funds (Radford et al., 2016).

We have a preliminary and tentative understanding of risk factors and trends related to the lateral transfer of community college students. Studies provide inconsistent results regarding the timing of lateral transfer, potentially due to differences in how time of enrollment is measured and how transfer is defined. Studies have found the risk of lateral transfer peaks in the first year (Berkner et al., 2001; Ifill et al., 2016) or in the second year (Shapiro et al., 2015). When attendance is measured by actual enrollment rather than by academic calendar, lateral transfer peaks in the second semester of enrollment (Bahr, 2012). From the perspective of credit accumulation, lateral transfer declines as students earn credits, and then increases again after students have earned 60 credit hours (Bahr, 2012). This counter-intuitive finding may point to the idea that in the early stages of education, transfer may be less risky because of the lower investment in program completion. As students accumulate credits, they may be less inclined to jeopardize their previous work by transferring to a community college with different policies and requirements. After students complete program requirements or earn their degree at the 60-credit threshold, they may be more likely to transfer to another community college (Bahr, 2012). However, of students who transferred from a two-year institution to a two-year institution, only

3.3% had earned an associate degree. Certificate-earners comprised 5.7% of the transfer population, while 90.9% of lateral transfers had not earned a credential (Velez, Radford, Bentz, Lew, & Ifill, 2016), casting some doubt on this hypothesis. Concurrent enrollment in two or more community colleges in one semester is strongly associated with lateral transfer, and the risk of lateral transfer is greater the semester after a student transfers laterally (Bahr, 2012).

There is a positive association between the frequency of lateral transfer and duration of enrollment, but the direction of the relationship is uncertain (Bahr, 2012). Students who are enrolled longer have more opportunity to transfer, while students who transfer may remain enrolled longer because of different degree requirements or another situation precipitated by transfer. Similarly, there is a positive association between the frequency of lateral transfer and course unit load, with students who are enrolled closer to full-time transferring laterally more often (Bahr, 2012). Net of other variables, the odds of lateral transfer are greatest in the spring semester for students who were not enrolled in coursework the previous semester and greatest in the summer term for students who were enrolled in the prior semester. Academic investment in the community college, in the form of course success rate, credits attempted, and non-credit courses taken, is associated with a lower risk of lateral transfer (Bahr, 2012). Students who reside in areas with higher educational attainment are more likely to transfer laterally than students from areas with lower educational attainment. This association could potentially relate to the greater concentration of community colleges in those settings (Bahr, 2012).

In a study of student mobility in the state, the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board (WHECB) (2009) found lateral transfer between community and technical colleges is the second-most common transfer pattern in the Washington public higher education system. The coordinating board conducted focus groups (M. Lundgren, personal communication, June 20, 2018) and reported students at Washington community and technical

colleges transfer laterally for three reasons: convenience, selection, and stop-out (WHECB, 2009). Students who transfer for convenience complete prerequisite courses close to home or work before transferring to a different community college for a specific program. *Selection* in this analysis relates to concurrent enrollment, with students taking courses at multiple institutions to find additional course options or better scheduling. Finally, students who stop out may enroll at a different college for personal reasons or convenience (WHECB, 2009). This research offers a preliminary understanding of the motivations of community college students who transfer laterally, but it does not separate lateral transfer from concurrent enrollment and does not provide detail and context regarding students' experiences.

Scholars do not know why community college students transfer laterally (Bahr, 2012). Some researchers claim external issues drive lateral transfer among community college students (Mitchell & Grafton, 1985; Townsend, 2001), while others propose students make lateral moves more purposefully (Bahr, 2012). Students may perceive community colleges to be like supermarkets (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983) or shopping malls (Adelman, 1999) where they get what they need and leave. To date, no in-depth qualitative study has asked lateral transfer community college students how and why they made enrollment decisions.

### **Critique of Literature**

Most research on transfer examines vertical transfer from the community college to the university (Bahr, 2012; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007; Li, 2010; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Utter & DeAngelo, 2015). Few studies have focused on other forms of transfer, including lateral transfer and reverse transfer (Bahr, 2012; Baldwin, 2017). National longitudinal studies such as the BPS track student characteristics, enrollment, and attainment at intervals over a multi-year period (NCES, n.d.) and reveal attendance patterns that were formerly unexamined. These comprehensive studies from the Department of Education and other research

using national, statewide, or multi-institutional data sets (Bahr, 2009, 2012; Crosta, 2014; Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009; Gross & Berry, 2016; Hossler et al., 2012; Shapiro et al., 2015) provide an array of information about trends, relationships among variables, and student outcomes. However, these studies do not allow for comprehensive, contextualized research (Goldrick-Rab, 2009) and tell only part of the story of student mobility. I have located one qualitative study of community college lateral transfer students (WHECB, 2009), and little evidence of why community college students transfer laterally.

National longitudinal research like BPS have become more detailed and better segmented. For example, a report written from the 2004/06 BPS (Berkner, He, Mason, & Wheelless, 2007) indicates whether students transfer, but does not specify the direction of transfer. A reader would understand 24% of students who began their education at a community college in 2003-2004 had transferred within three years (Berkner et al., 2007), but would not know whether they transferred to four-year institutions or to community colleges. The most current reports from the 2012/14 BPS (Bentz et al., 2016; Ifill et al., 2016; Radford et al., 2016; Velez et al., 2016) include greater specificity, indicating direction of first transfer, with the implied understanding that students often transfer more than once. While I would like to see additional information regarding program of study, these data shed new light on transfer patterns and outcomes. As interesting as they are, these reports only address certain questions.

Many reports (Adelman, 1999, 2006; Peter & Forrest Cataldi, 2005) convey data in relation to a bachelor's degree goal. For example, a table in one report showed "Percentage of beginning postsecondary students in public two-year institutions in 1995-96 with a bachelor's degree goal who completed a bachelor's degree according to the number of years to complete the degree, by multiple institution attendance patterns" (Peter & Forrest Cataldi, 2005, p. 20). There was no corresponding table for students with an associate degree goal. In North Carolina, 49%

of community college students are enrolled in career and technical degree programs (North Carolina Community College System, 2017a), and nationwide, close to two-thirds of community college students are enrolled in career and technical programs (NCES, 2012). It is highly likely students in technical programs transfer to other community colleges. For many aspects of community college lateral transfer, there is a significant gap in the literature.

### **How Scholarship Frames Lateral Transfer of Community College Students**

Studies of community college students inherently involve issues of equity. While there is some debate, research has shown students who begin their education at a community college graduate with a bachelor's degree at a lower rate, accumulate fewer credits, and have a higher chance of dropping out compared to similar students who start at four-year institutions (Long & Kurlaender, 2008). This is particularly concerning considering the population of students who attends community colleges. A U.S. Department of Education profile of first-time postsecondary students who enrolled in higher education in the fall of 2011 demonstrates how community colleges students differ from their peers at public and private nonprofit four-year institutions (Radford et al., 2016). Compared to students at four-year institutions, students at community colleges are more likely to be independent, to have dependents, and to be married than students at four-year colleges and universities. They are more likely to be 20 years of age or older, to be veterans, to have a disability, and to be the first person in their immediate family to go to college (Radford et al., 2016). Community college students are less likely to be recent high school graduates and more likely to have a job than students at four-year colleges and universities. Dependent community college students are more likely to come from lower income households than their dependent peers in four-year institutions. A greater proportion of Black and Hispanic students attend two-year public colleges than four-year public and private nonprofit institutions

(Radford et al., 2016). Overall, students at community colleges are less advantaged and more representative of marginalized groups than are students at four-year institutions.

Learning more about which students transfer laterally, why they transfer, and what happens after they transfer may benefit students who already face significant challenges. Community colleges serve a diversity of students, including many who need remediation in reading, writing, and/or math. Nationally, of students who started their postsecondary education at public two-year institutions in 2011-2012, 32.6% self-reported enrolling in remedial courses (Radford et al., 2016). North Carolina community college institutional records report nearly twice this number (Clotfelter, Ladd, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2015). For students needing remediation, attending a community college may be their only option for higher education.

For college administrators and policymakers, the problem of lateral transfer is critically important. North Carolina community colleges are funded based on the number of students enrolled at the institution and the number of students who perform at or above benchmarks established by the State Board of Community Colleges (State Board of Community Colleges Division of Finance and Operations, 2016). If colleges lose funding, they are less able to serve students and more likely to cut programs, services, and jobs. A given community college may receive incoming lateral transfer students, and may even take in more transfer students than leave the institution. However, no college wants its students to leave. It does not matter if the lateral transfer balance is net-zero or net-positive; colleges want the students who enroll to be successful at that institution. Transfer affects the bottom line, but transfer also impacts morale. A well-functioning community college should be a place where students have opportunities to achieve their goals with the full support of faculty, staff, and administrators. If students transfer to another community college because they move or pursue a program not offered at the original

institution, there is little practitioners can do. However, if they transfer for another reason, there may have been something the college could have addressed to retain students.

### **Suggestions and Implications for Future Inquiry**

Given the gap in the literature on lateral transfer among community college students, scholars could study nearly any facet of lateral transfer and contribute to the field. My pressing concern regarding lateral transfer of community college students is why they leave. I want to know what motivates students to depart a community college, especially if they pursue the same program at a college within easy driving distance. Conversely, students may transfer to change programs, to complete prerequisites for a limited-enrollment program, or to regain satisfactory academic progress for financial aid. Right now, we do not know what motivates a student to leave one community college for another. If students leave because of negative experiences, the college needs to examine and address the events or circumstances that led to student departure. Learning why community college students transfer laterally can shape policy in an institution or across a state, or create change on a larger scale.

We should learn more about who transfers laterally. One study showed Black and Asian community college students were more likely to transfer laterally (Bahr, 2009), which contrasts with results from four-year institutions, where race did not have an independent effect (D. Kim et al., 2012). Bahr (2009) found male students were more likely than female students to transfer laterally, but Kim et al. (2012) found the opposite. Differences between the two sectors might point to different reasons for transfer, varying impacts of financial aid, or institutional effect. Learning about differences related to which groups of students transfer may provide indications about reasons for transfer and the influence of culture, and may open this topic to critical inquiry.

We currently have superficial information about outcomes related to lateral transfer. We have little understanding of what happens to lateral transfer students after they arrive at their

destination institution. Learning more about how transfer impacts time to degree, degree completion, and educational expenditures would provide valuable information about the impact of lateral transfer on students and may generate policy changes. Bahr (personal communication, March 7, 2016) believes studies need to show empirically how lateral transfer impacts learning outcomes and graduation outcomes. Additional quantitative studies will help us understand some characteristics of lateral transfer, but they will leave many questions unanswered. Research on lateral transfer would benefit from qualitative inquiry that describes students' experiences in their own words.

Lateral transfer is common among community college students, but there is little research on the topic. Lateral transfer students may be impacted in terms of time to degree, educational expenditure, loss of financial aid, or other negative outcomes. Institutions are impacted by a loss of enrollment and a decrease in performance measures. We need to better understand lateral transfer in community colleges and learn from students why they leave. Research about lateral transfer of community college students could lead to strategies to help meet the accountability and funding needs of institutions and the educational needs of students.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

To better understand the lateral transfer of community college students, I will engage with the epistemology of social constructionism and the theory of student college choice. The majority of research on student mobility is conducted through a positivist epistemology. Constructionism enables me to ask different questions about transfer, learn the meaning students attribute to their experience, and contribute unique knowledge to the field. A theory of college choice helps to explain the motivations behind students' enrollment decisions. After distinguishing social constructionism from constructivism, I will describe the origins and history of social constructionism, explain its key assumptions, critique the theory in relation to

educational inquiry, and evaluate the implications of using social constructionism as a foundation for understanding and analyzing lateral transfer of community college students. I will then discuss the foundations of college choice theory, clarify its key assumptions, describe a specific conceptual model of student college choice, critique the model, and evaluate the implications of using the model of student college choice as a framework for understanding community college lateral transfer.

### **Social Constructionism**

The term *social constructionism* is often confused with *constructivism* (Burr, 2015; Harper, 2012), with some authors using the terms interchangeably (Chian & Nuzzo, 1996; Harper, 2012). Over time, *constructivism* has become an umbrella term for multiple approaches (Chian & Nuzzo, 1996; Cunningham & Duffy, 1996). Social constructionism and constructivism are part of a group of related theories (Raskin, 2006) that share assumptions, including the ideas that human knowledge does not reflect an external reality, humans create frameworks to understand themselves and their world (Raskin, 2006), and language shapes the reality people experience (Burr, 2015). The word *constructivism* should be avoided by social constructionist researchers (Harper, 2012), in part because it has technical definitions in other domains, including developmental psychology and theories of perception (Burr, 2015; Harper, 2012).

Social constructionism emphasizes the collective development of meaning through relational and social processes, while constructivism stresses individual, private meaning systems created in the mind (Chian & Nuzzo, 1996; Raskin, 2006). Based on Piaget's (1977) theory of cognitive structures and influenced by biology, constructivism understands cognition as adaptive (Glaserfeld, 1995). In constructivism, people develop compatible meaning systems of words and language through failures in understanding and subsequent adjustments in their individual

mental structures (Glaserfeld, 2005). Conversely, social constructionism understands meaning as the result of ongoing interaction and communication between people (Raskin, 2006; Shotter, 1995). Broadly, social constructionism and constructivism differ in the degree to which people control the construction process and the extent to which social forces are involved (Burr, 2015).

**Origins and history of social constructionism.** Social constructionism emerged from discontent with positivist assumptions of an objective world and an acknowledgement of the limitations of linguistic conventions (Gergen, 1985). Constructionism is in the interpretive paradigm, which aims to understand the world. Theorists working within interpretivism believe there is no objective truth and dialogic discourse creates subjective reality (Lather, 2006). Social constructionists seek to illuminate the processes by which people account for the world in which they live (Gergen, 1985). As a theoretical orientation, social constructionism helped lay the foundation for critical and radical approaches such as discourse analysis, deconstruction, and poststructuralism (Burr, 2015). The precise origins of social constructionism cannot be traced, in part because the theory recognizes meaning is created in relationships and changes over time (Gergen, 1994). Social constructionism is multi-disciplinary, with roots in philosophy, sociology, linguistics, and psychology (Burr, 2015).

***Philosophical foundations of social constructionism.*** In the 1800s, Friedrich Nietzsche prepared the way for social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and sowed the seeds of postmodernism by asserting there is no grand meaning, narrative, or purpose to be found in history. He claimed the Enlightenment's focus on reason, science, and progress had become dogmatic, and he asserted history and human life were not progressing (Burr, 2015). Karl Marx, also a foundational figure in social constructionism, proposed human consciousness is determined by one's social position. To Marx, thought was founded in human activity and social relations, a root premise of social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Nietzsche and

Marx concur knowledge is not grounded in external reality, but is at least partially produced by human thought (Burr, 2015).

***Sociological foundations of social constructionism.*** Social constructionism has firm roots in sociology. A founder of sociology, Max Scheler originated the term *sociology of knowledge* in the early 1900s (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). A contemporary of Scheler, Karl Mannheim, advanced the idea of relationism, that knowledge is a product of historical and cultural context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1994). These ideas built off earlier ideas and set the stage for more substantial contributions.

***Symbolic interactionism.*** Symbolic interactionism largely arose from work at the University of Chicago in the early to mid-twentieth century (Burr, 2015). George Herbert Mead, who is credited with founding symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969), ascribes to Dewey's (1925/1958) proposition that meaning is a product of communication. Extending Dewey's line of thought, Mead (1934) states meaning is a relation between phases of the social act, not a mental construction. To Mead (1934), language creates situations and objects; language does not merely symbolize a situation or object already in existence. Blumer (1969) expands on Mead's view by proposing three premises of symbolic interactionism: (a) humans act toward things according to the meaning they have for them, (b) meaning results from social interaction, and (c) meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process. Individual conduct and joint activity are not simply expressions of qualities people bring to interaction; they are formed through an ongoing social process. Meaning is formed, learned, and transmitted. Objects have no fixed status except as their meaning is sustained through communication (Blumer, 1969).

***Socially constructed reality.*** Berger and Luckmann's (1966) influential book *The Social Construction of Reality* further developed ideas central to social constructionism. Berger and Luckmann's discussion of the relativity of perspectives, impact of individual perspectives on

social processes, and reification through language figure prominently in social constructionism (Gergen, 1994). Though human knowledge is related to a particular social and historical context, the order of meaning appears to individuals as the natural way of the world, *a priori* to individual experience. People create society, society creates objectivity through institutionalization, and then society creates people. Language is the content and the method of transmitting a society's knowledge and culture (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

***Linguistic foundations of social constructionism.*** Both micro and macro social constructionism, as defined by Burr (2015), emphasize the role of language in the construction of reality. Micro social constructionism takes place in everyday interactions among individuals, while macro social constructionism centers on the power derived from social structures, social relations, and institutionalized practices. Wittgenstein (1953) first popularized the notion that words do not simply reference things in the world. Rather, the meaning of words is determined by the ways people use language in their everyday interactions. Saussure's (1972) structural linguistics contributed the idea that a sign is composed of two parts: a *signifier*, which is the spoken sound, and the *signified*, the referent of the signifier. Saussure proposed the link between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, a human invention. Nevertheless, this human invention has significant impact. The way humans have categorized the world through language creates a framework for reality (Burr, 2015).

Both structuralism as advanced by Saussure and poststructuralism view language as the primary means of constructing the person. Structuralism and poststructuralism also share a stance of anti-humanism, the rejection of a coherent, unified self. Poststructuralism diverges from structuralism in the idea that meaning is never fixed, which opens the potential for conflict, and thereby introduces power relations (Burr, 2015). If meanings are variable and always open

to question, the use of language becomes the process through which identities are built and challenged and through which individual and societal change occur.

***Psychological foundations of social constructionism.*** The emergence of social constructionism in psychology is credited to Kenneth Gergen with the publication of his 1973 paper “Social Psychology as History” (Burr, 2015). In this work, Gergen reinforces the contextual nature of knowledge and contends one must look beyond the individual and into social, political, and economic domains to understand psychology and social life. In a later work, Gergen (1985) puts forward four assumptions of social constructionism that continue to serve as key principles of the theory. Burr (2015) expanded on Gergen’s ideas in her book *Social Constructionism*.

**Key assumptions of social constructionism.** Although a concise definition of social construction is not feasible, a social constructionist approach accepts at least one of the following four assumptions (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 1985).

***There is no objective truth.*** The first assumption of social constructionism states, “The terms by which we understand our world and our self are neither required nor demanded by ‘what there is’” (Gergen, 1999, p. 47). This assumption implores us to take a critical stance toward our experiences and to question the idea that the nature of the world can be perceived (Burr, 2015). Social constructionism starts with skepticism of the taken-for-granted world (Gergen, 1985) and challenges the idea that knowledge is based on objective, unbiased observation (Burr, 2015). From a social constructionist view, there are no objective facts (Burr, 2015; Crotty, 1998), and though the world may appear objective, that objectivity is humanly produced (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). There is no world of meaning outside human perception and because each person has a distinct frame of reference and exists within a specific and multidimensional context, the world is not the same for multiple people. Scientific claims to

knowledge are not privileged in social constructionism; all understandings are constructions (Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1985, 1994). Scientific understandings have changed even over my lifetime. For example, Pluto, once one of the nine planets in the solar system, is now classified as a dwarf planet. Textbooks, models of the solar system, and documentaries had to be revised when Pluto was demoted. Social constructionism threatens the premise language can express truth and the notion science can provide accurate descriptions of the world (Gergen, 1994).

Human classifications are arbitrary. The categories we employ to understand the world do not relate to real divisions (Burr, 2015). There are no essences or inherent qualities that dictate what symbols should be used in representation or communication. An unlimited number of explanations is possible for any situation, and in principle, none of those explanations can be judged superior to the others (Gergen, 1999). Because we construct our own versions of reality, any way of understanding the world is partial, both in terms of its limits and its reflection of vested interests (Burr, 2015).

To use an example from education, a class is understood differently by each student. One student may learn something new every day, enjoy class assignments and projects, and feel an affinity for the instructor. To that student, the class is good, valuable, and fun. Another student may already know much of the material and resent doing what he considers busywork. To that student, the class is a waste of time. Another student may register for the class, attend one session to be counted as present, and never appear again. That student may see the class as only a way to receive financial aid. These students understand reality as it exists for each of them. Their understanding varies because of their experience, position in society, frame of reference, and other contextual factors. Constructionism recognizes this inescapable diversity of interpretation and seeks to understand how others understand the world.

*Knowledge is historically and culturally specific.* The second assumption of social constructionism indicates the categories and concepts we use to understand the world are historically and culturally specific (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 1994, 1999). There is no social existence beyond the influence of culture, and we cannot conceptualize a world that is unconstructed because we cannot remove ourselves from our own constructions (Gergen, 1994). Cultural knowledge is composed of social artifacts (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 1985), which are produced through communication that occurs in a particular historical context. Understanding is a result of ongoing relationships among people (Gergen, 1985, 1994), not a product of the individual mind, which is unable to create language or make meaning in the absence of another (Gergen, 1999). We are able to share a language and create meaning only because relationships have been sustained over time (Gergen, 1994). Our historically and culturally situated understandings are no better than other ways of knowing (Burr, 2015). In social constructionism, there is no ultimate truth, but what is taken to be true has achieved validity in a particular culture at a given point in history (Gergen, 1999).

Who attends college and the purpose and nature of postsecondary education are concepts that have shifted along with social forces. Originally intended for the eldest sons of wealthy families, access to higher education expanded with the creation of publicly-funded institutions (Shugart, 2013). Junior colleges were founded near the turn of the twentieth century after a push by some educators to focus on students who had already completed their freshman and sophomore years of college (Cohen et al., 2014). Following World War II, the passage of the G.I. Bill resulted in unforeseen demand for higher education, and the Truman Commission proposed the merger of liberal arts junior colleges with industrial education centers to provide convenient, inexpensive education to anyone who wanted to learn, later giving rise to community colleges (Shugart, 2013). Less than 10% of college students attended two-year institutions at the

end of the 1940s; by the end of the 1960s, one-quarter attended two-year colleges (Snyder, 1993).

As baby boomers entered the educational system in the late 1960s, higher education expanded to the masses and took the shape of an industrial model designed to serve as many students as possible at the lowest viable cost (Shugart, 2013). In the 1970s, enrollment doubled in two-year colleges (Snyder, 1993). One thousand community colleges opened over 50 years, and the number of community colleges stabilized in the late 1980s as the needs of service areas were met (Cohen et al., 2014). In the 1980s, the college-going population declined and enrollments shrank. A retail model of higher education based on enrollment management and branding touted the unique features of each institution and turned students into consumers (Shugart, 2013). Research on the lateral transfer of community college students may shed additional light on how students understand community college education in the present cultural and historical context.

*Knowledge is sustained by social processes.* The third assumption of social constructionism is that knowledge is created through daily interactions between people in social life (Burr, 2015). Contrary to conventional understanding, the process of communication is not initiated by an individual. The relationship between people enables meaning to be created. In this way, relationship rather than the individual becomes the organizing unit of social life (Gergen, 1994). Understanding must be shared for people to find commonality in the world and to communicate about their experiences. Constructionism seeks to uncover those understandings, which change over time and across space, and are communicated by language. Interpretations are open to re-interpretation and negotiation, primary components of social life (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

Language is a pre-condition for thought and the basis of the concepts and categories by which we frame understandings of the world (Burr, 2015). The process of naming and explaining the world creates the world, and words shape understanding. For example, describing a high-stakes discussion as either a *fight* or a *dialogue* significantly changes how someone approaches the encounter and how others perceive it. Without the shared framework of language, meaning would be difficult to create in any significant sense. People can gesticulate, make noises, and contort their facial features, but language enables people to create meaning with much more precision and sophistication. Language is the most important sign system for humans and the most important agent of socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Language is an unparalleled tool, yet language imposes limits on understanding (Gergen, 1985). Different people have different comprehensions of the world in part because of the means they possess to describe it. A young child with little experience in the world and a limited vocabulary sees the world very differently than an erudite adult. People process the world by encoding their experiences into language, and without words to describe an object, feeling, or event, a person's ability to create and share meaning is limited. Even among people with great faculty for language, rules for signification are ambiguous, evolving, and fluctuate based on who applies them (Gergen, 1985). Furthermore, language itself is limiting; words are inadequate to describe emotions, landscapes, relationships, or even objects. Two people could listen to the same description and have markedly different interpretations of that which is described.

The degree to which a given understanding or explanation of the world is sustained through time depends not on the empirical validity of that view, but on the whims of society (Gergen, 1985, 1994). For instance, access to a college education has increased dramatically over the past 150 years. In 1869–1870, the first year national college enrollment data were collected, approximately 1% of 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in postsecondary education

(Snyder, 1993). By 1900, 2% of the same-age population were enrolled in college. That number grew to 7% in 1929, 15% in 1949 (Snyder, 1993), 25% in 1979, and 36% in 1999 (NCES, 2016a). College attendance among 18- to 24-year-olds peaked at 42% in 2011 and was calculated at 41.2% in 2016, the latest date for which data are available (NCES, 2017b) From 1869 to 2015, college attendance increased from 1% of 18- to 24-year-olds to over 40%, with many students outside that range also attending college. In the United States, where 42.3% of the total population age 25 and older has attained at least an associate degree (Ryan & Bauman, 2016), college-going may not be the norm, but neither is it the exception. For someone living in the late 1800s, it would be difficult to imagine nearly half the population would earn a college degree. College is no longer only for the elite. Through social processes, the meaning of college has changed.

***Knowledge cannot be separated from social action.*** Words are empty until they are conferred power through communication (Gergen, 1994), which has consequences in social life. Descriptions and explanations of the world are not value-neutral, and what is considered good or right or just is always generated from within a tradition. Certain constructions are already privileged, and alternatives already rejected (Gergen, 1999). To cite another example from higher education, preparation programs for students identified as having academic deficits were called *remedial* education from the 1860s to the 1960s. The term *developmental* education emerged in the 1970s and was borrowed from adult development and learning theory popular in the field of college student personnel (Arendale, 2005; Boylan & Bonham, 2007). Unlike *remedial*, which follows a medical model of prescriptive treatment, *developmental* references a talent development model in which students can improve knowledge and skills (Arendale, 2005). *Developmental* education is the term used by the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges (North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges, 2017), but a number of North

Carolina community colleges have, without direction from the governing body, renamed *developmental* education *pre-curriculum* education in their college communications (Fayetteville Technical Community College, n.d.; Guilford Technical Community College, 2016; Sandhills Community College, n.d.; Wake Technical Community College, n.d.). This shift in terminology may indicate a new conception of the students who enroll in coursework that prepares them for credit-bearing classes. Referring to students as having deficiencies, developing skills, or preparing for college-level work changes how those students are regarded and treated.

Language influences social action. Before the advent of research into student departure from college, all students who left prior to finishing a degree were lumped into the category of *dropout* (Tinto, 1975). Students could leave for any number of reasons, including academic dismissal, transfer to a different institution, or a lack of funding, and they were all labeled *dropouts*. The term *dropout* stems from an institutional model of completion, and as technologies enable multi-institutional analyses of student enrollment behavior, higher education is moving toward a system perspective of completion in which it is difficult to define a true *dropout* (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2007). Identifying whether someone *dropped out of* or *transferred from* an institution shapes societal perceptions of the student and that pattern of behavior. The term currently in favor for students who do not finish a credential is *non-completer* (WestEd, 2012). A *transfer student* is a *non-completer* from the perspective of the institution, but not from the system of education. The policies that are crafted to address the needs of these different classifications of students shape the action of colleges, coordinating boards, philanthropic organizations, interest groups, and state and national governments. Those policies then impact students, faculty, staff, administrators, and everyone within the domain of higher education.

### **Critique of Social Constructionism in Relation to Educational Inquiry**

Using social constructionism as a theoretical foundation in educational inquiry comes with benefits and drawbacks. Much research in higher education, including required reporting to the NCES for the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), is conducted from the epistemology of positivism, which sees the world as fixed, agreed-upon, and measureable (Merriam, 2002). Investigating higher education through social constructionism is counter to the norm and disrupts positivist truths. Social constructionism has been critiqued for its treatment of reality, view of personal experience, and moral relativism.

***Treatment of reality.*** Social constructionism believes whatever is, is. As a theory, social constructionism makes no claims to ontology (Gergen, 1994). With social constructionism, multiple accounts of the world are possible with no way to determine which is more real or true than the others (Burr, 2015). When we attempt to articulate what exists, we enter the world of discourse, which is built upon specific traditions, values, and ways of life (Gergen, 1999). Our engagement with the world can never exist outside of the categories and concepts we have created to organize our experience, and we cannot claim to understand a *real world* outside our descriptions of it. The claim nothing exists outside of discourse appears to deny materiality, essentially reducing illness, hunger, and war to products of language (Burr, 2015). To a constructionist, the concept of *illness* is only one way to understand a phenomenon. A student who has trouble sustaining focus, fidgets, and talks excessively may be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a medical condition treated with therapy or pharmaceuticals. These symptoms have been pathologized and labeled an illness, while other interpretations such as a lack of discipline are equally valid within the framework of social constructionism. There is no way to determine which explanation is more true, but students

whose symptoms are relieved by medication may disagree. Social constructionists can be charged with working in the abstract world of discourse rather than in the concrete world.

From a social constructionist perspective, lateral transfer community college students do not experience one common reality. Their experiences cannot be ordered into simple categories, and each student has a story to tell. From a positivist point of view that seeks to predict and measure the world, the idea there is no reality means a researcher can never arrive at a definitive explanation or a conclusion. Not only does each student have a different reality, each researcher brings a unique perspective that colors understanding of the student's reality. This proliferation of viewpoints and negation of *truth* are problematic in education, which often seeks to solve problems through policies applied consistently with all students. With constructionism, there is no right answer to the problems in higher education and no prescription to follow to fix them. However, constructionism allows better understanding of the lived experiences and challenges encountered by students. This deep insight can yield recommendations for change that address facets of the student experience we otherwise may not know.

***Personal experience.*** In social constructionism, the notion of personal experience is problematic. The common view of the individual as having personality characteristics, attitudes, motivations, and personal agency is inconsistent with constructionism (Burr, 2015). Because it maintains human action stems from relationship rather than from the individual, social constructionism challenges the traditional Cartesian view of the self. For social constructionists, the individual mind does not reflect an independent world. Instead, communal interchange forms the basis of thought (Gergen, 1994). Though it argues for revised interpretations of personhood, social constructionism has not posed an alternative to the self that wields the same explanatory power (Burr, 2015).

Most educational research assumes people have a *self*, a set of characteristics and traits that exist in some relatively stable combination within each individual. By identifying traits or characteristics that impact an outcome, positivist researchers can generalize findings and predict results. For example, if research shows lateral transfer students are uncertain about their career goals, an appropriate response may be to provide students with a career assessment they can use to identify their strengths, interests, aptitudes, and work values. That information could then be leveraged in the identification of a suitable program of study that results in a better fit for the student. Constructionism maintains there is no self, no stable set of characteristics that define a person. A student may be uncertain about career goals, but the student's understanding of *career* and *goals*, and what is acceptable, valued, or desirable are not products of an individual mind looking inward. They are all products of social relationships. An individual self is a discrete person who has knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics. Rather than a self, constructionism sees a web of culturally and historically situated relationships through which meaning is created. Though this constructionist view is decidedly more complicated than a fixed self, it creates potential for change, adaptation, and growth.

**Relativism.** With social constructionism, it is difficult to argue some ideas or ways of thinking are correct or better than others (Burr, 2015), and moral standards are understood to be constructed, like any other concept. Detractors may view social constructionism as open to everything and standing for nothing (Gergen, 1994). Social constructionism does not pass moral judgment. For example, a creationist textbook is in principle no less correct than a textbook based on evolution. That said, constructionism recognizes there are normative rules in society, but it views these rules as existing in a specific cultural and historical context (Gergen, 1985). In the context of present-day America, normative rules value explanations crafted on the framework

of science, so the notion of evolution tested through scientific method is more prevalent in education than the idea of divine creation.

Applied to the topic of lateral transfer, constructionism does not make value judgments. If a student transfers laterally from one community college to another in order to collect federal financial aid, that is neither good nor bad. It just is. If a student bullied for having a disability leaves an institution, social constructionism does not weigh in on the actions of the actors. When seen through a critical or poststructural framework, social constructionism looks like a passive bystander to injustice. However, as mentioned above, social constructionism does recognize normative rules in society. The constructionist goal of understanding does not go far enough toward improving education and society, and admittedly, the social constructionist laissez faire approach to social justice is a concern. However, a deeper understanding of students' experiences with lateral transfer can lead to the application of other theoretical frames in the future. So little is known about lateral transfer that it may be premature to view it through a critical lens.

**Implications of social constructionism as a framework for inquiry.** The field of higher education needs to better understand lateral transfer of community college students. National longitudinal studies of college attendance patterns provide descriptive statistics related to students who transfer. Positivist studies attempt to predict who is likely to transfer laterally, when they might leave, and how transfer impacts measurable outcomes. Constructionism enables me to ask different questions about transfer, learn the meaning students attribute to their experience, and contribute unique knowledge to the field.

*Understand the experiences of students in their own words.* Researchers and practitioners in higher education know little about lateral transfer of community college students. Existing research on lateral transfer of community college students (Bahr, 2009, 2012; Bentz et

al., 2016; Berkner et al., 2001; Ifill et al., 2016; Mitchell & Grafton, 1985; Radford et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2015; Townsend, 2001) has been conducted from a positivist epistemology. Relying on surveys and statistical analyses, positivist research values large sample sizes over depth and detail (Gergen, 1985). Bahr's (2009, 2012) research has provided information about transfer frequency and timing, but it lacks the perspective and input of students who have transferred. It also does not address why students leave one community college for another or what transpires after they transfer. Constructionist inquiry could address those questions and would allow me to understand the world through the lived experience of students who leave one community college for another.

As a constructionist researcher, I would serve as the research instrument and would learn directly from students through a process of verbal communication. As they discuss lateral transfer, students' language would reveal subtle distinctions and a more complete view of their experience than would a survey or statistical analysis used in positivist inquiry. By analyzing the language students use to describe lateral transfer, I would gain insight into the unique context that shapes their understanding of their experience. Each student's account would differ, and by expressing stories in their own words, students would convey the reality of lateral transfer as they lived it.

***The reality of lateral transfer is subjective.*** No two people experience lateral transfer in the same way, and lateral transfer cannot be understood through observation alone. Using a constructionist epistemology, I would talk with lateral transfer students to learn about their experiences. Researchers previously proposed community college students transferred laterally because of college proximity (Mitchell & Grafton, 1985). Though some students may change colleges because of distance, others may transfer to enroll in a different program, to leave an unproductive environment, or to attend the same school as a friend. A constructionist researcher

seeks to understand a participant's subjective reality, and from a constructionist perspective, all of these hypothetical viewpoints are valid.

Though generalization is not the goal of constructionist research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), learning about the experience of numerous community college students who have transferred laterally may enable me to find commonalities in their experiences. I would learn if lateral transfer has similar meaning in their lives and how understanding is shared among participants. Common words, phrases, and sentiments expressed in the responses of research participants may lead me to develop tentative understandings of the experience of lateral transfer. Learning why students transfer laterally and what impact transfer has on their lives may change how higher education researchers view these students and how practitioners shape policies and practices to meet their needs.

*The meaning of lateral transfer is socially constructed.* Language provides a framework for sharing meaning. To understand a community college student's lateral transfer experience, a constructionist researcher relies on language. Though meaning can be shared in nonverbal and artifactual ways, verbal communication through spoken, written, or signed words conveys the depth and nuance of meaning valued in constructionism. Language is our best tool to describe and record human experience, but it is imperfect, inconsistent, and inadequate. By asking students to describe their experiences in higher education, I can begin to understand their reality, but always with the caveat that language constrains reality. There is no magical method of meaning-making that transmits unaltered understanding from person to person, and my subjectivity impacts my analysis of the data I collect.

Meanings are created by people in relationship with each other (Gergen, 1985), rather than by some fundamental truth. Lateral transfer may mean something different in the institutional context of accreditation probation, a chilly racial climate, or the initiation of a

student loan program. Furthermore, community college students have their own understandings of what it means to transfer, the conditions that warrant transfer, and the consequences of transfer. While one student could understand lateral transfer as a sideways move in which nothing is lost or gained, another could view it as a step up to a better school, and another could perceive it as a way to regroup after a bad semester. The most important knowledge on lateral transfer of community college students comes from the students who experience lateral transfer and make it meaningful.

**Closing thoughts on social constructionism.** Community colleges have been called to use *data-driven* decision-making (Bailey, 2005; Zachry & Coghlan, 2010), and some have softened the message by promoting *data-informed* decision-making (Riccardi, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, 2009). Nevertheless, the data community colleges are charged to collect and analyze are typically quantitative data (Achieving the Dream & Jobs for the Future, 2010; Clery, 2013). Quantitative data are used to test hypotheses, study relationships, and determine cause and effect. Qualitative data are used to understand phenomena in rich detail (Ary, Jacobs, Sorensen, & Walker, 2014). Through constructionism and the analysis of language, we can learn from students in their own words. If we want students to stop departing from institutions, we need to learn from students why they are leaving. We need to learn from students what motivates them to stay enrolled, keeps them interested in their program of study, and sustains their drive to complete their education. Constructionism can move the field of higher education toward different understandings that may shed new light on persistent concerns.

Studying lateral transfer through the epistemology of social constructionism shapes the approach, goals, and methodology of the research. However, social constructionism does not provide a framework to analyze the experiences of community college students who transfer

laterally. To better understand students' enrollment behavior in the context of their lives, it is helpful to add a mid-level theory related to the concept of student college choice.

### **College Choice Theory**

Student enrollment pathways involve a series of decisions or choices (Adelman, 2006; Bahr, 2012; Porter, 2003). For continuing students, these decisions include first, whether to re-enroll in college and second, whether to enroll at the same institution (Bahr, 2012; Porter, 2003). Community college students must decide whether to continue their education at a community college or at a four-year institution, and if they transfer, they must choose which specific institution to attend. Students' experiences influence their decisions, with recent experiences having greater impact on their actions than experiences in the more distant past (Beekhoven, De Jong, & Van Hout, 2002).

The college choice process is complex (Bahr, 2012; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Nora, 2001), whether a student is choosing a college for initial enrollment or a transfer destination. In analyzing college choice, it is useful to separate the decision of whether to enroll from the decision of where to enroll (Bahr, 2012; Skinner, 2016). Untangling those decisions can help researchers and practitioners better understand persistence behavior (Porter, 2003). This study of students who transfer laterally between community college students will consider both decisions and emphasize the second, where the students decide to continue their education.

**Foundations of college choice theory.** Research on student college choice decision-making began in earnest in the late 1970s and the 1980s (Becker, 1975; Manski & Wise, 1983; Tierney, 1983), with a number of researchers developing models to explain college choice (Chapman, 1981; Fuller, Manski, & Wise, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982). The majority of research on college choice involves conceptual frameworks based on economics, sociology, or a combination of the two (Coleman, 1988; Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Jackson, 1982;

Nora, 2004; Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2006; Somers et al., 2006). The economic perspective views decisions about college as a rational process in which students weigh the benefits of college against the costs, similar to an investment decision (Adelman, 2006; Manski & Wise, 1983; Paulsen, 1990). The sociological perspective focuses on the early stage of the college choice process, examining context and factors that influence the decision to attend college and the level of postsecondary attainment to which a student aspires (Paulsen, 1990; Perna, 2006; Somers et al., 2006). The sociological model also helps to explain differences in college choice across groups (Perna, 2006).

Shortcomings with both the economic and the sociological models have led researchers to combine them and to include psychological influences in decision-making. The economic model assumes people are rational actors, which is not always the case (Nora, 2004). It also neglects to account for how people's decisions are shaped by social context, including norms, interpersonal relationships, and social networks. The sociological approach, on the other hand, omits agency that gives a person purpose or direction, and conceptualizes action as a product of the environment (Coleman, 1988). The psychological approach adds the impact of college experiences and environments and the notion of student-institution fit (Nora, 2004; Paulsen, 1990). A combined economic and sociological model assumes college choice decisions are determined in part by a person's habitus, the values and beliefs that shape views and interpretations (Nora, 2004; Perna, 2006). College choice involves institutional and individual considerations in a process that combines rationality and intuition (Nora, 2004).

*Economic perspective and human capital theory.* The economic perspective on college choice has been significantly influenced by theories of rational choice and human capital. College attendance imposes direct costs in the form of tuition, books, fees, supplies, and, depending on the student's circumstance, transportation, special housing, and/or childcare.

College attendance also imposes indirect costs in terms of foregone earnings, the income students could have generated in the workforce had they not been enrolled in school (Becker, 1975; Perna, 2006). These costs are investments in education and produce human capital, the knowledge, skills, and capabilities that can raise monetary or psychic income (Becker, 1975; Coleman, 1988). Human capital cannot be separated from the individual (Becker, 1993) and the most important determinant in degree of investment in human capital is the expected rate of return or profitability (Becker, 1975). The most significant investments in human capital are education and training; an investment in education raises a person's income over the course of a lifetime, more than offsetting the costs of college (Becker, 1993).

***Cultural capital.*** Other forms of capital are important to a sociological understanding of how the world functions. Bourdieu (1986) classifies capital into three types: economic capital, which can be immediately converted into money; cultural capital, which is sometimes convertible into economic capital and is institutionalized as educational credentials; and social capital, which is also sometimes convertible into economic capital and is rooted in social networks. Cultural capital is the system of language skills, mannerisms, and cultural knowledge that is transmitted in families and indicates social class status (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Perna, 2006). Cultural capital can be embodied in the form of dispositions, objectified in the form of cultural goods, and institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). The transmission of cultural capital is hidden and unconscious, and is an key component of the reproduction of social class stratification (Bourdieu, 1986).

***Social capital.*** Social capital is the accumulation of resources linked to membership in a group (Bourdieu, 1986) and exists in networks that facilitate action (Coleman, 1988). To produce social capital, people invest in a network of relationships that provide access to resources they can use to achieve their interests (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). The amount

of social capital a person possesses is related to the size of the network she or he is able to mobilize and the amounts of economic, cultural, and social capital held by each of the members of the group (Bourdieu, 1986). Social capital in the family and in the community help to create human capital in the next generation (Coleman, 1988), and the profits that arise from membership in a group produce the group cohesion that makes the profits possible (Bourdieu, 1986).

**Habitus.** These multiple forms of capital contribute to the formation of a person's habitus, the internalized thoughts, perceptions, and dispositions that arise from the immediate environment and are shared by members of a social class (Bourdieu, 1977; McDonough, 1997). A habitus is constrained by the social and historical conditions in which it is formed (Bourdieu, 1977). Habitus molds individual aspirations and guides decision-making by shaping what choices seem reasonable or sensible (McDonough, 1997). Organizational habitus refers to the impact an intermediate organization like a college has on reproducing social class distinctions and shaping students' perceptions (McDonough, 1997). The interaction of an individual with available opportunity structures is a conception of college choice (Adelman, 2006; Hillman, 2016) that draws on the idea of habitus. What may appear to researchers as an irrational college choice decision is informed by a student's identity and family and career goals (Iloh & Tierney, 2014), which are inseparable from habitus.

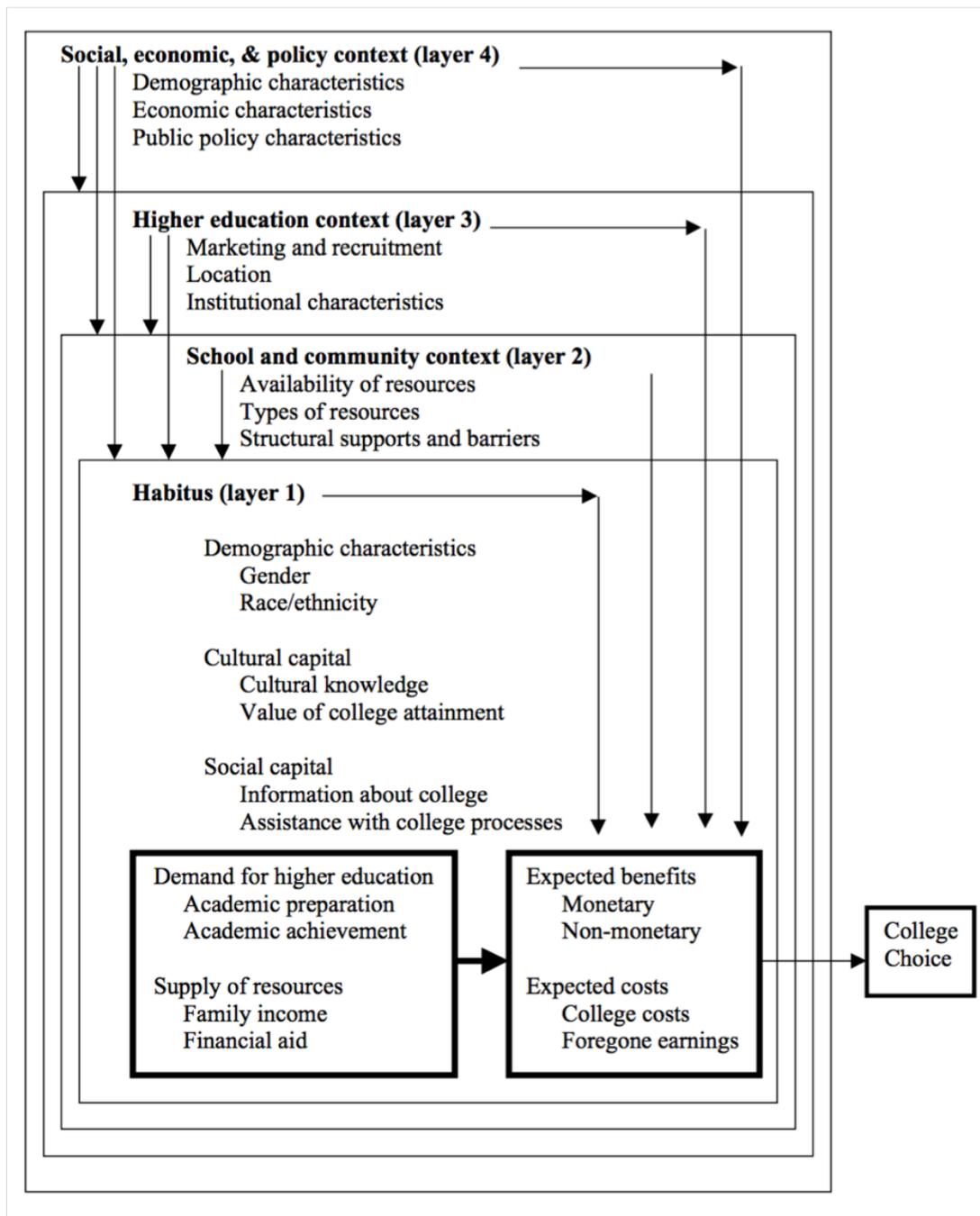
**Three-phase model of college choice.** Popular models of college choice divide the process into three phases (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982), and Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model has been particularly influential in the field (Radford, 2013). Whereas Jackson (1982) classified the three phases as *preference*, *exclusion*, and *evaluation*, Hossler & Gallagher (1987) frame the stages as *predisposition*, *search*, and *choice*. During the predisposition phase, students determine whether to attend a postsecondary institution. In the

search phase, students gather information about different options for higher education and establish a choice set of institutions from which to choose. In the choice phase, students evaluate their choice set and determine in which college or university to enroll (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). At each stage, institutional and student factors, including habitus (Nora, 2004), interact to produce outcomes that influence the choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Examined through the lens of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, lateral transfer students have already established their disposition to enroll in college. Of greater interest are the second and third phases, how they search for possible transfer destinations and then finally choose a community college to which to transfer.

**Perna (2006) conceptual model of student college choice.** The Perna (2006) conceptual model (see Figure 1) of student college choice integrates economic and sociological approaches and assumes a student's cost-benefit analysis of attending college is shaped by habitus and multiple layers of context. The social, economic, and policy context; higher education context; school and community context; and habitus inform this assessment of benefits and costs, which leads to a college choice decision that encapsulates all three phases of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model. The macro social, economic, and policy context that forms the exterior layer of the model recognizes college choice is influenced by events such as demographic changes, variations in employment rate, and announcements of new policy directives (Perna, 2006). The next layer, higher education context, indicates college choice is shaped by institutions through their attributes, characteristics, and communication efforts (Perna, 2006). The following layer, school and community context, is informed by the idea of organizational habitus (McDonough, 1997) and acknowledges how social structures and resources at the high school and community impact college choice (Perna, 2006). The innermost layer, habitus, reflects a student's demographic characteristics and cultural and social capital.

Outer layers have a cumulative influence on interior layers, and each layer influences a student's college decision (Koricich, Chen, & Hughes, 2018). The layer of social, economic, and policy context informs higher education context, and both of those layers inform school and community context (Acevedo-Gil, 2017). These layers of context and individual characteristics in addition to the student's demand for education and supply of resources inform the cost-benefit calculation that influences a student's choice of college (Perna, 2006).

The Perna (2006) conceptual model of student college choice was chosen as the framework for this study of community college students who transfer laterally because it gives structure to the many considerations that complicate a student's college choice decision. The model considers both the decision to enroll in college and the selection of which college to attend as important components of the college choice process (Perna, 2006). Consistent with social constructionism, the Perna (2006) model recognizes the importance of situated context in an individual's enrollment decision. This framework also incorporates theories of human capital, cultural capital, social capital, and habitus, which enable a varied and multi-faceted approach to data interpretation.



*Figure 1.* Perna's conceptual model of student college choice. From "Studying College Access And Choice: A Proposed Conceptual Model" by L. W. Perna, in J.C. Smart (ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, Vol. XXI, pp. 99–157, 2006, Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer. Copyright 2006 by Laura W. Perna. Reprinted with permission.

**Critique of college choice theory and implications for inquiry.** Models of college choice, including Perna's (2006), are based on the initial enrollment of traditional students. Little is known about the college choice process of students who enroll in two-year institutions (Iloh & Tierney, 2014; Perna, 2006), and to date, there are no conceptual models of transfer student choice. There are well-known models of student departure (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1980; Bean & Eaton, 2000; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1993) and models of student choice (Chapman, 1981; Fuller et al., 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Perna, 2006), but no model that combines the two into a theory of transfer student choice. However, transfer students do choose to continue in higher education, select among alternative institutions, and then enroll in a different college, so a model of college choice is applicable to transfer. Perna (2006) acknowledges some variables, such as parental encouragement, in her model may be relevant only to traditional students. However, she posits the broader elements of the model may apply to non-traditional students and encourages researchers to test the appropriateness of her model with that population (Perna, 2006). Predictors of enrollment may vary between two- and four-year institutions, and the costs and benefits of enrollment in different sectors are likely different (Perna, 2006). Nonetheless, in the absence of a model of enrollment in community colleges specifically, Perna's (2006) framework should be useful in studies of enrollment decisions of community college transfer students.

### **Relationship of Study to Personal Experience and Knowledge**

I am drawn to issues of student retention, persistence, and transfer for professional and personal reasons. For more than six years, my professional work has focused on retention. I led the implementation of a multi-state, grant-funded student completion initiative at a community college, and I established a department that provides academic and non-academic supports to increase student retention and success. As part of my work with the grant, I requested a report

from the college's institutional research department of the transfer destinations of students who left the college without completing a credential. The grant team and I were surprised to learn the second most popular transfer destination for non-completers was a community college about 30 minutes away. Multiple other community colleges were included on the list of popular transfer destinations for students who departed without earning a credential. We had assumed our students were transferring to four-year universities. None of us had considered students were leaving for other community colleges. This realization motivated me to think differently about transfer and about how community college students understand their experience in higher education.

From a personal perspective, I was a lateral transfer student. I attended an out-of-state, private university rather than a community college, and I transferred halfway through my junior year. I actually transferred twice. The financial aid award I received at my first transfer destination, an in-state private university, was insufficient and I withdrew shortly after the semester began. I transferred again and finished my degree in a different major at an in-state, public university. By the time I earned my 120-credit baccalaureate degree, I had amassed 174 credits. My decision to transfer was a turning point in my life and one on which I reflect, understanding it differently as time passes. I am interested to learn how other students understand their transfer experience and how it impacts their identity.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

#### Methodological Approach

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research design that uses diverse theories and interpretive lenses to study stories (Creswell, 2005; J.-H. Kim, 2016). Narrative researchers analyze first-person accounts of experience in storied form, which are ubiquitous in everyday life (Merriam, 2002; Riessman, 1993, 2008). Humans use stories to make sense of their experiences and to communicate with others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012), leading some scholars to suggest humans are essentially storytelling beings (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Fisher, 1984). Narrative inquiry “tells the story of individuals unfolding in a chronology of their experiences, set within their personal, social, and historical context, and including important themes in those lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 75). Narratives are strategic and functional (Riessman, 2008), and individuals become the narratives they tell about themselves (Riessman, 1993). Hence, narrative inquiry provides insight into how individuals understand their identities and construct meaning (Creswell, 2013; Riessman, 1993, 2008). Narrative approaches may be effective at expressing the experience of students and developing an understanding of the barriers they face (Perna, 2006), areas of focus for this study.

**Theoretical underpinnings of narrative inquiry.** Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research that focuses on understanding human action and experience through interpretation rather than prediction (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; J.-H. Kim, 2016). As a qualitative research methodology, narrative inquiry uses language to access people’s lived experience as they understand it (Polkinghorne, 1995, 2005). Narrative inquiry is cross-disciplinary and gained popularity in the 1980s amid challenges to realism and positivism (Riessman, 1993, 2008). Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) propose narrative inquiry arises from an

ontology of experience based on the work of John Dewey. Dewey's (1938) ideas of continuity of experience through time and interaction with situation or environment are central to narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; J.-H. Kim, 2016). Furthermore, narrative inquiry is influenced by phenomenology. Each person has a unique outlook shaped by experience and therefore asserts subjectivity. This first-person knowledge of lived experience is the basis for phenomenology and is the subject of narrative inquiry (J.-H. Kim, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Narrative inquiry operates within the interpretivist paradigm (J.-H. Kim, 2016), which understands reality as subjective and constructed through discourse. Interpretivism believes there are many truths rather than a single reality and aims to understand the world (Lather, 2006). Members of the Chicago School of Sociology influenced narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) through work on life history (Gill & Goodson, 2011) and symbolic interactionism (Polkinghorne, 1995). Consistent with the tenets of social constructionism, narrative inquiry recognizes meanings are socially constructed (Gergen & Gergen, 1988) and human actions are influenced by historical and social context (Gill & Goodson, 2011). Narratives are products of social interchange (Gergen & Gergen, 1988), and in narrative analysis, narratives are jointly constructed by the researcher and participant in relationship (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995). People simultaneously live, tell, retell, and relive their stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). When used as data in qualitative research, narratives do not speak for themselves (Riessman, 2005). Theories guide the interpretation of stories constructed through narrative analysis (J.-H. Kim, 2016) and provide an analytical framework for researchers (Wolcott, 1994).

## Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally and the impact lateral transfer has had on their lives. To that end, I address two broad research questions with related sub-questions:

1. What are the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally?
  - a. How do lateral transfer students make college choice decisions?
    - i. How do lateral transfer students choose which colleges to attend?
    - ii. How do lateral transfer students decide to leave an institution?
  - b. How do experiences at the community college and experiences outside the college influence students' decisions?
2. How do community college students understand the impact of lateral transfer on their lives?
  - a. How do lateral transfer students make sense of their decision to transfer?
  - b. How do lateral transfer students understand the influence of their transfer decision on subsequent events?

## Research Design

Though it is informed by diverse theories and can be understood through numerous analytical frameworks, narrative inquiry exhibits defining characteristics that distinguish it from other methodologies. Three key features of narrative inquiry are a focus on experience, the creation of plot, and an explanatory purpose.

**Focus on experience.** Experience is the starting point for narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013; J.-H. Kim, 2016). Using the narrative mode of thought, humans organize and understand their experience in the construction of reality (Bruner, 1991). Through the methodology of narrative inquiry, a researcher analyzes first-person accounts of lived experience for the meaning those stories have for the teller (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), who is a

social actor with agency (Gill & Goodson, 2011). Stories about human events are imbued with temporality, meaning, and social encounters, providing order and structure to the chaos of life (Gill & Goodson, 2011). Individuals are in a constant process of personal change (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and understand themselves and live out relationships with each other through stories (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Often, people use stories to understand experiences “where there has been a breach between ideal and real, self and society” (Riessman, 1993, p. 3). For example, a student may claim to have been misadvised by an academic advisor, which caused him to take courses that do not count for his degree and for which he will not receive financial aid.

Narrative inquiry seeks to explore the unique characteristics of specific experiences. Narrative researchers primarily study participants’ understandings of ordinary, everyday life events (J.-H. Kim, 2016). Narrative inquiry seeks to understand individual experience and how it functions within a larger social and historical context (Gill & Goodson, 2011). Almost paradoxically, narrative inquiry focuses on the particularities of life, providing rich detail and context, to create a holistic quality in explanation (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry attends to details and the uniqueness in each situation, accounting for context and complex interactions of elements (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008). Collectively, individual cases provide a foundation for understanding new experiences using analogy. After identifying a new experience as similar to a previous experience, narrative reasoning draws upon existing understanding while noting the distinctive qualities that make each experience unique (Polkinghorne, 1995).

**Creation of plot.** A second feature of narrative inquiry is its organization of events and happenings into a temporal sequence, or plot. Polkinghorne (1995) distinguishes between *analysis of narrative* and *narrative analysis*, following Bruner’s (1986) separation of

paradigmatic and narrative modes of thought. Contrary to *analysis of narrative*, which seeks themes common across stories, *narrative analysis* synthesizes elements of experience into stories. Narrative analysis ties together events and actions as they contribute to the direction and movement of a plot (Polkinghorne, 1995). Human experience and time are bound together (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989), as people understand time to move in one direction (Polkinghorne, 1995). Events do not happen only in the present moment; they occur in a sequence (Riessman, 2008) and have a past, present, and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). People also assume a causal relationship between a choice or happening and an outcome, which forms the basis of plot unfolding over a segment of time. Narrative analysis synthesizes events into explanations (Polkinghorne, 1995). In the earlier example of academic advising, the student could claim misadvisement led him to take classes he did not need. Thus, he withdrew from those classes, which lowered his completion rate, causing him to drop below standards for satisfactory academic progress for financial aid.

Culturally constructed standards of an acceptable plot determine how events and choices are ordered over a temporal sequence in narrative analysis. Polkinghorne (1995) states plots construct a story by defining a temporal range for action, providing criteria for the inclusion of events, ordering linked events toward a conclusion, and clarifying how specific events influence the story. Gergen and Gergen (1988) also offer standards for a well-formed narrative: establishing a meaningful end, selecting events relevant to that goal, organizing those events, establishing a causal relationship among events, and signaling beginning and end points. Narratives require a balance of past, present, and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989), but they do not simply mirror the past. Narrative accounts interpret the past; they allow storytellers to establish new connections among events and to re-imagine their lives (Riessman, 2005). Narrative analysis provides a retrospective explanation of an outcome that incorporates human

purpose, chance occurrences, and external pressures (Polkinghorne, 1995). The plot of a narrative is the throughline that coheres the data elements into a story. The final tale “must fit the data while at the same time bringing an order and meaningfulness that is not apparent in the data themselves” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 16).

**Explanatory purpose.** Narrative inquiry provides understanding or an explanation of a person’s lived experience. As a linguistic form, narrative is uniquely capable of conveying human activity as intentional, situated engagement in the world (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative inquiry discovers how individuals make sense of their experience and how they understand their social world and agency within it (Gill & Goodson, 2011). Moreover, narrative thinking explains human action as the result of a person’s past experiences and learning, present situation, and future goals (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative thinking also explains why an individual makes certain choices and connects those choices to a central purpose. To explore a question about how something happened or why an event transpired, a narrative researcher uncovers elements of lived experience and configures them as meaningful components toward the achievement of a purpose or goal (Polkinghorne, 1995). To create a story, researchers rely on theories and knowledge relevant to their discipline to interpret events and then must provide evidence to support their proffered understanding.

Returning a final time to the advising scenario and its subsequent effect, we can understand how a sequence of events explains the student’s actions and the consequences of those choices. The student registered for classes recommended by an academic advisor. Those courses did not count toward his degree program, so he withdrew. Withdrawing from those courses brought him below the threshold for satisfactory academic progress for financial aid and endangered his future Pell Grant award. This hypothetical student left the institution and enrolled at a nearby college to circumvent financial aid probation and appeal procedures.

Through narrative, even one as rudimentary as this example, we can understand an individual's lived experience, organize events in temporal order to form a plot, and offer an explanation for a course of action.

### **Design Rationale**

Narrative inquiry provides strategies and techniques to help me understand the lives and experiences of students who transfer laterally from one community college to another. The central focus of narrative inquiry is experience as lived and told in the stories of individuals (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Creswell, 2013; J.-H. Kim, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lateral transfer has personal and social meaning in the lives of community college students who leave one community college for another. However, that meaning is not understood by the field of higher education because it has not been studied. We need to learn from the stories of students who experience lateral transfer to understand their choices and action.

Narrative inquiry recognizes the social construction of reality through stories and relationships and allows for diverse interpretive frames. Without listening to students who have transferred laterally, we do not know why they enroll in a community college different from where they began. After reviewing the data, a researcher may interpret story elements using theories ranging from a macro-level theory such as critical race theory to a mid-level theory such as a theory of college choice. There may be many different plots in student stories of lateral transfer, and all of them would enrich understanding of an understudied phenomenon. Narrative analysis functions at the level of the individual, recognizing each person's experience is unique and not able to be replicated (Polkinghorne, 1995). Through narrative inquiry, I can identify similar elements in different students' stories of lateral transfer and note the particularities that make each tale distinct.

Finally, narrative inquiry can explain human action in light of intentions (Gill & Goodson, 2011) and motivational meanings (Polkinghorne, 1995). Through narrative analysis, I can identify story elements that join together in the formation of a temporally-sequenced, causally-linked plot. Creating narratives from constituent parts of students' tales of lateral transfer can help to explain why students transfer and the considerations that influence their decisions. Through narrative inquiry, I can also understand how lateral transfer impacts the ongoing story of students' lives. If people are essentially storytelling beings, narrative inquiry is a way to understand not only an account of an event, but what it means to be human.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a social constructionist researcher, I understand meaning is created through communication between individuals, and meaning is always situated in cultural and historical context. Even if it were desirable, it would be impossible for me to remove my influence from the data collected. Narratives are inherently socially constructed; they are crafted for a particular audience at a specific moment in time. As a White, middle-aged, middle-class, female researcher, my identity shapes the stories participants tell. Furthermore, meaning is negotiated between participant and researcher. The interpretation the participant and I create is unique to our relationship.

In this study of lateral transfer community college students, I recruited and oriented participants, conducted interviews to collect data, and analyzed data. Because this study was conducted through qualitative methods, as the researcher, I served as the research instrument (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I took an active role in all stages of the research process, from working with the institutional research department at the study site to identify participants to relating findings back to theory during analysis. I developed criteria for queries of the student information system, reviewed reports that listed students who matched my criteria,

and contacted potential participants. I explained the research process, described expectations of participants, and scheduled and conducted interviews. After conducting initial interviews, I engaged in preliminary analysis as I continued data collection because collection and analysis should happen concurrently (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I recorded my thoughts and experiences in a research diary. After I drafted my findings, I checked with participants to learn if the findings rang true. I referred to my research diary as I analyzed data and reflected on my impact on the stories participants tell.

### **Ethical Issues**

Throughout a narrative study, researchers must note and address ethical considerations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I recorded my thoughts about ethical matters in my research diary throughout the project. Prior to the study, I addressed common research issues such as confidentiality, informed consent, and protection of participants from harm, but in the field other ethical issues arose that required impromptu decisions based on my values and sensitivities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Throughout the research process, I kept in mind that by conducting research ethically, I enhanced the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Researcher bias is an ethical issue. Because I was the primary research instrument, data were filtered through my theoretical positions and biases (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It was impossible to eliminate these biases, but I tried to identify them and record in my research diary how they may have affected the collection and interpretation of data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2002). As a university student who transferred laterally, my own experiences may have colored my perception of the participants' stories. I bracketed my experiences with transfer and chose not to share them with participants. I did share some personal information to establish rapport with participants, and I offered thoughts on college processes with which I am

familiar. Though I tried to limit my influence on participants' narratives, my self-disclosure and contributions may have altered the stories participants told.

### **Data Sources**

The sources of data for this study were individuals who met selection criteria described below. Narrative inquiry seeks detailed understanding of an individual's experience (Creswell, 2013). I conducted individual interviews rather than focus groups to gain an in-depth understanding of how participants experienced lateral transfer and their understanding of the impact of lateral transfer on their lives. In focus groups, individuals may feed off each other's comments, with an insight by one participant sparking the thought of another participant. However, participants may censor themselves in focus groups, hesitating to disclose personal information or to voice an opinion contrary to the majority. Focus groups allow for the collection of data from more participants in a shorter amount of time, but investing time in each individual participant provides richer data about each person's stories. Social constructionism may seem to support the use of focus groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) more than one-on-one interviews, but dyadic communication is also social, with meaning constructed between interlocutors. Narratives are products of social interchange rather than creations of the individual (Gergen & Gergen, 1988).

This study took place at Lakeside Community College (a pseudonym), a multi-campus institution in North Carolina. There are 58 community colleges in the state, and in highly-populated regions of North Carolina, a community college may be found in each county. The main campus of Lakeside Community College (LCC) is located within 65 miles of 11 community colleges, and within 45 miles of six of those 11 community colleges. Participants in this study transferred from three colleges within 45 miles and one college within 65 miles of the

main campus, as indicated in Table 1. The institutions represent rural, suburb, and town settings, (NCES, 2017a), as shown in Table 1.

The fall 2017 enrollment at LCC and the four origin institutions ranged from fewer than 2,000 students to 10,000 students (North Carolina Community College System, 2018a), as noted in Table 1. All five colleges enroll more women than men and more part-time than full-time students. Four of the five colleges are predominately White institutions with White students ranging from 62% to 78% of the population. One college is a majority-minority institution (NCES, 2017a). Students 24-years-old and younger comprise 56% to 79% of the population at the five colleges. For full-time, first-time students, one-year retention rates range from 52% to 73% and graduation rates vary from 12% to 31% among the five institutions. Transfer out rates, which include both lateral and vertical transfers, range from 22% to 27%, with one institution not reporting (NCES, 2017a).

Lakeside Community College and colleges from which participants transferred offer both college transfer and career and technical associate degree programs. For students interested in vertical transfer to a university, all five colleges offer Associate in Arts and Associate in Science degrees, two offer Associate in Fine Arts degrees, and one offers the Associate in Engineering. Among Associate in Applied Science career and technical degree fields, business administration and nursing programs had high numbers of graduates at all five institutions. Medical office administration, criminal justice, information technology, and medical assisting programs also had high numbers of graduates from multiple institutions (NCES, 2017a). Unique programs offered by only one or two of the five community colleges include agriculture, aviation, dental hygiene, hotel and restaurant management, interior design, massage therapy, medical laboratory technician, photo and film technology, recording arts technology, turfgrass management, viticulture and enology, and wildlife biology (NCES, 2017a).

Community colleges in North Carolina may elect to participate in the William D. Ford Federal Direct Loan Program (Financial Assistance for Community College Students, 2012). Of LCC and the four community colleges from which participants transferred, two participate in the Direct Loan program and three do not offer student loans, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1

*Institutional Profiles*

College	Distance to LCC	Fall 2017 enrollment <sup>a</sup>	Setting <sup>b</sup>	Loans
Holly Grove Community College (HGCC)	20 miles	3,600	Rural	Yes
Lakeside Community College (LCC)		10,000	Suburb	Yes
Pastoral Community College (PCC)	41 miles	1,900	Rural	No
Stone Community College (SCC)	65 miles	3,300	Rural	No
Tall Pine Community College (TPCC)	29 miles	3,300	Town	No

<sup>a</sup>Enrollment counts from the North Carolina Community College System (2018a) are rounded to the nearest 100. <sup>b</sup>Setting information is derived from the NCES (2017a).

**Data Collection**

Narrative inquiry involves selecting individuals who have life experiences to share about the research problem and then spending time collecting their stories through multiple forms of data. Researchers need to collect extensive detail about each participant to have a clear understanding of the individual's experiences, including personal history, cultural context, and historical context (Creswell, 2013). In narrative inquiry, researchers must actively collaborate with participants, establishing close and trusting relationships and respecting participants as people, not merely sources of information (Creswell, 2013; Gill & Goodson, 2011). The relationship between researcher and participant shapes the stories and the meaning of stories the participant tells (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), a notion that reflects a social constructionist perspective. Researchers should be emotionally attentive, engaged, sensitive, and non-judgmental in the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Riessman, 2008) to create an

environment in which participants want to share information about their lives and derive satisfaction from the experience. In this study, I collaborated with participants to gather data through interviews and documents.

**In-depth interviews.** Like most narrative projects (Riessman, 2008), this research is based on primarily on interviews. Interviews are an appropriate method to gather data when the researcher is interested in learning about information that cannot be observed, including participants' feelings, interpretations, and past events (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through interviews, I captured direct quotations from lateral transfer students about their perceptions of their experiences, feelings, and interpretations at the time of the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2005). Interview data are interpretive because of the interpretation processes of participant and researcher in relationship with each other and are contextualized because of the circumstances of the interview conversation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To produce the detailed accounts desired in narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2008), I conducted unstructured interviews. However, narrative inquiry is constrained if analysis is limited only to single interviews (Riessman, 2008). To supplement interview data, I incorporated documents and a research diary.

**Documents.** Researchers should evaluate potential data sources by whether they can help to answer research questions and whether they can be accessed in a reasonably practical and systematic way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally and the impact lateral transfer has had on their lives. Demographic data and academic records maintained by Lakeside Community College provided valuable information relevant to my research purpose. Student records from Colleague, LCC's student information system, included demographics, program of study, institutions attended, registration history, grades, and account restrictions or holds.

Academic transcripts from prior institutions provided information not included in Colleague. For example, if a student earned a D in a course at a North Carolina community college, that course does not transfer and is not recorded in the destination institution's student information system. However, the course appears on the transcript from the origin institution and contributes to an understanding of the student's experience. Though documents are sometimes difficult to obtain (Creswell, 2005), they can be particularly useful when discussed during an interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). With participants' consent, I requested from Lakeside Community College access to records in the student information system and transcripts from previous institutions. Participants and I discussed these materials in interview conversations, and I referred back to the documents as I wrote findings and analysis.

**Research diary.** Research diaries are written by the researcher and contain memos and reflections on topics including the context of data collection, research methods, and ideas or plans for future research (Holly & Altrichter, 2011). Research diaries allow researchers to capture thoughts and musings that otherwise may get lost. In addition to detailed descriptions, research diaries include notes connecting data to theory, methodology, and plans (Holly & Altrichter, 2011). I maintained a research diary to record my reflections on the research process, data collection, and preliminary data analysis. Research diaries help researchers make their observations, interpretations, biases, and unconscious processes more visible. Because stories are shaped by the teller for an audience (Riessman, 2008) and meaning is created collaboratively in narrative inquiry (Riessman, 1993), a research diary helped me understand how I impacted participants throughout the research process.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study are community college students who attended two or more North Carolina community colleges. This study examines student experiences with lateral

transfer, not vertical transfer or reverse transfer, which occurs when students transition between two-year and four-year institutions. This research focuses on students in North Carolina because the state community college system provides consistency among different institutions in application processes, placement criteria, course descriptions, program requirements, and student information systems. Though all of these elements are not identical at all 58 community colleges, the North Carolina Community College System Office has established standards and policies by which all community colleges must abide. Including in the sample students who attended community college in another state adds complications related to degree requirements, course equivalencies, data access, and other considerations.

The sample for this study met my operational definition of *lateral transfer*, a discontinuation of enrollment in one community college and subsequent enrollment at another community college with a lapse of no more than one year between enrollments. For this analysis, transfer may have occurred in any term: fall, spring, or summer. Unlike four-year institutions, community colleges in North Carolina do not offer student housing. It is unlikely community college students relocate to attend college in the fall and spring and then return home in the summer, only to go back to their original institution in the fall, especially given the variety in age and life circumstance of community college students. Moreover, many career and technical degree programs require summer enrollment because of laboratory and work-based learning components. Excluding students who transferred in a summer term would have unnecessarily limited the pool of participants. Enrollment patterns of community college students are varied and even chaotic (Crosta, 2014) for a number of reasons, and requiring participants in this study to have been continuously enrolled would have also unnecessarily limited the pool. However, a period of non-enrollment of more than a year may have indicated

the student's intent was to withdraw from higher education rather than to continue at a different institution.

Within the pool of individuals who met my criteria for participation, I attempted to recruit participants diverse in sex, age, and race/ethnicity. In one study, Black and Asian community college students were more likely than White students to transfer laterally, and women were more likely to transfer laterally than men (Bahr, 2009). However, from this quantitative analysis, we do not know how students' identities impact their experiences with lateral transfer. Collecting data from a range of participants allowed me to consider how identity shapes students' experience with lateral transfer and their understanding of the impact lateral transfer has had on their lives.

The participants and site of this study particularized the data. LCC and the four origin community colleges represent a range of campus settings, sizes, programs of study, demographic profiles, and retention and graduation outcomes. All North Carolina community colleges use the same course library, and some courses have standardized student learning outcomes across all institutions. Curriculum standards for programs of study are also consistent, though they allow for limited local variation. Colleges can specify electives and determine how often to offer courses (e.g., only in the spring semester or every term). In North Carolina, the tuition rate is uniform across all community colleges, though fees may vary. These characteristics of the research context generate unique findings.

**Descriptions of participants.** Six students enrolled at Lakeside Community College in the spring of 2018 participated in this study. All participants had transferred from another North Carolina community college in either the fall of 2017 or the spring of 2018 and had a break of less than a year between enrollments. None of the participants had earned an associate degree or higher, and all were enrolled in an associate degree program. Table 2 describes participant

demographics and program of study at origin and destination institution, and indicates whether the participant moved to a new home while enrolled at either community college.

Table 2

*Participant Profiles*

Participant	Age	Sex	Race/ethnicity	Origin program	Destination program	Relocation
Andi	19	F	White, Non-Hispanic	Associate in Arts	Entertainment Technologies-Recording Engineering	No
Belle	28	F	Black, Non-Hispanic	Pre-Practical Nursing	Associate in General Education	No
Dylan	27	F	White, Non-Hispanic	Architectural Technology and Design	Associate in Arts	No
Kai	22	M	Black, Non-Hispanic	Associate in Science	Aviation Systems Technology	Yes
Kerri	33	F	White, Non-Hispanic	Business Administration	Business Administration	No
Maya	21	F	White, Non-Hispanic	Pre-Associate Degree Nursing	Human Services Technology	No

**Participant Selection**

Qualitative researchers choose participants based on their ability to contribute to an understanding of the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2005, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patten, 2014). Intentionally selecting individuals who will be good sources of information is called *purposeful* (Creswell, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2005) or *purposive* (Patten, 2014) sampling. Unlike quantitative research, which values a large, representative sample to support empirical generalizations, qualitative research prioritizes information-rich cases to yield insight and in-depth understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2005). I used purposeful sampling to select participants for this narrative study of lateral transfer community college

students. For this research, I employed multiple criteria in the selection of a sample, a technique called purposive (or purposeful) criterion sampling (Patten, 2014). From the pool of potential participants who met my criteria, I recruited participants diverse in sex, age, and race/ethnicity to achieve maximum variation. Patterns that emerge from maximum variation sampling are particularly useful in capturing the central experience of a phenomenon (Patton, 2002). By researching students with a range of backgrounds, I can understand which lateral transfer experiences are common across groups and potentially more fundamental to the phenomenon.

To identify students who met my purposeful criterion sampling strategy, I used the student information system at Lakeside Community College and the NSC. All North Carolina community colleges use the Ellucian Colleague student information system, and institutional research staff can write queries to extract lists of students who meet given criteria. The Colleague system contains records of other institutions attended if students declare those institutions on their application. This *Institutions Attended Summary* screen shows which other colleges students attended and their period of attendance. I asked institutional research staff to pull a list of students who only ever attended North Carolina community colleges and who attended at least one community college other than LCC. I requested the list omit students who co-enrolled at multiple institutions and students with a lapse of more than one year between enrollments.

Institutional research staff submitted the list to the NSC to identify whether any of these students were ever enrolled in an institution other than a North Carolina community college. On their application to Lakeside Community College, students may choose to only disclose attendance at institutions where they earned credit they plan to transfer. If students did not earn course credit, they may not disclose all previous institutions attended. Data from the NSC would

likely reveal all institutions attended because the organization's database includes enrollment records of 98% of college students in the United States (NSC, 2017b).

Using databases to identify potential participants who met my criteria was challenging. Following an initial search of student records, a staff member at LCC indicated 81 currently enrolled students met my criteria. After an undisclosed change in the search, an additional 933 students were identified. This list of 1,014 students was submitted to the NSC for further refinement. The list of potential participants I received after it was cross-referenced with the NSC database indicated 218 students met my criteria for inclusion. Upon examination, I questioned the results. On first pass, I identified 47 records that should have been excluded because the students had attended a four-year institution or an out-of-state community college, or they were still enrolled in high school. From these de-identified records, I requested contact information for 42 potential participants who would maximize variety in sex, age, race, and program of study. As they examined student records related to my request, LCC staff identified more discrepancies in the data. LCC staff and I were never able to pinpoint where the query or NSC request had gone awry, and LCC did not have the institutional research capacity to repeat the search. To ensure potential participants met my criteria, I incorporated another layer of screening.

In qualitative inquiry, a researcher needs an adequate number of participants to answer research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There is no ideal sample size, and narrative research often includes just one or a few individuals (Creswell, 2013). Given the long list of potential participants, I narrowed my criteria to focus on students who transferred from community colleges within 45 miles from the main campus of LCC. I believed this additional criterion could yield participants who transferred for reasons other than relocation. I revised my request for contact information to focus on this group, which resulted in a list of 56 potential

participants. Upon review, I eliminated a number of students who attended institutions outside the specified radius, were concurrently enrolled, had a break of longer than a year between enrollments, or were members of a 1+1 program that intentionally incorporated lateral transfer to maximize the resources of two community colleges.

Participants should be accessible and willing to provide information (Creswell, 2013). I emailed 32 potential participants to invite them to participate in the study over the course of two days. I received 12 replies and asked interested students three additional questions: (a) Have you ever attended a college other than LCC and [other college]? If so, which school did you attend?, (b) Did you ever take classes at two institutions within the same semester?, and (c) Have you already earned a college degree? Though I intended to exclude students who had already earned degrees, I did not include that criterion in my formal request to the LCC institutional research department, and the list of results included students who had already attained degrees. If students earned a degree from one community college and subsequently enrolled at LCC, their attendance pattern did not qualify as *lateral transfer* and they were ineligible for the study. I contacted by phone students who did not respond to email. Of the 32 students initially contacted, three participated in this study.

I identified 26 additional students with less than a year between enrollments and submitted a second request for contact information. The list I received did not correspond to my request; the student identifiers were re-ordered in some part of the process, resulting in a mismatch. At this point, the LCC staff member helping me identify participants retired and left the institution, and my project was transferred to a staff member who identified the error and provided a corrected list. The staff turnover also resulted in a change in process. The first staff member assisting me with participant identification included student email addresses on reports. The second staff member provided only phone numbers. I asked the institution to email potential

participants on my behalf, and I followed up with phone calls. I gained two more participants, one of whom had attended a university for a few weeks. Her university enrollment should have excluded her from the NSC report, but she made it through the filters. After hearing the details of her situation, I determined her experience fit the study, as discussed below.

Qualitative inquiry is an emergent process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and to recruit more participants, I expanded my criteria to include students who transferred from institutions farther than 45 miles away. I contacted an additional 56 potential participants through an email sent by LCC, and I followed up with phone calls to 15 students. I conducted one interview with a student from this participant pool and determined my data had reached saturation, so I discontinued participant recruitment. At the point of saturation, interviewing additional participants is unlikely to yield new information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patten, 2014). Out of the initial list of 218 students returned from the NSC, I interviewed six participants.

Originally, I had planned to limit the study to students who had never attended an institution other than a North Carolina community college. Ultimately, I incorporated two participants who had attended other types of institutions. One participant attended a public university for less than a semester seven years prior to enrolling in the community college from which she later transferred laterally. Because her university attendance was brief and there was a long period separating her university and community college enrollments, with only a summer between community college enrollments, I considered her experience consistent with that of other participants. The second participant was a critical case. She enrolled at a state university for the 2007–2008 academic year and then at a community college immediately following, but left after two semesters with no credential. Over the next eight years, she completed non-credit certificate programs at a community college and a for-profit institution before enrolling at a community college in 2017 to pursue a degree. She transferred from that community college and

plans to transfer to a different community college for the next stage in her education. Though her journey includes waypoints not found on the paths of other participants, her experience contains distinct lateral transfer segments informed by earlier moves.

For participation in an interview that lasted between 30 and 90 minutes, participants were compensated \$50. I transferred funds to students following the interview. Three participants requested an electronic transfer, and three requested a check mailed to their home address. Participants were not compensated for reviewing drafts of their narratives or for answering short clarifying questions.

### **Interview Protocol**

Unstructured interviews are flexible, conversational, and assume individual participants understand the world in unique ways (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative inquiry studies such as this one seek to understand the perspective of the participant. An interview format of open-ended questions and minimal interrogation cedes greater control to respondents and reduces the inequality of power in the interview context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Gill & Goodson, 2011; Riessman, 1993). Good interview questions yield detailed, descriptive data and stories about the central phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and allow respondents to answer in ways they find meaningful (Riessman, 2008). For narrative inquiry, researchers should ask few, open-ended questions that allow interaction with a participant to build conversationally (Barbour & Schostak, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I asked participants to tell me about their college experience, starting from when they first thought about going to college (see Appendix A for the interview protocol). Specific questions were developed during the ongoing interaction with the participant rather than planned in advance (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I asked probes and follow-up questions to learn more details or to ask for clarification or examples (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). If a researcher is engaged, attentive, and views the interview as a

reciprocal exchange, the wording of questions becomes less important. In fact, almost any question can elicit a narrative reply if the researcher relinquishes control and approaches the interview as a conversation (Riessman, 1993, 2008). In this study, I approached interviews as conversations with participants in which we developed meaning together.

All interviews were conducted remotely to accommodate my distance from the research site and to increase convenience for participants, who arranged interviews in the evening or on the weekend and participated from home. I scheduled interviews in Zoom, a free software distributed by Zoom Video Communications, Inc., which allows synchronous audio, video, and recording. It can be difficult to build rapport with participants through asynchronous interviews (James & Busher, 2012), so I used synchronous audio and video technology, through which a researcher can build rapport similar to face-to-face interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). I thought video would help participants to see me to be a real person, not a distant researcher, and I wanted to understand nuances of their stories that might be conveyed through facial expressions and other nonverbal means. One participant did not have the Internet bandwidth to effectively use the software, and we conducted our interview by phone. Another speaker requested no video, and I complied. I conducted video interviews with four of the six participants.

Audio recording interviews is recommended because everything that is said is captured for later analysis (Glesne, 2006; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Riessman, 2008). There is debate over whether interviewers should take notes in addition to audio recording their conversations with participants. Taking notes can be useful if an interviewer wants to log nonverbal communication or indicate the importance of something, and note-taking is a safety measure in the event recording equipment malfunctions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). On the other hand, taking notes may necessitate breaks in eye contact and can distract an interviewer from attending to nonverbal and verbal cues. Furthermore, participants may interpret a researcher's break in

note-taking to mean the participant's speech is no longer noteworthy (Glesne, 2006). After gaining permission from participants, I audio recorded interviews. I recorded each interview in two of the three digital audio applications I used, Voice Recorder by TapMedia Ltd., Simple Recorder by Happy Tap, and Zoom. I recorded on two devices to protect against malfunction, damage, loss, or operator error. I stored files of recorded interviews and interview transcripts on my home computer in a password protected folder.

Qualitative researchers must decide whether to transcribe their own interview recordings. Hiring a transcriptionist allows a researcher to spend time on analysis rather than on the protracted process of transcription. However, the researcher may be less familiar with the data if someone else transcribes it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Riessman (1993) recommends beginning with a rough transcription and then re-transcribing selections for detailed analysis. I transcribed one and a half interviews and elected to hire a transcriptionist for the remaining interviews. Making decisions on how to display talk is a form of analysis and interpretation (Riessman, 1993). I directed the transcriptionist to leave verbal fillers and vocalized pauses in the transcript and to write participants' speech as it sounded rather than to conform with grammatical rules. For example, I asked the transcriptionist to include participants' run-on sentences rather than parse their speech into conventional sentences that were easier to read. After I received interview transcripts, I listened to the recordings to fill in missing words and correct errors.

**Ethical issues.** Guaranteeing the confidentiality of participants is critical (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2005), but when participants are engaged deeply with the researcher in analysis, they may want to be recognized for their authorship role, which presents an ethical dilemma for the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In this document, I use pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of participants and have not included personally identifying information. To establish reciprocity with my participants, I offered monetary compensation for

their insights and their time, but this could have affected who participated and how they responded (Creswell, 2005). Participants may have joined the project to complete the minimum requirements to receive monetary compensation rather than to freely share their stories for the purpose of building knowledge. Participants also may have said what they thought I wanted to hear. I mitigated these concerns by establishing rapport, asking questions to learn details of participants' experiences, and monitoring how participants responded to my questions and then changing tack when necessary. For example, in one interview, the participant focused on the courses she had taken and the grades she had earned, possibly in response to my earlier questions. I shifted to general questions to help her think more broadly about her experience as a lateral transfer student and to empower her to take the conversation in a different direction.

I informed potential participants of the nature of the research project and obtained their consent for participation, avoiding any deception. I provided informed consent forms to students via email prior to interviews. To truly consent, participants must know enough about the study to understand the situation in which they agree to participate. The informed consent form included information about the structure of the research study, risks, rights, possible benefits, confidentiality, distribution, and contact information for the Institutional Review Board and for me as the researcher (Seidman, 2006). Though obtaining informed consent is required, it also demonstrates an ethical commitment to research participants and helps to build an equitable relationship between researcher and participants (Seidman, 2006), which may improve the quality of the data collected. I informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study without penalty at any time. By signing the informed consent form, participants also consented to a one-time release of relevant academic records, including transcripts.

Interviews involve specific ethical considerations. Participants may feel their privacy is violated by questions, or participants may reveal information they had intended not to disclose

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The power dynamic of interviews typically favors the researcher, who controls the interview direction and creates interview questions (Barbour & Schostak, 2011; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Nevertheless, researchers who foster participatory relationships and collaborate with participants can reduce the power differential, turning interviews into conversations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell, 2013). I conducted unstructured interviews that promoted a collaborative relationship with participants and later asked their opinion of my work. After participants engage in a study, researchers should debrief them by reviewing the purpose and procedures of the research and offering to share results when they become available (Patten, 2014). Taking research back to participants allows them to ensure their identities have been concealed and enables them to provide informed consent a second time. Participants may not agree with researcher interpretations, so it is important that researchers differentiate their views of participants' lives from the interpretations of participants (Riessman, 2008). I emailed each participant a copy of the narrative I composed based on our interview conversation. Five participants responded to say the stories rang true to their experience and adequately concealed their identities. One of those five corrected an inaccuracy, and the other four found no errors. I did not hear from the sixth participant, whom I contacted twice.

It is difficult to predict the impact of research on participants, and they may not fully understand the risks and benefits involved (Gill & Goodson, 2011). Participants may experience strong emotional reactions as a result of exploring sensitive topics during interviews (Patten, 2014). Moreover, narrative inquiry may be an interruption in participants' lives (Gill & Goodson, 2011), and narrative researchers need to be sensitive to the identity-sustaining nature of participants' life stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Providing a forum for participants to

reflect on their higher education journey may have helped them process their experiences and better understand how they construct their identity.

### **IRB Procedures**

This study was approved by the Appalachian State University Institutional Review Board on January 25, 2018 with the IRB number 18-0101. It was approved January 26, 2018 by the research site with IRB number 201710. IRB approval at the research site was modified on March 21, 2018 to combine the study consent form with the consent to release records form and to change the recruitment process by asking LCC to email potential participants on my behalf. I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program course for social/behavioral research with human subjects on April 5, 2016.

### **Data Coding and Analysis**

I used a multi-step process to code and analyze the data. First, for each participant, I developed a chart to sort the interview into chronological order. The chart listed important dates, often in year and semester format, on the left and a description of the corresponding event on the right. These chronologies of participant experiences helped me identify turning points in their stories and accurately order events. The chart used to order one participant's narrative is seen in Table 3.

Table 3

*Chronology of Events for Participant Kerri*

Date	Event
2003SP	Graduated from high school
2003FA	Enrolled at LCC
2004SP-2004SU	Worked: Restaurant/retail
2004FA	Enrolled at LCC
2005SP-2005SU	Worked: Restaurant/retail
2005FA	Registered at LCC, did not attend
2006-2008SU	Worked: Corporate job full-time
2008FA	Enrolled at LCC, deleted one class, took another class, earned an A
2009SP	Enrolled at LCC
2009FA	Mother passed away, earned F's
2010-2015	Worked: Corporate job full-time
2015	Got different corporate job
2016 June	Applied to LCC
2017SP	Enrolled at TPCC
2017SU	Enrolled at TPCC
2017FA	Enrolled at TPCC, planned transfer to LCC, completed LCC orientation
2018SP	Enrolled at LCC

*Note.* *FA* is an abbreviation for fall, *SP* is an abbreviation for spring, and *SU* is an abbreviation for summer.

Data analysis involves making sense of the data to answer research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative research, data analysis is inductive and involves researchers comparing units of data, in this case narratives, and coding them for common patterns across the data (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narratives represent participants' ways of making meaning, and researchers should respect their meaning-making structures by preserving the narrative unit (Riessman, 1993) rather than fracturing narratives into thematic categories (Riessman, 2008). To allow for adjustments in data collection and to test emerging concepts or categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I began data analysis while I collected data.

Narrative analysis examines how individuals make sense of their experience and how sharing stories enables them to understand the world and their agency in it (Gill & Goodson,

2011). Narrative inquiry focuses its analysis on stories, including chronologies of events and turning points or epiphanies (Creswell, 2013; Riessman, 1993). Decisions individuals make about how and why stories are told can reveal how those individuals understand and communicate meaning, including what they hope to emphasize or hide (Riessman, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). There is no standard procedure or method for narrative analysis. Rather, narrative researchers may choose from a variety of approaches and may combine elements of different approaches to fit a given study (Riessman, 1993, 2008).

Regardless of which analytic approach narrative researchers take, they must manipulate transcriptions of discourse. Decisions about how to display talk cannot be separated from interpretation; transcriptions are always selective and incomplete (Riessman, 1993, 2008). Even if each word is recorded accurately, a transcription is partial. Researchers and transcriptionists decide whether to include non-vocalized and vocalized pauses, verbal fillers, or other sounds. They choose whether to note vocal pitch, rate of speech, facial expressions, gestures, posture, and other aspects of nonverbal communication that are present in face-to-face conversation. They also decide whether to include themselves in the transcript. How an interview is transcribed shapes interpretations and supports specific theoretical positions (Riessman, 2008). I included vocalized pauses and verbal fillers in the transcription because those elements offer additional insight into meaning and reflect the participant's experience as narrator in the context of our conversation.

**Thematic analysis.** For this narrative inquiry, I attended foremost to content. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally and the impact lateral transfer has had on their lives. I am interested more in the meaning participants make of their experiences than in their meaning-making process. Thematic analysis is the most common type of narrative analysis and focuses on the content or

themes told by participants (Creswell, 2013; Riessman, 2008). Thematic analysis preserves narrative sequences and is centered on intact cases, unlike a grounded theory approach that breaks textual data into thematic segments (Riessman, 2008). In thematic narrative analysis, a researcher works to re-story each interview, sorting biographical narrative episodes into chronological order to provide a plot with a beginning, middle, and end (Creswell, 2013). Subsequently, the researcher identifies and codes themes in each transcript before selecting cases to illustrate patterns and comparing themes of different cases (Riessman, 2008). For this study of the experiences of students who transfer laterally among community colleges, I used thematic analysis. I re-storied the narrative of each participant and then analyzed narratives individually for themes before comparing themes across cases.

After I ordered major events chronologically, as indicated in Table 3, I coded interviews by organizing transcripts by topic, quotation, and date in a chart. I added a fourth column for preliminary analysis and reflections on the research process. An excerpt from the chart I created after my interview with Kerri is below in Table 4. Using narrative reasoning (Polkinghorne, 1995), I drafted narratives from these charts after identifying salient episodes and choosing illustrative quotations.

Table 4

*Coded Transcript of Interview with Participant Kerri*

Topic	Quotation	Date	Interpretation & Reflection
First college choice	But um I just I mean, it was kind of set in my mind, you got to go to college after high school, so um and LCC was um I had applied to other four-year colleges um I had got into one but it was in the mountains and I didn't really feel like moving far away yet so I just chose LCC for the reason of just because I could live at home and um still go to school and it wasn't that expensive so. I know that was the reason after high school. Um and they had the program um that I was thinking about going into	2003FA	Applied to multiple colleges Got into one LCC fallback? Proximity Cost Program
First semester experience	I was also working and I was young [laugh] and I wasn't really worried about going to school to be honest. Um. So I wanted to be in school but I didn't make it my priority. So at the time I was working and I was just um I don't know I have a little bit of anxiety so being in the classroom with many people kind of um doesn't help that so um yeah I'm pretty sure that's why I didn't um. And I think with my psychology I'm like why um, I went to class so. Um I thought maybe I passed that one actually. But, yeah, I think it wasn't I was still really immature and I wasn't really worried about going to school even though I wanted to be in school I just wasn't making it my priority.	2003FA	Not good semester Reasons for leaving Working Not priority Anxiety Maturity Environment Personal <i>Hard to remember 15 years ago</i>

*Note.* Reflections on the research process are indicated with italicized text.

**Role of theory.** One analytical strategy for narrative inquiry is to use theory as a resource to contextualize findings or to relate findings to larger issues (Riessman, 2008; Wolcott, 1994). As I read, analyzed, and coded narratives, I made note of emerging themes, and I related those themes to existing theory to inform my analysis. Narrative researchers need theories to make sense of stories, but theories should guide, not dictate, understanding (J.-H. Kim, 2016). Narratives are social constructions, as they are “socially derived, socially sustained, and require interdependency of action for their execution” (Gergen & Gergen, 1988, p. 53). Narratives are

created for a specific audience (Riessman, 2008), and participants made decisions about the content and form of their stories based on their perception of me and their understanding of my role as a researcher. Similarly, the meaning participants and I attribute to their stories is a collaborative creation specific to our relationship and the social and historical context in which the research occurred. Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice is broad and inclusive, incorporating habitus, school and community context, higher education context, and social, economic, and policy context in addition to considerations of supply and demand and benefits and costs. I did not read narratives as confirmation of this theory, but I employed Perna's (2006) model as a frame for interpretation.

After I composed narratives from interview transcripts, I coded them according to key points of Perna's (2006) theory. I used indicators for social, economic, and policy context; higher education context; school and community context; and habitus, coding demographics, cultural capital, social capital, resources, and cost-benefit analysis separately. I then grouped together segments exemplifying each code and drafted analyses applying the conceptual model of student college choice (Perna, 2006). Finally, I identified quotations in narratives that revealed how participants made sense of their decision to transfer and the impact transfer has had on their education and life.

### **Trustworthiness**

Validation in narrative analysis and other interpretive research is an ongoing concern (Riessman, 1993), but one that can be addressed through thoughtful consideration of how a study is developed, how data are collected and analyzed, and how findings are presented (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Unlike experimental studies, there are no formal procedures or rules for validation of narrative inquiry. Personal narratives are not accounts of an objective reality, nor

are they assumed to be complete (Riessman, 1993, 2008). The social constructionist perspective and interpretive tradition that frame this study shape how validity is assessed (Riessman, 2008).

**Threats to validity and trustworthiness.** Threats to validity and trustworthiness in narrative research include the selective reconstruction and interpretation of stories, researcher bias, narrative smoothing, and limited generalizability of findings.

***Selective reconstruction and interpretation.*** As participants tell stories, they selectively reconstruct the past, excluding experiences that conflict with their current identities. Narratives change from one telling to the next and narrators' agendas shape what is included and excluded from the plot (Riessman, 1993). Narrative inquiry recognizes participants interpret their experience as they craft stories and acknowledges researchers interpret participants' interpretations (Riessman, 2008). In narrative inquiry, interpretations of events are tentative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and arguments produce conclusions of likelihood rather than certainty (Polkinghorne, 1988). The goal of narrative inquiry is not historical truth, but an understanding of the meaning participants create about their experiences, motivations, and identities. Participants may create multiple constructions of their experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and those unstable understandings may manifest as varying and contradictory stories. The participants in this study may narrate an experience differently over multiple tellings. They may contradict themselves or relate events that could not have happened. While some may believe such a story is invalid, as a narrative researcher, I am interested in the meaning of the story and I understand all stories are interpretations of experience.

***Researcher bias.*** As mentioned above, researchers bring biases and subjectivities to their research (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My positionality and interpretive lens impact what I choose to study, how I conceptualize the research, and how I collect, analyze, and represent data. In addition to being a lateral transfer student, I am a White, middle-aged, middle-

class female who ascribes to certain values and beliefs. I filtered data through my own biography (Riessman, 1993, 2008), which led me to a different analysis than would be written by another researcher. People accustomed to positivist research may question the validity of findings dependent on the interpretation of the researcher. Evaluators of qualitative research believe all researchers bring biases and perspectives to their work, and read narrative studies with an eye to persuasiveness, correspondence, and coherence (Riessman, 2008). To be considered valid, the results of qualitative research should be consistent with the data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

***Narrative smoothing.*** Through narrative smoothing, researchers omit certain data and emphasize others to create a cohesive, compelling story or to make their findings fit a theory (Spence, 1986). It is tempting to write a “Hollywood plot” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 181) in which everything works out in the end. Researchers must manage the tension between creating an account faithful to the data collected and creating a good story (J.-H. Kim, 2016) that meets the criteria of persuasiveness, correspondence, and coherence (Riessman, 2008). In writing my findings, I was confronted with decisions about what data to include and what data to omit to create a faithful yet engaging story. I selected for inclusion data that contributed to the plot and revealed insight about the participant’s character and decision-making process.

***Limited generalizability.*** The findings of qualitative research have limited generalizability because sample sizes are small and are not representative of a given population (Perna, 2006). Qualitative research is appropriate when researchers seek to develop a deep understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2005) or to answer questions related to meaning (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative researchers use nonrandom, purposeful sampling to engage with participants who can best help them answer research questions. Sample sizes are small in part because qualitative methods are time-consuming. In this study, I interviewed six participants

who transferred laterally between community colleges. Although I found commonalities among cases, I cannot argue the participants I interviewed are representative of all lateral transfer students. Some readers may question the value of research findings that cannot be extended to a broader population.

**Strategies to increase validity and trustworthiness.** To be convincing, the findings of qualitative research should represent the reality of participants, demonstrate consistency with data collected, and potentially transfer to other populations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Good narrative research is persuasive with findings that are believable, reasonable, and convincing (Creswell, 2005), and qualitative researchers can employ a number of strategies to increase the credibility of their findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell (2013) recommends researchers engage in at least two of the following procedures to increase validity: triangulation; member checking; clarifying researcher bias; and including thick, rich description.

**Triangulation.** A widely used strategy to increase the internal validity of a study is triangulation, by which a researcher uses multiple methods of data collection, multiple sources of data, multiple theoretical perspectives, or multiple researchers to corroborate evidence (Creswell, 2013; Denzin, 1970; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The most common forms of triangulation are the use of multiple methods and the use of multiple sources. In this study, I collected data from interviews, documents, and a research diary. I also collected data from participants with different perspectives and followed up with clarifying questions as needed. By using multiple sources of data and a combination of data collection strategies, I substantiated participant accounts, lending my study internal validity.

**Member checks.** A second strategy to increase internal validity is taking the emerging findings back to participants for feedback, a process known as member checking or participant validation (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Riessman, 1993). As members of the

research team, participants can determine if interpretations ring true to their experience, and if not, the researcher can adjust the description of results to better correspond to participant experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patten, 2014). After I developed narratives, I requested feedback to ensure I captured participants' experience. Based on input from a participant, I altered one narrative to more accurately describe a sequence of events.

***Extensive data collection.*** To thoroughly understand participants' perspectives and to convey the complexity of a phenomenon, researchers should collect data until the point of saturation, when no new information surfaces as data collection continues (Creswell, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I collected in-depth information from six participants and discussed with them the academic records I received from LCC. Collecting data through multiple methods increased the amount of information available for analysis and helped me reach saturation.

***Clarifying researcher bias.*** Qualitative researchers should engage in reflexivity, explaining their biases, orientations, and assumptions that may impact the research (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Researchers who clarify their perspective help readers understand how they arrived at conclusions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My experiences as a lateral transfer student likely colored my interpretation of participants' stories of their experiences in higher education. How I understand my college choice process, motivations, and actions impacted the elements of participants' stories to which I attended and how I analyzed their stories. Furthermore, my positionality and life experiences give me a situated perspective through which I understand the world. For example, I may not fully understand the experiences of a Black male first-generation community college student because I have a different experience as a White female whose parents graduated from college. I reflected on my identity and experiences to surface my biases and made them known to readers.

***Audit trail.*** Researchers can support claims of validity and reliability by creating an audit trail that describes how the sample was selected, how data were collected, and how decisions and inferences were made throughout the research project (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Riessman, 2008). An audit trail facilitates reflexivity and can produce insight about the consequences of decisions on the results of the study (Riessman, 2008). My research diary functioned as a means of data collection and an audit trail. I included notes about observations, decision-making processes, problems encountered, interactions with data, and reflections. Reviewing my research diary/audit trail increased my self-awareness; other readers could examine it to better understand my interpretations.

***Rich, thick description.*** External validity in narrative inquiry and other forms of qualitative research is better understood as transferability than generalizability (Creswell, 2013; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A focus on the particular may yield an understanding of the universal (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), but qualitative research makes no claims on the generalizability of results. Researchers should provide rich, thick description including extensive detail about participants, research settings, and findings supported by specific evidence, including precise words and descriptions of the context of production (Riessman, 1993, 2008). In the discussion of my findings, I incorporated verbatim quotations from participants and provided context about their experience. Context increases the credibility of my analysis, as do the connections I make between descriptive evidence and theory. In this study, I provided detailed descriptions of participants, context, evidence, and findings to help others determine if my results may apply to different situations.

## **Conclusion**

There is a gap in the knowledge of community college students who transfer laterally. This narrative inquiry begins to address that gap. Quantitative studies (Bahr, 2009, 2012;

Berkner et al., 2007; Ifill et al., 2016; Radford et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2015; Velez et al., 2016) have provided descriptive data about lateral transfer community college students, and reasons community college students transfer laterally have been proposed (WHECB, 2009), but no in-depth studies have investigated why they leave and how they make decisions about where to enroll. The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally and the impact lateral transfer has had on their lives. Better understanding community college students who transfer laterally is the first step toward addressing potentially harmful consequences of lateral transfer.

For institutions, lateral transfer may negatively impact enrollment and reports of institutional performance. Lateral transfer may also indicate dissatisfaction with some aspect of the institution. Policies, processes, institutional culture, and interactions within the college's control may be sending students away. Community college stakeholders should seek the perspectives of students to learn how they experience the institution. Students can explain their intentions, motivations, and reasons for their behavior, which is information stakeholders may not learn through other means. This study seeks to understand the meanings lateral transfer community college students give to their experiences in higher education. Staff, faculty, and administrators at community colleges want students to stay enrolled and finish their programs (Cohen et al., 2014). Learning more about students who leave the institution but remain in the system of higher education may help to support that goal.

For students, the impact of lateral transfer is largely unknown. Quantitative studies (Bahr, 2009; Bentz et al., 2016; Ifill et al., 2016; Peter & Forrest Cataldi, 2005) have revealed limited information on outcomes, including enrollment status and completion rate, related to lateral transfer between community colleges. These data provide a big picture view of what is happening for large groups of students, but they do not convey the experience of individuals.

This goal of this narrative inquiry is to gain a deep understanding of the experiences of students who transfer laterally between community colleges and the impact transfer has had on their lives. As a result of lateral transfer, students may experience a loss of credit, an increase in time to graduation, or a decrease in financial aid. On the other hand, they may find a better institutional fit, enroll in a program more aligned with their educational or career goals, or gain a fresh start. Better understanding the lives of community college students who transfer laterally may lead to changes in policy and practice to better meet their needs.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

Lateral transfer among community college students is surprisingly common (Bahr, 2012), yet little is known about the college choice process of students at two-year institutions (Perna, 2006). The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally and the impact lateral transfer has had on their lives. To understand the experiences of lateral transfer students, this study examines their college choices and how experiences at the community college and outside the college influence their decisions. Additionally, this study seeks to uncover how lateral transfer students make sense of their decision to transfer and how they understand the impact of transfer on later events.

This research was conducted through narrative inquiry, which provides insight into how individuals understand their identities and construct meaning (Creswell, 2013; Riessman, 1993, 2008). Through narrative inquiry, I can understand how a student's experience fits within a larger social and historical context (Gill & Goodson, 2011) and synthesize chronological events into an explanation (Polkinghorne, 1995). For this study, I interviewed six community college students who had transferred to Lakeside Community College from another North Carolina community college with a break of enrollment of less than a year between institutions. I established a chronology of events and coded transcripts of interviews to identify turning points in participants' stories and to learn how they conceptualized transfer. I crafted narratives from coded transcripts and then coded those narratives according to key elements in Perna's (2006) model of student college choice. I coded narratives again to reveal how participants understand the impact of lateral transfer on their lives.

This chapter presents a narrative of each participant's college experience and then offers a summary and interpretation of each story. Each narrative begins with the participant's decision

to go to college and concludes with the participant's plans for the future. Following each narrative, I examine participants' stories using Perna's (2006) theory of student college choice and additional literature to explain the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally. I then discuss how each participant understands lateral transfer and its impact on subsequent events.

### **Participant Narratives and Interpretations**

**Andi.** The first educational institution Andi ever attended was Holly Grove Community College (HGCC). She had been homeschooled through high school but always knew she would go to college because, as she says, "that's what you do." HGCC was five minutes from where she lived, and it was a cost-effective option. Andi states,

I chose there simply because I knew I was gonna do two years at a community college 'cause it's cheaper that way... why would I pay more money to go to a university to learn the same thing, and get my associates.

Andi was not sure to which university she would eventually transfer or what career she would pursue, but she knew she wanted to do something related to music. She reveals, "Honestly, I was just getting my two years there in hope that I would figure it out before I got finished there. And I did."

Andi was a full-time student at HGCC, taking classes required for the Associate in Arts transfer program in the fall of 2016 and spring of 2017. Though she did not know what to expect, Andi had fun at HGCC; she enjoyed her classes, made friends, and played basketball. Over the year, she finished her developmental math requirement and accumulated 25 college credits, earning a 3.52 GPA. Andi lived at home, worked part-time at a grocery store, and used Pell Grant funds to help pay her college expenses.

A friend of Andi's mother had attended Lakeside Community College (LCC) and told her family about LCC's music production program, which he said was "really, really good." Andi initially did not investigate the program because she wanted to attend a university for a four-year degree. She says, "I feel like there's a lot of stigma towards community colleges. ...At first I even had the stigma because like I wanted to do HGCC for two years and then I wanted to go to a university... I said I didn't want to get my degree from a community college so I didn't even look into [LCC]." She looked closely at three transfer institutions: a private, out-of-state, for-profit university; a private in-state university; and a public in-state university. To Andi, the idea of moving away from home and living in a dorm was the quintessential college dream. After learning how much it would cost to attend these universities, Andi considered LCC. She says,

I looked into their program and saw that it actually was pretty good so I ended up transferring over there because they had that program and HGCC doesn't have anything like that. So I went over there so I could get my degree in recording engineering and music business.

Describing her thought process, Andi adds,

There was this cool program, it was something that I was interested in that was at a community college, which is something I could afford, and it was like 20 minutes away from where I lived. So it wasn't even like, oh, I'm dropping this transfer program, I was like, oh, this is cool, I'm gonna go over here and try this.

Even though LCC was a short drive away, Andi gave the commute and its associated costs serious consideration. She explains,

I don't have the nicest car and it's kind of falling apart so it was like, is it worth it to drive, you know, 12 more miles, 24 total more miles a day to go there and all that and gas

prices and I'm gonna have to work more hours to make more money so I can afford the gas to get there and back.

As Andi thought about her options, she decided the drive was worth the risk. She says,

I know what I wanted to do, so like, why would I not do it just because I might not have a car that'll get me there. And all that kind of stuff. And then yeah, I was just like, take a risk, you know, and if I need something it will be provided eventually, like, if my car crashes I'll find a way to get a new car, like, I can make it work.

The transition between HGCC and LCC was not difficult, though Andi was sad to leave her friends and quit basketball. During orientation at LCC, Andi learned most of her credits did not apply to the recording engineering program. She was confused at first, but her mother helped her understand why some of the classes Andi had taken at HGCC did not count toward the LCC degree. Reflecting on that time, Andi says,

That's frustrating to begin with but then I just kinda looked at it like if I ever need to go back and like finish getting my associates or something, like, those will already be under my belt. So I don't feel like it was time wasted because the classes are taken and I do have the credits it was just, yeah, I mean it's not time wasted because if I need to go back, I can. It'll be quicker to get my associates. And I did learn things, so it is what it is, it's how it works and you can't really change that.

Despite only nine of her 25 HGCC credits counting toward her new degree, Andi likes LCC, particularly the small size of the recording engineering program. She explains,

Everyone knows everybody it's kinda like a small little family. So it wasn't hard to adjust and like, get to know people and make friends. And I love the classes because I'm learning something that like, I actually want to do eventually.

Thinking about her first semester at LCC, Andi says,

If I were to describe it in one word I would call it, like, magical, kind of like entrancing because, like, everything there was what I had wanted and pictured. So like I get there and like, I go on a live sound lab which is like basically this big room that we use for concerts that we do once a month. And like, I was just in awe, like, this is so cool, like, this is where I need to be.

In her second semester at LCC, Andi says life has gotten busier and her classes are harder. She does freelance photography, videography, and graphic design in addition to working part-time at a combination convenience store/fast food restaurant. Some of the magic of the recording engineering program has worn off, but it's still fun and she loves what she's doing. Andi likes the relaxed atmosphere of the program and calls her instructors by their first names. She is particularly impressed by an instructor who adapts his teaching style to each student's learning needs, describing him as "super amazing."

The recording engineering program requires a work-based learning component through which students practice skills they learned in class. Andi hopes to complete her work-based learning requirement at a recording studio in Atlanta. She thinks an internship at that studio will open doors for her, positioning her for a job in either Atlanta or another large city. For now, she has put her university aspiration on hold, electing to earn an Associate in Applied Science degree. Reflecting on transfer, Andi says the move from HGCC to LCC definitely did not impact her in a negative way. She did not think of herself as transferring from one community college to another community college. Rather, Andi says, "I'm going from one place to another so I can get closer to my goal."

Table 5

*Enrollment Profile: Andi*

Date	Institution	Program
2016SP	Graduated from homeschool	
2016FA	HGCC	Associate in Arts
2017SP	HGCC	Associate in Arts
2017FA	LCC	Entertainment Technology-Recording Engineering
2018SP	LCC	Entertainment Technology-Recording Engineering

***Andi summary and interpretation.*** Without a clear plan after high school, Andi enrolled at the local community college. She completed developmental and college transfer courses at HGCC and intended to pursue a baccalaureate degree at a university. After learning of entertainment technology program at LCC and investigating the cost of attendance at three universities, Andi decided to transfer to LCC to pursue recording engineering, which is not offered at HGCC. This program is not designed to transfer to a university, and Andi plans to go to work after graduation rather than to complete a four-year degree as originally anticipated.

When investigated through the lens of Perna's (2006) model of student college choice, higher education context and habitus played a significant role in Andi's story, though social and school and community contexts also impacted her decisions. Andi's perception of community colleges shaped her aspirations to earn a four-year degree. Community college education has a low status in the United States (Labaree, 2017), with high school students reporting pressure to attend four-year colleges rather than two year colleges (Holland, 2015) and media portraying community colleges and community college students negatively (Hawk & Hill, 2016). Andi never doubted she would go to college, and though she planned to start at a community college, her goal was to finish at a four-year institution. Andi needed to come to terms with her own stigmatization of community colleges before she was willing to transfer to LCC.

Andi's school context is distinct because she was homeschooled. Community colleges have become a common destination for homeschooled students, in part because some four-year institutions advise homeschooled students to attend a community college to gain academic experience before transferring to a university (Sorey & Duggan, 2008). Without a high school guidance counselor and in the absence of multitudes of students charting their college paths, Andi did not have an expert to guide her college search and peers with whom to discuss college options. Andi based her estimation of university affordability on published tuition prices, which are the most visible indicators of college cost, but not accurate representations of how much students and their families will pay (Baum, 2017). Andi did not apply to universities and therefore did not learn what financial aid packages she would have been offered to cover the higher sticker price. The county where Andi grew up is home to only one postsecondary institution, HGCC. Familiarity with HGCC and her understanding of college costs may have led her to narrow her options.

Andi's college choices were largely made by comparing options in the higher education context. She initially enrolled at HGCC because of its location, price, and college transfer program. In 2016, the year Andi enrolled at HGCC, tuition at North Carolina community colleges was \$72 per credit hour (State Board of Community Colleges Division of Finance and Operations, 2016), or \$1,728 for two semesters of full-time study. She identified three university programs related to music business, and discovered annual tuition alone would cost between \$4,100 and \$34,000, which she could not afford. LCC offered the subject Andi wanted to study, it was the same price as HGCC, and it was close enough for her to commute to campus. Andi chose to attend LCC rather than a university because of the cost, and she chose LCC over HGCC because it offered a music business program not available at HGCC.

These contexts shaped Andi's habitus, which includes personal thoughts, perceptions, and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1977; McDonough, 1997). Andi possessed some cultural capital as she made her college choice decisions. Her family valued college attainment and Andi never questioned whether she would attend college. Her brother had earned a welding degree from HGCC and her sister had earned a graduate degree. Andi aspired to graduate with a music business degree from a university, not a community college, because she perceived community colleges as stigmatized. In fact, Andi refers only to an Associate in Arts transfer degree as an "associates," not using that term to refer to a two-year Associate in Applied Science degree, which she recognizes as a degree, just not an associate degree. Andi's conceptualization of different degrees may relate to her limited social capital, a component of which is information about college. Andi does hold some social capital despite not attending a traditional high school, as evidenced by the fact her mother understood and explained to Andi why all of her HGCC credits did not transfer to LCC. Andi also understands her HGCC credits may apply to an Associate in Arts degree if she returns to college at a later point.

Andi made college choice decisions based on financial resources. After a year at HGCC, Andi had completed 25 college transfer credits and earned a 3.52 GPA. With those achievements, she could have been accepted to any of a number of universities. Cost determined her decision to transfer to a community college rather than a four-year institution, at which she would have incurred expenses for room and board in addition to tuition and fees. Beyond the social stature afforded to university graduates, Andi did not weigh the expected benefits of attending a university against the expected costs. Her limited financial resources and understanding of the price of a college education steered her to LCC.

Lateral transfer has had a positive impact on Andi's education and life. Though she uses the work *transfer* to describe her transition between colleges, Andi more frequently talks about it

in terms like, “I went over there so I could get my degree...,” “I’m gonna go over here and try this,” and “I’m going from one place to another so I can get closer to my goal.” She understands enrolling in the recording engineering program at LCC as a strategy to meet her career goals. Enrolling at HGCC enabled Andi to earn college credits while she determined which career path to follow. After she made a career decision, she saw a pathway through LCC to her goal of becoming a recording engineer. Andi enrolled at LCC to progress toward her chosen career, and in the recording engineering program, she has found a sense of belonging. Because Andi changed from a transfer to a career and technical program, 16 of her 25 credits earned at HGCC do not apply. Frustrated at first, Andi accepts the loss of credit as a typical aspect of higher education. Rather than ruminating on lost time, money, and effort, she views those 16 unapplied credits as a way to speed completion of a possible future credential. Andi drives farther to attend class at LCC and spends more money on gas, but completing the program is worth the time and resources she invests in the commute. Andi understands the work-based learning component of the LCC recording engineering program as the way she will enter the music business. Without transferring laterally and joining the program, securing a studio internship would be much more difficult. For Andi, lateral transfer was a strategy to achieve career goals, and it has had a positive impact on her education and life.

**Belle.** When she was in high school, a career exploration activity led Belle to consider healthcare for her future occupation. She earned a certified nursing assistant (CNA) certificate prior to high school graduation in 2007, and healthcare has been her focus ever since. Immediately after high school, Belle enrolled at the public historically Black university in the county where she grew up. She stayed for a year, earning 10 transferrable credits and accumulating significant debt. The next year, she enrolled at Mountain View Community College (MVCC), still in the same county, because she had been told she would receive more

one-on-one attention and tuition was less expensive. Belle took classes for a year and planned to pursue nursing, but did not earn the minimum Test of Essential Academic Skills (TEAS) score required to enter the limited-enrollment nursing program. The competitiveness deterred her, and she thought, “maybe I’m not smart enough to get into this program.” With a child on the way, she says, “I started to do something like faster that would help me make more money, which was the CNA II.”

She went to work for the local hospital as a certified nursing assistant and attended Rolling Hills Community College (RHCC) nearly an hour away to earn her CNA II certification through a continuing education program in 2011. Two years later, Belle attended a for-profit institution about five minutes from her home to earn a phlebotomy certificate. With that credential, Belle was able to secure a job as a lab technician in a hospital about 30 minutes away in a neighboring county. She says,

I made good money being a lab tech but nursing has always been my thing. I always wanted to work with people and in the lab I don’t have any patient care whatsoever I’m just with blood and specimens and chemistry and microbiology stuff like that.

Belle paid off her university debt in 2017. At the same time, her work schedule aligned with her sister’s, which meant they could watch each other’s children. Belle decided it was time to go back to college. She says, “It’s always a money thing and like especially if you’re a single parent of two kids having the time to go there, having somebody to watch your kid.” Still not confident of her chances of being accepted into a nursing program, Belle looked for other health programs nearby. She enrolled at Stone Community College (SCC) about 30 minutes away with the intention to pursue the dental assistant program. She soon realized dental assisting was not a good fit and reached out to an instructor in nursing. Of the encounter, Belle says, “She was like,

you have a lot of background and I was like, well I always wanted to be a nurse.... She was more welcoming. Soon as they seen me they was like, you shoulda been down here.”

Belle wanted to attend SCC for two reasons: admission to the nursing program was not as difficult as at MVCC and the faculty and staff were supportive and responsive to her questions.

She explains,

The nursing program [at SCC] last year had like eight people in it. Like not a lot of people want to do it so it's kinda easier to get in and it's not as like competitive where you have a whole bunch of people trying to go to the school just to do that one nursing program.

Belle continues,

They were more hands-on, like okay you could do this, you could do that, you, you in the medical field you already know what you're doing you could do it go for it. Like I said, everybody there is more receptive they will help you if you have any questions it doesn't matter what time it is I can text this lady at 3:00 in the morning and she's gonna write me back with an answer when she gets it.

As she completed prerequisite courses for the nursing program, Belle encountered a problem. The anatomy and physiology class she needed was only offered in the morning at SCC. She talked with her advisor about the situation, explaining,

I was like, well I can't just, you know, quit, stop working, you know. A lot of people do that but I'm like, I have two kids to support and, you know, rent and everything else so I was like, I can't take this BIO in the morning which they offer because I work at the hospital Monday through Friday and they didn't have any weekend classes just straight all morning classes. So I decided to do LCC because they offer it in the evening.

Before she decided to enroll at Lakeside Community College (LCC), Belle also considered MVCC and Holly Grove Community College (HGCC). The evening course at MVCC was already full and HGCC was out of the way. LCC was only about 10 minutes from the hospital where Belle worked and it offered the financial aid she needed.

Belle applied to LCC and enrolled in the evening anatomy and physiology class, which meets two days a week. She describes her busy schedule by saying,

My day is getting up at 4:30 in the morning, getting two kids ready, droppin' them off at my sister's, going to work by 5:30, getting off by 1:30 p.m. and on Mondays going to school at 5:00 and getting out at 7:00 and on Wednesdays, which I dread, Wednesdays is from 4:30 in the morning all the way to 9:00 at night. So school is all day.

A portion of this time commitment is a mandatory supplemental instruction (SI) class that meets once a week. Belle does not see the value in supplemental instruction, saying "It's just more work for no reason." Her SI leader took the class with a different instructor and Belle does not believe the SI leader understands her instructor's expectations. The SI curriculum does not seem to align with her anatomy and physiology course curriculum, and Belle asserts she probably would not have gone to LCC if she had known about the SI program.

Belle considered applying for admission to the licensed practical nurse (LPN) program at LCC, but decided she would rather pursue the license elsewhere. The LPN program at LCC has more prerequisites than the LPN program at other community colleges. LCC requires a full CNA recertification rather than a refresher course, which is accepted at SCC, MVCC, and HGCC. LCC also would require another English and math class. Belle explains,

I'm trying to get my C in BIO and get out of this school and go back to SCC and I, I would've stayed at this school but it's a lot of stuff that they don't accept and a lot of things that you like have to go and complete over for them and their nursing program.

Belle has had trouble getting answers from advisors at LCC. She says, [LCC] is not a bad school but it's, it, I guess it's too many people it's kinda hectic because you just can't get an answer or you have to keep on calling back and keep on calling back and sometimes when you call back they have attitudes or they're frustrated. Some of her classmates say they were misadvised regarding which anatomy and physiology class to take, and Belle is concerned she may not get correct information if an advisor does call her back. She had positive experiences speaking with admissions advisors at SCC and HGCC, and she plans to apply to the LPN program at both institutions. Belle adds, "I was so happy about SCC and having the communication with them I was really looking at SCC." She says advising is important, "Cause like if you know you have somebody to go to for help and support that makes a big difference."

Reflecting on the multiple institutions she attended, Belle says, Transferring actually kind of sped up my process I think like, uh, a lot of schools, like I said when I went to [the university] I took a lot of classes and all those transferred credits actually helped at SCC so that I didn't have to take a lot of prereq classes. So to me that kinda sped up the process and the fact that your transfer, uh, credits they last for a while... I was able to bypass a lot of things that a lot of students couldn't. Um, I know that, like I said, that was important because that actually got me to the point where like, I'm almost finished, I could actually do this.

Practical considerations have shaped Belle's path. She says,

You're a single parent and you're looking to jump into the work field and make money. That's the only reason why I didn't do like the RN program and go for the associates because I actually want to make money while I'm being a nurse.

If she is accepted to the SCC LPN program, Belle expects to graduate in May 2019. She would change her work schedule to accommodate her classes, and she and her sister have already discussed childcare arrangements. Belle plans to follow her sister's footsteps by becoming a registered nurse (RN) through an LPN to RN bridge program and then earning a baccalaureate degree in nursing. Ultimately, Belle and her sister would like to open a nursing home together and put their education to good use.

Table 6

*Enrollment Profile: Belle*

Date	Institution	Program
2007SP	Graduated from high school	Earned CNA I
2007FA	HBCU	Pre-Nursing
2008SP	HBCU	Pre-Nursing
2008FA	MVCC	Pre-Nursing
2009SP	MVCC	Pre-Nursing
2011	RHCC	CNA II
2013	For-profit institution	Phlebotomy certificate
2017FA	SCC	Pre-Practical Nursing
2018SP	LCC	Associate in General Education

***Belle summary and interpretation.*** In high school, Belle earned a CNA I license and knew she wanted to work in healthcare. After a year at a university, Belle transferred to a community college, but did not qualify for admission to the limited enrollment nursing program and left. She worked as a CNA as she earned two non-credit certificates, and she used those credentials to pave her way to positions with higher salaries. After she paid her university debt, Belle enrolled at SCC, but course offerings did not align with her work schedule. Belle transferred to LCC pick up a course at a better time of day and intends to transfer yet again when that class concludes.

Belle has taken a tortuous path in higher education to find fulfilling work and support her family. In terms of Perna's (2006) model of college choice, Belle was particularly influenced by

higher education context and habitus, specifically financial resources, though other contextual elements contributed to her decisions. In terms of economic context, long-term certificates in nursing lead to high returns on investment through increased wages, outpacing returns on most other sub-baccalaureate credentials (Dadgar & Trimble, 2015). Belle is pursuing an LPN so she can work as a nurse while she earns an RN through a bridge program. Licensed practical nurses earn an average of \$45,030 per year, and projected job growth for is faster than the average for all occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018a). Registered nurses earn an average of \$70,000 per year, and projected job growth is much higher than the average for all occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018b). With a degree in nursing, Belle can find a steady job that pays a family-supporting wage. Belle's school context also shaped her path. She attended a high school that promoted career exploration and offered a certified nursing assistant course. Early exposure to nursing skills helped Belle establish career goals that influenced her higher education choices.

Belle experienced a variety of higher education contexts, each of which shaped her decisions. After high school, Belle, a Black woman, enrolled at the local historically Black public university for a year. She transferred to a community college because it was less expensive and she had assumed significant debt at the university. She had also been told she would receive more personalized attention at a community college, a common perception among community college students (Kearney, Townsend, & Kearney, 1995; Somers et al., 2006). To fulfill a requirement for admission to the nursing program at MVCC, Belle completed the TEAS, a 170-question multiple choice test designed to assess preparedness for nursing and allied health programs by measuring skills in reading, math, science, and English and language usage (Assessment Technologies Institute, 2016). Each North Carolina community college that offers nursing determines admission requirements for the program, and minimum TEAS scores may

vary by institution (R. Batts, personal communication, June 26, 2018). Belle's disappointing score on the TEAS had a lasting impact on her subsequent higher education enrollment decisions.

Non-credit certificates offered a way for Belle to earn credentials quickly and qualify for jobs that paid more money. The CNA I certificate Belle had already earned allowed her entry into the CNA II class at a community college. A nearby for-profit institution with a healthcare focus offered a phlebotomy credential with no roadblocks for admission. Ease of access was a major consideration in Belle's educational choices, and like other students who attend for-profit institutions (Chung, 2012), Belle exhibited high mobility across available options.

After she paid her university debt and decided to pursue a program for college credit, Belle chose a community college. However, she picked SCC, an institution about 20 minutes farther from her home than MVCC, though both offered the program in which she planned to enroll. Her previous experience with MVCC had soured her on the institution and she was willing to drive farther for a new start. The staff and faculty at SCC were helpful and friendly, and they encouraged her interest in nursing. Belle was impressed by the college's student service ethos and she wants to return to SCC for the nursing program. She also believes admission to the nursing program at SCC is less competitive than at other colleges.

If SCC had offered the anatomy and physiology course Belle needed when it fit her work schedule, she would not have transferred. LCC, a much larger institution, offered the course in the evening and was also convenient to the hospital where Belle worked. Attending LCC was not a long-term strategy for Belle. She understands LCC's admission requirements for nursing to be more extensive than at other institutions. Moreover, Belle's experience with LCC has been discouraging. She has not felt the high-touch student support she found at SCC and the

supplemental instruction requirement associated with her course has seemed like additional work with no reward.

Belle's college choices have been influenced significantly by her supply of financial resources and her social capital. As a single mother, Belle's primary concern is caring for her children. To support her family, she needs to bring in steady income. Belle made enrollment decisions that enabled her to keep her full-time job, and she chose the LPN route to nursing because she would be able to work rather than focus solely on her education, as is often required for Associate Degree Nursing programs. A career in nursing will support Belle's family, and it will also help her feel fulfilled. She wants to work with people, not lab samples.

Belle benefits from social capital in higher education and in her life outside college. Within higher education, faculty and advisors at SCC talked with Belle about options for completing the required anatomy and physiology course. They helped her find a solution to her scheduling challenge and built her confidence about pursuing nursing. The connections she made at SCC and the brief positive interaction she had speaking with advisors at HGCC determined where Belle plans to apply to nursing programs. Conversely, the interactions Belle had with LCC students who shared their negative experiences with advising and Belle's own difficulty connecting with an advisor contributed to her decision to apply elsewhere for nursing. Outside education, Belle's social capital with her sister makes her education possible. Without someone to watch her children, Belle could not take classes. She and her sister share childcare responsibilities and plan their schedules so they can both pursue nursing degrees. Belle's sister is a source of support, and because she has finished an associate degree in nursing and is pursuing a baccalaureate degree in nursing, she is a positive role model for Belle.

For Belle, lateral transfer was a practical step to move her closer to her educational and career goals. She twice uses the word *transfer* to describe her movements, but more often

describes them in phrases like, "...get out of this school and go back SCC...", "...decided to do LCC...", and "go back to SCC," indicating LCC is but one stop on her journey. Belle's history of attending a number of institutions to earn higher credentials that lead to better jobs is evidence of her orientation to education. Her move to LCC was purely practical and based on course scheduling. She had no complaints about SCC, even though the drive was long. SCC did not offer the anatomy and physiology class she needed when she could take it, and LCC did. LCC was a better option than other nearby community colleges because there were openings in the evening section of the course and the campus was close to Belle's job. Assuming Belle passes the anatomy and physiology class at LCC with at least a C, lateral transfer will have had a positive impact on Belle's life because it will have gotten her one class closer to the nursing program. Belle's experience with LCC has not been as positive as her time at SCC. Coupled with stringent requirements for admission to the nursing program, Belle's difficulty communicating with an advisor and frustration with supplemental instruction at LCC have persuaded her to look elsewhere for nursing. Belle believes transfer has accelerated her progress through college because she thinks of her education one program at a time rather than as a continuum of experience over the 11 years since she graduated from high school. Because her credits have been accepted by other institutions, Belle has been able to bypass requirements other students must complete. Using transfer credits to fulfill nursing program requirements has helped Belle realize her progress, which has given her hope of completing a nursing degree.

**Dylan.** Dylan did not think much about college until she was in high school. During her senior year, she participated in a program working with special education students and decided she wanted to pursue elementary education and special education in college. The state university campus in the county where she lived had a good education program, so she enrolled there after high school in the fall of 2008. She did not complete her first semester, in part because she

believes she was not mature enough to live in a dorm with her best friend. She had registered for early classes but was not a morning person and did not go to class. Dylan had done well in high school, but was not maintaining her high standards and decided to drop out before she failed her classes. She went to work full-time. In the fall of 2009, Dylan registered for classes at Lakeside Community College (LCC) because her mother pressured her to go to school, but Dylan says she “just didn’t go.” She was dropped from the classes for being a no-show.

For the next five years, Dylan worked in restaurants. She gave birth to a daughter in 2014 and quit her job to stay at home while her daughter’s father supported the household financially. Dylan and her daughter’s father did not have a good relationship and she felt stuck. She says, “I was a stay at home mom for two years, I didn’t have a car, I didn’t have any money, um, and I had just been alone for like two years so I had like no confidence in myself.” Dylan decided that she needed to get an education in case she ever needed to provide for her daughter on her own.

Watching television shows on the HGTV network inspired Dylan to look into interior design programs. She discovered Tall Pine Community College (TPCC), in the town where she had moved, had one of the best interior design programs in the state. She immediately took steps to enroll for the fall of 2015. Dylan wanted to change her life situation, and she started by going to school. She explains,

I had to get out of there, basically so I started out with school and then I... I started working weekends with a girl I met at school and progressively got myself out of the situation that I needed to get out of um. So yeah, it was like, it was kind of like I needed to go for my child... I didn’t have an education so I didn’t want to wait tables for the rest of my life and count on tips instead of take care of a daughter by myself.

Dylan enrolled at TPCC in the fall of 2015 in the interior design program, taking a full-time load of 14 credit hours. The program was like a job, and students were required to be on campus five days a week. Dylan did not work and devoted her time to homework, studio time, and raising her daughter. Sometimes, her daughter went to the studio with her and watched cartoons on the computer while Dylan worked on the big drafting tables. She loved her classes and earned all A's that semester. She says, "I just immersed myself in it. Because it was something not to think about my relationship at home."

The next semester, Dylan registered for the program's recommended 17 credit hours. She recalls, "It ended up being the roughest semester of my life." The week before final projects were due, Dylan was admitted to the hospital with pancreatitis and learned she was diabetic. She believes her illness was exacerbated by the stress of that semester. Dylan's instructors gave her incompletes to allow her to wrap up her projects after she was released from the hospital. Again, she earned all A's. She took summer classes and then decided to leave her daughter's father in the fall of 2016. Dylan went to work full-time waiting tables at IHOP. She did not want to overwhelm herself with too many classes, so she took three in the fall and then two in the spring of 2017.

In May of 2017, Dylan learned of a job opportunity in the space management department at the university she had previously attended. In the position, she would be able to use the skills she had learned at TPCC and have a steady income. The job hours conflicted with the hours she would be required to be on campus at TPCC. She says,

I wanted that job and I couldn't, I couldn't manage the classes that I had left. They were, you know, I would have to be in class from eight to five, like three days a week and I really wanted the job, really, really bad and I wanted to be there three days a week so I couldn't, just couldn't make it work.

Still 22 credits shy of the 73 credits required for the Associate in Applied Science degree in interior design, Dylan left TPCC with a certificate in architectural technology and design. She recalls,

So I got my certificate and I went to work there [at the university]. Um, because it was really, it was a great opportunity for me as a single mother. To go from making tips to making \$15 an hour to do, to work on AutoCAD, which is what I loved about school... The technical stuff. Like I loved SketchUp and I loved AutoCAD. I took the job and I just decided to get the certificate, um, but I was really close.

Dylan decided immediately to pursue an associate degree at Lakeside Community College because she says, "I just wanted to finish *something*." She states, "I chose LCC because they had better online programs. And that's what I wanted to do because with the job, I can't really go to class." Dylan adds,

Another thing about LCC that was appealing to me was that they offered the student loans. [TPCC doesn't] participate in federal loan programs so you can only get your grant. And as a single mom, you know, going to school, I was going to need more money, so I kinda wanted, you know, somewhere that had the loans as well but somewhere that had better online programs.

The process of enrolling at LCC was not difficult. Filling out the loan application was the step that took the most time, but Dylan was able to get her transcript sent online and everything was settled quickly. She initially enrolled in the information technology program, but switched to the Associate in Arts after a semester. Familiar with the software LCC uses, Dylan determined how her TPCC credits transferred by looking at her online program evaluation. She remembers, "I just looked up my, my program evaluation and realized that, um, you know, my basic like my art history and my, uh, English classes got transferred but none of my design

classes counted for anything.” Even now, she says, “It still bums me out because I look at my transcript and like 13 classes don’t count towards anything toward my new degree.”

Dylan has enjoyed attending both TPCC and LCC, but says, “it’s kind of two different experiences ‘cause I’ve only purely gone online at LCC but I went in person at TPCC.” She likes the tools LCC incorporates into online classes and says her instructors have been responsive and helpful. Online classes have been easy to manage with working full-time and having a child because assignments are due only once a week. Since she enrolled at LCC, Dylan has driven the 20 minutes from work to campus twice, once to change her program of study and once to meet with her advisor.

In terms of the future, Dylan hopes the university converts her temporary position into a permanent one. Though she would still need to apply for the job, she feels confident her training, experience, and performance would make her a strong candidate. Her tentative plan is to complete her associate degree as a part-time student over the next two years and then transfer into an online business administration baccalaureate program. If she gets the permanent job, the university would pay for three classes a year and she would definitely transfer into the online business program. She adds, “I’m glad I went back to school I really am. I enjoy it. I, I will probably end up with a four year degree just ‘cause I don’t want to stop school yet.”

Reflecting on her experience, Dylan says,

I’ve pretty much come to terms with . . . I’m happy with the certificate I got in interior design. I’m working in the field so I’m building, you know, experience in that. And then I want to work at getting more business admin too in case I ever decided to combine the two. Because my ultimate dream would be to flip houses so if I could get like some business knowledge and you know the design knowledge I know and I keep learning at my job I might be able to just do that one day.

Table 7

*Enrollment Profile: Dylan*

Date	Institution	Program
2008SP	Graduated from high school	
2008FA	University	Elementary and Special Education
2015FA	TPCC	Interior Design
2016SP	TPCC	Interior Design
2016SU	TPCC	Interior Design
2016FA	TPCC	Interior Design
2017SP	TPCC	Interior Design
2017FA	LCC	Information Technology
2018SP	LCC	Associate in Arts

***Dylan summary and interpretation.*** Dylan enrolled at a university directly following high school and realized she was not mature enough for college. After working for over five years in restaurants and for two years as a stay-at-home mom, Dylan decided to return to college. She chose TPCC because it offered the program she wanted to study, interior design. Determined to improve her life and to support her child, Dylan dedicated herself to her studies. Eventually, her home life grew intolerable and she left her daughter's father, continuing school part-time and taking a full-time job waiting tables. When a position became available using skills she learned at TPCC, she took it, understanding accepting the job meant leaving the interior design program, which required significant time on campus. Dylan transferred to LCC because the college offered a variety of online programs, Federal Direct loans, and an opportunity for her to finish a credential.

Dylan's college enrollment decisions can be understood through the lens of Perna's (2006) model of student college choice. The school context influenced Dylan's decision to attend postsecondary education and in which institution to enroll. Dylan attended a high school that offered a course through which she worked with students in special education classes. She enjoyed her time with the students and decided to pursue elementary education and special

education, enrolling at a state university known for its education programs. The autonomy she found at the university had adverse effects on her academic achievement. Dylan left the university to conserve money and to retain her identity as the good student she had been in high school.

After having a child within an unhealthy relationship, Dylan's perspective changed. She decided she needed an education to support her daughter financially in the event she ever left her daughter's father. Habitus, particularly Dylan's supply of resources, drove her decision to return to college and the choices that led to lateral transfer. The higher education context also contributed significantly to her trajectory. Dylan enrolled at TPCC because she wanted to complete a program in interior design, and TPCC is one of five community colleges in the state that offers the curriculum (North Carolina Community College System, 2018b). Conveniently, TPCC was also the closest community college to her home. The interior design program required a significant commitment of time on campus because of its studio requirements. When presented with the choice of continuing the interior design program, which would have involved forgoing earnings in the hope for a future job in the field, or immediately working full-time in a steady job with benefits, Dylan accepted the job opportunity. As a single mother, Dylan's need to support her daughter outweighed her desire to earn a degree in interior design. Rather than leave the system of higher education, Dylan enrolled at a different institution.

The higher education context shaped Dylan's next college choice decision. After taking college classes for two years and accumulating 51 credit hours, she was not content to stop out after earning a certificate from TPCC. Through numerous online programs, LCC offered an opportunity for Dylan to take classes and work full-time. With few exceptions, LCC's online classes are asynchronous and can be completed without students ever coming to campus. Moreover, assignments are due once a week, which allowed Dylan flexibility to complete course

work on her schedule. Unlike TPCC, LCC offered Federal Direct loans. In 2012, a revision to North Carolina law allowed community colleges in North Carolina to opt out of offering federal student loans (Financial Assistance for Community College Students, 2012). Many community colleges do not offer Federal Direct loans because student default rates can jeopardize an institution's ability to offer any type of federal financial aid, including Pell Grants (Consequences of Cohort Default Rates on Your Ability to Participate in Title IV, HEA Programs, 2009). Dylan needed the additional money a student loan would provide.

For Dylan, lateral transfer was a byproduct of her decision to take a full-time job. She uses the word *transfer* to discuss her move from TPCC to LCC and to refer to her prospective move from LCC to a university. However, because she met the requirements for a 17-credit-hour certificate with her 51 total credits, Dylan also speaks in terms of attainment, saying things like, "I just decided to get my certificate..." and "I'm happy with the certificate I got..." Dylan may think of herself more as a graduate of TPCC than as a transfer student. Dylan's primary consideration is providing for her daughter, and a full-time job was the most direct way for her to make more money and gain insurance benefits. Without the change in her employment, Dylan would have stayed at TPCC and completed the interior design program. Her enjoyment of learning and desire to earn a degree, along with the opportunity for more income through financial aid motivated Dylan to enroll in an online program at LCC. However, transferring into a new program rendered Dylan's interior design credits unnecessary, a fact that depresses her still. Dylan's job has had a positive impact on her life, and the interior design program at TPCC was a casualty of that decision. Enrollment at LCC was a way for Dylan to stay in college, bring home extra income, and learn skills that may help her in the future.

**Kai.** When he was in eighth grade, Kai learned his high school grades would impact whether he was admitted to college. He had not given much thought to college, but his mother

said his choices after high school would be to join the military, enroll in college, or find a job. His family members had taken the military route, and he wanted to do something different by going to college. Kai struggled in high school and didn't think he stood a strong chance of being accepted for admission at a university, so he looked only at community colleges, and at one in particular.

After graduating from high school in 2014, Kai applied to Lakeside Community College (LCC) because it offered the aviation program he wanted to pursue. He loved jets and had wanted to work in aviation since high school. Tall Pine Community College (TPCC) was closer to where he lived, but it did not offer aviation so he did not apply. Kai did not own a car and had hoped to move closer to LCC, but his plan to move did not come to fruition. Because he could not get to LCC, he dropped his classes before the semester started and went to work at a factory in his hometown.

Within three or four months, Kai realized working 36 hours per weekend, his schedule at the factory, was not for him. He could not see himself working there the rest of his life and resolved to get back to LCC. He says,

I decided to work to get a car to, you know, be able to go to LCC eventually. And as I was working I was not in school and, uh, that was... that changed my mind, it changed my outlook making me want to go back to school.

During a conversation about Kai's current job and future goals, a friend suggested he apply to TPCC. Kai reviewed the LCC website to identify the courses he would need for aviation and realized he could take some classes at TPCC. He explains, "I decided to take those classes while I'm here and then when I go to LCC I can go straight into, uh, my aviation classes." Without help, Kai wasn't sure he'd be able to complete all the steps to apply for college. His friend at

TPCC told him “you just apply,” and Kai learned the process was not as difficult as he anticipated. He applied and was accepted at TPCC.

Kai planned to transfer from the beginning and made sure he prepared himself for LCC. He printed the aviation program plan from the LCC website to guide his course selection at TPCC. He explains,

So that’s how I stayed on course and everything. And I talked to my advisor, I had an advisor there at TPCC and, uh, they made sure I was taking the right classes for me to be able to transfer.

In the spring of 2015, Kai started college with developmental math, taking two one-credit modules for a total of two credit hours. He didn’t take the class seriously because “it wasn’t a real math class” and he passed one module but was required to repeat the other. Kai says, “I had bad study habits and, and didn’t really study too much and, uh, yeah, uh, it kinda hit me hard.” The next semester, Kai passed the math module as well as college-level English and humanities classes. He also registered for music that semester, but withdrew without completing the course. Over the next year and a half, he passed English and psychology classes on the first try and completed a college-level math course on the second attempt.

The spring semester of 2017 was Kai’s last semester at TPCC. After taking so many general education courses, he was eager to transfer and get into his major. He recalls,

After the math I believe I only had public speaking to take and, uh, that, that’s one of the classes I was just like, you know, uh, instead of spending another semester at TPCC I can just go to LCC finish that and just go straight into my, uh, my aviation classes. So, uh, just eager to get out of TPCC and, and to finally get into LCC. Uh, I, I waited I think it was 2014 I was trying to go and I didn’t go and I was, I was just eager to get back to LCC.

That spring, the barriers that kept Kai from attending LCC were resolved. In January, he bought a reliable car, and in March, he and his girlfriend moved about 15 minutes closer to LCC. The conclusion of Kai's time at TPCC was also the end of his time at the factory. He was hired full-time by an aircraft manufacturer to work in the supply chain, stocking parts delivered by a truck and then issuing parts to mechanics and technicians. Kai appreciates the opportunity to work in aviation while he's earning his degree. He states,

It's a nice transitional job. I mean, you know, I am around, uh, these mechanics, I see what they get to do and, uh, you know, they teach me some things. But this job, I mean it gets, it definitely got my foot in the door, you know, I'm, I'm already there I just have to get the license and I can, you know, I can go to another department. But, um, I don't see me being in here... after I get my [airframe and powerplant] license I will definitely pursue a job in, uh, working on these, these airplanes.

In the fall of 2017, Kai's transition to LCC was smooth. His TPCC credits transferred and were applied to his degree. Kai completed his last general education requirement, a public speaking course, at LCC. He took only that class because he was working a new job with a different schedule and didn't want to overwhelm himself. He says, "I wanted all my attention to be towards the aviation classes not have to deal with public speaking and aviation and a new job." He also wanted to familiarize himself with the college and surrounding area. Kai was accustomed to a college with about a third of LCC's enrollment, and the larger campus and greater number of students were a change. Unprepared for the volume of students at LCC, Kai was 15 minutes late to class on his first day because he was looking for a parking spot.

Now that he has finished his general education requirements, Kai is taking aviation courses. In the spring of 2018, he enrolled in one 15-credit class that met five hours a day, five days a week. Working full-time and being in class 25 hours a week, not including homework, is

a struggle for Kai, but he says, “I like it. It’s worth it.” The 15-credit class is broken into topical sections including sheet metal and electricity. Kai explains,

If you fail one of those sections you have to wait till next fall to, to, you know, pick back up so it’s a lot of stress, you know, to, to do good and to pass. You know, because I, you know, waited so long to get here I would be hurting if I, you know, have to go back another year.

He adds, “So it’s stressful, but I do like it, it’s just very stressful.”

Reflecting on his journey, Kai says,

Getting to LCC is a—even though I haven’t, you know, finished yet—it’s a, I feel like it’s a, it’s a small accomplishment, you know, it’s, uh, I had, I had to work, you know, hard to get back here.

His study habits and his identity as a student have changed since he transferred. Kai expresses,

When I was at TPCC, I, I’m not gonna say I didn’t try, but it didn’t feel like, it didn’t feel like I was moving, you know, in the, in the right direction. I knew I was, you know, taking the right classes but because I wasn’t there, it was always, uh, like a letdown. But since I, you know, since I got here, uh, classes have been, uh, you know, I’ve, I’ve been studying more, uh, passing a lot of classes. Not, not passing with, you know, C’s any more uh, you know, I, I like the transition, um, I’m a better student since I, since I made it here.

Table 8

*Enrollment Profile: Kai*

Date	Institution	Program
2014SP	Graduated from high school	
2015SP	TPCC	Associate in Science
2016FA	TPCC	Associate in Science
2017SP	TPCC	Associate in Science
2017FA	LCC	Aviation Systems Technology
2018SP	LCC	Aviation Systems Technology

***Kai summary and interpretation.*** Transferring between community colleges was Kai's plan from the time he enrolled at TPCC. Kai's educational goal, to study aviation, had remained unchanged since high school. LCC offered an aviation program, and he knew that was where he would earn his degree. However, Kai encountered setbacks that delayed his entry and shifted his enrollment. With a focus on his ultimate goal, Kai made strategic decisions that paved the way for him to enroll in the aviation program at LCC and gain work experience in the aerospace sector.

Viewing Kai's experience through Perna's (2006) model of student college choice reveals how layers of context influence his college choice decision. At the macro level of social, economic, and policy context, the labor market in North Carolina influenced Kai's choice of career, which informed his decision about the credential needed to enter the field. Aerospace is a growing business sector in the state (Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina, 2016), and collectively, civilian aircraft, engines, and parts is North Carolina's top foreign export (U.S. Census Bureau Foreign Trade Division, 2018). With a job in aviation, Kai could follow his interest in jets and find a career with value in the labor market.

The higher education context directed Kai's college choices. After high school, he applied to LCC because the college offered an associate degree in aviation. The open door policy of the community college meant he could gain admission despite his lackluster high

school performance, and the campus was within driving distance from his home. When a lack of transportation prohibited Kai from attending LCC, he chose to attend TPCC because it was also open admission, it was easy to access with his available transportation resources, and he could take classes at TPCC that would count toward the aviation program at LCC. With a common course numbering system at all North Carolina community colleges, Kai knew, for example, if he took ENG-111 at TPCC it would apply as ENG-111 to the aviation degree at LCC. When he had nearly exhausted TPCC courses that applied to the LCC degree and his personal situation had changed, Kai again enrolled at LCC to continue to pursue his educational and career goal.

Examining Kai's story through school and community context indicates available community resources may have contributed to his college choice decisions. The primary reason Kai delayed his enrollment at LCC was the lack of transportation to the campus. He did not have a car, and the bus was not a viable option. The bus between the cities runs infrequently, and traveling by bus takes two to five and a half hours one-way, depending on departure time. Online classes were not an option because the developmental courses Kai needed were only offered on-campus. Until he purchased a car, Kai needed to attend a college he could reach.

The higher order layers of context shaped Kai's habitus, his traits and perspectives. College was not emphasized in Kai's family, indicating limited cultural capital. His mother presented college attendance as one of three post-high school options, and the other members of his family had taken the military path. Kai understood a college education would help him accomplish his goal of working on jets. After not securing transportation to LCC in 2014, Kai went to work at a factory. The repetitive, tedious work reinforced his belief in the value of higher education and motivated him to save money for a car and start taking college classes.

Kai's perspective as a student with limited high school academic achievement shaped his decision to enroll at a community college. Eight community colleges in North Carolina offer at

least one of four programs related to aviation: aerospace manufacturing and repair, aviation electronics technology, aviation management and career pilot technology, or aviation systems technology (North Carolina Community College System, 2018b). Two public universities in the state offer baccalaureate degrees in either aviation science or aerospace engineering (The University of North Carolina, 2018). Kai did not investigate universities because he understood his high school grades would preclude his admission, and he chose the community college that offered an aviation program in closest proximity to where he lived.

Kai's social capital helped him navigate the college system to progress toward his goal. Though he no longer had access to a guidance counselor, a friend who attended TPCC provided information about the college and assistance with admission processes. Kai used the colleges' websites to compare course offerings, and he understood courses at TPCC would transfer to LCC. With the help of a TPCC advisor, Kai planned for which courses he would register using the aviation program plan as a guide. These connections facilitated college choice, enrollment, and transfer.

Though he worked full-time, Kai qualified for a Pell Grant. His limited financial resources impacted his decision to attend a community college, where tuition for the 2017–2018 academic year was \$76 per credit hour (Grovenstein, 2017), compared to tuition at a state university, which ranged from \$119 to \$292 per credit hour (The University of North Carolina, 2017). After buying a car, he secured a job in the supply chain department of an aviation company, but he wanted a different kind of work within the industry. To Kai, the benefit of earning aviation systems associate degree is worth the cost of his time, money, and effort to complete the program.

Kai's first college choice decision was to attend LCC, but life barriers prevented him from starting classes there after high school. With a singular ambition to attend LCC, Kai

enrolled at TPCC and took classes he knew would apply to the LCC aviation program. Though he uses the word *transfer*, Kai more commonly refers to movement from TPCC to LCC as, “finally get into LCC,” “get back to LCC,” and “getting to LCC.” To Kai, LCC was a destination and a goal. His decision to transfer from TPCC to LCC was made before he ever enrolled. For Kai, transferring was evidence he was headed in the right direction (Goldrick-Rab, 2009) and cause for celebration. Kai’s experience with lateral transfer has been positive. He lost no credits in the transition because he planned his TPCC courses based on LCC’s program. He is stressed because of the pressure he feels to do well, but he has become a better student because he cares about his classes. Kai used lateral transfer strategically to accomplish his objective of studying aviation.

**Kerri.** Kerri first enrolled in college in the fall of 2003 after graduating from high school the previous May. There was never a question of whether she would go to college; she understood that after high school, you go to college. In her senior year, she applied to a few state universities and was accepted to one, but it was three hours away and she wasn’t ready to move that far. She chose the local community college, Lakeside Community College (LCC), because it was close to home, inexpensive, and offered the allied health program she wanted to pursue.

That first semester, Kerri registered for developmental reading and English, basic PC literacy, and general psychology. She was young and working, and she experienced anxiety in a college classroom. She wanted to be in school, but didn’t make her studies a priority. Before the semester was over, she had withdrawn from her developmental coursework. She finished the computer class with a C and failed psychology. Kerri does not attribute her lack of success that semester to the college, stating, “The instructors were... good from what I remember.... I don’t think it was really necessarily the school because I didn’t have any problems with registering.... I don’t think it was anything LCC related.”

The following spring and summer, Kerri worked in retail or restaurants; she can't remember which because she did both for years. She tried college again that fall, again at LCC, where she registered for developmental English and general psychology, two classes she did not successfully complete the year before. Her grandfather passed away and she and her family traveled to his home and back multiple times that semester, interrupting her routine and distracting her from college. She withdrew from all her classes in the fall of 2004.

After another break, Kerri registered for developmental reading and English again in the fall of 2005. However, her classes were dropped for non-payment. At that point, she had decided the medical field was not a good fit, not because she was not interested, but because she was discouraged by the years of college required for the program. She decided to work full-time as she determined what to do. Kerri was paying out of pocket for college, and she knew she'd be wasting her money if she started classes but decided not to stick with the same program of study. She says,

It was kind of hard to try to speak with someone about like trying to get some like career, not really career, yeah kind of career counseling, in a sense.... This is one problem I've always ran into with like the length of time you have to wait in order to... talk to somebody about something. You know in in high school you have a guidance counselor you can go to. Well, when you get to college it's kind of just like, oh, you're just kind of put in there. You kinda have to decide everything. So, um, I think I just decided I was probably, um, you know, going to work full-time until I could figure out what I wanted to go back to school for so I wouldn't waste my own time and money.

Kerri got her first corporate job outside restaurants and retail in 2006. After working full-time for a few years, she decided to go back to school at night, telling herself, "If I'm going to go back to school, I need to start at some point." She knew she had developmental requirements to

meet before she could start in any program, and she wanted to get those out of the way. In the fall of 2008, Kerri registered for a developmental math class and passed—her first successful course completion in five years. The following spring, she took the next level of developmental math and passed that too, in addition to the developmental English class from which she had withdrawn twice before. That spring, Kerri pursued financial aid to help her pay for college expenses.

To receive Pell Grants, students must make satisfactory academic progress (Satisfactory Academic Progress, 2010). LCC defines satisfactory academic progress as maintaining a 2.0 grade point average, completing 67% of registered credit hours, and earning a degree within 150% of the published timeframe required for the program. Because her poor grades in 2003 and 2004 brought Kerri's GPA below the 2.0 benchmark, she was required to submit an appeal with her request for financial aid. Her appeal was granted and she received Pell Grant funds to finance her education.

Maintaining the momentum of completing courses in back-to-back semesters, Kerri registered for college-level math and English for the fall of 2009. That semester, her mother passed away and Kerri missed the withdrawal deadline. Kerri tried to petition the college to change the F's she received to W's with no luck. She says, "It's kind of difficult sometimes to get in touch with people at LCC and actually it's, you know, understand the right way to go about doing things." Kerri went back on academic probation, lost her financial aid, and stopped out of college.

Kerri focused on her job for the next six years. She continued to work in the business world and began a position with a new corporation in 2015. She also got married and had a baby. Still, she wanted to return to college and earn her degree. Her job offered flexible hours, and her husband's income allowed her to work part-time. In the summer of 2016, she applied to

LCC but soon learned her financial aid would not be granted because of her previous academic performance. She needed financial assistance to enroll in college, but did not want to take out loans. She decided not to start classes until she had a plan for financial aid. Looking for a solution, Kerri says,

I kinda just like talked to someone else and figured that if I go to another school, get my grades up, and try to come back, I could appeal it again and maybe they would offer the financial aid, so that's what I did.

In the spring of 2017, Kerri enrolled at Tall Pine Community College (TPCC) about 45 minutes away in a neighboring county. Size was one of the reasons Kerri chose TPCC when she went back to school. She explains,

I decided TPCC just because it's a smaller school and like I said I do have, um, some anxiety, and even though I knew I was going to be taking my classes online it was just really easy to apply for, um, apply for the school and financial aid and I knew that, um, with my standing at LCC I wasn't going to be offered, um, financial aid, um, even though I had tried in the past or I had tried at one point to appeal my status because of what happened, um, and I had to do that again this time, um, but I just decided a clean slate, I'm just going to start at a new school.

It helped that Kerri had a friend who worked at TPCC and guided her through the application and registration process. She thought briefly about pursuing the human services program, but decided to stick with business administration.

Kerri chose TPCC over Pastoral Community College (PCC), which was about 25 minutes closer to her home and even smaller than TPCC. She considered PCC when choosing where to enroll, but did not find their number of online course sections adequate for her needs. Because of her concerns about distance and schedule flexibility, Kerri committed to taking online classes,

though she had to drive to TPCC's campus for orientation and registration. However, she was familiar with the area because she had family nearby, which increased her comfort with the transition.

At TPCC, Kerri did well. In the spring of 2017, she took a business class, college-level English, and general psychology, which she had tried twice before, and earned A- grades in all of them. Buoyed by her success, Kerri enrolled in two business courses and a computer class over the summer, which she later realized was too much. Keeping up with three 16-week classes condensed into a 10-week term was difficult. She made it through the summer, earning a B+, C+, and a C. For the fall, Kerri registered for a business course and a humanities course, but chose to not complete humanities because it would not apply to the business administration degree at LCC, where she had already decided to transfer.

Kerri decided to leave TPCC and return to LCC, chiefly because of practical considerations related to her program of study. The courses Kerri needed weren't available at TPCC. She says, "I kept on running into problems with TPCC with, um, when it came to taking the course, courses weren't always available, even though it was online." She adds, "LCC had better classes, I mean, and they, I think they offer more of their classes online whereas TPCC, um, yes they have an online program but it doesn't necessarily mean that every single class would be offered online." Also, Kerri knew she wanted to take the required math course on campus rather than online, and LCC was more convenient for a regular commute. She explains,

I knew I was going to have to take some business math, um, at some point and I would have to take that in class because there's no way I could teach that to myself online and so I knew it would be easier for me to go to LCC's campus.

Kerri adds, "If I needed some tutoring, anything that I needed to go face to face, you know I didn't have to drive so far to go to the campus."

Furthermore, LCC's business administration program appealed to Kerri more than TPCC's program. Using the colleges' websites, she compared their business degrees and noticed differences in requirements. In North Carolina, each associate degree program follows a curriculum standard common to all community colleges. However, individual colleges have the latitude to establish local requirements by mandating specific courses or requiring credits above the state minimum of 64 semester credit hours for an Associate in Applied Science degree. LCC offered a greater variety of classes for the business degree. More importantly, LCC required up to eight fewer semester credit hours than TPCC for the same degree. Kerri says,

I was like, well if LCC only has to have this many credits and you know, TPCC is requiring more, so I was like, I definitely, I was like, I'd rather, you know, I want to get done sooner than, than later, so yeah, that kind of definitely made another big, um, impact on my decision to transfer.

After she had decided to transfer, the enrollment process was easy. Kerri was pleased she could complete everything online, including getting her transcript sent. She emailed the advising center once, but otherwise handled enrollment at LCC on her own. The most tedious part was communicating with the financial aid department. Kerri shares, "The long process was trying to amend or appeal my financial aid status again." Her successful course completion at TPCC had brought her back into compliance with the requirements of satisfactory academic progress and she again qualified for a Pell Grant at LCC, which includes transfer course work in calculations of financial aid eligibility.

Kerri enrolled in classes at LCC without consulting with someone about her transfer credits or course selection. At the halfway point of the semester, she had not met with an advisor. She explains her decision to wait by saying,

I knew going through orientation that we would we would have to [meet with an advisor] at some point in order to be able to register to go into summer or fall. Um, so I was just kind of waiting, um, for that point. I guess, you know, we got an email, they send out an email through LCC letting you know that, um, we need to meet with, it's time for you to meet with your advisor.

She had determined her courses for the semester on her own. She registered for microeconomics and personal finance, both online. Reflecting on this decision, Kerri reveals,

I was kinda going by what I was going to take at TPCC, like how I had it planned at TPCC. And since some of the classes were the same, um, I just kind of... I wish I would have gone and talked to somebody though because I probably would not have taken this [economics] class online either. It's a little bit harder than, um, than I thought to take it online.

Reviewing her online program evaluation, Kerri says,

It's not really hard to read, it's just kinda hard to see where my classes fit in and then like kinda understand like how many more classes I need in like certain areas, so, um. I mean I see the like... I see what like what's in progress and what I've completed, but, um, yeah it just, it's still kind of, for me to sit down with somebody and them to tell me, I would probably, um, better understand.

LCC did not have a record of Kerri completing the business class she passed her last semester at TPCC because she had sent her transcript in October, prior to completing the class in December. Kerri did not realize she had not submitted a final transcript and had not received credit for all applicable course work.

Reflecting on her educational journey, Kerri thinks taking online courses at TPCC helped to prepare her for taking online classes at LCC. She is impressed with the changes LCC made to

its online platform, which made the learning management system easier to navigate, and she likes the student financial aid portal and fact LCC offers direct deposit. Kerri was surprised by the difficulty of online courses at LCC compared to her TPCC classes. She says,

The experience that I had with taking online classes there and classes online here at LCC is a world of difference. ...I can definitely tell that they [LCC] treat the classes, you know like it's a college course, and not you know, you're not just in high school.

Kerri finds online classes more difficult at LCC in part because she is required to take some exams on campus, which she had not experienced at TPCC. She cites not being able to refer to her book and test anxiety as reasons she failed her on-campus economics midterm. Despite the setback, she states, "it's kind of different experience here at LCC, but it's been good. It hasn't been bad. ...I'm just looking forward to completing school." Kerri perceives LCC as a better school than TPCC and says,

I would rather have on my resume on getting my degree from them [LCC] than TPCC, um, just 'cause I know that they, um, you know, obviously they, they have a lot of programs it's now where they, for, you know, they're trying to get you career ready.

The opportunity for career advancement is what motivates Kerri to persist in college and work toward her associate degree. If she wanted to take a different position with her current employer, she is worried that without a degree, her application would not be reviewed. Referring to a college degree, Kerri states, "I feel like it's something everybody should have... the more you know, the better, so to me you'll get places."

Table 9

*Enrollment Profile: Kerri*

Date	Institution	Program
2003SP	Graduated from high school	
2003FA	LCC	Associate in General Education
2004FA	LCC	Associate in General Education
2008FA	LCC	Business Administration
2009SP	LCC	Business Administration
2009FA	LCC	Business Administration
2017SP	TPCC	Business Administration
2017SU	TPCC	Business Administration
2017FA	TPCC	Business Administration
2018SP	LCC	Business Administration

***Kerri summary and interpretation.*** After high school, Kerri enrolled at LCC to stay close to home. She attended intermittently and had limited success passing her courses, which she paid for out of pocket. Upon her first application for financial aid, Kerri was required to submit an appeal because of her low GPA and poor completion rate. Her appeal was granted, and she received Pell funds for two semesters before she lost financial aid and stopped out for seven years. Because she could not receive financial aid at LCC, Kerri applied to TPCC and took online courses. After earning good grades and realizing the LCC program was shorter and offered more variety in courses than the TPCC program, she transferred back to LCC and her financial aid was reinstated.

When examined through Perna's (2006) theory of student college choice, policy context, higher education context, and habitus were particularly influential in Kerri's decision-making. Federal regulations dictate each college must establish standards of satisfactory academic progress to participate in Title IV, Higher Education Act financial aid programs, including the Federal Pell Grant program (Satisfactory Academic Progress, 2010). Kerri was on financial aid probation after appealing her failure to make satisfactory academic progress during her prior enrollment. With two F's in the fall of 2009, Kerri lost her Pell Grant at LCC. Because she did

not declare her previous college enrollment on the TPCC application or submit transcripts from LCC, TPCC did not consider her transfer credits when the financial aid department calculated Kerri's award package. In the spring of 2017, she received a Pell Grant from TPCC, which allowed her to continue in college. With good grades at TPCC, Kerri improved her GPA and completion rate, and she demonstrated satisfactory academic progress to the LCC financial aid department, which awarded her Pell Grant funds upon her return in the spring of 2018.

Higher education context was a major element in Kerri's enrollment choices. With their open door policy, community colleges provide most of the developmental education offered in North Carolina. In the fall of 2013 and spring of 2014, eight of the state's 16 public universities offered developmental classes, and a total of 3,193 students enrolled in the 156 sections provided by the UNC system (Henz, 2015). Meanwhile, in the 2013–2014 academic year, including the summer term, 53,777 students enrolled in a developmental education class at a North Carolina community college (B. Schneider, personal communication, June 27, 2018). Kerri was academically underprepared for college when she enrolled at LCC in 2003, according to standards for college readiness at that time. North Carolina community colleges use scores from placement tests such as the COMPASS and Accuplacer, standardized tests like the SAT and ACT, and AP exams to place students into the appropriate level of coursework if they do not demonstrate college-readiness through previous college coursework. In 2014, the community college system added high school GPA as a measure for placement (State Board of Community Colleges, 2016). Right after graduating from high school, Kerri placed into developmental math, reading, and English. Her lack of preparation for college-level course work contributed to her initial enrollment at a community college. Of the universities to which Kerri applied, only one offered her admission, leaving community college as the most likely option.

The university to which Kerri was accepted was three hours away. She chose LCC because of proximity, cost, and program availability. Kerri had no complaints about the instruction she received or the registration process at LCC. However, she found it difficult to meet with an advisor, in part because of long wait times. LCC may have been understaffed, or there may have been more demand than advisors could handle when Kerri sought assistance. She recognized which college resource she should use to help her stay enrolled (Hatch & Garcia, 2017), but the resource was inaccessible. Speaking with an advisor about career options or withdrawal procedures may have helped Kerri get on a career path sooner or comply with policies related to withdrawing from classes, which may have kept her in good academic standing and enrolled at LCC.

Course availability and program requirements more than proximity influenced Kerri's college choice decisions. When choosing an institution other than LCC, Kerri considered distance, selection of online courses, and size. PCC was small and located about 20 minutes from where Kerri lived, but the college offered a limited number of online courses. TPCC was farther away, though Kerri was familiar with the town because she had family in the area. TPCC was smaller than LCC, and it offered a better selection of online courses than PCC. After she encountered trouble finding online courses in her program, Kerri considered transferring. The difference between LCC and TPCC program requirements for the same degree contributed to her decision to return to LCC. She could earn the same degree, an Associate in Applied Science in business administration, with eight fewer credit hours at LCC than at TPCC. Although she planned to complete her degree online, Kerri knew she wanted to take math in person and the commute to LCC was shorter than the drive to TPCC. If she needed to go to campus for another purpose like tutoring, the commute to LCC would be manageable. Furthermore, Kerri understood LCC to be a better college than TPCC and she would rather earn a degree from LCC.

Course selection, program requirements, proximity, and college reputation influenced Kerri's decision to transfer and her choice of transfer destination.

For Kerri, transfer was both a way to return to LCC and a practical decision to finish her degree quicker. After years of stops, starts, and failed classes at LCC, Kerri enrolled at TPCC to receive financial aid and continue her education. She completed her classes and earned good grades, qualifying for financial aid at LCC, which was closer to her home and, in her opinion, a better college. Additionally, transfer represented an opportunity for Kerri to finish her program faster because LCC required fewer classes for the same degree. Kerri consistently refers to her experience moving from TPCC to LCC as *transfer*. Her degree attainment goal is an Associate in Applied Science, which does not require vertical transfer, and Kerri identifies as a future graduate from LCC. She characterizes her experience at LCC as good, but transfer has made it more complicated. Though she encountered no problems registering, she doesn't understand exactly how her credits apply and which classes she must complete for the degree. She also did not anticipate how difficult her LCC online courses would be, and she has been challenged by her instructors' expectations. Kerri is focused on graduation and approaches her course work as a way to meet that target.

**Maya.** When she was 10 years old, Maya's grandfather got very sick and was in the hospital for extended treatment. Maya was close to her grandparents and spent nearly every day with her grandfather, watching doctors and nurses come into his room to draw blood and check the machines. She knew then she wanted to be a nurse and help others. She understood nursing required a degree, and from a young age, there was no question in her mind she would go to college. Her father had earned an associate degree in plumbing, but her mother had not attended college. It was important for Maya to go to college to pursue her chosen profession and to make her family proud.

Her senior year of high school, Maya took two welding classes at the local community college, Pastoral Community College (PCC), about 15 minutes from her home. She chose welding because both her father and brother weld as a hobby, and she had tried welding through an agricultural mechanics class at her high school and enjoyed it. Maya liked the community college atmosphere. She graduated from high school early, finishing classes in December 2013 and completing exams in January 2014.

Maya did not go straight to college. Her uncle passed away in December, and his mother, Maya's grandmother, needed to learn to live on her own without her son to help. Maya moved 45 minutes away to live with her grandmother for the next year. She worked at Chick-fil-A and signed up for a certified nursing assistant (CNA) program offered through PCC that fall. CNA certification was a prerequisite to enter the PCC nursing program, so it was a step in the right direction. Maya finished the CNA program in December and, knowing her grandmother was going to be OK, applied to start classes at PCC in the spring.

Pastoral Community College was an easy choice for Maya. Because she had taken two classes there in high school, she was, in her words, "already kind of enrolled and it was just an easy transition." She explains,

I knew that I wanted to go to my community college... because it was closest to home and it was kind of like what everyone else does around here. When they graduate, you just go to your community college for a little while and then you transfer.... I wanted to do nursing. I wanted to take the cheaper, uh, first step as opposed to just jump ahead first to a university.

She says convenience was key to her decision, adding, "I could work close to home and I could go to school close to home. I could still live at home and save money." Though she lives with her parents, Maya likes being self-sufficient and wanted to continue working so she could pay

her bills and take care of herself. She quit her job at Chick-fil-A and found work at a restaurant five minutes away.

She enrolled in two classes that spring 2015 semester—English and general psychology, both requirements for the nursing program. English was a breeze, and Maya earned an A. Psychology, on the other hand, was “a game changer,” she says. Maya’s psychology instructor was rigorous and Maya realized college was not going to be easy like high school, where she got “a grade for pretty much participating.” She did not find her instructor effective, saying,

She would kind of tell us what would be on an exam and we would study that and it would be nothing, nothing that she told us would be on the exam would be on the exam. And so it was a lot... for me I felt like it was a lot of miscommunication that she expected us to know what she knew, but we just weren't there yet.

Maya earned a D in the course and would need to repeat it.

Maya took classes that summer, wanting to make progress toward her degree without overloading herself by enrolling full-time. She took a second English course and repeated general psychology, earning an A in each. Maya says her summer psychology instructor “was quick to respond to my emails and she answered questions that I had... the information that she provided was a little bit easier for me to understand and I feel like that's why I did better.” Her English instructor did not hold high standards. She explains,

He would let us out early. We'd only be in class for like an hour and so the other two hours we're supposed to be in class, we're free to go do what we wanted, go back home and he can go golf or do whatever. So for me it was, it wasn't really a fair semester I guess because we didn't meet the whole time, but I enjoyed it.

In the fall of 2015, Maya enrolled in three courses, humanities, developmental psychology, and the first anatomy and physiology (A&P) course in a two-course sequence.

Maya had heard A&P was difficult, and adds, “I never in my wildest dreams imagined it was, it would be as hard as it was.” Part of the difficulty was her instructor. She says,

I felt like every time he gave a test, it was just, tell me what you know and you better know it all.... He very rarely responded to emails. He was not the best explainer and anatomy was just... I mean honestly, it was like, here's your book. You need to learn the whole body and then I'm going to quiz you on it.

She did well in her other two classes, but earned a D in A&P.

In the spring of 2016, Maya enrolled again in A&P and decided to focus by not enrolling in any other courses. Her instructor this time was younger and he tried to help by creating study guides and teaching in a fun, engaging way. Maya had been exposed to the information the previous semester and “was just trying to find new ways to learn it and memorize it.” She earned a C, the minimum grade required for entrance into the nursing program. Over the summer, Maya took an ethics class and earned an A.

In the fall, Maya enrolled in the second course in the A&P sequence. She says, I thought A&P one was hard; A&P two was a lot harder.... I had the same teacher that, um, I failed with the first time I took A&P one and the first day of class he saw me and he asked me, he's like, are you going to make it this semester? And I said, well, he's already got his mind made up about me.

Maya set out to prove her instructor wrong, telling herself if she passed, she'd never have to see him again. She was miserable in the class, saying, “I hated going and hated listening to the teacher, hated the material.” At the same time, Maya was left to run the restaurant where she worked after the owner had major surgery. She worried more about keeping the business open than her coursework and stopped putting effort into the class. She earned a D. Recalling that semester, Maya remembers thinking,

If this is how the rest of my college career is going to be where I'm like pulling my hair out and I'm like stressing and crying, then college is not for me. And I've even considered quitting because I'm like this is—I'm miserable. I shouldn't be this miserable. Because of her lack of success with A&P, Maya began to consider another career path.

She explains,

I started looking for other options for college and I was like, you know, I felt that if nursing was meant to be, then so maybe I could understand it better. Maybe, you know, maybe it would just click for me and, and so I felt like this wasn't what I was meant to do.

Compounding Maya's dissatisfaction with PCC was the college's recommendation that nursing students not work more than 10 hours a week. She says,

I really want to work. And if nursing's not going to let me do that, then I'm going to have like have even more debt by the time I finish nursing school and, um, that's not something that I was really a fan of.

As she researched other programs, Maya enrolled in chemistry and sociology, both required for the nursing program, in the spring of 2017 at PCC. She loved chemistry but believes her instructor was too easy; he wanted everyone to do well. He told the class what would be on tests and offered extra credit on nearly every assignment. Maya's sociology instructor was also too easy and taught in a monotone. Worse, he “let this class run him instead of him running the class” by not maintaining order in the classroom. She was content with her grades but found the instruction lacking. With few exceptions, Maya says of her time at PCC, “I think I had poor instructors.”

Describing the process of thinking about what to do next, Maya states,

The first thing I had to realize was, okay, so if I'm not going to do nursing, what am I going to do with my life. And I started searching for jobs that still worked with like

children and families.... So if I know I don't want to do nursing, I don't want to do teaching so like what's left out there. And I stumbled upon social work.

The diverse careers associated with a social work degree offered many options, and the field seemed like a good fit. Maya wanted to stay at a community college, which she sees as more personal than a large university. Through her research, Maya found that LCC, about 45 minutes away, offered a human services technology program, which sounded very similar to social work. She decided to transfer and recalls,

I didn't talk over the decision of transferring and changing majors with anybody, not my mom, not my boyfriend, not, not even my grandma, like nobody because I was like, everyone is expecting me to do nursing and I'm just going to be a disappointment.

Maya handled the transfer process on her own. She chose her courses from the human services degree plan in the college catalog, matching the credits she already earned against program requirements. She was pleased her courses from PCC counted toward the human services degree. Her chemistry, ethics, and welding classes did not apply toward the LCC program, but the rest did. She registered for what was available that she had not already taken, which ended up being three courses.

When she began classes at LCC in the fall of 2017, Maya was nervous about starting over again. She shares,

My first day at LCC I cried because I'm like, am I making the right decision like I have leaving. PCC is, is all I've known so far and I was just really nervous about going to a school where I didn't know anybody. I didn't know the campus. I didn't know the teachers. It was further away from home.

She continues,

Stepping out of my comfort zone and doing something different was, it was a little scary, but at the same time I loved it because after I got to LCC and started taking classes, I'm like I, I don't stress anymore. I don't cry anymore. I'm happier and then I knew I made the right decision.

Though she's pleased with her decision to transfer and pursue a different program of study, Maya is disappointed with aspects of her experience at LCC. In the fall, one of her instructors was out due to illness for two weeks in a row, and Maya doesn't believe the class covered half the book. In the spring of 2018, Maya decided to take five classes in the human services program, her first full-time semester of college. Before spring break, her instructor for four of those classes, who was also her advisor, announced she was leaving the college mid-semester. As she headed into spring break, Maya did not know who would teach her classes when she returned, or who would take over as her advisor. She says, "The job is open, it's listed, but they haven't found somebody willing to take the position." Maya acknowledges, "I have a lot of fears that we're just not going to, we're just not going to have a good education this semester." She reveals her mother does not think she's getting her money's worth at LCC, and Maya admits, "I haven't learned what I need to." Maya insists that aside from her instructors missing class and quitting, she loves attending LCC, saying "it feels like everything has fell into place." However, in the same conversation, she claims, "I already have a countdown until I graduate because I'm kind of just ready to get out of there."

Reflecting on her educational path, Maya thinks her decision to transfer was related more to wanting to leave PCC than wanting to go to LCC. She says,

I feel like I was wasting time and I was wasting money being at PCC because I wasn't really getting anywhere. And so it was, it was a combo. It was both wanting to leave PCC and wanting to go to LCC just so I could... I mean I wanted to quit working crappy

jobs making like eight or nine dollars an hour. I mean I wanted to get out there and, and make a difference.

She adds, “If PCC had had the program that I’m in, I would have never left.” Maya believes everything happened for a reason and says, “I’m just glad I’m where I am now and that I’m doing something that I enjoy and I’m happy that I can kind of enjoy college and now that I’m excited to graduate and move forward with something else.” Maya is projected to graduate in May 2019.

After she graduates with a human services technology degree from LCC, Maya plans to earn a baccalaureate degree in social work and potentially minor in child development. After earning her BSW, Maya thinks she may take a break from school and work before pursuing her master’s degree. She is still deciding her focus within social work and is currently weighing family counseling or adoption and foster care. The Associate in Applied Science degree Maya is pursuing is not designed to transfer. To move to her next educational goal, she will need to take coursework at the university in addition to the anticipated two years of upper-level major courses or matriculate through a bilateral articulation agreement that recognizes her human services courses as transfer credits.

The decision to transfer was deeply personal for Maya. She discloses,

For me, the, the decision to change, to transfer was honestly coming to... terms and getting peace with myself, like, it's okay to change your mind, like, people do it all the time. Um, you know, you shouldn't make yourself miserable because life's too short and if I was gone tomorrow, I would not want to die stressed out and miserable because I didn't make the right decision in life to... for what I wanted to do. And when I finally figured out, like, you know, whatever, like, it's your life, do what you want, be happy. Um, you know, don't be afraid to disappoint because those who really care about you will

support you.... I think the biggest battle was with myself because... I knew that if I, I could be at peace with myself then everyone else would be okay with the idea.

Table 10

*Enrollment Profile: Maya*

Date	Institution	Program
2013FA	High school & PCC	Welding
2014SP	Graduated from high school	
2014FA	PCC	CNA I
2015SP	PCC	Pre-Associate Degree Nursing
2015SU	PCC	Pre-Associate Degree Nursing
2015FA	PCC	Pre-Associate Degree Nursing
2016SP	PCC	Pre-Associate Degree Nursing
2016SU	PCC	Pre-Associate Degree Nursing
2016FA	PCC	Pre-Associate Degree Nursing
2017SP	PCC	Pre-Associate Degree Nursing
2017FA	LCC	Human Services Technology
2018SP	LCC	Human Services Technology

***Maya summary and interpretation.*** Maya's first experience at PCC was in high school, and after graduation, she completed a CNA I certificate through the college and later enrolled as a credit student because PCC was nearby and inexpensive. Maya was dissatisfied with most of her instructors and had difficulty in the gateway classes for her program of study. Miserable, she looked for a different program that would involve similar work and she found human services technology offered at LCC. She transferred to enroll in the human services program and to move on from her negative experiences at PCC.

In terms of Perna's (2006) model, Maya made college choice decisions largely based on higher education context and habitus, particularly the anticipated benefits of college completion. Economic, social, and community contexts influenced her decision to a lesser degree. As discussed above, nursing is a growing field and nurses earn higher than average salaries for associate degree graduates (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018b; Dadgar & Trimble, 2015). Maya originally chose to pursue nursing, which would allow her to help people and make a good

income. Maya attended a high school that promoted dual enrollment with PCC, which afforded her the opportunity to earn college credit and become familiar with the campus. She knew she would attend PCC because it was customary for high school graduates in her rural community to enroll at the community college prior to transfer to a university. Maya is rooted in her community and close to her family. She wants to stay close to home and pursue a career through which she can work in her county, and a job in healthcare or human services will allow her to do that. Maya's decision-making process sheds light on the motivations of rural students who choose community colleges, a topic that warrants further investigation (Koricich et al., 2018).

Higher education context was key to Maya's college choice decisions. Because she had taken classes at PCC in high school, she was familiar with the college. It was close to her home and inexpensive, and it offered the nursing program she wanted to complete. Characteristics of PCC and nursing admissions requirements contributed to Maya's decision to leave. The quality of instruction for most of her classes did not meet her expectations. A number of her instructors were either overly demanding or exceedingly lax. The first instructor she had for A&P I, who also taught A&P II, had a particularly negative influence on her PCC experience. Though Maya enrolled at PCC one more semester after earning a D in A&P II, she had begun to believe nursing was not the career path for her. Despite changing her mind on nursing after completing A&P II, Maya enrolled in courses required for entrance to the nursing program the following semester. Either she did not know what else to take, or she was not quite ready to let go of her dream.

Admission to nursing programs is highly competitive. In 2016, 77% of associate degree nursing (ADN) programs turned away qualified applicants totaling 35% of students seeking admission (National League for Nursing, 2016). Although North Carolina community colleges are open door institutions, some programs such as nursing admit students selectively. Colleges

often use a point structure to admit students into cohorts for nursing, allied health, and other limited enrollment programs. Students earn points based on grades in specific classes that apply to the program. For nursing, those classes include English, psychology, and the two-course anatomy and physiology sequence. A D grade earns no points and is not considered successful completion. With multiple D's, Maya time, effort, and money were going to waste. The human services technology program is not limited enrollment and does not require A&P. If PCC offered a degree in human services, Maya probably would have stayed, despite her bad experiences. A popular program of study, human services technology is offered at 34 of North Carolina's 58 community colleges (North Carolina Community College System, 2018b). Of those 34, LCC is the closest to Maya's home.

Maya's college choices were shaped by the monetary and non-monetary benefits of earning a degree. For years, she had worked in restaurants earning \$2.13 per hour, the minimum wage for tipped employees in North Carolina (North Carolina Department of Labor, n.d.), plus tips. Maya took a job with a home health company in 2017, but that position does not pay particularly well, though her income is more steady than when she waited tables. Maya is looking forward to a job with better pay, but also one that offers more meaningful work. Motivated by the goal of helping children and families, Maya wants a career in which she can make a difference, and she thinks that career will be in social work.

Values and resources contributed to Maya's decisions. Maya prides herself on self-sufficiency and making her own way in the world. Though she may qualify for financial aid, Maya has not completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) because she wants to pay for college herself. During our interview, I advised Maya to complete the FAFSA to learn if she is eligible for Pell Grant funds, but she seemed resistant to receiving financial assistance. To earn a degree without going into debt, Maya wants to work and attend an

institution with low tuition and fees. North Carolina community colleges are affordable for Maya and the location of PCC and LCC allow her to live with her parents and save money on living expenses.

Maya has some cultural capital because her father graduated from a community college and her boyfriend is enrolled at a public university. Though her mother did not attend college, significant people in Maya's life valued college attainment and supported her desire to earn a degree. Maya has not completed the FAFSA, which may indicate she lacks the cultural capital to understand Pell Grant funds do not need to be repaid, or that her own tax dollars support federal student aid. If Maya continues her education to seek a baccalaureate and graduate degree, she is taking courses that may not contribute directly to her ultimate goal. She may apply her knowledge to future university classes, but the human services credits will not transfer unless she matriculates through a bilateral articulation agreement. Maya may have changed her educational goals since enrolling at LCC, or she may have not been aware of the difference between technical and transfer associate degrees, which could have been an effect of limited cultural capital.

To Maya, lateral transfer represented a fresh start and personal growth. At PCC, Maya experienced ineffective instruction, did not enjoy her classes, and could not seem to get through the gateway anatomy and physiology sequence. When she left PCC, she also turned away from her long-time goal of becoming a nurse. She kept her decision to transfer and change programs a secret because she thought her family would be disappointed in her. Maya uses the term *transfer* to describe her transition to LCC, but it does not seem a natural description, as she says, "...the decision to change, to transfer..." and "...how I kind of transferred or how I changed my mind from nursing to human services." For our conversation, she may have adopted language she would not have normally used to describe her experience. At LCC, Maya embarked on a new

program of study, human services technology, and a new life goal. Lateral transfer has been positive for Maya's wellbeing, but it has also presented challenges. She is not concerned about the few credits she lost in transfer, but she is not satisfied with the quality of instruction she has received at LCC. Maya is ready to finish her associate degree and continue her education toward a career in social work. Lateral transfer provided a path for Maya to redirect her focus and find a new purpose.

### **Conclusion**

The participants in this narrative inquiry study lead complicated lives and made college choice decisions considering a multitude of issues. These decisions cannot be distilled into a straightforward tripartite classification of *convenience*, *selection*, and *stop outs* (WHECB, 2009). When viewed through the lens of Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college student choice, higher education context and habitus seem to exert a stronger influence on participants' choices than social, economic, and policy context or school and community context, but all layers of the model shape their decisions. In the following chapter, I examine the collective college choice decisions of participants and relate those findings to literature to develop a greater understanding of lateral transfer among community college students.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions

### Introduction

This final chapter will address the research questions through an analysis of the commonalities and differences in participants' lateral transfer experiences and relate the findings to available literature on community college choice and student mobility. I will identify how this research fills gaps in our understanding about the lateral transfer of community college students. I will also examine limitations of the study and revisit the conceptual framework chosen for this inquiry. Lastly, I will discuss implications of the findings, including potential changes to policy and practice, and propose recommendations for future research.

### Analysis – Literature Links

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally and the impact lateral transfer has had on their lives. To that end, this study addressed two broad research questions with related sub-questions:

1. What are the experiences of community college students who transfer laterally?
  - a. How do lateral transfer students make college choice decisions?
    - i. How do lateral transfer students choose which colleges to attend?
    - ii. How do lateral transfer students decide to leave an institution?
  - b. How do experiences at the community college and experiences outside the college influence students' decisions?
2. How do community college students understand the impact of lateral transfer on their lives?
  - a. How do lateral transfer students make sense of their decision to transfer?
  - b. How do lateral transfer students understand the influence of their transfer decision on subsequent events?

The experiences of community college students who transfer laterally are revealed in chapter four through the narratives created from interviews with participants. Each participant's college choice decisions and understanding of transfer is discussed following the corresponding narrative. This section will relate findings from the group of participants to relevant literature.

**College choice decisions of lateral transfer students.** Lateral transfer community college students' choice decisions may be divided into multiple parts: (a) how they choose which college to initially attend, (b) how they determine to leave that institution, and (c) how they choose which institution to subsequently attend. I will examine each of these components as experienced by participants in this study to address the three research questions related to college choice: *How do lateral transfer students make college choice decisions? How do lateral transfer students choose which colleges to attend? How do lateral transfer students decide to leave an institution?*

**Initial college choice.** In this study, initial college refers to the community college from which participants transferred laterally to LCC. However, considering this institution the starting point of participants' college journey is misleading because for a number of participants, prior experiences, including participation in high school programs and previous college enrollment, shaped the decision to attend the origin lateral transfer institution. Participants chose their initial community college because of reasons related to location, cost, selectivity, financial aid, programs offered, and courses offered.

**Location.** Location was a consideration in the initial college choice for most participants in this study. In the literature, location is often conflated with time and/or cost as *convenience*, with frequent references to the distance of a student's commute (Bers & Smith, 1987; Guillermo-Wann, Hurtado, & Alvarez, 2013; Jepsen & Montgomery, 2009; Kearney et al., 1995; WHECB, 2009) and the corresponding impact on decreased costs for transportation and increased time

available to manage other responsibilities (Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013). In the present study, I separate location and cost because the term *convenience* obscures distinctions made by participants. Andi, Kai, and Maya attended the college in the county where they were raised and still resided. Kerri's choice of TPCC was related to location but unrelated to convenience; the college was farther away than two other community colleges that offered the same program.

*Cost.* Cost is a widely-cited reason why students choose to attend community colleges (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Bers & Smith, 1987; Kearney et al., 1995; Somers et al., 2006; Urbanski, 2000; Wood & Harris, 2014). Andi, Kai, and Maya never considered enrolling in an institution other than a community college after high school, in part because community colleges were affordable. Kerri chose to attend TPCC because it was inexpensive, and after years of paying university debt, Belle decided to attend a community college. The low cost of community college is especially appealing to single parents like Belle, who are responsible for supporting their families (Bers & Smith, 1987). Research indicates low college expense is an important consideration in the college selection of Black males (Wood & Harris, 2014), like Kai.

*Selectivity.* Kai elected to enroll at a community college because he did not think he would be accepted to a university. Low-income and first-generation students like Kai may limit their options to and not engage in a comprehensive college search process (Roderick, Nagaoka, & Coca, 2009). Over 70% of respondents to a phone survey about college choice attended a particular college because they did not think they would have problems being admitted (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & DuPont, 2011). A common assumption is that students choose community colleges because they are academically deficient (Somers et al., 2006). For Kai and other community college students, the label of *academically deficient* may be self-applied.

Belle enrolled at SCC because she perceived the nursing program to be less selective than nursing programs at other community colleges. Nursing programs are expensive to operate, and

regulatory agencies limit the student-to-faculty ratio (Bissett, 1995), motivating colleges to implement selective admissions policies for nursing and allied health programs (Cohen et al., 2014). There is no uniform nursing admission policy (Bissett, 1995), and programs with high attrition rates can raise admissions standards to improve success, while programs with resources to support less-prepared students can lower standards and admit more applicants (Dunham & Alameida, 2017). Standardized test scores, grades in anatomy and physiology courses, and pre-nursing grade point average have been shown to predict successful completion of nursing programs, leading to calls for the continued use of these measures in limiting enrollment (Gilmore, 2008). However, this process for admission presents barriers for disadvantaged groups (Bissett, 1995). Belle attempted to circumvent the barrier of selective admission to the nursing program by attending an institution she perceived as having less competition.

*Financial aid.* The availability of financial aid influenced participants' initial selection of institution. Andi, Belle, Kai, and Kerri chose colleges where they could receive Pell Grants to help fund their education. Financial aid has been identified as an element of community college students' choice of institution (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Somers et al., 2006). In the present study, the availability of financial aid was particularly salient for Kerri as she chose to attend TPCC. Kerri enrolled at TPCC primarily because the college offered her Pell Grant funds not available through LCC.

*Programs offered.* Contrary to one study (Bers & Smith, 1987), this research indicates community college students enroll in colleges to pursue particular programs of study. The programs a community college offers are particularly influenced by economic context because the institution is expected to support the workforce needs of the service area (Perez-Vergara, Lathrop, & Orłowski, 2018). Belle, Dylan, Kerri, and Maya chose their initial institutions based in part on the programs offered. To a lesser extent, Andi chose HGCC because it offered a

college transfer degree, though every community college in the state of North Carolina offers an Associate in Arts (North Carolina Community College System, 2018b). Studies of community college students (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Somers et al., 2006), tribal community college students (Urbanski, 2000) and mixed samples of community college and university students (Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2011) support the finding that students make college choices to pursue specific programs.

*Courses offered.* Colleges offer courses that comprise programs. Though TPCC did not offer an aviation program, it offered general education courses Kai could transfer into the aviation program at LCC. Kai enrolled at TPCC as a way to complete LCC program requirements. In the literature, whether an institution offers particular courses is subsumed in a larger category related to academic opportunities (Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013) or selection (WHECB, 2009). It is common for students who transfer vertically to four-year institutions or students who transfer laterally between four-year institutions to declare an intent to transfer at the outset of their enrollment (Kearney et al., 1995), but this phenomenon is lesser understood among community college lateral transfer students.

*Decision to leave origin institution.* At some point, each participant in this study determined to leave the origin institution. Some researchers claim external issues drive lateral transfer among community college students (Mitchell & Grafton, 1985; Townsend, 2001), while others propose students make lateral moves more purposefully (Bahr, 2012). Participants in this study left colleges for a variety of reasons related to their experience at institutions and to their lives outside college. Participants redefined career goals, encountered a conflict with the course schedule, acquired new resources, and changed employment as a precursor to deciding to depart the origin institution. However, intervening issues contributed to participants' decisions to leave, indicating a complicated web of considerations rather than a single trigger.

*Change in career goals.* In a study of mobility among community college and university students, participants reported they had stopped out for career considerations (Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013). Although Andi and Maya did not stop out, they did transfer as a result of defining or redefining, respectively, their career goals while they were at their origin institution. It is common for students who have not committed to a specific program of study to take liberal arts courses (Cohen et al., 2014), as Andi did at HGCC. After she determined a career goal, Andi searched for a college with a corresponding program. Maya was motivated to change career goals because of the barrier presented by the requirements to enter PCC's nursing program. Limited-enrollment programs with selective admissions undermine the open door mission of the community college as they promote fiscal management and high success rates (Bissett, 1995). When Maya could not meet standards for admission, she decided to change careers.

*Course schedule conflict.* Lack of course availability has been identified as a reason for mobility among community college students (Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013; WHECB, 2009). In Kerri's case, required courses may have been offered, but they were not offered online. For Belle, attending an anatomy and physiology class offered only in the morning would have cost her full-time job. Both participants looked elsewhere to find available courses compatible with their needs.

*Resource acquisition.* Kai acquired new resources, namely a car, which opened the possibility of transferring to LCC. His supply of resources increased, and the benefit of progressing toward his goal by leaving TPCC outweighed any costs associated with the transition. I found no references in the literature to the impact of resource acquisition on a community college student's college choice decision.

*Change in employment.* When Dylan was offered a job that provided steady income and insurance, the benefit to her family outweighed the cost of quitting the program at TPCC. Life

circumstances is a reason community college students stop out (Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013; WHECB, 2009) or drop out (Cohen et al., 2014). Change in employment is commonly cited in retention literature (McKinney, Novak, Hagedorn, & Luna-Torres, 2018; Mukherjee, McKinney, Hagedorn, Purnamasari, & Martinez, 2017; Nakajima, Dembo, & Mossler, 2012), including studies based on surveys of non-returning community college students (Bonham & Luckie, 1993; Conklin, 1993), but not in college choice literature. Dylan's behavior is similar to stop-out. She left the program she wanted to complete at TPCC, and then decided to enroll at LCC.

***Transfer college choice.*** After selecting an institution for initial enrollment and deciding to leave that institution, participants in this study chose a different institution for subsequent enrollment. Elements that contributed to participants' decisions to enroll in the destination community college included location, cost, financial aid, programs offered, program requirements, course availability, and institution reputation.

***Location.*** Location contributed to participants' choice of transfer institution, though no participants transferred to the institution closest to their home. Belle selected LCC in part because it was the closest college to her place of employment and convenient to her commuting pattern (Somers et al., 2006). Kerri chose LCC because, while not as close to her home as PCC, it was closer than TPCC. Of colleges that offered participants' respective programs, LCC was the closest institution for Andi, Maya, and Kai. Again, location is frequently cited as a reason community college students choose to enroll in a given institution (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Bers & Smith, 1991; Cohen et al., 2014; Jepsen & Montgomery, 2009; Kearney et al., 1995; Somers et al., 2006; Urbanski, 2000; WHECB, 2009).

***Cost.*** Participants repeated that cost was a reason they chose to enroll in a community college after they left their original institution (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Bers & Smith, 1987; Kearney et al., 1995; Somers et al., 2006; Urbanski, 2000; Wood & Harris, 2014). However,

findings that students transfer to institutions that cost less (Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013) do not apply to this study because all North Carolina community colleges charge the same amount in tuition (Grovenstein, 2017; State Board of Community Colleges Division of Finance and Operations, 2016). When calculations of costs include gas, foregone earnings, and childcare, there may be cost savings associated with choosing a specific community college. Andi was unique among participants in that she compared the cost of attending LCC to the cost of attending three four-year institutions that offered recording engineering programs. However, like other community college students (Somers et al., 2006), Andi considered sticker price rather than net price of attendance and concluded attending a community college would be less expensive.

*Financial aid.* Although five of the six participants in this study received financial aid, the availability of aid at LCC made a significant impact on Dylan and Kerri's college choice decisions. As online students, Dylan and Kerri could have attended any of a number of institutions. However, LCC offered student loans, and Dylan needed the money to support her daughter. Kerri relied on a Pell Grant rather than on loans, and she returned to LCC because she regained eligibility for Pell funds distributed through the institution. As mentioned above, financial aid has been previously identified as a component of the college choices of community college students (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Somers et al., 2006).

*Programs offered.* Participants selected transfer destinations based on programs offered (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013; Somers et al., 2006; Urbanski, 2000). Andi, Kai, and Maya transferred to LCC primarily because the college offered the program they wanted to pursue and their origin institution did not. Interestingly, Dylan and Kerri were influenced not by a specific program of study offered at LCC, but by the fact LCC offered a variety of online programs. The variety of online programs at LCC presented options as Dylan

explored a new path in college. Kerri, who did not change her program upon transfer, may have interpreted the variety of online programs at LCC to mean the college would offer more online classes and have more availability in those classes, solving a problem she encountered at TPCC.

*Program requirements.* The requirements of a program of study, part of the higher education context (Perna, 2006), can vary among North Carolina community colleges. After incorporating courses mandated statewide, individual colleges have the autonomy to tailor a degree to the needs of their service area. Based on an analysis of business administration programs at TPCC and LCC, Kerri determined there was an indisputable advantage to transferring to LCC. I found no references to a comparison of program requirements in the literature on community college student college choice.

*Course availability.* The availability of courses, defined here as the potential to enroll in a course that is offered at a college, is cited as a consideration in college choice decisions of community college students (Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013; WHECB, 2009). Practical concerns about completing courses required for their programs drove Belle and Kerri to choose LCC.

*Institutional reputation.* The perceived reputation of an institution has been identified as a consideration in the college choice of community college students (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Wood & Harris, 2014). Kerri perceived LCC as a better college than TPCC and she wanted to earn a degree from LCC because of its better reputation. From her recent experience, Kerri cites rigorous online courses, enhanced technology, and a focus on career-readiness as evidence LCC is indeed a superior institution.

**Influences on enrollment decisions.** The sub-question *How do experiences at the community college and experiences outside the college influence students' decisions?* considers how a student's motivation to transfer relates to happenings within and outside the college. For Andi, Dylan, and Kai, experiences at their origin institution had minimal impact on their decision

to transfer. Events outside of college motivated them to leave their original institution and enroll at LCC. Andi learned about a program of study, Dylan accepted a job that conflicted with her program, and Kai secured a car to get him to and from LCC's campus. The shift in enrollment for Belle, Kerri, and Maya was catalyzed by events at the college. Belle was unable to take a class when it was offered. Belle's impending lateral transfer from LCC is related to onerous requirements for admission to the practical nursing program, negative experiences at LCC, and positive experiences with other colleges. Similar to Belle, Kerri was motivated to investigate returning to LCC after she encountered problems with the course schedule at TPCC.

Unsatisfactory grades and what she perceived to be poor instruction prompted Maya to consider another career path and look for options other than nursing. Given the motivation for their transfers, there was little, if anything, the origin institutions could have done to keep Andi, Dylan, and Kai enrolled until degree completion. Belle, Kerri, and Maya may have made other decisions if their experiences at the origin institution had been different. Practitioners must decide whether and in what circumstances they facilitate rather than prevent transfer (Goldrick-Rab, 2009).

**Impact of lateral transfer.** The summary and interpretation of each participant's narrative includes a discussion related to the second research question, *How do community college students understand the impact of lateral transfer on their lives?* and the associated sub-questions, *How do lateral transfer students make sense of their decision to transfer?* and *How do lateral transfer students understand the influence of their transfer decision on subsequent events?* I will address the similarities and differences among participants' understanding of lateral transfer in this section.

On the whole, lateral transfer positively impacted the lives of participants. Through lateral transfer, Andi, Kai, and Maya moved forward with their chosen program of study, Belle

completed a required course, and Kerri transitioned into a program with fewer credits at a college with a perceived better reputation closer to her home. For Dylan, lateral transfer was secondary to accepting a job. Enrolling at LCC allowed her to work toward an associate degree and access funds through a student loan, but education was not Dylan's primary consideration as she made the decision to leave one college and enroll in another.

Each participant made sense of the decision to transfer in a different way. Andi and Maya are similar in that they enrolled at LCC because they changed career goals and the college offered a program not available at their original institution. Whereas Andi had no complaints with HGCC, Maya had negative experiences at PCC and LCC represented a fresh start. Furthermore, changing her program from nursing and attending a different college represented significant personal growth for Maya. Lateral transfer for Kai meant he was taking a major step forward in meeting his goal of completing the aviation program. For Belle, lateral transfer was a practical way to complete a course and meet requirements for admission to the licensed professional nursing program. To Kerri, lateral transfer was a way to earn a degree faster and more conveniently from a better institution.

At the time of our conversations, transfer was a recent occurrence for participants. The participants in this study transferred laterally to LCC in the fall semester of 2017 or the spring semester of 2018. This research was conducted midway through the spring 2018 semester, meaning participants transferred three to seven months earlier. With more time, participants may understand differently the influence of lateral transfer on subsequent events. As a result of transfer, Andi has found a sense of belonging in the recording engineering program and sees the work-based learning requirement as a way to get her foot in the door of the music industry. Andi understands transferring to LCC means most of her credits do not apply toward her degree, though she views them as ready to be applied in the future, should the need arise. Belle thinks

transfer has accelerated her progress toward becoming a nurse. Likewise, Kai is closer to his ultimate goal, and he is a better, though more stressed, student since he moved to LCC. Maya has found greater wellbeing following lateral transfer, but she also encountered another sub-optimal educational environment. At LCC, Kerri is more challenged by her classes and is unsure of the requirements remaining for her program of study. Finally, lateral transfer has enabled Dylan to receive a student loan, but it has also rendered the majority of her credits unnecessary.

*Applicability of transfer credits.* Multiple participants in this study lost credit when they transferred. Most participants changed programs, and some credits do not apply to their new program of study. Table 11 shows the number of credits a participant earned at the origin institution and how many of those credits were applied toward the participant's program at the destination institution.

Table 11

*Applicability of Transfer Credits*

Participant	Credits earned at origin	Credits applied at destination	Credits not applied
Andi	25	9	16
Belle	6	6	0
Dylan	51	15	36
Kai	15	15	0
Kerri	18	15	3
Maya	27	18	9

*Note:* Only college-level credits with a grade of C or higher are included.

Kai and Belle lost no credits upon transfer. Kai used the LCC degree plan to choose his TPCC classes and worked with an advisor to ensure his classes would transfer. At both SCC and LCC, Belle was in a placeholder program for students planning to apply to a limited-enrollment program. Almost any credit will apply in the placeholder program. Belle is responsible for meeting entrance requirements for the LPN program to which she applies.

Of the other participants, three changed programs when they transferred. Andi transferred from a program designed for vertical transfer into a technical program, and Dylan did the opposite. Maya transferred from a pre-nursing placeholder program into a technical program. Kerri did not change programs and lost three credit hours. Upon close examination of her transcripts and the state curriculum standard for the Associate in Applied Science in business administration, it appears all of Kerri's credits may be applied to her degree. However, Kerri, an advisor, or a staff member in the records department will need to petition for a course substitution for those three credits to count. Although the state standard is common to the two colleges, local degree requirements differ between TPCC and LCC. Degree audits are programmed in the student information system to narrow local standards, not to broad state standards. I advised Kerri to speak with her advisor about the course and to address the substitution with her department chair if the advisor did not understand her substitution request. Community colleges, which are accustomed to transferring credits out, may have limited understanding of how credits are applied when they are transferred in (Baldwin, 2017).

### **Limitations**

Because this study was conducted with six participants, the results are not generalizable to a greater population of lateral transfer community college students. Moreover, all six participants transferred into the same community college. I chose this research design to facilitate the IRB process, which was complicated by the request for student records. A study of lateral transfer students who departed from the same community college may yield more actionable results for the origin institution, though the results would still not be generalizable. The destination institution in this study is larger than all origin institutions, and it offers a greater variety of programs. A study that includes participants who transferred from a large institution to a smaller one may yield different findings. Furthermore, participants in this study transferred

from community colleges in rural and town settings to a suburban community college. Students who transfer from institutions with urban settings or transfer to community colleges in non-suburban settings may have different experiences.

Though I attempted to recruit participants diverse in sex, age, and race/ethnicity, my sample was disproportionately female and included only Black and White students 33 years old and younger. This study does not incorporate the experiences of students with other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, only one male shared his story for this study, and his strategic lateral transfer was unique among participants. Incorporating more male voices may surface lateral transfer experiences not shared by female participants or the lone male in the study.

This study was conducted in a region in North Carolina heavily populated by community colleges. Results may have differed in an area of the state with fewer community colleges or with different local economic or social contexts. Results may also have varied in a different state or region of the country. Public higher education in the United States is the purview of states, and there is great variety across the country in how community colleges are organized and regulated. Contexts and policies in different states may impact who attends community colleges, their reasons for lateral transfer, and the impact transfer has on their education and lives.

### **Revisiting the Conceptual Framework**

I chose the epistemology of social constructionism and Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice as the conceptual framework for this study. Previous studies about the mobility of community college students (Bahr, 2009, 2012; Bentz et al., 2016; Berkner et al., 2001; Ifill et al., 2016; Peter & Forrest Cataldi, 2005; Radford et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2015; Velez et al., 2016) were framed by a positivist epistemology and conducted through quantitative research. Viewing lateral transfer through social constructionism brought previously unresearched questions to the fore. With social constructionism, I could learn from students in

their own words how they chose the colleges in which they enrolled, what motivated them to consider leaving, and how they chose their destinations. The language students use to describe their lateral transfer experience reveals what lateral transfer means to them. There is no ultimate truth about lateral transfer or finite list of reasons students move between community colleges. The lives of students and the decisions they make are complex and unique to the web of relationships in which they live.

Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college student choice is comprehensive and explains how a multitude of influences can shape a student's college decision. Specific aspects of the model do not seem as relevant to community college students, especially older students, as they may to students choosing a four-year college or university for entry directly following high school. *Family income*, part of a student's supply of resources in Perna's (2006) model, should be understood broadly. No participant in this study expressly mentioned parental contributions toward college expenses, and two students discussed how their partner's income allowed them the flexibility to go to college. Parents did not factor prominently in participants' discussions of their college choices beyond encouraging them to attend college right out of high school, in some cases. The Perna (2006) model is applicable to understanding a transfer student's choice of destination institution. Because the student has already enrolled in college, the degree of influence of components of the model may shift. In this subsequent college choice, higher education context, particularly the specific contexts of the origin and destination institutions, has greater influence on choice than other types of context. Likewise, the student's supply of resources stands out as a consideration taken into account when choosing a transfer destination.

**Conceptual model of transfer motivation.** The Perna (2006) model may help to explain the enrollment choices students make, but it does not address what motivates a student to engage in the choice process again after the initial selection of an institution. College choice and

persistence are intertwined, and reasons students choose institutions may also influence their decisions to leave (St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996). To better represent the process of transfer student choice, a catalyst needs to be added to Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college student choice. A student makes a college choice, and then the student experiences an event or acquires new knowledge that motivates the student to initiate another choice. As revealed in the present study, this catalyst is likely not a single event or thought, but an aggregate of multiple connected events or realizations. Each student creates and understands reality through social processes and has a different college experience. A model that lists discrete influences on college choice such as *cost, location, financial aid, program, schedule*, and so on will become inadequate as each new student's experience is considered.

Thus, drawing inspiration from the explanatory power of context as incorporated into Perna's (2006) model, I propose a choice catalyst shaped by context. The addition of this catalyst extends Perna's (2006) conceptual model of student college choice into a conceptual model of lateral transfer student college choice. In a departure from Perna's model of student college choice, the catalyst model omits school context because the student would have completed school prior to enrolling in college the first time. That completed school experience would not spark a decision to leave a college, but it may contribute to the next college choice, represented by Perna's (2006) model. Figure 2 shows a visualization of how participants in the present study determined to leave the origin institution, with considerations located within the corresponding layer of context. Figure 3 shows a version of the catalyst model without notations of specific considerations. Like Perna's (2006) model, outer layers of context exert cumulative pressure on inner layers, with the most urgent concerns relating to habitus. As students' goals, beliefs, and resources change, students are motivated to engage again in a decision of college choice.

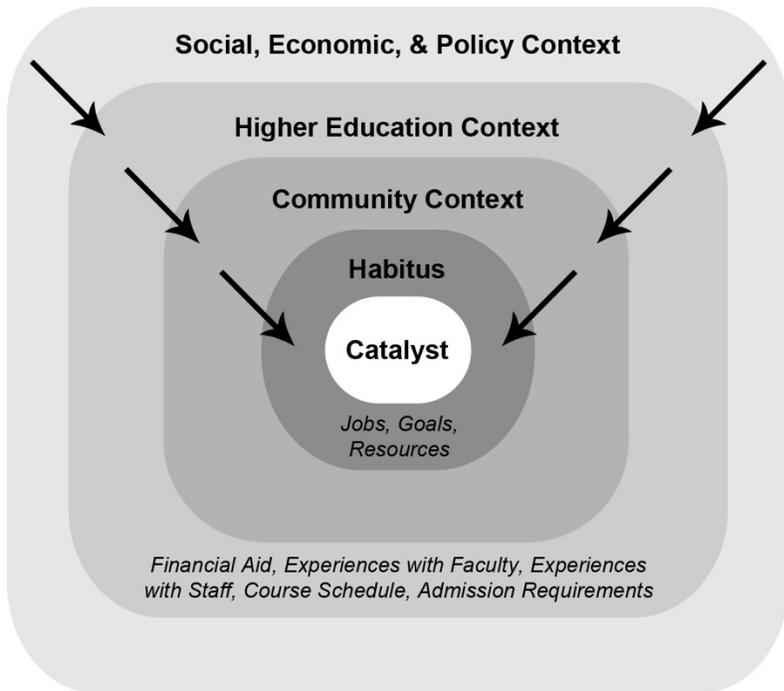


Figure 2. Participants' motivation to transfer

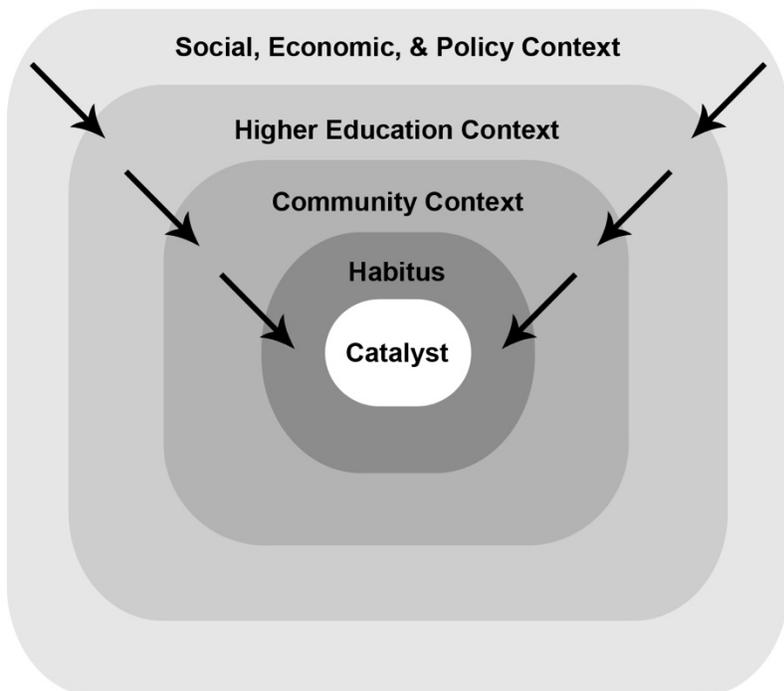


Figure 3. Proposed conceptual model of lateral transfer motivation

## Implications

Participants in this study had varied motivations for choosing a community college and then leaving that institution to enroll at another community college. The stories of participants are complex and involve events and considerations related to the multiple layers of context in which they live. This section will address implications of the findings and propose recommendations for action for practitioners and policymakers.

**Advising.** Kai's experience is unique because he always planned to transfer laterally and because he met with an advisor. Advisors help students develop goals (Cohen et al., 2014), guide students to courses that will help them achieve those goals (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015), and increasingly provide career advice (Ledwith, 2014) and assistance with life challenges (Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013). Other participants in this study could have benefitted from advising. Kerri repeatedly had trouble connecting with advisors to discuss career choice and financial aid procedures. Belle contacted her assigned advisor but never received a reply. An advisor may have noticed, for example, that Maya was growing frustrated with anatomy and physiology and could have helped her to identify a new career goal. An advisor may have been able to guide Kerri through career exploration and to provide direction on how to complete college processes, potentially keeping her from losing eligibility for financial aid. Advisors should engage in professional development to learn the skills and knowledge required to perform their job (Chen & Hossler, 2017; Guillermo-Wann et al., 2013; Vianden, 2016), and they should be held accountable for providing accurate information and responding to students within a reasonable timeframe (Vianden, 2016). Community colleges may want to provide high-quality, timely advising, but not have the resources to do it. On average, a full-time professional academic advisor at a community college is responsible for 441 advisees, compared to 260 advisees at a public university and 100 advisees at a private university (National Academic

Advising Association, 2013). For many community colleges, there is only one financial aid advisor for every 1,000 students (McKinney & Roberts, 2012). Community college advisors often lack the capacity to provide services to every student who needs their help (Bailey, 2016; Jaggars & Karp, 2016; McKinney & Roberts, 2012).

To provide better academic advising to students, community colleges need to prioritize advising and dedicate sufficient resources to implement a functional advising model that helps students identify a goal, take courses that lead to that goal, navigate college processes, access appropriate resources, and realize the institution cares about their success. Advising reforms are especially difficult (Jaggars & Karp, 2016), and hiring more advisors to create manageable caseloads (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016) requires new funding or a reallocation of funds used to support another college function. Understanding the critical importance of advising, one community college invested \$1 million to hire 25 additional full-time, professional advisors. Institutional leaders believed improved advising would increase retention, and that the corresponding increase in funding would more than offset the expense of hiring new staff (Rodicio, Mayer, & Jenkins, 2014). The average community college may not make a similar investment in personnel, but all colleges reassess priorities and allocate resources to fund priorities, one of which should be advising.

**Instruction.** In the present study, quality of instruction and instructor support influenced participants' enrollment decisions. Belle hopes to return to SCC in part because she was encouraged and supported by faculty members. Maya's frustration with PCC escalated as she continually experienced poor instruction, and now she seems to have landed in a dysfunctional department at LCC. To cut costs, community colleges rely heavily on part-time faculty members, who are usually paid only to teach and not to assist students with matters unrelated to the course or to participate in professional development (Bailey et al., 2015). Nationwide, part-time, non-

tenured faculty comprise 69% of instructors in community colleges (Hurlburt & McGarrah, 2016). Using grades on a common test across multiple campuses of a large community college, one study found students of full-time instructors outperform those of part-time instructors. This difference in student outcomes may be related to the working conditions of adjunct faculty, who often must teach more sections and at multiple institutions to earn a living wage (Chingos, 2016). Though it is unclear whether Maya's instructors at PCC were part-time or full-time, they could have benefitted from professional development, and in some cases, additional oversight.

Community colleges should support the professional development of faculty and the continual assessment and improvement of teaching and learning. For faculty to consider professional development relevant and valuable, it needs to be contextualized to their needs and linked to their motivations (Bailey et al., 2015; Hardré, 2012). Institutions can better support part-time faculty by providing them access to resources (Jolley, Cross, & Bryant, 2014), opportunities to participate in meetings and college events, feedback about their teaching (Chingos, 2016; Pons, Burnett, Williams, & Paredes, 2017), and better working conditions and compensation. Because faculty-student interaction inside and outside the classroom is associated with greater student learning, community colleges have been advised to foster and reward faculty interactions with students (Lundberg, 2014). However, community colleges may rely on faculty emotional labor to compensate for being under-resourced and over-burdened (Gonzales & Ayers, 2018).

**Financial aid.** Financial aid and financial stability figured prominently in the experiences of participants in this study. Among participants, only Maya did not access Pell Grants or student loans. Currently, students who qualify for Pell Grants are eligible for funding for the equivalent of 12 full-time semesters over their lifetime (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). As the present study demonstrates, students who change programs accumulate excess

credits because previously-earned credits no longer apply to their new program. Taking courses to meet new requirements chips away at lifetime Pell eligibility and has implications for calculations of maximum timeframe, a component of satisfactory academic progress (Satisfactory Academic Progress, 2010). To maintain eligibility for financial aid, students are required to complete programs of study within 150% of the expected timeframe for completion. For example, students are expected to complete a 60 credit-hour program within 90 attempted credit hours. Previous credits count toward calculations of maximum timeframe, so a student like Dylan, who entered LCC with 51 credit hours, is in jeopardy of losing financial aid eligibility before she completes a degree. Students can appeal college decisions about financial aid, as evidenced by Kerri's story, but there is no guarantee an appeal will be granted. Students who are unsuccessful in passing their courses, whether as a result of unsatisfactory performance or of not following withdrawal procedures, endanger their financial aid through a grade point average or completion rate that falls below the benchmark for satisfactory academic progress. If Kerri had participated in academic advising to inform her choice of career and received guidance about college processes, she may not have lost her financial aid and may not have left LCC, where she originally enrolled and intends to earn a degree.

Policymakers should consider modifications to the current system of financial aid, especially because financial aid may be the strongest predictor of graduation among community college students (Attewell, Heil, & Reisel, 2011). Ambitious national and state goals for degree attainment cannot be met without community college students earning more degrees. Providing more aid may enable community college students to work less and enroll in more credit hours to complete a degree faster. Grant aid is a better option than loans because of the high rate of default among community college borrowers and the possibility students drop out because they are unwilling to take on more debt (McKinney & Burrige, 2015). Students with dependents

need more money to care for their families as well as themselves, and the federal government might consider offering them a higher Pell award (Chen & Hossler, 2017). With additional grant aid, parents like Dylan may be able to work, go to college, and care for their children without going into debt.

**Funding.** Funding is a perennial problem of community colleges (Cohen et al., 2014), which spend an annual average of \$9,550 per full-time student compared to \$17,880 at public four-year institutions (Ma, Baum, Pender, & Welch, 2017). Colleges funded on calculations of full-time enrollment, like North Carolina community colleges, may be penalized if they enroll high numbers of part-time students (Cohen et al., 2014). In instruction, if one full-time student takes five courses or five part-time students take one course, the number of contact hours is the same. However, in student services, each enrollee presents a demand for advising, financial aid, career services, and other supports. Colleges funded on the basis of full-time enrollment do not have sufficient resources to provide services to all students, especially considering 64% of students enrolled in community colleges nationwide attend part-time (NSC, 2018). A high tuition, high aid model proposed by some economists (Cohen et al., 2014) would likely deter enrollment, based on students' focus on sticker price (Somers et al., 2006).

Policymakers should re-examine how community colleges are funded. The push to fund colleges based on student outcomes rather than enrollment indicates lawmakers want to improve the success of students and that they recognize funding may influence success. Funding performance ostensibly incentivizes colleges to allocate resources to improve outcomes (Hurley et al., 2014) rather than to recruit new students. However, an outcome such as the graduation rate of first-time, full-time students is inappropriate to assess community colleges because it does not account for the population of students community colleges serve (Chen & Hossler, 2017). Higher education researchers and policymakers should restructure community college funding

with consideration to the characteristics, needs, and goals of community college students. If performance-based funding persists as a popular model and proposed solution to community college funding woes, the metrics by which success is measured should acknowledge the contribution of every institution a student attends. Money alone is not a solution to poor student outcomes and experiences. Nevertheless, with increased funding, community colleges could hire more and better-qualified advisors and full-time faculty members, support professional development of faculty and staff, and offer more course sections to meet the scheduling needs of students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study revealed the experiences of six community college students who transferred laterally, uncovering how they made college choices and how they understand the impact of lateral transfer on their education and their life. Additional research is necessary to more fully understand the mobility and college choices of community college students. Largely to facilitate the research process, I studied students who transferred into the same institution. Results may be more actionable on the institutional level if a researcher studied students who leave a single institution. I selected for this study participants who transferred from a community college within driving distance of LCC to minimize the chance they transferred due to relocation. Future studies should include students who transferred from farther away to see if the transfer is a cause or effect of relocation, or to determine if students took classes online. In this study of colleges within close proximity, one participant completed all classes online at both the origin and destination institution. Future research can examine how community college students who take their classes entirely online choose from among many different college options. Additionally, future research with transcript-level data can bring more focus to issues related to the transferability and applicability of credit, which this research has shown is a concern even for

students who transfer between community colleges in the same program of study in a state system with a common course numbering protocol. Analyzing transcript-level data is time-intensive and complicated, but applicability of credits is potentially the most pressing issue related to transfer because it may have implications for advising, financial aid, curricular coherence, time to degree, cost, and completion.

Future research should explore a conceptual model of lateral transfer that integrates theories of college choice and theories of student departure. The model of lateral transfer motivation presented in Figure 3 of the present study could be examined through theories of departure such as those proposed by Bean and Metzner (1985) or Tinto (1993) as part of the development of a model of lateral transfer. Extending theories of choice and departure to create a comprehensive conceptual model of lateral transfer could add richness to the conversation of student mobility and yield new insights.

As we interrogate issues of student mobility, we should remember students make enrollment decisions based on their experiences in the contexts in which they live. As revealed by this study, in some cases, lateral transfer may be the best path for students to accomplish their goals. Community colleges should attend to the particularities of student experiences and understand when to facilitate lateral transfer and when to amplify retention efforts. Students, many of whom face significant barriers and persist despite their obstacles, deserve nothing less.

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Appendix  
Interview Protocol

Project: Lateral Transfer of Community College Students

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewee:

[Describe the project, including the purpose of the study, the sources of data being collected, how data will be managed to protect confidentiality, and how long the interview will take.]

[Ask the interviewee to read and sign the consent form.]

[Turn on the audio recorder and test.]

Questions/prompts:

1. Tell me about your college experience, starting from when you decided to go to college.
  - a. How did you choose which college to attend?
  - b. What were your experiences like at that school?
    - i. What else was going on in your life when you were at your first school?
  - c. What made you decide to leave?
  - d. How did you decide where to transfer?
  - e. What has your experience been like since you transferred?
    - i. Have things changed outside of school since you transferred?

2. [Review data from documents with participant. Discuss and clarify information.]

[Thank the participant for her or his cooperation and participation. Assure participant that responses will be kept confidential. Ask if participant would engage in a follow-up interview, if necessary. Remind participant that I will send a draft for review and feedback. Make sure

participant has my contact information if she or he has additional questions. Make arrangements for compensation. Thank participant again.]

### Vita

Kristi Elizabeth Short was born in Johnson City, Tennessee and grew up in Kernersville, North Carolina, where she graduated from East Forsyth High School. After studying biology at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, Kristi transferred to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), where she majored in communication studies and minored in religious studies, graduating *summa cum laude*. Kristi returned to UNCG for a master's degree in communication studies and a post-baccalaureate certificate in women's and gender studies. After serving as a teaching assistant at UNCG, Kristi accepted a position as a faculty member at Guilford Technical Community College (GTCC), where she taught communication studies before coordinating the college's online degree programs and teaching a student success course. From 2012 to 2017, Kristi directed GTCC's participation in Completion by Design, a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation initiative to dramatically increase completion rates of community college students. Also at GTCC, Kristi established the Center for Academic Engagement, which provides academic and non-academic support to improve student learning, retention, and completion. She earned an education specialist degree in higher education and a doctor of education degree in educational leadership from Appalachian State University. Kristi presently serves as director of the Texas Success Center at the Texas Association of Community Colleges.

Kristi is an avid traveler, equestrian, and San Francisco 49ers football fan. She lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband, three Jack Russell Terriers, two Siamese cats, and horse.