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Limited research has been conducted on how students' experiences at the colleges in which they initially enroll factor into the decision of where to transfer once a decision to leave the initial institution is made. This study addresses the issue in a context of mattering and belonging among college students. The data analyzed for this qualitative study were gathered through one individual interview and three electronic mail reflection prompts with each of the participants.

The results show that for first-generation students the idea that a college degree would lead to a better life than their parents had motivated them to continue with their higher education by transferring instead of dropping out altogether.

The amount of financial aid offered to students is important in making the decision of where to enroll for both initial and transfer institutions. When a decision between two campuses is being considered, the institution offering the most financial aid tends to be the one chosen.

How positive or negative social interactions are for students at their initial institutions play a role in their expectations for such interactions at a transfer institution. Students who experienced negative social interactions at the initial institution sought more positive social connections at their transfer institutions.

Upon transferring, the students found they were more focused on their academic programs, both in terms of identifying a major field of study and in connecting with the faculty members. Regarding the importance of faculty in how students perceive whether

or not they matter or belong at an institution, the study shows that negative interactions are likely to drive students away, while positive ones will encourage students and make them feel more like they are part of the campus community.

Through this study, it was discovered that despite a student's feelings of being in the right place, sometimes situations arise that are beyond their control. These situations may force a student to leave an institution in which they have felt a strong sense of fit and that they belonged there.

A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF MATTERING AND BELONGING IN THE
TRANSFER STUDENT EXPERIENCE

by

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Committee Chair

To my Mom who passed away before I started this project,
but still provided inspiration and support along the way.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by William Charles Woodward, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Each year, many high school students (and their families) face the important decision of where to go to college. Although these students are searching for the ideal college experience, they are unfamiliar with life on campus; therefore, they rely on other sources to define what that experience should be for them. They take in the images from movies and television programs that only show the party scenes or the shenanigans of upper-class students toward newly entering freshmen (Palmer, O’Kane, & Owens, 2009). Rarely are the rigors of academics addressed in these scenarios beyond a brief discussion of failing a class because of being too social. Even if their parents attended college, it was a generation ago and situations on campuses have changed, and their images of college life may be remembered through lenses reflecting only the extreme experiences. As a result, high school students may make their college choices based on arbitrary and trivial factors, such as being a fan of a particular school’s sports teams, instead of on the potential to find academic success that will propel them to high achievement in their chosen career fields.

In fact, studies have shown that students do not use a very mature or complex set of decision-making skills when considering this significant life decision (Govan, Patrick, & Yen, 2006; Hermanowicz, 2006). Some students may decide where to apply and enroll based simply on college rankings as determined by the editors of magazines such

as *US News & World Report* or the *Princeton Review* (Manley, 2007). Quite often this results in a decision made as a response to “an enormous amount of tension about choosing and being admitted to the ‘right’ college” (Fitzsimmons, Lewis, & Ducey, 2005, p. 28), rather than what is the best institution for that student. Therefore, it should come as no surprise when students decide they have made the wrong choice and wish to transfer to another institution.

The notion of “wrong choice,” however, may present itself in different ways. Whereas for some the wrong choice may be a result of a less-than-thorough search and selection process (Galotti, 1995a), for others their experiences at the institution in which they initially enrolled may provide clarity about career or life goals (Tinto, 1993). In cases related to the latter situation, the students may have felt they made the right choice on the outset, but after exploring many options may realize that in order to pursue their educational and career goals, they have to move on to another institution.

Another element that plays a role in whether or not students persist at their initial institutions is the way in which the students engage in the academic and social life of the college or university (Tinto, 1993). However, engagement is not simply a matter of the initiative of the student in seeking ways to connect, but also how the faculty, staff, and other students at the institution provide information about the ways in which students newly entering the institution can become engaged and determine that they “fit” and see themselves as a member of the campus community (Rosenberg, 1985; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989).

In addition to informing where students may apply for admission, students' backgrounds also play a role in their ability to find a connection to an institution. Inner city and rural schools often do not provide the same resources to support students' educational needs (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). These resources may include fewer options for students to take advance placement courses and exams, in addition to a general lack of sophistication in the guidance and college selection process.

One such population for whom the college choice process is even more difficult is first-generation students because they often do not have enough information about their college options to make an informed choice (Ball, Reay, & David, 2002). Parents who have completed various levels of postsecondary education are able to share with their children the importance of seeking a degree, as well as information about the experiences the student can expect to encounter when on campus (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Additionally, parents who did not attend college are more likely to overestimate the cost of sending a child to college. These parents typically do not have access to information about financing a college education and, therefore, may discourage their child from researching or applying to elite colleges and universities (Perna & Titus, 2004). Without encouragement from family, students are less likely to be motivated to pursue a degree of any kind, but especially from a selective institution. If the motivation is low, the likelihood of performing well on required standardized entrance exams is also diminished (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Paulsen & St. John, 2002).

It is worth noting that since this research began, colleges and universities receiving federal financial aid were required by the U.S. Department of Education to

provide a net price calculator on their websites to provide a clearer picture of the actual costs of attendance. Since institutions had until October 2011 to implement this policy, the effect of this policy on the findings of previous research regarding assumptions made about costs of attendance is not yet known.

If first-generation students do make the choice to attend college, they typically choose less selective institutions and are at greater risk of not persisting to graduation than those whose parents attended college (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Horvat, 2001; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; McDonnough, 1997; Pascarella et al., 2004). Therefore, when first-generation students decide they want to transfer to another institution instead of dropping out altogether, it is worth investigating.

Lamont and Lareau (1988) define cultural capital as: “*institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion*” (p. 156, italics in original). I believe a lack of cultural capital as evidenced by the above examples prevents some students, such as first-generation students, from gaining the appropriate insights into the college search and choice processes. This also may be the case of students from areas lacking resources regardless of parents’ highest level of education completed.

The purpose of this study is to examine how the experiences of students at their institutions of initial enrollment influenced their approach to selecting their transfer institutions and whether or not it played a role in their ability to find a sense of belonging, or “fit,” at their new institution. In order to gain a full understanding of this process for

these students, it is important to consider the ways in which they approached the choice processes for each of the schools they attended, as well as the ways in which they became involved in the different campus communities.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this project, I use the term initial institution to indicate the institution a student enters directly from high school. Transfer institution refers to the college or university into which he or she enrolls after leaving the initial institution.

In order to more completely understand the transfer experience, it is important to define the various ways in which students enter, leave, and re-enter college and university settings. The terms lateral entry and vertical entry define what may be assumed to be the most common types of movement of students from one institution to another (Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007). Lateral entry students leave one four-year institution for another, and vertical entry students transfer from a two-year college to a four-year institution. Poisel and Joseph (2011) further define the ways in which students move from one institution of higher education to another. In addition to lateral and vertical transferring referenced by Kirk-Kuwaye and Kirk-Kuwaye, students may also reverse transfer by moving from a four-year college or university to a two-year institution. “Swirlers” are defined by Poisel and Joseph as “students who move consecutively among multiple institutions, including both two year and four year, without necessarily progressing toward the completion of a bachelor’s degree” (p. x). Each of these types of transfer experience will be addressed in this study.

Davis (2010), while discussing the difficulty in defining first-generation students, emphasizes the importance of a common definition if this group of students is to receive the necessary focus in terms of support on their respective campuses. Definitions vary based on different levels of education of a student's parents. Some researchers include students whose parents have attended but not graduated from college, or those whose parents do not have a four-year degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Davis, 2010). However, for the purposes of this project, I define first-generation students as those whose parents did not attend any level of higher education.

Why Study Transfer Decision-Making?

Since it is preferable that students persist at their initial institutions, determining if the source of their dissatisfaction can be identified during the decision-making process is key. According to Ishitani (2008), "students who transfer from a four-year institution to another four-year institution often report dissatisfaction with their initial institution" (p. 404). It is my belief that students who decide to transfer consider different factors in choosing the transfer institution than when choosing their initial institution. By gaining a better understanding of how students' experiences after initial enrollment affect the decision-making as they decide to transfer and choose a transfer institution, students may make better decisions about their initial-entry institutions. High school guidance and college admissions counselors may also use this information to aid students in making better decisions about first choice institutions. Students making better choices may avoid the factors that created dissatisfaction and may, therefore, be more inclined to persist to graduation at their initial institutions.

Students who transfer take more time to finish their degrees (Peter & Forrester Cataldi, 2005). This can be a result of needing to retake courses or backtracking depending on the mode of transfer the student is facing. With two-year to four-year transferring, there may be articulation agreements that allow for a smooth transfer of completed credit hours, thus aiding in the student's ability to stay on track as they work toward achieving a bachelor's degree (Adelman, 2006). However, "swirlers" or students transferring among four-year institutions face the difficulty of negotiating which of the credits they have already completed will "count" toward their graduation requirements at the institution in which they enroll.

Relevant Research

The college choice process has been identified in the literature as a series of stages through which students progress in making an ultimate choice of where to matriculate (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1995; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). As students move through the predisposition, search, and choice stages, they consider their own personal characteristics as well as the attributes of the institutions. The predisposition phase is a "developmental phase in which students determine whether or not they would like to continue their formal education beyond high school" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 211). This phase takes into account socioeconomic status, student ability, ethnicity, gender, parental education levels and encouragement, as well as encouragement from high school faculty and staff. Peer groups may also influence students' decisions to attend college, as they are likely to want to follow the same path as

their friends. Lastly, the students' thoughts about the future in terms of career aspirations also play a role.

Once the decision to continue one's education beyond high school is made, the search phase commences. As Hossler and Gallagher (1987) point out: "at the same time students are searching for institutions, institutions are searching for students" (p. 213). Therefore, it is during this phase when recruitment materials of institutions of higher education come into play. How the students interpret those materials based on the personal characteristics they used to determine whether or not they are going to attend college can have an effect on the search phase. Location and finances are typically the first parameters set by students in the search phase. They then take into account which schools within those boundaries offer the academic programs in which they have an interest.

The search phase ends once students have identified "a choice set . . . of institutions that a student has decided to apply to and seek more information about in order to make a better final matriculation decision" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 214). From the choice list, which has no limit in size, the student makes a decision of where to enroll. The same factors taken into account during the predisposition phase often come back into consideration at the choice phase. Parents again play a role as it relates to distance from home and cost of an attendance. Because the students have no direct previous experiences to understand what it means to be a college student, they are left to interpret the information they have gathered in order to make a choice based on their instincts of where they feel they will fit. Without the proper information during each of

the three stages, students may find it difficult to succeed academically or connect socially, which may lead to a feeling that they do not “fit” and a decision to transfer to another institution.

In *Leaving College* Tinto (1993) presented a theory based in the anthropological concept of rites of passage as a means to advance from one stage of life to another, particularly from childhood to adulthood. The idea that an individual passes through the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation can be readily seen in students moving from high school to college. The key to retention, he asserts, is in the incorporation stage. Students who find meaningful connections in both the intellectual and the social experiences in college are more likely to persist.

Other researchers suggest a successful transition from high school to college is equally important for retention in college. According to Schlossberg (1981), how well a person manages transition is based on the situation, the self (the individual’s personal characteristics), the support available to the individual, and the strategies the individual employs to cope. It is how the person manages this stress that determines his or her likelihood of persisting at the initial choice institution. For students who develop a sense of belonging on campus they have successfully connected the transition and incorporation stages. Feeling as though one is an important part of their college environment is especially helpful to first-year college students as they negotiate their new campus (Tinto, 1993).

No matter how often in life people find themselves entering new situations, they experience a period of marginalization (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). It is

how they learn to adjust to a new environment that affects how long the feeling lasts. Schlossberg (1989) associated students' transition processes with feeling like an outsider, and that they often feel like they do not matter to those who were already established in that community. As students transition into the college environment, whether directly from high school or from another institution of higher education, they seek ways to feel connected. Opportunities must exist to inform those who are new on campus of how they can become involved in both academic and co-curricular experiences in order to establish a connection and minimize the feelings of marginality they may feel (Astin, 1984/1999; Tinto, 1993).

Although there have been theories presented regarding the college choice process, why students may leave an institution, and the importance of feeling a sense of belonging, there is limited research in the area of decision-making as it relates to transfer students and especially first-generation students who decide to transfer. Given that first-generation students are less likely to persist to graduation than their peers whose parents attended college (Ishitani, 2006), it becomes important to consider that if a first-generation student decides to transfer instead of drop out altogether, he or she has made a decision to remain committed to the goal of obtaining a college degree.

When a first-generation student has made the decision to remain in the higher education system by leaving one institution for another, it is important to understand what about their experiences motivates them to continue despite the evidence that suggests they are more likely to drop out entirely (Allen et al., 2008; Horvat, 2001; McDonnough, 1997). It is also important to determine if their experience of being part of a college

community has affected their decision-making process to assure they are making the right decision to transfer and to an appropriate institution.

Where research is lacking is in identifying what factors contribute to students deciding where to transfer. As students face the decision of where to transfer, they are thrust back to the three stages as defined by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Hossler et al. (1995). I posit that this time, a degree of perspicacity that allows the students to consider the choice and selection stages more deliberately displaces the predisposition stage.

Personal Connection to the Study

Throughout my career as a student and professional staff member at varying sizes and types of institutions, I have encountered first-hand the importance of both decision-making and a sense of belonging as determinants of a student's persistence at a particular institution. As a first-generation student, I made my college choice based on a distant family member who worked in the profession I thought I wanted to pursue. I applied to the college he attended, and when accepted, chose that institution and enrolled. As I reflect back on my own undergraduate experience, I can identify the points along the way where my increased co-curricular involvement coincided with the improvement in my grade point average. However, by the time I decided to get involved in university life outside the classroom, I had already established meaningful friendships with a consistent group of people and knew that I was going to graduate from that institution. I had developed a strong sense of belonging.

In a previous professional position as an associate dean for campus life at a small, liberal arts college, I met with students as they were leaving the institution for a variety of reasons, including because they planned to transfer to another college or university. These conversations began with a discussion of what initially drew them to that particular campus. What I heard supports the notion that they did not fully explore whether that college was the right one for them beyond the best financial aid package or the offer to play intercollegiate sports. It is clear they did not fully consider whether the college was a place where they would find a sense of belonging. Or, they did find a sense of belonging; however it wasn't balanced with their academic goals.

Quite often it seems as though college and university faculty, staff, and administrators use this type of anecdotal evidence to develop programs to address issues of retention on their campuses. Although my own personal experiences provide an initial inclination to support the notion that a sense of belonging contributes to students' persistence, it is a thorough review of the concepts of transition theory, student departure, mattering, and undergraduate student belonging that justifies my stance.

Importance of the Study

As the President of the United States brings forth his plan for more students being educated beyond the high school years, it is important for us to consider that more and more individuals who do not have knowledge of the collegiate experience will take on the task of selecting an institution of higher education that is right for them. The results of this proposed research will be of interest to professionals who work in a variety of capacities with students entering higher education institutions for the first time. For high

school guidance counselors, the information obtained can assist them in providing encouragement and appropriate information to students who may not otherwise consider college as an option beyond high school. By asking students to consider what made them most successful in high school, or what they wished had been different about their high school experience, guidance counselors can provide assistance through the search and choice phases. They may also develop programs asking former students to return to their high schools to share realistic views of what the college experience is all about to begin to debunk the stereotypes of college as one big party that happens to have some classes in the way.

On-campus professionals in college admissions and enrollment management, new student orientation, academic advising, and student activities can also be informed by this research. If students show a motivation to succeed and persist to graduation, it is in the interest of those at the institution in which they enrolled initially to provide information and support to the students as they pass through the variety of stages they face throughout their collegiate experience.

How well students feel connected to a campus should be more important than the prestige of the institution. In order to gain accreditation, all colleges and universities go through the same rigorous process regardless of their name recognition. Therefore, students should be more concerned with finding an institution in which they feel comfortable and where they will belong (or fit). How does one make that decision, though, with only the limited information from brochures, web sites, and campus

tours/visits where their sole purpose is to showcase all the best aspects of the experience at that institution?

Research Questions

The purpose of the study was to explore how students' transfer decisions are informed by having experience being part of a collegiate community for an amount of time. Thus, the following questions guided my research:

1. What experiences at students' initial institutions play a role in their decision to leave that institution and transfer to another?
2. In what ways do students' initial college experiences inform their decisions of where to transfer?
3. Based on their previous college experiences, are students more inclined to seek out and find a sense of belonging at their transfer institutions?
4. In what ways, if any, are the transfer experiences of first-generation students different from those of students who had at least one parent complete a college degree?

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to review the higher education and other relevant literature pertaining to college choice, transition, and sense of belonging. Additionally, research about transfer trends is included to provide a context from which to understand the framework of this study.

Because there is little research addressing transfer trends of first-generation students, the information is provided in general terms first followed by a discussion of what research there is addressing how first-generation students manage these college going experiences.

The chapter begins with a review of literature pertaining to the process of high school students making the college choice decision. Once the choice process is complete and a decision of where to enroll has been made, the students face a significant transition in their lives. It is, therefore, important to understand the existing transition theory literature. The concepts of mattering and belonging are then discussed to provide insight into how students make a connection to the institutions in which they are enrolled. After a discussion of the reasons and reasoning behind why students may leave their initial-enrollment institution, information is provided to give an idea of the rate of transferring among students in American colleges and universities. The chapter concludes with a discussion of transfer student success.

College Choice

Many researchers have examined the positive relationship of obtaining a college degree and future success. From social mobility (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Walpole, 2003) to healthier lives, increased earning potential, and fewer unemployment issues (Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002; Perna, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007) to state legislators believing more jobs are created in an environment with educated citizens (Hossler et al., 1995), the desire to pursue a college degree is understandable. The decision to attend college, which for many students is more of an assumption than a decision, is followed by the choice of which college to attend.

In order to understand what factors contribute to a student's decision-making regarding the transfer from one institution to another, one must first consider the process of college choice from high school to initial institution. Wright (1995) conveyed an applicant's frustration with the process. The student found "it frightening to be manipulated by the various propaganda techniques" (p. 13) and expressed uncertainty in her ability to choose the right college. Yet, even though the schools' intentions may be to provide thorough information to the students that they feel will help with the process, the students are left to sort out all they receive to make a matriculation decision.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) pointed out that the college decision-making process is one of multiple stages. The predisposition, search, and choice stages all take into consideration multiple student characteristics. The myriad factors considered in making the decision to pursue a college education also play a role in a student's decision of which institution to enroll. It is acknowledged that providing information on the

choice stage allows enrollment managers to “see themselves as students see them” (Hossler et al., 1995, p. 47). This provides an opportunity for admissions personnel to focus their recruitment efforts on students who are more likely to feel they are a fit with the institution. This focus on institutional fit is important as institutions seek students who are more likely to persist to graduation. Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) approach is limited in that it only considers students who are making a choice of college directly from high school. Once a student experiences the college environment, he or she may have different insights into what makes the best fit.

In Galotti’s (1995b) study, 207 first-year college students participated in a research project that examined what students recalled about making the choice to matriculate at a particular institution. These students had participated in a study less than two years earlier when they were in their junior and senior years of high school (Galotti, 1995a). In the follow-up study the students were asked to recall what they could about their initial decision-making process. It was found that they “recalled about half of the criteria they originally reported using” (p. 307) in choosing the college in which they enrolled. They were then asked to identify what they felt they should have considered during the process of choosing a college. The students in the study indicated that their current frame of reference shaped what they now would consider if making the same decision again. Although this study used the college choice process as a tool to observe patterns of memory recall, the results prove helpful in acknowledging that over time students do not recall the process involved in making such an important life decision. Additionally, this study highlights how taking part in the collegiate experience may

provide insight and, therefore, influence the choice of transfer institution when students decide to leave the college or university in which they were initially enrolled.

Social class and minority status have an impact on a student's decision-making process. Although set in London, the research of Ball et al. (2002) provides insight into the limitations of choice as seen through the eyes of students from lower socioeconomic status and ethnic minority students. They interviewed 65 minority students about their college choice process. Specific attention was given to support systems—parents, counselors, etc.; from where they gathered information about the institutions they considered; and the limitations they faced during the choice process.

The researchers identified two types of choosers. “Contingent choosers” (p. 337) are generalized by their low income, working class parents. These students typically find themselves responsible for seeking out information about the college application process and, therefore, do not have much information available to them on which to make a college choice. Ultimately, they “know little about the institutions they choose, even their first choice” (p. 341). The contrasting group is the “embedded choosers” (p. 342), whose parents have university degrees, and for whom matriculation in an institution of higher education is expected; additionally, cost is not a deciding factor in where to attend. These students find they have support systems in place that help with the decision-making, especially as it pertains to providing first-hand information about particular institutions under consideration. The likelihood of making a choice based on fit is much greater among this group of college choosers. This study is limited in relation to my research in that it does not discuss whether the students who participated in the study

persisted at their first choice institutions and whether the “embedded choosers” were more likely than the “contingent choosers” to persist.

Data collected from over 20,000 high school students who enrolled in liberal arts colleges were studied to determine the ways in which these students chose the college in which they matriculated (Govan et al., 2006). According to this study, the complexity of a student’s decision-making is impacted by level of academic achievement, campus visit experience, and amount of information provided about financial aid. Students who rated these factors more highly showed an increase in the complexity of decision-making. Although no information was provided in this study to distinguish among socio-economic status, a connection between this study and that of Ball et al. (2002) is apparent through Govan et al.’s (2006) assertion that “students who may not have used a more rigorous college decision-making strategy may not have had all the information available to make the most optimal decisions” (p. 26). Despite this statement making a connection to the potential lack of cultural capital of some students, Govan et al. (2006) ultimately concluded that students do not use more complex strategies for college decision-making simply because it is easier not to than it is to devote the time to a more thorough search. This study provides the groundwork to examine if students are more likely to use a more complex decision-making strategy once they are exposed to college-level thinking, thus giving more careful consideration to their choice of transfer institution.

First-Generation Students and College Choice

For first-generation students who have to seek college information for themselves, it can become an overwhelming task. Although the research of Golatti (1995b) and

Govan et al. (2006) points to the fact that high school-aged students do not take the time to weigh all of their options when it comes to college choice, first-generation students who want to take the time may not have that option if the information is not readily available for review.

Of note in both of these studies was the factor of money. Whereas Govan et al.'s (2006) embedded choosers typically did not consider finances when making their choice, it is likely a strong consideration for first-generation students. Family socioeconomic status often outweighs the students' academic abilities, and therefore, plays a role in determining access to institution attended. When parents who did not attend college are involved in the choice process, they are more likely to overestimate the cost of sending a child to college because they typically do not have access to information about financing a college education. Therefore, parents of first-generation students who are involved in the decision-making process may discourage their child from researching or applying to elite colleges and universities (Perna & Titus, 2004). As a result, these students are missing out on the opportunity to engage in an academic environment that can ultimately provide them economic and social benefits (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Karabel & Astin, 1975; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Walpole, 2003). For students who do decide to attend an elite institution, concerns about how to pay for it certainly weigh heavily on the minds of the students and their families. However, in light of the current economic situation in the United States, one should not assume that families where at least one parent has a college degree are in a better socio-economic status. Even in families where the student

would not be defined as first-generation, finances may be a significant factor in college choice.

In an effort to offset some of these financial concerns, Beattie (2002) and Perna and Titus (2004) express the importance of academic preparation and test scores in terms of providing options related to place of enrollment, as well as increasing the possibility of receiving merit-based financial aid. The challenge to this approach lies in the fact that many first-generation students are more likely to attend high schools that are under-resourced and do not offer advanced placement classes or other opportunities for the students to create a more attractive application (Inkelas et al., 2007).

Flint (1993) expressed that increased knowledge about financial aid offerings may extend a college search by identifying other funding opportunities. Simply providing information, however, will not alleviate the problem of funding a postsecondary education. Astin and Oseguera (2004) point out a “Catch-22 of financial aid caused by the manner in which most institutions (especially the private ones) run their financial aid programs” (p. 323). Increased internal funding for financial aid may come from raising tuition, however, this will also increase the need for the students who need it most.

The entirety of research on college choice focuses exclusively on high school students planning to enroll for the first time in college. Moreover, the literature on students transferring from two-year to four-year colleges only considers the ideas of connectedness and expectations (Laanan, 2007). There are even studies that focus on race and gender in the transfer experience (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). Although it may be easy for some to make the connection between first-generation or low-income

students and race, I choose not to at this time because there is so little research on students related to the notion of transferring. By adding another component, such as race, to the research construct, the findings related to transfer students in general might end up lost in the discussion. Therefore, my focus is on the lack of attention given to students who decide to transfer and persist in the college experience.

Transition Theories

In all likelihood, going to college, by literally moving onto campus or starting college while living at home, is not the first time most people have experienced transition in their lives. Whether it was the first day in kindergarten, moving to a new middle school because of a parent getting a new job, or the first day at a summer job, adolescents have experienced some sort of transition before they are faced with it when they leave for college. With each of the earlier transitions, the students have developed coping skills that will help them as they encounter each additional transition they face throughout their lives.

Yet, the transition from high school to college can be especially difficult because it has come to be associated with the idea of moving on from one's family and as the beginning of one's life on his or her own. Therefore, how smoothly that transition goes can have an effect on the student's sense of satisfaction, belonging and fit. If it doesn't go well, is the student more likely to decide he or she is going to transfer before giving the initial institution a chance in order to find a sense of belonging and fit?

When students who have been engaged in the college search and choice processes for the previous two (or more) years leave their homes for their first year of college

immediately following high school, they are embarking on what Schlossberg (1981) defines as an on-time transition. This particular transition takes place at a time in the students' lives when they expect it. Since going off to college is an anticipated transition, the students should be able to more clearly identify the effect it may have on their lives (Goodman et al., 2006). According to Schlossberg, "any change or transition . . . causes some stress" (p. 9) and the characteristics of the individual can add to, or alleviate, the stress caused by the transition. Therefore, it is easy to understand why individuals handle the transition to college in quite different ways.

A person's environment, broadly defined in terms of interpersonal support, institutional support, and the physical setting, plays an important role in how transition is navigated. Interpersonal support systems come from relationships that are either intimate, from one's family, or from a network of friends. When one turns to outside agencies for assistance, he or she is looking to institutional supports. The physical setting is defined by what one considers upon hearing the term environment. It includes where one lives in terms of neighborhood, setting, and with whom, as much as the local weather, and the effect these have on the transition one is experiencing (Schlossberg, 1981). The most salient pieces to this particular discussion are the interpersonal and institutional support students seek as they manage the transition to a new environment.

The students themselves, of course, play an important piece in how college transition is handled. Attitudes toward self and the world, as well as behavior compose the psychosocial competence of an individual. These elements are defined in terms of one's sense of responsibility, one's optimism about his or her ability to build trust in an

effort to work within the systems of the modern world, and one's ability to plan for the future (Schlossberg, 1981). Each of these factors plays a key role in how a student manages the college environment into which he or she has just entered. The control students have of these environmental and personal resources has an effect on their ability to make sense of, and work through, the transition (Goodman et al., 2006).

It is through Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering's (1989) work with adults returning to higher education that transition is framed as a process of moving in, moving through, and moving on. The period of moving in addresses the individual's need to understand the new system into which he or she is entering. This includes gaining a familiarity of expectations and rules that must be followed. Once the preliminary information about the new environment is understood, the moving through process begins. This period typically is longer than the moving in stage. Individuals in this stage focus on the balance of their on campus and off campus lives. How successfully one progresses through can be determined by the amount of support received from those around him or her. This support is not only expected at home, but also on campus in the services provided. When one gets to the moving out stage, it typically marks the beginning of yet another transition. As a student completes courses, for example, he or she is looking ahead to what comes next.

Although the above pieces of transition theory are generalizable to any student starting a college experience, it resonates most with first-time, first-year students. The concepts, however, are also applicable to the needs of traditional-aged college students who make the decision to transfer from one institution to another. For some, moving to a

new college or university is internally motivated, on-time, and has a positive effect on the student in terms of academic and/or social fit. For other students, a family emergency requiring the student to return home may create a sudden transition that was externally motivated at an off-time. Regardless of the factors leading to the decision to transfer, the individual facing the transition must learn to rely on available support systems, as well as understand the control he or she has over the environmental and personal resources.

Palmer et al. (2009) acknowledge the difficulties students face in the transition process in their study of the “betwixt space,” which they define as the time when students are “suspended between one place (home) and another (university)” (p. 38). In order for students to make the full transition to university life, they must first experience a turning point. This turning point typically happens within the first half of a semester and is an event that makes the determination for the student of whether or not he or she will remain at that institution. Schlossberg (1989) also addresses this in-between place that students experience in their transition to college. In fact she and Palmer et al. (2009) use the term liminal to refer to this particular time in the transition before the student feels a connection to his or her new environment. Palmer et al. do not delve into the possible sources of the turning points that students encounter. Schlossberg, however, points specifically to the need for the university to establish rituals to assist students in gaining a feeling of belonging to the institution. Although they do not explicitly use the term, Hausmann, Scholfield, and Woods (2007) suggest that the betwixt time actually begins earlier—between the students’ acceptance and the first days on campus. Therefore, it is

important to acknowledge that students' expectations of college are as important as actual experiences in determining if they will persist at that institution.

First-Generation Students and Transition

First-generation students face their own unique circumstances that potentially could complicate their transition process in ways other students may not encounter (Ishitani, 2006; Lohfink, & Paulson, 2005; Rhee, 2008; Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). Once first-generation students decide they are going to college, navigate the search and choice processes, and determine the best ways to finance their education, they then have to face the challenge of transitioning into a new environment. And, the research is not on their side. First-generation students are generally less prepared, have more difficulty transitioning from high school to college, are more likely to leave before completing a degree, and if they do leave are less likely to return (Horvat, 2001; Inkelas et al., 2007; Ishitani, 2006; McDonnough, 1997; Pascarella et al., 2004; Thayer, 2000). In addition to limited resources, these students' expectations of college life may be greatly informed by stereotypes presented in the media, which may provide misinformation that creates an increased sense of discomfort as they begin the process of transition into the new environment (Palmer et al., 2009).

Because of their lack of knowledge about the college experience, first-generation students typically do not have an adequate amount of information to make the best choice (Ball et al., 2002). Those who make it through the stages of college choice (Hossler et al., 1995) often face unexpected obstacles that may make completing a degree at that institution so difficult that leaving is the only option (Padilla, 1999).

Padilla (1999) developed his theory over ten years of qualitative studies involving Chicano students who found success in their college experiences. He conceptualizes the campus experience as a “black box [comprised of] a geography of barriers” (p. 136). According to this theory, students bring with them varying levels of theoretical knowledge or “book knowledge that is learned through coursework and formal study” (p. 136) and heuristic knowledge, which is “acquired experientially” (p. 136). Regardless of the amount of each kind of knowledge students possess, they are asked to bring this knowledge to a new environment—a college campus. Their knowledge helps them as they encounter the obstacles they face and navigate their way through their college years. How well equipped they are to overcome these barriers often has an impact on whether a student persists to graduation, drops out, or transfers. Some students are able to rely on their previously gained knowledge to adapt to each obstacle with which they are confronted and overcome them. Others are not able to so. Ultimately, students who cannot overcome barriers or who are confronted by multiple barriers tend not to persist at that institution.

Additionally, this theory posits that first-generation students are likely to encounter more barriers during their college experience since they do not enter college with a completely informed idea of what to expect and, therefore, may not possess the necessary tools to overcome the barriers they encounter. For example, a student who finds that the financial barriers are too much to overcome at a private institution to which he or she has been admitted may find that transferring to a public institution may be a step in eliminating pieces of that particular barrier.

According to Pascarella et al. (2004), “compared to their peers, first-generation college students tend to be at a distinct disadvantage with respect to basic knowledge about postsecondary education” (p. 250). Therefore, Padilla’s (1999) theory is important as one considers first-generation students’ lack of knowledge about the collegiate experience. Whereas it is typical of all college first-years to experience a time of adjustment to their new environment, first-generation students enter college having not heard what to expect from others, such as parents or siblings, who have been through the experience. With no one to turn to when unanticipated situations arise, first-generation students may feel overwhelmed and retreat to where they feel most comfortable—home. This can have a negative effect on the students’ decisions to remain enrolled. Inkelas et al. (2007) found that the parents of first-generation students were less encouraging of their students to attend college. This fact, coupled with Isitani’s (2006) finding that parents’ expectations for college attendance is negatively related to retention, does not bode well for first-generation students looking to home for support in navigating barriers they encounter during their first weeks on campus.

Mattering and a Sense of Belonging

It is undeniable that there is a significant overlap in the findings of research regarding mattering and that addressing sense of belonging. Specifically, Tovar, Simon, and Lee (2009) state, “We remain confident that mattering and sense of belonging are two distinct but related constructs” (p. 174). Although I do not choose to use the terms interchangeably, I acknowledge that one informs the other. Therefore, this section draws

on both constructs in an effort to address students' connections to their institutions in as complete a picture as possible.

Everyone at some point in life feels a sense of marginality about something (Goodman et al., 2006). For students who are starting their college lives, feeling marginalized may be a frequent occurrence, especially in the first few weeks on campus as they come to understand the new roles guiding that environment. This may take place when a student is learning to navigate the dining hall during busy meal times, or trying to understand the rigorous expectations of college professors. Schlossberg (1989), through further work on adult students' transitions to the college environment, discovered that "people in transition often feel marginal and that they do not matter" (p. 6). It is in this premise, that the ways in which one's sense of marginality and mattering have an effect on one's ability to handle transition, where we can begin to understand how one comes to develop a sense of belonging.

While this study addresses belonging and mattering from the perspective of college-aged students, it would be naïve to assume that it is a new phenomenon that the students have never faced before. Indeed, these students likely have had to establish ways to negotiate these concerns since they were first thrust into the company of other children. Research with younger school-aged children is important to consider because the ways in which students connect with their peers, teachers, and parents in their earlier educational settings, should play a role in what their expectations are as they search for and select a college. What needs to be considered is how high school guidance staffs and

college admissions counselors can help students bring to consciousness this likely unconsidered element of the search and selection process.

Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) research focused on self-esteem, parental mattering, and mattering and social adjustment among adolescents from junior high through senior year in high school. Based on the information gathered from their longitudinal study of 6,568 different students over nine years, they determined that "mattering is a motive: the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension exercises a powerful influence on our actions" (p. 165). This idea of motive provides the overlap with sense of belonging theories. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) review of the empirical support of belongingness as an element of human nature confirmed their hypothesis that "human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong" (p. 522). They define belonging in terms of the relationships people make with one another. People feel a greater sense of belonging when they have established relationships with a few people over a long period of time.

One may at first discount the results of Nichols's (2008) mixed-method study conducted among middle school students as irrelevant to the work of college students; however, this study creates a bookend with Schlossberg et al.'s (1989) research on mattering among adult learners returning to college. After all, college students are emerging adults who are in their late adolescence. Therefore, they are not all that far removed from the experiences of the students in this particular study.

Nichols's (2008) research also informs this study in that it looks at the experiences of students in two different school environments and whether or not their perception of belonging changed based on school setting and/or as a result of the passage of time. The participants in the study were 45 middle-school students who had made the transition to a recently opened school. The results showed that students' feeling of belonging rested in two areas: "interpersonal relationships and . . . academic achievement or opportunity" (p. 145). It is also worth noting that, based on a model of belonging created using the preliminary study results, the students' expectations of the new environment played a role in whether or not they felt a sense of belonging in the new school. If they were excited about the change and the new school lived up to their expectations, they felt a greater sense of belonging.

Perhaps the most often referenced theories pertaining to college student retention are those of Tinto (1993) and Astin (1984/1999). Tinto's theory derives from a longitudinal study focusing on why students leave institutions of higher education. Although no one factor for student departure was identified in his work, he did find that students who were engaged in both the academic and social lives of the institution were more likely to persist to graduation. For students who leave, it is often associated with a sense of disconnectedness or lack of belonging at that institution.

Although Astin's (1984/1999) work also addresses the need for a connection to the institution in order to increase the likelihood of persistence, he looks more closely at specific types of engagement. Students engaged in co-curricular activities, sports, honors programs, and research are more likely to find a connection with a variety of elements of

the university. Astin also found positive connections between living on campus and having a part-time job on campus with student persistence. Both Tinto (1993) and Astin found that students who experienced meaningful interactions with faculty also were more likely to remain at their colleges and universities.

The concept of belonging ties together the work of Astin (1984/1999) and Tinto (1993) in that it not only reinforces their notion of connectedness, but also takes it to another level. In discussions of belonging, the connection is much more than a superficial, occasional interaction; it relies on the fact that the individual feels valued by others in the environment—that they matter (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Hausmann et al., 2007; Marshall, 2001). When students enter the college environment without guidance from their parents, their sense of belonging to that institution is generally lower. They did not have the benefit of their parents' experiences to guide them through the process of understanding what to expect from their experiences (Pittman & Richmond, 2007).

Recent studies explore the notion of belonging in the context of colleges and universities and provide support for Tinto's (1993) and Astin's (1984/1999) claim that students who find academic and social connections to their institutions are more likely to persist. From the academic viewpoint, Freeman et al. (2007) studied how a student's sense of belonging in an individual classroom translates to a greater sense of belonging to the campus as a whole. Adapted versions of the Psychological Sense of School Membership survey were administered to the 238 participants in their study, all in their first semester of their freshman year. They found that when students perceived the

faculty member was caring and encouraging, the students were more likely to feel they belonged in that academic environment. This perceived caring of faculty members was most evident in those who encouraged participation of all students in the class. By encouraging students to interact with each other, the faculty member is helping the students create social bonds that may ultimately translate into a greater sense of belonging. This sense of belonging in class and on campus is also positively related to students' motivation to succeed academically (Freeman et al., 2007; Pittman & Richmond, 2007, 2008).

Hausmann et al. (2007) conducted a three phase longitudinal study administered to 365 new university students over the course of their first year to further explore academic connections during that first year. They discovered that academic integration at the college level, while important, was related to a sense of belonging only after peer relationships were established. Hamm and Faircloth's 2005 qualitative study of 24 eleventh-graders found that often for students, peer relationships are related to a sense of belonging based on how much they feel valued by others, as well as how much they value their community. Therefore, it is important to consider the ways in which students develop relationships with their peers at the high school level and in college. Valuing one's community for some relates to societal mattering, which Rosenberg (1985) defines as the "feeling that one's thoughts and actions have an impact, create ripples, are felt" (p. 215). As students find themselves in a new learning environment, they typically can find the interpersonal connections. However, students who want to make a difference on the grander, societal scale may have to search harder to find the avenues for this.

Hausmann et al. (2007), in the study mentioned above, also considered external support as it related to sense of belonging and students' intentions to persist. They found that students who had parental support were more likely to experience an increase in their intentions to remain enrolled at that institution. Marshall (2001) provides additional insight through her work related to mattering. Her study, conducted at a Canadian university, examined 110 individuals in middle to late adolescence because previous research identified this as a time in a person's life when "a sense of mattering to others is of critical importance" (p. 473). One of the findings of this study indicates, "older respondents perceived themselves as mattering more than younger respondents" (Marshall, 2001, p. 485). This proves interesting since the "older" respondents were of college age.

Marshall's (2001) research reinforces the findings of earlier studies (Rosenberg, 1985; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; Schlossberg, 1989) that the perception that attention is being paid to one by parents and/or friends plays a role in whether one feels significant to others. As one might expect, positive attention is more likely to have a stronger effect on one's perception of mattering.

Dixon Rayle and Chung (2007) revisited Schlossberg's (1989) research on the notion of mattering. The 533 participants of their study were traditional aged college students, with a specific focus on first-year students. The students were administered survey packets consisting of instruments measuring three constructs: "academic stress, social support from family and friends, and mattering to college friends and the college" (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007, p. 26). The packets were given as part of a first year

course in the education department. This study draws together the importance of social and academic connections to an institution. The findings of the study show the most significant factor in the perception of mattering to the college is social support from family and friends. They also report that students who are able to develop friendships in college feel less stress related to their academics. Because the participants in this study were new to the college environment, the results provide additional support for the previous findings that it is important for students to develop social networks early in an effort to enhance their academic motivation.

Research by Elliot, Kao, and Grant (2004) and Tovar et al. (2009) builds on the foundation of Rosenberg and McCullough's (1981) and Schlossberg's (1989) research to further develop instruments for conducting quantitative studies addressing college students' senses of mattering.

Elliott, Kao, and Grant (2004) constructed an index to measure the various forms of mattering. Their initial questionnaire of 47 items in a Likert format was administered to 508 students from classes at a private college in New England. From this they narrowed the number of survey questions to 26 that were then given to two different groups of students in order to measure what they had identified as different elements of mattering. The first group measured "the two forms of self-consciousness and self monitoring" (p. 346) and was collected from 388 students. A group of 544 different students responded to questions measuring "perceived social support, self-esteem, and items crafted to measuring meaninglessness and normlessness as forms of alienation" (p. 346). The findings of this study include a positive correlation between mattering and

“self-esteem and perceived social support” (p. 349) and a negative connection “with all forms of self-consciousness and alienation” (p. 349).

This study provides important correlations from a quantitative approach that provide an understanding of students’ perceptions of how important they are and whether they matter to others. However, to establish a more complete picture, it may be beneficial to personalize this information on a smaller scale by listening to individual student accounts of how they perceived their sense of belonging to an institution and how that affected their decisions of whether to remain enrolled at their initial institution or choose to transfer to another. Through these interviews, the researcher can delve further into the reasoning for why they chose to leave, as well as gain an understanding of whether or not their experience at the first institution informed their choice of transfer institution and their own drive to find ways to connect in the new environment.

The research of Tovar et al. (2009) stands out from the others in that the data was gathered by administering the same online survey to both community college and university students. They received 3,139 responses that, because of the two student populations, provided for a “multiply diverse” (p. 159) sample. The researchers randomly divided the sample into subsamples; one for exploratory factor analysis and the second for the confirmatory factor analysis. The results of this study support the importance of feeling connected with other people on the campus to help them feel as though they matter which then contributes to a heightened sense of self. Although this research was conducted in a quantitative format, questions from the study’s survey can inform an individual interview protocol for a qualitative study.

If taken at face value, these theories seem to provide the answer to the retention issue in very clear terms: Institutions that provide ample avenues for students to engage in a variety of academic and social opportunities should see a marked increase in their retention numbers. Although Cooper (2009) points out that in addition to providing encouragement and support for student involvement, institutional values also should play a role in establishing a sense of belonging in students, she acknowledges that “social constructivists recognize culture as a fluid, multifaceted construct which continually evolves” (p. 4). This clearly demonstrates how difficult it can be for higher education administrators and university faculty to create a general model into which all students will fit and find a connection to the institution. From the transfer perspective, these students have already left one institution. Perhaps they left because they felt that they did not belong at their initial institution. Is the answer, however, as simple as to say that the university failed to provide the support to the student to make him or her find a connection? Maybe. Just maybe. As the research shows, students leave institutions of higher education for a variety of reasons (Tinto, 1993). This study is interested in those students who chose to continue pursuing their goal of attaining a bachelor’s degree and whether or not a connection to an institution actually played a role in their decision to leave the initial institution or stay at the transfer institution.

First-generation students, arguably, need these opportunities for engagement more than other students as a way to increase their knowledge about the expectations of college attendance. However, the circumstances of first-generation students often create

challenges (or barriers) to their ability to take part in opportunities provided by the campus to encourage connections.

Additionally, for students to be able to connect with an institution and feel that they “fit,” the students need to feel that the campus environment is supportive (Cooper, 2009). The research of Kodama (2002) addresses the Schlossberg (1989) study related to the idea of marginality. Her study consisted of a survey mailed to two groups of commuter students (transfers and native students—those who had been at the institution since entering as a freshman). The instrument specifically addressed the ways in which the participants became involved on campus, utilized resources, and learned of activities taking place on campus. Because of the connection of support to feelings of marginality, responses to some of the instrument’s questions were totaled to provide a means to measure feelings of support. Responses were received from 168 students identified as transfer students and 141 identified as native students. The analysis of this quantitative study showed that, “while there was not statistically significant differences in marginality for transfer and native students . . .” (p. 239), transfer students felt less support on campus than native students. This study focused primarily on students who commuted to campus for their studies. Therefore, although it can be used to inform the current study, there are elements of living on campus addressed in my study that may show different results related to support. By examining the opposite of mattering—marginality—one might begin to understand why students leave an institution.

Why Students Leave

At first consideration it may seem without logic to immediately follow a discussion about transition and belonging with one pertaining to student departure, however I feel it is important to examine why students leave institutions of higher education before one can consider how students' sense of belonging may affect their decisions to persist at a particular institution.

In his seminal work, *Leaving College*, Tinto (1993) discusses the many reasons students may choose to leave a college in which they are currently enrolled. While he identifies institutional and individual factors that may lead to student departure, he also points out, "there does not appear to be any easy or simple way of characterizing student departure from higher education or of explaining its patterning among different students and institutional settings" (p. 33). As he explores the idea of student departure, attention is given to the idea of connectedness to the institution in its academic and social realms. Often when a student does not find a connection in whichever of these he or she deems most important, the student will likely not persist at that institution.

Hermanowicz (2006) reasserts Tinto's notion that the reason why students leave a particular institution are as varied as the students who are leaving. In his exploratory study he found that students tend to make a decision about leaving early in a semester and do so without seeking out typically available resources to address whatever the reason is they have identified for deciding to leave. An important aspect of this study was the insight into how students "*thought* about their courses of action when they were embarking upon them" (p. 26).

Elkins, Braxton, and James's (2000) study of 411 students during their first year in college was conducted in three stages. The first and third stages consisted of data collection from the students' Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey responses and student records regarding persistence, respectively. The second data collection was through a survey developed specifically to address the notion of separation, the first of three stages identified in Tinto's (1993) theory. They sought to uncover whether or not the support students receive in their quest to pursue a college degree and their perception that they had to leave their previous life behind affect their persistence to graduation at their institution of initial enrollment. One of the results of their study found that "the factor of support had the greatest influence on the persistence/departure decision" (p. 262). Students who felt supported from different sources (ranging from family and friends to on-campus personnel) were more likely to persist. This support was not only related to the decision to attend college, but in helping to create a separation from their previous "attitudes and values" (p. 260). The ability to move on from the past was especially important for minority students and first-generation students.

Astin's (1984/1999) theory of student involvement also addresses the notion that students who have a connection to their institution of higher education are more likely to persist to graduation. Involvement in such activities as student government, honors programs, and athletics tend to produce positive results in terms of retention. His research further concluded that students who live on campus and have frequent interactions with faculty are more inclined to be satisfied with their college experiences.

As Tinto (2006) revisits the attention given to retention, there is a change of focus from why students leave to how to promote student success. He theorizes that if faculty members focus on enhancing the educational experience for students, students will persist.

Regardless of the intention of the research surrounding student attrition, the results typically return to the idea that students who are connected in some way to their institution are more inclined to persist (Pike & Kuh, 2005). Walpole (2003), for example, conducted her research on the socioeconomic status of the student's family. Her longitudinal study utilized data collected from some 12,376 students who provided information through the CIRP survey at 209 four-year U.S. institutions. The information was gathered in 1985, with follow-up surveys conducted in 1989 and 1994. She concluded that students from low socioeconomic statuses were more likely to have jobs off campus, thus limiting their opportunities to develop connections to the campus environment.

Wohlgemuth et al. (2007) studied the 1996 first-year cohort at a mid-western university to determine what factors contributed to the retention of those students over the next six years. They considered not only financial factors, but also the effect of academic and environmental factors, on the students' likelihood to remain enrolled at the institution in which they initially matriculated. In terms of financial aid, they found that as the amount of gift aid received and participation in the work-study program increased, so, too did the students' likelihood of persisting to graduation. They also found that first-generation students and minority students who participated in programs specifically

targeted to them persisted at greater levels than those who did not have access to such programs.

Although contrary to the belief of enrollment managers who see a student leaving as a detriment of the retention numbers that may negatively affect their college rankings, one must keep in mind that not all departures should be deemed failures by the institution. Tinto (1993) argues, “individuals will choose to depart from an institution of higher education because they have come to see that further participation in that institution no longer serves their best interests” (p. 142). This may often be the case with transfer students. If a student has changed direction, or decided on a direction, in terms of future plans, it might not be something that can be accomplished at that particular institution; therefore, transferring to another institution is the logical next step. While this work generalizes the concept of leaving by equating leaving to stopping out or dropping out, it does hint at transfer students. However, it is mostly referred to in the context of transfer from two-year to four-year institutions.

Allen et al.’s (2008) unique approach to studying persistence reinforces the difficulty in predicting who is likely to leave a particular institution of higher education. Instead of focusing on retention of first-year students, they conducted their longitudinal study on students in their third-year. They tracked nearly 7,000 students who matriculated in college for the first time in the fall of 2003. As these students reached their third year, their enrollment status was checked to determine if they were still enrolled, had dropped out, or had transferred to another institution.

The researchers considered many factors such as grade point average, ACT scores, and demographic data (including race, socioeconomic status, and gender) in examining their results. Of particular interest are the results related to students who had transferred by their third year. Although students with higher grade point averages were likely to persist, these students also transferred, although to a lesser degree. Students from higher socioeconomic statuses “were more likely to transfer than drop out,” whereas “first-generation and economically disadvantaged students are more likely to leave postsecondary education” (Allen et al., 2008, p. 661). I conclude this section with this particular study because its results bring us back to the question guiding this study: In what ways do a student’s experiences at the institution of initial enrollment contribute to his or her likelihood of persisting to graduation?

This research addresses the possibility of college and university personnel preventing students from leaving their institutions. Whereas I propose this may occur through a more complete decision-making process upon first entry into college, Allen et al. suggest that programs “might target underachieving students of higher socioeconomic status” (p. 663).

Transfer Trends

The myriad ways students enter and move among institutions of higher education are as numerous as the reasons why they choose to transfer. Therefore, in order to understand the context of the reasoning for why students transfer from one institution to another, it is important to consider the trends of such movement within the higher education system. Poisel and Joseph (2011) give a general definition of a transfer student

for their monograph: “a student who has attended a college or university and plans to continue his or her education at a different two- or four-year institution” (p. x). Peter and Forrest Cataldi (2005) add an element to the definition related to length of time: “a student was considered to have transferred if that student left one institution and enrolled in another institution for at least 4 months” (p. 6). This additional piece provides clarification about students who may take classes at another institution during summer break even though they intend to return to their original institution at the beginning of the fall semester.

Although Poisel and Joseph (2011) offer a concise definition, they acknowledge that such a definition is insufficient in today’s transfer climate. They provide definitions of “subpopulations who are further identified by the direction of transfer” (p. x). In addition to lateral and vertical transfer students mentioned in the research of Kirk-Kuwaye and Kirk-Kuwaye (2007), other enrollment patterns of students in higher education include reverse transfers; cross-level transfers, concurrent enrollment, or double dipping; dual credit or dual enrollment; and swirlers. An example of a lateral transfer is a student who moves from one four-year institution to another. Vertical transfers likely are what most people would think of when the notion of transferring is mentioned: moving from a community college to a four-year college or university. Reverse transfers do the opposite of vertical transfers. They begin at a four-year institution and leave to attend a two-year community college. When students enroll concurrently at four-year and two-year institutions they fall into the category of “cross-level transfer, concurrent enrollment, or double dipping” (p. x). Dual credit or enrollment

refers to students who are enrolled in courses at institutions of higher education while finishing their high school degrees. The last category, swirlers, is the one that does not show a student's clear progression toward earning a degree. These students may "move consecutively among multiple institutions, including both two year and four year" (p. x). Adelman (2006) adds a credit-earned element to the pattern of swirlers, indicating that they earn "more than 10 credits from both sectors in the process" (p. 64).

The primary research regarding how many students transfer and in what ways is informed by analyses of data sets that represent longitudinal studies of students who have entered institutions of higher education in the United States. Information in these studies considers students who co-enrolled or participated in dual enrollment programs in which they were enrolled in more than one institution at the same time, or were enrolled in college courses while completing their high school degrees (Adelman, 2006; Hossler, Shapiro, & Dunder, 2012; Peter & Forrest Cataldi, 2005; & Poisel & Joseph, 2011).

Research from the United States Department of Education brings the issue to light on a nation-wide scale (Adelman, 2006; Peter & Forrest Cataldi, 2005). Peter and Forrest Cataldi (2005) used data available from the 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01) and the 2000/01 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B:2000/01) to gather information about the movement of students through higher education. The BPS:96/01 data examines students who began in 1995-96 and then reviews those same students six years later regardless of their degree attainment, whereas the B&B:2000/01 study included in the sample "students who

attained their degrees in 1999–2000, regardless of when they first enrolled in postsecondary education” (p. 33).

The BPS:96/01 data showed that, of the total number of student enrolling in institutions of higher education for the first time in 1995–1996, 32% transferred at least once during the period for which data was available. Eighty percent of those who transferred did so only one time. Where students first matriculated played a role in whether or not they transferred and, if they did, the type of institution into which they transferred. Of those who began at four-year institutions, 26% transferred. However, 40% of students starting at public two-year institutions transferred. The percentage of students who began at four-year institutions and transferred to public four-year institutions was 42%, regardless of whether they began at a public or private institution. Of note, however, is that students who began at private colleges and universities were more likely to transfer to another private school. An examination of the B&B:2000/01 data showed that of the students receiving their bachelor’s degrees in 1999–2000, “59 percent . . . attended more than one institution during the course of their undergraduate enrollment” (Peter & Forrest Cataldi, 2005, p. 33).

Adelman (2006) uses the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1998, or NELS:88/2000, which “followed a national sample of 12,000 students from the time they were in the eighth grade in 1988 to roughly age 26 or 27 in December 2000” (p. 3). His review of the data found that students who transfer from one four-year institution to another four-year institution “increased the probability of earning a bachelor’s degree by

15 percent” (p. 67). He also determined that students were less likely to transfer from more selective initial enrollment institutions.

As can be seen by the information provided by the two previous studies, the varying methods of gathering data on students as they transition through the college experience, as well as the variety of means in which students enroll in the different types of institutions creates difficulty in identifying one standard statistic to define how many students complete their bachelor’s degrees from their institutions of initial enrollment. Additionally, the data that was examined by these researchers is now more than a decade old. It has to be acknowledged that the landscape of higher education has changed significantly over those ten years. A report recently published by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, however, uses enormous amounts of data to provide an analysis of the student experience of transition through the collegiate experience (Hossler et al., 2012).

Arguably, the most comprehensive look at the transfer experience was put forth by Hossler et al. (2012). The authors analyzed the enrollment statuses of nearly three million students who initially enrolled in higher education in fall 2006. Their enrollment status was tracked, regardless of when it happened and to where they moved, over a five year period. What they found is that “one-third of all students change institutions at some time before earning a degree” (p. 5). One-quarter of those students transfer more than once, with thirty-seven percent transferring during or after their second year. Because of the extensive nature of this report, I choose to use the results as the guide for addressing questions pertaining to the percentage of students who leave their initial institutions.

Transfers and Success

Although the intention of this proposed study is to focus on four-year to four-year institutions, research results from studies of community college transfer to two-year institutions can provide additional insight. Laanan (2007) found many factors that contribute to a student's academic success after transfer from a two-year college to a four-year university. For example, students who perceive the four-year experience in a negative light will have difficulty adjusting to their new environment. This finding brings into question how students make the decision to move from two-year to four-year institutions. Do they have information about the full range of possibilities in terms of transfer options, or are they locked into pursuing their baccalaureate degree from institutions with a prearranged agreement with the community college? While this may appear at first thought to have little bearing on the decision-making process of students contemplating transfer from a four-year institution, the relevance lies in the concept of information available. Are students intending to transfer weighing multiple options as they did during their initial college search, or have they already narrowed the possibilities based on limited information gathered from peers at their current institution?

In a study specifically addressing four-year to four-year, or "lateral transfer," Kirk-Kuwaye and Kirk-Kuwaye (2007) used a qualitative approach based on National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) questions to examine if lateral transfer students were more engaged in their new campus than "vertical transfers" (pp. 9–10)—students moving from a two-year institution to a four-year institution. The results of their interviews with seventeen students, nine of whom were lateral transfers, indicated that

lateral transfer students were no more engaged in their new campus environment than their vertical transfer peers. What was determined was “that students’ expectations based on their previous experiences in higher education” (p. 23) had an impact on their amount of uncertainty when transferring. Again, consideration must be made to the decision-making process.

Conclusion

The successful retention of students offers at least three benefits: the student will be able to reap the rewards that a college degree affords, the college or university will be able to maintain the income that derives from the student’s attendance, and society will be able to utilize the skills of students in becoming more productive. (Tierney, 1992, p. 604)

Although a somewhat cold approach to the need for campuses to focus on the matter of student retention, Tierney’s words provide a basis for striving to understand not only why students leave their respective campuses, but also how institutional planners can work to create a place where students feel they belong. An important connector between these elements is knowledge of the process of transition from high school to college. By understanding what students experience and expect as they move from one educational venture to another, those around them throughout the process will be better equipped to help them manage the process.

The research in this paper supports my position that students’ sense of belonging has a positive effect on their decision to persist at their particular institution. Therefore, it is important that program planners consider this factor as they develop programs for incoming students. Additionally, this research may offer practitioners empirical support

to justify and enhance programs that were originally developed based solely on anecdotal evidence.

Despite the overwhelming evidence against first-generation students' chances of persisting to graduation, students from this population do enroll in colleges and universities, and find success. For institutions that truly want to provide access to all academically qualified students, the process must begin long before an admissions application appears for consideration. College and university officials must make themselves available to parents of first-generation students to be sure they understand the benefits of investing in the futures of their children. Additionally, family members need to understand that the price students actually pay for their education is likely considerably less than the price listed in admissions brochures (Hill, Winston, & Boyd, 2004). This is especially true for those students who are academically gifted.

Once first-generation students arrive on campus, opportunities must exist for them to become connected to their peers and to the faculty. It is unfair to assume any student knows how to approach a faculty member, but especially so for first-generation students who may feel intimidated by the level of schooling and intelligence of their professors. Programs that bring faculty members into the residence halls where students can meet them on more casual terms can help begin to break down barriers that may exist for not just first-generation students, but all students.

With some extra effort on the part of college and university administrators, faculty, and staff, first-generation students can feel as if they belong in a place that may seem very foreign to them and their families. And, as first-generation students graduate

and move into their chosen professions, they owe it to the next generation to make it known that there is a way to manage the unknown.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Guided by the following research questions, I chose to conduct this study with a qualitative approach.

1. What experiences at students' initial institutions play a role in their decision to leave that institution and transfer to another?
2. In what ways do students' initial college experiences inform their decisions of where to transfer?
3. Based on their previous college experiences, are students more inclined to seek out and find a sense of belonging at their transfer institutions?
4. In what ways, if any, are the transfer experiences of first-generation students different from those of students who had at least one parent complete a college degree?

One may argue that a survey administered to a large number of students who have transferred from one institution of higher education to another could provide an understanding of the factors that contributed to these student's decisions to attend another institution. However, as can be seen by the questions, I was interested in understanding what personal experiences influenced their decisions to make the move from one campus to another. According to Maxwell (2005), "The strengths of qualitative research derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its

emphasis on words rather than numbers” (p. 22). Additionally, a qualitative study provides more insight into the specific ways in which students may seek and find a sense of belonging on the campuses where they are enrolled. I believe it is through understanding the individual stories that I can draw together commonalities among these students who, perhaps, may only have in common the fact that they are college students who made a decision to leave their initial institution but not drop out of college entirely.

It is through a phenomenological approach that I developed an understanding of the experiences of the participants as they worked through their decision to transfer to another institution, as they chose the institution into which they transferred, and as they sought a connection at the transfer institution. This research strategy “focuses on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 107). In other words, this process allowed me to determine the shared experiences of the participants in terms of the transfer phenomenon since they all lived through that particular experience (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 2002; Schram, 2006).

Sampling

As Creswell (2003) noted regarding qualitative research, “The data collection process might change as doors open and close for data collection, and the inquirer learns the best sites at which to learn about the central phenomenon of interest” (p. 184). Originally, four institutions were identified based on their size and student populations, but most importantly because they are all four-year, private institutions. By choosing private colleges and universities, I was able to focus on the issues regarding transfer beyond the assumption of transfer to a public institution because of financial reasons.

My original focus was on first-generation students who transferred to these institutions. After a low response to the recruitment of participants, I eliminated the first-generation criteria, and I added another institution to the recruitment pool. Although each of the campuses chosen has students who transfer in each semester, it was uncertain how many of those students would be interested in participating in this study. By seeking participants from five different campuses, there was a greater likelihood of identifying an appropriate number of students for the purposes of this research. Four of the campuses are within driving distance from my home, and the fifth is the campus where I am currently employed. Therefore, it was cost effective for me to visit the participants and interview them on their current campuses in an environment that was familiar to them.

After identifying the institutions, I contacted student affairs administrators and staff members who worked directly with orientation programs, specifically those for transfer students, to identify potential participants. Because of the specific nature of the qualifiers for participating in this study, a purposeful selection process was used to identify participants (Creswell, 2003; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1990). Although priority was given to students who recently completed the transfer process over those who had transferred during an earlier semester, the delay in obtaining a goal number of participants, and the process of adding another institution, the decision was made to interview students during their second semester on their transfer campus. This was a spring semester, so the students were still in their first academic year on the new campus. This criterion is important because I was most interested in the process by which these students decided to transfer and choose the school where they were enrolled at the time of

this study. The longer the students were at their new institution, the more engrained in that campus's culture they may have been and the less likely they may have been to remember their reasons for deciding to transfer to the new institution. Recall that in the Galotti (1995b) study, the longer students were in attendance at an institution the less they remembered about their initial decision-making process regarding college choice. Also, by interviewing and corresponding with the participants during their first year on the new campus, I was able to gain an insight into the students' levels of involvement and how that contributed to their sense of belonging at that institution.

Contacts were made at the chosen institutions in a variety of ways. At one institution, I talked to an administrator at a national conference who then gave me the contact information for the appropriate person at his college. Another contact was made through a current colleague who recommended a person at her alma mater. A colleague at a previous institution where I worked served as another contact. I re-approached another institution through a different contact that proved to be more helpful than when I originally reached out to that particular campus. Since I am currently employed at the campus that was added last, I already had knowledge of the individuals with whom I needed to work to gain approval to conduct the study on that campus. With each institution, I worked with the school officials to assure the confidentiality of the student information throughout the recruitment process.

Approval to conduct the research on each of the campuses was obtained pending institutional review board approval at UNCG. At three of the campuses, participants were recruited by sending letters to all of their incoming transfer students for the fall

semester. The letters were sent on their respective campus' letterhead with the contact persons' signatures. Then, once the students arrived on campus for orientation, they received fliers in their orientation materials informing them of the study and the qualifications for participating. One of the campuses preferred to handle the recruitment a bit differently. The contact person on that campus waited until the transfer students were on campus. Then she sent the letter to the students who she knew fit the selection criteria. On the added campus, my home institution, I sent emails directly to the transfer students prior to the start of the fall semester with the information from the letters and fliers sent by the other institution contacts.

My goal was to identify three to four students from each of the four schools to participate in the study for a total of 12–16 students. An examination of current research on first-generation students, students who transfer, and college decision-making processes found that most were conducted as quantitative studies. I decided on the range of 12 to 16 participants because the qualitative studies I identified showed samples ranging from one person in a case study to 65 participants, with most of them in the teens (Ball et al., 2002; Byrd & MacDonald, 2005; Hermanowicz, 2006; Kirk-Kuwaye & Kirk-Kuwaye, 2007; Lehmann, 2007; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Reid & Moore, 2008). By choosing a nearly equal number of participants from each site, I could focus on themes that are common among the participants regardless of the campus where they are enrolled.

Of the students who contacted me with an interest in participating in the study, I corresponded with them to be sure they fit the criteria. From those students, I made the

choice of which students to ask to participate. The information for those not chosen was kept in case the initially invited students did not agree to participate in the study. In the end, six students from three of the selected campuses were interested in participating in my study. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants.

Table 1. Participant Summary

Participant Pseudonym	Initial School Type	Age at time of interview	Sex	Parent Education
Paige	Four-Year Public	23	Female	First Generation
Tracy	Four-Year Private	21	Female	First Generation
Shanee	Public Community College	20	Female	First Generation
Inez	Four-Year Private/Community College	20	Female	Father College
Graeme	Four-Year Private	19	Male	Both Parents College
Chuck	Four-Year Public	21	Male	Mother College

Three of the students were first-generation students, one had both parents who attended college, and the other two had one parent each who attended. Of the six students, they represented the variety of ways students experience college in the current higher education climate. Of the students whose initial institutions were four-year public universities, one moved directly from one to the other, while the other participant took a year off before returning to the higher education environment. One of the two students

whose previous experience had been at a private institution took a semester off before transferring, while the other moved from one campus to the other with no time off. One of the students completed an associate's degree at a public community college before transferring directly to a four-year institution. The final participant represented students who moved from a four-year institution to a community college and then back to a four-year institution. She did not take any time off between each of the institutions.

Data Collection

I gathered information from the participants in two ways: semi-structured interviews and electronically mailed reflections. This process lasted throughout a spring semester. I first conducted semi-structured interviews with each individual on his or her current campus (see appendix A for protocol). A semi-structured interview approach allowed me to ask the same questions of each student while also letting the student's responses guide the direction of the interview in a different direction as unexpected topics arose (Shank, 2006). Through the individual interviews I gained an understanding of the student's timeline of when the decision to transfer was initiated, and what circumstances and experiences influenced the decision. I also had the opportunity to hear from the students whether or not they felt a sense of belonging at their initial institution and whether or not they found connections at their transfer institutions.

At the conclusion of the interviews, I explained to the participants the electronic mail reflections and when they should expect to receive the email prompts from each of three that I sent. One week following the individual interview, I emailed the reflection prompt pertaining to community and connectedness (see Appendix B). Two weeks after

the first reflection prompts were electronically mailed, or three weeks following the individual interview, I sent the second reflection prompts. The focus of the second reflection was engagement in the new campus environment, and lessons learned from their experiences on the initial campus that informed the approach to their experiences at the transfer institution (see Appendix C). Finally, after receiving the responses to the second reflection prompts, each participant received, via electronic mail, a final reflection prompt. This last piece was to give the participants a chance to provide any additional information about their experience as a transfer student. It also explored what they learned about themselves as a result of the transfer experience, and whether or not participating in the study had an impact on the student's transfer experience (appendix D).

The timing of the electronic mails, as the last components of the data gathering, was to allow them time to think about the questions asked during the individual interviews and their experiences at the transfer institution. By repeating the questions about connections to people and clubs and organizations, they were able to either reiterate their experiences or provide additional information they may not have considered during the initial individual interviews. This process of reflection elicited honest thoughts about whether the students were actually different from what they were at the initial-entry institution, or if they were simply better prepared to address these issues once they had a clearer understanding of the expectations of college life.

Data Analysis

Hatch's (2002) nine-step "typological analysis" (p. 152) guided the approach to data analysis I utilized for this study. As defined by Hatch, the first step I took was "to read through the data set and divide it into elements . . . based on predetermined categories" (p. 152). My initial analysis provided twelve categories that were shaped by the questions in the individual interview protocol. Once these typologies were identified, I moved on to the second step and reviewed the complete data set, pulling together quotes in a document that related to each typology. Once I had all of the data collected that I felt best represented the sentiment of the typology, I summarized the main ideas of each participant's experience related to that typology. I then re-read the data to "look for patterns, relationships, themes within typologies" (p. 153). Each of the connections within the typologies was assigned a code that was then assigned to corresponding pieces of data. In the next step, I selected data that supported the relationships, while also looking for examples that were counter to the established patterns and themes. Once I found "relationships among the patterns identified" (Hatch, 2002, p. 153), I began writing the findings using excerpts from the interview and electronic mail reflection transcripts that best represented the resulting generalizations.

The methodological design of this study addresses the specific research questions posed earlier with an understanding that the approach has to address issues of validity and generalizability (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Maxwell, 2005). By using multiple methods to collect data, I am establishing my approach to triangulation as a means to address the validity and generalizability questions. The way Patton (2002) addresses the

meaning of triangulation of data sources is reflected in the two approaches I implemented in my study. I compared the responses from the two data gathering formats (individual interviews and multiple electronic mail reflections) for consistency. Because I gathered information over the course of a semester, I could compare what the students said over the course of time.

“The researcher filters the data through a personal lens that is situated in a specific sociopolitical and historical moment. One cannot escape the personal interpretation brought to qualitative data analysis” (Creswell, 2003, p. 182). The concept of researcher bias is one I took note of as I approached this study. According to Maxwell (2005), it is imperative that I, as the researcher, address the potential for bringing my own experiences and assumptions into my interpretations. Because I was a first-generation student, I had a set of assumptions about what this experience is like for similar students. However, I remained open to the interpretation of the data I received and understood that the experiences of first-generation students now may be quite different from when I was enrolled in college. With these considerations at the forefront of my approach to this study, I believe the results will withstand criticism about the rigorousness of the method of research.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an analysis of the data collected by the individual interviews, and the student responses to electronic mail prompts provided at intervals after the individual interviews were completed. The following sections provide further detail regarding the themes that emerged through the identified typologies during data analysis. I start with introductions of the participants to provide additional information about them that gives a context for the reader as the themes are discussed. I then discuss the elements related to why they decided to go to college and the potential for leading them to a better life. The role of location and financial aid awards is addressed in terms of how they played a role in the students' decision-making when choosing each of the institutions in which they enrolled. Next, the ways in which they did or did not feel a sense of fit and belonging is presented. Fit and sense of belonging are approached in general terms first, with the next two sections specifically addressing faculty influence and connections with peers. Each of the sections is presented in a manner that provides an insight into their initial and transfer institution experiences as related to that particular theme. Examples from their individual interviews and electronic mail reflections provide support statements for each section.

Introduction of Participants

In order to appreciate the commonalities and differences that became evident during the analysis of the data, it is important to have an understanding of the participants. Although some of the participants shared one or two traits, the one quality they have in common is that they were all enrolled in a private, four-year institution of higher education at the time of the individual interviews. Each of the students participating in this study came to the current college or university through the transfer process.

Their individual experiences offer a glimpse into the myriad means by which the students made their way through the landscape of higher education. In addition to providing this insight, this chapter also allows the reader to begin to understand how, despite their different reasons (and reasoning) for transferring, there are still pieces that are similar enough to provide a framework for working with students who are deciding to transfer, as well as those who have entered institutions as transfer students.

Whereas Figure I in the previous chapter provides a snapshot of the students who participated in this study, the information below is provided to give an additional context to the analysis of data collected from the participants. The names used throughout this study are the pseudonyms provided by the participants.

Paige is the oldest of the participants at 23 years of age. She began her education at a public four-year institution in her home state. Her interest in music performance was a major reason she chose both institutions she attended. She is a first-generation student who lived on campus at the initial institution and lived at home with her mother after

leaving that institution. She was a commuter student at the transfer institution. After leaving her initial institution, she stopped out of higher education for a period of time before deciding to continue her education at a four-year private institution that is also in her home state.

Tracy, who is 21 years old, is also a first-generation student. She attended a four-year private institution in a neighboring state to where she grew up. A traumatic experience during her first year at the initial institution played a role in her decision to transfer. She transferred from the initial institution to the transfer institution without any time off. She lived in a residence hall at the initial institution, but lived at home with her mother and stepfather and commuted to the transfer institution.

At 20 years of age, Shanee had earned an associate's degree at a public community college before entering a private four-year college as a transfer student. Both institutions are in her hometown. Although she considered campuses farther from home when deciding on a transfer institution, she chose a college close to home so she could continue living at home with her parents and commuting to campus. Once she completed her associate's degree, Shanee went to the four-year college the next academic year. Neither of her parents attended college, but they were supportive of her higher education goals. She has volunteered at a local police station since her enrollment in the community college. As a result, she is interested in a career in the law.

Inez's experience represents that of students who attend multiple institutions of various levels while maintaining the goal of earning a bachelor's degree. Although she is only 20 years old, her current college is the third in which she has been enrolled. An

interest in art led her to enroll in a small, out-of-state, private college before graduating from high school. She left that college before earning a degree and attended a public community college while living at home. Immediately after completing her associate's degree, she matriculated at the four-year private college in which she was enrolled at the time of this project. She is one of two participants who lived on campus during the semester when information was gathered for this study. Her mother had attended college but not graduated, and her father has a bachelor's degree.

Both of Graeme's parents have college degrees. He is a 19-year-old who made his initial college choice based solely on the opportunity to play college football. The initial institution is a private, four-year university in his home state. After deciding to leave the initial institution, he took a semester off before enrolling in the transfer institution that is located in a different state from his hometown. He lived in campus housing at the initial institution and in an off-campus apartment while attending the transfer institution.

Chuck's initial college plans were derailed during his senior year of high school when he found himself getting into trouble that led to his incarceration during what should have been the fall semester of his first year in college. He chose to enroll in the four-year public university in his hometown since he was starting at the beginning of the spring semester. Choice of major is what guided the 21-year-old to the transfer institution in which he was enrolled at the time of this study. His mother, who has a college degree, is the only parent he mentioned during the study. He lived at home and

commuted to the initial institution and, like Inez, lived on campus at the university into which he transferred. He did not take any time off between the two institutions.

Report of Findings

Four major themes emerged from the research with each major theme supported by sub-themes. The sense of fit or belonging emerged as a major theme in both the initial institution experience and the transfer experience. A sub-theme of this concept included the ways in which pre-enrollment experiences and connections to academics (through major courses and faculty) created a sense of belonging at their initial and transfer campuses. Faculty and peer interactions, both positive and negative, also contributed to how much the students felt a connection to the institution they were attending.

During the search and choice processes at both initial and transfer institutions, the second theme regarding campus location and its connection to finances played a role in the participants' decisions of where to matriculate. The notion of needing a college degree to improve their quality of life emerged as a third theme while discussing with the participants their predisposition toward college attendance. Within the third theme, it is noteworthy that family members were influential in guiding the students' thoughts about the importance of earning a college degree.

The fourth theme that emerged was the least expected. The data shows that, no matter how connected a student is to a particular institution, there can be no accounting for the fact that "life happens." Circumstances beyond one's control may influence whether or not they can remain enrolled at a particular institution. Five of the six

participants in this study experienced life events significant enough to change the course of their college-going experience.

Sense of Fit or Belonging

This section provides insight into the level of fit and belonging the students experienced at their initial institutions, and how it played out in their decisions to move on and transfer to another college or university. For the participants in this study, their feelings of fit and belonging played out in different ways. Three sub-themes emerged in defining the ways in which the students developed a sense of belonging. First, initial experiences with a particular institution played a positive role in students deciding to attend that college or university. Second, interactions with faculty and other staff contributed to how students felt welcomed and supported while on campus. Finally, the information gathered for this study shows that the way the students were engaged on their first campus influenced what they were hoping to find in terms of connections on their transfer campus. For example, students who experienced a positive co-curricular experience at their initial institution changed their focus to academics at the transfer institution. As Paige explained, “It was a lot different this time around because I wasn’t focused on, you know, the college experience; I was focused on finishing my degree.” Conversely, Graeme and Inez, the students who had negative social experiences at the initial institution sought to make better connections at the transfer institution. What is interesting is that the academic component was also stronger among these students.

Previous experience at institutions. Paige, Inez, and Graeme all engaged in activities with their initial institutions prior to their first semesters on campus. Although

the activities provided an initial feeling of belonging, and helped them decide to attend those institutions, they eventually made the decision to transfer. The initial experiences with the campuses did not provide enough insight to what the true experience of being a student on that campus was all about.

Paige had attended a music camp and worked with one of the faculty members in the academic program in which she was interested. The faculty member was impressed by her and continued to make contact with her through the college search and choice processes.

Graeme and Inez, however, realized they made their college choices for the wrong reasons and came to understand that transferring was the best option after negative experiences with finding ways to connect to the faculty and their peers at their initial institutions.

Graeme's experience on his initial institution campus occurred the summer before his first semester of academics. He chose the initial institution because of the opportunity to play division I football in college. As a freshman football player, he was strongly encouraged to attend the summer academic program. Not wanting to let the coaches down, and to show his dedication to the program, he attended that program.

Inez attended a summer writing program at her initial institution, enjoyed being there, and decided to enroll there because, "I would rather be here earning a college degree than in high school, you know, just languishing in blah." It was through her love of, and talent for, art that led Inez to a nontraditional path through her college experience. She found out that the art classes she took while in high school at a local community

college weren't going to count toward her high school graduation requirements. As a result, she sought alternative education routes that eventually led her to a small, liberal arts college where the average age for freshmen is younger (about 15 years old) than that on more traditional college campuses. Because of the uniqueness of that campus, she was able to enroll without first earning her high school diploma. When she first started looking at schools, she looked to a state where she believed, "there are quite a few good art institutions." It was during this initial search process when she realized that a smaller school might be better suited to her. She "was looking at, you know, these big [opens arms wide], you know, state universities that, well, they had good art programs; they were just way too big. I was gonna get lost there."

Shanee went to high school as an early college student through a local community college in her hometown. As a result, she was familiar with that institution's course offerings and decided not to look into any other options.

Limitations of college search. Graeme's focus during his initial college search was only based on fit as it related to the ability to play college football. Once he was presented with an opportunity to play at a division I school, he "kind of jumped all over it, and didn't really research the school—what it was about, you know." As a result, uneasiness set in about whether or not his initial institution was the right one for him almost as soon as the other students started arriving on campus.

At first there's that initial excitement of, like, you know, being in college and, you know, you finally get to see people *other* [emphasizes other] than football players for the first two months. Um, so really probably about a month in I kinda started realizing that, you know, I'm just not getting along with people.

Graeme tried to reason with himself when he felt he was getting homesick or not liking his experience at the initial institution.

The first time, you know, you get homesick or you don't like it, you know, I, I definitely stuck it out, and um . . . it would get kind of bad, you know, really wasn't liking it, and I'd be like, 'Alright, you know, it's just the first semester of college, just let me, you know, regroup—try it again.' And I went through the first semester kinda like that, just kinda havin' ups and downs about it. You know, not feeling like it really was such a good school for me. But, you know, I was still gonna, gonna definitely, you know try and stick it out

It was when he went home for winter break when Graeme heard his friends who attended other colleges talking about how much they were enjoying their experiences, “and how, you know, well they, they fit into the school.” It was during those conversations that he began to realize:

I didn't even know anything about the school . . . The thing I really thought of is, “One, if I didn't play football here, I would never be here. Like I, this would not be a school I would've chose. And, two, I don't think I can do this for another four years.”

Chuck didn't have direct experience on the campus of his initial institution.

However, he decided to stay in his hometown because he was involved in the community, which helped him get to know some of the administrators at that institution. Because of the trouble he had been in he chose to go to the college in his hometown, “Just 'cause I didn't want to deal with the hassle of [pause] people questioning me, I guess.”

Chuck admitted that not being able to finish his senior year had put him behind. “Yeah, it took me a while to get back in the groove.” Because he chose his initial institution based on unusual circumstances, Chuck had his mind on transferring from

when he first enrolled at his initial university and spent his time there figuring out what his next step would be for his education.

“Gut feelings” about a place. The school Inez ended up transferring to is one that her grandmother had recommended to her brother who was conducting his own college search as a high school senior. Although the grandmother had never been to the college herself, she knew family members and friends’ children who had attended and really found it to be a great experience. So, at her grandmother’s insistence, Inez checked it out:

I’ve now come down, seen the campus, been around, really liked the, you know, the vibe of the campus—the feel of it. [pause] You know, looked into the accounting department. Decided I liked it, and I do still like it.

For Inez, like the others, there was a feeling about being on the campus that made sense to her. Based on the visit, she felt that she could see herself there.

For Shanee, her transfer decision was between two institutions with similar class sizes and tuition charges. Interestingly, the way the school she ended up choosing presented itself on their website contributed to her choosing that institution. “[Their] website and everything was, like, more welcoming and it gave me more information than [other school considering].”

Faculty Influence

One theme that emerged from the data was the influence of faculty members on the participants. Throughout the experiences of initial choice and transfer choice, and in terms of engagement, faculty interactions were important regardless of whether they were

positive or negative. The connections with faculty made a difference in how much the students felt they mattered to, and were valued by, members of the campus community. Although negative interactions may have been a piece of why a student chose to leave his or her initial institution, it was never mentioned as a primary reason. Also, a positive connection with a faculty member was not reason enough for any of the students to reconsider transferring. This was especially the case for the first-generation students who were faced with situations beyond their control that led them to decide to transfer.

Positive faculty interactions. Positive interactions with faculty guided the students in terms of college choice, as well as major and future decision-making. Students also valued the opportunities they had to get to know the faculty beyond the material they shared in class. Whether it was listening and providing support as the students worked through personal issues, helping them find internships, or sharing about their own lives, the students appreciated the willingness of the faculty to take the time from their days to be there for them. Paige and Tracy, two of the first-generation students, even went so far as to refer to their relationships with faculty as parent-like. Tracy, for example, described her closeness to one professor in the music department at her initial institution as “. . . more like a father to everybody there.” This was important to them because they had moved away from home to attend their initial institutions.

For Paige and Shanee (another first-generation student), the connections were so strong that they mentioned maintaining contact with the faculty members from the initial institution even after they moved on to the transfer institution.

For Paige, the faculty connection began during the search and choice process at her initial institution. Regarding the faculty member she met during the summer camp she attended, Paige said, “. . . he was a big part of what got me to go to [the initial institution] because it seemed like somebody wanted me to be there.” I followed up by asking if that professor’s influence was the most important reason she chose that institution. She replied,

Yeah, I think it was. I didn’t know that that, but I think, uh, looking back, yeah, it definitely was, um, because none of the other schools I applied to really had that, you know, he, he reached out like the rest of them didn’t.

Since a faculty member had recruited Paige to her initial institution, I wanted to know if she maintained a connection with that faculty member once she got to campus. She explained that he was her academic advisor and she had him as an instructor for classes, as well as for individual instrument lessons. For her, though, the connection went beyond the classroom. She stated,

And the great thing about Doc was that you could go to him with *any* [emphasis on any] problem you had. So, he was like having a parent when I, I didn’t have one down there. And, I mean, still to this day . . . I have his phone number and I text him if I have a problem. And he gets back to me almost immediately [drawing out the word immediately].

Although Paige had influence from her boyfriend and his family in deciding to go back to finish her degree, she once again relied on a faculty member with whom she’d made a connection to make a decision about which major to consider at the transfer institution. Part of Paige’s decision-making process involved focusing on a major. Once

she began speaking to a key person in the field of study at the transfer institution, he helped her realize for the first time that she “didn’t have to *know* [emphasis on know], you know, right away—which is something I’ve had an issue with since middle school.” The faculty member encouraged her to create her own major based on the classes that were of interest to her and that helped her decided to enroll at that institution.

Something to note is that there was a sense of maturity in the relationships the students developed with the faculty on the transfer campuses. Whereas on their initial campuses, they looked to the faculty for support, the reported conversations with faculty at the transfer institutions were about life issues and future plans. They could talk to the faculty as peers about more than class assignments. They still sought support, but on a different level.

Despite Paige’s feelings of not being able to connect with faculty on her transfer campus, in the follow-up electronic mail reflection, she indicated that among the three people to whom she feels connected are two faculty members. The first is the one she talked with when she was preparing to transfer. The other faculty member is a person whom she says, “I have known for years and . . . because he is supportive of my plans to further my education.”

Tracy found connections with faculty members on the transfer campus to be more engaging than at her initial institution. In talking about a faculty member in her major field of study, Tracy said, “She’s been awesome, and I can talk to her about, like I can ask her questions about class and also about things outside of class, and she’ll typically be a good person to go to.” Tracy indicated that she had confided in this professor about

personal issues and felt supported because, “she’ll ask me about it and make sure I’m still okay and stuff like that.”

At the community college, Shanee made connections with instructors. Even after completing her associate’s degree, she maintained contact with them.

I still talk with some of the faculty members. The main two I connected with were the ones that actually challenged me. So it was like when I would go in their office and I would ask them about an assignment, they were, I guess, open. Like they were nice and friendly. So, it’s like I would go talk to them about, like, other stuff.

When Shanee was enrolled in the community college, she noticed that the faculty in her major had some connection to the school into which she eventually transferred.

When I was at [community college], that’s what led me to come here because most of my criminal justice teachers, like, when I would go into their offices, they would have, like the graduation, um, degree from [transfer institution], and they also had like different other things from [transfer institution] as well.

Although she doesn’t feel especially connected to her transfer institution, Shanee shared, “it doesn’t really bother me because I still have people that I communicate with like faculty members that I still talk to. Like I can go in their office and have a conversation, and it’ll be fine.”

What is interesting in this study is that Graeme and Inez, who were most vocal about the negative interactions on their initial campuses, were not deterred from connecting with the faculty at the transfer institutions. Instead, they found very strong levels of support and encouragement from the faculty at their transfer institutions.

Inez saw the dedication of the faculty to their disciplines and the school as a sign of connectedness. Referring to the department of her major, she stated,

It's a pretty small department. Everyone in there has been there for at least, like, sixteen years. Sixteen to, like, thirty years. So, they're all really [pauses] a part of this school and they've, you know, really invested themselves in this program—in their department. And it's really nice.

Clearly, Inez was looking for a specific type of school that offered a specific major in a specific type of location. Inez seemed very settled in her transfer institution. She shared how much she connected with a particular faculty member on campus:

I adore [her] . . . You know, she's just really good to talk to. Like, sometimes, just you know, before or after class, we'll just . . . I'll sit down and talk to her. And, we'll just have a conversation, you know . . . And she's just so thoughtful. She really is. She's so thoughtful, and I like it when I run into her on campus and I'll chat with her a bit.

Previously Inez had mentioned working through periods of panic attacks and depression at her initial institution. She felt the staff and faculty at the transfer institution were better at working with students who face these kinds of circumstances. “They were a lot more understanding here . . . You know, they listened and they understood . . . They know how to, you know, the right give and take for students who have these problems.”

For Graeme, who never quite felt he was in the right place at his initial institution, the experiences on the transfer campus were quite different. Regarding the faculty:

I really enjoy how personable all the professors are, and the fact that, you know, in the biology department, I can walk into any of my teachers' doors and sit down and talk to 'em for thirty minutes. I mean, it's not even necessarily about biology.

. . .

Through Graeme's connections with faculty members at his transfer institution, he discovered a passion for a field that will guide him into his future. "I want to go to a good marine biology grad school. And, I really want to work in marine biology."

Negative faculty interactions. The nature of the negative interactions the students experienced at their initial institutions ranged from not feeling supported to feeling that the faculty did not care to make time to talk with students outside of class.

When I brought up classes to Tracy, it became evident this was one of her points of dissatisfaction with her initial institution; however, it wasn't about the courses as much as it was about advising. She brought her schedule to the attention of one of her other professors because of falling behind and, according to Tracy, the professor was upset with the advising she had received.

When it came to how she felt about academics at her initial institution, Shanee found that it depended on the instructor for her classes. After mentioning the instructors by name, she mentioned,

For their two classes, I had to study for 'em, and it's like I actually, pretty much, had to work for my grade. But for the other two, um, professors, it was more so, if you wrote it and it made sense, then you would get an A—regardless of, like, the quality of the work.

Because of the way she described that situation with the easier classes, I asked if she was disappointed by that. She explained, "Yes . . . I felt like I was in a sense wasting my time. But I knew I had to get my degree, and I didn't want to transfer to another community college." Shanee's reason for transferring is the most clear. She completed

her associate's degree and had to transfer to continue striving toward her goal of earning a bachelor's degree.

Paige's experience provides somewhat of a tradeoff. She acknowledges that she was prepared to focus on academics and, while the expectation is that the faculty will be more available when they are needed, she was okay when they were not because she did not feel she needs their support in the same way. Since Paige had been influenced to attend her initial institution by one of the faculty members there, I asked if she had found a similar connection with any faculty at the transfer institution. She alluded to having "some issues with some of the faculty members here. One in particular, but I'm not going to name him since you're [motioned toward the recorder and laughs]." She goes on to share what she had heard about smaller campuses and faculty accessibility:

One of the things that, that you're told when you go to a smaller school like this is that, um, the faculty are more accessible. Um, because it's a smaller school, there aren't as many people for them to have to deal with, so they're, they're a lot more accessible. And, um, I found that that's not necessarily the case. But that's fine [drawing out the word fine], um, because I'm more prepared for that kind of thing now.

Inez's first institution was a college, however, the students were younger than a traditional college population. As a result, she felt that the students didn't receive the support she was expecting. I asked what kind of support she thought there should be for the students.

From advisors and, you know, faculty. There was really only one faculty member that everyone felt they could depend on. Everyone else was just a little [makes a wavering hand motion] eeh. Like, [pauses] my advisor, uh, actually towards the end of my time at [initial institution], ended up dumping me about three weeks

after he looked my mother and grandmother in the eye and told them that he was committed to helping me succeed . . . And I had a professor who told me I had wasted a seat in his class, and he was the least popular seminar teacher . . . Not exactly a nurturing college environment.

Despite stating that he enjoyed the professors and did well academically at his initial institution, Graeme shared,

Honestly, I never really made much of a connection with any of the faculty or the teachers. You know, it was a small classroom, but kinda at the end of the, the class, the teacher was, “Alright, class is over.” [hand motion pointing away from his body] First one out the door. [hesitated] Not real sure where their office was. Kinda had to go find ‘em.

On his initial campus, Graeme felt that the faculty weren’t as interested in getting to

know him as a student. He conveyed this in the following statement: “Where I was before, it was like, ‘Oh, yeah, you can talk to me, but you need to email me and make a five minute appointment between my lunch break and my coffee break.’”

Since he was attending college in his hometown, Chuck felt too familiar with some of the faculty and that created a sense of unease for him and became one of the reasons he didn’t want to stay there.

I already knew basically everybody there so . . . that’s, I guess that’s another reason why I didn’t like it. ‘Cause I already knew everybody . . . I knew the people I had as teachers or people I knew from the community ‘cause I waited tables at two different restaurants, and I knew ‘em from there.

More focus on academics at transfer institution. Paige acknowledges that she is prepared to focus on academics at her transfer institution and finds activities like her

house-sitting job is a great way for her to relax and focus on her studies. Because of the focus on academics, she is less interested in getting involved in traditional co-curricular activities. She has limited that to playing in bands and ensembles, but is quick to point out that participation in those groups is required of her class and are for credit. She did explain, “I use my jobs as, as strangely, as strange as this sounds, um, as kind of an extracurricular like kind of thing.” As Paige described everything she has to balance, I was not surprised that she wanted to let me know that she was on the dean’s list from the semester prior to when the interview took place.

Tracy found more of an academic connection at her transfer institution than a social connection. “I’m doing better in my classes. I, I feel like anyways. I participate a lot more here in class.”

Shanee was feeling connected to her transfer institution, but she felt that, I guess I don’t really have as much time to do the organizations or whatnot because of like the homework is so much different. Like, it takes so much time [adding quickly and smiling] which is not a bad thing.

She continued, “Like, here I really do have to apply myself to get the grade I want. So, it’s like, I’m not really involved in organizations on campus.”

One of the ways Chuck had hoped to gain a sense of belonging at the transfer institution was by participating on the baseball team. His decision to step away from baseball was a difficult one. While he struggled with knowing that he’d miss practicing and playing on the baseball team, he understood,

I couldn't practice baseball full time and go to school full time, and be good at both of 'em. So, I had to be either mediocre at both or be good in one and then not good in the other.

He missed it enough, in fact, that he told me he was talking with the coach about getting back on the team after taking the time to determine just what the academic rigors were like and whether he could balance them both.

Even though he had been involved in other activities, "I decided to concentrate on my school work." Academically, by choosing to focus on aviation and step away from baseball, Chuck showed that he was changing his focus. He admitted, "I have a lot of discipline academically here, 'cause I actually study [laughs]. I spend most of my time studyin' instead of, um, doin', I guess, recreational activities." Chuck summed up the importance of focusing on his academics: "I'm actually . . . I guess I'm doin' what I've always wanted to do. And, um . . . Yeah, I don't want to fail at it, really."

While the lure of playing college football (division I, no less) had been the primary reason why he chose to attend his initial institution, when searching for a transfer institution Graeme had clearer expectations of finding a place where he could "excel in academics and football." Whether consciously or not, he mentioned academics first.

For Chuck, he was focused on schools with a specific major when he was making the decision to find a school into which he could transfer. Some of the schools he researched weren't accredited, and others only focused on providing training in the field of study without awarding a bachelor's degree. Chuck wanted to attend a school where he would come out with a degree. When asked what it was about the transfer institution that made him choose it over the others he was considering, he said, "It's more hands on

. . . I thought it'd be more one on one or closely together. Like fewer students. Be easier to . . . I guess better instructional time.” When I followed up and asked if he'd found that to be true, he replied, “Oh, yeah.”

Connections with Peers

The participants connected with their peers in a variety of ways through interactions in the classroom and through co-curricular involvement. The first-generation students found the strongest peer connections at their initial institutions. For the two enrolled in four-year institutions (Paige and Tracy), these bonds were not strong enough to keep them enrolled once circumstances beyond their control led them to make the decision to transfer. Of the non-first-generation students, Inez and Graeme had the most negative interactions at their initial institutions. As with faculty connections, not connecting with their peers was just one piece of the decision to transfer, though it did contribute to a sense of feeling like they were not at the right college.

Positive peer connections. As a musician, Paige participated in different ensembles that helped her connect with others in her major at the initial institution. She also mentioned that she pledged the professional music fraternity during her second semester on campus. She described the group as “a very, very professional, very structured kind of thing . . . so it was actually probably a pretty good influence.” Of the group, she realized, “that actually probably helped me a lot because I, I was able to make more friends and, and know more people and stuff like that through the fraternity.” Despite feeling positive about her fraternity involvement, when I asked if she was involved in anything that wasn't related to music, she made a connection to why she may

not have persisted at that university. She replied after a brief hesitation: “I don’t think so. That was probably one of my downfalls, too.”

Regarding connections to peers on her transfer institution, Paige mentioned another student who “was the first student who spoke to me when I began at [transfer institution]. She is always kind and enthusiastic about everything, which is uplifting in such a stressful environment.”

Of all of the participants, Tracy had the most positive experience with co-curricular involvement and making friends at her initial institution. In reflecting on her experiences at her initial institution, Tracy declared, “I was involved, very involved in the school, and [after a brief pause, smiling] I loved it.” She added, “Just whenever we had something going on on campus, I tried to be involved. I tried to be there taking part in it.” Since she was so enthusiastic about her involvement, I asked what motivated her to be so involved. “Cause it was, it was fun and [pauses], it was [thinking] either be involved in the campus or there was nothing to do there [sighing laugh] without havin’ to find a ride to the nearest big city.”

When I asked about feeling connected to her peers at the transfer institution, I was not surprised by Inez’s response since she is a more outgoing person than others in the participant group.

I have, you know, friends from classes. And I have some friends from chorus. I have, you know, friends from . . . the friends who live in my boyfriend’s hall. Some friends who . . . other transfer students that I met, you know, orientation week and we bonded during that time. You know some friends from my dorm.

Inez especially enjoys spending time with students who are part of the gaming club on campus. One of the things that made Inez feel disconnected from her initial institution was that every conversation was so serious. She felt like she couldn't just be a young adult and joke around sometimes. With this particular club on her transfer campus, she feels she can have

these really great conversations about [opens arms wide above her head] anything and everything, and we'll just go everywhere with it. And, you know, it ranges. It can be a serious conversation, but there are also a lot of fun conversations. A lot of, you know, just joking conversations. So, we can be adults. We can have, you know, an adult debate. But sometimes we just, you know, want to make jokes.

Inez also shared a connection she made with another transfer student who came through orientation with her. The friend was there for her when she needed someone to watch out for her. Lastly, Inez talked about her boyfriend. "I just really *like* [emphasizing like] him."

Through the list of places that Inez mentioned she met people on the transfer campus, I wondered if there was something about the place that she felt made it easier to meet people there. She acknowledged that she felt it was easier to meet people on the new campus. She attributed it to the fact that,

You just kind of end up talking to people. Like, you'll start talking to somebody in the dining hall, you know, getting ice cream, you just start talking to a person. Next thing you know you're having a conversation, and then a couple days later, you're friends.

In the follow-up electronic mail reflections, Graeme expressed, “A community can be either good or bad.” In describing how he knows when he feels like he is a part of a community, he shared,

I feel like I am a part of a community in a good way when I feel as though I can easily be myself, communicate with others in the community with ease, and actively be a part or role model of the community without feeling as though I cannot express myself.

It is clear that Graeme’s definition of a community and whether or not he feels like he is part of one is reflected in his negative experience at his initial institution. It was obvious that Graeme felt more at ease with the other students on the transfer campus.

A lot more people from where, you know, I’m from . . . And, just, people are really nice here. They’re really, you know, outgoing. They’ll talk to you. You don’t [pauses] you don’t have to be in their club to be cool.

Graeme was excited to talk about his involvement as a founding father of a fraternity that was colonizing on the transfer campus. He acknowledged that the Greek community at his initial institution had been one of the reasons he didn’t feel connected. However, it was different on the transfer campus because, “You know we started this . . . I’m one of the founding fathers of it. And I think that’s, that’s a really cool thing to do.”

Shanee’s experience was a bit different from the other participants because she was a commuter student at her initial institution, which was a community college. While she focused on academics, she also joined two clubs and “did some volunteer work for the student government association.” I was curious about how much time that took, so I

asked what kind of things she did with that group. This is when she became the most animated during the entire interview. She explained,

I would help them plan events and, like, I would be there. And then we would also . . . They had a thing where they would put lollipops [gesturing with her hands how they wrapped the lollipops] and put like little words on like a sheet of paper and attach it for like when the elections were coming up. And so we would help pass them out.

Even with her involvement with student government at her first institution, Shanee felt she was better able to connect with students who were in her classes rather than those who were in the clubs with her:

. . . if I'm around you more then I'll be more likely to have a conversation, 'cause it takes a while for me to actually put myself out there to even have a conversation with someone. So it's like I saw them pretty much like every week. And, like almost on a daily basis, 'cause we were all criminal justice majors, so we were pretty much takin' the same classes. So, I guess it was like more of a stronger connection 'cause like the people in the clubs, I would speak to 'em, but I wouldn't really get like personal with them. It would be more of a 'hey, how are you?' and its talk about the club and that was pretty much it.

Although she didn't give specific examples of students she's connected with on the transfer campus during the individual interview, she did mention two students among the three people with whom she's connected in response to the electronic mail reflection. The peers are freshmen she met during orientation. "They were nice and we have been friends ever since then. I do not see them every day because we all have homework and I work part time, but I see them as often as I can."

Negative peer interactions. Despite being very active in co-curricular activities at her initial institution, Tracy was not very involved at the transfer institution. While she

expressed an interest in getting involved, and even admitted that she missed being as involved with co-curricular activities as she had been at her initial institution, it was her dislike for another student that kept her away from being more active.

One thing that kind of shunned me away from it is I met one person that's involved in the type of things that I would have been involved in and then they just kind of irritated me so much that I was just, "I don't want to be near you anymore than I have to." But, I don't know, I guess I'll just have to let stuff like that go and force myself to go. 'Cause I'm a shy person. I don't usually talk to people. And, I know to get involved in the things I want to be involved in, I'm goin' to have to suck it up and go talk to a couple professors [laughing].

It is clear that Tracy's experience at the transfer institution did not align with the definition of community she provided in response to the electronic mail reflection. She feels that a community develops "when those surrounding you become more than just faces you see each day." She feels that she is "part of a community . . . once I can be used to help the community progress." In explaining her lack of connection to the transfer institution, Tracy shared, "I come to class and leave. That's all." Since she hasn't sought ways to get involved that will "help the community progress," it is understandable why she seems so unhappy at the transfer institution.

Inez's difficulty in connecting with the faculty at her initial institution continued outside of the classroom setting as she found it difficult to get involved.

All the clubs were student run, basically. And, a lot of them just didn't keep up. Like they didn't keep going, they weren't on a regular schedule [pauses] or something happened. Or they became like these little in-groups where you couldn't get in [quietly laughing].

In addition to not feeling important to the faculty and staff at her initial institution, Inez realized that she did not fit in with her peers, either.

I was pretty weird; although I think most of my weirdness was that I wasn't in such a huge [stretches huge] rush to act like an adult all [stretches all] the time. Like I didn't want to discuss politics lunch, and dinner, and breakfast, and lunch, and dinner, breakfast, and lunch, and dinner [putting her hands on her head as if in exasperation]. It was like a constant contest trying to one up other people around you whether they realized it or not.

It is worth noting at this point that when asked in the electronic mail reflections how she describes community, Inez responded that a community is defined, “. . . by the people . . . how they interact, and the general feel of the place.” She went on to explain that she knows when she feels like she is a part of a community, “. . . when I feel in sync with the feel of the community and I feel like I fit.” Clearly, from her responses, one can see that Inez did not feel like she was a part of the community at her initial institution.

For Graeme, a connection with his peers outside of the classroom was important. “I did well in class, but my biggest thing was just I couldn't find a group of friends outside of football that I really connected with.” Graeme described the students at the initial institution as

A lotta people that just weren't my style of people. It's just hard to explain, but I just really couldn't find a good group of people that I actually fit in with and that I actually got along with very well.

Graeme pointed out that he didn't want his only friends to be guys from the football team. While his experience in football was fun, “after that I'd just come and sit in my dorm room and not really do anything. Didn't really hang out with other people.

So, it was just kinda, kinda just wasn't very happy there." Graeme's description of why he wasn't finding friends proved a bit contradictory in that he understood he wanted to make friends outside of the football team, however, in his living situation he was the only football player yet didn't capitalize on that opportunity. "I was the only football player, so I . . . It wasn't like I was surrounded by, you know, a bunch of guys that I knew well, that I lived with." Ultimately, the one connection he talks about making on the initial campus is one of the guys on the football team. "We're like best friends. Um, and we were pretty close when I was still there, but [pauses] you just [sigh], mmm, I don't know, I just never really met other people that I really got along with."

Chuck felt there was no difference in his level of engagement between the two schools. "I tried to be a part of a lot of activities there and I also do here, too." Interestingly, he was connected to the activities that he was exploring outside of baseball because his classmates in his major were involved in those activities. Chuck's take on what defines a community is very much in line with his approach to meeting people at the transfer institution. He considers "a community to be a group of people that see each other a few times a week that work together to make their own town or city a better place to live." He went on to liken a community to "a spider web" where everyone is "connected through someone or a group of people."

Table 2 below summarizes the amount of connection the participants experienced on their initial and transfer campuses as explained in the previous sections. Connections with peers refers to social involvement in organized co-curricular activities such as student clubs and sports organizations, as well as social organizations related to their

academic areas. Academic focus and engagement refers to interactions with faculty and how much they focused on their academic endeavors.

Table 2. Co-Curricular and Academic Engagement

Participant Pseudonym	Parent Education	Initial College Engagement	Transfer College Engagement
Paige	First Generation	Connected with Peers Connected with Faculty	Primarily Academic Focus
Tracy	First Generation	Connected with Peers Not Connected with Faculty	Unsuccessfully Sought Club Engagement Some Connection with Faculty
Shanee	First Generation	Connected Some w/Peers Mixed connections with Faculty	Primarily Academic Focus
Inez	Father College	Disconnected from Peers and Faculty	Highly Connected with Peers Good Connection with Faculty
Graeme	Both Parents College	Disconnected from Peers and Faculty	Highly Connected with Peers Highly Connected with Faculty
Chuck	Mother College	Some Connection with Peers and Faculty	Highly Connected with Peers Good Connection with Faculty

Location and Financial Considerations

Two elements that played a role in the decision-making process for most of the students were closeness to home and finances. Although these seem like unrelated topics

on the surface, the data revealed that the two were often intertwined with one affecting the other in terms of decision-making. The participants had different experiences related to their plans to stay close to home, and how financial matters affected their decision-making. Location provided mixed results, with some of the students choosing to stay closer to home and others having a clear desire to be farther from their families and hometowns.

However, for participants who mentioned finances as a consideration during the initial search and choice processes, the location of the colleges and universities also came into play in their decision-making. Although the three first-generation students talked about financial aid as a determining factor of choosing their initial institutions, the personal circumstances of each of the students played a role in their decision-making processes for choosing both their initial and transfer institutions. As they discussed their personal situations, the connection to the specific events in their lives and where they enrolled was evident.

Initial enrollment decisions related to finances and location. With the exception of Graeme, finances and location were important in determining their initial institutions. The three first-generation students (Paige, Tracy, and Shanee) explicitly discussed the role financial aid played in their decisions of where to initially enroll.

When asked about the influence of scholarships on her decision to attend the university in which she initially enrolled, Paige replied:

They were pretty, uh, big factor, but, um, [pauses] even though [the initial institution]—it wasn't a lot of money that they offered, it's also not the most expensive place. I had several loans, but, uh, it was, uh, mostly like scholarships.

Despite getting admitted to the school she eventually transferred to (which happens to be in her hometown), Tracy attended the school farther from home because that school, “. . . overall . . . gave me the best financial aid package.” I asked Tracy if the financial aid award was the primary reason why she chose the initial institution into which to enroll. She said, “It was the tiebreaker, I think, because I got into two schools that were equally far away from [her hometown].”

Tracy made it clear that, even though her mother wanted her to stay closer to home to attend college, she was convinced, “I know that there’s gotta be stuff out there other than here. So I felt like I needed to get away and see some other things than what I’ve been around the majority of my life.” Interestingly enough, after being at her initial institution, she found that, “it helped me appreciate home a lot more.”

For Shanee, attending the community college was cost effective because, “the tuition wasn’t high, and it’s like, I didn’t have to pay anything out of pocket. The federal Pell Grant covered it all.”

During the initial search process, Shanee found herself limiting her search to places that were local because she “didn’t wanna really stay in a dorm room, because I don’t like sharing, like, bathrooms with people I don’t know.” One of the downsides of Shanee deciding to live at home while attending her first institution was that she had to share a car with her mother. That played a role in her choosing the campus she did, because it was closer and less of an inconvenience in terms of being able to share the car with her mother.

The choices Inez faced were never based on location. She attended the first institution because of a program she attended in the summer before enrolling. It didn't matter to her that it was in another state. The only consideration for closeness to home was the community college she attended in between the two four-year institutions. The reasons Inez chose the community college from where she earned her associate's degree was a combination of finances and reputation. She explained that, "Tuition was paid for by a Pell grant because . . . my mother, who I am dependent . . . a dependent of is [pauses] ridiculously poor."

In reflecting on the first institution he attended, Chuck noted, "I always told myself I wouldn't go to [the initial institution], then I end up goin' there a year and a half just 'cause it's in my hometown." It wasn't his intention to stay so close to home. He had planned to attend one of the military academies before getting into some trouble in high school that ultimately derailed his plans to attend college the fall semester after graduating from high school. Ultimately, he explained why he didn't go to college the fall after his senior year and how he chose to enroll where he did: "'cause I had to, not because it was a choice. Just 'cause when I . . . I got out [of jail] in December then started in January, so I just had to make a . . . I just had to go to school when I got out." Because of the timing of when he was released from jail, Chuck did not have time to go through a full college search process. Therefore, he enrolled in the local university because he knew, through his connections, that he could get admitted and start getting his life back on track.

Transfer decisions related to finances and location. As I examined the students' decision-making when they were choosing their transfer institution, I kept in mind my research question about whether or not their experiences at the previous institution played a role. What I found is that financial aid and location came into play once again. There was more awareness, however, of how these pieces intertwined. For example, being closer to home also allowed them to save money if they chose to live with family and commute.

Money and location were clearly the top reasons why Paige chose the transfer institution she did. In addition to receiving scholarship money from the academic department, she was able to save money by living at home and commuting to school. Being able to commute allowed her to focus on her academics. She stated, "I really just wanted to be closer to home so that I could not have to worry about rent, not have to worry about, uh, being in the dorm or something, you know."

Not only could Tracy save money by living at home with her mother while attending the transfer institution she chose, she also received more financial aid from that institution. The incident that led to Tracy deciding to leave her initial institution helped her realize that she wanted to be closer to family. "I felt like with the things that had went on so far there, I probably needed to be near my family for a little while. And, just to regroup and, uh, stuff."

Shanee ended up staying at home and commuting to her transfer institution. Partly, however, because of information she received about living on campus. She met with an admissions counselor and was encouraged to live at home because her tuition was

covered by financial aid, but she wasn't going to receive enough to live on campus, too. She was advised that living on campus would mean that she would have to take out loans, which she'd have to repay. Her understanding was that, "if you do housing, you . . . and you stay on campus, you pretty much have to pay for it yourself. Like, even if you take out loans, but it's still gonna come out of your pocket in the long run."

As Shanee was considering where to transfer, when it came to financial aid, she sat down with the numbers and figured out how much she would get. Something that Shanee did that other students often do not is look beyond the actual dollar amounts. She figured what percentage of the tuition the financial aid would cover. This helped her understand that the private schools she was looking at were somewhat better deals in terms of the financial aid packages.

Shanee also considered financial aid in her timeline for applying to four-year institutions from community college. According to her,

I knew that, like, you had to apply early for admissions, and like, to get the most, um, financial aid. You had to apply early, so I started lookin' at it I guess the December before the year that I would graduate.

Because her focus when choosing the next four-year institution was turned toward fit, Inez relied on her grandmother and father for more financial support when she chose the college into which she enrolled. Her grandmother had recommended Inez look at the college, so when she ended up liking it, she knew her grandmother would help out in any way possible so she could attend.

When I asked Chuck if he ever had plans to finish his degree at the initial institution, he replied,

Ever since that first day, that first spring I knew I was gonna transfer 'cause ever since high school, I said I'm never goin' to [initial institution]. [Exhaling laugh] And I end up goin' . . . I started lookin' the next fall semester, 'cause I knew I couldn't transfer after just one semester of college. I mean I probably could have, but [pausing] I didn't.

Even though he knew he could have left sooner than he chose to, Chuck explained why he decided to leave after being there longer than he originally anticipated:

I just got tired of bein' there, basically . . . It's a good school. Nothin' against the school or anything. It's got good academics and stuff, but I didn't want to be in my hometown anymore, 'cause I knew I'd get in more trouble if I stayed there. So I just took myself out of the equation, I guess.

Location and wanting to stay out of trouble were both considerations for Chuck as he contemplated institutions for transfer. For example, he ruled out a school in Florida because, based on his past record, "I didn't feel like Daytona would be the best place to get back on track."

Chuck eventually chose a transfer institution that is a private university with additional fees for his chosen field of study. Because of this, I asked specifically about finances.

It's not, it's not lookin' too good right now, but my mom . . . My mom's helpin' me out. She took out loans for me. I just need to apply for more scholarships. I . . . Actually, I just got a interview for [chain restaurant], so that'll help out with my rent off campus. 'Cause I'm getting' ready to call her after this and tell her that, um [pauses, smiling] I'll pay for my rent over the summer if she pays for my school [laughing]. So, I'm gonna try to compromise with her.

I mentioned his willingness to contribute something and he finished my thought: “as opposed to just asking them to just pay for everything.”

Graeme, whose parents both earned college degrees, was the only participant who did not give priority to cost or closeness to home during the decision-making process in choosing the initial and transfer institutions. When addressing location for choosing his transfer institution, Graeme was most concerned with finding a campus with a smaller environment in a location that was relatively quiet with few distractions. He also mentioned being interested in a college with “more of a locally-based student body.” He found this at the small university in which he eventually enrolled. Although in another state, the transfer institution is driving distance from his hometown. Cost of attendance did not play a factor in location from home, either. Since he attended private institutions, he understood that it didn’t matter if he attended college in his home state or not.

Table 3 summarizes the location of the participants’ initial and transfer institutions in relation to their hometowns. Inez’s initial location is identified in two ways because she attended two different institutions before enrolling in the institution where she was at the time the research was conducted.

Table 3. Closeness to Home

Participant Pseudonym	Parent Education	Initial Campus Location	Transfer Campus Location
Paige	First Generation	Away (in state)	Hometown
Tracy	First Generation	Away (out of state)	Hometown

Table 3. (Cont.)

Participant Pseudonym	Parent Education	Initial Campus Location	Transfer Campus Location
Shanee	First Generation	Hometown	Hometown
Inez	Father College	Away (out of state)/ Hometown	Away (out of state)
Graeme	Both Parents College	Away (in state)	Away (out of state)
Chuck	Mother College	Hometown	Away (in state)

College Degree Equals Better Life

Five of the six participants in the study addressed the need for a college degree to have a better life. This notion played out in three ways: (a) a general feeling of wanting to do better in life than their parents, (b) understanding the need for a degree to pursue an area of interest that may lead to a career, and (c) as a motivator to continue after leaving the initial institution.

Better life than their parents. Wanting to do better in life than their parents was particularly salient for the first-generation students. It is worth noting that the encouragement to go to college in order to have a better life came from their parents or other family members. Even though they did not attend college, the parents of the participants held the belief that earning a college degree was the key to future success.

Paige's experience provides an example of the way in which her mother supported her going to college in order to have more than what she was raised with. Regarding the importance of earning a college degree, Paige shared:

College wasn't really, uh, it wasn't an *option* [emphasis on option], it was an, uh, necessity. I knew I never really wanted to be in the situation that my mom ended up in, and, uh, so, uh, that's definitely a huge motivator for me. Always has been. Probably, yeah, that's probably my biggest motivator for going to school in the first place.

While the preceding comment may imply that Paige was distancing herself from her mother, she later explained it was her mother who encouraged her. When I asked Paige if she had any idea why it was so important to her mother that she go to college, she explained:

My mom just wanted to make sure that I could make something of my life; that I could have a career . . . that would really, um, forward my life so I wouldn't have to struggle for everything that I had.

For Tracy, it was an uncle who advised her about going to college to have a better life than her parents. "He wasn't forceful about it, but he made it very well known that the best thing I could do to not be like my mom or my dad was to go to college."

Shanee was encouraged to go to college by her parents because, "they didn't want me to get stuck with a high school diploma because they wanted me to be able to, like, have a better life than what I grew up on." She explained further her parents' hope for her to earn a college degree: "So they didn't want me to just be stuck workin' at like a fast food restaurant or just like a department store as, like, a sales associate."

Chuck's mother, who had a bachelor's degree, was his guiding force in understanding the importance of a college degree. ". . . I always was told that to do something in life that you had to go to college to be prosperous, I guess, or somethin' like that."

Pursuit of a career. The second way the participants saw a college degree leading to a better life was in understanding that earning a degree was the only way to pursue an area of interest that may lead to a career. As the students looked to their education as a means to improve their quality of life, they each understood the need for certain pieces to fall into place in order to achieve their goals for the future. They made connections to their academic and co-curricular involvements that would provide the experience they needed in their respective areas of interest.

Although Inez felt supported by her family through her college-going experiences, it was a high school teacher who helped her understand that she needed to go to college to pursue her passion for art. She came to realize, especially for the type of art in which she was interested, “I have to go to college; I have to *learn* [emphasis on learn] how to do these things. ‘Cause they’re very hard to just pick up naturally.”

After initially pursuing art as a degree program, she became undecided about whether or not she wanted to be an artist and draw comic books. Eventually, she found herself enjoying the accounting major. When asked about when she thought she would finish her degree, it became clear that she was still exploring where her new major interest may take her in the future. She informed me,

Because I added on that extra major, forensic accounting, I mean I have to take a few more classes. I’m probably going to be here at least for another year . . . Probably more than that, though, because there are some other things that I wanna do, so I might delay just a little.

I asked her to clarify what those other things are.

Like classes I want to take . . . some other things that I would like to explore a little. Like, maybe I want to take a look at political science a little bit because it does tie in very strongly to economics.

Chuck's choices regarding his college-going experience were influenced by his interest in joining the military after he graduates. It was clear that he had done some research on this, which he interpreted to mean:

If I went to a four year university, and when I went to the military I'd be, um, I'd be eligible for the, I said earlier [struggling for the right word] . . . higher rank, um, I guess for the . . . to get a better job, I guess.

Paige, who added a minor in history after discovering she wanted to work in museums for her career, planned to be finished in another year and a half. She shared: "I'm still, I'm gonna keep the music performance and try and go, uh, maybe a music specialty route with museum studies."

For Shanee, she found volunteering for a local police department was the type of involvement that was going to help her further her pursuit of a career in law enforcement. She was volunteering and doing an internship. As for where she sees herself when completing her degree, Shanee is still considering her options.

I'll either do law school, or I'll get my master's. Like, I'm debating or whatnot. Like, I'll take both of the tests that I need to get in to . . . and it's like whichever one I guess is better, I'll go off of that, or whichever one I can get into . . . or, if I get into both, then I'll look at both of 'em and see which one I want to do more.

Whichever she chooses, she has thought about potential career paths in both. If she pursues law school, she would like to work for the government for a while, then open her own firm. With a master's degree in criminal justice, Shanee is considering the FBI or Homeland Security as options.

For Graeme, football was an important piece of the puzzle while choosing both his initial and transfer institutions. "College football is fantastic. I love it. Um, once I'm done, though, I'm not, not gonna try and do any more." Graeme's connections with faculty members at his transfer institution, helped him discover an academic passion he hopes to pursue beyond earning his bachelor's degree:

I want to go to a good marine biology grad school. And, I really want to work in marine biology. So that's kinda definitely where I wanted to go. I've thought about that for some... for a long time. I'd like to be a researcher. I think, I think like field research, or something like that would be really cool. I don't ever really want to see myself sitting behind a desk for days on days, you know, on end.

Avoiding jobs. Some of the students went so far as to describe the motivation for earning a college degree in terms of the type of work they were hoping to *avoid* in their futures. For them, there was a distinction between having a job and a career.

Shanee was not considering college before she went to high school because when she was younger, she hoped to pursue a career in modeling. "But then I didn't want to do it because it was just beauty and not beauty and brains. So I started looking at colleges."

When weighing the options of what his future would be like if he stayed in his hometown and didn't go to college, Chuck explained:

I didn't want to be a coal miner. That's what we got back home . . . You know, it's good money, and people that do it, you know, I have a lot of respect for 'em, but it's not somethin' I want to do. I don't want to be underground twelve hours a day.

After leaving her initial institution, Paige kept in mind the notion of wanting to do more with her life. "Right after I came back home . . . I worked at [a large fast food chain] for a month and, uh, realized that fast food was definitely not the way I wanted to go."

Motivation to continue toward earning a degree. The need for a college degree that was instilled in the participants remained with them even after they made the decision to leave their initial institutions. For all of the participants, this motivated them to continue. The first-generation students were determined to complete their degrees despite any setbacks they may have faced leading them to move on to another college or university.

When I brought up the possibility of dropping out altogether, Paige interrupted my question:

Oh, no, that was never an option. Um, I, my, my parents are, are do not make much money and, and so there's, uh, I, I have seen that kind of thing. That's just not what I, I planned for the rest of my life. Um, so not finishing was never an option.

For Tracy, even after making the decision to leave her initial institution, she was determined to continue her education: "I wasn't goin' to leave unless I had somewhere to go." Even though Tracy felt that she kept getting confronted by roadblocks to her achieving her goal of earning a degree, she held on to a sense of optimism: "I feel like

it's, it's temporary. Like, it might feel like it's been forever or it's gonna be forever, but I know that basically my degree is my ticket out.”

The one student who did not directly address the idea of needing a college degree to advance in life was Graeme. He was the only participant in the study whose parents both had college degrees. Perhaps because of their education, his parents instilled in him from a young age the expectation of college attendance.

I don't think it was really even a question so much for me. I think it was kind of, um, expected from my parents . . . I never really had the, the question of whether I wanted to or not. I always knew I wanted to go . . . pretty much, I mean, since like grade school, you know I'd always really, you know, planned to go to college.

Graeme was in the process of considering if he would take a semester off when his father was in an accident that left him in the hospital for a few weeks.

I saw this as an opportunity . . . It just kind of worked out where it made sense for me to take a semester off and help him out. But it was never a question in my mind of whether I would go back to a school. I knew I would.

Life Happens

Despite the students doing their best to find an environment in which they can find success, all but one of the students in this study faced some situation that contributed to their decision to move on from their initial institution. For a study involving six students, this is worth noting. There are some questions that stand out as a result. Is this indicative of the student experience in the 21st century? What can staff and faculty on campuses do to acknowledge that there are limits to what they can do to assist students

through their tough times on campus. Regardless of the support systems in place, it will always be the student (perhaps with the guidance of their parents) who make the decision to leave and pursue their education at another institution than the one in which they initially enrolled.

For Paige, Tracy, Inez, Graeme, and Chuck, family and other personal matters shaped their experiences at their initial institution. These situations often overshadowed (or stood in the way of) their ability to find a connection to others on campus. For Tracy and Paige, the two who seemingly found the greatest sense of belonging at their initial institutions, they faced trigger events that forced the decision of leaving upon them.

According to Paige, she had what she called “an emotional breakdown.” She did not offer much detail about what happened to her during her time at the initial institution that led to the breakdown. She did talk about her mother coming to pick her up from campus and taking her home. She ended up taking time off from college altogether before deciding to return.

Although Tracy attributed her reason for transferring from her initial institution, where she’d been very involved in co-curricular programs, to “trouble with her schedule,” she alluded to “other things that had happened, that kind of piled on top of each other . . . and I realized that it wasn’t like . . . even though I didn’t want to leave, I realized I kinda needed to leave.” Unknowingly, I asked her if she could identify the biggest contributor to her deciding to transfer. Tracy shared,

Um, my freshman year there I was assaulted on campus . . . And then the person who did it ended up transferring at the end of that year and I went back ‘cause I loved the school. And, then toward the end of my second year there, one of the

person's friends showed up at my dorm wantin' to know why I tried to get his friend in trouble, and all this stuff. And, I realized that some people weren't gonna let it go.

Graeme actually made the decision a couple of weeks into the next semester that he was going to leave. And, instead of finishing the semester, he left. This was the only time he mentioned anything about the cost of his education.

You know, I could've probably made it through the first year and, you know, maybe the second year, but I didn't wanna drag it out any more than it had to be drug out once I realized that this really wasn't a good fit . . . You know there's no point in paying money to be unhappy.

For Shanee and Chuck, the experiences at their initial campuses played less of a role in whether or not they stayed. Shanee completed here associate's degree, so moving on was the next step in achieving her goal of earning a bachelor's degree. Chuck had no intentions of staying at his initial institution, so whether or not he felt connected to campus didn't make a difference in his determination to transfer to another institution.

Chuck was in a unique situation because his interactions were based on his prior knowledge of members of the faculty since he knew some of them from involvements in the community during his high school days. Regarding his experience at the transfer institution, he did not talk about specific faculty members during the interviews. His focus was on the experiences he had in class and the type of instruction he felt he received.

When referring to why she chose the community college she did after leaving the initial institution, Inez made it clear that, "it is one of the [emphasis on the] best

community colleges in the country.” Inez pointed out that people in the community where it was located often referred to it as “thirteenth grade,” however, she stressed, “If you go there and you actually work, you can get a really good education there. There are a lot of really good professors; a lot of really good courses offered.”

After Inez finished her associate’s degree, she had a clearer picture of what she expected from the next college she wanted to attend. Having changed her major from art to accounting, as she began her search she was thinking,

Okay, now I have a better idea of what I’m looking for in a college, now that I’ve been in college for several years. I wanted a smaller school with a good, you know, accounting program—good business program—that wasn’t too isolated.

Conclusion

From the information gathered through interviews and electronic communications with the participants, themes emerged related to college choice and how students found a sense of belonging while enrolled. The students saw earning a college degree as a way to make a better life for themselves. This was especially important for the first-generation students. Interestingly, family members who did not attend college are who encouraged the students to attend college—often to avoid certain jobs that would prevent them from having better lives than their parents.

The first-generation students in this study were more sensitive to financial aid awards and scholarships when deciding where to enroll for both their initial and transfer campuses. For all three of them living at home while attending the transfer institution was a way to save money while they worked toward completing their degrees. Although

not living on campus may have played a role in their lack of connection to their peers, the focus was on academics for these students.

Connections to faculty and peers were important for the student to feel that they were connected to the institutions (both initial and transfer) and that they belonged. Although neither connection was given as a primary reason for deciding to transfer, it was clear that lack of connection did play a role in not feeling connected at the initial institutions. This was true especially for the students who were not first-generation.

In an ideal situation, students will find a college where they belong during their initial search. They will enroll, find positive connections with faculty and peers, and navigate the college experience with a minimum of bumps along the way toward the goal of earning a college degree. However, for all but one of the participants in this study, unexpected circumstances arose in their lives that affected the “smooth sailing” of their college-going experiences. No matter how much the students had found a sense of belonging at their initial institutions through connections with faculty and peers, these negative life experiences led to decisions to transfer.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

As high school students search for a college to attend after graduation, they typically consider multiple factors. In addition to tangible items such as whether or not a college offers their intended major, how much of a financial aid package they are offered, and distance from home, they are also considering whether or not they can see themselves as a student on that campus. Will they fit in; do they belong there? For many students, their considerations come together nicely and they find themselves on a campus where they have a positive experience and achieve their goal of earning a college degree at their initial choice institution. For others, situations arise that make them reconsider their initial choice and they find themselves looking to transfer to another college or university. Once the choice is made to leave their initial institution, they return to the college choice process trying to find a new place that more fully meets their expectations of the college experience. It is important to understand student's reasons for transferring in order to offer the best suggestions for how they should approach the search process the second time around.

In this chapter, I discuss the transfer experience and how the sense of belonging plays a role in college persistence. I will then address the relevance of being a first-generation student as it relates to the transfer process. I next share the limitations of the study in order to provide a more complete approach to the implications for the higher

education profession. Implications for campus faculty and student affairs professionals are then discussed, followed by suggestions for future studies that emerged from questions arising from the data collection process.

The Role of Belonging in College Persistence

The role of others in helping students feel that they belong to a community has to be considered since someone has to acknowledge them and validate their input to the community. When asked to identify the three people on their transfer campuses with whom they have made a connection, all of the students named at least one faculty member. Although this finding supports the work of Tinto (1993), and Freeman et al. (2007), it directly responds to Astin's (1984/1999) research that found that faculty interaction was the strongest indicator of students' satisfaction with their college or university. For some students, the impressions that faculty members made on them as they searched for a campus made the difference on whether or not they chose to enroll at a particular institution. The students who did not feel connected to faculty at their initial institution did have a strong connection to faculty at the transfer institution.

Student-faculty engagement was also connected to the degree to which students are satisfied with other aspects of their college life (Astin, 1984/1999). This supports the importance of faculty members reaching out and showing that they care for what is going on in the students' lives beyond their classes. Whether it is listening, helping find internships, or sharing about their own lives, these are all ways that students relate to faculty members. The influence of faculty members, therefore, is very important to keep in mind as it relates to the entire college experience, from selection to sense of belonging.

Another piece of feeling as if one belongs to a particular community is peer relationships. Graeme did not feel connected to anyone outside of the football program at his initial institution. Meanwhile, Inez felt isolated from her peers at the first campus she attended. It was after they transferred and felt that they fit in with other students on the transfer campuses that they felt connected. These students also had negative experiences with faculty on their initial campuses. According to Hausman et al. (2007) and Dixon Rayle and Chung (2007), peer relationships often have to be established before academic integration could be fully achieved. With this information in mind, one may consider that it was the lack of positive experiences with their peers that prevented them from developing a connection to the faculty. With no positive connections on campus, it is not a surprise that these students chose to leave their initial institutions in search for others where they felt more of a connection. Both students discussed the ways in which they connected to their peers and faculty at their transfer campuses. What remains unclear, however, is which relationships were developed first—with faculty or with peers.

Although faculty and peer connections are the primary indicators of belonging in the literature, one also has to consider the level of self-awareness of the individual. Each of the students in this study was asked to define community and how they know when they belong to a community. In many ways, their definitions were directly aligned with the literature, especially that of Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) and Baumeister and Leary (1995). The participants felt they were part of the community when “others take my opinions seriously and ask for my opinion” (Paige); “once I have a place in the community; once I can be used to help the community progress” (Tracy); “when each

member of the community accepts me in some way” (Shanee); “when I feel in sync with the feel of the community and when I feel like I fit” (Inez); “when I feel as though I can easily be myself” (Graeme); and “when you are out somewhere . . . and someone you sort of know, but not really, comes up to you and starts talking to you like they have known you since the day you were born” (Chuck). As can be seen from the participants’ own words, they wanted to be known and to contribute to the growth and development of the community so they would know they mattered and were accepted in some way as a part of that community. Their comments showed how they wanted to be connected them to the community, however they also express a need to be acknowledged as an individual within the community. The use of personal pronouns cannot be ignored when considering the ways in which they feel they belong. They have to gain a sense of importance to those who are already established in the community.

What can be determined from the information provided by the participants of this study is that connections are important in matters of belonging that lead to persistence. The students are going to find their own priorities and sense of importance in determining which relationships are most relevant to their experience. It was also evident that, despite the students’ best intentions, circumstances beyond their control may arise in their lives that will affect their experience and, therefore, their decision to stay enrolled at an initial institution. This was true in some way for Inez, Chuck, Tracy, and Paige. For Paige and Tracy, they felt leaving their initial institutions was the best decision even though they had connected with their peers in very positive ways.

Relevance of Being a First-Generation Student

All of the students in the study, whether or not they are first-generation believed that earning a college degree will provide a means to achieving an improved quality of life. With a college degree, they would find a career and not just a job to support themselves and their families. This is reflected directly in the research about the importance of a college education for social and economic advancement (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Walpole, 2003; Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002; Perna, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). It is perhaps no coincidence that as students move on to another institution in pursuit of a college degree, academic achievement becomes a priority.

The research of Perna and Titus (2004) addressed the notion that family members of first-generation students, because they are less informed of the college experience, do not provide the same level of support to their children about going to college. However, this held true for only one of the first-generation students in this study. All of the other participants found support from family members throughout their college going experience. For the student who did not identify family support, she looked to peers and within herself to find the support and encouragement to achieve the goal of earning a college degree.

The first-generation students felt more of a need to focus on academics at their transfer institutions. Their involvements away from campus (part-time jobs, internships, volunteer experiences) were how they found a connection because they saw a direct link to that work and what they hoped to do with their futures. On the other hand, the students who had at least one parent with a college degree sought involvement on campus and

became excited when talking about the ways they were connecting to their peers and the faculty. Graeme, for example got involved with the founding of a fraternity on his transfer campus despite feeling excluded from the social scene on the initial institution because he was not in a Greek letter organization.

The findings of this study support the research of Golatti (1995b) and Govan et al. (2006) regarding first-generation students not having the most complete information when searching for colleges. They are going to consider what they have experience with and not look further or in more detail. Paige, Tracy, and Shanee, the first-generation students in the study, gave the most weight to scholarship offers and financial aid packages when choosing both initial and transfer institutions. All three also considered the savings of living at home as a deciding factor regarding the transfer institution in which they enrolled. Additionally, Shanee only considered the local community college when initially conducting her college search because she had experience with that institution and wasn't given any guidance about other options.

Limitations

Although attempts were made to conduct as thorough a research project as possible, there are limitations to this study that need to be shared for the reader to consider. Because of a very narrow original selection criterion—first-generation students who transferred from one four-year institution to another four-year institution, I experienced difficulty in the recruitment process. That difficulty resulted in altering the nature of the study by opening up the search to include students who originally enrolled in community colleges and to those who were not first-generation. Time constraints

prevented the opening of the study to more sites. As a result, the sample size was smaller than originally proposed. The smaller sample size, although giving rich information for the participants who were included in the study, does not allow for broader findings regarding the research questions.

Another limitation relates to the length of time for data collection. The data was collected for this study over one academic semester. By not maintaining connection to the students beyond that one semester, I do not know if they completed their studies at the institution at which they were enrolled when I interviewed them. All but one of the participants had plans to finish, although one of the others did face financial difficulties that may have interrupted his ability to remain enrolled for following semesters.

My own connection to two of the campuses may also be construed as a limitation. I previously worked at one of the sites where I recruited participants, and I currently am employed at another. I have been gone long enough from the campus of previous employment to not know any of the participants selected. However, I am familiar with the student population and stereotypes about the campus environment. This helped me understand some of the references made to campus events, programs, and organizations that were mentioned. As for the campus where I am currently employed, since the students selected for the study had transferred into the institution, I did not have as much of an opportunity to interact with them and get to know them prior to their participation.

Implications for Campus Faculty and Student Affairs Professionals

Cooper (2009) considers the ways in which a sociological approach to culture can inform college and university administrators who are trying to determine the best way to

provide support services to their students. She acknowledges, “They [administrators and faculty] hope that students do not merely see themselves as located within a community but that they feel they belong there” (p. 2). The diversity of a student body can create obstacles and opportunities for the staff and faculty in their attempts to create a sense of belonging for each individual student. The notion of creating students who will become global citizens is one that must not be discounted. However, in order to do that, we must find ways to engage students from all walks of life into the community that is their campus—at least for the time they are enrolled.

As much as staff and faculty try on campuses to make a good impression when students arrive—be it for a campus open house or visit, orientation, or the move-in day at the beginning of the semester—sometimes, students arrive with preconceived notions about their experiences. And, if those ideals aren’t matched in real experiences, they are not going to be happy, no matter how happy others around them may be. Therefore, student affairs professionals must avoid the temptation to adapt a freshman orientation program to serve as a transfer orientation simply by changing a couple of words on a PowerPoint presentation. Although a potentially difficult task, we must instead embrace the diversity of experiences and expectations the transfer students bring with them.

Something for student affairs administrators to consider for any students arriving on their campuses are the traditions and rituals that help new students understand the ethos of the community that they are about to join. Through participation in these activities, students may begin to understand their place on campus and see themselves as part of the unique community that is that campus. Although the concept of rituals was

not addressed in this study, the work of Schlossberg (1989), Tinto (1993), and Cooper (2009) support this consideration for future research addressing how students feel they belong to the campus environment.

For some, it may not be about the college experience as much as about focusing on the end result. As seen by the reasoning for why the students were not as involved in their transfer institutions, sometimes when they transfer their focus is on academics and graduating. They are often focused on work or volunteering off campus that, while not being involved in a traditional sense, is still giving them experience that will parallel, if not exceed the experiences they would have on campus in leadership positions. It will be important for staff working with transfers to not become frustrated with them if they are not involved on campus. Take the time to talk with them and learn what they have going on outside of campus. For others who transferred because of a lack of a sense of belonging, they may be looking for the chance to connect and to matter.

With the encouragement of all students to obtain a college degree, there will be more and more students who are the first in their families to attend college. Research is being conducted to more thoroughly understand what is needed to educate and support first-generation students as they work through selecting and enrolling in colleges and universities. However, it remains important to consider the different needs of first-generation student in all components of the college-going experience, from choice to enrollment to graduation.

Once first-generation students arrive on campus, opportunities must exist for them to become connected to their peers and to the faculty. It is unfair to assume any student

knows how to approach a faculty member, but especially so for first-generation students who may feel intimidated by the level of schooling and intelligence of their professors. Programs that bring faculty members into the residence halls where students can meet them on more casual terms can help begin to break down barriers that may exist for not just first-generation students, but all students. With some extra effort on the part of college and university administrators, faculty and staff, first-generation students can feel as if they belong in a place that may seem very foreign to them and their families. And, as first-generation students graduate and move into their chosen professions, they owe it to the next generation to make it known that there is a way to manage the unknown.

All of the participants in this study found connection to the faculty. With this knowledge in hand, admissions counselors need to be sure to have the faculty on board to meet with students during campus open house visits. Additionally, high school guidance counselors should encourage students to request meetings with faculty members when they are searching for colleges so they can begin to establish a connection by understanding not only more about their fields of study, but by meeting the faculty in a more relaxed setting than a classroom on the first day of classes. For these practices to be effective, the faculty must be open to these opportunities. Sharing results from studies such as this with faculty will help them understand more clearly that the task of recruiting and retaining students falls to everyone on campus and not solely to the new student orientation staff.

The support of families cannot be ignored for students who are finding their way through the college experience. This was true of the participants as they transitioned

from high school to their initial institution, and as they transferred to another institution of higher education. Parents are an important support system without regard to whether or not they attended college themselves. College and university officials cannot, however, make assumptions about the level of understanding that parents have about the college-going experience. Therefore, although parents must be included in the conversation from the beginning, it is important to discover how much information the parents need to assure they have an understanding of what is being discussed. It is clear that they are going to at least offer their input. For Tracy and Shanee, their parents made it clear that they wanted their daughters to go to college near their hometowns. Shanee complied, while Tracy chose to go to a campus in another state, although Tracy eventually transferred to a campus in her hometown.

Adelman (2006) provides an explanation for why it is so difficult to predict whether or not a student will decide to remain at his or her initial institution:

An administrator cannot change the fact that the institution was not the student's first choice and that he or she is determined to transfer from the moment of first registration; there is no drug to prescribe for a student with severe homesickness; one cannot—and should not—prevent the student from changing majors for the second time; no college authority has any influence on the romantic life and angst of 20 year-olds that may affect their involvement with academic pursuits . . . furthermore, there is a natural capacity limit to truly meaningful contact with faculty outside the classroom. (p. 83)

Any or all of these factors may exist in students' lives without it being known to those on campus who are trained to help them. Therefore it should come as no surprise that some students are going to make the decision to transfer and continue their education at another institution. Some students enter their first institution with the intention of

moving on after two or three semesters, and others experience life events that dictate to them the need to transfer even if they were having a very positive experience. Regardless of the reasons, a number of students will decide to transfer from colleges and universities across the country. Therefore, it is necessary to consider other ways to work with transfer students on our campuses.

Although it may seem a bit unorthodox to most college administrators, especially those faced with shrinking first-year enrollment numbers, this study supports implementing programs on four-year campuses that assist students who are in the process of deciding whether to transfer to another institution. The advice offered by staff members to students considering the transfer option may help the students come to understand more clearly the available resources at that institution. Perhaps the student will make adjustments based on the offered advice and remain at that institution. This may be especially true for first-generation students who enter college not fully understanding the resources typically available to students on college campuses. It may also prove helpful for students who made their initial college choice based on the ability to participate in only one aspect of the campus without seeking knowledge about the whole experience.

Implications for Students Conducting a College Search

Although the primary recommendations have been focused on what those helping students with their college choice should consider, it is also important to encourage students to take an active role in their search process. After all, they are the ones who will be in the classrooms, engaging in co-curricular activities, and living that experience

on a day-to-day basis. Only they can determine whether or not the institution they choose to attend is a good fit.

Graeme provides perhaps the best piece of advice for any student approaching the college search process:

The biggest experience that has helped guide me is knowing whether or not a school is a good fit for you. I learned at my last campus that it was not a good fit for me and that being happy in school was a necessity. Here [at the transfer institution], I was able to evaluate the surroundings and determine that I was in a place of better fit.

For the students, then, I recommend paying attention to what feels right when they are visiting campuses. There is definitely an importance to looking deeply into an institution's "character" and whether or not it matches the students' expectations of the college experience. And the student's feelings have to be the guiding force in decision-making, not their parents' or the best friend's.

Implications for Future Research

As I sought the answers to the research questions guiding this study, other information came to light that should be considered in future qualitative studies examining the three primary elements of this research: the transfer experience, mattering and belonging among college students, and the first-generation student experience.

Although this project took into consideration students from a variety of transfer experiences, I believe by studying each kind of transfer student (lateral, vertical, swirlers, etc.), higher education practitioners will come to more fully understand who they are, what their experiences are like, and how they'll overcome difficulties along the way to

earning a college degree. For the purposes of this study, the work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provided insight into the college search and choice process. I acknowledge this work was based on an examination of high school students embarking on the college search process. What I determined through the course of my research, however, is that these theories are generalized to address the population as a whole. I contend that future research in the arena of student transition must take into consideration the human element – that life happens. In addition to providing the general guidelines based on the findings of the majority, the outliers must also be addressed. As was found in my study, the outlier (Graeme) was in fact the “text book” case. His situation was most directly inline with the literature. What wasn’t addressed in the literature was an examination of how to work with students who face situations that are beyond their control. Future qualitative studies should focus on case studies to further inform practitioners about the fact that student experiences do not neatly follow prescribed stages of a transition model.

In addition to addressing the ways in which students transfer, the students themselves should be considered in future research. Larger sample sizes would allow for an examination of how attributes such as socioeconomic status, race, and whether the students are from urban or rural hometowns play a role in students’ expectations related to sense of belonging and mattering. A recommended way to bring these traits into consideration would be through a longitudinal study that follows student from their search process while in high school through their college graduation—or decision to leave the college environment altogether.

As noted earlier, most studies focusing on mattering and belonging, are conducted with middle or high school students. In much the same way it is naïve to assume that students making the transition to college are experiencing transition for the first time, it is also naïve to assume that students entering college have developed a complete set of tools, emotionally and otherwise, to help them navigate the transition without experiencing any difficulties. One cannot assume that just because an 18 year old is suddenly walking around on a college campus, he or she no longer has concerns about fitting in or being a part of something larger. Instead, it is likely these feelings are heightened—especially during the first few days on campus at the beginning of a term when they witness the returning students reconnecting with their peers after being away for summer or winter break. Only through further research can this aspect of college students' lives be more fully understood.

Conclusion

In reference to Tinto's (1987) work, Adelman (2006) states,

At whatever age they start out, entering postsecondary students are not empty vessels; they come with demographic characteristics and high school experiences (and, if there is a gap of years between high school graduation and postsecondary entry, work experiences and family formation as well) that condition and shade where and how they enter the postsecondary system. Once at an institution, these background characteristics interact with the academic processes and social environment of that institution to yield varying degrees of determination to persist and complete credentials. Institutional culture, including habits of faculty interactions with students outside of the formal classroom and opportunities for a variety of peer group interactions, plays a significant role in Tinto's models of academic and social integration. (p. 81)

In bridging the gap of the experiences that students bring with them from high school into college it is important to consider how connected they feel to the place, its people, and its offerings that will lead to a well-rounded experience providing opportunities for growth on both intellectual and personal levels. For students who transfer from one institution of higher education to another, they have more experiences to add to the way they interpret their surroundings and the people who make up the new community into which they are expected to become an active member.

By gaining a better understanding of the decision-making process students use the second time around, high school guidance and college admissions counselors may use this information to aid students in making better decisions about first choice institutions. Students making better choices may avoid the factors that created dissatisfaction and may, therefore, persist to graduation at their initial-entry institutions. I give this suggestion of the need to understand the decision-making process of adolescents as a way to highlight the emphasis enrollment managers place on selecting the right students for an entering class of freshmen each fall. With a sense of uneasiness, they look at the history of retention numbers and acknowledge a certain percentage will make the choice to leave (via transfer or dropping out) within their first two years.

I recommend that campus leadership embrace this phenomenon. Instead of scoffing at the statistics about attrition, embrace it and know that, because of the work of the faculty and staff on your campus, new students may find out something about themselves that creates an understanding of what they need to do in order to find future success. If that means leaving their initial choice institution to pursue a different major,

let them go. For this to be more fully embraced among individual campuses, the Department of Education needs to be advised about this positive aspect of student development that takes place every day on campuses around the country. Policy makers must be encouraged to use qualitative research to guide them in addition to the numbers-driven assessments they currently use.

Although this study had only a small number of participants, the data gathered provides additional information to the higher education discussion about transfer students, mattering and belonging among college students, and the first-generation student experience. Each of these components could stand alone in their own right, however by bringing them together in a qualitative study, I reiterate the importance of examining the student experience in a holistic manner. In the day-to-day work world where everyone is asked to do more with fewer resources and the inability to add more time to one's day, it is important to take time to stop and think about who the students are who are crossing our paths. What we claim to know about them based on the forms they complete, or essays they write to gain admission only touches the surface of their life experiences. It is our responsibility as educators to understand them on a deeper level. Only then can we begin to meet their needs and provide a well-rounded educational experience.

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APPENDIX A
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Give student a copy of their consent form and ask them to review it once more before beginning the interview.

Remind the student that, as stated in the consent form, each participant will be asked to choose a pseudonym by which he or she will be referred throughout the study as a means to keep the information unidentifiable and confidential. Ask for and record the students choice of pseudonym.

Introduction Script:

I appreciate you for taking the time to talk with me. I am interested in learning more about why students transfer from college to college, and specifically, students who are the first person in their families to go to college. I want to learn about how you came to decide to attend college, and the process you went through to decide to transfer into this college.

1. Tell me about when you knew that you wanted to go to college.
[Probe: Who or what contributed to you making that decision?]
[Probe: What was your family's reaction when you shared this with them?]
2. Tell me all the things you considered when making the choice to attend the first college.
[Probe: Anything else?]
[Probe: Which of those became the most important reasons why you chose that school?]
3. What was your experience like at the first school you attended?
[Probe: What were your classes like?]
[Probe: Were you involved in any activities or clubs outside of classes?]
[Probe: Who did you create connections or relationships with?]
4. When did you know that you wanted to transfer to another school?
5. Tell me the reasons you wanted to transfer.
[Probe: Anything else?]
[Probe: Which of those became the most important reasons why you decided to transfer?]
[Probe: Did you ever consider just leaving college altogether?]

6. Tell me all the things you considered when making the choice to come here to this school.
[Probe: Anything else?]
[Probe: Which of those became the most important reasons why you chose this school?]
[Probe: What was different about the way you made your choice this time?]
[Probe: How did you decide to attend a private college or university?]
7. In what ways has your experience been different since you've been here?
[Probe: How have academics been prioritized here?]
[Probe: In what ways are you getting involved on campus outside of your coursework?]
8. Who has been your support system since you first enrolled in college?
9. When do you see yourself completing your degree?

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX B**E-MAIL REFLECTION PROMPT #1: COMMUNITY AND CONNECTEDNESS**

To be sent 1 week following the individual interview

Prompt Script:

Hello!

I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me last week regarding your transfer experience. As mentioned at the end of that interview, this is the first of two (2) electronic mail reflections I'd like you to complete. Please take time to consider each question before responding. The information you provide will be confidential. I will use the pseudonym you provided during the individual interview in identifying any comments you make here.

You should send your responses in a reply to this email. Please reply within three (3) days.

10. How do you define community?
 - a. How do you know when you feel like you are part of a community?
11. What is the community like where you are currently enrolled?
 - a. How is this different or similar to the last college you attended?
12. Who are three (3) people you've connected with on your new campus?
 - a. How did these connections happen?
 - b. What are their roles on campus (peers, professors, staff members, etc.)?

Thank you for providing your thoughts on these questions. You'll receive the next set of questions in two (2) weeks.

APPENDIX C**E-MAIL REFLECTION PROMPT #2: TRANSFER EXPERIENCE**

To be sent 2 weeks following the first set of prompts.

Prompt Script:

Hello!

Thank you for sending your responses to the first set of questions. Below are the final reflection questions. Again, I ask that you consider each question thoroughly before responding. Please respond within three (3) days by replying to this email.

1. In what kinds of activities are you involved on your current campus?
 - a. How did you get connected to those activities?
 - b. If you aren't involved, why do you think that is?
2. In what ways do you make yourself known to others on campus (faculty, staff, other students, etc.)?
3. Do you believe you are more engaged with what's going on at this campus than you were at the last one?
 - a. Why or why not?
4. What experiences from your first campus have helped guide your approach to your involvement and educational goals on this campus?

Thank you for providing your responses.

APPENDIX D

SUMMARIZING REFLECTION PROTOCOL

One week after receiving the second email reflection prompt, each student will receive an email asking them to respond to the below questions. They will be reminded in the email that the information they provide will be kept confidential. Their previously selected pseudonym will be used to refer to any statements from this reflection used in the research.

Email Script to accompany the questions:

I appreciate your participation in the first two pieces of my research on first-generation transfer students. This email provides instructions for completing the third and final piece of the project.

Now that you are nearing the end of your second semester at your transfer institution and shared your insight through individual interviews and an online focus group discussion, I am interested in learning about your experiences on your new campus and as a participant in this research project. Please provide your responses to the following questions by replying to this email and typing below each question.

1. As you reflect back on the individual interview and the focus group for this study, what additional pieces of information would you like to share with me about your experience as a transfer student?
 - a. In what ways was it as easy/or difficult as you imagined it might be?

2. What new things have you learned about yourself . . .
 - a. As a result of your transfer experience?

 - b. During the semester you've been on your new campus?

3. What impact, if any, do you believe participating in this study had on your experience as a first-generation transfer student?

Thank you very much for giving of your time to participate in this study.