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The Transfer Student Experience: Challenges and Institutional Support Systems for Undergraduate Transfer Students at a Public Four-Year University

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THE TRANSFER STUDENT EXPERIENCE: CHALLENGES AND INSTITUTIONAL
SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR UNDERGRADUATE TRANSFER STUDENTS AT A
PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

A thesis to be submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

By

OLIVIA VANESSA MATTHEWS
B.A., Wright State University, 2013

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April 2015

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Olivia Vanessa Matthews ENTITLED The Transfer Student Experience: Challenges and Institutional Support Systems for Undergraduate Transfer Students at a Public Four-Year University BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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The transfer student population is rising on college campuses in the United States. Institutions of higher education should better understand how to support this growing, diverse population. This qualitative study of transfer students investigates what transitional challenges these students face, how they utilize institutional support services to assist them with these challenges, and if they feel appreciated, welcomed, and supported in their new environment. Focus group sessions and a demographic questionnaire were used to obtain data in this study. Participants invited to participate were second term transfer students who began at their current institution during the fall of 2014. Transfer students could not have previously participated in the post-secondary education option (PSEO) or dual enrollment program in high school, and could not be international or permanent resident students. Four participants engaged in the focus groups and were between the ages of 20-32, with three of the participants identifying as female and one as male. All transfer student participants were currently enrolled in an undergraduate program full-time at a mid-size four-year, public university located in the Midwest. Themes that emerged from the sessions included academic advising issues, lack of institutional communication, awareness of support services, and campus culture. Limitations of the study, implications for higher education, suggestions for future research, and recommendations for professionals working in higher education are also addressed.

Keywords: Transfer students, academic advising, support services, campus culture

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapters	Pages
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
General Background.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	2
Definition of Terms.....	4
Research Questions.....	5
Assumptions.....	5
Scope.....	6
Significance of the Study.....	6
Conceptual Framework.....	8
Overview.....	12
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	13
Introduction.....	13
Literature Review.....	13
Terminology.....	16
Demographic Factors.....	17
Challenges Faced by Transfer Students.....	19
Grades and Degree Completion.....	22
Retention.....	26
Orientation Programs.....	30

	Advising Transfer Students.....	34
	Financial Aid.....	36
	Discussion.....	37
	Implications for Organizations.....	38
	Summary.....	39
III.	METHODS AND DESIGN.....	41
	Introduction.....	41
	Population and Sampling.....	43
	Data Collection Procedures.....	43
	Data Analysis.....	47
	Credibility.....	48
	Trustworthiness.....	48
	Dependability.....	49
	Confirmability.....	49
	Transferability.....	49
	Summary.....	50
IV.	RESULTS.....	51
	Introduction.....	51
	Demographics.....	52
	Academic Advising.....	52
	Institutional Communication.....	53

Support Services.....	54
Campus Climate.....	56
Research Questions.....	57
Summary.....	58
V. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, & RECOMMENDATIONS.....	59
Introduction.....	59
Discussion.....	59
Limitations.....	64
Future Research.....	64
Recommendations.....	66
Summary.....	67
References.....	69
Appendices.....	76
A. Schlossberg’s Transition Model.....	76
B. Demographic Questionnaire.....	77
C. Audio Consent Form.....	79
D. Informed Consent Form/Cover Letter.....	80
E. Focus Group Questions.....	84
F. Introduction & Ground Rules.....	85

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

General Background

Transfer students are a diverse and growing population that have been previously neglected in both the literature and at institutions of higher education in the United States (Lester, 2006; Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). One-third of all students transfer at least once during their college years, with 25% of the students who transfer changing institutions two or more times (Marling, 2013). When certain populations become salient at colleges or universities, research is needed to examine the unique challenges these students face, how these students utilize institutional support systems, and how effective these systems are in supporting the specific needs of the population. Demographic factors are also important considerations when studying how to best support and encourage students to succeed in higher education.

In this study, the challenges faced by transfer students and their experiences with institutional support systems at a four-year, public institution located in the Midwest were examined. The factors of age, gender, race, ethnicity, military status, class level, and institutional grade point average (GPA) were also analyzed for differences in the experiences of these transfer students. The purpose of this research was to better understand this growing, diverse population of students with the goal of creating better programs and systems to help these students succeed.

Statement of the Problem

Institutions of higher education are constantly trying to learn more about the ever-changing diversity of the undergraduate student population in order to best support these individuals to degree completion and success. Currently, the focus at many institutions is on racial and ethnic diversity initiatives. While this is important, the transfer student population is also diverse and filled with individuals who have unique experiences that can contribute to others' learning in a similar manner as a student from an underrepresented or marginalized group. Diversity in higher education needs to focus on more than just race and ethnicity to ensure that large groups of students are not neglected. More research needs to be conducted to better understand the transfer student population so effective strategies can be created and implemented. The purpose of this study is to better understand what transitional challenges undergraduate transfer students encounter, how institutional support services influence their success, and how the differences in certain characteristics of each student impacts their collegiate transfer experience.

Gordon (1992) asserted that transfer students are less likely to complete a degree than native students, making it imperative to understand more about this population so the factors that encourage and restrict degree attainment can be revealed. Recent research conducted by Miller (2013) at four-year institutions in Texas supported this assertion; "data collected show that native students always graduate at higher rates than their transfer peers" (p. 45). Handel (2013) discussed how for a over decade numerous politicians and administrators have been warning the country about the low productivity of the colleges and universities in the United States in regard to producing students with certificates and degrees. The United States ranks only 6th among developed nations for

the percentage of individuals in the 25-64 year old population possessing an associate's degree or higher (Handel, 2013). One of every five students who attend a two-year college transfers to a four-year institution, and 15% of all four-year students also transfer at least once during their first two years (Gordon, 1992). The population of transfer students is continuing to grow and staff, faculty, and policy makers at institutions of higher education need to be educated on this population and ready to help them succeed.

This research focused on undergraduate transfer students currently attending a four-year public university in the Midwest, who had previously attended one or more colleges or universities from any institutional sector. The challenges that transfer students encounter is a primary focus of this research and were measured by utilizing focus groups. The institutional support systems that undergraduate transfer students receive to meet their needs were also examined. The impact of the perceived level of support offered by the institution to transfer students and how it influenced their experience and success in college was also be explored. The gender, age, race, and ethnicity were collected through a short questionnaire linked with the focus groups to identify possible patterns between transitional experiences and demographic factors. The institutional grade point average and class level of all participants was also recorded from institutional data. Understanding what unique challenges and transitional issues transfer students endure, what role institutional support systems have on their success, and how demographic factors influence their experience will help inform student affairs professionals and other faculty and staff and better assist this emergent population to success.

Definition of Terms

- **Diversity:** Refers to any difference in an individual or his or her prior experiences that influences that student's ability to adjust and succeed in college, with a specific focus on the factors of race, ethnicity, age, gender, military status, class level, and institutional grade point average, along with the student's educational background and experiences (Sharkin, 2012; Brock, 2010; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).
- **Native student:** Any undergraduate student currently attending an institution of higher education who has only received college credit from one institution during his or her college career.
- **Student success:** Refers to the student's ability to ultimately complete a degree and achieve grades during his or her collegiate experience that allows him or her to obtain the career position or admission to the graduate school of choice upon graduation. Factors influencing a student's ability to succeed include the perceived level of support offered by the institution that assists him or her in coping with each unique transitional challenge that he or she may encounter.
- **Transfer student:** Any undergraduate student who has received college level credits from more than one institution of higher education, not including international students, permanent residents, dual enrollment high school students, or post-secondary education option (PSEO) program students.

Research Questions

- 1) What challenges do undergraduate transfer students face during the transition to their new institution?
- 2) What types of institutional support systems do transfer students receive to meet their needs?

Sub-Questions include:

- 3) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their gender?
- 4) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their age?
- 5) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their race/ethnicity?
- 6) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their military status?
- 7) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their class level?
- 8) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their institutional grade point average?

Assumptions

The researcher assumed that the Office of Institutional Research correctly identified students who shared in this research as second term transfer students who are not international students or permanent residents. It is also assumed that these students correctly indicated that they are not past or current participants of the PSEO or dual enrollment program, and that they accurately conveyed their challenges, experiences with

institutional support systems, and correctly provided their demographic and other relevant data.

Scope

This study was limited to the responses provided by undergraduate transfer students who attended focus group sessions during the spring semester of the 2014-2015 academic year at a single, four-year public research university located in the Midwest. This research only included transfer students who began attending the university beginning the fall term of the 2014-2015 academic year. International students, permanent residents, post-secondary education option (PSEO) and dual enrollment program students were not be able to participate in this research because their experiences would likely be different than the typical undergraduate transfer student in the United States. Veteran and military students were allowed to participate in this research, but were asked to identify as such through the use of a demographic questionnaire.

Significance of the Study

Understanding what challenges undergraduate transfer students face, how the institutional support systems impact their experience, and how their experience differs based on certain factors is crucial to helping these students succeed in college. This research identified institutional support service areas that need to be improved to help transfer students successfully endure their challenges and also identified areas that are currently successful and should remain in place through any impending budgetary cuts. Due to the growing trend of performance based funding, understanding how to better assist special populations of students is especially important since funding will now be

based primarily on course and degree completion. Transfer students are an ideal population to attract to a college or university to help increase funding under the new models. Since they already have credits, they are closer to graduation than the direct from high school population, which is declining. Also, transfer students make up a significant amount of the student population, with one-third of all college students transferring during their educational career and 25% of those students who transfer doing so more than once (Marling, 2013). Provided with the appropriate services and level of support, these students can complete their degree and start their future successfully.

While there are numerous research studies and articles about transfer students in higher education (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013; Harper-Marinick & Swarthout, 2012; Helm, 1999; Monroe, 2006), the focus of this current study addresses several gaps in the current literature. Many studies on transfer students focus solely on community college to four-year transfers, while this study will examine the challenges faced by students from all prior institutional types and combinations. Also, there is a need for research that examines the challenges faced by transfer students and how select characteristics impact the transitional and other related difficulties. Examining the institutional support systems has also not been a focus of prior research, but is essential information to add to the body of literature on transfer students to best support their unique needs during their collegiate experience. Transfer students are a neglected population in diversity initiatives at institutions of higher education. This research will serve to show administrators and policy makers that understanding the needs of transfer students and creating support initiatives for this population is just as important as assisting other diverse groups of students to success.

Conceptual Framework

This study involved identifying the transitional issues undergraduate students encounter when they transfer, along with analyzing the types of institutional support systems offered and what impact they have on these students. To better understand what this diverse population experiences during a particular transitional period in their lives, Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory was used as a guide. Schlossberg first developed this theory in the early 1980's, but it has been revised over time with input from other individuals. This theory is "psychosocial in nature" and acts as a "counterpoint to age and stage perspectives" (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 213). Schlossberg's Transition Theory aims to increase understanding about adults in transition and help them receive the support they need to cope with these transitions (Evans, et al., 2010). Since the focus of the current research study was on students in transition, Schlossberg's Transition Theory is germane to understanding the challenges and coping mechanisms of transfer students. A chart outlining Schlossberg's Transition Theory can be found in Appendix A.

A variety of factors influence a student's ability to cope with a transition. Schlossberg's theory asserted that the way an individual perceives the transition, the characteristics of the environments before and after the transition, and characteristics of the individual enduring the transition were all factors that affected a person's ability to adapt (Evans, et al., 2010). For example, if a student was extremely depressed and did not do well socially and/or academically at their original institution due to this mental health issue, then this student may have a difficult time transitioning to a new institution if these feelings are not yet resolved. After receiving feedback from other scholars and

researchers, Schlossberg changed her theory to, “dealing with response to transition since adaptation may not always be achieved” (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 214). For the purpose of comparing this current research study to Schlossberg’s theory, the revised model will be used.

Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) considered transitions as, “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 33). A student transferring to a new institution would be experiencing a change to their life, especially if the student switched from one role to another, as is the case for a full-time employee deciding to return to school to complete their education in hopes of finding a better job; this person would be transitioning from the role of employee to student. A non-event would occur when something that was anticipated did not happen. For example, when an undergraduate student applies to an institution with the intent of transferring to that school, expects to be accepted, but is ultimately denied admission, this would result in the student needing to rethink his or her future plans.

It is important to note that a transition only exists if the individual experiencing it sees it as significant (Evans et al., 2010). For example, research has shown that students transferring from a two-year institution to a four-year institution are better able to cope with transitional difficulties because they expect these challenges (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012); students who did not see the change as significant would not be experiencing a “transition” applicable to Schlossberg’s Transition Theory.

Goodman et al. (2006) asserted that considering the type, context, and impact of the transition is important. Types of transitions include anticipated transitions, unanticipated transitions, and non-events. Non-events can be further classified by

whether they are personal, ripple, resultant, or delayed. Personal non-events directly impact an individual's goals, ripple non-events occur when an individual close to someone experiencing a transition feels the impact, resultant non-events are caused by an actual event, and delayed non-events occur when an individual is still hoping that the event may happen (Goodman et al., 2006). Context regards a person's relationship to the transition and the environment in which the transition is occurring. Impact refers to how significantly the transition influences the person's life (Goodman et al., 2006). Both positive and negative transitions are capable of producing stress on the individual experiencing the transition and others who are influenced by the resulting changes. Experiencing multiple transitions at the same time can magnify the effects of stress.

Goodman et al. (2006) presented four primary sets of factors that impact an individual's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies, which are commonly referred to as the 4 S's. The first "S" refers to the person's situation, which includes the consideration of the trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, the individual's previous experience with a similar transition, his or her concurrent stress, and assessment of the transition (Goodman et al., 2006). The second "S" stands for self, which is broken up into two categories - personal and demographic characteristics that influence how that individual views his or her life and any transitions influencing it (Goodman et al., 2006). For example, if a transfer student is not satisfied both academically and socially at his or her current institution and makes the decision to transfer, personal and demographic factors could influence his or her ability to adjust at their second institution. If the student was receiving a scholarship at his or her original institution and does not receive a similar award at the new institution he or she may have

difficulties adjusting or may not return to college at all without adequate financial resources and familial support.

The third “S” is support, which includes three areas: types, functions, and measurement. In Schlossberg’s Transition Theory, support typically refers to social support received from various sources, including an individual’s peers, intimate relationships, family, institution, and community (Goodman et al., 2006). This area of the model is particularly applicable to the current research study’s focus on institutional support systems and their influence on a student’s ability to succeed. The final “S” stands for strategies, which refers to coping mechanisms including those that change the situation, those that regulate the meaning of the problem, and those that help manage the stress after the transition (Goodman et al., 2006). There are also four “coping modes” that Goodman et al. (2006) stated may be utilized: information seeking, direct action, inhabitation of action, and intrapsychic behavior. It is emphasized that individuals who are flexible and utilize multiple coping strategies are the most successful in navigating both positive and negative transitions (Goodman et al., 2006).

The idea of moving in, moving out, and moving through the transition along with the accompanying factors is extremely useful in helping transfer students adjust and succeed both academically and socially in higher education. Evans et al. (2010) discussed how Schlossberg’s Transition Theory can be used to help design assessment techniques and interventions to help adult learners achieve success in college. Advisors or counselors working in higher education who understand this theory could use it to assist transfer students who are struggling with transitional issues. If an advisor or counselor can ask the right questions based on the four S’s, then the transfer student may reach a

point of clarity and be able to comprehend why she is struggling and how to resolve the issues. Schlossberg's Transition Theory is detailed, easy to understand, and highly applicable to understanding the unique experiences faced by transfer students. The theory also includes useful information relevant to helping these students successfully complete the transition to their new environment.

Overview

The transfer student population has previously been neglected in both the literature and at colleges and universities in the United States. This goal of this study was to better understand the challenges these transfer students face, how they use institutional services to help them transition, and to determine whether they feel supported, welcomed, and appreciated at their new institution. Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory was used as a guide throughout this research to aid in understanding the factors influencing the transitional experiences for these adult individuals in higher education.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Diversity in the undergraduate student population within institutions of higher education in the United States is constantly evolving. One population that has been steadily growing across all institutional sectors is transfer students (Lester, 2006). Transfer students have been referred to as an emerging population since at least 1992 (Gordon, 1992). Recent research also mentioned how this population continues to grow (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013). Research on transfer students is minimal, and they are often referred to in existing literature as a neglected population compared to other emergent populations (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

Literature Review

For the purpose of this literature review, the term “transfer student” refers to any undergraduate student who has college credits and has attended more than one institution after graduating from high school. Transfer students vary in numerous ways including demographics, educational history, challenges faced, preferences, and experiences. Through this literature review, the diversity of transfer students and how this impacts the support services needed for retention will be addressed. Students who have transferred from numerous types of institutional sectors will be included in this research, with the focus being on the students’ experience of transferring from their original school(s) to a public, four-year institution in the Midwest.

Staff and faculty often underestimate the significance of the transfer student population; Handel (2013) reported information from an analysis compiled by the National Student Research Clearinghouse showing that 45% of students who completed a bachelor's degree during the 2011-2012 school year previously enrolled in a community college. This research showed a significant increase from previous years; Ishitani (2008) cited research from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) who found that 22% of students who began their higher education journey at a two-year college during the 1989-1990 academic year transferred to a four-year institution within 5 years. Also, community colleges are the fastest growing sector in higher education, currently enrolling half of all undergraduate students (Fann, 2013).

Students are frequently choosing to begin their educational experience at a community college largely due to the appeal of open access admissions and affordability (Nowak, 2004). Handel (2013) discussed how Latinos, the fastest growing minority in the United States, have a tendency to enroll in community colleges, which will also boost enrollment in this sector. As the population of transfer students continues to rise with the increase of enrollment in community colleges along with other factors, it is especially important to consider their particular needs. Regarding community college students, Miller (2013) stated that, "more information is needed on effective institutional support mechanisms for those students that increase the likelihood of successful transfer and eventual degree completion" (p. 39).

While institutions have been beginning to do a better job in reaching out to students from diverse populations, the problem seems to lie in defining "diversity." Transfer students are not commonly included in diversity initiatives on campuses, despite

their unique and wide range of characteristics. Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) argued that the most important area in which transfer students are extremely diverse is their prior educational experiences. Nowak (2004) asserted that it is extremely difficult to define transfer students and that the only commonality among these students is that they have previous credits and have attended an institution prior to their current school.

It is important to note that there are different types of transfer students. For example, research conducted by Wang (2009) focused on community college students who transferred to four-year institutions and factors that predicted and limited their success. Lester (2006) discussed how students who transition from a two-year college to a four-year university comprise 25% of the student population nationally. More recent data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that, “one-third of all students switch institutions at least once before earning a degree” (Gonzalez, 2012, p. 1). Other research focuses on various subsets of the transfer population, transfer students in general without controlling for previous institutional types, or specific functional areas in student affairs highlighting best practices to help the population as a whole (e.g. advising).

This literature review discusses relevant terminology, demographic factors, challenges faced by transfer students, grades and degree completion, diversity, and tendencies of the transfer student population as well as retention initiatives including orientation programs, advising techniques, and financial aid. Acquiring the knowledge necessary to best help the transfer student population succeed is useful for every student affairs professional, policy maker, professor, and other individuals who work with or make decisions that influence students in higher education.

Terminology

Before reviewing other characteristics of and issues experienced by and related to transfer students, it is essential to understand the terminology used for this population. Gordon (1992) defined “reverse transfer students” as students who transfer from a four-year institution to a two-year institution. Forty-three percent of individuals who transfer are classified as reverse transfer students, moving from a four-year university to a two-year college (Marling, 2013). Gonzalez (2012) discussed that among students who transfer from four-year institutions, 51.9 percent transfer to a two-year institution. Gordon (1992) found that students that fall within this subgroup are more likely to be older, married, employed, and attending school part-time. “Student swirl” refers to the phenomenon of individuals going back and forth between institutions (Johnson & Muse, 2012). It is difficult to determine the percentage of students who fall under this category due to a variety of factors, including the timing of enrollment at the student’s new institution, whether or not the student transferred or simply stopped attending college, and institutions not having proper resources to attempt to track these students (Johnson & Muse, 2012).

Ishitani (2008) explained that “transfer shock” refers to a dip in student’s grade during the first semester after transferring to a new institution, which is typically resolved within a year. The term “double dipping” occurs when a student is enrolled at two or more institutions at the same time (Johnson & Muse, 2012). Also, “stopping out” refers to when a student withdraws from an institution without transferring (Johnson & Muse,

2012). The use of the term “native” in this literature review refers to students who attend the same institution at which they originally enrolled without transferring.

Demographic Factors

While the term “diversity” is typically used to refer to race and ethnicity, it has also grown to include other demographic variables such as gender and age (Sharkin, 2012). Race, ethnicity, gender, age, military status, class level, and institutional grade point average are important characteristics to assess when discussing the undergraduate transfer student population. For example, students who belong to underrepresented groups may face additional struggles that could influence their decision to transfer and their ability to succeed in an institution of higher education. Page (2013) discussed how the Hispanic student population has additional barriers to success including low high school completion rates, citizenship issues, the desire to live at home which limits their options for college, a huge familial influence on decisions regarding college attendance, and the fact that the majority of Hispanic students begin their higher education experience at a community college. Brock (2010) asserted that the type of institution a student attends greatly impacts their chance for success; “undergraduates who begin at four-year colleges and universities are about twice as likely to complete a postsecondary degree as undergraduates who begin at two-year institutions” (p. 114).

Completion and persistence rates differ substantially by race and ethnicity (Brock, 2010). Asian and Pacific Islanders have the highest five-year graduation and persistence rates, followed by non-Hispanic whites, Hispanics, and non-Hispanic blacks (Brock, 2010). Only 9% of the bachelor’s degrees conferred in 2010 were awarded to Hispanic individuals and 10% to African-Americans, while 73% of the degrees awarded were to

Whites (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). It is important to note that there is large demographic variability within each population, so race or ethnicity alone is not necessarily a good predictor of college success (Brock, 2010).

The age and gender of a transfer student are also important demographics to consider since the completion and persistence rates vary (Brock, 2010). Demographic trends in higher education change over time; in the 1970s roughly 60% of students were male and 40% were female; in 2005 this number was reversed with females now being the majority population (Brock, 2010). Nowak (2004) found that forty-six percent of community college students are 25 years of age or older. Brock (2010) discusses an increase in students over the age of 25 at all institutional types and a proportionate decline in students 24 years of age and younger which is a trend that is expected by the U.S. Department of Education to continue in upcoming years. It is important to remember that there really is no “typical” transfer student since they have such diverse educational backgrounds, but it can be helpful to understand generalities to possibly develop programs to help support student populations who are transferring or graduating at lower rates.

Class level, institutional grade point average, and military status are other important considerations when discussing transfer students. Research conducted by Ishitani (2008) found that freshmen transfer students were 73% more likely to depart during their first semester at a new college or university than sophomore or junior transfer students. Also, students are more likely to transfer during their second year in college than any other year (Gonzalez, 2012). Ishitani (2008) found that after controlling for other possible variables, transfer students with higher grade point averages are

associated with higher levels of retention. Currently, minimal research exists on military and veteran transfer students. This population was included in this research study to begin adding to the literature about the differences in the experiences of veteran and military transfer students when compared to non-military transfer students. When conducting research on transfer students, the race, ethnicity, gender, age, military status, class level, and institutional grade point average of each individual in the study should be considered. It is essential to consider these factors because the experience of students may differ based on these characteristics.

Challenges Faced by Transfer Students

Just like any other college student, transfer students have challenges that they must overcome. Some of these issues are unique to this population, for example, articulation problems occur frequently for individuals who transfer, including credit evaluation and course placement difficulties (Gordon, 1992). When choosing which institution to transfer to, this population of students must consider additional factors when compared to what native students did when they chose the same institution. For example, transfer students must obtain information about which of their previously completed courses will transfer to the possible new college or university, which can often be a difficult and stressful process (Townsend, 2008). When credits do not transfer to a subsequent institution, transfer students feel that their time and money has been wasted (Townsend, 2008), which could cause decreased levels of satisfaction with the institution and reduce retention rates.

Lester (2006) found that transfer students reported lower levels of satisfaction with the campus climate and their relationships with peers and faculty members than

native students. Students who have transferred also typically possess more external responsibilities that can make navigating the college environment difficult (Lester, 2006). Research conducted by Nowak (2004) supported the notion that transfer students have additional responsibilities outside of academia in comparison to their non-transfer student counterparts. Each individual experiences the transition to a new institution in a different manner. Some students struggle more with the academic side of a transition while others find it difficult to adjust socially. Research conducted by Glennon (2012) supported the idea that transfer students often have significant challenges adjusting to the social aspects of the transition, including feelings of isolation and unfamiliarity with the campus community.

Orientation programs and residence life experiences are two ways in which incoming students frequently forge social relationships with peers and feel a sense of community on campus. Transfer students generally are less likely to join student activities or have a working knowledge about campus resources due to the lack of orientation provided by the institution (Nowak, 2004). This could make it difficult for them to create social connections with other students. Also, transfer students often fail to acquire student housing because it is typically reserved for incoming freshmen (Nowak, 2004). Bettinger (2004) found that when comparing community colleges with four-year institutions, students at community colleges on average complete less credit hours per term, are more likely to be commuters (2% of community college students live on campus nationally), and have a significantly higher age of initial enrollment. With the added responsibilities in their lives, frequent lack of orientation sessions, and inability to

live on campus, transfer students struggle to create important connections that could be essential in helping them transition and successfully graduate from college.

Transfer students also experience difficulties dealing with issues that native students encounter in addition to the problems faced that are specifically related to their population. For example, Lester (2006) found that common problems for incoming students include academic difficulties, financial issues, grades, and ethnic differences. Also, both native and transfer students can experience homesickness, interpersonal challenges, and developmental growth experiences (Benjamin & Chatriand, 2008). Transfer students also report problems with time management skills, which is a concern for native students as well (Glennon, 2012). These struggles should be anticipated and addressed by staff and faculty members.

The customer service received when visiting various departments on campus can skew a new student's perception of the institution to be negative (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). All employees should be trained properly in their respective areas to adequately answer any questions asked by students or refer them to the appropriate department with a positive attitude in order to allow every student to feel welcome. Students in a study conducted by Nowak (2004) also felt that faculty judged them harshly. This is a problem that needs to be addressed in higher education; staff and faculty members should only be selected for employment if they show no biases and are accepting and welcoming to students from all diverse backgrounds.

A study conducted by Packard, Tuladhar, and Lee (2013) found that community college faculty teaching STEM classes who included advising about the transfer process into their classroom teaching were effective in helping students transition to a four-year

institution. The faculty members did this by discussing the expectations of the academics at the university level in addition to strategies for adjusting to a four-year institution (Packard et al., 2013). The recognition of achievement plus support in the notion that they were competent enough to succeed at a higher academic level given by community college faculty were also commonly mentioned as reasons students successfully transferred to a four-year institution (Packard et al., 2013). This research further supports the assertion that faculty have a significant influence on the future success of students transferring and completing a bachelor's degree.

Grades and Degree Completion

The success of a transfer student is based on multiple factors. Success is typically defined as the student's grades and whether or not they complete a degree, but can also refer to how well the student adjusts socially. For the purpose of this section, the focus is primarily on grades and degree completion. Tobolowsky & Cox (2012) found that the perception an incoming transfer student holds about an institution can significantly impact their success across all levels. Transfer students often hold preconceived notions about their new school and sometimes believe that changing institutions will solve all of their prior problems (Roof & Cawthon, 2004). It is essential that students address their reasons for leaving the previous institution to identify and work through issues so that history does not repeat itself.

Ishitani (2008) found that during the first semester at a new institution, freshmen transfer students (with class level based on overall credits) were 73% more likely to depart than sophomore or junior transfer students. Students most frequently transfer during their second year in college (Gonzalez, 2012). Support efforts should especially

focus on helping transfer students make the transition to their new institution during their first semester to aid retention. Higher grade point averages in transfer students were associated with higher levels of retention after controlling for other possible variables, but native students still have higher grade point averages than first year transfer students (Ishitani, 2008). Research conducted by Wang (2009) supported the hypothesis that the grade point average (GPA) of a student transferring from a community college was the best indicator for whether or not that student would graduate from a four-year institution; “the odds of being continuously enrolled in postsecondary education increases by a factor of 3.441 for a one-point increase in community college GPA” (Wang, 2009, p. 581).

Research completed by Ishitani (2008) supported the assertion that transfer students have lower graduation rates than native students. Also, the more credits that a student holds when they transfer, the more likely they are to achieve a bachelor’s degree (Glennon, 2012). Nurkowski (1995) found that students who transfer already possessing an associate’s degree tend to be more persistent in obtaining a bachelor’s degree than other groups. Additionally, community college graduates overall had higher grades at four-year institutions than native or other transfer students (Nurkowski, 1995). Students who do not have children and those who work less than 40 hours a week were more likely to transfer to a four-year institution after attending a community college (Kevin & Jaeger, 2009). The academic success of transfer students is largely influenced by the presence of adequate student support services, having a designated transfer advisor, a large presence of transfer students on campus, and effective articulation agreements (Nurkowski, 1995). Harper-Marinick and Swarhout (2012) asserted that, “student success in transfer from a community college to a university is dependent on several key

characteristics of any articulation and transfer system: structure, policies and processes, and the accessibility of the system and design” (p.1). Wang (2009) found that in general, females are more likely than males to graduate with a bachelor’s degree, and students who begin at a community college are less likely to achieve a bachelor’s degree.

One factor that hinders the successful completion of a degree for transfer students is the presence of adjunct professors in their classes (Jaeger & Eagan, 2011). The debate in higher education about whether or not the pros outweigh the cons when hiring adjunct professors over full-time professors is pertinent to discussing the success of transfer students. Part-time faculty made up 46.3% of faculty appointments in the United States among all institutions and 66.7% in community colleges in 2009 (Kevin & Jaeger, 2009). When students are exposed more frequently to part-time faculty, they are less likely to return to their institution for a second semester (Kevin & Jaeger, 2009). A recent study conducted by Jaeger and Eagan (2011) found that students who spent more classroom time with part-time faculty in a community college had lower rates of transfer to a four-year institution, regardless of their academic program of study.

Understanding what impact the classroom environment has on a student’s desire to transfer and what teaching methods work most effectively in educating and retaining students is an important consideration. A qualitative study on transfer students led by Fee, Prolman, and Thomas (2009) revealed that, “students appreciated their studies most when the material connected to their lives” (p. 1206). Internships and modern methods of interactive teaching are especially important for transfer students to allow for this connection of academics with their every day lives outside the classroom, since they tend not to participate in extracurricular activities. Research by Miller (2013) supported the

notion that transfer students tend not to have an interest in socializing as they are primarily focused on achieving their degree and doing well in their classes. However, if students are able to connect their class material with their own lives which is traditionally done through institutional extracurricular activities, they are more likely to achieve higher grades since they will have learned the information on a deeper level. Miller (2013) recommended active learning, which can be achieved through teaching techniques including hands-on activities, group participation, and real world examples being implemented by faculty. Senior administrators and faculty members interviewed for this research strongly believed that active learning encouraged critical thinking and analysis skills which were extremely helpful to transfer student success in college (Miller, 2013).

Brock (2010) asserted that while access to college has increased in recent years, the success of college students, defined here as persistence and degree attainment, has not increased. One barrier to degree attainment, particularly for underrepresented groups, is the requirement to take remedial courses for students deemed unprepared for college by test scores (Brock, 2010). Recent data from the Department of Education showed that 42% of freshmen at community colleges require at least one remedial course in reading, writing, or mathematics; at public four-year institutions this statistic ranges between 12 and 24 percent (Brock, 2010). Research conducted by Wang (2009) demonstrated that students who require remedial reading courses are no more or less likely to obtain a bachelor's degree, but students who require remedial math classes are less likely to get their four-year degree. Wang (2009) explained that this finding is likely due to the increased cost of taking remedial classes, extended length of time to complete a degree, limited class scheduling options, and a lessened sense of confidence in one's ability to

succeed in college. As discussed by Brock (2010), research has showed that remedial courses delay degree completion for students at two-year institutions. It is essential to consider the community college student population when discussing transfer students since roughly half of students who achieve bachelor's degrees previously attended a community college (Handel, 2013).

Social adjustments are also important to discuss regarding the undergraduate transfer student population. Transfer students in general spend more time preparing for class, but are less engaged in extracurricular activities (Lester, 2006). Recent research by Miller (2013) supported this finding; one of the greatest challenges for transfer students coming from a community college to a four-year institution in Texas was a lack of engagement or assimilation to the new institution. Due to their additional outside responsibilities and time of entrance, transfer students often have difficulties finding a social group to join since students tend to find their niche during freshmen year (Miller, 2013). The ability of a student to adjust socially to their new institution is vital to understanding degree completion and success. Students who do not forge successful social relationships with their peers and other members of the campus community are less likely to be retained at that institution (Miller, 2013).

Retention

The word "retention" is used frequently in higher education; faculty, staff, and policy makers are constantly discussing ways to increase retention. For transfer students, retention can be even trickier than when dealing with native students. Transfer students have already left an institution, whether it be for lack of available degree options or reasons related to discontent with the school itself, so they may be more susceptible to

leaving than a native student. Staff and faculty need to be specially trained to deal with sensitive issues that may arise working with transfer students as well being familiar with the multiple transitions that these students may encounter while in college (Benjamin & Chatriand, 2008). Aheron (2009) discovered that the first term of a student's academic experience is extremely important and programs should include significant support during this time to ease transitional difficulties. Tinto (2012) supported the assertion that a student's first term is incredibly important since students are most likely to transfer during their first term at a new institution; 38% of those who leave a four-year institution do so during their first year, while 29% leave during their second year.

Students that feel at home within the institutional community are less likely to leave or transfer because they will have a greater investment (personally, socially, emotionally) in that college or university (Benjamin & Chatriand, 2008). Residence life experiences are especially effective at allowing students to feel a sense of belonging at their new institution (Benjamin & Chatriand, 2008). For example, Woosley and Johnson (2006) discussed how providing opportunities for transfer students to engage socially early into their experience at the institution is important to helping them successfully assimilate. Residence life programs and staff members can help transfer students by encouraging or requiring attendance at hall meetings and activities, so students can meet other individuals and find their social niche (Woosley & Johnson, 2006). Also, both their peers and residence life staff can be instrumental in recommending leadership and other opportunities to get involved on campus, which in turn will enhance that student's experience at the institution, which is vital to satisfaction and linked to success (Woosley & Johnson, 2006). Benjamin and Chatriand (2008) found that programs that link

academics with student life experiences increase retention. Student Affairs offices often serve to help students link their experiences inside the classroom with their out of classroom life which helps educate the student as a whole and aids in creating a future productive member of society.

Students have many reasons for leaving their original institution. Helm (1999) discussed how students often leave due to financial difficulties, motivational issues, or an overall dissatisfaction with the school. Students often drop out within the first 6 weeks at the institution to which they transferred, typically when expectations of their new school do not meet reality (Hodum, 2007). Research by Bettinger (2004) found that students who are wealthy, live on campus, and those who took the ACT in high school are less likely to drop out or transfer while students who are older, from out of state, or male are more likely to leave their original institution. A racist or indifferent campus culture also is a reason that students leave an institution of higher education (Nowak, 2004). Students from different sectors of institutions leave for different reasons, with exceptions still possible. For example, a student from a four-year school may transfer to another four-year school due to dissatisfaction with their intellectual growth at their original college or university (Ishitani, 2008). Ishitani (2008) found that for community college students who transfer from a two-year to a four-year typically do so because they want to achieve a higher level of degree than was offered at their two-year institution.

There are multiple factors that influence a transfer student's decision to remain at their new college or university. Significant predictors of success for transfer students include attending a new student orientation, previous college grade point average, and declaring a major (Helm, 1999). Helm (1999) also found that students who are

determined, assertive, and have a mentor are more likely to graduate with a four-year degree. Research conducted by Miller (2013) found that two-year institutions that have a structured pathway, a culture centered on students, and individuals holding leadership positions who are culturally sensitive, have increased levels of students successfully transferring to four-year institutions.

Fortunately, there are numerous ways in which colleges and universities can increase retention of transfer students. Tinto (2012) outlined four areas that have historically been shown to help students succeed, including the expectations students have of themselves, various types of support, assessment and feedback conducted by the institution, and the students' level of involvement. Tracking the educational progress of students is important, so that higher education agencies can communicate gaps in support and new policies and programs can be created to help students succeed (Welsh, 2002). Gordon (1992) suggested that more research on transfer student characteristics, improved academic quality at two-year institutions, and increased support services could help the retention problem. Students often leave institutions when their expectations do not meet the reality of their experience (Monroe, 2006). Transfer students frequently have not only their original college expectations to deal with, but also their experiences with previous institutions (Monroe, 2006). This is why it is especially essential that students are oriented to the institution's policies, have opportunities to integrate socially and academically, and are supported at all stages of the process.

Other methods that could increase retention include flexible admissions, better transfer policies, specialized services for transfer students, tailored orientation programs, and equal access to on campus housing (Gordon, 1992). Institutions with the highest

transfer student success rates align their campus culture with the needs, goals, and preferences of students (Aheron, 2009). Fugard (2009) found that accessible information, bountiful transfer services, having an easily navigable webpage with information tailored to transfer students, and encouraging student engagement also helps retention. Glennon (2012) recommended better transfer student programming and establishing on campus housing for transfer students. Miller (2013) recommended services such as specialized student organizations, flexible class scheduling, extended hours for essential services, free transportation, and child care services that meet a nontraditional student's schedule and financial situation.

It is important to remember that institutions cannot fix certain aspects of retention issues. Butler (2011) stressed the importance of students choosing to leave colleges and universities for personal reasons that were outside of the influence or control of the institution. For example, students who leave the school to care for a sick family member do not necessarily have any problems with the institution, but simply have factors outside of their control pulling them away. Assessment techniques should be used when students leave a college or university to identify what led them to this decision. If a student leaves for personal reasons, support should be provided to that student to help him or her make a smooth transition when he or she is ready to return to college.

Orientation Programs

Orientation programs are an essential part of helping incoming students successfully transition to their new college environment. Over 96% of colleges and universities report having used orientation programs to help students' transition (Mayhew, Vanderlinden, & Kin, 2010). Other research showed that over 80% of

institutions in the United States offer 1-3 day long programs often scattered over the summer months prior to fall term (Greenfield et al., 2013). Transfer students are frequently neglected in orientation programs that would serve to introduce them to important support services on campus (Gordon, 1992). Glennon (2012) recommended the development of specialized orientation programs for transfer students. The goal of orientation programs is to help students and families transition; and the activities included should help build a sense of community, distribute information, and define campus culture (Greenfield et al., 2013). A positive first experience at a college or university sets the tone for the remainder of a student's time at that institution (Helm, 1999). Miller (2013) recommended that transfer students have a required transfer student orientation to increase their chance of success at the institution by understanding the policies and services offered.

There are numerous recommendations in the literature for improving or creating successful orientation programs for transfer students. Students often benefit from small group settings during orientation sessions (Lester, 2006). Institutions with a large group of incoming students should hold as many orientation options as possible to keep the number of participants in sessions low. Orientation programs are most effective when multiple departments are involved, they are well planned, and when the mission and vision of the institution are discussed (Greenfield et al., 2013). Sessions should include academic information, general information about the school, programs to aid in social adjustment, testing, advising, and programming to assist with transitions (Roof & Cawthon, 2004).

The most successful transfer student orientations occur when institutions are committed to transfer process, provide appropriate resources for planning, creating, and implementing the programs, clearly define institutional expectations, include students in planning process, and are prepared to assist students prior to and after their arrival (Roof & Cawthon, 2004). Mentorship programs are especially helpful for students within the transfer population (Roof & Cawthon, 2004). Hodum (2007) found that the majority of students had a positive orientation experience that allowed them to interact socially and develop lasting friendships through the activities and a welcoming environment.

New models of orientation programs have been increasing in recent years (Greenfield et al., 2013; Johnson & Muse, 2012; Mayhew et al., 2010). This includes common reading programs, service learning experiences, alternative settings, outdoor formats, online versions, and orientation programs for new populations including adult students and their families along with transfer students (Johnson & Muse, 2012). Common reading programs are being used in 40% of institutions, and 20% of colleges and universities are now implementing outdoor adventure orientations that include activities such as camping, wilderness survival techniques, and hiking (Johnson & Muse, 2012). Females are more likely to learn from orientation programs, which is problematic because males are already entering higher education at lower rates than females (Mayhew et al., 2010). Outdoor orientation programs would be an excellent way to draw more males into higher education and hopefully increase their learning about assimilating to their new institution. Focusing on attracting males to these new orientation types should not mean that females are discouraged from attending; it is important that both sexes are welcomed.

Designing an orientation session for transfer students is different than creating a traditional orientation session for incoming freshmen directly from high school. Transfer students tend to be more focused on the academic aspects of orientations and do not particularly care for the social opportunities or information; some students are even offended when forced to participate in social activities during sessions (Mayhew et al., 2010). Transfer students who leave one four-year institution to attend another typically take several months off before returning to college, so an orientation program is especially important for them to seamlessly transition to college life and expectations again (Johnson & Muse, 2012).

Online orientation programs have grown in popularity in the last few years. This is largely due to the cost benefit for both the student and the institution while also increasing access for low-income, first generation, commuter, and older students by providing an orientation without having to schedule it around their other responsibilities (Mayhew et al., 2010). Research on orientation programs for transfer students conducted by Mayhew et al. (2010) showed that students found having a designated office on campus for orientation programs helpful and considered friendly and knowledgeable staff an essential part of a successful orientation session. Having a designated office on campus may not be possible for all institutions, especially smaller ones or those with dwindling resources, but students should be made aware of a central location at which they can obtain answers to their transitional questions as they arise. Students also should be greeted in a friendly manner and individuals running orientation sessions should be thoroughly informed to accurately respond to any questions asked by students.

Glennon (2012) recommended the development of specialized orientation programs for transfer students. The goal of orientation programs is to help students and families transition; and the activities included should help build a sense of community, distribute information, and define campus culture (Greenfield et al., 2013). A positive first experience at a college or university sets the tone for the remainder of a student's time at that institution (Helm, 1999). Miller (2013) recommended that transfer students have a required transfer student orientation to increase their chance of success at the institution by understanding the policies and services offered.

Advising Transfer Students

Advisors play an important role in creating an easy transition to the academic side of a new institution for transfer students and should be friendly and knowledgeable in the same way that orientation leaders should be to create a welcoming environment in which students can feel comfortable and succeed. Individuals working as advisors should ensure that they do not equate a student's prior experience with college to the ability to succeed at the new institution (Gordon, 1992). For example, a student from a smaller institution may have previously received personal updates on financial aid processes from staff members at the prior institution, but could lose scheduled classes and be charged late fees at a larger institution if the student was not aware that he or she needed to independently accept the financial awards by a particular date without any warning.

Aheron (2009) found that students indicated a lack of awareness about services offered by the institution and that there was a significant amount of confusion about transferring courses. Research conducted by Chin-Newman and Shaw (2013) supported the finding that transfer students are frequently unclear about which of their classes will

transfer to another institution. Additionally, students possessed conflicting thoughts on advisors, indicating that while they would recommend advising services to other students, they had negative experiences during advising sessions (Aheron, 2009). Transfer students frequently experience significant stress when their classes are delayed in being evaluated for transfer credit which can also delay their completion of a degree (Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013).

For community college students, receiving quality advising both pre- and post-transfer is essential to a smooth and successful transition (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2013). Students who transfer from community colleges are often unaware of the academic prerequisites for their major at the four-year university (Aheron, 2009). Advisors should help students “navigate the educational landscape” and connect their career, academic, and life goals to their choice in a major (Allen et al., 2013, p. 340). Transfer students who are prepared for and expect possible issues in the transfer process and are knowledgeable about requirements at their new institution are more likely to succeed than those who do not anticipate problems or learn about institutional requirements (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

There are many suggestions for improving advising practices to help retain transfer students in the literature (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Fann (2013) suggested that states implement a transparent and user-friendly course numbering system to make the transferring process easier. Implementing frequent academic advising and working at a state level to increase collaboration between two-year and four-year institutions so students can interact with individuals from a four-year prior to leaving their original school is recommended (Lester, 2006). Research from Gordon (1992) also supported the

suggestion that better collaboration between institutional sectors is needed as well as improved articulation agreements. Transfer students significantly benefit from specialized advisors (Gordon, 1992). When possible, transfer student centers with specific advisors specially trained to assist this population should be implemented to aid retention and success (Miller, 2013).

Financial Aid

Financial concerns are frequently cited as a reason students leave institutions (Scannell, 2011; Bettinger, 2004; Kurz, Scannell, & Veeder, 2008). Twenty percent of first-time freshmen withdraw or transfer from four-year colleges after their first year in Ohio (Bettinger, 2004). Students who receive higher levels of certain types of financial support (grants, scholarships, and loans) are less likely to drop out (Johnson & Muse, 2012). Research conducted by Bettinger (2004) showed that higher levels of need-based aid are positively correlated with a higher chance of graduation. Students who come from families living in poverty are more likely to drop out, but they are also more likely to receive a higher level of need-based aid (Bettinger, 2004). While there are plentiful scholarships for other diverse groups, transfer students have limited scholarship opportunities (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Bettinger (2004) found that second year retention for students in regard to aid depended on whether the level of financial aid awarded for that student changed from their first year.

Students who transfer from community colleges are often unaware of the possible financial assistance available to them at their four-year institution (Aheron, 2009). Gordon (1992) recommended simplifying the financial aid process, so that students have better opportunities for support. Possibly due to financial concerns or admissions

policies, it is rare for students to transfer to elite universities (Aheron, 2009).

Scholarships for other diverse student populations have been developed, so transfer student scholarships should also be on the rise as the population continues to grow. Miller (2013) asserted that transfer student scholarships should be offered to help support this population to degree completion and success. Transfer students should receive information and be educated on every step of the financial aid process at their new institution to avoid any confusion or misunderstandings that could lead to lowered satisfaction and retention of the student.

Discussion

While the current literature on transfer students covers a wide range of topics, additional research is still necessary. The literature reviewed in this document supports the notion that transfer students are neglected in many areas of institutions including orientation programs, residence life, advising, funding opportunities, institutional support, and more. Staff, faculty, native students, and educational administrators all benefit from supporting this population in different ways. For example, native students would learn more about the world in which they exist by interacting with transfer students who have diverse educational backgrounds and experiences.

Further research is essential to discovering more about this population, so educators can decide how to best support transfer students through their educational career. Additional research would be able to address gaps and limitations in the current literature as well as providing a heightened level of validity and reliability to existing studies. Since community colleges tend to have an open door policy and are more affordable, this is the fastest growing sector in higher education (Roman, 2007). The

transfer student population is only continuing to grow in size and cannot continue to be ignored. An excellent first step for institutions to take to begin helping this unique population is to implement specially designed orientation programs for transfer students.

Implications for Organizations

The growing trend in higher education for budget allocations is performance-based funding. Institutions under this model are funded by incentive systems that, “have been designed to link campus funding levels to desired institutional performance outcomes in such areas as student retention and graduation rates, undergraduate access, measures of institutional efficiency, student scores on licensure exams, job placement rates, faculty productivity, campus diversity, and, increasingly, student learning” (McLendon & Hearn, 2013, p. 26). The goal is to encourage institutions to spend funds on actually helping the students through their educational journey, so that they can graduate and successfully begin a career.

Research conducted by Fann (2013) found that 81% of first-time community college students claim that they want to achieve a bachelor’s degree, but only 25-35% of these students successfully transfer to a four-year institution. Despite the declining percentage of high school graduates, the percentage of students enrolling in college is expected to continue increasing, but at a slower rate (Adams, 2014). The U.S. Department of Education predicts a decline in high school graduation rates between 2012 and 2020 (Handel, 2013). Direct from high school students have historically been the preferred choice for colleges to focus recruitment efforts on since the pool of students seemed infinite, but since there will be less direct from high school students to pull for recruitment purposes, institutions will also have to focus on community college students

who intend to transfer to reach enrollment goals (Handel, 2013). Surprisingly, administrators sometimes see transfer students as a liability (Roof & Cawthon, 2004). For institutions that operate under performance-based funding models, administrators should think of transfer students as an asset since they have prior college experience and are closer to completing their degree, which is a frequently used measure of success in this particular funding model.

Institutions of higher education are increasingly focused on attracting a diverse student body to allow for individuals to interact with students who have had different experiences than their own. The transfer student population is incredibly diverse and the retention of these students should be a top priority for all staff and faculty members. Also, alumni are more likely to make donations to an institution and speak positively of their time spent there to prospective students and their families if they had a positive experience while attending. The perception individuals hold about a college or university has a more significant impact than most realize. Focusing on helping transfer students succeed is beneficial to multiple parties, including both transfer and native students, faculty members, staff, and policy makers.

Summary

Previous literature has demonstrated that transfer students are disregarded in a plethora of areas. This includes orientation programming, advising, financial aid, housing, opportunities for social connections, support services, and more. The literature supports the notion that additional research is needed to address this increasingly growing population. One major gap in the literature is that students who transfer from a four-year institution to another four-year university are not typically mentioned. The focus tends to

be on students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions, which neglects a large portion of an already forgotten population. Few studies look at all types of transfer students and identify them as separate subgroups within the population to compare for differences in needed support services. Also, the type of institution (public or private, small or large) is not regularly included in the literature. Additional research may also further support present theories and findings which will then be considered increasingly valid and reliable to administrators who may in turn incorporate changes to their institution to better assist transfer students. Also, since the transfer student population is so diverse and much of the little research available is dated, it is essential to assess the demographics and shifting needs of the population through updated research.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND DESIGN

Introduction

The researcher that conducted this study was previously an undergraduate transfer student. Because of the challenges she faced transitioning to a four-year institution and her experiences dealing with the institutional support systems on the campus, she was inspired to study this population and these issues more in-depth. In order to pull quality data from individual transfer students, the qualitative method of focus groups was used. A short questionnaire was administered to collect information about the age, gender, race, ethnicity, and military status of the participants, since these factors may have an impact on a student's experience in transferring. Also, the institutional grade point average and class level of each focus group participant was obtained from the Office of Institutional Research for the same purpose.

Before conducting any research for this study, the researcher requested approval to complete a research study involving human subjects. The Institutional Review Board required a petition for approval of research that involved human subjects, which included the research protocol, the researcher's curriculum vitae, and a copy of the consent form given to and signed by participants, as well as any recruitment letters or advertisements used to attract students to participate. After reviewing the submitted application materials, the Institutional Review Board at the researcher's institution determined that

this project did not meet the Federal definition for human subjects research, and therefore did not require approval.

This chapter explains the details of the research design, including information on the target population and sampling techniques, data collection procedures, and the data analysis process utilized in the study. This study analyzed the relationship between the challenges faced, experiences utilizing institutional support services, and relevant characteristics of undergraduate transfer students at a four-year, public, open access, research institution located in the Midwest. The research questions for this study were:

- 1) What challenges do undergraduate transfer students face during the transition to their new institution?
- 2) What types of institutional support systems do transfer students receive to meet their needs?

Sub-Questions include:

- 3) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their gender?
- 4) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their age?
- 5) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their race/ethnicity?
- 6) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their military status?
- 7) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their class level?
- 8) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their institutional grade point average?

Population and Sampling

The population that was studied was comprised of undergraduate transfer students in their second term at the institution of interest, who were not previous or current PSEO or dual enrollment program participants, permanent residents, or international students. The Office of Institutional Research provided data to identify second term transfer students meeting these qualifications during the 2014-2015 academic year. The Office of Institutional Research could not, however, identify students who had participated in PSEO or dual enrollment programs in high school, so a question regarding this was added to a demographic questionnaire completed by subjects (see Appendix B). Convenience sampling was utilized since the students who participated in the focus groups for this study were volunteers who met the initial requirements for the study. Convenience sampling is defined by Goodwin (2010) as, “a non-probability sample in which the researcher requests volunteers from a group of people who meet the general requirements of the study (e.g. teenagers)” (p. 563). This type of sampling was used since the researcher wanted as many students as possible from the targeted population to participate in this study to obtain valid and reliable results. Snowball sampling was also used to obtain additional participants after the first scheduled focus groups had a low participation rate. Bernard (2000) stated that, “in snowball sampling, you locate one or more key individuals and ask them to name others who would be likely candidates for your research” (p. 179).

Data Collection Procedures

The targeted population for this study was undergraduate transfer students in their second term at the institution being studied. PSEO and dual enrollment program past or

current students, along with permanent residents and international students were not included since their experience in transferring was thought to be different than the experience of college-aged transfer students residing solely in the United States. In order to obtain students accurately fitting the targeted population, data were requested from the Office of Institutional Research to invite the students to participate in this research.

The qualitative research method of focus groups was chosen to allow students to elaborate and delve deeper into their experiences facing challenges and using institutional support services than a quantitative instrument would have allowed. Prior to each focus group session, the researcher linked pseudonyms to the real names of each student who RSVP'd to attend to protect confidentiality. Only the researcher had the master list linking a student's real name with his or her pseudonym. Upon entering the focus group session, each student informed the researcher of his or her actual name and was then provided with the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B), audio consent (see Appendix C), and informed consent forms (see Appendix D) with his or her pseudonym written on them. The students also had a name card in front of them with their pseudonym written to aid in accuracy for note-taking and transcription purposes during the focus groups.

A peer from the researcher's master's program aided in taking notes to ensure accuracy. This peer did not have access to any personal information about the subjects, other than the information that was verbally provided by participants during the sessions. The focus group was recorded on two cellular devices to further ensure accuracy in transcription. The use of recording devices was addressed in the invitation letter and an

audio consent form was provided through email prior to the session for students to review and reflect on whether they would be comfortable with the audio being recorded.

A short questionnaire was used to collect demographic and other relevant information about the focus group participants to see if there was any relationship between the experiences of transfer students based on their age, gender, race, ethnicity, and military status. The institutional grade point average and class level of participants was also collected to look for differences; this information was requested from the Office of Institutional Research and participants were informed in the invitation letter that this information was pulled and would be linked to their verbal responses. The list of questions that was asked during the focus groups can be found in Appendix E.

Students who were identified as second term undergraduate transfer students during the spring term of the 2014-2015 academic year, who never participated in the PSEO or dual enrollment program and were not classified as international or permanent residents as provided by the Office of Institutional Research were contacted via email to invite them to participate in this study. The goal of the research and ability to opt out at any point during the study was provided in a cover letter document that students were required to sign giving their consent prior to participation in this research. An audio consent form was also provided to students via email and at the session to either provide or decline consent for the audio from the session to be recorded. The introduction and ground rules verbally provided to the students at the beginning of each session can be found in Appendix F.

Students that fell within the target population as provided by the Office of Institutional Research were contacted via email to invite them to participate in this

research. Throughout the course of the research, students were provided with 7-10 days notice from the initial email to the date of the focus group session. Potential participants were asked to RSVP 24 hours in advance of the focus group session that they wished to attend. Reminder emails were sent out the day before each session to remind students to RSVP if they were interested in attending upcoming sessions. During the first week of the initial four focus groups, participants were verbally asked to encourage any peer who fell within the target population to consider attending a session. An additional session was advertised via email and held the week following the initial focus groups. Four more focus group sessions were also added the week after the institution's spring break to attract additional student participants.

Focus group sessions were offered four times during the first week, one additional session was offered the following week, and four more sessions were offered the week following the institution's spring break. The first three participants in this study attended a session during the first week; one session had two participants, and the other session had one participant. The fourth participant attended a session offered during the final week. The sessions were held behind closed doors to protect privacy. All participants provided consent for the sessions to have the audio recorded via the researcher and her peer's cellphones. An incentive was offered and advertised through the invitation email sent out to the target population. Students who participated in the focus groups were entered into a raffle to win one of two \$25 Visa gift cards, and two students were awarded the prizes.

Prior to the final week of focus group sessions, the researcher contacted the Transfer Student Resource Center to inquire about any events where transfer students

might be present or any other suggestions for obtaining additional participants. Due to the diverse backgrounds and interests of transfer students on campus, there was no event or specific location where these students would be present. However, it was suggested to visit the Commuter Student Lounge to try to recruit participants, since transfer students may be at that location. The Commuter Student Lounge was visited once a day for five days to attempt to recruit students.

The Multicultural Center Lounge was also visited once a day for five days to try to recruit students to participate from the target population. Students that the researcher spoke with did not fall within the specific parameters of the study, but were provided with the consent document to pass along to anyone they may know that could meet the requirements for the study. The three students who participated during the first week of sessions were also again contacted via email and asked to suggest to anyone they may know who fell within the target population to consider participating in the research. One additional participant was obtained by implementing these techniques after the first week of sessions. While there were many potential transfer student participants on campus, it was difficult to find students who met the limited requirements for this study.

Data Analysis

Schlossberg's Transition Theory was used as a framework for this study, which allowed the researcher to better understand how to approach studying adults who are experiencing transitions, which directly relates to the targeted population for this study of transfer students in higher education. Qualitative data was obtained through the use of focus groups, which was recorded via the researcher and her peer's cellphones and subsequently transcribed, coded, and analyzed for themes after the focus groups

concluded. Data obtained through the demographic questionnaire was coded and connected to the student's responses through assigning pseudonyms during the collection process to protect confidentiality. The approach used to analyze the data in this study was open coding. Leedy and Ormrod (2013) defined the open coding process as:

The data are divided into segments and then scrutinized for commonalities that reflect categories or themes. After the data are categorized, they are further examined for properties—specific attributes or subcategories—that characterize each category. In general, open coding is a process of reducing the data to a small set of themes that appear to describe the phenomenon under investigation. (p. 147)

The data were analyzed using the open coding process, which resulted in four primary themes that emerged from the results: academic advising, institutional communication, support services, and campus climate.

Credibility

Credibility refers to, “the extent to which others perceive the study's findings to be convincing and worth taking seriously” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013, p. 262). After all data were collected, credibility was established in this study by allowing participants to review the findings and broader implications as perceived by the researcher to ensure that they were correct and conceivable. All participants were individually emailed this information for their review, but no feedback was received.

Trustworthiness

Leedy and Ormrod (2013) asserted that in qualitative research trustworthiness can be used in place of the term validity. One method in which to obtain trustworthiness or

validity in a qualitative research study is to acquire feedback from other individuals with no investment in the research project. A peer continually reviewed this study at all stages of the development to ensure trustworthiness and to provide feedback to the researcher. The researcher was previously an undergraduate transfer student, so the presence of a peer during the data collection process aided in ensuring that bias was reduced and trustworthiness was increased.

Dependability

The research design, methods, and data from this study was compared to relevant existing research studies to ensure that the current study met dependability standards.

Confirmability

Confirmability is achieved when the results from the study can be confirmed or replicated by other individuals. The focus groups held with the participants were recorded by two cellular devices and transcribed. The primary researcher and the same peer who has reviewed this study for trustworthiness took notes on each session. Participants were allowed to review transcripts from their individual sessions to support confirmability. All participants were individually emailed this information for their review.

Transferability

Transferability is obtained when a study can be transferred to apply in different environments or situations. To achieve transferability, the researcher used Schlossberg's Transition Theory about adults to apply to transfer students experiencing transitions in a new institution of higher education. Other students on college campuses likely experience similar transitions described in both the conceptual framework and the targeted population.

Summary

This chapter described the research design and methods for the study. A qualitative design was selected to attempt to achieve quality information from the targeted population of transfer students. The method of focus groups was chosen in order to try to obtain in-depth answers from individual students about the challenges they encounter and their experiences with the institutional support systems at the institution being studied. The questionnaire was used to collect demographic data and was connected to information pulled from the Office of Institutional Research. In this chapter, the researcher addressed her reason for studying this population; the Institutional Review Board research guidelines were reviewed; recruitment of participants was outlined; and data analysis methods using Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a conceptual framework were explained.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to better understand what challenges transfer students face during their transition to their new institution, whether or not they feel welcomed and supported, and how they utilize support services to assist them with the challenges they experience. The research questions for this study were:

- 1) What challenges do undergraduate transfer students face during the transition to their new institution?
- 2) What types of institutional support systems do transfer students receive to meet their needs?

Sub-Questions include:

- 3) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their gender?
- 4) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their age?
- 5) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their race/ethnicity?
- 6) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their military status?
- 7) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their class level?
- 8) Are there differences in the experience of transfer students based on their institutional grade point average?

This chapter includes the demographic information of the participants, a discussion on the themes that emerged from the qualitative data, and a summary of the results from this study.

Demographics

Four undergraduate transfer students who were enrolled full-time in their second term at the research institution participated in the focus group sessions. All four students identified as White. Class levels represented included two freshmen, a junior, and a senior. The ages of the participants ranged from 20-32 years old. There were three participants who identified as female, and one who identified as male. None of the students were previously or currently part of the military. Three of the participants had attended a total number of two institutions, including their current one, while one student had attended a total of five. The three females had all attended the same local community college prior to attending their current institution, and the male participant attended a different community college. Three of the students that participated had a fall term GPA between 3.00-3.20, while one had a GPA listed of 0.00. Due to the small sample size for this study, demographic factors were not analyzed for trends while discussing the results.

Academic Advising

The first theme that emerged from the responses of participants was issues with academic advising. Participants mentioned various challenges they encountered with academic advisors during the transition to their new institution. Regarding her academic advisor, Jasmine shared that:

I feel like they push you a certain way. Because I didn't really know what I wanted to do here and then I had a certain advisor that was just because I was a female, to do women's studies. I'm like, whoa, that's not what I wanted to do. Jasmine changed advisors after this experience and shared that the expectations she had of her second advisor were not met. The advisor wanted Jasmine to do her own research on majors and related career opportunities, when Jasmine had sought the help of the advisor for guidance on finding this information, and left the session dissatisfied. A second participant, Belle, discussed her experience with her advisor upon entering the university. She stated:

Advising was a complete nightmare for me. They set me up with a transfer advisor when really I should have spoke with an advisor within my college and the degree program I wanted to go into, so I got two conflicting stories and I ended up taking classes that I didn't need because of it and it was a frustrating experience for me.

Students that had attended the same local community college who transferred to the current university mentioned that their previous college had a centralized system for most student services, which made it easier to meet with the correct advisor and to get their questions answered.

Institutional Communication

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with the communication from their current university when transitioning from their previous institution. One participant, Ariel, shared how she felt like she had access to anyone that she needed at her previous community college and stated that:

I expected more communication from the university to make the transition a little easier. I had some problems with my financial aid come up and they didn't bother telling me until it was right at crunch time. And, you know, working full-time at that time and, you know, going through the things that I was going through at my job, 'cause it was a really busy time at my job, it made life pretty hard.

Another participant, Belle, agreed with the aforementioned challenges relating to communication and that it felt like a "culture clash" between the previous community college and the current university. She stated that:

I didn't feel like I could look up who I needed to speak with on the website directly and I felt very lost in knowing who do I talk to because I knew who to talk to at [name of local community college] but it wasn't so easy to figure out where I needed to go and who I needed to talk to.

Ariel also shared her frustration with the communication at the institution by discussing that when she received information about the university, it came from a friend and not the institution itself. She commented:

The information did not come from university. But, you know, as far as getting direct answers like that out of the college? No. It's kind of like you just walk into the doors and it's like, here you are, figure it out! Yeah.

Support Services

Participants in this study only knew of a few of the numerous support services offered by the institution. Students had used the library, a study coach, the centralized admissions and financial aid office, advising services, or the writing center. Participants mentioned a lengthy wait time to reach someone at the centralized admissions and

financial aid office. However, students also shared that once they reached someone in the admissions and financial aid offices their answers were solved; one student learned about scholarships through working with a study coach; and one student found the writing center helpful in writing a lab report for his class.

Participants were also aware of the disability services office at the university since it is well known for its services offered to students with disabilities, but none of the participants had used this service. One student acknowledged the counseling and wellness services, but also stated that he had not used this office. None of the participants were aware of the Transfer Student Resource Center on campus.

All of the students agreed that the support services they have utilized were helpful in assisting them with their transitional challenges they encountered. However, two students agreed that a welcome packet or transfer student specific orientation of some type would have been helpful in acclimating them to the institution. Ariel shared that she expected a little more support and communication from the institution. Belle stated:

For me, I expected kind of, I don't know, a welcome transfer student packet of some sort... I know that they have that for incoming freshmen and I know they have that for PSEO students, but I felt like I was just like dropped in, and okay here you go, welcome! Go! You know, there wasn't really any, it was definitely dropped in the deep end and figure it out from there.

Belle further commented:

I feel like we feel planted, you know, and not nurtured in the sense of like freshmen coming in probably feel, because, you know, incoming freshmen coming right out of high school especially have that opportunity to work one-on-

one with an advisor right from the beginning and kind of walk through the process. Whereas, we have been through the process at previous schools, so coming in here and not getting at least a little bit of a directory, or an orientation of some sort, that was more focused on what we were doing and what we needed to know... I think would probably, that would have helped me.

Campus Climate

Participants were divided about whether they felt supported or welcomed at the institution, with individuals having both positive and negative comments and experiences. Some of the issues that students discussed included not being able to find parking, disliking their peers at the institution, and having advisors that made them feel unwelcome. The students seem to agree overall that they were not treated any differently specifically because they were transfer students. When asked if he felt adequately supported and appreciated as a transfer student, Eric stated, "I do. I think that this university is pretty open, especially to the... I know they have a lot of services for the disabled as well. Which is really nice." Ariel reflected this sentiment by sharing that she feels like all students are treated the same, but at the same time said that the answer to whether she felt supported and appreciated and whether the campus was welcoming or not was both yes and no. Belle asserted that she did not see a distinction in the treatment of transfer versus other students, but reflected:

I think the biggest question I had, and I actually posed this to a friend the other day, is if we would feel, she also is a transfer student, if, would we feel the same way coming in as freshmen and being at this point, not transferring, than we do

now. Because I feel like there is that disconnect and she agreed, she felt the same way.

Ariel and Belle both mentioned that their previous campus felt safe, and like home, while they felt disconnected from their current institution. They both mentioned other transfer students who were also having a difficult time connecting with the current institution and one participant mentioned that the current institution does not seem to hold much respect for their students. However, participants seemed to be happy with their classes and recognized that they could reach out to their faculty members for support if needed. Participants also mentioned that they were not involved or only minimally involved in campus activities. Jasmine also shared that she actually feels like she is in college now, while she did not feel this way at her previous community college.

It is important to note that one student did not seem to have any issue in transferring from his previous institution to the current university. The only issues he encountered in transferring was that the courses were more “challenging” at the university level than at his community college. Eric further stated that:

I noticed [name of current institution] it definitely had a lot of things to offer, you know, financially and they are used to a lot of students that transfer as well, so I knew that they’d be perfectly fine with it, which is one of the reasons why I came here.

Research Questions

The first research question for this study was, “What challenges do undergraduate transfer students face during the transition to their new institution?” The participants in this study provided examples of challenges they faced with their academic advisors,

financial aid, campus climate, institutional support services, and institutional communication.

The second research question for this study was, “What types of institutional support systems do transfer students receive to meet their needs?” Students had utilized the writing center, academic advising offices, admissions, financial aid, a study coach, or the library. However, participants indicated a lack of awareness about institutional support services that could have aided in easing their transitional difficulties. For example, they were not aware that the campus had a Transfer Student Resource Center. Also, the experiences described by the students in using the support services they knew about were not always positive. Since only four transfer students participated in this research, the demographic questionnaire linked with the verbal responses of the participants was not analyzed for trends, so the sub-questions were not answered.

Summary

The responses from the transfer student participants in this study showed that they faced various challenges during the transition to their new institution. These challenges included issues with academic advising, institutional communication, the campus climate, and a lack of awareness about support services. Participants had used several institutional support services to assist them in their transition. These services included the library, a study coach, admissions, financial aid, academic advising, and the writing center. Students reported both positive and negative experiences in utilizing support services at the new institution.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH, & RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter will discuss how the results of this study compare to the literature on transfer students, the limitations of the study, suggestions for future research, recommendations, and a final summary.

Discussion

The themes that emerged from this study were issues with academic advising, institutional communication, lack of awareness about support services, and campus climate. As one of the first staff members that students will meet when coming into a new institution, academic advisors have an especially important role to play in helping transfer students make a successful transition and feel welcome at their new institution. However, instead of helping the students that participated in this study, the advisors they met with seemed to confuse them or make them feel unwelcome. If students feel this way, they are less likely to be retained. Ariel mentioned during the study that since she did have previous college experience that the process may be easier for her, but she still expected more communication from the institution. This is consistent with the assertion from Gordon (1992) that advisors should ensure that they do not equate a student's prior experience with college to their ability to succeed at the new university. Ariel struggled during her first term at her new institution due to a lack of understanding about the

financial aid policies and procedures at the current institution, which could have been addressed in an advising or orientation session. Advisors should not push students to major in something based on their gender, nor should they ignore the request of a student for information about careers related to the majors they are exploring.

Financial concerns are frequently cited as a reason students leave colleges or universities (Scannell, 2011; Bettinger, 2004; Kurz, Scannell, & Veeder, 2008). Ariel could have easily left college due to the financial struggles she encountered due to poor institutional communication. Belle and Jasmine also could have been turned off to the new institution due to their negative experiences with academic advisors when transferring in. Advisors should help students connect their career, academic, and life goals to their choice in major (Allen et al., 2013), which is what Jasmine expected from her advisor, but was told instead to look for that information on her own. It is incredibly important to help transfer students understand the new policies and procedures at their institution, as well as providing the resources they need to make a smooth transition to their new university. Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) found that transfer students who knew about the requirements at their new institution were more likely to succeed than those who were not aware. Participants mentioned that they thought a welcome packet would be helpful to assist them in understanding more about the systems at the institution and learn who they need to talk to in order to address their concerns. Effective institutional communication is key to the success of transfer students.

One of the gaps in the literature on transfer students is how they utilize institutional support services to assist them with the challenges they face when transferring. However, Aheron (2009) did find in one study that transfer students

indicated a lack of awareness about services offered by the institution. This is consistent with the findings from this study, since students were only aware of a few student support services on campus and in most cases had not even utilized these services. They also mentioned both positive and negative experiences in using these services. For example, participants struggled with their advisors and the wait time to reach someone at the centralized admissions and financial aid office. However, students also mentioned that once they reached someone in the admissions and financial aid offices their answers were solved; one student learned about scholarships through participating with a study coach; and one student found the writing center helpful in writing a lab report for his class. Gordon (1992) suggested that increased support services could aid in reducing issues with retention. Monroe (2006) claimed that students frequently leave institutions when their expectations do not meet the reality of their experience. For the students who encountered difficulties in their transition, it is possible that they could eventually leave the institution if these problems are not resolved.

Lester (2006) found that transfer students reported lower levels of satisfaction with the campus climate and their relationships with peers and faculty members than native students. In this study, participants reported satisfaction with their faculty and classes, but dissatisfaction in some cases with the staff and peers at the institution. Two participants mentioned feeling disconnected from the institution and that they do not feel at home at their current university like they did at their previous college. An orientation of some type may help these students find their place at a university, since freshmen and other incoming students are offered an orientation for the same purposes. Students also cited issues with their advisors as making them feel unwelcome, which was a topic that

came up several times in response to different questions, so it certainly had a negative impact on the experiences of these students in adjusting to the institution. This issue needs to be addressed. Students from the local community college who transferred to the current university did mention that their previous college had a centralized system for most student services, which made it easier to find answers when they had questions and to meet with the correct advisor.

Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory was used as the conceptual framework for this study and it is important to interpret the results within the context of this theory. As discussed in Chapter One, what are referred to as the four S's are sets of factors that influence an individual's ability to cope with a transition (Goodman et al., 2006). The first S, situation, includes factors such as previous experience, concurrent stress, and role change. For example, Ariel's experience with the lack of institutional communication about her financial aid was more stressful due to the concurrent stress she was experiencing from her full-time job. A combination of these factors could have easily led to her making an unsuccessful transition and not being retained by the university. Institutions of higher education should have services and systems in place that help students make a smooth transition, not ones that make the lives of students even more difficult.

The second S in Schlossberg's Transition Theory includes factors relating to the individual's self, such as demographic considerations and psychological resources. While this study did not have enough students participate to consider demographic factors, these are important considerations. The students in this study managed to endure challenges during their transition with their advisors, lack of institutional communication, lack of

awareness about support services, and in some cases without feeling welcome at their new institution. This demonstrates a moderate to high level of resilience and commitment to their goal of achieving a degree and a related position after graduation.

The third S, support, was especially pertinent to the current study. Students who utilized the support services that they were aware of on campus appeared to have a positive experience. However, likely due to a lack of orientation, students were unaware of many other support services available that could have aided significantly in easing their transitional difficulties, such as the Transfer Student Resource Center on campus. Since the students did not receive significant support from the institution, some participants referred to the support from their friends with whom they were able to discuss their transitional challenges as transfer students or obtain information about the institution.

The final S as described by Schlossberg stands for strategies, or what type of coping modes individuals use to make a successful transition. As Ariel commented, “transferring itself is a very scary process.” The students in this study seemed to focus primarily on their classes, as several participants mentioned not being involved or only being minimally involved in campus activities. Goodman et al. (2006) stressed that using multiple coping modes seems to be the most effective method to move through transitions. Participants appear to be using multiple methods. For example, Ariel utilized the information seeking coping mode by ensuring that she obtained the information she required from a friend when the institution did not provide it. Jasmine used the coping mode of direct action when she changed advisors in an attempt to find one that would better help her move through her transition instead of pushing her toward a degree she

was not interested in. The responses of the participants in this study further demonstrate that transferring schools is a significant transition that involves a stressful rollercoaster of emotions and challenges, both positive and negative. They must use multiple strategies to endure the transition in order to be successful at their new institution.

Limitations

This study lacks transferability and trustworthiness since only four participants engaged in focus groups and the results are not generalizable. Also, since there was not a higher number of student participants, demographic factors could not be analyzed for trends. Three of the four participants attended the same local community college prior to attending their current institution and their experiences differed from the one male individual who attended a different community college. There could be something different in the experiences of the participants that transferred from the same community college that could impact the results of this study.

Future Research

Future research should be conducted to add to the body of literature about what challenges transfer students face and how institutional support services are utilized to aid in their transition. A higher number of participants should be obtained to increase transferability and trustworthiness. One method a future study may be able to use in order to retain more student participants is to initially email a survey for interested students to complete. After students complete this survey, they could be invited to participate in a focus group session to elaborate in-depth about their experiences. Another method that may help increase the number of participants is to work closely with one or more offices on campus that provide support services to students in order to identify and invite

students to participate in the research. While this study had limited parameters for the requirements of participants in order to better understand the transitions transfer students experience, if a future study had a different focus and more open requirements for participation, more subjects would likely be obtained.

In future research, students should represent diverse educational backgrounds as well as having demographic diversity such as gender, race/ethnicity, military status, and the number of institutions attended. Comparing the experiences of students who transferred from a community college to a university versus transferring from another university to a university would aid in better understanding how to meet the needs of this diverse population. Also, given the increasing number of veterans on campus it would be very interesting to compare the experiences of military transfer students with non-military transfer students. Since demographic trends in higher education change over time, females are now the majority population in higher education, consisting of 60% of students (Brock, 2010). Future research should analyze differences between males and females, since the transitional difficulties, challenges faced, and experience using institutional support systems may differ by gender.

Students of diverse races and ethnicities often possess different challenges and concerns when selecting and attending an institution of higher education (Page, 2013). Future research should compare the challenges faced in transferring and experiences in using institutional support services for students from different races and ethnicities. Research shows that graduation and persistence rates differ significantly by race and ethnicity (Brock, 2010). In order to help support the groups that are persisting or graduating at low rates, research should be conducted to better understand why the

differences exist. Tailored support services and programs should then be developed to help these students succeed. Transfer students who do not belong to the majority racial or ethnic population may face additional struggles that could lead to these students leaving the institution if they are not supported appropriately.

Recommendations

One recommendation for assisting transfer students overall, but especially individuals that face additional challenges due to factors related to their race or ethnicity, is to develop a mentoring program. Mentors could be a staff or faculty member, or even a fellow transfer student. Having a mentor on campus would likely resolve some of the difficulties that transfer students felt in this study. A mentor could help the student feel at home, increase institutional communication, and serve to connect students with appropriate support services as needed to help them successfully transition and ultimately graduate. One study that analyzed the compounded challenges faced by male Latino students in college found that, “mentoring programs are pivotal in providing ongoing encouragement, support, and resources for Latino male students” (Clark, Ponjuan, Orrock, Wilson, & Flores, 2013, p. 463). Mentoring programs also have become increasingly popular on college campuses to support African-American students. Creating mentoring programs to assist the diverse population of transfer students could be monumental to increase retention, persistence, and graduation rates, along with allowing these students to have a positive experience while in college.

Individuals working in higher education should educate themselves about the unique needs of the diverse transfer student population to improve, create, and implement services and programs to help these students succeed. This large and growing population

cannot continue to be neglected. Administrators should not assume that just because transfer students have previous college experience that they will automatically understand the policies and procedures at their new institution. Academic advisors should be approachable and able to provide students with the information they need. Institutions should create tailored orientation programs to assist students make a successful transition, to increase and improve institutional communication with these students, and to help them be aware of and understand the goals of the support services offered on campus. Additional research should be conducted to better understand the changing needs of these students, and professionals working in higher education should continually educate themselves about this neglected student population.

Summary

Overall, the findings from this study were consistent with the literature. Academic advisors play an important role in helping students make a successful transition to their new institution and should be friendly and knowledgeable. Institutions should communicate properly with all incoming students, not just freshmen, and should provide an orientation tailored to meet the needs of the transfer student population so that they do not feel lost and disconnected. An orientation would also likely help students understand what support services are offered on campus and students may be more inclined to utilize these services when needed. Providing proper orientation services for students to learn about the resources available at the new institution and the different policies and procedures is vital for their success. Also, all of these aforementioned factors play a role in creating a positive campus climate for transfer students, who may feel dissatisfied with their new university based on their negative experiences with advisors, lack of

institutional communication, or confusing structure of the services offered on campus. Also, without staff understanding the needs of this population, necessary services are not offered at all or in the correct manner to assist these students and instead makes them feel disconnected from their new institution, which makes it more difficult for them to acclimate and succeed. The results from this study further illustrate how important it is not to neglect the transfer student population.

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Appendix A

Schlossberg's Transition Model

Transitions

Events or nonevents resulting in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles.

Meaning for the Individual Based on:

Type: anticipated, unanticipated, nonevent

Context: relationship to transition and the setting

Impact: alterations in daily life

The Transition Process

Reactions over time

Moving in, moving through, and moving out

Coping with Transitions

Influenced by ratio of assets and liabilities in regard to four sets of factors:

Situation

Trigger, timing, control, role change, duration, previous experience, concurrent stress, assessment

Self

Personal and demographic characteristics: socioeconomic status, gender, age, health, ethnicity/culture

Psychological resources: ego development, outlook, commitment, values, spirituality and resilience

Support

Types: intimate, family, friends, institutional

Functions: affect, affirmation, aid, honest feedback

Measurement: stable and changing supports

Strategies

Three categories: modify situation, control meaning, manage stress in aftermath

Four coping modes: information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, intrapsychic behavior

Note: Compiled from information in Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006).

Chart adapted with permission from Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. Copyright © 2010 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

- 1) Did you participate in the post-secondary education option (PSEO) or dual enrollment program in high school?
 Yes No

- 2) Are you an international student or permanent resident?
 Yes No

- 3) What is your gender? _____

- 4) What is your race/ethnicity? _____

- 5) What is your current age? _____

- 6) Including your current university, how many institutions of higher education have you attended?
 1 2
 3 4
 5 Other: _____

- 7) Please list the names of the colleges or universities you have attended.
 1. _____
 2. _____
 3. _____
 4. _____

- 5. _____
- 6. _____
- 7. _____
- 8. _____
- 9. _____
- 10. _____

8) Are you a veteran or current member of the U.S. military? If yes, please specify which branch.

Yes, I am a veteran

Yes, I am a current member Branch: _____

No

Appendix C

Audio Consent Form

I, _____, acknowledge and accept that the audio from the focus group session in which I participate on _____ (m/d/y), will be recorded via the researcher and her colleague's cellular devices.

Please note: The audio recording will be used solely to aid in transcription purposes and will be erased upon the completion of this thesis research. You will still remain an anonymous participant if the session is recorded. You have the right to refuse audio recording for this session. You will not be penalized and are still welcome to participate.

Yes

No

Please print your name: _____

Please sign your name: _____

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form/Cover Letter

Project Title: THE TRANSFER STUDENT EXPERIENCE: CHALLENGES AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS FOR UNDERGRADUATE TRANSFER STUDENTS AT A PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Olivia Matthews, and I am a graduate student in the College of Education and Human Services. As part of my graduate research, I am requesting your participation in my research study, which is described below. You have been asked to participate in this research because the Office of Institutional Research identified you as a transfer student who began attending this institution during the fall term of 2014.

Purposes of the study: To collect information from transfer students regarding their transitional challenges, how well institutional support systems assist these students in adjusting and achieving success, their perceived level of institutional acceptance as a transfer student, and if there are differences between students with certain characteristics. The goal for this research is to identify challenges transfer students face and learn more about how helpful institutional support services are and how the individuals working to provide these services can better support this student population. Demographic factors may also be considered to see if there are any significant differences in the experiences of

transfer students of different ages, genders, races, ethnicities, military statuses, class levels, and institutional grade point averages.

Methods used for this study: All results of this study will be used for research purposes. An email invitation to participate in this study will be sent to students identified by the Office of Institutional Research as beginning transfer students in fall of 2014, who were never part of the post-secondary education option (PSEO) or dual enrollment program in high school and are not international students or permanent residents. Students will be given a list of dates and times for focus group opportunities and will be asked to RSVP by email to one of these sessions, if interested. Upon arrival a demographic questionnaire, audio consent form, and informed consent document will be provided for review and will need to be signed by the participant prior to the session beginning. These documents will have a pseudonym listed on them that has been previously linked to the participant's real name so the results will remain confidential. Name cards will be provided to participants with their pseudonym listed to help link the verbal responses of participants with their questionnaire responses. A graduate student from the same master's program as the researcher will take notes during the sessions to aid in accuracy. Students will also be provided with a form to accept or deny their consent for the session to be recorded. No session will be recorded if even one individual denies consent. The researcher and her research colleague's cellular phones will be used to record audio from the focus groups when consent is unanimously granted. All audio recordings (when applicable), transcriptions from focus groups, and demographic questionnaires will be destroyed via

shredding and erased from any password protected computer files once the requirements for this thesis research is completed. The focus groups are expected to take between 30-60 minutes.

Rights as a participant: There are no known risks of participating in this research. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. All students who show up for a session will be entered into a raffle to win a \$25 Visa gift card. Two participants will be awarded with this incentive prize. Students who leave a session early will still be entered in the raffle. Data collected during the focus groups and questionnaires will contain no personally identifying information. Results will also not include personal identifiers; only the pseudonym provided to each student by the researcher will be used. You are free to leave and terminate your participation in this study at any time without prejudice or repercussions. All participants will individually receive by email transcriptions of the session in which they participated and the overall findings from the combined focus groups to review for credibility and confirmability purposes. Your signature on this consent form indicates your consent.

If you have any questions about this study please contact the principal investigator, Olivia Matthews (newcomer.7@wright.edu), or Committee Chair/Advisor Carol Patitu Ph.D. (937-775-4148; carol.patitu@wright.edu). For further questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact WSU Institutional Review Board 937-775-4462 or robyn.wilks@wright.edu.

Print name here

Signature here

Date

Appendix E

Focus Group Questions

- 1) During the transition from your previous college or university, what challenges did you encounter?
- 2) What support services offered by the university are you aware of that could help you with the aforementioned challenges? Which of these services have you used? What were your experiences in using these services? Did the services help solve the transitional difficulties you were experiencing?
- 3) Do you feel that you are adequately supported and appreciated as a transfer student at this university? Is the atmosphere welcoming? Why or why not?
- 4) Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences that you think is important for the university or me to know?
- 5) Do you know that there is a Transfer Student Resource Center on campus?

Appendix F

Introduction & Ground Rules

WELCOME

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. I appreciate your willingness to participate. The audio from this session will/will not be recorded. Participants will be identified by their provided pseudonyms only and therefore will remain anonymous.

INTRODUCTIONS

Researcher/Facilitator; Note-taker

PURPOSE OF THE FOCUS GROUP

The purpose of this study is to collect information from transfer students regarding their transitional challenges, how well institutional support systems assist these students in adjusting and achieving success, their perceived level of institutional acceptance as a transfer student, and if there are differences between students with certain characteristics. The goal for this research is to identify challenges transfer students face and learn more about how helpful institutional support services are and how the individuals working to provide these services can better support this student population. Demographic factors may also be considered to see if there are any significant differences in the experiences of transfer students of different ages, genders, races, ethnicities, military statuses, class levels, and institutional grade point averages.

GROUND RULES

- 1) Be respectful of all experiences, opinions, and perspectives shared.
- 2) There are no right or wrong answers, speak up whether you agree or disagree.

Every response is important and we want to hear what you have to say.

- 3) What is discussed within this room stays within this room.
- 4) Relax and be yourself.
- 5) Do not interrupt each other. Please allow each individual to respond before adding your experience, opinion, or perspective.