PLAYING NICE IN THE SANDBOX:
EXPLORING COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCES TO SUPPORT
TRANSFER STUDENT SUCCESS

A thesis presented
by
Donna Petras
to
The School of Education
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2017
Abstract

This study was designed to explore the collaborative experiences between community college and 4-year institution administrators to improve the transfer process, enhance transfer student success, and support bachelor’s degree completion for community college transfer students. Knowledge generated is expected to inform staff and faculty at community colleges and 4-year institutions as to how collaboration will enhance the success of transfer students with optimal transfer of credits and completion of the baccalaureate degree. The qualitative research tradition of interpretative phenomenological analysis was used for this study. Semi-structured interviews were held with five community college and five university leaders. With the goal of approaching my research as a scholar-practitioner, the Theory of Collaborative Advantage (TCA) was the framed used and is a practice-based theory about the management of collaborations which focuses on the potential for collaborative advantage arising out of inter-organizational partnerships. The findings indicate that these leaders agree that collaborations are advantageous, transfer students should be supported through joint institutional efforts, and policy should incentivize institutions to collaborate. Findings also show that key resources and attributes are necessary for successful transfer including inter-institutional support networks and impactful future practices should engage faculty, use data to drive decisions, and structured policies and systems should be implemented.

Keywords: transfer, collaboration, student success, retention, articulation, FERPA, course equivalency, concurrent enrollment, student swirl, GED, student services, swirl, community college, university, degree completion, baccalaureate degree, transfer credit, communication, commitment, leadership, trust, advising, navigation, learning, processes, data, policy, financial, curricular alignment, mutual respect, common goals
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr. Kimberly Nolan, my advisor and first reader, for her all-inclusive support and guidance in the development, research, writing and defense of this study. I’d also like to extend special thanks to Dr. Joseph McNabb, my second reader, for providing thorough and thoughtful feedback. My third reader, Dr. Jim Sawyer, is my current boss and colleague and am extremely thankful for his willingness to be the third reader as well as his not-so-subtle persistence that I pursue and complete this educational journey. Lastly, I would be remiss if I did not thank my husband John, daughters Kaelyn and Megan, and my dear friend Barb whom I “blame” for pushing me to take the first step toward my doctoral degree. I also need to acknowledge my extended family, friends, professional colleagues and classmates for their reassurance and being my greatest cheerleaders. I am very fortunate to have this circle of support and hope to demonstrate the impact of collaboration to support transfer student success, just as I have been fortunate to have their collective encouragement and faith in accomplishing this goal.
# Table of Contents

**Abstract** .................................................................................................................................................. 3

**Acknowledgements** .......................................................................................................................... 4

**Table of Contents** .................................................................................................................................. 5

**Chapter One: Introduction to the Study** .............................................................................................. 7

  - Context and Background ..................................................................................................................... 7
  - Rationale and Significance ................................................................................................................ 9
  - Problem Statement ............................................................................................................................ 12
  - Statement of Purpose and Research Question .................................................................................. 13
  - Definitions of Key Terminology ....................................................................................................... 13
  - Theoretical Framework ..................................................................................................................... 14

**Chapter Two: Literature Review** ....................................................................................................... 21

  - Public Policy and Policy-makers’ Influence on Transfer Issues ...................................................... 22
  - Institutional Processes and Support Services for Transfer Students ........................................... 28
  - Transfer Agreements and Collaborative Approaches ..................................................................... 37
  - Summary ............................................................................................................................................. 40

**Chapter Three: Research Design** ..................................................................................................... 41

  - Qualitative Research Approach ..................................................................................................... 43
  - Participants ......................................................................................................................................... 47
  - Procedures .......................................................................................................................................... 48
  - Summary ............................................................................................................................................. 58

**Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis** ............................................................................................... 59

  - Elements of Effective Collaboration .............................................................................................. 61
  - Resources and Attributes for Successful Transfer .......................................................................... 73
  - Impactful Future Practices .............................................................................................................. 84
  - Summary of Findings ....................................................................................................................... 94

**Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice** ................................................................ 98

  - Elements of Effective Collaboration .............................................................................................. 99
  - Resources and Attributes for Successful Transfer .......................................................................... 103
  - Impactful Future Practices ............................................................................................................ 108
  - Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 117
    - Recommendations for Practice .................................................................................................... 119
    - Recommendations for Future Research ....................................................................................... 124

**References** ........................................................................................................................................ 127
Appendices........................................................................................................144

Appendix A: Email and Phone Script for Participant Recruitment………………...144
Appendix B: Consent to Participate.................................................................146
Appendix C: Interview Protocol and Questions.............................................149
Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis is to explore the collaborative experiences between community college and 4-year institution administrators to improve the transfer process, enhance transfer student success, and support bachelor’s degree completion for community college transfer students. The lack of collaboration between 4-year institutions and community colleges is defined as the resulting barriers and difficulties transfer students experience when little or no collaboration occurs. Knowledge generated is expected to inform staff and faculty at community colleges and 4-year institutions as to how collaboration will enhance the success of transfer students with optimal transfer of credits and completion of the baccalaureate degree.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to community college transfer issues to provide context and background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, drawing connections to potential beneficiaries of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that serves as the lens for the study is introduced and explained.

**Context and Background**

The current national focus on postsecondary educational initiatives have put the baccalaureate degree at the forefront of the student success agenda as the minimum credential required to support economic development in our country. The high cost of attendance at 4-year institutions, deficits in a student’s academic preparedness and the need to manage personal and family obligations influence many students to begin their educational path to a baccalaureate
degree at a community college. Community colleges are in all 50 states and comprise nearly 25% of all institutions of higher learning with 45% of all college students attending a community college (Tollefson, 2009). Although the mission of community colleges has ebbed and flowed, the transfer function remains important to its image and is recognized as contributing to the educational attainment of our citizenry (Grubb, 1991).

The transfer of community college students who then successfully go on to complete the baccalaureate degree is the shared responsibility of policy-makers, educational institutions, and the students themselves. Public policy requires refinement to be effective which may include incentivizing students to begin their educational path at a community college and then transfer to complete the baccalaureate degree. Educational institutions must work with their faculty and transfer partners to ensure the optimization of credits taken so money and time are not wasted.

The academic and non-academic approaches at the community college and four-year institution impact transfer student success, but vary in their effectiveness. The impact of state-level transfer policies have, at this point in the research, proven to be a less effective approach to improve the transfer rates and baccalaureate degree completion for transfer students. As more students are expected to seek out 4-year degrees in the future, greater use of 2-year college student transfer services and articulation programs will occur as well as an increase in the amount of required reporting and tracking (Sylvia, Song, & Waters 2010).

Providing transparent transfer information from both the community college and four-year institution and reporting information about institutions’ transfer policies and performance, educational institutions, policy-makers, and state officials can all better understand and improve transfer policies and effectiveness to enhance student success in the most cost effective way.
(Smith & Miller, 2009). The study by Zamani (2001) noted that to create and optimize transfer student opportunities, there is a need for 2- and 4-year colleges to work in partnership.

Community college students face many possible barriers that may inhibit successful transfer to a 4-year institution. These include financial, personal, and academic preparation as well as those specific to institutional practices (Hagedorn, 2004; Rhine, Milligan & Nelson, 2000). Many students are uncertain of their college decisions, unsure of their own ability as well as the academic standards of college and, therefore, choose to start at a community college and can then have the option to transfer (Belfield & Bailey, 2011). Therefore, this study seeks to understand the collaborative experiences of administrators at community colleges and 4-year institutions to support student transfer success.

**Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for this study is the researcher’s interest in expanding the study and understanding of how collaboration between community colleges and 4-year institutional administrators can enhance a seamless transfer processes for students. Several factors can impede or hamper the transfer process for students. Some students self-navigate, which can lead to enrolling in inappropriate or non-transferable courses resulting in re-work and time wasted. As noted by Ott and Cooper (2013), when students learn about a loss of transfer credits, they are upset and discouraged. This can result in poor retention rates and lengthen the time to completion. Academically underprepared students with low basic skills in reading, English, and math may be required to take developmental coursework, but typically do not transfer nor do these courses satisfy graduation requirements. The challenge of engaging faculty at four-year institutions to participate in course transferability evaluation and their misperceptions of
appropriate rigor of community college course work, may result in inconsistent course equivalency determinations (Kisker, 2007).

Non-academic factors impeding transfer and completion are especially a barrier for at-risk student populations including low-income, under-represented minority Black and Latino/a students, and first-generation in college students. Lack of family support, little engagement with their peers in campus activities as well as financial barriers, work, and family responsibilities contribute to the challenges faced by students intending to transfer (Duggan & Pickering, 2007). In addition, reduced counseling and advising resources and unfounded lines of role demarcation limiting other staff to advice and/or mentor students also results in misdirection for the student’s transfer path (Bahr, 2008).

The surge of community colleges in the United States occurred in the 1950s as an educational option for many of the veterans returning after World War II (MOs holder & Circle, 2007). Initially the focus of community colleges was on technical and career training, but over time the development of coursework and programs led community colleges to serve as the foundation of a college education. The result is nearly a third of students transfer at some point in their academic careers with a quarter of those changing schools more than once (Hassler et al., 2012).

An important finding is the relationship between transfer institutions’ partnerships and faculty involvement in transfer efforts. Involving faculty at both the two- and four-year campuses is critical to promoting a culture of transfer (Kisker, 2007). A more professional atmosphere and personalized services, such as having a greater proportion of full-time faculty rather than part-
time and expanding academic support services, seem to benefit the traditional-age transfer student population (Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Laubach, 2008).

The national completion agenda as well as private foundations such as the Lumina and Gates foundations, have all set goals to increase degree completion at community colleges and universities (Claret, 2013). To facilitate the completion of a bachelor’s degree, transfer pathways will need to become more seamless. Transfer processes as well as institutional characteristics can impact the interest in transferring and the transfer rates of students. When processes are not seamless and do not focus on optimizing student services, transfer success is unlikely. According to Townsend and Wilson (2006), disengaged faculty, large class size, and the research missions of many 4-year universities negatively affect the transfer students’ social and academic integration. In addition, 4-year college efforts to facilitate the fit of community college transfer students into the receiving institution have been minor in comparison to efforts to assist first-year native students (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

A clear demarcation between a transfer policy’s intent and effectiveness is another consideration. Some policies incentivize or mandate institutions to participate in joint articulation efforts, but do not include aspects of student support such as mandated advising (Anderson, Sun & Alfonso, 2006). By examining the number and types of credits transferred, as well as the timing and attainment of bachelor’s degrees for transfer students, policy-makers could begin to determine appropriate changes in policy to actually affect student outcomes (Roska & Keith, 2008).

The typical profile of the community college student having greater personal responsibilities outside of the classroom carries over to transfer students, especially those at-risk
who often struggle to find a balance in various aspects of their academic, social, work, and family obligations (Duggan & Pickering, 2007). Black students and students with a GED have a lower estimated probability of transferring from the community college (Hoachlander, Sikora, Horn, & Carroll, 2003). Interestingly, students receiving financial aid, working while enrolled, and are dependent on parental income increases the probability of transfer. Female students are as likely as males to transfer to a four-year institution (Anderson et al., 2006). One of the most important findings appears to be that adjustment to 4-year universities, in terms of satisfaction and academic performance, is most strongly influenced by how well transfer students have prepared for the transfer process (Berger & Malaney, 2003).

The outcomes of this investigation will provide recommendations for all stakeholders involved in transfer including students attempting to optimize their transfer of credits. In addition, both community colleges and 4-year institutions will benefit by exploring the advantages of collaboration.

**Problem Statement**

In many direct and indirect ways, the problems with the transferability of courses and degrees as well as retention to completion are referenced in the national and state higher education debates as barriers to successful transfer (Boswell, 2004). This includes persistence to degree completion, the bachelor’s degree as a minimum credential for job attainment, accessibility, affordability, and the growing issue of managing student debt. At the course level, credits can be transferred to satisfy a specific course or awarded as general credit. From the student’s perspective, they are told their course transfers, but in many cases general credit does not apply to satisfying the bachelor’s degree requirements and ultimately results in wasted time
and money (Hagedorn, Moon, Cypers, Maxwell, & Lester, 2006). As noted by Marcus (2013), students churn for long periods of time in college, piling up debt and wasting time repeating the same courses when their credits do not transfer. As a result, student retention, persistence and completion are at risk.

Statement of Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore how community college student transfer can be enhanced through the collaboration of administrators at 2- and 4-year institutions. The research this study sought to answer is:

How do 2- and 4-year college and university administrators understand and describe the impact of collaboration on successful transfer and the degree completion processes for community college students?

Definitions of Key Terminology

Following are definitions for key terminology used in this study:

Transfer – the movement of community college students taking credits earned to a 4-year college or university.

Retention – student remains at a higher education institution until the educational goal is completed.

Articulation – are formal agreements between two or more colleges and universities that document the transferable courses and policies for a specific academic program or degree.

FERPA – the Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act was enacted in 1974 to ensure the privacy of educational records.

Course Equivalency – a college course at one institution has the same objectives and course outcomes as a course offered at another.
Concurrent Enrollment – a student is enrolled and attends courses at two or more higher education institutions during the same time period.

Student Swirl – students who swirl have multi-institutional attendance with discontinuous enrollment.

GED – General Education Development tests that include four subject areas which, when passed, certify that the test-taker has high school-level academic skills.

The following section of this chapter will include a description and discussion of the Theory of Collaborative Advantage (TCA) which will serve as the theoretical lens for this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

The primary evaluation component of this research is the impact of collaborative relationships between the community college and transfer destination on the success of transfer students. Many varied theoretical frameworks have been associated with similar research topics on collaboration including network embeddedness theory, negotiated order theory, and social exchange theory, to name just a few, but that the framework of collaborative advantage best aligns with the researcher’s problem of practice. A similar theory of collaborative inertia is also part of the organizing principles to the theory; however, the collaborative advantage aspects are the focus of the organization of this research.

The theory of collaborative advantage (TCA) is described by Vangen and Huxham (2006) as a practice-based theory about the management of collaborations which focuses on the potential for collaborative advantage arising out of inter-organizational partnerships. The development of TCA emerged in 1989 out of research by these authors after studying many types of collaborative examples. Their research included people who headed up major partnerships to those acting as members representing organizations on matters that were of concern to them collectively and upon which they needed to take action. The research paradigm
of this theory has some similarity to ethnographic insights from naturally occurring data, but differs in that the researcher is expected to intervene in the organizations studied and their members (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). The authors describe this form of research as following a phenomenological approach. Seminal authors Das and Teng (2000) also refer to the theory as aligning partner resources which can directly affect the collective strengths as well as conflicts of an alliance and its performance.

According to Huxham and Vangen (2000), the TCA is also structured with collaborative inertia which results in a tension between the two theories. Collaborations are conceptualized as paradoxical in nature with contradictions that can cause inevitable differences between partners. The synergy that can be created through jointly working together for a common goal is juxtaposed with the tendency for collaborative groups to be riddled with conflict and slow to produce results. The advantage versus inertia is an element within this theory that assisted in the exploration of the subjects and institutions at the center of this research as well as providing a framework that can be used in reflective practice.

The conceptual framework for TCA includes four themes that integrate the theory including managing goals, trust, cultural diversity, and leadership (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Congruence on goals allows for greater alignment and commitment among the collaboration participants resulting in a greater likelihood that the goals will be accomplished. Trust is also seen as a necessary condition for successful collaboration. For the purpose of the TCA frame, culture is defined broadly to address the distinct professional, organizational and national cultures to which the collaborators belong. The context of leadership is also defined in a non-traditional perspective. This theory does not observe leaders and followers, but instead focuses on the mechanisms that lead collaborative activity and outcomes.
This framework demonstrates that without careful development and organization, collaborations are more likely to reach collaborative inertia than collaborative advantage. And, without proper management, many collaborative efforts usually fail. To achieve thoughtful and contributory findings of this research to influence a successful collaborative effort, these theories guided the investigation of the problem as well as the qualitative approaches to gathering data. Impacting the success of transfer students is a complex issue that is influenced in many more ways than how well a group collaborates toward improving the transfer students’ success. Although inertia may be experienced, the final outcome is perceived as better than would have been the case without the collaboration.

**Critics of the Theory**

Many of the examples of TCA are related to public, governmental or business entities. Therefore, the literature is somewhat limited for the application of this lens in higher education collaborative studies. A summary of the criticisms of the theory of collaborative advantage are organized around the four themes described earlier including managing goals, trust, cultural diversity, and leadership.

An important linking mechanism in a collaborative effort is initial agreement on the problem definition and goals. The accomplishment of goals in a collaborative project requires time for negotiation and exchange (Fox & Faver, 1984). This can prove to be difficult if only a few staff people are dedicated full-time to the relationship and others may be evaluated on the performance of their primary responsibilities and therefore often neglect duties relating to the collaboration (Kanter, 1994). Fox and Faver (1984) also note that a long-term collaborative project necessitates interdependence and a strong sense of commitment to negotiate through potential obstacles that may arise. When participants in the collaboration do not completely agree
on a shared purpose, they may not be able to agree on next steps (Bryson, Crosby, and Stone, 2006). In addition, the authors note that a collaborative effort needs to be accountable to measure success and develop a system to document its results. This, too, requires commitment and resources.

Trusting relationships are often depicted as the essence of collaboration and maintaining the trust once it is built, is an ongoing requirement for successful collaboration (Bryson, et al., 2006). Collaboration partners build trust by sharing information and knowledge and demonstrating competency, good intentions, and follow-through. However, failure to practice and apply these trust-building characteristics and unilateral action can undermine trust. Although members of a collaborative entity may reference trusting each other, in reality the trust among all partners may not be strong. This aspect needs to be examined to determine how it can be developed and maintained to ensure a trusting working relationship with one’s collaborators (Fox & Faver, 1984). Any interpersonal relationship requires an investment of time and emotional energy and, even in the best collaborative examples, there will be inevitable differences of opinion. If prior relationships do not exist, then partnerships are likely to emerge more incrementally and begin with small, informal deals that do not require much trust, but may also delay the accomplishment of goals (Bryson, et al., 2006).

Cultural differences need to be examined to determine how they may create friction or synergy. Differences in authority, reporting, and decision-making may negatively influence the momentum of a collaborative effort (Kanter, 1994). If members of the collaboration differ in status, mission, size or reputation, conflict may be exacerbated, jeopardizing the success of the effort (Bryson, et al., 2006).
As previously referenced, the TCA frame defines leadership in a non-traditional way by focusing on how components of the collaborative tasks and outcomes are led. Varying levels of employees from the institutions participating in the collaborative may be responsible for serving in those activities. Some may not have the same vision and commitment to the effort or the same rapport among the collaborators (Kanter, 1994). Two key leadership roles in any collaborative are sponsors and champions (Bryson, et al., 2006). Sponsors are defined as individuals who have considerable prestige, authority, and access to resources they can use on behalf of the collaboration. Champions are people who focus intently on keeping the collaboration going and use process skills to help the collaboration accomplish its goals. As noted by Bryson et al. (2006), the effort could be compromised when there is a turnover in these roles or when powerful players such as top officials leave, join, or alter their level of involvement in the collaboration.

Rationale

In addition to the theory of collaborative advantage, several theoretical frameworks were studied in the process of determining the lens of this research including network embeddedness theory, negotiated order theory, and social exchange theory. The network embeddedness theory studies how enmeshed an entity is in a network by evaluating the components of social capital, advancement and trust. Its application has been referenced more in supply chain collaboration and the impact of redistribution of resources versus relationship exchange. One aspect of TCA not addressed by negotiated order theory is that the researcher intends to evaluate the more pragmatic process of collaborative efforts which was not articulated in the negotiated order theory seminal articles reviewed. The foundation of the social exchange theory is power and its impact on social influence; however, power is not regarded as the most sociological aspect of an
inter-organizational collaboration with common goals. After extensive contemplation of these theories and others, the theory of collaborative advantage was chosen as the best frame for this project.

**Application of the Theory to this Study**

This framework applies directly to the research with the goal of evaluating the collaborative experiences which influence and positively impact the successful transfer of community college students to complete the baccalaureate degree. The TCA makes reference to the membership structures of collaborative initiatives and describes them as often ambiguous, complex and dynamic. This can create issues with agreement on all the integrative themes of the theory.

The participants that were the focus of this study were located in a Midwest state and hold leadership positions at both public and private institutions. Each person has varying capacities to manage goals and the power to make decisions. Of the 4-year institutions participating, the cultural diversity was evident based on the institutional characteristics with some of the institutions being large, research universities and others small, Christian, private colleges. The way success was defined by the participants also varied based on the importance of transfer students from community colleges to each of their respective institutions.

The community college participants varied in size and demography and contributed their perspectives in collaborating with 4-year institutions on matters of student transfer. The researcher directly participated and intervened as noted in the collaborative advantage theoretical framework and described in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm.
In summary, this theory was chosen as a pragmatic approach for the researcher’s study. With the goal of being a scholar-practitioner, this frame allowed for the exploration and research for the scholarship gained as well as the practical application of outcomes learned to enhance the collaboration between community colleges and 4-year institutions to improve their support of transfer students. This lens was the overlay of the exploration of the literature in the evolution of the community college as well as transfer education public policy, student and institutional characteristics, transfer agreements and collaborative approaches between community colleges and 4-year colleges and universities.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review will explore and evaluate the research and studies completed regarding the transfer function between community colleges and 4-year institutions. This review will provide the context and background of the research related to the collaborative experiences of institutional administrators at 4-year institutions and community colleges. Past research has documented the struggles faced by transfer students related to credits earned at the community college that do not transfer and the success of transfer students to complete the bachelor’s degree. In addition to areas of study that focus on the student attributes, research has also evaluated the individual efforts of either the community college or 4-year institution. While these studies provide a description of the issues and barriers as well as efforts at the institutional level, there is little research that focuses on the impact of collaborative efforts between the two institutional types to ensure credit transferability and completion.

This review will evaluate the literature by exploring the following questions: (a) What is the influence and impact of past and present public policy and policy-makers on transfer-related issues? (b) What institutional processes and support services are provided for the various transfer student types? (c) How do transfer agreements and collaborative approaches between community colleges and transfer destinations support successful completion of the bachelor’s degree? Collectively, the exploration of the literature to address these questions provides an overview to support the context of the research addressed in this study. It also contributes to the determination of the gaps in the literature related to collaborative efforts to support transfer students.
Public Policy and Policy-Makers’ Influence on Transfer Issues

Historical foundations and the evolution of trends often provide a window to the future. Community colleges are in all 50 states and comprise nearly 25% of all institutions of higher learning with 45% of all college students attending a community college (Tollefson, 2009).

The Evolution of the Community College

The junior college that emerged in the early part of the last century has supported the transfer mission strand throughout its evolution into today’s community college structure (Townsend, 2001). Following World War I it was suggested that two-year colleges focus on offering training for semi-professional jobs and would, therefore, attain status as the capstone of the American vocational education system; however, even after the influx of returning servicemen after World War II, most community colleges remained transfer-oriented (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

The surge of community colleges in the United States occurred in the late 1940s and early 1950s as an educational option for many veterans returning from World War II with the initial focus on technical and career training, but over time the development of coursework and programs led community colleges to serve as the foundation of a college education (Mosholder & Zirkle, 2007). The increase in transfer rates and expansion of policies during this time period were impacted by the post-WW II Higher Education for American Democracy report (Mosholder & Zirkle, 2007). In the 1950s and 1960s, the community college mission expanded to offer associate degrees and a renewed focus on vocational programs and, as a result of the Higher Education Acts of 1965 and 1972, higher education coordinating agencies were created (Lee, Mackie-Lewis, & Marks, 1993).
The redefinition of the mission of community colleges occurred in the 1980s and included access for minorities and other disadvantaged segments which actually resulted in a decline of transfer rates during this time period (Molsholder & Zirkle, 2007). The revival of the transfer mission began in the mid-1990s due to influences of state policy-makers viewing this path as a way to save money (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Due to this change in mission, community colleges embraced the open access admissions model which provided many more students the opportunity to transfer to a 4-year institution and are now the starting point for most disadvantaged and non-traditional students (Altstadt, 2012; Molsholder & Zirkle, 2007). Enrollment has more than tripled since 1970 and now over 40 percent of all postsecondary students are educated at a community college (Shapiro et al., 2013).

**Democratization versus Diversion**

Community colleges take pride in being an access point to higher education for underserved populations. Economists have been interested in measuring not only the extent to which this is true, called the *democratization effect*, but also the impact that community colleges may have had in reducing the number of bachelor’s degree recipients by diverting some students away from 4-year colleges, called the *diversion effect* (Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Romano, 2011). *Democratization* increased access for many students due to the open admissions practices and low costs at community colleges; conversely, *diversion* channeled students into the community college where they attended part-time and were employed while attending school, potentially delaying their educational progress toward a baccalaureate degree (Long & Kurlaender, 2009). Critics state that community colleges *divert* students who would complete more post-secondary education at the 4-year institution while advocates assert that community colleges are lower cost options for those who are financially disadvantaged (Rouse, 1995). The
majority of studies have found that the impact of the community college has been to increase educational attainment in the United States resulting in both increased access and a positive impact for the economy as a whole (Romano, 2011).

For the United States to remain globally competitive, colleges must graduate more students and policy-makers should consider the impact of pre-college factors, such as college readiness and race, on the effectiveness of leading indicators, such as attending college full-time and continuous enrollment, to most efficiently increase degree completion rates (Davidson, 2014). Research and data show that academic outcomes are similar for community college transfers and native students, which demonstrates that community colleges are successful in preparing students for transfer. Such evidence may be relevant to state policy-makers, since it demonstrates that attending a community college may not affect the future success of transfer students (Hilmer, 1997).

**Funding Policies**

One of the attractive platforms for community colleges is their affordability due to the funding model of state appropriations, tuition, and in some cases, local taxpayer support. Governance of community colleges varies from single-state governing boards to minimal state control and strong local governing boards and the relative degrees of state and local control of community colleges generally follow the money, in that the funds provided by each component of local and state boards and the legislature is proportional to the accountability expected by each (Tollefson, 2009). Although tuition has increased over time, community colleges became more affordable through the 1970s and 1980s with the creation of the federal Pell grant program resulting in the net price to decrease (Dowd, 2003). However, by the early 1990s the net price
was higher than it had been in two decades, and many more community college students were forced to borrow to finance their education (Doyle, 2009).

Findings in the literature also support state policies that provide incentives for academically prepared students to choose community colleges at the beginning of their postsecondary career. The state benefits from an efficient system that provides a lower cost college education, and students benefit from an effective pathway to the bachelor’s degree supported by transfer and curriculum articulation between the two sectors (Melguizo & Dowd, 2009). Interestingly, some data show that students in states with mandated articulation agreements do not experience an increased probability of transferring (Anderson et al., 2006; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).

Community college appropriations at the state level have continued to evolve and many states have begun to experiment with performance-based funding models. This model allocates state support on various outcome measures, not just on enrollment, including retention, progression, or completion (Altstadt, 2012). Community colleges are generally evaluated using measures based on those developed for senior institutions resulting in inappropriate comparisons given the large number of part-time students who take longer to complete (Askin, 2007). The public hears a myriad of different statistics on college enrollment rates, completion rates, grades, and time-to-degree, but many of these data are never validated (Adelman, 2005). The transfer rate for community college students is difficult to define, and although the most complete picture is provided by using multiple indicators, this approach can be burdensome and expensive to achieve (Bradburn, Hurst, & Peng, 2001). Sound and well-utilized data systems are as important as dedicated and well-prepared faculty, caring and knowledgeable student support staff, and up-
to-date and appropriate educational facilities and technologies are, to ensuring successful student outcomes (Ewell, 2010).

Institutions that develop programs to achieve increases in funding based on performance could realize improved retention rates resulting in additional tuition revenue (Hermes, 2012). In an effort to maximize their funding, colleges might be tempted to decrease efforts to support disadvantaged students who would likely weaken their performance measures and, therefore, performance-based programs should place a premium on degree completion and transfer by low-income students and underrepresented populations which is critical to rewarding outcomes and not just enrollments (Hermes, 2012). To diagnosis achievement gaps and develop strategies for improvement, states should disaggregate state-level analyses by college and make the results available to colleges for their own use (Ewell & Jenkins, 2008).

Attending a community college before attending a 4-year university may be especially attractive to low-income students. The tuition savings from attending two years at a community college are substantial with 2-year institutions providing an increasingly important transfer function to 4-year colleges (Fairlie & Grunberg, 2013). At the national level, average annual tuition at community colleges is $2,792 compared with $8,070 for public universities and $24,525 for private universities (U.S. Department of Education [DoE], 2013).

**Transfer Pathways**

Officials in most states support the transfer mission of community colleges (Askin, 2007). Participants in the Access to the Baccalaureate Roundtable recommended funding to establish state-wide record systems, system-wide common general core curriculum, and common course numbering systems for general education courses to encourage accrediting bodies to promote transfer, and access to the baccalaureate degree (Boswell, 2004). Policy-makers often
have a traditional view of educational attainment as students move throughout post-secondary pathways. This view may not reflect the non-linear paths students are currently taking to complete credentials and degrees. Students *swirl* going from community college to 4-year institution, 4-year to 4-year, 4-year to community college or concurrently enroll in various institutions at one time resulting in a great challenge to track students and collect data (Barkley, 1993; Bontrager & Clemons, 2005). This includes many students, including native students at four-year institutions, utilizing the community college to earn credits toward the bachelor’s degree.

These varying enrollment patterns should be considered when developing state-level policies related to articulation and transfer (Townsend, 2001). As greater numbers of students *swirl* through post-secondary institutions, colleges are faced with challenges including student tracking, coordination of programs, curriculum development and delivery, and articulation of individual courses (Barkley, 1993; Borden, 2004). According to federal studies, more than two-thirds of students who earn a bachelor’s degree attended two or more institutions to do so and one in five attended three or more (Adelman, 2005). To be effective in the development of future policies, as students make choices about various program and institutional choices as well as postsecondary paths, institutions and policy-makers should focus on strategies that facilitate success (Hossler et al., 2012).

Many studies have evaluated the equity of transfer paths and opportunities among all students which has implications for transfer policy. As transfer rates vary by social background, state policies need to evaluate the implications of developing legislation to ensure minority and working-class populations that focus on access to post-secondary education via the community college and also allow for an equal chance for transfer (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Hagedorn et
Further study would be beneficial to evaluate the effectiveness of transfer student motivators at the state level. If students are incentivized through transfer scholarships, rewarded for beginning at a community college, and guaranteed admission at the 4-year institution for completing the associate degree, then more students may appropriately navigate the transfer path to complete the baccalaureate (Mery & Shioring, 2011).

Policy-makers should offer incentives for 2- and 4-year institutions to work together to strategically partner in the development of best practices around transfer which includes faculty collaboration (Hoffman-Johnson, 2007). This includes course alignment and outcomes as well as degree pathways. In addition, many studies have concluded the ineffectiveness of transfer and articulated plans in increasing transfer rates; however, they have not evaluated the factors as to why or the ways to improve their success to support and incentivize baccalaureate completion (Grites, 2013; Oseguera & Rhee, 2009).

**Conclusion.** Although the mission of community colleges has varied over the last century, the transfer function remains important to its image and is recognized as contributing to the educational attainment of our citizenry (Grubb, 1991). Providing transparent transfer information from both the community college and 4-year institution and reporting information about institutions’ transfer policies and performance, policy-makers and state officials would better understand the process to improve transfer policies and effectiveness to enhance student success in the most cost effective way (Smith & Miller, 2009).

**Institutional Processes and Support Services for Transfer Students**

A number of promising efforts have been identified in the literature including clear articulation agreements with four-year institutions, effective leadership, holistic advising, accurate information, and the development of learning communities to assist community college
students to complete the pathway of transferring (Smith & Miller, 2009). Both the community college and 4-year institution need to be cognizant of the social and academic environments and ease the transition process for transfer students (Rhine et al., 2000).

**Institutional Processes**

Transfer processes and institutional characteristics can impact the interest of students to transfer and the resulting rates of transfer. When processes are not seamless and do not focus on optimizing student services, transfer success is unlikely (Bahr, 2012). Students aspiring to complete the baccalaureate must survive the community college experience, complete the transfer process to a four-year college, and persist once they are there (Dougherty, 1992). Obstacles at the four-year institution make it challenging for transfer students where many still have the mindset that they only accept transfer students as a means to back-fill their freshman class enrollment goals (Dougherty, 1992). Institutional barriers that hinder student transfer include limited options for a convenient course schedule, lack of faculty involvement, insufficient information regarding transfer requirements, and poor academic advising (Hagedorn, Cypers, & Lester, 2008). When recruitment of transfer students is done as a planned strategy to sustain academic programs, transitions are smoother and transfer students persist at higher rates (Marling, 2013).

Common themes that demonstrate increased transfer rates include a structured academic pathway, student-centered culture and culturally sensitive leadership (Miller, 2013). Challenges at the four-year institution include difficulty for the student to integrate into the institution, issues with meeting deadlines or understanding the financial aid system at the new institution, and credits that do not transfer or apply to the student’s degree plan (Miller, 2013). Possible barriers for community college students successfully transferring include financial limitations, difficulty
accessing transfer information and the lack of coordination between 2-year and 4-year institutions (Ellis, 2013). The community college needs to think about responding to sub-baccalaureate aspirations, especially for disadvantaged students, who may be less likely to enter the community college intending to pursue a baccalaureate degree (Dougherty, 1994). A culture of collaboration among the staff will support the student’s path through transfer-preparatory coursework and access to transfer information (Miller, 2013).

Campus climate and culture are institutional characteristics that often affect retention and matriculation to a 4-year institution. This is more evident for those newly transferred community college students on the 4-year campus. The institutional environment and joint meetings by community college and 4-year institution stakeholders are important factors as it relates to transfer rates as well as success in bachelor’s degree completion (Zamani, 2001; Rhine et al., 2000). Community colleges practices do not often facilitate completion and students find it difficult to navigate the bureaucratic processes and program and course choices mainly on their own (Jenkins & Rodriguez, 2013). Transfer centers can be an effective institutional response to encourage the relationship between 2- and 4-year institutions by offering students access to academic support professionals, information on admissions, outreach activities, transfer plans, academic skills support services, outreach activities at the transfer destinations’ campuses and assisting students with navigating articulation agreements (Zamani, 2001; Hagedorn, 2004).

Another important finding is the relationship between transfer partnerships and faculty involvement in transfer efforts. Involving faculty at both 2- and 4-year campuses is critical to promoting a culture of transfer (Kisker, 2007). A more professional atmosphere and personalized services, such as having a greater proportion of full-time faculty rather than part-time and expanding academic support services, seem to benefit the traditional-age student
population (Calcagno et al., 2008; Eagan & Jaeger, 2009). The findings indicate a significant and negative association with every 10% increase in students’ exposure to part-time faculty instruction, students tended to become almost 2% less likely to transfer. Introducing faculty development opportunities to emphasize their impact on supporting transfer students, enhancing advising and orientation programs at community colleges and the transfer destination, and instilling a culture at the 4-year university to recognize the transfer student is academically on par with the native student will also contribute to increasing transfer rates and successful degree completers (Handel, 2013; Rhine et al., 2000).

Course equates are an important factor in the transfer student successfully moving on to the 4-year institution (Roska & Keith, 2008). Determining what mechanisms can then be implemented to enhance the acceptance of community college courses is imperative. Faculty are critically important to alleviating barriers to this issue. The mindset of faculty regarding academic freedom in the classroom and their interest and willingness to come together from both institution types to develop common course content and outcomes are key factors (Kisker, 2007). It is essential for the leadership from both institution types to embrace and communicate course alignment as a priority to faculty (Handel, 2013). Further study is necessary to determine how to overcome the possible barriers including the misperceptions of the lack of academic rigor at community colleges and the misalignment of course content and outcomes between similar courses at the community college and 4-year institution.

Transfer Student Characteristics

One third of all students [community college and 4-year institutions] transferred at least once within five years; the most prevalent transfer destination was a public two-year institution;
the most common time for transfer was in the students’ second year; transfer rates were similar for part- and full-time students; and over one quarter of all transfers crossed state lines (Hossler et al., 2012). Understanding the portrait of the transfer student is an essential component to connect students and their families to institutional services, communicate effectively with partner institutions, and engage constituents at the local, regional and national levels (Marling, 2013).

Studies on demographic characteristics of transfer students have indicated that students who did transfer were of a higher social class, less likely to be minority, and less likely to be female (Lee & Frank, 1990). More recent studies have found that Black students and students with a GED have a lower estimated probability of transferring from the community college (Shapiro et al., 2013). Interestingly, students receiving financial aid, working while enrolled, and were dependent on parental income increase the probability of transfer (Hoachlander et al., 2003). Differences in family background, high school preparation, social background, particularly socioeconomic status, affect whether students transfer and is of great concern to the community college as gateways to the baccalaureate (Askin, 2007; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). High school students with a greater intrinsic value for attaining a baccalaureate degree are more committed to achieving that goal while attending both the community college and 4-year institution (Wang, 2009).

One of the areas community colleges support students is through offering developmental coursework to those students who present themselves as underprepared for college. Academically underprepared students with low basic skills in reading, English, and math are required to take developmental coursework, but these courses typically do not transfer nor do they satisfy graduation requirements (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Findings also indicate that placing students into developmental education may actually decrease their odds of successfully
transferring to a 4-year institution (Crisp & Delgado, 2014). In one study, researchers found that taking any or many (three or more) remedial courses lowered bachelor’s degree attainment while increasing the time to complete the degree (Boggs, 2010; Crisp & Delgado, 2014; Jenkins & Rodriguez, 2013). With the additional tuition and associated educational costs as well as lost earnings, it is estimated that the average community college student who enrolls in developmental coursework pays between $1,607 and $2,008 dollars for remediation (Crisp & Delgado, 2014).

There is no linear path to a degree, particularly for students who start out in community colleges, and many factors can influence a student’s preparation and persistence (Adelman, 2005). Lack of family support, not engaging with their peers through student life, financial barriers, work, and family responsibilities all contribute to the challenges faced by students intending to transfer (Freeman, Martin Conley, & Brooks, 2006). Transfer students are likely to experience a complex academic, social and psychological adjustment process because of the environmental differences between 2- and 4-year institutions and require an awareness of the expectations of the 4-year school to facilitate the successful transition and ultimate success in the completion of a bachelor’s degree (Laanan, 2001). Many students have trouble understanding college and academic requirements, a problem that hampers their educational planning and discourages them along with excessive general education requirements and an inability to get the courses they need as barriers to their success (Jenkins et al., 2014).

In addition, attending part-time and majoring in vocational studies appear to have significant negative effects on transferring. One of the traditional missions for community colleges is to provide vocational or career training. Several previous studies on the topic of transferability indicated students in a vocational track may not be as likely to transfer or be
successful in transferring credits (Eagan & Jaeger, 2009). More recently, however, data show that there is not a statistically significant difference in baccalaureate attainment between academic vs. vocational students (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).

Other data suggests positive outcomes for those transfer students who earned a higher GPA in the first year of enrollment and completed an associate degree (Eagan & Jaeger, 2009). Selecting a major, planning one’s schedule of classes, completing general education requirements, and having a strong goal in mind may account for some of the differences in graduation rates among transfer students (Piland, 1995). Students’ lack of academic preparation, familiarity with higher educational systems, poor advising and financial pressures are cited as the dominant reasons for low transfer rates (Hagedorn, et al., 2008; Zamani, 2001).

Reaching milestones associated with credits earned and completing a portion of a program greatly increases the probability of completion which enforces the need to reach out to students early on, provide orientations to college life, and encourage use of counseling and other supports to engage them in the academic and social life of college (Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, & Jenkins, 2007). Student support mechanisms consisting of security, sense of well-being, and information needed to succeed in college as well as challenges that include encounters with new situations, people, and ideas that cause students to view the world and themselves differently provide a balance to prompt their development and growth (Padilla, Trevino, Trevino, & Gonzalez, 1997). The measurement properties of transfer student adjustment are similar across demographic groups including men and women, Whites, African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics and Asians, and students from two-year and four-year transfer institutions (Padilla et al., 1997; Young & Litzler, 2013).
Non-academic factors can also impede or hamper the transfer process for students. Some students self-navigate, which can lead to enrolling in inappropriate or non-transferable courses resulting in re-work, time wasted, poor retention, and lengthen time to completion (Gawley & McGowan, 2006). Students become discouraged and upset after learning about a loss of transfer credit and the associated loss of time and money (Ott & Cooper, 2013). The most significant factors that influenced transfer students’ attainment of the bachelor’s degree included the number of semesters enrolled, cumulative credits earned and GPA at the community college, ethnicity, academic preparedness, and not having an extended stay at the community college (Mourad & Hong, 2011). However, other data reveal that community colleges advising transfer-seeking students to stay to earn the associate degree, could lead to four-year college outcomes that are nearly 10 percentage points greater than comparable students who do not complete the associate degree (Crosta & Kopko, 2014).

**Student Support Services**

The transfer function was, and still is, one of the most important functions of community colleges (Glass & Harrington, 2002). The author also notes that success of college transfer students, from an academic standpoint, has long been used as an important measure of the quality of a community college education and research shows that transfer students seem to experience transfer shock after their first semester. Stakeholders involved in the transfer function, including legislators and accrediting bodies, should create systemic, strategic and timely interventions to create a positive culture of transfer (Grites, 2013). Four-year institutions should continue to seek effective ways of reaching out to these students, perhaps through counseling, tutoring, and mentoring, in an effort to help them adjust more effectively to the academic and social life of the school (Piland, 1995). Most institutions have these services
available, but since most students don’t take advantage of optional services, an effort to intentionally seek out community college transfer students, make them aware of the availability of these opportunities, and offer them in a convenient and seamless way is essential (Glass & Harrington, 2002).

In addition, reduced counseling and advising resources and unfounded lines of role demarcation limiting other staff to advise and/or mentor students may also result in misdirection of the student’s transfer path (Mosholder & Zirkle, 2007). Increased availability, awareness and collaboration of academic advisors and counselors may be critical reforms for 2- and 4-year colleges to consider that encourage students to transfer (Bahr, 2008; Nora & Rendon, 1990; Smith & Miller, 2009). This will only be effective if community colleges and 4-year institutions produce clear degree pathways and institutional policies to which students can apply their enhanced knowledge base (Jenkins, Kadlec, & Votruba, 2014). One of the key challenges facing low-income students is their lack of college knowledge, and in the community college environment, these students don’t do optional and, therefore, intrusive and mandatory advising as the means to transmit better information to students seems an appropriate and potentially effective approach (Jenkins et al., 2014).

**Conclusion.** It is critical that institutions recognize that there is a not a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting students in their educational path including those who aspire to transfer and complete the baccalaureate degree (Zamani, 2001). The characteristics of students in the realm of higher education vary on many measures including age, academic preparedness, program interest, level of engagement and a host of other factors including non-cognitive aspects such as motivation and individual perception as to their intelligence and likelihood of being a
successful student (Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012). As institutions recognize the unique profile and needs of each student, they also need to individualize their services to support them.

Transfer Agreements and Collaborative Approaches

Many efforts to increase transfer rates are grounded in partnerships, relationships, and collaborative efforts between 2- and 4-year institutions. According to one study, the success of a collaborative undertaking includes a strong stimulus for collaboration, such as transfer success, interdependence between institutions, and an appreciation for the give-and-take required among participants (Hoffman-Johnson, 2007).

Transferable Credits

What may be described as the most important mechanism for ensuring successful transfer, is for community colleges and 4-year institutions to work together to ensure there is not a widespread loss of credits during the transfer process. The greater the loss of credits, the lower the chances of completing the baccalaureate degree and only 58% of community college students are able to bring all or almost all of their credits with them to the 4-year institution (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). In addition, when credit loss during transfer did not occur, community college students’ bachelor’s degree attainment rates increased from 45% to 54%. Faculty involvement is critical in this process. Transfer articulation agreements can facilitate faculty from various institutions to join together and discuss the learning objectives and outcomes associated with the courses being “matched” across institutions (Borden, 2004).

Over time, the state has become increasingly involved in the articulation process grounded in the emphasis for greater accountability in higher education and in developing statewide articulation policies as an umbrella under which collaboration can be encouraged, monitored and rewarded (Roksa & Keith, 2008). Many transfer students lose credits in transit to four-year colleges which can harm transfer students' educational attainment (Dougherty, 1987). At the course level,
credits can be transferred to satisfy a specific course or awarded as general credit. From the student’s perspective, they are told, “yes, your course transfers,” but in many cases general credit does not apply to satisfying the bachelor’s degree requirements and ultimately results in wasted time and money (Flaga, 2006; Kisker & Wagoner, 2013). Ensuring that credit is applicable to the major or graduation requirements is a major distinction versus simply the acceptance of credit (Marling, 2013).

A new approach to significantly improve transfer and articulation and increase the number of bachelor’s degree recipients is the emergence of the transfer associate degree (Kisker & Wagoner, 2013). One early challenge was differing perspectives on what a degree should include with some who believed the degree should be as easy a path as possible, while others held that it must be based on a common minimum academic standard (Patton & Pilati, 2012). According to the authors, this was ultimately resolved by ensuring a faculty-driven approach through collaborative discussion between faculty from 2- and 4-year institutions.

**Collaboration between 2- and 4-Year Institutions**

Collaboration and creative programming between community colleges and four-year institutions to increase persistence, retention and degree attainment are key approaches to supporting student success and reducing student debt. A recent model that demonstrates the advantages of community colleges and four-year institutions joining forces to facilitate degree completion is offering bachelor’s degree programs on the community college campus through a university center model (Smith & Miller, 2009; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). This is especially ideal for the community college student who has personal obligations and cannot commute or relocate (Wang & Wickersham, 2014).
Another model showing positive outcomes is the development of a joint admission and concurrent enrollment program between community colleges and four-year institutions. In 2004, a joint conference on baccalaureate attainment recommended joint admission programs, and financial aid consortium agreements, and co-enrollment of students at the 2- and 4-year institution which supports higher rates of persistence and bachelor’s degree completion (Clemetsen & Blazer, 2008). Participating institutions in concurrent enrollment programs can also provide transfer pathways to support completion and degree attainment which would ultimately lead to student success and time and money well spent (Smith & Miller, 2009).

Critical components of collaborative partnerships include curricular alignment, articulation agreements, collaborative campus programming, data-driven decision making, faculty engagement in the transfer process, a culture of performance and accountability, and up-to-date information (Miller, 2013). Although transfer rates have been stable over the last 20 years, the rates have been far from notable resulting in states creating mandated articulation policies including articulation agreements as the principal instrument to facilitate the transfer process (Anderson et al., 2006). A culture of collaboration can have positive implications beyond the internal institutional level to include a powerful impact on the communities in which they serve (Lundquist & Nixon, 1998). What may seem like minor logistical issues from the institutions’ perspectives, can make a huge impact in a student’s ability to persist after transfer. Successful transition cannot be accomplishment by a single program in a one-day format by only the sending or receiving institution, but should be a joint effort to appropriately orient the student before and after transfer (Grites, 2013).

**Conclusion.** Further study of the various collaborative approaches and new tools such as the transfer associate degree should be fully explored to determine their impact on transfer
students’ transitions, success and completion of the degree. With dwindling state resources, institutions will reap the benefits of collaboration for implementing or refining transfer policies and how they are given credit for their role in the education process (Marling, 2013).

**Summary**

The review of this literature indicates the need for additional attention and evaluation to fully understand the experiences of those who administer these functions within their respective institutions as well as to create impactful practices to enhance the collaborative approaches undertaken by community colleges and four-year institutions. The successful transfer of community college students to complete the baccalaureate degree is the shared responsibility of policy-makers, educational institutions, and the students themselves. Public policy requires refinement to be effective which may include incentivizing students to begin their educational path at a community college to complete coursework or an associate degree and then transfer to complete the baccalaureate degree. Educational institutions must work with their faculty and transfer partners to ensure the optimization of credits taken so money and time are not wasted. In addition, collaboration and the planning of strategic and timely interventions are essential to the establishment of a positive culture of transfer and to ensure transfer student success (Grites, 2013). The research collected and evaluated in this study will extend the current scholarly evidence described in this literature review by evaluating the experiences of the institutional leaders around the transfer processes between a community college and the 4-year university.
Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to explore the collaborative experiences of administrative leaders at 2- and 4-year institutions to improve the transfer process, enhance transfer student success, and support bachelor’s degree completion for community college transfer students. Higher education degree completion through successful transfer is at the forefront of the national education agenda. This study will aid in the understanding of the collaborative experiences among institutional leaders to positively impact these goals. The research this study will answer is:

How do 2- and 4-year college and university administrators understand and describe the impact of collaboration on successful transfer and the degree completion processes for community college students?

The focus of the research aligns well to a qualitative approach with the findings developing based on the participants’ perspectives and did not begin with a specific hypothesis to prove or disprove (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The homogeneity of the sample may have restricted the findings and may not be generalized to all community colleges and 4-year colleges and universities (Roberts, 2010). However, the intent of a qualitative approach aims to provide rich descriptions and details of processes related to the phenomenon in the study’s participants’ own words, within their own context (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

How the participants make meaning of collaborative experiences and how they make sense of the phenomenon of collaboration align directly with the IPA approach (Smith, 2011). The research question supported the method of a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis approach with open-ended, one-on-one interviews. The researcher evaluated and
interpreted the data for patterns and themes that resulted in a specific context to better understand the participants’ experiences (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). As noted by Smith (2010), the best IPA studies focus on the balance of commonality and differences within a sample and how they are reflected in both themes and how the themes play out for individuals.

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm was the appropriate foundation for the study because it sought to bring the lived experiences of those involved with the phenomenon of collaboration (Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist-interpretivist researcher understands that knowledge is brought into being through dialogue and is also the co-producer of knowledge (Biggerstaff, 2012). Determining how the participants of this research made sense of collaboration and its impact on the success of transfer students was essential to the study.

The role of the researcher within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is to help bring consciousness to the meaning that participants hold in their mind about their lived experience with the phenomenon (Ponterotto, 2005). The researcher’s role in this study was to help bring such realities to the surface through interactive dialogue with participants during the interview process (Ponterotto, 2005). The approach of conducting semi-structured, one-on-one, in-person interviews with the participants helped bring forth the genuine experiences of the study participants that might otherwise be outside of their consciousness which is a main assumption of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm (Patten, 2002; Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm fits well with the qualitative approach to this study because it allowed the researcher to be interactive with the process, findings were co-constructed and the sense-making of the participants’ lived experiences evolved.
IPA is also concerned with the participants’ emotional reactions to the experience of collaboration and the perspective and interpretation are from a unique sense of an individual’s understanding. Therefore, this study was best served by the IPA approach through the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm with the intent of capturing the lived experiences of community college and university leaders as it relates to their involvement and understanding of collaborating across institutions.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

The qualitative research tradition of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) provides rich and detailed findings and is appropriate for this study to investigate the lived experiences of higher education leaders as it relates to being a participant in a collaborative process or relationship to affect the success of community college transfer students.

Several tenets contribute to IPA including phenomenology, interpretation or hermeneutics, and idiography to inform its distinctive epistemological framework and research methodology (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is phenomenological in its detailed examination of the personal lived experience of practical engagement with the world and in exploring how participants make sense of their experience (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). This method also acknowledges that the understanding of an event or an object is always mediated by the context of cultural and socio-historical meanings. IPA is interpretative in recognizing the role of the researcher in making sense of the experience of participants. Consistent with its phenomenological underpinning, IPA is concerned with trying to understand what it is like from the point of view of the participants. At the same time, a detailed IPA analysis can also involve asking critical questions of participants’ accounts. Thus, interpretation can be descriptive and
empathic aiming to produce rich experiential descriptions (Shinebourne, 2011). The emphasis of IPA is to study people idiographically with the goal of exploring the in-depth experience of the phenomenon for the participants and not to generate a theory to be generalized over the whole population. Therefore, random sampling does not apply and participants are selected purposively. This allows for a defined group for whom the research problem has relevance and personal significance (Smith et al., 2009).

**Research Tradition**

The founding of the philosophical movement of phenomenology is credited to Edmund Husserl who focused on reflection to develop meaning of experiences. Although several scholars are referenced as being associated with the development and refinement of the phenomenological method, Husserl is credited with its origin (Dukes, 1984). Husserl was the first to formally theorize phenomenology as *the science of the essence of consciousness* as experienced from the first-person perspective (Sadala & Adorno, 2002). Husserl also advanced several conceptual components of phenomenology including *epoché*, which centers on the notion that people must reflect on an experience before they can feel, and only at that point can the experience have meaning.

In addition to Husserl, other notable scholars include Heidegger who, in the late 1920s, set forth his own phenomenological perspective and believed that we frame everything based on what we know. He was concerned with the ontological question of existence itself and asserted that experiences were more interpretive and should be examined in the context of our relationship to the world (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1984; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). In the mid-1940s, Sartre developed the study of the consciousness of being and defined the self as a
series of freely chosen acts of consciousness (Spiegelberg, 1960). Also in the mid-1940s, Merleau-Ponty expanded upon the views of his predecessors to develop an approach that focused on the role of the body in the experience of human science (Sadala & Adorno, 1984). Over time, the philosophy of phenomenology that Husserl founded, evolved from purely a reporting process without analysis to approaches that are descriptive and interpretative (Giorgi, 1997).

IPA was first used as a distinctive research method in psychology in the mid-1990s. Smith (1996) drew on theoretical ideas from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and on an engagement with subjective experience and personal accounts (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995). Meanings are constructed and modified through an interpretative process that is subject to change and redefinition and people are, therefore, active in shaping their own future through the process of interpreting meaning (Shinebourne, 2011).

Phenomenology, as defined, is an analysis of people’s perceptions related to a definable phenomenon (Giorgi, 1995; Sadala & Adorno, 2002). Those perceptions can include a lived experience, how people relate or understand a phenomenon as well as the meaning people give to a phenomenon. The phenomenological model, according to Sanders (1982), consists of determining the limits of who and what is to be studied, collection of the data, which are part of any qualitative study, and the phenomenological analysis. Phenomenology has evolved from a philosophy to research method and is one that attempts to understand people’s insights, views and understandings of a particular experience. It therefore seeks to understand how people construct meaning to that experience.

Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, constitutes another major theoretical foundation of IPA. Historically, hermeneutics developed from interpretations of biblical texts,
but was subsequently established as a philosophical foundation for a more general theory of interpretation (Palmer, 1969). Although phenomenology and hermeneutics were developed as two separate philosophical movements, Heidegger presented hermeneutics as a prerequisite to phenomenology. According to Heidegger, the meaning of hermeneutic resides in *the whole manner in which human existence is interpretative* (Shinebourne, 2011).

Idiography constitutes the third theoretical underpinning of IPA. An idiographic approach aims for an in-depth focus on the particular and a commitment to detailed finely-textured analysis of actual life and lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is idiographic in its focus on detailed examination of particular instances, either in a single case study or in studies of a small group of cases (Larkin et al., 2011). In such studies, the analytic process begins with the detailed analysis of each case, moving to careful examination of similarities and differences across cases to produce detailed accounts of patterns of meaning and reflections on shared experiences.

The approach of IPA aims to understand the lived experience of a conscious, situated, embodied being-in-the-world, where “the world” is understood through a respondent’s involvement in it (Larkin et al., 2011). Interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA) translates reported experiences into patterns and themes, but also includes the psychological or sociological factors that may have influenced the data, are examined by the researcher (Pietkiewicz, & Smith, 2014). These data are exclusively the participants’ own words about the experience which influenced the dialogue shared during the interview process. In this study, the 2- and 4-year institutional leaders’ lived collaborative experiences and perspectives were the basis of the investigation.
Participants

Purposeful homogenous sampling provided assurance that study participants were selected carefully and best served the research question (Smith et al., 2009). The type of sampling was purposive to ensure a homogenous group by which convergence and divergence existed among and between the leaders at the 2- and 4-year institutions who are directly involved with the study topic of transfer and collaboration (Smith et al., 2009). Purposive sampling refers to a method of selecting participants because they have particular features or characteristics which will enable detailed exploration of the phenomena being studied (Shinebourne, 2011). For this study, all of the participants hold leadership or administrative positions at their respective institutions and are actively engaged in collaborative activities.

The researcher recognizes that IPA is primarily an interpretative approach. A broadly descriptive IPA study that lacks depth and therefore demonstrates little difference to a standard thematic analysis does not represent good IPA (Smith, 2010). This research gathered data from 10 participants who are leaders and administrators from 2- and 4-year colleges and universities. This sample size aligns with current studies using IPA as their method, although most of the research regarding sampling sizes for qualitative research notes, *it depends*, based upon the methodology and epistemological perspective (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) referenced no larger than 15 participants as an appropriate sample size for an IPA study. As referenced in Baker and Edwards (2012), saturation is central to ensure a range of responses and the purpose of the study must be evaluated to decide how many interviews is enough. Alan Bryman from the University of Leicester, a contributor to the Baker and Edwards (2012) paper, noted that the homogeneity of the group as well as the subgroup variability are determinants of the appropriate sample size. For this research, the
prospective participants were homogeneous in that all are higher education leaders and administrators, but had sub-group variability as well. The participants included a mix of males and females, age ranges, ethnicities, and position titles that reflect leadership roles such as provost, associate vice president and president. A mix of institution were also represented including research universities, smaller open-access 4-year colleges, 2-year institutions, public/private, and urban/suburban/rural.

The researcher’s point of access to the participants’ experience was through their accounts and obtained through direct contact. The concept of double hermeneutics refers also to the researchers’ role and involvement through their own preconceptions and prejudices which may constitute an obstacle to interpretation unless priority is given to the phenomenon under investigation (Smith, 2007). In double hermeneutics there is a dual role of the researcher. The participant is trying to make sense of his/her world and the researcher is trying to make sense of how the participant is trying to make sense of his/her world (Smith & Eatough, 2007). Smith (2004) has argued that both modes of hermeneutic engagement can contribute to a more complete understanding of the participant’s lived experience. Smith et al. (2009) maintain that IPA occupies a centre-ground position whereby it is possible to combine a hermeneutic of empathy with a hermeneutic of questioning.

**Procedures**

Following the proposal defense, the researcher sought approval from Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board. Once this was obtained, the researcher developed a list of prospective participants based on previous networking and professional relationships. Each were contacted via email and then by phone to describe the research and initially solicit their interest in participating. Once the appropriate number of participants were secured, the
researcher reconnected with them to determine their availability and preferred location for the initial interview. Study participants were informed in advance of the expectations of their time, provided a full explanation of the goal of the study, their role, and that their participation was completely voluntary (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The researcher prepared for the interviews by testing the interview questions with a non-study participant to assure rich data would result and to practice for the interviews. This allowed the researcher to be fully present to the participants’ stories, be an active listener and allowed for sense-making during the dialogue. In line with the IPA method, rapport with participants was established before beginning the interview and the length was long enough to gain rich detail of the phenomenon being studied (Smith, 2007). As described in the IPA research approach, semi-structured interviews were held and audio recorded to accurately capture first-person accounts from the participants and to produce a verbatim transcription of the dialogue that occurred. The researcher also scribed notes during the process to capture facial expressions, body movement, and tone. Smith et al.’s (2009) recommendation of starting with broad, general questions that allowed the participant to set the boundaries of the topic, so that the researcher did not impose their understanding of the phenomenon on the participant’s narrative of their experience was also followed. The researcher focused on building rapport and trust, asked open-ended questions free from presumptions, offered prompts when questions appeared to be ambiguous or abstract, and active listening was used during the responses and dialogue (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This allowed the researcher to be attentive to the participants’ responses, negotiate meaning when things seemed unclear, and construct appropriate follow-up prompts to assist in the sense-making. During the interview, moments of silence were permitted for reflection of issues being discussed and an
awareness of all verbal and non-verbal communication was captured in the researcher’s notes.

Transcripts were created using the online transcription service Rev and evaluated by the researcher through a systematic process of reflection, identification, description, clarification, interpretation, and contextualization (Larkin et al., 2011; Larkin et al., 2006). These processes reflect various aspects of the standard phenomenological method within a hermeneutic framework. For IPA research, the sense-making activities of the participants’ experiences are the basis for learning about their relationship to the world. This allowed an account of an identifiable experience to develop - for this research their collaborative experiences - and their meaning within certain contexts (Larkin et al., 2006).

Data Analysis

Data were collected through a series of first-person interviews to ensure they could be adequately situated, described, and interpreted (Larkin et al., 2011). Analyzing the data for this IPA study followed the recommended steps by Smith et al. (2009) which included reading and re-reading transcribed interviews while listening to the audio to capture cues and inflections, initial noting, developing emergent themes, searching for connections amongst emergent themes, moving to the next case and looking for patterns across cases. These critical aspects of an IPA study allowed for a thorough process of analyzing the data and encouraged focus on each participant’s interview responses and dialogue, the sense-making of their experiences with collaboration, to be interpretive and capture the participants’ voice, and an in-depth analysis of the similarities and differences amongst the participants. Participants were asked to respond to any follow-up questions or clarifications as necessary.

Recorded interviews were transcribed using the online transcription service, Rev. According to Smith et al. (2009), the first and second steps of reading and re-reading each
interview transcript after it has been transcribed verbatim can happen concurrently. The authors also recommend that these initial steps occur while listening to the audio recording of the interview as well as to take notes to record initial perceptions or observations from the interview. Shaw in Forrester (2010) recommends keeping a reflective diary to note anything that comes to mind throughout the whole process of research. This supported transparency of the data which is important for trustworthiness. The record of analytic activity in a reflective diary provided an audit trail that illustrates how the researcher moved from the raw data to the interpretation presented in the results.

Notes taken during the interview were also incorporated at this time. During the evaluation, jotting was used to record thoughts and reflections of the answers to each question which assisted in the formulation of initial impressions and the next step of first-coding (Miles et al., 2014). These processes also assisted in bracketing out any potential preconceived notions, highlighted any important linguistic elements, and noted any conceptual ideas that developed (Smith et al., 2009). The steps of reading, re-reading, jotting, and bracketing occurred numerous times to assure that a true sense of each participant’s story and his or her unique experience with the phenomenon was reflected. In addition, the responses were combined into one table that included the interview question and each of the participants’ responses. This allowed for simultaneous evaluation of each response per question. The layout of the responses by interview question facilitated comparing and contrasting the data that allowed for more in-depth meaning.

Patterns and connections were then developed after further reading of the transcript and reflection of the notes obtained for each case to develop and map emergent themes as documented for the third step in Smith et al.’s (2009) recommended data analysis process. Shaw in Forrester (2010) also suggests writing descriptive summaries to assist with theme
identification and making initial interpretations. These methods contributed to the transparent process of ensuring claims made were evidenced in the data.

Once step three was complete, the researcher then began searching for connections across themes developed, which is the fourth step outlined by Smith et al. (2009). It is also recommended that the researcher organize themes as appropriate and begin to evaluate how the themes are convergent or divergent. Shaw in Forrester (2010) also references the development of clustering themes by evaluating connections between the initial themes in order to further reduce the data into meaningful chunks.

Step five of the Smith et al. (2009) approach is moving to the next case and required being cognizant of bracketing themes that emerge in each case. Since IPA is idiosyncratic, themes may be unique to each participant or may overlap (Shaw in Forrester, 2010). Boeije (2002) also recommends transcripts be evaluated individually as well as compared together as a more subjective and creative approach. Once each transcript was analyzed individually, common themes and patterns amongst all transcripts were identified as noted in step six to look for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). An audit trail is also important to ensure interpretations are based on the data as noted by Shaw in Forrester (2010). The coding process was supported by using the web-based data analysis tool, MaxQDA.

Second cycle/pattern coding allowed for the development of smaller themes from the codes into relevant causes and explanations, relationships, and theoretical constructs and resulted in themes being weighted based on the number of codes within each theme as well as their substantive contribution to the analysis (Miles et al., 2014). After the completion of the first- and second coding of the data, the jotting technique was applied again as a way to cross-
reference material that was repeated as a theme in more than one response to the questions included in the interview. In addition, the reflective diary notes and analytic memos were evaluated to determine the existence of any relationships among the data and the practice of constant comparison was also applied throughout the process of analysis (Miles et al., 2014). As a final step, interpretations were then made from the analysis of all notes, identifications of patterns, themes, like and opposing statements as well as the absence of anticipated or expected data. Once final themes were established, extracts of the transcripts were summarized for each theme (Shaw in Forrester, 2010).

These critical aspects of an IPA study allowed for a thorough process of analyzing the data and encourage focus on each participant’s interview responses, the sense-making of their experiences with collaboration, to be interpretive and capture the participants’ voice, and permit an in-depth analysis of the similarities and differences amongst the participants.

**Ethical Considerations**

Participation was voluntary and great care was taken to ensure the criteria for human subjects were followed. Interviewees were told that they could opt out at any time during the research. The researcher ensured the data were secure and anonymity was provided to all participants. For ethical reasons it was crucial that the interviewer monitored how the interview was affecting the participant (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The researcher was cognizant of the participants’ feelings, took great care to avoid harm, and would have stopped the interview, if necessary (Smith et al., 2009).

Integrity of the data collected was of utmost importance and warranted actions were based on sound analysis (Creswell, 2012). All participants’ names, other names and/or names of
institutions mentioned were replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Before the research began, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants and signed consent forms were collected. In addition, oral consent was obtained prior to the start of the interview audio recordings.

The data were kept in a secure electronic, password-protected area of the researcher’s computer as well as on a separate password-protected external hard drive. All paperwork associated with the study including signed consent forms and printed data were stored in a locked, fireproof storage box in the researcher’s home. The audio recordings of the interviews were discarded at the conclusion of the study. No names or identities were used in any research reports or papers.

**Trustworthiness**

The evaluative criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed to assess the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of this qualitative research to assure trustworthiness and validity in the study. Validation strategies were used during data collection, analysis, and in the presentation of the findings with the approach that research validity comes from findings that are interesting and applicable.

Confidence in the truth of the findings underscores the criterion of credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is achieved through the use of appropriate research methods, the application of triangulation to adequately shed light on a phenomenon, and to apply member-checking to assess adequacy of data and results (Shenton, 2004). The researcher asked participants to read the transcripts of the interviews in which they participated to ensure their words matched what they intended to express (Shenton, 2004). In addition, quality data
collection requires participants feel comfortable and the researcher show sensitivity to the context (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher in this study established a strong rapport with participants to ensure honesty and credibility which resulted in the participants being open to sharing their experiences with the researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

The second criterion of transferability was demonstrated by providing sufficient detail about the phenomenon of collaboration and transfer success to allow conclusions to be drawn that were transferable and comparable to other contexts (Shenton, 2004). This was achieved through the technique of thick description and is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a detailed account of experiences in which the researcher explicitly describes the patterns of relationships and puts them in context. The mutual connection of the researcher to the participants in this study contributed to this context as a result of prior engagement and participation in committee work and projects related to transfer initiatives. Likewise, this supported the researcher’s understanding of the context.

Dependability, the third criterion, shows that the findings will be consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The technique of audits were used to evaluate whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions of the research study were accurate, reliable and valid. As noted in chapter 4, the researcher described the research question and design, detailed the process of data gathering, and provided a reflective appraisal of the study (Shenton, 2004). In addition, the researcher provided an audit trail through the use of diagrams to include the raw data collected, products of summation, notes of methodology and trustworthiness, personal notes, and the development of instruments used for interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This audit trail allowed for a comprehensive description of evidence that supported this research and its findings.
Lastly, the research met the fourth criterion of confirmability by assuring the findings of the study were shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although the researcher revealed the bias of the mutual professional relationship with some of the participants, interview questions were open-ended to assure that this bias did not influence the participants’ responses (Creswell, 2012). Block quotes and excerpts of the verbatim transcripts were used to alleviate any biases in the interpretation.

**Potential Research Bias**

In research, the positionalities of researchers and the researched are pertinent (Parsons, 2008). This study sought to evaluate the collaborative experiences of 2- and 4-year institutional leaders and how they make sense of collaborative relationships to support transfer student success. The high cost of attendance at four-year institutions, deficits in a student’s academic preparedness and the need to manage personal and family obligations, influence many students to begin their educational path to a baccalaureate degree at a community college. There are several factors influencing the student’s transfer agenda including socioeconomic factors, age, race, gender, pre-college academic preparation, educational goal, and the type and status of college/university (public/private, non-profit/profit). The transfer pathway at some colleges and universities is encouraged and fostered while others would rather only serve and dedicate resources to their native students.

My previous knowledge on this subject is a result of my experience and responsibilities related to transfer at my current institution, a community college. I also have experience attending and presenting at local, state and national conferences on this topic, serving on state-wide committees, legislative subgroups and testifying on these issues. To evaluate my own
positionality on this problem of practice, I challenged myself with regard to any predispositions and biases I may have. Do students from low-income K-12 districts need additional assistance to navigate a transfer pathway? Are non-traditional community college students (those not directly out of high school) unlikely to have a baccalaureate degree as a goal? Are female students more likely to seek out assistance? Should universities with an elitist perspective be ignored when pursuing the development of transfer plans? Do 4-year colleges and universities give preferential treatment for evaluating and accepting a transfer student from another 4-year school versus a community college? Will all faculty at 4-year institutions assume community college faculty are not as knowledgeable and coursework is of lesser quality, therefore, not appropriately preparing the student for the rigor at their school?

In many ways our positionalities are subconscious in nature, not developed and practiced in a purposeful manner. It is recommended that the researcher totally become immersed in the study and to try step into the participants’ shoes as far as possible. IPA aims at giving evidence of the participants’ making sense of the phenomenon under investigation, and at the same time document the researcher’s sense making (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As a participant in this IPA research, my prior experience and knowledge, positionality, and previous research informed the study’s design, data and recommendations (Larkin et al., 2006). Although difficult, the IPA method aims to remove bias.

Limitations

The use of the interpretative phenomenological analysis method and its research design requires a small sample size. This limits the findings to understanding the participants’ self-
reported perceptions of their lived experiences in collaborative relationships between 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education. As noted earlier, since the participants are the same in many ways, this did restrict the findings, and therefore, the data may not be generalized to all community colleges and 4-year colleges and universities (Roberts, 2010).

Impacting the success of transfer students is a complex issue that is influenced in many more ways than how well a group of institutional leaders collaborates toward improving the transfer students’ success. The lack of the transfer students’ perspectives as well as other constituencies is a limitation of this study. The addition of the student’s sense-making of collaborative efforts to support successful transfer would provide rich data, and should be considered for future research. The lens for this study, the theory of collaborative advantage (TCA), presumes that the participants will perceive their collaborative experiences as advantageous. This framework demonstrates that without careful development and organization, collaborations are more likely to reach collaborative inertia than collaborative advantage. Although inertia may be experienced, the final outcome is perceived as better than would have been the case without the collaboration.

**Summary**

This study will inform the current body of research related to transfer student success by overlaying the lens of collaborative advantage. The results will contribute to the scholarly literature on the understanding the collaborative experiences of leaders at 2- and 4-year institutions to support transfer student success as well as provide recommendations for practitioners and future research.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis is to explore the collaborative experiences between community college and 4-year institution administrators to improve the transfer process, enhance transfer student success, and support bachelor’s degree completion for community college transfer students.

The analysis of the interview data collected yielded three superordinate themes and four corresponding nested themes for each. These include 1) Elements of Effective Collaborations, with the nested themes of 1.1) Communication and Commitment, 1.2) Working Jointly toward a Common Goal, 1.3) Leadership, 1.4) Trust, Mutual Respect and Understanding; 2) Resources and Attributes for Successful Transfer, with the nested themes of 2.1) Financial Challenges, 2.2) Advising and Student Supports, 2.3) Navigation and Information, 2.4) Academics and Learning; and 3) Impactful Future Practices, with the nested themes of 3.1) Processes and Supports, 3.2) Curricular Alignment, 3.3) Data-driven Decisions, 3.4) Policies and Systems. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the themes divided by 4-year and 2-year institutional participants with 2-year participants’ responses highlighted.

The participants for this research included administrators and executives from Midwestern 2- and 4-year higher education institutions. Each were interviewed independently with a total of five from community colleges and five from 4-year institutions. Community college participants estimated that about half of their incoming students state they intend to transfer to complete the bachelor’s degree while the 4-year institutions’ percentage of transfer students comprised approximately 15-45% of their undergraduate student body. Table 4.2 describes the characteristics of each participant and the institution they represent.
### Table 4.1
**Participants' Occurrences of Superordinate and Nested Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4-Year Institution Interviewees</th>
<th>Walter</th>
<th>Debra</th>
<th>Emily</th>
<th>Michael</th>
<th>Linda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-Year Institution Interviewees</td>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>Murray</td>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>Matt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 1 Elements of Effective Collaborations

- **1.1 – Communication and Commitment**
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes

- **1.2 – Working Jointly toward a Common Goal**
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes

- **1.3 – Leadership**
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes

- **1.4 – Trust, Mutual Respect and Understanding**
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes

#### 2 Resources and Attributes for Successful Transfer

- **2.1 – Financial Challenges**
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes

- **2.2 – Advising and Student Supports**
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes

- **2.3 – Navigation and Information**
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes

- **2.4 – Academics and Learning**
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes

#### 3 Impactful Future Practices

- **3.1 – Processes and Supports**
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes

- **3.2 – Curricular Alignment**
  - Yes
  - Yes
  - Yes

- **3.3 – Data-driven Decisions**
  - Yes
  - Yes

- **3.4 – Policies and Systems**
  - Yes
  - Yes

---

### Table 4.2
**Participant and Institutional Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Carnegie Classification</th>
<th>Location/Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public, 2-Year</td>
<td>Associate's Colleges: Mixed Transfer/Career &amp; Technical-High Traditional</td>
<td>Rural/1,600</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As referenced earlier, the Midwestern state represented in this study operates under a decentralized higher education system with each institution having autonomous control. The findings discussed in this chapter could, therefore, be applicable to any state that does not have a central higher education system whose requirements and processes are controlled by a state board of education mandated through a legislative or constitutional process. This chapter will discuss the results including each of the superordinate themes, the nested themes for each, and conclude with a summary of the findings.

### Elements of Effective Collaborations

A foundational element of student transfer is the willingness of two institutions to come together to facilitate the development of an agreement and supports for the process to be

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Institution Type Details</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Debra</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Private, 4-Year, Religious</td>
<td>Master's Colleges &amp; Universities: Larger Programs</td>
<td>Urban/5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public, 4-Year</td>
<td>Doctoral Universities: Moderate Research Activity</td>
<td>Urban/22,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Private, 4-year, Non-profit</td>
<td>Master's Colleges &amp; Universities: Larger Programs</td>
<td>Suburban/4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Public, 2-Year</td>
<td>Associate's Colleges: Mixed Transfer/Career &amp; Technical- High Nontraditional</td>
<td>Suburban/23,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Public, 4-Year</td>
<td>Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity</td>
<td>Suburban/44,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monica</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public, 2-Year</td>
<td>Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional</td>
<td>Urban/9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murray</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Public, 2-Year</td>
<td>Associate's Colleges: High Transfer-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional</td>
<td>Suburban/4,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Public, 4-Year</td>
<td>Doctoral Universities: Highest Research Activity</td>
<td>Urban/28,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public, 2-Year</td>
<td>Associate's Colleges: Mixed Transfer/Career &amp; Technical- High Nontraditional</td>
<td>Suburban/13,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 [http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification_descriptions/basic.php](http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/classification_descriptions/basic.php)
successful. The superordinate theme of Elements of Effective Collaborations describes the participants’ perspective and sense-making of those components. This finding is significant due to its correlation with the theoretical frame used in this study.

The frame of this research, the Theory of Collaborative Advantage (TCA), was organically referenced by the participants during the interviews including TCA’s components of managing goals, trust, cultural diversity, and leadership. All TCA components were mentioned by all participants in various ways and to varying degrees during the interview process. The framework of cultural diversity within TCA references the composition of the individual participants in the collaboration. In these findings the context of diversity was referenced, but only moderately and, therefore, did not emerge as part of the themes discussed. Goals, trust and leadership are included in this first superordinate theme.

The implications of this superordinate theme are also significant because of the participants’ responses referencing both the advantages and challenges to collaborating. According to Huxham and Vangen (2000), the TCA is also structured with collaborative inertia where collaborations are conceptualized as paradoxical in nature with contradictions that can cause inevitable differences between partners. The synergy that can be created through jointly working together for a common goal is contrasted with the tendency for collaborative groups to be riddled with conflict and slow to produce results. Participants noted both the positive aspects to collaboration or the advantage as well as the barriers or inertia for collaborations to either be successful or fail. The advantage versus inertia is an element within this theory that assisted in the exploration of the subjects and institutions at the center of this research as well as providing a framework that can be used in reflective practice.
As part of the Interview Protocol (Appendix C), each participant was presented with a working definition of collaboration as, *working jointly with others or together, especially in an intellectual endeavor*. All participants agreed with this definition, but some expanded the definition to include additional components. Debra contributed “you collaborate because you want to build on something…enhance it.” Walter noted it should have “a common goal; mutually beneficial goals.” Ann added “working together toward a common goal” to the definition. Wendy described collaboration as “mutual success of both parties.” Further, the participants felt that effective communication and commitment to the effort were also essential as well as an understanding of the expected accomplishments of the collaboration. Therefore, the four nested themes discussed below are: Communication and Commitment, Working Jointly toward a Common Goal, Leadership, and Trust, Mutual Respect, and Understanding.

**Communication and Commitment**

Although this first nested theme is not explicitly described in the TCA framework, the participants viewed communication and commitment as two critical components of an effective collaboration. The development of partnerships requires thoughtful evaluation and the participants expressed that developing collaborations can be a complex process. Participants also commented that each party of a collaboration needs to approach it with the intent to come to a common understanding and a can-do attitude. This is best accomplished through open communication and a commitment to sustain the effort.

Participants felt that open communication was essential for a collaboration to be successful. Matt commented that “for a collaboration to be sustainable, an investment in communications is very important.” This included a willingness to listen to others’ perspectives.
Emily noted that “developing collaborations is complicated and takes quite a bit of effort to communicate and not dictate.” Her comments also noted the aspect of the effort brought forth to a collaboration needs to be grounded in effective communication. Walter expressed “communication needs to be both ways, it’s internal and between institutions. We have to always and constantly communicate internally, and promote and highlight what’s happening with our partners, what’s going to impact initiatives we have together.”

Communication among a collaboration’s stakeholders is also key. Participants referenced that this includes faculty who need to be open-minded and willing to communicate and compromise. A lack of communication, especially authentic communication, can impose barriers for a collaboration to be successful.

The nested theme of commitment was described in varying ways. Terms like engagement, intentional efforts, and good work ethic were used by participants to describe their feeling of why commitment was important for a collaboration to be successful. Emily commented that “things fall apart when people don’t keep their commitments; don’t follow through.” Michael referenced commitment as a means to demonstrate the priority of a collaboration and noted “presence is critical – if we’re not present enough, then it’s going to be perceived as not a serious effort.”

Differences in the degree of the commitment became evident when comparing responses from 2-year versus 4-year institutions. Comments from community college participants support their sense that some 4-year institutions may not view community college transfer students as important as native students. These comments included “commitment needs to manifest itself as
a sense of urgency and a feeling of priority with people willing to give the time” and “saying one thing and doing another.” Walter sensed this from his own 4-year institution by stating:

It is important to overcome the naysayers and it is up to us [leaders] to set the stage and then push it down all the way to the front lines. Conversations and narrative are essential to demonstrate that all of the focus should not be on FTIACs (first time in any college).

Community college respondents portrayed a sense of a greater commitment to transfer issues than 4-year colleges and universities. Murray, a community college president noted that his institution is “more than just committed…we stalk our four-year institutions, but we do that to ensure that they do what they say they are supposed to do.” Another criticism of the lesser commitment from 4-year institutions was referenced as an unwillingness to work on issues, versus simply creating and signing an agreement and think the effort is complete. Matt felt that “unfortunately, the 4-year schools do not have that same commonality as they focus on their institutional and department priorities which may not have any mention of transfer students.” Monica also supported this perspective by stating:

You’ve got to be able to show that the collaboration is worth something if people are going to put time into it, and work on it, that something comes out of it. People have to give time for the collaboration, and we know none of us have enough of that. They [4-year institutions] have to give the time to do it, and to make it a priority.

Walter, a 4-year institution leader, expressed that commitment can’t be forced by stating “work with those institutions who are willing and interested in productive collaboration and ignore those who don’t want to put forth the effort.”
Communication and commitment are fundamental components to any life or organizational situation and this is also true for a collaboration to be productive. Overall, the participants expressed that effective ongoing communication, the sense of the timeliness of people working together, and having the resources to sustain the effort are key elements to supporting successful collaborations and contribute to transfer student success. This nested theme is significant because ongoing accomplishments and evaluation of a collaboration is completed through good communication among the partners involved. In addition, it is also noteworthy that individuals recognize the responsibility of demonstrating ownership and obligation for the effort.

**Working Jointly toward a Common Goal**

The participants appeared to make sense of a collaborative effort through descriptions such as shared outcomes and shared processes. Several of them expressed there is an understanding that people are going to have differences, but must be willing to work together to build relationships. Matt specifically referenced working toward a common goal and added:

> A collaboration has to be based on institutions and individuals recognizing that they have commonality in the interests of students and recognize that it’s more effective and efficient for them to work together as opposed to doing it singularly. As issues that the institutions face become more complex, and the knowledge it takes to understand these issues becomes vast, it’s almost necessary to collaborate because not one institution nor one individual has the capacity to resolve these complexities. Collaborators believe that they can’t master everything and seek out individuals who can help unravel the complex issues.
There was no distinction between 2- and 4-year institutions when articulating the collaborative effort to work toward a common goal. Descriptors such as build, enhance, equality, and working together were used by all participants. A shared understanding of the programs at each institution and the flexibility to work together and problem solve were mentioned as also being integral to working jointly to accomplish the goal. However, it was also noted that there has to be motivation for a collaboration to work; a reason to come together. Working together toward a common goal can come in the form of external motivation, but there has to be internal motivation as well. The effort needs to be internalized. Wendy’s sense was to “approach a collaboration with an open mind and to listen without going in with a predetermined anything or list of assumptions.” She also added “institutions need to have similar missions and both believe that students are first.”

By contrast, when participants were asked about barriers to working jointly toward a common goal, elements such as lack of vision, what’s in it for me attitude, self-centeredness, and closed-mindedness were all mentioned. Emily responded by stating “it has to have a defined outcome. If it lacks an outcome, it doesn’t work very well. But people cannot come to the table thinking they know everything about the issue and aren’t willing to work together.”

Monica stated individual attitudes like “it’s all about me and what I want and what I need impose barriers to a successful collaboration.” She also observed:

A sense of I don’t want to change and it’s interesting when people say they don’t like change. People change all the time. Think about how many times you change your clothes or your hair. It’s not change that people are afraid of, it’s the perception of what they could lose as part of that change.
The participants all expressed the significance and balance of working together with no hidden agendas and a recognition of what each institution contributes to the effort. Collaborations are guided by a vision and purpose which provides guidance on progress, assists with decision-making, and supports the partners in working toward a common purpose. An essential aspect, therefore, is that common goals are understood and supported by both institutions. Each party should place a mutual level of importance on the endeavor for the collaboration to be successful.

**Leadership**

The nested theme of Leadership was expressed by the participants when responding to prompts related to attributes they felt were necessary for a collaboration to be successful. Wendy felt that “new partnerships take work and that needs to start with the institutions’ presidents to evaluate the opportunities that exist.” Many responses reinforced the previously referenced nested theme of Communication and Commitment specifically related to the senior-level staff at the institution. Walter described that “senior level commitment is important and will contribute to the development of a collaborative relationship versus simply a one-time initiative. Leadership commitment from the president – and senior leadership – is what will make it happen.” Linda referenced the leadership role as someone who spearheads the initiative stating “it has to be a project between groups of people with the same goals, but also has to have a champion.” Monica’s perspective was described as:

A collaboration needs a ring leader. Someone that will rise and be visible so that other people see it and then think – look what they’ve done; look what they’re doing; we haven’t even thought about that; could we do that?
Participants also felt the leaders needed to possess the characteristics of being flexible and committed. Matt’s sense was that “good leaders are constantly reading the situation. Sometimes they read it wrong, but they are committed to being flexible and adjusting to ensure success.”

A sense of responsibility was also described as important for leaders to possess. Participants shared that the leaders of the institution should take on the responsibility for the creation of collaborations. Once it is developed, the next step is for the president to send the message of the internal expectations from the top-down throughout the institution. Monica described a responsibility to “facilitate the connections and emphasize the importance of collaborative efforts among faculty and administrators.” Matt noted that this is a key factor and stated “it’s the sense of the collaboration that needs to seep down to deans, faculty, and support staff.” Ann agreed by stating “expectations regarding collaboration must be shared, not just from the president, but on down through the institution.”

Participants from 4-year institutions shared a sense that their role was to put forth an effort to win over the skeptics of community college students among faculty and staff within their respective institutions. Walter referenced that it was important to emphasize an “understanding that [community college] students are not different from ours [4-years].” Debra, a senior administrator at a 4-year institution stated:

Leaders at the 4-years need to dispel the perception that community college students are weaker or less prepared. On the faculty side, there is a notion that those [community college] students are less prepared or come in as a weaker students…that they let anybody in.
Emily also sensed cynics within her institution and stated “if you don’t have a good leader that knows how to steer around obstructionists, the effort will simply fail.” Monica shared that, “faculty [2- and 4-year] need to be willing to put aside their egos, their personal agendas, and protecting their curriculum and look at what is in the best interest of the students.”

One additional component of this nested theme is the essential attribute of a relationship between the two institutions involved in a collaboration and how changes in leadership can compromise the success. Matt noted “one type of institutional threat to collaborations is a change in leadership – trust, longevity of the relationship – are weakened.” He also sensed that “changes in leadership makes collaborating difficult and makes it extremely hard for a collaboration to emerge when there are leaders of institutions who have not been there a while.” Several participants also referenced this threat, but acknowledged that the possible turn-over in leadership is an attribute that cannot be controlled.

In summary, the nested theme of Leadership emerged when participants described characteristics that contribute to a successful collaborations. The leaders mentioned were not only presidents of the institutions, but also senior administrators and faculty all having the responsibility to demonstrate and support a new or established collaborative venture. An additional aspect was the establishment of individual relationships among faculty and senior leaders from the 2- and 4-year institutions and the challenge of the potential rebuilding that may be necessary when there is a change in leadership. Overall, the participants shared the sense that there is no replacement for establishing long-term relationships between institutions so that the communication about opportunities to enhance transfer student success can be broadly disseminated.
Trust, Mutual Respect and Understanding

This nested theme under the superordinate theme of Elements of Essential Collaborations is a fundamental underpinning of the participants’ responses. The participants expressed that no matter how the components of a collaboration might look on paper, it is all about the people involved and their touch-points with each other that contribute to the success of an initiative. Matt commented that “while a collaboration may be among institutions, the reality is the institutions are composed of people. Recognize that each player in a collaboration has a purpose and a function.”

Other participants felt that a mutual respect and appreciation for the people working on the collaboration and an understanding that is well informed about the responsibilities involved in the effort were also important. A central aspect of this was described by Walter as “an understanding among administrators and faculty that it’s important to forge partnerships.” Participants described that trust is also an important factor. Debra stated “collaborations grow over time and the successful ones are based on relationships, social capital and trust.” Walter also contributed “trust and openness, sharing between institutions – particularly faculty. Building relationships and be open and willing to consider the other’s perspective and position.” By contrast, participants referenced a lack of trust or questions of an ulterior motive when a joint project is under development as contributors to the failure of a collaboration.

A sense of equality among the institutions was also shared by the participants. Linda expressed that:

You have to have an understanding that the reality is different based on the [type of] institution. Both parties need to be open to collaboration, open to always treat the other
side as an equal. The number one reason for a collaborative effort to fail is if it is perceived as one side giving a lot and the other one just receiving.

Walter also shared this sentiment and felt:

You have to approach a collaboration that we’re equal partners. We’re not the senior and they’re the junior institution. We have to support each other’s success and make sure that there’s value to both partners. That message still gets lost so you have to really work at making it happen on both ends.

The sense of understanding was also described in relation to the transfer students shared by the institutions and the importance of focusing on the students’ vantage point. This understanding also expanded to the context of the communities served and the policies and rules that govern each institution.

**Conclusion.** The pragmatic aspects of collaborating organizations is secondary to the human aspects. If the individuals involved in a collaboration to support transfer students do not trust the other’s intentions, the effort will fail. Each party needs to understand the mission and the priorities under which each institution operates and respect those differences to ensure the collaboration is fruitful for everyone.

Effective collaboration takes compromise by all parties involved in the effort. The transfer experience for each student may be very different and will not be effective if approached as a one-size-fits-all process. A collaborative project will be most successful when partners come together to jointly contribute and focus on how to be support transfer students with the students at the focus of the effort. Based on the experiences of the participants, key aspects include those referenced in the frame of collaborative advantage including managing goals,
leadership, and trust, but the participants added other important attributes. Commitment and communication were described as also being critical to successful collaborations as well as the effort being mutually beneficial to those involved. Participants also referenced the potential challenges and barriers to the success of a collaboration including an attitude of selfishness as to what one party may receive, the lack of an established relationship among the partners, and not focusing on the transfer student as the driver of the goals to be accomplished.

**Resources and Attributes for Successful Transfer**

Many of the comments by the participants referenced students and the attributes that are either barriers to transfer or components necessary for transfer students to successfully move on to complete the baccalaureate degree. Some focused on the student as an individual and others discussed organizational resources and impactful practices at both the 2- and 4-year institution. One institutional practice suggested by Murray was to “do more than just bring students to the institution. They need to be integrated and connected to the college.” Emily commented on the importance of understanding transfer students “to start from the students’ vantage point…where they come from, what drives success.” Matt also noted the requirement to “understand the needs of the students…to keep in mind their goals.”

Many participants referenced the importance of providing comprehensive supports for transfer students. Beyond advising, attributes such as educating students about financial literacy, providing pathways, and ensuring student success in the classroom were all mentioned. The nested themes under the superordinate theme of Resources and Attributes for Successful Transfer include Financial Challenges, Advising and Student Supports, Navigation and Information, and Academics and Learning.
Financial Challenges

The nested theme of Financial Challenges brings to light the monetary struggles of both the institution and the individual student. Reductions in federal, state and local funding have resulted in institutions passing these deficits down to the student by increasing tuition and fees. At larger, research-based 4-year institutions there is an additional challenge of balancing budgetary support for academics versus research. Many institutions supplement these constraints through fundraising to create scholarships and seek grants to offset the impact on students – some more successfully than others. In addition, there is an emerging debate on the value of a college education and increasing student debt, all of which contribute to financial hurdles for successful student transfer.

Financial challenges were referenced by participants from both 2- and 4-year institutions. The impact of financial implications on collaborative efforts was referenced by Matt who stated that “institutions can feel threatened when they are faced with significant cutbacks or lack of funding. The instinct to survive as an institution usually trumps your ability to collaborate.” Participants described creative approaches to supplement funding deficits including partnerships with constituencies such as business and industry and fundraising for endowments to support scholarships. Linda commented that ‘our goal is to always increase our endowment such that we have more money to give to our students in the form scholarships.” Murray purported the notion that “community colleges are a viable option; credits may be earned through high quality instruction at a much lower price point.” Walter also commented on the difference between the tuition rates at a 4-year university versus a community college:
I think it brings into question the value of a four-year institution because why would you want to pay $1,200 or $1,500 for an English class that you can take at the community college with the same adjunct faculty at a much lower cost?

He also questioned the current funding model as well as the metrics used to calculate budget allocations to institutions and how this ultimately results in a disincentive to collaboration:

We could have 50% to 70% of our students be transfers and graduate on time, but still be penalized because our budget is weighted more on how many of our freshmen students we enroll and graduate…if you can prepare a student to get into a four-year program even if they’re shy a semester or two before earning an associate degree, why should that matter? The same thing for universities – if we have students who are not ready to be at the university we should start thinking about sending them to a partner community college because they may be better equipped to prepare them and can do that a lower cost than we are and can. For an underprepared student, being in a class of 30-40 students is more conducive to learning than being in a lecture hall with 500 students. Policies and topics such as these would help student success if addressed.

From the student perspective, many do not understand the institutional funding models nor how costs are calculated. Wendy expressed that “financial barriers is one of my greatest concerns. I don’t want students to use their Pell money to take classes that won’t transfer so they will have enough money to finish the bachelor’s degree.” Michael noted that there are “disadvantages and difficulties for low income students. Transferring from a community college can be sticker shock when the 4-year institution is 3 to 10 times the rate per credit hour.
Financial aspects are an essential characteristic for successful transfer.” Beyond the costs of attending college, Ann sensed that it was important to “understand the financial constraints that the student may be facing – not only tuition, fees and books, but those outside of the educational world – transportation, food, housing.” Debra stated that the “lack of funds [for the student] can be a barrier, especially if they haven’t had good advising. She also recommended that institutions implement a financial literacy program for students to enhance their understanding of how to pay for college and appropriately manage debt.

With increasing college costs and the rise of student loans to supplement declining federal and state support, transfer students face challenges financing their post-secondary education. These challenges are heightened when credits either don’t transfer or are not applicable to the student’s major and they are forced to retake courses at the transfer destination. This is further exacerbated when disadvantaged students are also faced with paying for basic needs such as food, child care, and housing.

Advising and Student Supports

Participants sensed that advisors, counselors, and faculty were vital for students to be supported in their path from a community college to a 4-year college or university. Debra expressed the importance of “proper advising and clarity of expectations at the beginning of the student’s journey. We have to look at our advising systems and integrate them to support students.” Wendy felt a responsibility to “finding out how we can assist when we advise students and connect them to the right people. We have to be the broker – just really help them succeed and don’t waste their time and money.” She also referenced the importance of personal relationships with faculty.
Murray stated:

Our counselors follow students all year long on issues that are important for students to transfer. We have counselors who help students, but we also encourage faculty to advise which results in the faculty members having a relationship with the 4-year institution. Students need to receive clear and accurate advising from both institutions.

Participants perceived the alignment of institutional support structures for transfer as a very detailed and complex process since many students self-advice. Emily described that students and the institution have a responsibility to support transfer students by stating:

Students need to be open to hearing advice and be able to process and analyze the information they receive to ultimately be able to self-advocate and self-advice. They can’t be passive in the process, but it’s the institution’s responsibility to make sure they have the knowledge and tools to do so.

Many participants noted the importance of advisors to illustrate the path to successful transfer for students, but recognized the additional funding needed to ensure an optimal number of staff to accomplish this task. Murray felt that “a network of people from across both institutions is essential for supporting students and sharing ideas.”

It was also mentioned that students need to be engaged in the process. Walter added that “engagement and a sense of belonging contributes to their [the student’s] success.” He noted that a system to let students know that transfer is possible would support a belief in themselves that they can accomplish the goal of completing the bachelor’s degree. Linda commented about the opportunities for students to be engaged and felt “that when students come from community colleges they are probably coming to class and leaving. They need to be engaged in professional
organizations, in student projects, etc., if they want a successful future.” Michael described student engagement as integration into the institution and is especially difficult for those students who may be the first generation in their family to pursue a post-secondary education. He stated:

Lack of integration is the primary barrier. In fact, one of the invisible barriers. If a student doesn’t have the courage, the family members in their sphere of influence, that makes it more difficult. They don’t know what to expect. They haven’t had anyone in their family share that with them or their group of friends.

Participants also described a sense of transfer shock for the students after transferring. This phenomenon had been described in previous research including Rhine et al., 2000, whose research emphasized the need to be aware of the varying differences in the social and academic environments between the 2- and 4-year institutional settings and ease the transition process for transfer students. Participants noted it was important for the transferring student to have an understanding of the differences between a community college and university environment. Michael noted that the message they send to students at orientation is to:

Use the resources and support structures we have, the writing lab, the science lab, the math lab and use those services as much as you can. We also have a mentoring program. Get in there and take advantage of the resources that are here for you.

Monica supported this notion as well and felt that “students experience culture shock. Not understanding the difference between a community college culture and wherever they transfer to. The cultures will be different.”

Successful transfer of the community college student is dependent on the supports provided by both the 2-year institution and transfer destination. This includes coordinated
advising by both institutions as well as opportunities for students to engage in student life. To be the most effective the resources and supports need to be intentional, not passive, coordinated and well communicated.

**Navigation and Information**

In many situations knowledge is power and this is also true of the information needed by community college students navigating the process of transferring to a 4-year college or university. One of the participants noted that a lot of information and intention to assist students is there at all the institutions, but it’s the communication gaps that cause this objective to fail. Murray talked about an *in-your-face* approach of being more intentional with the transfer information available on social media and the web.

Several participants noted that centralizing information for students would be helpful. Emily noted:

> Our silos force students to go to so many touch points that deters effective communication. We should centralize information gathering for students. Institutions of higher education are structured around disciplines and academic departments and the bureaucracy is focused more on the research and academics rather than how students understand what they are trying to get done. Students, in my experience, don’t know the difference between a university and a college within a university and why we are structured this way.

A few of the participants described centralizing transfer information for students in the form of a one-stop-shop for all-things transfer. Debra’s institution created a system to support transfer students, “by designating space in the registrar’s office into a transfer information desk.
It did not take a lot of resources, but has been very effective.” Walter stated that his institution, “put forth a great amount of resources to create a Transfer Student Success Center including an organizational re-design, hiring new staff, and designing a new space for the Center.” He added that the goal of the Center is to lessen the “nightmare for the students who try to follow discrete transfer guides that change based on program and/or institution.” Ann, an administrator from a rural community college sensed:

Students in isolated regions face their own challenges – most are not the typical 18-year old who just graduated from high school. Many have jobs and families so having to leave the area as well as the affordability to do so impact their ability to transfer. It is difficult for them to learn how to navigate and the resources that are available – how to navigate a very complicated system.

Disadvantaged students – those who may be lower income or be the first generation in their family to attend college – experience additional challenges including even knowing where to go for information. Emily noted “it is especially difficult for first-generation students – learning to navigate a university bureaucracy is not something you learn by osmosis.” By contrast the process for students who are not disadvantaged has been easier. Michael observed:

Students who are not disadvantage have had the benefit of parents helping to navigate and their school counselors have been providing direction so they have a very in-depth understanding about how to play the game. They know how to negotiate the various offers and understand the differences.
Murray also made reference to minority students stating “they [transfer students] don’t know what to expect. These difficulties are further heightened with respect to race and ethnicity.”

College transfer has been described in the literature as a maze that is difficult to navigate. This notion was demonstrated through the participants’ contributions to this research. It is clear that the post-secondary community must not assume any common foundational knowledge by students intending to transfer. The information provided to students needs to be extensive in depth and breadth, offered in a multitude of printed and electronic formats and, most importantly, easy to navigate.

**Academics and Learning**

A critical element for transfer student success is the learning that occurs in the classroom to prepare them to achieve their goal of a bachelor’s degree. When the process works as it should, the outcomes are very good. Emily noted “our transfer students succeed at a higher rate than our native students. That’s a shocker for some and to hear that on a campus of a 4-year institution is always a hard number to swallow for some people.” Student success was at the core of much of the dialogue with the participants. Michael sensed there was a “need to better understand how to increase the success of our students.” Matt and Ann expressed the importance and necessity of collaborating in order for the institutions to even meet minimal criteria of student success and facilitate expansion of learning opportunities.

The notion of *college-level work* and the rigor transfer students will experience were mentioned by most of the participants. From the community college perspective, it was in a
defensive way in response to how they felt most 4-year institutions viewed their quality of instruction. Matt noted:

College-level work does not have one definition. There are different levels of college work. The expectations are all going to be very different depending on the subject matter and program. Both sides need to talk collaboratively about what they consider college-level work. The 4-year schools don’t necessarily trust the intellectual abilities of the 2-year schools to educate people to be successful in the foundational skills, like math and English, to be successful at the 4-year level.

The defensive mode from the community college appears to be justified based on comments brought forth by some of the 4-year institution participants. Linda stated that the “student must be academically prepared for the 4-year rigor” and Debra expressed that “some administrators and faculty believe those students [community college] are less prepared or come in as a weaker student; that the quality of the teaching isn’t on the same level as ours – like we are somehow unique.” Michael voiced that “students need to have a clear understanding of what the academic climate is like, what they should expect academically (at the 4-year) before they get here.” However, he did not offer any suggestions as to the process of how this expectation should be expressed and acquired by students intending to transfer.

Wendy noted that her institution was committed to “making sure they have the right skill sets when they leave here [community college] and the key constituent to ensure that learning occurs are the faculty.” A few of the participants discussed their efforts at bringing the faculty together, but also the challenges to do so based on teaching schedules, their research commitments, and other institutional responsibilities that impede their availability. Walter
commented that “it is helpful to bring together the faculty to discuss what is going on in their
classrooms and the ways student learning is assessed.” Monica also described that “it would be
very beneficial if we were able to bring faculty from the universities and the community college
together to discuss and agree on core learning outcomes for every class.

Within the academic structure of the institutions, course alignment was mentioned several
times as a topic to evaluate when striving for student success. Murray stated “we need to work
collaboratively to align courses to have the same outcomes.” Walter suggested an approach to
“look at competency-based learning versus course by course equivalencies where we tend to
quickly look at a match of course title or topics covered in a syllabus to make a decision.” Emily
expressed frustration to ineffective course alignment:

We have institutions [community college and 4-year] who share faculty, use the same
book, same syllabus, and the course doesn’t transfer. Logically, I don’t get that. It’s
unfortunate that the student suffers because the motivation not to accept the credit is all
about money. They want the students to take their [4-year] class.”

The measurement of student success can be measured by many variables. Student
success in the classroom is evaluated based on an assessment of learning outcomes defined for a
course. In many ways, the process of defining and evaluating learning outcomes is a subjective
process, and therefore, can be very difficult to find agreement across 2- and 4-year institutions.
One aspect to overcome is the perception that the level of learning and academic preparation at
community colleges is inferior to the outcomes of students at 4-year colleges and universities.

**Conclusion.** The resources provided to students and the attributes necessary for
successful transfer cover a wide range of topics and each are important factors to support the
student to completion of the bachelor’s degree. Participants described the financial challenges faced by students including the need to address the issue of increasing student debt and how to best use the pot of money available to assist the student to complete the bachelor’s degree. Institutions are faced with budgetary constraints making it difficult to add advisors to assist students in navigating the confusing labyrinth of transfer. Learning is a shared responsibility between faculty and the student, but the institution also needs to recognize their role in integrating the expectations and outcomes to ensure the transfer of credit. Reducing the barriers faced by transfer students and increasing the supports provided will contribute to success and completion.

**Impactful Future Practices**

The interview protocol asked participants to contribute recommendations for future efforts related to supporting transfer students as well as enhancing collaboration among institutions. One participant expressed this as thinking outside the box and Ann referenced it as “if I had a magic wand…”

Walter expressed the need to view things differently or changes will eventually be mandated and concluded “we need to figure out ways to work better with them [other institutions] and their students. I mean we need to do that; it’s going to be an imperative, not a choice.” Matt sensed that “to be effective as a collaborator is not to discount the external world; it’s to take it into account, so constantly looking to see how things change. Things like licensing agreements, government agendas and legislative oversight.” This last superordinate theme contributed greatly to the findings presented in Chapter 5 and includes the nested themes of Processes and Supports, Curricular Alignment, Data-driven Decisions, and Policies and Systems.
Processes and Supports

Participants expressed that transfer needs to be viewed as an institutional priority and to be included as a component in the strategic plan that addresses transfer students specifically. This would facilitate the enhancement of the transfer processes, define the collaborative efforts needed to support student success, and find the common goals of those involved in the collaboration. From the student perspective, the institution needs to practice open communication so the student has a better understanding of the processes they need to follow and be more intentional about success if the student’s goal is to transfer. Murray noted “that means the right people need to be in place and there needs to robust technology to support them.” Michael described this as a collective impact with “more communication, clearer goals, shared goals, shared processes.”

Recommendations expressed by the participants included improvements to the institutional support structures and the transfer processes students experience. Michael proposed that an evaluation of “all processes related to transfer – orientation, transfer equivalency decisions, financial aid packaging and the timing of the award offer” be completed. Linda stated that institutions should “lower the barriers that we know exist to ease the transition from a community college to a university setting.” Debra suggested a “checklist for articulation agreements as a strategy to make the creation of the agreements consistent.” She also recommended that “the community colleges should have a good financial literacy program to educate and help students plan their finances for the four years or more that it will take to complete the bachelor’s degree.”
Alignment of organizational support structures between the 2- and 4-year institutions as well as courses and outcomes were also recommendations suggested by the participants. Michael suggested “a robust student services network. Help the student navigate, not only the educational components, but areas like financial aid, veterans, and other support services that may also be external to the institution.” He added that it was important to provide “advising around financial aid especially with rising loan default rates and the long-term impact this can have on a student’s credit thus crippling students who may have already been disadvantaged most of their lives.” To facilitate the attempt to centralize transferability efforts, Michael’s institution “created a cross-campus committee. One college at the university does one thing and another does something completely different. This committee was an attempt to harmonize things.” The notion of a one-stop-shop approach emerged again including the development of transfer centers for students with the resources to support it. Michael expressed the idea of:

A collaborative model where staff have been cross-trained to answer questions about financial aid, review a transcript for transferability or simply answer questions and point prospective or current transfers in the right direction. Provide faculty and staff development to better understand transfer.

Orientation for transfer students was mentioned by a few of the participants, Debra emphasized the importance that it is “not a one-time deal; touching base with them often throughout the first year.” Walter suggested:

Having conversations immediately on what transfer looks like and reducing the choices to ensure the course being taken will transfer. Learning Community for transfers as well
as make it [the Learning Community] available to prospective students while they are still at the community college.

In order for these recommendations to be effective, Michael suggested that institutions “invest in people who can develop, build, and maintain the relationships essential for a collaboration.” This includes professional development and training for faculty and staff. Debra sensed a need “to work together about how to achieve goals rather than doing it alone.” She further noted that “faculty should not only have a responsibility for teaching and learning, but also supporting the student as a person. Also an ombudsman-type position or an advocate, a go-to person; kind of a transfer queen or king” to support students.

All participants expressed that additional substantive processes and supports are essential for successful transfer student outcomes. Some require additional resources to achieve, but many can be realized through a stronger commitment to collaboration. Joint efforts that are coordinated between institutions were articulated as being the preferred approach and likely the most effective.

**Curricular Alignment**

Much of the previous research around issues of transfer focus on the challenges with the transfer of credit from the community college to the 4-year institution. Participants’ suggestions and recommendations for future improvements in this area included the alignment of articulation agreements and to provide clear and easy to follow programmatic pathways. Michael sensed an “alignment from K-12 to 2-year to 4-year” would facilitate an enhanced approach.

Ann expressed that “one of our goals states that we will conduct college business with a view to developing partnerships and alliances to expand learning opportunities, specifically
articulation agreements. Articulated credit between the community college and 4-year institution is the ultimate collaboration.” According to Walter it would be better for 4-year institutions to “have a broad-based agreement with the community college instead of trying to manage articulation and transfer plans with each college within a university or even within each department.” Wendy’s comments supported this idea by commenting that it was very important to develop “pathways and master transfer agreements that can facilitate the ease of transfer in the most effective route possible.”

Specifically related to course equivalencies, many participants suggested engagement by key stakeholders including faculty. Monica noted that community college faculty need to be “willing to compromise and not take it personally when their courses don’t transfer.” From the 4-year perspective, most participants referred to the faculty as having the responsibility of determining course equivalencies. Michael noted “we have over 1,000 faculty and each of them have a voice to determine the transfer of credit” which does not facilitate the timeliness of these decisions and can impede consensus if varying opinions exist.

To overcome some of these barriers, Walter suggested to “look at competency-based learning outcomes versus course by course equivalencies.” Other systematic improvements recommended by participants included common course numbering systems. Ann noted:

This approach can facilitate the transferability of a student’s credits, especially when the community college is in a rural setting. They will have to leave home to transfer and this will lay a clear path for how to go from entry to baccalaureate degree.

Michael also suggested a “common course numbering system to create a successful and clear pathway for students to transfer their courses.” Monica sensed the need to “create universal
policies or mandates that encourage institutions to comply with course alignment and acceptance of credits. In some cases, we’re using the same book, same syllabus, same faculty, but the course won’t be accepted.” Murray called for the development of “consistent nomenclature across institutions. Consistent course descriptions – name, requirements, syllabus.” Ann noted that “success for the transfer student is getting credit for as many completed courses as possible – not to get general credit, but to get actual credit for the courses that are required for the baccalaureate degree.” She added that the state should create a “system where the numbering and the course content would be the same for the basic fundamental courses.”

Mutual pathways that are accepted between both institutions, the commonality of language, terms, and course numbering structures were referenced by all participants. Curricular alignment may be the greatest challenge given the autonomous higher education environment in their state. However, overcoming this challenge would likely have the greatest impact to improving the understanding of the transfer process, increasing the successful completion of the bachelor’s degree, and reducing the unnecessary financial challenges transfer students experience.

Data-driven Decisions

Measuring, tracking, evaluating, and most importantly, sharing data related to transfer student attributes and success were frequently mentioned by the participants. Michael stated that “collaborations require understanding and one way to support the effort is to follow data. Data helps measure success, where barriers may exist, where improvements can be made, and can be used to convince the skeptics.” Matt noted “the best data is essential for designing effective transfer systems.” Murray expressed the importance of sharing data:
Redesigns implemented to affect change need to be monitored to determine their effectiveness and that is done through building data systems. This information needs to be conveyed back to the community colleges so that collectively transformations can happen. Monitor data such as transfer retention, graduation rates, and National [Student] Clearinghouse data to support curricular partnerships. More data sharing between institutions that allows for a student to be tracked more effectively from the time they apply to the time they’ve transferred and graduated.

Walter noted the need for internal evaluation of the data:

Data needs to drive more of the decision-making – although half of our incoming students every year are transfers, and this past year 47% of our graduates were transfer students, the conversation, the narrative, the planning, budgets and marketing still focus on the FTIACs (first-time in any college).

Wendy also expressed that “evaluating the data related to transfer is critical as a measure of student success. Are they completing their goals, length of time to complete, what areas can be improved, what might have been the barriers if they didn’t complete, etc.?" Michael noted that additional data regarding the course placement of students is needed and sensed:

We have to find new ways to assess potential rather than testing a student once when they enter the community college where more than one-third of students are either placed into developmental education programs or in classes where they can’t succeed. Multiple measures of placement would greatly increase student success.
As noted by Walter “community colleges are seen as competition to 4-year institutions and, in this environment of budget cuts, we focus on enrollment driven metrics instead of student success metrics.”

Current policies and structures do not incentivize institutions to collaborate on transfer initiatives. Data can be used as a tool to measure student success at both the 2- and 4-year institutions, influence the development of policies and systems that support transfer students, and ultimately, motivate and encourage institutions to collaborate on these matters.

**Policies and Systems**

Most participants emphasized that systems should focus on the student’s perspective and also expressed that generally institutions don’t do optional. Murray noted:

If you only see it from the institution’s perspective, it gets bogged down very quickly.

Unless there’s an iron clad law that requires a state to transfer students from a 2- to a 4-year institution, we will have issues with respect to transferring students.

Policies to incentivize collaboration were recommended. Walter commented that “policies are working against forging relationships – it’s a big hindrance when you are just counting credits instead of thinking about learning, competencies and completion.”

Funding and the resources to make transfer happen successfully at the institutional level and for students were referenced by many of the participants. Walter commented that “resources are needed to hire more advisors; policies and systems need to be in place that make it easier.” Linda concurred by recommending “more funding to hire more staff to support transfer students.” Wendy suggested “legislation that provides more funding.” Michael proposed:
An equitable funding model starting with the K-12 system. The lowest income communities really, generally speaking, have the worst outcomes, the oldest textbooks, the fewest support networks, the largest classrooms, the most teacher turnover, and have the lowest paid teachers. All of those combine into a recipe for low outcomes, poor completion rates, and the lack of college preparation.

Debra suggested a collaborative approach to financial aid and said “it should be viewed as one pot of money and [institutions] need to work together to divide it up.” Wendy proposed an approach to “incentivize students who choose to stay and work in the state by developing a forgivable loan policy.”

One of the Impactful Future Practices that both 2- and 4-year institution participants focused on was the introduction of regulations via a state educational system in their state. Walter observed that “programs that obligate the institution to comply is particularly important when there is internal resistance.” Matt commented that “state and federal governments need to set up policies that incentivize collaboration, that nudge it forward, as opposed to polices that develop and support greater autonomy. Ann also supported a reduction in autonomy:

A state system with top-down directives could improve our outcomes. One of the things we pride ourselves on, here in our state, is the autonomy that every college has. That autonomy comes back and bites us in the butt when it comes to transfer.

Emily expressed her sentiment of the need for institutions and the government to prioritize transfer initiatives:

Transfer needs to be an institutional priority – not just lip service. It also needs to be a federal and state priority. Better systems online or electronic for students who choose to
self-navigate with information that is much more available and accessible. Students want info graphics, they want websites to look like Amazon searches. I would have a higher education system in our state because those states that do have systems have demonstrated a much more effective relationship between 2- and 4-year institutions that support students – the data proves it. In our state, the biggest thing to figure out is how we all want to operate. I’m so tired of some of the conversations we’re having. I’m embarrassed by some of my colleagues’ behavior and sense of entitlement around how those things should work and a real disconnect between what I see as the needs of our state and the communities we work in and serve, and what we’re doing for our students.

Seventy percent of the participants advocated for the development of a state-wide system and, interestingly, the majority of those were from 4-year institutions. Murray stated “create a statewide system of colleges.” Ann suggested the “block transfer of the degree from community college to the 4-year institution and a deep articulation of programs to ensure the transfer process is smooth.” Walter noted that “currently there are multiple sets of parameters, rules and plans with each of our [community college] partners; you end up with 28 different frameworks so I would standardize some of these processes.”

Repositioning policies and developing or modifying systems can be a lengthy and daunting endeavor. Although the various institutions represented in this study may publicly denounce sweeping changes to the current higher education system in their state, the participants in this study universally agree that adjustments would improve collaboration and increase the success of transfer students.
Conclusion. The processes and supports, data-driven decisions, curricular alignment and policies and systems were key themes described by participants in regard to Impactful Future Practices. They noted that in order for transfer to be a priority it should be addressed strategically and included as part of the institution’s long term plan which will also emphasize its importance to all stakeholders. This includes providing the professional development and training to faculty and staff so they can support transfer initiatives and assist students efficiently and effectively. Curricular pathways should be developed to optimize course transferability including the process of evaluating course-to-course equivalencies. Data measurements are essential to evaluating the effectiveness of institutions to support student success and completion as well as the value of collaborating. However, the current structures of systematic measures of student success do not incentivize collaboration. Almost all participants, including those from 4-year institutions, referenced their willingness to relinquish operational autonomy in favor of a state system that mandated institutions to participate in the effort to improve transfer student processes and success.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to explore the collaborative experiences of administrative leaders at 2- and 4-year institutions to improve the transfer process, enhance transfer student success, and support bachelor’s degree completion for community college transfer students. A detailed and close analysis of the interview data collected yielded several findings as to how the participants’ experiences of collaboration to affect the transfer process and contribute to student success and completion.
The findings and results of the interviews conducted during this research demonstrate the importance of developing partnerships and alliances all in the vein of trying to provide enhanced opportunities for transfer student success. The superordinate themes described the participants’ experiences and sense-making regarding Elements of Effective Collaborations, the Resources and Attributes for Successful Transfer, and Impactful Future Practices.

Participants expressed frustration with the higher education environment in their state. They noted that it has the most decentralized higher education structure in the country which works against the formation of shared goals. No other state has that kind of struggle to get to some alignment to benefit students. The participants sensed that collaborations have many benefits, but also layers that need to be built, is a complicated endeavor, and takes adequate people and time to make it successful. Participants described collaborators as people who are always seeking out ways to link to others in ways that are mutually beneficial and result in mutual success for both parties. Participants recognized that one institution cannot accomplish broad, wide-reaching objectives that impact a community without aligning and sharing resources through collaboration. Key components of successful collaborations as described by the participants included making connections, communication, commitment, flexibility, trust, mutual respect, influence and leadership, and recognizing that the goal of the partnership is to reach a common goal. These attributes are critical to ensure the collaboration persists when things may get difficult or complicated.

All participants noted the importance of institutional supports and the need for resources to better serve transfer students. Also mentioned were the individual attributes that, in some cases, pose barriers for students to be successful. To some degree, there is a responsibility on the part of the student to be an active participant in the transfer process and seek out assistance and
counsel. However, barriers are intensified for students who are minorities, first generation, and low-income. The participants noted that it’s about facilitating connections with student services, faculty, financial aid, the transfer destination, and community resources to support the transfer student. It’s important to have the right people available to help the student including staff who can review transcripts, make determinations about transferability of coursework, be a financial advisor and be knowledgeable about the process to refer the student appropriately when necessary. Participants felt that their institutions needed to dismiss assumptions and expectations about transfer students including what they may know about the transfer destination, their academic preparedness, and the steps to navigate the higher education system. Institutions need to be deliberate in their engagement with the student, but students also need to be proactive, not reactive to ensure a smooth transition and completion of the degree. One participant used the metaphor that it *takes a village* to support successful student transfer and bachelor’s degree completion including the community college and 4-year destination collaborating to jointly provide the supports and resources needed for the student to achieve success.

Participants contributed several impactful future practices that focused on new or enhanced processes and supports, including the use of data to drive decisions for change and enhancements, the improvement of alignment of curriculum to ensure transfer of credit earned, and an overhaul of current policies and systems. Partner institutions should collaborate to evaluate the barriers encountered by transfer students and develop processes and supports to reduce the obstacles and ease the transition from the community college to the transfer destination. This includes assisting transfer students with the educational and personal components to be a successful degree completer through a comprehensive transfer support framework. One option offered by the participants to improve course transferability was to
evaluate learning outcomes based on competency in a subject area versus simply completing a course. Many participants advocated for a common course numbering system to allow for seamless transfer of classes that are generally part of degree or graduation requirements such as English, math, social sciences, humanities and science. Impactful future practices to improve transfer rates and completion should focus primarily on the student’s perspective and not only on those that benefit the institution. Barriers of competitiveness should be addressed to ensure our students are best served to completion.

Overall, this investigation revealed the participants’ experiences, sense-making, and knowledge of the transfer process, their focus of putting students first, and their passion for improving the system. The following chapter will include a summary of the significance of these findings, the correlation of the components of the theoretical framework of collaborative advantage and current literature, and the implications for practice and future research.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to explore the collaborative experiences of administrative leaders at 2- and 4-year institutions to improve the transfer process, enhance transfer student success, and support bachelor’s degree completion for community college transfer students. The primary evaluation component of this research is the impact of collaborative relationships between the community college and transfer destination on the success of transfer students. The theory of collaborative advantage (TCA) emerged in 1989 based on research by Vangen and Huxham and was chosen as the appropriate theoretical framework for this study. TCA is a practice-based theory about the management of collaborations which focuses on the potential for collaborative advantage arising out of inter-organizational partnerships. To achieve thoughtful and contributory findings of this research to influence a successful collaborative effort, this framework guided the investigation of the problem as well as the qualitative approaches to gathering data. The qualitative research tradition of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) provides rich and detailed findings and was appropriate to investigate the lived experiences of higher education leaders as it relates to being a participant in a collaborative process or relationship to affect the success of community college transfer students. Therefore, this study was best served by the IPA approach through the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm with the intent of capturing the lived experiences of community college and university leaders as it relates to their involvement and understanding of collaborating across institutions.

The analysis of the interview data collected yielded three superordinate themes and include 1) Elements of Effective Collaborations; 2) Resources and Attributes for Successful Transfer; and 3) Impactful Future Practices. This chapter begins with a discussion of the
findings within the context of each of the superordinate themes and how they are situated with the existing literature. These themes align with much of the research currently published, but expand on the impact of how collaborative efforts optimize the support and processes for transfer students to be successful. A discussion of the implications of these findings for the practice setting and their use within both community colleges and 4-year institutions will also be explored. Specifically, many of the components of effective collaborations can be applied and operationalized within institutions to positively enhance partnerships to affect successful student transfer. The result will influence the augmentation of the coordination of support services, communication of information, and the brokering of agreements. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for future study including the sense-making from the transfer students’ perspective regarding the influence of collaborative efforts among the 2- and 4-year institutions, the institutional supports students would recommend be implemented or strengthened to facilitate successful transfer, and the incentives at either the state or institutional levels to motivate transfer students to successfully complete the baccalaureate degree.

**Elements of Effective Collaborations**

Collaborations between community colleges and 4-year institutions to affect successful transfer requires several attributes and include managing goals, leadership, and trust as referenced in the TCA frame. Commitment and communication were added to this superordinate theme by the participants as being critical to successful collaborations as well as the effort being mutually beneficial to those involved. Congruence on goals allows for greater alignment and commitment among a collaboration’s participants resulting in a greater likelihood that the goals will be accomplished. Trust is also seen as a necessary condition for successful collaboration. The context of leadership is also defined in a non-traditional perspective. This theory does not
observe leaders and followers, but instead focuses on the mechanisms that lead collaborative activity and outcomes.

The TCA framework also includes cultural diversity with culture defined broadly to address the distinct professional, organizational and national cultures to which the collaborators belong. Although this component of the TCA did not emerge as a nested theme from the participants, diversity was referenced in several ways including the need for diverse members to be involved in a collaborative effort. Diversity of students was also noted and addressed various characteristics including traditional-aged to adult, socio-economic status, first-generation, and varying learning styles which all contribute to the composition of multicultural classrooms. One participant noted that collaborations should be a long-term relationship with many people across the institution involved, so a strong partnership can be built. Miller (2013) supported this perspective by asserting that a culture of collaboration among the staff will support students’ paths through transfer-preparatory coursework and access to transfer information. Other participants posited that it was critical to get the right people in a room who have the ability or willingness to negotiate, intellectual firepower and expertise, and are flexible. Interestingly, one of the participants sensed that it was good to throw a skeptic or an uninformed person in the collaborative effort to provide a different perspective. A culture of collaboration can have positive implications beyond the internal institutional level to include a powerful impact on the communities in which they serve (Lundquist & Nixon, 1998).

An important aspect of successful collaborative efforts described by the participants to support transfer students is the mindset that the community college and 4-year institution share the student. The perspective that does not view the student as my student and their student after transfer, but rather our student who then benefits by ensuring coordination of support and
guidance simultaneously by both institutions. This effort can be supported by concurrent enrollment programs and is noted as a promising practice in previous research. Clemetsen and Blazer (2004), referenced a joint conference on baccalaureate attainment which recommended joint admission programs and financial aid consortiums and co-enrollment of students at the 2- and 4-year institution to supports higher rates of persistence and bachelor’s degree completion. Smith and Miller (2009) also noted that participation in concurrent enrollment programs to support completion and degree attainment ultimately lead to student success and time and money well spent. From the student’s perspective, minor logistical issues and processes make a significant impact on successful transfer. Grites (2013) reported that successful transition should be a joint effort by the sending and receiving institution through ongoing efforts to support the student before and after transfer. In addition, he also posited that collaboration and the planning of strategic and timely interventions are essential to the establishment of a positive culture of transfer and to ensure transfer student success.

Critical components of collaborative partnerships as reported by Miller (2013) included curricular alignment, articulation agreements, collaborative campus programming, data-driven decision making, faculty engagement in the transfer process, a culture of performance and accountability, and up-to-date information. A promising approach to ensure discussion on these topics between community colleges and 4-year institutions is the development of an advisory council that meets regularly. This is supported in the literature based on findings by Zamani (2001) and Rhine et al. (2000) that observed the institutional environment and joint meetings by community college and 4-year institution stakeholders are important factors as it relates to transfer rates as well as success in bachelor’s degree completion. One of the community colleges included in this study created an advisory council of executive leaders from fourteen of their
university partners. This council meets 2-3 times per year and its vision is to exchange ideas and strategies as it relates to curriculum, enrollment, successful transfer, student services, and community and economic impact with the primary focus of enhancing transfer students’ successful and timely completion of their baccalaureate degree. Since its inception in 2014, discussion items have included national and state legislative issues and trends affecting their state’s community colleges and universities, academic preparedness, performance data and success indicators for transfer students, and collaborative programming opportunities to support enrollment objectives and economic development. One outcome of this group’s collaborative efforts was the awarding of a national grant from the Kresge Foundation to jointly study transfer data among the institutions with the support of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University.

The notion of incentivizing collaboration among community colleges and 4-year universities was described by many participants during the interviews conducted. Many expressed their frustration in what they describe as improper funding formulas used to determine their institutions’ effectiveness in measurements of student success indicators as a disincentive to collaboration. Transfer students do not count for neither the originating institution nor the transfer destination in the way graduation rates are calculated. Only those students who start and complete their degree at the same institution are included. In addition, some models only look at full-time students which severely diminishes the completion rates at community colleges whose students are most likely to attend on a part-time basis. Hermes (2012) cautions that in an effort to maximize their funding, colleges might be tempted to decrease efforts to support disadvantaged students who would be likely to weaken their performance measures and, therefore, performance-based programs should place a premium on degree completion and transfer by low-
income students and underrepresented populations. These formulas along with the impact of graduation rates on college rankings do little to incentivize institutions to support and focus on the success of transfer students. One participant lamented that their institution is expected to provide resources to support transfer students, but is in no way rewarded through funding models. Marling (2013) agreed with this incongruity and noted that with dwindling state resources, institutions should reap the benefits of collaboration for implementing or refining transfer policies and how they are given credit for their role in the higher education process.

In summary, this study’s data has demonstrated the receptivity of the participants to partake in collaborative efforts with the transfer partner institutions. They also expressed positive results occur when the collaboration’s stakeholders are committed, openly communicate, demonstrate leadership attributes, secure trust among the partners, and are jointly working toward a common goal. It is important to note that when comparing the existing literature to the findings of this study, the components of commitment and communication were not specifically referenced in the TCA framework, but were themes that emerged by the participants when discussing key elements of successful collaborations. A balance of respect and recognition among the contributions made by all institutions involved in higher education is necessary to advance the completion agenda of our students. Collaborative efforts need to be rewarded and incentivized to ensure the support and success of transfer students.

**Resources and Attributes for Successful Transfer**

In continuing with the approach of our students, collaborative inter-institutional student support systems including joint transfer student orientation, advising, and financial aid packaging are attributes recommended for successful transfer. Zamani (2001) posits that it is critical for
institutions to recognize that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting students in their educational path who aspire to transfer and complete the baccalaureate degree. The notion that the path to a degree is not linear, particularly for students who start out in community colleges was purposed by Adelman (2005) as well as noting that many factors can influence a student’s preparation and persistence. Gard, Paton, and Gosselin (2012) suggested that the characteristics of students including age, academic preparedness, program interest, level of engagement and a host of other factors including non-cognitive aspects such as motivation and individual perception as to their intelligence and likelihood of being a successful student, all contribute to addressing the unique the needs of students. During this study, Walter addressed the responsibility of institutions to provide supports and instill a belief in the student that s/he can successfully transfer and complete a bachelor’s degree. As institutions recognize the unique profile and needs of each student, they also need to individualize their services to support them.

One of the attractive aspects for a student to begin their post-secondary education at a community college is the affordability due to the funding model of state appropriations, tuition, and in some cases, local taxpayer support. Many participants in this study noted the challenges students face to finance their education and the value of beginning at a community college. Although many students receive federal financial aid and 4-year institutions support transfer students through scholarships, many are still faced with financial challenges with regard to transportation, food, housing, and family obligations. Attending a community college before attending a 4-year university may be especially attractive to low-income students. Fairlie and Grunberg (2013) recognized this and referenced that the tuition savings from attending two years at a community college are substantial and is increasingly important to the transfer function to 4-year institutions. Data from the U.S. Department of Education also reported the affordability of
beginning at a community college by reporting that in 2013 the average annual tuition at community colleges was $2,792 nationally, compared with $8,070 for public universities and $24,525 for private universities. Additional issues that contribute to the financial challenges for transfer students include potentially enrolling in inappropriate or non-transferable courses that results in re-work, time and money wasted, and lengthen the time to completion. Ott and Cooper (2013) purported that students become discouraged and upset after learning about a loss of transfer credit and the associated loss of time and money.

Advising and support services provided to students before and after transfer were topics referenced frequently by the participants as well as the need for increased resources to ensure a more appropriate ratio of the number of students per advisor. Transitional support for transfer students was also an important resource noted by participants. Research by Piland (1995) noted that 4-year institutions should seek effective ways of reaching out to students in an effort to help community college students with the transition and adjustment to the academic and social life. Many of the 4-year institutions in the study reported that a separate orientation for transfer students is provided; however, many participants supported that this also occur at the community college for new students who state they intend to transfer. Research completed by Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, and Jenkins (2007) supported the approach to reach students early on and found it greatly increases the probability of bachelor’s degree completion. Enhancing advising and orientation programs at both the community college and transfer destination would provide information and facilitate knowledge from the beginning of a student’s post-secondary experience and was corroborated by Handel (2013) and Rhine et al. (2000). The earlier the concept of transfer can be initiated and communicated to prospective students, the better. Michael sensed that communicating the process and value of completing a baccalaureate degree
could begin as a coordinated effort at the high school level in conjunction with colleges and universities. Wang’s (2009) research supported this approach by stating high school students with a greater intrinsic value for attaining a baccalaureate degree are more committed to achieving that goal while attending both the community college and 4-year institution.

One of the challenges students face when transferring to the four-year institution includes the lack of appropriate information which results in poor knowledge of how to navigate the processes of transfer. Miller (2013) and Ellis (2013) both referenced the challenge for the student to understand the transfer and financial aid systems at the transfer destination as well as having difficulty accessing information about transfer options. Although most institutions have information and services available, the participants noted that most students don’t take advantage of seeking out the information or services, especially if they are optional. Glass and Harrington (2002) recommends an effort to intentionally seek out community college transfer students, make them aware of the availability of these opportunities, and offer them in a convenient and seamless way is essential. Mosholder and Zirkle (2007) reported that reduced counseling and advising resources and unfounded lines of role demarcation limiting other staff to advise and/or mentor students may also result in misdirection for the student’s transfer path. Also, participants commented that some students choose to self-navigate versus seeking guidance and direction from an advisor, which can lead to enrolling in inappropriate or non-transferable courses, and according to Gawley and McGowan (2006), can result in re-work, time wasted, poor retention, and lengthen time to completion.

Information is critical when transfer students lack family support, have financial, work and family responsibilities, are disadvantaged, and may be the first in their family to pursue a post-secondary education. Research by Freeman, Martin Conley, and Brooks (2006) also
references these challenges. The transition that transfer students are likely to experience is complex and requires information to ease the social and psychological adjustment process because of the environmental and cultural differences between 2- and 4-year institutions. Laanan (2001) suggested support for the transfer student to provide an awareness of the expectations of the 4-year school to facilitate the successful transition and ultimate success in the completion of a bachelor’s degree. Many participants described the difficulties students have understanding college and academic requirements, the jargon used, and navigating the structure of a college or university. This then hampers their educational planning and discourages them according to Jenkins et al. (2014).

The teaching and learning that occurs during the community college experience and the resulting academic preparedness of the student were referenced often by participants. Consistent achievements toward the earning of credits and course outcomes were reported as critical indicators for the student to be successful in transfer. Reaching milestones associated with credits earned and completing a portion of a program was reported by Calcagno, Crosta, Bailey, and Jenkins (2007) as greatly increasing the probability of completion. In addition, Marling (2013) described additional efforts by 4-year institutions to ensure a smooth transition for community college students including a strategy to sustain the student’s academic pathway.

Community college participants in the study described a sense of elitism by 4-year institutions and felt their students were not viewed on the same academic level as the native 4-year institutions’ students. Instilling a culture at the 4-year university to recognize the transfer student is on par with the native student will also contribute to increasing transfer rates and successful degree completers (Handel, 2013; Rhine et al., 2000). The mindset of faculty regarding academic freedom in the classroom and their interest and willingness to come together
from both institution types to develop common course content and outcomes are key factors (Kisker, 2007). It is essential for the leadership from both institution types to embrace and communicate course alignment as a priority to faculty (Handel, 2013). Glass and Harrington (2002) noted that success of college transfer students, from an academic standpoint, has long been used as an important measure of the quality of a community college education.

A number of promising efforts have been identified by the participants and in the literature. Smith and Miller (2009) suggested clearly stated course outcomes be developed in conjunction with four-year institutions, effective leadership, holistic advising, and accurate information are essential to assist community college students to complete the pathway of transfer. Rhine et al. (2000), along with the participants in this study emphasized that both the community college and 4-year institution need to be cognizant of the social and academic environments and ease the transition process for transfer students. A non-competitive environment is necessary to motivate institutions and the staff within the student services areas of both the community college and transfer destination to jointly develop processes and supports that ensure a seamless transition for students and optimize the transfer of credit.

**Impactful Future Practices**

Participants in this study were asked to provide recommendations for future efforts to improve transfer student success through collaborative practices. The data generated from their responses aligns well with the literature in relation to new or enhanced processes and supports, alignment of curriculum, the importance that decisions be driven by data, and the need for structured and mandated policies and systems which can all contribute to advancing successful transfer.
The findings in this study are validated in the literature with respect to the creation of a network of supports for transfer students. Providing increased availability, awareness and collaboration of academic advisors and counselors were noted by Bahr (2008), Nora and Rendon (1990), and Smith and Miller (2009) as critical reforms for 2- and 4-year colleges to consider that would encourage students to transfer. Participants further expanded on this approach to emphasize that this will only be effective if community colleges and 4-year institutions partner on the processes and methods to deliver this network of supports. Once transfer students are afforded the opportunity to take advantage of a network of services, Jenkins, Kadlec, and Votruba (2014) noted that institutions need to work together to produce clear degree pathways and institutional policies to which students can apply their enhanced knowledge base. Many participants pointed out the additional supports needed by disadvantaged students in navigating the process of transfer. Their lack of *college knowledge* and the fact that these students *don’t do optional*, Jenkins et al. (2014) recommended intrusive and mandatory advising as the means to transmit better information to students as an appropriate and effective approach.

Several participants reported the development of transfer centers to support students and recommended that the centers be located on the campuses of both the community college and 4-year institution. These centers can simply be a desk within a student services area or be a designated departmental office that provides information and services to current or prospective transfer students. Additionally, participants underscored the importance of ensuring this information also be available electronically in formats that *speak* to the student and to ensure the resources are easily found on institutional websites. Research from Zamani (2001) and Hagedorn (2004) support the participants’ recommendations by stating that transfer centers can be an effective institutional response to encourage the relationship between 2- and 4-year
institutions. Services provided by these centers should offer students access to academic support professionals, information on admissions, outreach activities, student organizations, transfer plans, referrals to academic support services, and assisting students with navigating articulation agreements.

Findings in this study as well as in the literature emphasize the importance of faculty engagement to support transfer students. Participants described faculty involvement across a spectrum of areas including their participation in the brokering of transfer agreements, developing relationships with their counterparts at partner institutions, and be knowledgeable about transfer options to advise prospective transfer students as to their options. Kisker (2007) cited the involvement of faculty at both 2- and 4-year campuses as critical to promoting a culture of transfer. It was further recommended that institutions be proactive in providing faculty development opportunities to emphasize their impact on supporting transfer students.

Much of the literature addresses the need for curriculum alignment to facilitate the process of transfer and this was frequently referenced by the participants in this study. Monaghan and Attewell (2015) described the most important mechanism for ensuring successful transfer, was for community colleges and 4-year institutions to work together to ensure there is not a widespread loss of credits during the transfer process. They also cited that their data showed the greater the loss of credits, the lower the chances of completing the baccalaureate degree with only 58% of community college students who are able to bring all or almost all of their credits with them to the 4-year institution (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). In addition, when credit loss during transfer did not occur, community college students’ bachelor’s degree attainment rates increased from 45% to 54%. Community college participants cited this as an area that requires greater attention and action by noting that the key factor for improvement is to ensure course-to-
course transferability with the credit applicable to the student’s major requirements. This is also substantiated by the literature. In studies by Flaga (2006) and Kisker and Wagoner (2013), they noted that from the student’s perspective, they are told, “yes, your course transfers,” but in many cases general credit does not apply to satisfying the bachelor’s degree requirements and ultimately results in wasted time and money. Marling (2013) reported that ensuring that credit is applicable to the major or graduation requirements is a major distinction versus simply the acceptance of credit.

The literature describes attributes necessary for increasing transfer rates and many relate to curriculum and learning. Selecting a major, planning one’s schedule of classes, completing general education requirements, and having a strong goal in mind may account for some of the differences in graduation rates among transfer students according to Piland (1995). Miller (2013) also found common themes that resulted in increased transfer rates included a structured academic pathway, student-centered culture and culturally sensitive leadership. The development of transfer articulation agreements was noted as the ultimate collaboration by one of the participants.

It was also described by the participants that faculty involvement is of critical importance in this process. This was substantiated in the literature including Borden (2004) who stated that faculty from various institutions who join together and discuss the learning objectives and outcomes associated with the courses being “matched” across institutions can facilitate the optimization of transfer agreements. Educational institutions must work with their faculty and transfer partners to ensure the optimization of credits taken so money and time are not wasted.

Participants referenced state systems and their comprehensive view of how courses, and programs, and degrees can be seamlessly moved from one institution to another. Specifically noted, was the creation of mandates to ensure students can progress through the higher education system
without a loss of credits. The concept of a transfer associate degree was recommended by Kisker and Wagoner (2013) as an approach to significantly improve transfer, articulation, and increase the number of bachelor’s degree recipients. They and other researchers including Patton and Pilati (2012) noted one early challenge was differing perspectives on what a degree should include with some who believed the degree should be as easy a path as possible, while others held that it must be based on a common minimum academic standard. Differing perspectives on this option were also described by the participants and generally varied based on the institution type they represented. Participants did agree with the literature in that this was ultimately resolved by ensuring a faculty-driven approach through collaborative discussion between faculty from 2- and 4-year institutions.

Participants often referenced that recommendations for future practices and policies be grounded in data and research. They often cited attributes such as institutional hidden agendas and anecdotal one-time issues as driving decisions versus actual data driving the decisions. Using data to better understand the characteristics of the transfer student as well as their enrollment patterns and academic outcomes were critical aspects described by the participants for any future movement to improve transfer student success. Marling (2013) referenced that understanding the portrait of the transfer student is an essential component to connect students and their families to institutional services, communicate effectively with partner institutions, and engage constituents at the local, regional and national levels. The literature speaks to some of these data including Mourad and Hong (2011) who noted the most significant factors that influenced transfer students’ attainment of the bachelor’s degree included the number of semesters enrolled, cumulative credits earned and GPA at the community college, ethnicity, academic preparedness, and not having an extended stay at the community college. Previous research and the sense-making of participants varied on the impact and importance of the transfer
students’ tenure at the community college and the completion of the associate degree before transferring. In contrast to the Mourad and Hong (2011) data, Crosta and Kopko (2014) revealed that community colleges who advise transfer-seeking students to stay to earn the associate degree, could lead to four-year college outcomes that are nearly 10 percentage points greater than comparable students who do not complete the associate degree. Participants expanded on this discussion by noting that the appropriate time spent at the community college can be guided by the student’s program of study. Programs in some of the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields or those with extensive major course sequencing may be best served through early transfer to the 4-year institution.

In regards to enrollment patterns for post-secondary students, including community college transfer students, shows students swirl going from community college to 4-year institution, 4-year to 4-year, 4-year to community college or concurrently enroll in various institutions at one time resulting in a great challenge to track students and collect data (Barkley, 1993; Bontrager & Clemetsen, 2005). Adelman (2005) reported that according to federal studies, more than two-thirds of students who earn a bachelor’s degree attended two or more institutions to do so and one in five attended three or more. As greater numbers of students attend multiple post-secondary institutions, Barkley (1993) and Borden (2004) assert colleges are faced with student tracking challenges, coordination of programs, challenges for curriculum and delivery, and articulation of individual courses. Participants expressed the challenges of tracking these students in a decentralized state. This includes many students, including native students at four-year institutions, utilizing the community college to earn credits toward the bachelor’s degree. Nearly all participants suggested a more coordinated state system that would provide transparent transfer information from both the community college and 4-year institution. The
literature also cites the importance of reporting information about institutions’ transfer policies and performance to inform the understanding of policy-makers and state officials to improve transfer policies and effectiveness with the goal of improving student success in the most cost effective way (Smith & Miller, 2009).

Frustration was expressed by all participants regarding the measures used to evaluate success and completion rates of transfer students. In the literature, Askin (2007) noted that community colleges are generally evaluated using measures based on those developed for senior institutions resulting in inappropriate comparisons given the large number of part-time students who take longer to complete. Altstadt (2012) asserts that community college appropriations at the state level have continued to evolve and many states have begun to experiment with performance-based funding models. This model allocates state support on various outcome measures, not just on enrollment, including retention, progression, or completion. All participants reported the need to reform how student success is measured.

The transfer rate for community college students is difficult to define as asserted by Bradburn, Hurst and Peng (2001), and although the most complete picture is provided by using multiple indicators, this approach can be burdensome and expensive to achieve. As institutions compete for students, participants commented on the challenges they face in translating the data that are published so the public understands its implications. The literature noted this concern as well, especially when data are not validated or explained (Adelman, 2005). Participants and the literature both agree that sound and well-utilized data systems are as important as dedicated and well-prepared faculty, caring and knowledgeable student support staff, and up-to-date and appropriate educational facilities and technologies are, to ensuring successful student outcomes (Ewell, 2010).
The participants in this study universally advocated for improved systems and policy enhancements which supports findings in the literature. Grites (2013) purported that stakeholders involved in the transfer function, including legislators and accrediting bodies, should create systemic, strategic and timely interventions to create a positive culture of transfer. Based on research by Roska and Keith (2008), states have become increasingly involved in the articulation process grounded in the emphasis for greater accountability in higher education and in developing statewide articulation policies as an umbrella under which collaboration can be encouraged, monitored and rewarded. Participants agreed that policy-makers should develop policies to inspire collaborative efforts among higher education institutions. The study by Hoffman-Johnson (2007) noted this specifically by stating policy-makers should offer incentives for 2- and 4-year institutions to work together to strategically partner in the development of best practices around transfer.

According to Boswell (2004), participants in the Access to the Baccalaureate Roundtable recommended funding to establish statewide record systems, system-wide common general core curriculum and common course numbering systems for general education courses, to encourage accrediting bodies to promote transfer, and access to the baccalaureate degree. Participants in this study cited these same recommendations noting that none of these currently exist in the higher education realm in their state. They also observed that policy-makers often have a traditional view of educational attainment as students move throughout post-secondary pathways which lends to inappropriate perceptions and the development of ineffective formulas used in funding models. This view may not reflect the nonlinear paths students, especially transfer students, are currently taking to complete credentials and degrees. Based on research by Townsend (2001), these varying enrollment patterns should be considered when developing state-level policies related to articulation and transfer.
The study’s participants from both community colleges and 4-year institutions referenced the benefits for students to begin their education at a community college citing reasons such as affordability, academic supports, and the need to balance life and work responsibilities while pursuing their education. Findings in the literature also suggest that state policies should provide incentives for academically prepared and high achieving students to choose community colleges at the beginning of their postsecondary career. Melguizo and Dowd (2009) posit that the state benefits from an efficient system that provides a lower cost college education and students benefit from an effective pathway to the bachelor’s degree, supported by transfer and curriculum articulation between the two sectors.

Anderson et al. (2006) referenced that, although transfer rates have been stable over the last 20 years, the rates have been far from notable resulting in states creating mandated articulation policies including articulation agreements as the principal instrument to facilitate the transfer process. Interestingly, research reported by Anderson et al. (2006) and Monaghan and Attewell (2015) noted that students in states with mandated articulation agreements do not experience an increased probability of transferring. Many studies including those conducted by Grites (2013) and Oseguera & Rhee (2009) have also concluded the ineffectiveness of transfer and articulated plans in increasing transfer rates; however, they noted that those studies have not evaluated the factors as to why or the ways to improve their success to support and incentivize baccalaureate completion.

One area referenced by the participants that aligns with the literature is the inequality of transfer options experienced by minority and disadvantaged studies. Many studies have evaluated the equity of transfer paths and opportunities among all students which has implications for transfer policy. As noted by Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) and Hagedorn et al.
transfer rates vary by social background. The authors recommend that state policies need to evaluate the implications of developing legislation to ensure minority and working-class populations that focus on access to the community college and also allow for an equal chance for transfer.

The findings in this study are validated in the literature with respect to transfer processes, services necessary to support students to be successful, and a discussion of the policies to improve transfer rates and completion. However, the information in the literature regarding how institutions collaborate regarding transfer efforts is limited, and therefore, these findings provide rich contributions to the literature as to the impact of collaborative partnerships to support transfer. Unfortunately, many of the impactful future practices discussed in the literature and by the participants in this study require substantive changes in policy and legislation that would also necessitate additional budget dollars to enact.

Conclusion

The research this study sought to answer was:

How do 2- and 4-year college and university administrators understand and describe the impact of collaboration on successful transfer and the degree completion processes for community college students?

The foundational frame of this research was the theory of collaborative advantage and sought to understand the sense-making of higher education leaders’ perspectives on the impact of collaborations to affect transfer student success. Collectively, the superordinate and nested themes generated through this study address the positive effects of collaboration when the tenets of TCA are applied, the challenges community college transfer students encounter to achieve the
completion of the bachelor’s degree, and possible practices to positively impact future policies and practices.

The participants in this study provided rich and genuine contributions to the research. The data generated from this qualitative study concluded the participants support collaborative efforts as a means to improve the transfer success of students. They purport the importance of open communication and commitment and the elements in the TCA frame as important to effective partnerships including managing common goals, leadership and trust as well as the diverse composition of the individuals involved in a collaboration. All described the impact of coordinated student services for community college students to complete the process of transfer to a 4-year institution to bachelor’s degree completion. Lastly, the participants also contributed impactful recommendations for the future to further enhance the rate of successful transfer.

The literature correlates well to the data generated in this study and, therefore, demonstrate the significance of the findings. The findings demonstrate that the successful transfer of community college students to complete the baccalaureate degree is the shared responsibility of policy-makers, educational institutions, and the students themselves. Rhine et al. (2000) emphasized that both the community college and 4-year institution need to be cognizant of the social and academic environments and ease the transition process for transfer students. Public policy requires refinement to be effective which may include incentivizing students to begin their educational path at a community college to complete coursework or an associate degree and then transfer to complete the baccalaureate degree. The literature also cites the importance to inform policy-makers and state officials to improve transfer policies and effectiveness with the goal of improving student success in the most cost effective way (Smith & Miller, 2009). Collaboration is a significant component to support the development of
relationships which then lead to fruitful partnerships all in the vein of ensuring transfer student success and is supported by research from Zamani (2001) and Rhine et al. (2000) who reported that joint meetings by community college and 4-year institution stakeholders are important factors as it relates to transfer rates as well as success in bachelor’s degree completion.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Based on the conclusions above for each of the superordinate and nested themes, several recommendations for future practice were developed based on the findings of this study to support transfer students through collaboration.

**Early Identification of Prospective Transfer Students.** Mechanisms for the early identification of transfer students at the community college as well as prospective high school students intending to transfer should be implemented. The practitioner should engage admissions or counseling staff to ask prospective students during the intake process at the community college, either at the time of application or during orientation, to declare if their intent is to transfer with the goal of completing the baccalaureate degree. The student’s record could then be flagged by the records staff to indicate this goal and all prospective academic planning could focus on transfer. Also, community college recruiters should connect with the high schools in their service area to develop a process of identifying those students who plan to begin their post-secondary education at the community college with the goal of transferring to complete the bachelor’s degree. A series of activities should be jointly developed by the community college and 4-year recruitment and admissions staff to build awareness among these prospective transfer students including the financial, academic, and social aspects as well as engage and educate them
about the benefits of transfer, expose them to services and options, and develop transfer plans to facilitate a pathway to success.

**Transfer Advisory Council.** The practitioner at a community colleges should develop an advisory council of leaders and faculty to include those institutions that are the top transfer destinations for their students to enhance student transfer pathways and completion. The process should be led by the institutional and academic leadership connecting with the leaders at the transfer destinations. The activities need to provide a value-added incentive for participation and result in achieving goals set by both institutions which may include improved student success indicators, enrollment targets, and completion rates. At best, the findings in this research support the notion that most 4-year institutions reference transfer, but do not address it strategically as part of their initiatives or goals. Instead, most place an emphasis on advancing the research of their faculty and focus their resources, both staff and budgets, to recruit students as freshman. Regular meetings with the advisory council would serve to build relationships and trust, generate common goals and new opportunities to support transfer students, and provide a forum to discuss enhancing options and services that would generate improved pathways for students.

**Joint Support Services Network.** A joint support services network that includes a collaborative student intake process and financial aid packaging should be created by the practitioner between the community college and top transfer destinations. This could include a joint application for admission as well as orientations at both the community college and transfer destination that would include advisors from both institutions. This proactive, intentional approach is recommended as a means to provide coordinated services versus disjointed services for students and avoid misinformation being conveyed. The advisors would be knowledgeable about the programs and services at both institutions to provide a seamless network of guidance
for students that is ongoing throughout the student’s experience at both the community college and 4-year institution. Optimally, a regular exchange of student data would be shared to develop a joint transcript so the student would not be responsible for initiating the transfer of credit request back and forth between the institutions. The student should be afforded the opportunity to take advantage of student support services, career services, and student life activities at both institutions. This would reduce the transfer shock a student experiences due to the comfort of having knowledge about both institutions from the beginning of their post-secondary experience.

**Navigational Transfer Framework.** The development of a navigational transfer framework is recommended to include an audit of transferable coursework ensuring credits earned are not only transferable, but are also applicable to a student’s program of study. Figure 5.1 displays the navigational transfer framework graphically. This framework could be implemented by the practitioner and used independently by the student who prefers to self-navigate as a check to determine their next steps in the process as well as by advisors and faculty as triggers to offer options to students and move them through the process to ensure timely completion. Many students are unsure or confused by the appropriate next steps in the maze of the post-secondary procedures and this framework would support the student in navigating the transfer processes. The student may know their destination or their program of study. Or they may know they want to complete the baccalaureate degree, but are undecided as to which program and 4-year institution. This framework will facilitate the decision-making process for the transfer student by suggesting resources and supports to explore.
Figure 5.1 – Transfer Framework

New Community College Student

Transfer Decided

Destination Decided

Major Decided

Transfer Undecided

Complete Transferable General Education Courses at the Community College While Exploring Information

Joint Information Sources:
- Advisor/Faculty
- Student & Transfer Services
- Financial Aid
- Family/Work/Friends
- Campus Visits

Other Considerations:
- Academic Preparation
- Transferable Credit
- Transfer/Articulation Agreements
- Financial Aid/Scholarship Packaging

Major and Destination Decided

Create/Use Existing Transfer Plan
Ongoing Credit Evaluation by Term
Timing of Transfer
Earn Credential before Transfer Y/N

Transfer to 4-Year Institution

Complete Graduation Requirements

Baccalaureate Degree Earned
**Faculty Engagement.** Institutions should promote an awareness of transfer among the faculty and incentivize them to engage with their peers to enhance transfer pathways. This study demonstrates the logistical challenge of engaging faculty on a regular basis. The creation of a subgroup of the advisory council should be initiated by the practitioner and comprised of 4-year faculty chairs and 2-year faculty representatives from key transfer program areas. These faculty should come together three to six times a year to discuss course outcomes, address ways to improve course content to increase the acceptance of course transfer equivalencies, and create detailed transfer agreements. These individuals should have the respect of their peers to advance and champion transfer initiatives at their respective institutions. Students would benefit from enhanced transfer pathways as faculty engage in a more open discussion of the transferability of courses and the development of transfer plans and avoid time and money wasted when course don’t transfer.

**Data and Policy.** A system of data collection and tracking that allows for data-driven funding formulas should be derived that incentivizes collaboration and use these data to also recommend effective statewide policy modifications to improve transfer student success. In a decentralized state, there are insufficient data reporting expectations regarding transfer students. A central database that includes information about student demographic characteristics, start term, year of matriculation, major declaration, Pell status and other financial aid elements, course data including course name, prefix, and number, date taken, CIP code, credit hours, grade earned, overall GPA, and credential(s) earned would provide rich data to evaluate and analyze the student’s progress and accomplishments before and after transfer. These data would provide indicators of the successful transfer student to use to develop supports and policies to increase transfer student success.
Advancing Knowledge. The researcher of this study has also been engaged in a transfer data study with the Community College Research Center (CCRC) through funding from the Kresge Foundation during the same period of this research. Findings from this study as well as the data derived from the study with CCRC will be presented by the researcher at several national, regional, and state conferences including:

- Great Lakes Regional Student Success Conference, February 16-17, 2017, Detroit, MI
- DREAM, Achieving the Dream, February 21-24, 2017, San Francisco, CA
- Michigan Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers Summer Summit, June 15-16, 2017, Midland, MI
- American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers Transfer & Technology Conference, July 9-11, 2017, New Orleans, LA

Recommendations for Future Research

There are limited studies in the literature that address the impact of collaborative efforts to improve transfer student success. Findings in the literature that address student transfer topics generally focus on student attributes or institutional functions that affect transfer. The data from this research provided findings on how leaders from 2- and 4-year institutions experienced collaboration to improve the success of transfer students. Based on the conclusions of this study and recommendations for practice, future research should explore the sense-making of transfer from the students’ perspective including their impressions of the collaboration efforts among the
2- and 4-year institutions. In addition, a study that evaluated the sense-making of policy-makers related to legislating higher education issues, specifically those related to transfer students. It would contribute to further understanding of the experiences of all stakeholders involved in transfer by evaluating the sense-making of additional constituents.

Further study is necessary to determine how to overcome the misperceptions of the lack of academic rigor at community colleges and the misalignment of course content and outcomes between similar courses at the community college and 4-year institution. Previous research as well as findings in this study report the opinions of faculty and staff at 4-year institutions making the assumption that students who start at a community college are not as academically prepared as those who start at a 4-year college or university. This misperception can be dispelled through course outcomes data to demonstrate the preparedness of the student to succeed at the transfer destination. The more faculty become engaged with peers at their partner institutions, the greater the understanding and appreciation of academic rigor, course expectations, and outcomes will be.

Future study should also evaluate options to overcome barriers to transfer and the impact of incentives at the state and federal levels. This could include options for how to promote starting at a community college and transferring to complete the bachelor’s degree. As mentioned by this study’s participants, financial incentives through state grants or federal loan forgiveness programs could be offered if students choose the transfer path. Evaluating the effectiveness of transfer student motivators at the state level would be beneficial. The literature also supports this possible approach by noting if students are incentivized through transfer scholarships, rewarded for beginning at a community college, and guaranteed admission at the 4-year institution for completing the associate degree, then more students may appropriately navigate the transfer path to complete the baccalaureate (Mery & Shioring, 2011).
The findings from this future research will add to the scholarly literature as well as contribute to the practice of supporting student transfer success by directly impacting collaborative efforts between 2- and 4-year institutions, engaging faculty and other stakeholders to facilitate an understanding of the learning that occurs among their students, and provide data to demonstrate needed transfer supports and processes for the state and federal policy-makers to consider.
References


Briscoe, F. M. (2005). A question of representation in educational discourse: Multiplicities and
intersections of identities and positionalities. *Educational Studies, 38*(1), 23-41.


Advanced Nursing, 37(3), 282-293.


Wilbur, S. (1996). *Understanding the Dynamics of Community College - University*


Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Scripts

Email Script

Dear <name of interview prospect>,

Hello! I hope this email finds you well.

I am currently pursuing my doctoral degree in higher education administration at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts and am working on my dissertation research: Playing Nice in the Sandbox: Exploring Collaborative Experiences to Support Transfer Student Success. I intend to explore how 2- and 4-year college and university administrators understand and describe the impact of collaboration on successful transfer and the degree completion processes for community college students.

I have identified you as a leader at your institution and would like to invite you to participate in this study. Your time commitment will be to participate in one 60-90 minute interview to talk about your experiences in collaboration and transfer as well as about another hour to review and provide feedback to the transcripts of our time together. The interview will be audio-recorded and will take place during the next couple of months at a time and place that is most convenient to you. Confidentiality will be maintained at all times with pseudonyms assigned to you and your institution in all documents. You will also be able to opt out of the research at any time.

I am planning to interview 4-5 executive administrators at 2-year community colleges and 4-5 at 4-year colleges and universities that represent a mix of institution types and locations throughout the state.

Please let me know if you are interested and willing to participate and provide a number to best reach you by phone. If you are selected, I will call you to discuss the study in more detail and to schedule our first interview together. If you are not selected, I will notify you of that decision via email. Please feel free to contact me at petras.d@husky.neu.edu or at 248.933.0722 should you have any questions.

Many thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Donna Petras, Ed.D. Candidate, Northeastern University

Phone Script – Accepted Participants

Hello! This is Donna Petras. I’m calling regarding your willingness to participate in my dissertation research: Playing Nice in the Sandbox: Exploring Collaborative Experiences to Support Transfer Student Success. If you are still available and interested in participating, I would like to set up a date, time and location for the interview.

<Discuss date/time/location>
I will bring an informed consent form for you to sign. As a reminder, confidentiality will be maintained at all times with pseudonyms assigned to you and your institution in all documents. You will also be able to opt out of the research at any time.

Do you have any questions for me at this time?

I’d like to thank you in advance for your time and contributions and look forward to seeing you on:

<date/time/location of interview>

I will follow-up with an email about a week prior to confirm this is still convenient for you. In the meantime, feel free to contact me with any questions.

Email Script – Denied Participants

Dear <name of interview prospect>,

Hello! Many thanks for offering your time and support as I pursue my dissertation research: Playing Nice in the Sandbox: Exploring Collaborative Experiences to Support Transfer Student Success. As I noted in my previous email, my study was restricted to 8-10 participants representing a mix of institution types and locations. The number and mix of participants has been reached and your involvement is not forthcoming at this time.

I very much appreciate your willingness to contribute. If you are interested in receiving a copy of my completed dissertation, please feel free to contact me.

Many thanks,
Donna Petras, Ed.D. Candidate, Northeastern University

Email Script – Member Check

Dear <name of interviewee>,

Hello! Many thanks for your time and dialogue about your experiences with me on <date>. As we discussed, attached is the verbatim transcript of our conversation for you to review and check for accuracy. Please feel free to comment and edit as well as to add any additional thoughts you may have on this topic.

When you have completed your review and changes, please send it back to me. It would be very helpful if you could do this in 7-10 days. Feel free to contact me by phone at 248.933.0722 or via email. If you have no changes, it would be great if you could send me a quick email to let me know.

Many thanks again for your valuable insights and contributions to my research. If you are interested in receiving a copy of my completed dissertation, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,
Donna Petras, Ed.D. Candidate, Northeastern University
Appendix B

Informed Consent to Participate

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Higher Education Administration
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Kimberly Nolan, Donna Petras
Title of Project: Playing Nice in the Sandbox: Exploring Collaborative Experiences to Support Transfer Student Success

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being recruited because you are an executive leader/administrator at your institution and are likely involved in collaborative activities with other colleges and/or universities.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to interview leaders/administrators at community colleges and 4-year institutions to understand the collaborative experiences related to transfer students and how they impact transfer student success.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a series of interviews including:

- The researcher will contact you to describe the study and the expectations for your time
- Interview #1
- Review transcript derived from Interview #1
- Interview #2
- Review transcript derived from Interview #2

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interviews will take place at a location of your choice. Below are estimates of the time for each component:

- The researcher will contact you to describe the study and the expectations for your time (Approximately 15-20 minutes)
- Interview #1 (Approximately 50-60 minutes)
- Review and edit transcript derived from Interview #1 (Approximately 30-45 minutes)
**Interview #2**  
(Approximately 50-60 minutes)

**Review transcript derived from Interview #2**  
(Approximately 30-45 minutes)

---

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**
No foreseeable risk or discomfort is anticipated. However, you will be able to opt out of this research at any time.

**Will I benefit from this research?**
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may contribute to the collaborative approaches you use in the future to support transfer students.

**Who will see the information about me?**
Your identity as a participant to this study will not be known. That means no one, not even the researchers, will know that the answers you give are from you. All participants’ names, other names and/or names of institutions mentioned will be replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The data will be kept in a secure electronic, password-protected area of the researcher’s computer as well as on a separate password-protected external hard drive. All paperwork associated with the study including signed consent forms and printed data will be stored in a locked, fireproof storage box in the researcher’s home. The audio recordings of the interviews will be discarded once the study is complete.

**Can I stop my participation in the study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact:

Donna Petras, Researcher, petras.d@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research

Dr. Kimberly Nolan, Principle Investigator, k.nolan@neu.edu, the Principle Investigator

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
No.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
No.
I agree to take part in this research.

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part ____________________ Date

________________________________________________________________________
Printed name of person above

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent ____________________ Date
Appendix C

Interview Protocol and Questions

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. The last phase of my doctoral program is my dissertation which will seek to understand the collaborative experiences of 2- and 4-year institution leaders and administrators to improve the success of transfer students.

This interview should take about 60-90 minutes. Although I may take some notes during the session, I can’t possibly capture our interview word-for-word. So, I will be taping the session to ensure I capture all of your responses and comments. May I turn on the recording devices now?

Please be sure to speak loudly so I can be sure to record the entire interview.

All responses will be kept confidential. This means you are not identified as the respondent in any way. Feel free to talk openly, but don’t hesitate to decline responding to a specific question if you are uncomfortable. You may also end the interview at any time. The recording will be sent to a transcript service with the audio file labeled with a pseudonym. Once the transcription is complete, I will send you a copy to review to ensure it accurately reflects your answers and comments. In addition, I will provide you with my overall findings for your review and comment. Are you okay with this process as I’ve described?

Before we begin the interview, I would also like to review the consent form with you.

<Review consent form>

Do you have any questions?

<NEU Consent Form signed>

Are you ready to get started?

Questions

I will be asking you a series of questions that relate to collaboration with other institutions and transfer. But first, let me find out some information about your background.

1. Please tell me about your experience as an administrator in higher education?
   
   Listen for/Prompts –
   
   • How many years have you worked in higher education?
   • What types of positions have you held?
   • What areas have you worked in?
   • What is your educational background?
2. First, I’d like to focus on collaboration. Collaboration is defined as working jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor. How does this coincide with how you would define collaboration? Is there anything you would add or change to this definition?

3. Tell me about your institution’s mission, vision or strategic initiatives that have a focus on collaboration.

4. For this study, in the collaboration definition I think of the intellectual endeavor as supporting student transfer from a community college to a 4-year institution with the intended goal of completing a bachelor’s degree. Can you tell me about your experiences in this area?
   Listen for/Prompts –
   • Collaborative experiences with internal stakeholders
   • Collaborative experiences with external stakeholders
   • Working with other institutions on credit transferability
   • Brokering articulation agreements or transfer plans
   • Engaging with faculty regarding curriculum
   • Working with students services areas on transfer processes

5. Tell me about your institution’s mission, vision or strategic initiatives that have a focus on transfer.

6. Please describe transfer student success from your perspective?

7. What characteristics would you describe that are essential for successful collaboration related to transfer?
   Listen for/Prompts –
   • Managing goals
   • Trust
   • Cultural diversity
   • Leadership

8. What characteristics would you describe that could impose barriers or cause a collaboration to fail related to transfer?
   Listen for/Prompts –
   • No vision/direction
   • Mistrust
   • Lack of leadership
9. Can you describe attributes that are essential for transfer student success?
   Listen for/Prompts –
   • Elements at the federal, state, local, institutional and student levels?
   • Policies – process, course equivalencies/credit acceptance, and funding?
   • Pathways – articulation agreements, transfer plans, concurrent enrollment?
   • Institutional support services – orientation, advising, course schedules, faculty engagement, accurate information?
   • Promotion – awareness of options?
   • Student characteristics – age, SES, ethnicity, academic preparedness, area of study, completion of the associate degree?

10. Can you describe the issues that may impose barriers to transfer student success?
    Listen for/Prompts –
    • Inadequate policies?
    • Lack of pathways?
    • Poor institutional support services?
    • Lack of awareness of options?
    • Student characteristics?

11. What recommendations do you have for future efforts related to supporting transfer students?

12. What recommendations do you have for future efforts to enhance collaboration among institutions?

Closing

This concludes our time together today. Is there anything more you would like to add?

As I mentioned earlier, I will be sharing a copy of the verbatim transcript with you. It would be greatly appreciated if you could review and provide feedback. Would it also be okay to contact you if I need any clarification regarding one of your responses?

Many thanks for all of your time and consideration for my dissertation research!