Exploring First-Time Community College Transfer Students’ Perception of Their Experience as They Transition to a Large Public Four-Year Institution

A thesis presented
By
Eduard Sklyar

to the
Graduate 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
July 2017
Acknowledgment

This doctoral research study would not have been possible without the support and encouragement from my family, friends, and colleagues. A special thankyou to my wife, Shella, who believed in me throughout this journey. I am grateful to the members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Joseph W. McNabb, Dr. Kimberly Nolan and Dr. Stephen E. Joyner for their feedback and guidance during this process.

This journey was tough but two colleagues in my doctoral program, Althea Sterling and Natalie Coombs supported me with encouragement and advice. For that, I am thankful.

While a finished work of scholarship might look impressive, it takes a few very dedicated friends to help with editing the work. I am thankful to Shannon Lund, Mark Gold and my wife for their countless hours editing my copious papers in this program.

Last, but certainly not least, I am thankful to my transfer participants for interviewing with me and for sharing their thoughts on their experiences with the transfer process.
Abstract

Transfer students are a growing cohort in higher education, with most of them aspiring to earn a bachelor’s degree. However, only about 25% of all these students successfully transfer from a community college and receive a baccalaureate degree. The high attrition that takes place between the points of community college, the transfer process and through the baccalaureate completion is compelling since salary earning and job proficiency are linked to degree attainment. This study applied interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a qualitative tool to investigate how the participants made-sense of their experiences. This study examined the community college transfer students’ perceptions and experiences of support during the transfer process as they transitioned to bachelor’s degree-granting institution. The research data were derived from in-depth individual interviews of nine students at the end of the transfer process. The primary research question that guided the study is the following: *How do first-time transfer students from a community college perceive their experience with support services during the transfer process at a public four-year institution?* Utilizing Schlossberg’s transition theory as the theoretical framework, the researcher collected thick descriptive data on the participants’ experiences as they transitioned through the transfer process. Through the analysis of the data, three emergent superordinate themes were identified to contextualize their experiences. Analysis of the data revealed that the perception of support was dynamic and was informed by the entire transfer process experience. Students experienced minimal support from the community college and the four-year institution. The lack of support made navigating the new environment difficult and circuitous. And some students experienced a dilemma as they moved in, moved through and moved out of the transfer process. Most students found support from family and peers. This study’s findings and implications may provide guidance to higher
education practitioners at community colleges and bachelor’s degree-granting institutions on how to assist students in the transfer process.

*Keywords:* articulation agreement, associate’s degree, baccalaureate degree, community college, four-year, persistence, registration, student perceptions, transfer process, transfer students, transition
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................. 4  

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study and Theoretical Framework ......................... 8  
  Context and Background ................................................................................. 9  
  Rationale and Significance ............................................................................. 10  
  Research Problem and Research Question .................................................. 11  
  Definition of Key Terminology ..................................................................... 12  
  Theoretical Framework .................................................................................. 14  

Chapter 2: Literature Review .............................................................................. 24  
  Role of Community Colleges and the Transfer Process ............................... 24  
    Transfer Process .......................................................................................... 28  
    Transfer Credit & Articulation Agreement ............................................... 29  
    Academic Advisement ................................................................................ 31  
  Characteristics of Transfer Students ............................................................ 33  
    Likelihood to Transfer ................................................................................ 33  
    Transfer Student Adjustment .................................................................... 36  
    Stopping-Out ............................................................................................... 36  
    Transfer Shock ........................................................................................... 37  
    Other Factors That Influence Adjustment ............................................... 39  
  Transfer Student Persistence ....................................................................... 40  
  Transfer Student Degree Attainment ............................................................ 42  
  Implications from the Literature .................................................................. 45  
  Chapter Summary .......................................................................................... 47  

Chapter 3: Research Design .............................................................................. 50  
  Research Question .......................................................................................... 50  
  Qualitative Research Approach .................................................................... 51  
    Philosophical Assumptions ....................................................................... 52  
    Methodology ................................................................................................ 53  
  Participants ..................................................................................................... 57  
    Sample Characteristics ............................................................................... 58  
    Research Site .............................................................................................. 59  
  Procedures ....................................................................................................... 59  
    Data Collection ............................................................................................ 60  
    Data Analysis ............................................................................................... 61  
    Ethical Considerations ................................................................................ 64  
    Trustworthiness ........................................................................................... 65  
    Potential Research Bias ............................................................................. 66  
    Limitations ................................................................................................... 67  
  Chapter Summary .......................................................................................... 67  

Chapter 4: Analysis ........................................................................................... 69  
  Identification of Themes ................................................................................ 69
Support .......................................................................................................................... 72
  Community College Support ....................................................................................... 72
  Influence of Family and Peers .................................................................................... 77
  Institutional Support ..................................................................................................... 80
  Academic Department Support .................................................................................. 85
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 88
Navigating the New Environment .................................................................................. 90
  Sentiment Towards the Process ................................................................................ 91
  Agency ........................................................................................................................... 95
  Expectations Versus Reality ...................................................................................... 99
  Organizational Awareness .......................................................................................... 104
  Registration ................................................................................................................ 108
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 112
Dilemmas Through the Process ...................................................................................... 114
  Associate’s Degree Dilemma .................................................................................... 114
  Transfer Credit Conundrum ...................................................................................... 117
  Unresolved Issues ...................................................................................................... 120
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 122
Summary ......................................................................................................................... 123

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice ..................................................... 127
  Support ......................................................................................................................... 128
  Navigating the New Environment ................................................................................ 132
  Dilemmas Through the Process .................................................................................. 135
  Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 138
  Recommendations for Practice .................................................................................. 141
  Recommendations for Future Research ...................................................................... 148

Appendices ..................................................................................................................... 150
  Appendix A: IRB Approval .......................................................................................... 150
  Appendix B: Permissions to Recruit ............................................................................ 151
  Appendix C: Recruitment Letter .................................................................................. 152
  Appendix D: Internal Audit .......................................................................................... 153

References ....................................................................................................................... 154
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

More than half of all students enrolled in public institutions start their journey at a community college (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000). Most of these students endeavor to transfer to and ultimately earn their baccalaureate degree at a four-year institution (Best & Gehring, 1993; Cejda, 1997; Wang, 2009). As the transfer enrollment continues to grow, there is increasing concern over the transfer student’s ability to navigate and ultimately succeed at four-year institutions (Wood, Nevarez & Hilton, 2012). The purpose of this study is to understand how new community college transfer students perceive and experience institutional services during the transfer process as they transition to a large urban public four-year institution.

The goal is to understand the student’s perceptions and actual experiences with these support services. The knowledge generated is expected to inform higher education practitioners who oversee and/or generate policy on the processes that facilitate the transition of transfer students through the transfer process. Reconciliation between perceived expectations of institutional services and actual experiences can help institutional practitioners calibrate these services for incoming transfer students. Moreover, understanding how transfer students use institutional services at an early juncture can help practitioners at two-year and four-year institutions coordinate to make the transition optimal. This study will utilize interpretative phenomenological analysis to qualitatively explore the research problem.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the research related to the transfer student process 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 a lens for the study is introduced and explained.

**Context and Background**

More than two-thirds of entering community college students aspire to earn a baccalaureate degree (Best & Gehring, 1993; Cejda, 1997; Wang, 2009). However, only 25% of these students actually complete their studies at a four-year institution (Best & Gehring, 1993; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Berger & Malaney, 2003). This high attrition is compelling since students with a baccalaureate degree earn more in salary on average than students with only an associate degree (Wang, 2009). In addition, current employment and economic conditions have warranted the need for many adults to consider returning to their bachelor’s degree studies (Grites, 2013). This attrition of transfer students has led to an open debate about transfer students’ readiness for four-year college (Lee & Frank, 1990; Turner, 1992; Anglin, 1993; Best & Gehring, 1993; Piland 1995; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Wang, 2009; Wood et al., 2012; Mourad & Hong, 2011). A consideration of the benefits of attaining a baccalaureate degree should factor in the experience of transfer students from the antecedents to the transfer process, to the enrollment process at the four-year institution, and successful degree completion.

Research on transfer students has shown that the actual transfer process, which exists to bridge the transition of transfer students from community college to four-year institutions, may in effect, impede these students from succeeding at a four-year institution (Turner, 1992; Best & Gehring, 1993; Piland, 1995; Cejda, 2006; Wang, 2009; Wood et al., 2012). Therefore, this study seeks to investigate, evaluate and explore how first-time transfer students perceive and experience the process of transferring from community college to a four-year institution.


Rationale and Significance

Expanding research on how first-time transfer students experience the transfer process has implications for a variety of stakeholders with significance in the domains of policy, practice, and research. The transfer process for many students remains pivotal to attaining a baccalaureate degree and to career advancement (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011). The past several years have seen a boom in community college enrollment, which has positively impacted the enrollment of transfer students into four-year institutions. While the overall enrollment has increased, degree attainment has not. This is particularly concerning because many of the students who start at a community college are underrepresented and would benefit greatly from a degree.

Earning a bachelor’s degree is a benefit for the student. Students who earn a baccalaureate degree receive on average 50% more in salary than students who only complete an associate’s degree (Wang, 2009). The salary differential is further exacerbated when consideration is paid to the compounding effect over a full career period (Day & Newburger, 2002). Accompanying the monetary benefit, four-year college graduates have more job stability, job choices and earn better tangible benefits (Baum, Ma & Payea, 2013). Largely, work is an important determinant of quality of life (Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2010).

The ability for an individual to work is a benefit for society, where members of the community contribute to local, state and federal taxes, and to the community economy. Moreover, during the recession, students who completed their bachelor’s degree experienced a smaller proportion of the overall unemployment impact when compared to those without that degree. Considering this, the retention and success of transfer students at four-year urban institutions is essential to society and to the quality of life of the students (Turner, 1992; Best &
Four-year institutions have a vested interest in transfer students. Transfer enrollment is becoming a major part of the incoming class at traditional colleges. In fact, over the past five years at the City University of New York, transfer enrollment has seen a steady increase, while native freshman numbers have plateaued and even declined. Moreover, many higher education accreditation organizations require that four-year institutions commit to student retention, persistence, and completion. However, transitional support programs do not formally exist at many four-year institutions, which may impact the retention, persistence, and completion of transfer students (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001).

Community colleges also have a vested interest in the success of transfer students at four-year institutions. Many transfer students start at community colleges because of those college’s foundation of open access for all types of students (Lee & Frank, 1990; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000). Many of the students who enroll in community colleges could not have started their academic career at traditional four-year institutions because they might not meet admissions requirements, cannot afford the high tuition rates, or have the necessary academic readiness (Best & Gehring, 1993; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Mourad & Hong, 2011).

**Research Problem and Research Question**

The transfer process for many students remains a critical factor of obtaining a baccalaureate degree and career advancement (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011). Studies have shown that services at four-year institutions that facilitate various aspects of the transfer process are not adequate for transfer students (Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Gard, Paton & Gosselin, 2012). The purpose of this study is to understand how new community college transfer students...
perceive and experience institutional services (admissions, transfer evaluations and academic advisement) at a large public four-year institution. This study aims to understand the first-time transfer student’s expectations and experiences with institutional services (admissions, transfer evaluations and academic advisement) as they transition through the transfer process.

**Research Question**

How do first-time transfer students from a community college perceive their experience with support services (admissions, transfer evaluations and academic advisement) during the transfer process at a public four-year institution?

**Definition of Key Terminology**

**Academic Advisement** – This study defines academic advisement as services that assists incoming students with educational planning.

**Admissions** – This study defines admissions as the process through which students enter tertiary education.

**Articulation Agreement** - An articulation agreement is an officially-approved agreement between two institutions, which allows a student to apply credits earned in specific programs at one institution toward advanced standing, entry or transfer into a specific program at the other institution.

**First-time** – This study defines first-time in the context of transfer students who are transferring for the first time in their academic career.

**Native Student** – A student who entered the four-year institution as first-time freshmen (Laanan, 2001).
**Stopping-Out** – This is a phenomenon wherein some students take a pause in their higher education pursuit with every intention of resuming their studies sometime in the near future.

**Support Services** - There are multiple areas in a higher education institution that support the transfer process in a primary or an ancillary way. This study will operationalize support services to explicitly represent Admissions, Transfer Evaluations and Academic Advisement.

**Transfer** - This study defines transfer as the way in which students matriculate into four-year colleges from a community college after earning the required number of credits for transfer (Grubb, 1991).

**Transfer Evaluations** – This study defines transfer evaluation as a process by which the incoming institution evaluates the credits completed from the applicant’s prior institutions to determine if they can be applied towards the degree requirements.

**Transfer Shock** - This is a phenomenon wherein some transfer students experience a dip in their overall grade point average after they transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions (Cejda, 2006).

**Transfer Student** - A student who enrolls at a four-year baccalaureate granting institution after earning credits at another institution of higher learning.
Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory provides a theoretical framework that helps to illuminate the key aspects of the experience of transfer students as they transition through the transfer process from a community college to a four-year institution. Transition theory was originally developed as a counseling theory for retiring adults to better understand how they perceive this phase of their lives, and to evaluate their transition experience. The theory posits that adults have difficulty managing a transition and thus, may not be able to identify “support and challenges (Drago-Severson, 2004)” necessary to deal with the transition. Despite its initial purpose, many scholars have seen the utility of this theory and applied it to other populations, including traditional-age college students (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The original theory has since been revised in 1995, 2006, and 2012. The next section will present an overview of the theory, the phases of transition and the coping mechanism.

Transition is defined as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (Schlossberg, 1984, p.33). The individual’s perception of their experience of an event or non-event, as being a transition is a key aspect of the definition of the theory (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). In order to understand the meaning that a transition has for an individual, the type of transition, context, and impact of the transition must be considered (Schlossberg, 1984). A type of transition can be anticipated, unanticipated, or a non-event. Anticipated transitions are those that are seen as occurring predictably in one’s lifetime such as a high school graduation; whereas unanticipated transitions are where the individual did not expect them to occur, such as being fired from work or a sudden death of a family member. A non-event is defined as a transition a person expected to occur, but did not happen as hoped such as a marriage that never took place. Furthermore, context refers to one's
relationship with the transition and to the setting in which the transition takes place (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Finally, impact is determined by the degree to which the transition alters one's daily life (2006).

A transition can be positive, negative or benign and can include obvious and subtle life changes (2006). The participant’s own perception of the transition is key in identifying and appraising the transition phenomenon. An anticipated event for one person might be considered unanticipated for another person. Moreover, an event might be considered positive by one person and negative by another. An example of this would be, retirement.

Transition Phases

While transitions may be linked to one identifiable event or non-event, a transition is actually a process that extends over time (Goodman et al., 2006). The transition process consists of three phases: moving in, moving through and moving out (Chickering & Schlossberg, 2001). The moving in phase is the period where the individual familiarizes themselves with the rules, norms, and expectations of the new system (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). The moving through period “begins once learners know the ropes” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 57). Once the individual is in the midst of the transition, they must learn to balance new or changed activities with other areas of their lives as they move through the transition. Moving out can be seen as ending a transition, and then thinking about what comes next (Anderson et al., 2012). It is important to note that a transition can begin with the move in or the moving out phase. Figure 1 depicts the integrative model of the three phases of transition theory.
The Transition Model

The transition model has three major components: approaching the transition, taking stock of coping resources, and taking charge (Anderson et al., 2012). Goodman et al. (2006) defines coping, “as the overt and covert behaviors individuals use to prevent, alleviate, or respond to stressful situations” (p.28). The first part is approaching the transition where the transition is identified and subsequently occurs. This portion of the theory considers and ascertains the type and context of the transition, the impact on the individual experiencing the transition, and the individual’s perception of the transition. By understanding the overall context, the overall impact of the transition can be evaluated and coping options can be considered.

The second part of the model describes the affected individual appraising the factors that influence the transition and taking stock of their coping resources. This process is also referred
to as a review of the participant’s assets and/or liabilities (Schlossberg, 1984; Anderson et al., 2012). Schlossberg identified four major sets of factors that influence a person's ability to cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies, which are also known as the 4 S's (Schlossberg, 1984; Anderson et al., 2012).

The final part of the transition model is taking charge of the transition. It demonstrates the use of new strategies to manage and deal with the transition. This revolves around the individual strengthening the resources around them, which may include strengthening the coping resources. If assets outweigh liabilities then the transition will be less difficult (Schlossberg, Waters, Goodman, 1995; Anderson et al., 2012).

**Coping factors**

The first factor is situation, which is the ability to assess what has happened. This factor will vary according to what triggered the transition, the timing, the amount of control the individual has over the transition, the new roles the individual is taking on, the duration of the transition, the individual’s previous experience with a similar transition, how the individual assesses the transition, and other possible stresses the individual is experiencing (Goodman et al., 2006; Anderson et al., 2012).

The second factor is self, which consists of personal and demographic characteristics, and psychological resources. An individual’s personal and demographic characteristics affect how they view life, and include socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, culture, age, stage of life, and stage of health. Psychological resources include ego development, outlook, personal values, spirituality, and resiliency (Goodman et al., 2006; Anderson et al., 2012).

The third factor is support, which includes the resources that are available to the individual to adapt to and cope with the various phases of the transition. People receive support
from family, friends, intimate relationships, and institutions and/or communities. Functions of support include affect, affirmation, aid, and honest feedback (Goodman et al., 2006; Anderson et al., 2012).

The fourth factor is strategies, which refers to how the individual copes with and overcomes the transition. Coping responses include those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that aid in managing stress (Goodman et al., 2006; Evans et al. 2010). Goodman et al. (2006) also asserted four possible modes of coping: direct action, inhibition of action, information seeking, and intrapsychic behavior. They noted that individuals cope best when they remain flexible and use multiple strategies (2010).

Other Applications of Transition Theory

Since Schlossberg’s seminal work, transition theory has been applied to study multiple groups that have transitioned into new settings, including nontraditional returning students, academic probation students, and retiring faculty members. This theory has been tested and utilized by scholars in higher education. For instance, Powers (2010) applied the theory in understanding undergraduate male drop-outs’ perspectives of themselves. Kovton (2010) applied aspects of transition theory to international students’ transition to a United States institution.

Wheeler (2012) focused on veteran’s transition to a community college. One of the main themes that surfaced in her study was that veterans had mixed reactions to the services offered by the Veteran Affairs Certifying Officer, which could be classified within the support structures of the “4 S’s” model.
Critics of Transition Theory

Danish (1981) felt the original form of Schlossberg’s transition theory was ambiguous. While the theory attempted to establish a framework for understanding what adults experience as they transition, the theory did not identify a clear point when the transition actually occurs, or how one can intervene with individuals around various transition points (1981). The author also argued that transition is only one component of life span development. Thus, the context of the full life span profile is necessary to better understand the transition. Since this criticism, discrete transition phases were added to better delineate transition points (Anderson et al., 2012).

Schlossberg has considered transition theory to be dynamic and evolving (Schlossberg, 1981).

Hopson (1981) was critical of Schlossberg’s use of the term “adaptation” because the theory is solely reflective of “responses to transition” (p. 37). In addition, Hopson (1981) did not agree with Schlossberg’s definition of “supports” as individuals who surround the person through their transition, and who are merely present during the transition. He opined that “supports” should be reflective only of people who truly provide some form of assistance through the transition.

Rationale for Using this Theory

The problem under investigation in this proposed research study is to better understand community college transfer student’s perceptions and experiences on the transfer process as they transition to a traditional four-year college. According to Anfara and Mertz (2006), the theoretical framework of a study “affects every aspect of the study, from determining how to frame the purpose and problem, to what to look at and for” (p. 14). Transition theory will be the framework guiding this qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis study.
More than 75% of entering community college students aspire to earn a baccalaureate degree (Best & Gehring, 1993; Cejda, 1997; Wang, 2009). However, only 25% of these students actually complete a four-year institution (Best & Gehring, 1993; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Berger & Malaney, 2003). The high attrition is concerning since students who earn a baccalaureate degree on average earn more in salary than students who complete their associate degree (Wang, 2009).

The problem is multifaceted: transfer students experience difficulties during the transition to the four-year institution; they receive less financial aid (Melguizo, Kienzl, and Alfonso, 2011), are less engaged (National Survey for Student Engagement, 2008), and experience changes in cultures and academics leading to transfer shock and culture shock (Cejda & Kaylor, 1997; Cejda, Kaylor, & Rewey, 1998; Johnson, 2005; Whitfield, 2005). Colleges and universities must begin to better understand transfer students’ voices, and not just numbers. Transition theory may help conceptualize how the transition experience occurs for community college transfer students and how their perceptions and realities of the transition can impact acclimation, retention and persistence toward graduation at the receiving institution. By seeking to add a voice to community college transfer students and understanding their perceived reasons for successfully transitioning through the transfer process, universities may be able to subsequently improve the transition and enhance retention for these students.

**Applying Theory to this Study**

Examinations of transfer student populations have been based on many theories, including Rendon’s validation theory, Bean and Metzner’s attrition model, and Smedley, Myers, and Harrell’s stress-coping model amongst others. What makes transition theory stand out from the aforementioned theories for this research is that it focuses on the transition of the student.
This aligns with my endeavor to evaluate the transfer process through the lens of the transfer student’s understanding of the transition within the process.

The purpose of this study is to understand how new community college transfer students perceive and experience institutional services during their transition to an urban four-year institution. Transition theory provides a framework to evaluate the transition of a community college transfer student to a traditional university. The goal of transition theory is to examine phenomena that reflect transitions utilizing the three-phase model: moving in, moving through, and moving out of the transition. Therefore, transition theory aided in the development of the following research questions by narrowing my focus to the transfer process itself. Rather than looking at the entire first semester, I am interested in evaluating the period identified as the transfer or enrollment process for transfer students. While many offices interact with or facilitate aspects of the transfer process, the scholarly literature on transfer students identifies three offices that are pivotal in facilitating the movement of transfer students through the enrollment process: admissions, transfer evaluations and academic advisement (Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Gard, Paton & Gosselin, 2012). It is important to note that other offices, such as financial aid, have also been identified by the literature as pivotal. However, evaluation of this office is beyond the scope of this research study.

A key component to transition theory is that a participant’s understanding of a phenomenon is what gives meaning to the type of transition, the various phases of the transition, and the coping mechanism of dealing with each phase. While a transition might seem abstract, the theory attempts to compartmentalize the transition so that practitioners can better design the appropriate support systems. In this capacity, this framework aligns with the researcher’s constructivist, ontological and epistemological orientation.
Viewing my research goal through the lens of transition theory, students move into the transition when they begin their college application and are subsequently admitted. They move through the transition while they receive their transfer evaluations and academic advisement, and they move out of the transition when they enroll into the four-year institution. This perspective creates a framework through which we can evaluate how these offices interact with each other and transfer students, in relation to the transfer student’s transition within the transfer process.

Transition theory provides an excellent theoretical framework to examine the problem under investigation and articulate research questions to further the exploration. The transition theory’s three-phase model provides an excellent method for examining the transition of community college transfer students as they move into the transfer process at the traditional university, move through the process, and ultimately move out of the transfer process. This detailed approach can illuminate important perceptions and experiences of transfer students. The findings can generate a valuable discussion about the transition of transfer students within the transfer process, and how transfer students interact and utilize admissions, transfer evaluation and academic advisement.

While transition theory seems to be an ideal fit for this study, it is useful to note some minor limitations of the theory and the qualitative approach overall. This study sample represents student experiences at one institution. Schlossberg’s transition theory was conceptualized as a counseling theory for aging adults, and was not originally developed around or for traditional college transfer students.

Overall, transition theory is a functional and effective tool to compartmentalize and inform key aspects of the community college transfer student’s transition through the transfer process.
Conclusion

The transfer process for many students remains a pivotal juncture within their higher education journey. As transfer students continue to represent an expanding segment of the college-going population, the need to understand how they transition through the transfer process is a matter of vital importance for higher education professionals (Wood et al., 2012). The purpose of this study is to understand how new community college transfer students perceive and experience institutional services as they navigate the transfer process through the lens of transition theory.

The literature review in Chapter Two presents the extant scholarship on transfer students. Chapter Three describes the research design.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

The transfer process for many students remains a pivotal entree to baccalaureate degrees and career advancement (Laanan, 2007; Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011). Approximately 50% of all students who are enrolled in public institutions start their journey at a community college (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Mooney & Foley, 2011). Over the past several years, enrollment in community colleges has grown significantly, and has yielded more transfer students at four-year institutions (Stern, 2016). As the overall transfer enrollment continues to grow, there is increasing concern over transfer students’ ability to navigate and ultimately succeed at four-year institutions (Anglin, College, Davis & Mooradian, 1993; Piland, 1995; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Berger & Malaney, 2003; Wood et al., 2012; Stern, 2016).

The review will begin with an overview of the role of the community college as it relates to transfer students and the transfer process. Then, we will examine the characteristics of transfer students that ultimately influence their progress through the transfer process and degree completion at a four-year institution. Finally, the paper will present implications from the literature, and will conclude with a summary of the major research.

Role of Community Colleges and the Transfer Process

The transfer student experience often starts at community colleges, which fill an essential role as a stepping stone for students who begin there and then complete their studies at four-year institutions (Turner, 1992; Best & Gehring, 1993; Piland, 1995; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Berger & Malaney, 2003; Anderson, Sun & Alfonso, 2006; Wang, 2009; Laanan, Starobin & Eggleston, 2010; Mooney & Foley, 2011; Wood et al., 2012; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Lopez & Jones, 2016). Most community colleges are built on a foundation of open access for all types of
students (Lee & Frank, 1990; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Dowd, 2010). Many of the students who enroll in community colleges would not meet the admissions requirements for traditional four-year institutions, could not afford the higher tuition, or do not have the necessary college readiness skills (Best & Gehring, 1993; Rouse, 1995; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Doyle, 2009; Mourad & Hong, 2011; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Moreover, community college programs are more attractive to minority, low-income and other non-traditional students because they put more emphasis on the needs of the learner (Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Lee & Frank, 1990; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Berger & Malaney, 2003; Stephan, Rosenbaum & Person, 2009; Cejda & Kaylor, 2010; Wood et al., 2012; Van Ommeren, 2011; Ellis, 2013). Some of the additional foci of community colleges includes remediation, professional education, and continuing education (Wood et al., 2012; Mourad & Hong, 2011).

Community colleges were established as initial points of post-secondary education with a mission of open access (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2010; Stern, 2016). In the early 20th century, two-year junior colleges represented the first two years of course work needed to earn a bachelor’s degree (Thelin, 2011; Stern, 2016). The basic idea was for students to take general education or lower-division courses at a community college and then transfer to senior or traditional four-year institutions (Thelin, 2011; Handel, 2013; Stern 2016). In this capacity, community colleges acted as a springboard for students, who otherwise would not be eligible to attend a four-year institution, and were a gateway for many students interested in higher education (Dowd, 2010).

Another important and popular component of the community college is its vocational education programs. Many students attend community colleges to capitalize on vocational
and/or professional certificate programs that allows them to enter into the work-force more quickly (Fredrickson, 1998, Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Kasper, 2003).

Community colleges typically have the supplemental resources that underrepresented students need to deal with various challenges that are unique to their background (Thelin, 2011). In this capacity, the two-year institutions are filling gaps that four-year institutions do not (Turner, 1992; Cohen & Brawer, 2003). From a career investment perspective, students who considered the cost of college were more likely to apply to community colleges (An, 2010). These factors make community colleges popular choices for minority, poor and other underrepresented populations (Birnbaum, 1970; Stern, 2016). In addition to domestic students, community colleges also welcome students from international backgrounds and serve as a place where they are integrated into the U.S. educational system and workforce (Altbach et al., 2010). Community colleges offer remediation, English language learning and courses that help students become eligible to transfer to four-year institutions (Thelin, 2011; Handel, 2013).

Federal and state policy makers also have a vested interest in the success of community college students (Anglin et al., 1993; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Handel, 2013). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ranked the United States sixth among developed nations in the percentage of 25-64 year olds who earn at least an associate degree (Handle, 2013). This low ranking was the impetus for President Obama setting a goal for community colleges to increase their completion count by five million graduates by the year 2020 (White House, 2009).

Four-year institutions have a vested interest in the success of community colleges, because the community colleges have become major feeders for the students they serve (Anglin et al., 1993; Piland, 1995; Andres, 1999; Cejda, 2006; Wood et al., 2012). Transfer enrollment is
becoming a major part of the incoming class at the traditional colleges. In fact, over the past five years, transfer enrollment has seen a steady increase at the City University of New York, while native freshman numbers have plateaued, and even declined. Nationwide, community colleges have experienced faster growth in the past 30 years than public and private four-year institutions (Jargowsky, McFarlin Jr & Holovchenko, 2005).

Research on the efficacy of community colleges have found mixed results in terms of student success (Long & Kurleander, 2008; Beach, 2011; Clotfelter, Ladd, Muschkin, & Vigdor, 2013). However, almost all the variation was attributed to the type of student – not the quality of the community college. These findings illustrate a theme in the literature, called social stratification, which suggests that community colleges educating the poorest and most underrepresented students tend to perform worse than other community colleges (Karabel, 1986; Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008; Stephan et al., 2009; Beach, 2011; Clotfelter et al., 2013). Critics of community colleges have also argued that poor rates of retention, graduation, completion and transfer are also evidence of social stratification (Beach, 2011).

Other scholars have argued that the very nature of community colleges diverts some students who were eligible for four-year institutions from attending one (Leigh & Gill, 2003). This phenomenon has been referred to as the diversion effect (Rouse, 1995; Leigh & Gill, 2003) and undermatching (Smith, Pender, Howell, & Hurwitz, 2012). Other research has shown that students who endeavor to transfer to a four-year institution might instead be steered by their community college advisors into vocational and professional certificate programs (Clark, 1980).

The counterargument to the diversion effect is another phenomenon referred to as the democratization effect (Rouse, 1995; Doyle, 2009). The main idea behind the democratization
effect is that while it is plausible that some students would be eligible for admissions to a four-year institution, many of them still face the challenges of higher tuition costs and the lack of college readiness to handle the rigor of a four-year intuition (Doyle, 2009). Moreover, studies have shown that students who persist at the community college increase their likelihood to transfer (Leigh & Gill, 2003). Research on the impact of the existence of vocational education at the community college has shown that the vocational component does not impact student attrition overall (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).

**Transfer Process**

More than 75% of entering community college students aspire to earn a baccalaureate degree (Best & Gehring, 1993; Cejda, 1997; Wang, 2009; Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). However, only 25% of these students actually complete a four-year degree (Best & Gehring, 1993; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Berger & Malaney, 2003). The high attrition is concerning since students who obtain a baccalaureate degree, on average, earn more than students who only complete their associate degree (Wang, 2009). In addition, current employment and economic conditions have compelled many adults to consider going back to school to complete their bachelor’s degrees (Grites, 2013; Ireland, 2015). This attrition of transfer students has led to an open debate about the four-year college readiness of transfer students (Lee & Frank; 1990; Turner, 1992; Anglin et al., 1993; Best & Gehring, 1993; Piland 1995; Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Wang, 2009; Wood et al., 2012; Mourad & Hong, 2011). When considering the positive implication of attaining a baccalaureate degree, it is important to understand the experiences of transfer students: from the antecedents to the transfer process; to the enrollment process at the four-year institution, and, finally, successful degree completion.
One of the major reasons often cited within the literature for the high attrition rate for transfer students is transfer shock (Turner, 1992; Best & Gehring, 1993; Cejda, 2006; Cejda & Kaylor, 2010; Grites, 2013). Another significant reason for the low success rate is the actual transfer process. A review of the literature illustrates a transfer process that impedes the prospective community college students from succeeding in four-year institutions (Turner, 1992; Best & Gehring, 1993; Piland, 1995; Cejda, 2006; Wang, 2009; Wood et al., 2012). In addition, culture disparity between two-year and four-year institutions, the transfer credit articulation and evaluation process, and the stigma associated with being a transfer student have also contributed to the low success rate of transfer students in attaining a baccalaureate degree (Turner, 1992; Piland, 1995; Wang, 2009; Nevarez & Hilton, 2010; Ellis, 2013).

However, many students do transfer successfully from a two-year to a four-year institution. The process of a student matriculating at a different institution is referred to as the transfer process (Townsend, 2008). This process can be viewed as a bridge for the student between the current institution and the subsequent institution (Adelman, 2005). The process includes admission, transfer credit evaluation, financial aid and other services that fall under the enrollment umbrella at the four-year institution, as well as college and academic advisement at the two-year institution. Some studies have shown that these services are often not adequate for transfers (Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Gard, Paton & Gosselin, 2012).

**Transfer credit and articulation agreement.** Even when community college students complete the required coursework, institutional factors at the four-year institution such as a lack of an articulation agreement and unfair transfer credit evaluations, can stymie the student from successfully transferring their credits towards a bachelor’s degree (Anderson et al., 2006; Doyle, 2009; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Stern, 2016). Transfer credit evaluation is the process by
which the incoming institution evaluates the credits that were completed by an applicant at his/her prior institutions to determine if they can be applied towards their degree requirements. This process is facilitated by the transfer evaluations office. However, the approval of credits is often done by the faculty (Dowd, 2010), many of whom are typically off campus during the late spring through summer peak period for transfer evaluations.

Research on the pre-transfer and the post-transfer experience has shown that students were disappointed that some of their community college credits either did not transfer, or were transferred only as electives (Stern, 2016). This credit loss has implication; students have to repeat courses that they took at the community college level or invest more time to take general education courses (Bowls, 1988; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). This action can prolong the student’s studies at the institution and having to retake courses makes the higher education experience more expensive (Bowls, 1988). From the student’s economic perspective, student’s need to consider the opportunity cost of the additional time needed to complete the degree and the additional expenditure for the extra credits. Monaghan & Attewell (2015) found that students who can transfer most of the credits from a community college were more likely to graduate a four-year institution.

Another instrument utilized to evaluate credits transferring from a community college can be an articulation agreement between both institutions (Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Gard, Paton & Gosselin, 2012). An articulation agreement is an officially approved agreement between two institutions, which allows a student to apply credits earned in specific programs at one institution toward advanced standing, entry or transfer into a specific program at the other institution (Anderson et al., 2006). A limited articulation agreement, or no agreement, creates additional
hurdles for transfer students (Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Best and Gehring, 2003; Anderson et al., 2006; Doyle, 2009; Stern, 2016).

Overall, the transfer credit evaluation and the articulation agreement have a substantial impact on the student’s decision to ultimately attend a four-year institution (Roksa & Keith, 2008). From a state-level perspective, Stern (2016) found that institutions in states with articulation agreements accept a higher proportion of transfer credits. From an institutional perspective, Banks (1994) found that the transfer rates were higher in institutions with articulation agreements. Similarly, Higgins & Katsinas (1999) findings confirm that the presences of an articulation agreement can positively impact the transfer rate.

**Academic advisement.** Another important component of the transfer process is academic advisement at the two-year and four-year institution (Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Best and Gehring, 2003). While the office of academic advisement is ubiquitous within higher education institutions, the role it plays varies with the type of institution. At a four-year institution, academic advisors exist because students require information and assistance to navigate the University system and to make appropriate decisions. At a community college, academic advisors prepare students to make a successful transition to a four-year college, so that they can continue in their studies and pursue their bachelor's degree (Laanan, Starobin & Eggleston, 2010). In this capacity, academic advisors are often the first step in the transfer process and the stewards of the information necessary for a student to transfer. This first step includes explorations of goals with the student and academic planning necessary to transfer to a four-year institution.

However, if limited or incorrect information is disseminated by an academic advisor, it can have a cascading impact on the student’s ability to transfer (Laanan, Starobin & Eggleston,
Timeliness is also paramount, since the admissions process at the receiving institution has important deadlines for admission, transfer evaluations, financial aid and registration. Research evaluating the efficacy of academic advisement as it relates to transfer students found that students preferred meeting their advisors earlier in the transfer process; and they complained that information pertinent to the transfer policy and process was not readily available or inadequate (Davies & Dickmann, 1998). Gard, Paton and Gosselin (2012) found that improper or insufficient transfer advisement at the community college level was a primary impediment to successfully transfer noted by their sample (2012).

Conclusion

Overall, community colleges have made tertiary education more accessible (geographically and economically) to more individuals. Furthermore, community colleges are the more affordable alternative to four-year institutions for many students (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Unfortunately, even though the impetus of community colleges was to prepare students for four-year institutions, statistics of transfer students and their overall success in four-year institutions suggest they are not as successful as they should be.

Collectively, these studies illustrate that transfer credits and college articulation agreements are still pervasive and salient issues for transfers. Specific information on transferring or advisement might not be readily available at the two-year and four-year institution. These findings also indicate that transfer students are being treated differently than incoming freshman, who often are assigned to a first year program or learning community, and who receive advisement earlier in the enrollment process. Without access to quality information regarding the transfer process, and with advisement occurring later in the transition, navigating the transfer process can be challenging. Moreover, community colleges need to understand that
an important component of their success is the successful transfer of their students to four-year institutions. These findings reaffirm the idea that community colleges and four-year institutions need to work together when it comes to student advisement.

**Characteristics of Transfer Students**

Approximately, 75% of students entering community colleges claimed some intent to ultimately transfer to a four-year institution (Best & Gehring, 1993; Cejda, 2006; Doyle, 2009; Wang, 2009). Regrettably however, only 50% of entering students successfully transfer to a four-year institution (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Berger & Malaney, 2003). To better understand this disparity, research has shown that a student’s personal and institutional characteristics may impact the transfer student’s likelihood to ultimately achieve their senior college degree goals (Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Lee & Frank, 1990; Calcagno et al., 2008; Wood et al., 2012). These characteristics can act as a catalyst for success, or as antecedents to the attrition of the transfer student (Lee & Frank, 1990). The subsequent literature will explore student and institutional characteristics that relate to each phase of the transfer experience; the transfer student’s likelihood to transfer to a four-year institution, adjustment to the four-year institution, persistence and ultimately, success at the four-year institution.

**Likelihood to Transfer**

One important facet to consider is a student’s likelihood to transfer. A student’s likelihood to transfer is an important benchmark and the impetus to the transfer process (Stern, 2016). Some characteristics associated with likelihood to transfer can either impede or enable the student to take the necessary steps to transfer (Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Lee & Frank, 1990; Calcagno et al., 2008; Stern, 2016).
Research on the student’s likelihood to transfer found that being active on campus by holding a work-study job, being part of campus life, athletic participation and living on campus enabled the student’s likelihood to transfer (Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Wood et al., 2012). These findings illustrate that students who can afford to live on campus and devote their attention to campus life and a work-study job are more likely to transfer. By extension, these findings convey that the Office of Student Affairs at the community college is an important partner in enabling students to transfer. These findings are important because they illustrate that many aspects of the collegiate experience can impact the desire and ability to transfer. Unfortunately, many community college students cannot afford to live on campus (Lee & Frank, 1990; Wood et al., 2012). In fact, many students choose community colleges because they are commuter institutions. Moreover, many of these students also have other responsibilities outside of school, such as work and raising a family, which can keep them from participating in various student life activities.

The student’s high school academics are also important factors. Students with higher high school grades and test scores are more likely to transfer and ultimately succeed in a four-year institution (Lee & Frank, 1990; Wood et al., 2012). In addition to merit based achievements, higher educational aspirations and a more rigorous high school curriculum characterize the background of those who transfer compared to those who do not (Lee & Frank, 1990; Wood et al., 2012).

The student’s academic characteristics at the community college level are also important variables to consider. Students with higher grades at the community college are more likely to transfer (Lee & Frank, 1990). Additionally, class size can impact the student’s likelihood to transfer (Calcagno et al., 2008). Community colleges with a greater population of minority
students, tend to have lower graduation and transfer rates (2008). Students who complete their associate’s degree at the community college are more likely to transfer (Kopko & Crosta, 2016).

The student’s personal characteristics may also impact their likelihood to transfer (Velez & Javalgi, 1987; Wood et al., 2012; Ellis, 2013; LaSota & Zumeta, 2016; Stern 2016). Personal characteristics that are considered enabling include: having a high socioeconomic status, being affiliated with a religion (Velez & Javalgi, 1987), working no more than 19 hour per week, having little or no family responsibility (Wood et al., 2012), being motivated, being engaged, having a high locus of control (Ellis, 2013), being younger when entering the community college, attending primarily full-time, having an intention for upward transfer at entry (LaSota & Zumeta, 2016), and living in a rural environment (Stern, 2016).

By contrast, personal characteristics that are considered to impede the likelihood of a student transferring include: being older than a traditionally aged student while attending a community college (Velez & Javalgi, 1987), working many hours per week (Wood et al., 2012; LaSota & Zumeta, 2016), having family responsibilities (Wood et al., 2012), living in an urban environment, and being consider a minority (Stern, 2016). In terms of ethnicity, students that identify themselves as Latin (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2008) or consider themselves a minority (Calcagno et al., 2008) have a low likelihood to transfer.

Collectively, these findings illustrate a level of social stratification at community colleges, since the poorest and most underrepresented students may perform poorly in high school and thus community college. By contrast, students who are academically advantaged, and least socially disadvantaged, tend to be more successful using community colleges as a passageway to continued higher education (Lee & Frank, 1990). Additionally, students with characteristics that are considered impeding their likelihood of transferring to a four-year
institution are more susceptible to attrition during their higher education journey. However, these findings also illustrate that students can move beyond the barriers that are associated with their personal characteristics by being active on campus and performing well academically, which will increase their likelihood to transfer to a four-year institution.

**Transfer Student Adjustment**

For community college students that successfully transfer to the four-year institution, difficulties may still exist (Piland, 1995; Cejda, 2006; Flaga, 2006; Laanan, 2007; Laanan, Starobin & Eggleston, 2010; Gard et al., 2012). This has been attributed in part to the adjustment that incoming students have to make to navigate the new four-year institution’s environment, the challenges students face at the four-year institution upon enrolling, and the adjustment associated with the academic rigor from the community college to the four-year institution (Townsend, 1993; Gard et al., 2012; Gerhardt & Ackerman, 2014). Some transfer students who originate at a commuter community college do not perceive campus social engagement activities the same way a native student do. For these students, student engagement was perceived as an off-campus and family oriented activity (Lester, Leonard & Mathias, 2013). Patterns of social participation and academic involvement shift when transitioning from a two-year to a four-year institution (Berger & Malaney, 2003). During the acclimation to a four-year institution, some students might experience the phenomenon of stopping-out and/or transfer shock (Piland, 1995; Cejda, 2006).

**Stopping-out.** One theme identified in transfer student literature is the idea that some students take a pause in their educational pursuit – called stopping-out – for one semester or more (Piland, 1995). Stopping-out may occur during the transfer student’s attendance at the two-year or the four-year institution. Considering this, the issue of stopping-out is not a pre-transfer or post-transfer issue. Rather, it is representation of the actual circumstances that the student is
facing at that point-in-time. While stopping-out is not exclusive to community college and transfer students, this population may be most susceptible to it (Piland, 1995; Long & Kurlaender, 2008).

One study found that approximately 59% of students interrupted their studies at the community college by stopping-out (Piland, 1995). Another found that students who start their academic career at a community college have an increased likelihood of stopping-out (Long & Kurlaender, 2008). These findings collectively suggest that the road to obtaining a bachelor degree is long, and may include interruptions. The fact that many transfer students leave school for at least one semester clearly illustrates that life circumstances can present a hurdle to college adjustment and completion.

Transfer shock. Some transfer students experience a dip in their overall grade point average after they transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions (Cejda, 2006; Flaga, 2006; Grites, 2013). This decline in academic performance, when it occurs in the first two semesters, is called transfer shock (Cejda, 2006; Flaga, 2006; Grites, 2013). Transfer shock suggests that students need a semester or two to catch up to the rigors of four-year institutions. Unfortunately, transfer shock has also created a perception that transfer students are academically inferior to their four-year college native counterparts (Cejda, 2006).

Research on this phenomenon confirms an overall drop in GPA when evaluating the entire transfer cohort (Cejda, 2006; Cejda & Kaylor, 2010). However, research that took into account the transfer student’s disciplines found that students with majors in education, fine arts and humanities, and social sciences experienced a post-transfer grade point average increase. Transfer students in business, mathematics and sciences experienced a disproportionately high level of transfer shock when compared to the total sample (Cejda, 2006). These findings suggest
that transfer shock may not affect all transfer students, but rather those within certain disciplines. Furthermore, the issues behind transfer shock for an entire population, may not be illustrative of the academic performance of transfer students in specific respective majors (Cejda, 2006). In fact, Cejda and Kaylor (2010) found that more than half of their sample of transfer students experienced no transfer shock and even saw a slight increase in GPA (2010). Another finding was that students in a four-year private institution experienced a lower magnitude of transfer shock than their counterparts at four-year public institutions (2010).

Research on the impetus of transfer shock found that transfer students attempted to negotiate the new environment, which enabled them to adjust their behavior to be more successful (Flaga, 2006; Gard et al., 2012). Since four-year institutions have a different mission and culture than community colleges, it can take a semester or two to make sense of the new environment (Flaga, 2006). More specifically, the four-year institution landscape, vernacular, nomenclature, academic policies, and academic standards are different than those in a community college environment (Grites, 2013). Gard et al. (2012) found that upper-division transfer students were not prepared to manage the environment of a four-year institution (Gard et al., 2012).

One of the key effects of transfer shock is that transfer students face negative institution-focused assumptions (Grites, 2013). Faculty at four-year institution have high expectations for academic rigor. Incoming students are expected to be ready on day one of the academic calendar. This expectation creates a sense of hurriedness; transfer students have very little time to adapt to the new environment (2013). Together, these factors perpetuate the transfer shock experience and outcome.
**Other factors that influence adjustment.** From a community college perspective, students who have a low GPA at the community college level, a low perception of the four-year institutional environment or exhibited a low self-efficacy may struggle to adjust to a four-year institution (Laanan, 2007). Transfer students who earn good grades at the community college are academically prepared for the academic rigor of a four-year institution (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000). Students that transfer out of a community college prior to earning an associate degree performed similarly to students who earned an associate degree at a four-year institution (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000).

From the four-year institutional perspective, transferring and adjusting to a four-year institution is a multifaceted process that can be difficult for a student. There are adjustments occurring on psychological, academic and environmental levels (Laanan, 2001). Students might experience class size shock when they participate in large lecture halls or large classrooms (Gerhardt & Ackerman, 2014). Austin’s (1984) theory of involvement cites student involvement and interaction with faculty members as two key factors of students acclimating to the new environment. Academic involvement has been found to ease the transition and improve the overall four-year college experience (Austin, 1984; Svanum & Bigatti, 2009; Lopez & Jones, 2016). Moreover, guidance from faculty has been found as a determining factor for community college transfer students to continue their educational journey (Starobin & Laanan, 2008; Lopez & Jones, 2016).

Collectively, these findings suggest that transfer students are being perceived as underprepared due to the overall drop in the mean GPA of their cohort. This label is a fallacy. Only certain disciplines in the abovementioned studies experienced a dip in GPA. Furthermore, more than half of the cohort experienced the same level or increased GPA. These findings do
suggest that transfer students face a real transition struggle from the community college to their new four-year institution, partly due to the mission and culture at a four-year institution being different from that of a two-year institution. Student and academic involvement are key means to ease the overall adjustment to the four-year institution.

**Transfer Student Persistence**

Only a fraction of the students who intend to transfer persist. Persistence is an important aspect to successful degree completion. Persistence is a college indicator that measures the return rate of the student for their subsequent year until degree completion. Evaluating transfer student persistence is important because of the high level of transfer student attrition at four-year institutions. One strategy to evaluate persistence of transfer students is to compare them to their counterpart, four-year college native students. Research utilizing this approach has found that the graduation rate of transfer students was equal to or better than native students (Anglin et al., 1993). In addition, minority students from the community college performed as well as minority native students within the four-year institution (1993).

Some studies have found disparity between the successes of transfer students versus four-year college native students - transfer students performed not as good as their native student counterparts (Sandy, Gonzalez & Hilmer, 2006). However, this performance was attributed to the individual’s characteristics, not the efficacy of the community college or the transfer process (Sandy et al., 2006). In addition to personal characteristics, the student’s perception of various aspects of the college experiences plays an important role in their persistence at the institution (D’Amico, Dika, Elling, Algozzine & Ginn, 2014). Transfer students who perceived themselves as academically fit, were more likely to persist in their initial semester at the four-year institution (Lester et al., 2013; D’Amico et al., 2014).
Guidance from faculty members and college advisors has also been found to play an intricate role in student persistence (Berger & Malaney, 2003). Students who are best informed at the community college level and the four-year institutional level, are more likely to persist and ultimately succeed (Berger & Malaney, 2003). These findings suggest that proactively advising students on the transfer process at the community college can help those students persist at four-year institutions.

Another theme in the literature on transfer student persistence illustrates that students attend multiple institutions during their higher education journey. Kearney, Townsend, and Kearney (1995) found that most transfer students attend two or more institutions and that the path that these students take is heterogeneous. Four routes were identified: “4 > 2 > 4 path, 2 > 4 > 4 paths, 2 > 2 > 4 path, and 4 > 4 > 4 path” (p.336). The primary reason cited for the movement from one institution to the other was academic program quality and variety (1995). The findings from this study illustrated a unique perspective on persistence. While the students are not being retained at the original institution, they are persisting as they are transferring to an institution that is a better fit for them.

Another important consideration when evaluating transfer student persistence is time to degree completion. Many transfer students take longer than the traditional four to six years to complete their degree (Piland, 1995). Due to their complex journey through the higher education system, Piland (1995) found that transfer students take approximately eight years to complete their degree. This finding is important because persistence is often measured in a four to six-year cycle for transfer students at many institutions (Horn, Berger, & Carroll, 2004). This misalignment between how institutions measure persistence with the actual persistence of transfer students can result in underreported persistence rates for transfer students.
Collectively, these studies illustrate that transfer students from community colleges have the ability to manage the academic rigor of four-year institutions. However, these studies also suggest that life issues and challenges can change the path of the student, cause a stop out or keep the student from persevering altogether. These findings align with a common theme that four-year institutions do not have the necessary resources to assist transfer students with various life challenges and struggles, such as being a parent or working a full-time job while attending college. These findings also suggest that realistic expectations about the rigor of four-year institutions should be established while the student is in community college. This will help the student better establish their perceived academic fit.

Transfer Student Degree Attainment

Degree attainment can be considered the culminating point for a student who endeavors a baccalaureate degree. There are important implications for students who earn a degree versus those who do not. A student with a bachelor’s degree can potentially earn twice as much as a student who has earned only their associate’s degree (Wang, 2009). From the student and their families’ perspective, degree attainment is a major accomplishment and an important part of the student’s self-efficacy. Considering these points on the importance of degree attainment, it is disappointing that only 25% of students who start their academic career at a community college, graduate from a four-year institution. This statistic is compelling when you consider that 75% of students who enter community college endeavor to earn a baccalaureate degree.

Multiple studies have examined community college student’s degree attainment at a four-year institution and found that students who begin their academic journey at a community college are less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree (Alfonso, 2006; Sandy et al., 2006; Long & Kurleander, 2008; Stephan et al., 2009; Reynolds, 2012). Many of these studies attempted to
zero-in on a specific antecedent to this unfortunate outcome or identify characteristics that can enable a transfer student to complete their education. Stern (2016) found that students in a rural environment were more likely to attain a degree versus students in an urban environment. Other studies singled out a student’s gender as a significant indicator of degree attainment (Wang, 2009). Long & Kurleander (2008) found that students who major in a STEM curriculum are more likely to graduate. As stated in the previous section, persistence has also been found as an import indicator for degree completion (Piland, 1995). While another study found that although there exists a high attrition rate for transfer students, their graduation rate was similar to four-year college native students (Melguizo, Kienzl & Alfonso, 2011). This finding shows that the low graduation rate is not a transfer student problem but a general problem across higher education.

One common theme from several studies is that community colleges enroll disproportionately more students that identify themselves as poor, minority, underrepresented or marginalized (Alfonso, 2006; Sandy et al., 2006; Long & Kurleander, 2008; Stephan et al., 2009; Reynolds, 2012). These findings align with a common theme that four-year institutions do not have the necessary resources to assist transfer students with various life challenges and struggles, such as being a parent or working a full-time job while attending college (Alfonso, 2006; Sandy et al., 2006; Long & Kurleander, 2008; Stephan et al., 2009; Reynolds, 2012). Moreover, these findings illustrate that community college students have the odds stacked against them; a theme identified earlier in this literature review called social stratification (Karabel, 1986; Calcagno, Bailey, Jenkins, Kienzl, & Leinbach, 2008; Stephan et al., 2009; Beach, 2011; Clotfelter et al., 2013).
While the road to degree attainment might seem unsteady, research has shown that the student’s education expectation, perceived locus of control, college involvement and college GPA are significant predictors of succeeding at a four-year institution (Wang, 2009). Similarly, Mourad and Hong (2011) examined baccalaureate attainment by community college transfers. Their study found that fewer semesters enrolled, more credits earned, and high GPA at the community college were positively associated with degree attainment (2011). These findings clearly illustrate that if a student believes in themselves and puts forth the effort, they can succeed in a four-year institution.

Collectively, these findings exhibit that transfer students can handle the rigor and ultimately succeed at a four-year institution. Students who are proactive, study hard, and have a high internal locus of control can succeed at the four-year institution. Moreover, students who perform well academically at the community college level, have the capability to succeed at a four-year institution.

Conclusion

Overall, depending on the student’s individual characteristics, socio-economic status and the student’s personal circumstances, transfer students may face some adversity as they acclimate to the four-year institution. The phenomenon of transfer shock and stopping-out is not prevalent amongst the transfer cohort. These studies illustrate that the student’s likelihood to transfer, their adjustment to the four-year institution, their persistence at the four-year institution and their degree attainment at the four-year institution are all interconnected. Each step can have a cumulative effect on the successive step. Finally, this section clearly demonstrates that transfer students can manage the rigor of a four-year institution and ultimately, succeed.
Implications

Considering the low success rate of transfer students receiving their baccalaureate degrees, it is important for community colleges and four-year institutions to be vigilant of the many nuances and issues that transfers face. It is in the best interest of both types of colleges that transfer students should succeed (Anglin et al., 1993). According to the Department of Education, the number of students attending community college will continue to increase (Handel, 2013). This means that the community colleges will increasingly become significant feeders to four-year institutions (Andres, 1999). Considering this, four-year institutions are important stakeholders in transfer student’s success.

Four-year institutions need to work in partnership with community colleges and vice versa. This would generally help the transfer student transition from one school to the other (Handel, 2013). Jones and Lee (1992) studied transfer student degree attainment in the California State system. They found that the cooperative planning amongst institutions, the presence of transfer programs and transfer articulation were linked to successful degree attainment by transfer students. These findings further illustrate that university systems and standalone institutions should be keen on the cooperation between community colleges and four-year institutions. A starting point to improve the cooperation would be to create a credit articulation agreement (Jones & Lee, 1992; Best & Gehring, 1993). Both types of institutions should work in concert with each other and collaborate when necessary (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000).

The fallacy that transfer students are inept academically, as compared to four-year college native students, is unwarranted and perpetuates a stigma and perception that makes the four-year college experience more difficult for transfer students (Donovan & Schaier-Peleg, 1988). Both types of institutions should be aware that college-readiness depends more on
specific discipline than overall GPA (Cejda, 2006; Cejda & Kaylor, 2010). In fact, transfer students deal with multiple circumstances, which may cause them to stop out for a semester or may impact their grades. More importantly, transfer students are heterogeneous and should not simply be pigeonholed into a single cohort. Moreover, four-year institutions need to better educate faculty and staff members on the adjustment that transfer students need to overcome to acclimate to the new environment. Educating faculty and staff can help them update their approach towards transfer students, which can effectively ameliorate the sentiment that transfer student feel about their abilities academically.

Even though many students successfully transfer to four year institutions, many of their life issues and circumstances stay the same. Transfer students might be managing a family, full-time job and/or dealing with other issues. Senior colleges need to be cognizant of the struggles that many transfer students cope with (Anglin et al., 1993; Wood & Moore, 2015). Four-year institutions need to improve their student services so that these offices can assist transfer students and address their specific needs (Fredrickson, 1998). Institutional policy-makers and administrators that develop and manage transfer programs need to be more aware of the various characteristics that make up their transfer student body (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Furthermore, these institutions need to work with faculty to create a curriculum and overall experience that is more responsive and supportive to transfer type students (Donovan & Schaarier-Peleg, 1988). Quality control and student satisfaction surveys can be used to assess the transfer student experience in and out of the classroom (Pavlina, Zorica & Pongrac, 2011).

Community colleges also have a responsibility to assist transfer students. These institutions need to be aware that most of their student population endeavors to transfer (Best & Gehring, 1993; Cejda, 2006; Wang, 2009). Being cognizant of this, community colleges can
begin the transfer transition process by correctly advising students and preparing them to transfer (Piland, 1995). Furthermore, selecting a major and earning a good GPA at a community college is positively associated with persistence and degree attainment at a four-year institution (Piland, 1995). Effective remediation at the community college level has also been linked to transfer student success (Jones & Lee, 1992).

**Summary**

This literature review aimed to explore facets that encapsulate the transfer experience by examining the literature on the impetus of community colleges, the transfer process, and characteristics of transfer students from their likelihood of transferring through their degree completion at a four-year institution.

Over the past several years, transfer students have become more salient with the increasing federal and state government interest in this segment succeeding. Community college students currently make up approximately 50% of all public college students. Most of these students endeavor to transfer to a four-year institution. The community college plays an important role as a bridge for the transfer student from a two-year to a four-year institution. Community colleges need to be cognizant that half of their student body endeavors to transfer and earn a bachelor’s degree.

As the receiving institution of transfer students, four-year institutions need to pay more attention to transfer students and their success, because they are becoming a major part of four-year institution’s incoming enrollment class. These institutions should create transfer support programs designed specifically for transfer students. Institutions should educate faculty and
administrators on the importance of the transfer student and encourage them to be more sensitive to their needs.

The findings in this literature review illustrate that transfers are often categorized as a single cohort and face negative perceptions by faculty and staff members of four-year institutions. The attrition occurring in four-year institutions illustrates a level of social stratification since the poorest students often have additional responsibilities outside of school that dictate their time such as raising children and/or providing for their family. Four-year institutions seem ill-equipped with resources that transfer students need to persevere within the four-year institution domain. These institutions need to do a better job partnering with their community college feeders and make transfer students a higher priority.

Many transfers take a couple of semesters to adjust to the landscape and culture of four-year institutions. During this period, some of them see a small drop in GPA, which the literature calls transfer shock. Half of all transfer students do not experience transfer shock. Adjustment in GPA is usually aligned with the college major. Administrators should work with faculty to better receive new transfer students in classes; assess and monitor these students’ progress through the curriculum, and provide ample, resources that proactively deal with the various nuances that transfer students have.

While the literature is rich in broad transfer student content that can be encapsulated into the pre-transfer and the post-transfer experience, there is a deficiency in the literature on understanding the expectations and experiences of new transfer students during the transfer process. Studies that investigate the student’s experience with the transfer process are very limited. Even though Davies and Dickmann (1998) explored the transfer student experience, it is important to revisit this topic nearly two decades later. Today, the topic of transfer student
success is a salient one. Currently, only 25% of community college students who aspire to transfer, actually complete a four-year institution and earn a degree. Challenges continue at the four-year institution for many transfer students. Findings from additional research on the experience of transfer students during the transfer process can help foster a discussion on how to assuage apprehension concerning the transition during the transfer process to the four-year institution identified in this literature review.

Ultimately, transfer student success is in the best interest of the two-year institutions, four-year institutions and, by extension, our society.
Chapter 3: Research Design

The goals of research in this doctoral program was to examine a complex problem of practice, generate knowledge from data gathered at the research site, and provide context and strategies for introducing systemic change to help resolve the problem of practice. The purpose of this interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) study was to investigate and identify the experiences of community college transfer students as they transition through the transfer process at a public four-year institution.

The following chapter describes the study’s research design and provides support for the researcher’s methodological choice. In the first part of this chapter, the research approach is explained, while the second part of the chapter focused on the procedural elements of the project, offering a detailed account of how this study was conducted, including discussion of ethical considerations, trustworthiness, the researcher’s positionality, and possible limitations.

Research Question

The central research question that guided this inquiry was the following: How do first-time transfer students from a community college perceive their experience with support services during the transfer process at a large public four-year institution? It is useful to note that research questions for studies that use IPA as the methodology should focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context for people who share a particular experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). With this in mind, the goal of this central question was to illuminate and capture how community college transfer students, through their own voice, perceived and experienced their transition through the transfer process in conjunction with the support provided by the four-year institution. Schlossberg’s transition theory was used to ground this research.
Qualitative Research Approach

This study utilized a qualitative approach to understand the research problem. Qualitative methods are most compatible with the research goals to understand the aspects of an experience and meaning-making process (Creswell, 2012). There are multiple strategies of inquiry within the qualitative approach. This study applied interpretive phenomenological analysis.

Qualitative research is oriented towards developing understanding of the meaning and experiences of human lives in a social context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, and Davidson (2002), “Qualitative research is a broad umbrella term for research methodologies that describe and explain persons’ experiences, behaviors, interactions and social contexts without the use of statistical procedures or quantification” (p. 717). The qualitative approach is not meant to be generalizable to the population at large. The aim of this approach, however, is to illuminate the experiences of people as they take part or live through a particular phenomenon (Elliot, Fisher & Rennie, 1999).

Qualitative research places emphasis on explorations of a particular problem (Creswell, 2012) and aligns with idiographic methodologies, while the quantitative approach aligns with nomothetic methodologies. More specifically, this method places significance on learning from the participant and the context in which the participant exists. Studying a phenomenon through the voice of the individual experiencing it, in conjunction with the environment surrounding this experience, could illuminate important nuances that would be lost in a classic positivist study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). By focusing on the construct of the individual, this approach yielded findings that are explanatory, authentic, and unique to each participant.
Another component to the qualitative approach was that the researcher participates in the meaning-making process. The meaning-making or sense-making is in part constructed through the interaction between the participant with the researcher. Critics of the qualitative approach have called into question the efficacy of qualitative research because of the researcher’s involvement with the research study (Tracy, 2010). In response, qualitative proponents have proposed that qualitative studies should have high standards of rigor in their design, execution and findings (Tracy, 2010). Moreover, quality in qualitative research rests on proper alignment of a study’s purpose with applicable literature, methodology and theoretical framework. Due to the intricate role of the researcher in qualitative studies, it is important for the researcher to be cognizant of their biases as they play an interpretive role in the research study (Pascal, Johnson, Dore, & Trainor, 2010).

This study sought to demonstrate quality by meeting its purpose of investigating how community college transfer students made sense of their experience with support services through the transfer process at a public four-year institution using the lens of Schlossberg’s transition theory and utilizing interpretive phenomenological analysis as the method. The study’s philosophical underpinnings and research design are described in the sub-sections that follow, along with a statement about the researcher’s potential biases and measures intended to enhance credibility.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

The goal of my research question was to capture the subjective descriptions of the participants to understand how they viewed their experiences during the transfer process with support services, and the degree to which these services either enabled or impeded their
transition through the transfer process. To this end, the researcher’s ontological and epistemological orientation aligned with the constructivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). Constructivism holds that reality is constructed in one’s mind - not as an external singular entity, and that there are infinite possibilities to this reality (Creswell, 2013). In addition, that truth is relative and is dependent on one’s perspective (Charmaz, 2006).

The constructivism paradigm claims that knowledge is subjective and that the study objective should be to better understand the phenomenon under observation, rather than to predict or control it. The premise of this paradigm is that meaning is hidden and can be brought out through research. The constructivist paradigm is inductive (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The objective is to understand and interpret the meaning of the phenomena through the participant. The unit of analysis is the act of meaning-making (Butin, 2010). The researcher has a stake in the study as they play a role in co-constructing the reality with the participant, and through the interpretive process during the data analysis and theme generation (Creswell, 2013). Findings using this paradigm of inquiry could help understand the meaning and impact of the experiences of transfer students, and yield the delta between their expectations and the reality of their experience with support services as they transition through the transfer process.

Methodology

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology was selected for this research to study the experiences of transfer students as they transition through the transfer process (Smith, 1996). IPA was an ideal approach because it is consistent with the ontological orientation of the researcher and the research question. The research question focused on the students’ understanding of their experiences and sense-making activities during the transfer
process, which is the very essence of IPA. Research questions for studies using IPA should focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context for people who share a particular experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

IPA is a fairly new methodology that was introduced by Smith (1996) in a health and psychology journal, and has its roots in psychological research. Since its introduction in 1996, IPA has been utilized by the health professions and other social sciences, including educational research (Smith et al., 2009). This approach is concerned with understanding people’s experience with a phenomenon that is significant to them, and the meaning they attach to it (Smith, 2004). The aim of IPA is to provide in-depth explorations of participants’ experiences and to provide a close examination of how participants make sense of these experiences (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, voice is given to a particular perspective of the participant (Wagstaff et al., 2014).

IPA diverges from mainstream psychology when it comes to determining how people think. IPA aligns with the idiographic mode of inquiry, as opposed to the nomothetic approach which predominates in psychology (Smith et al., 1995). The nomothetic approach aligns with positivist paradigm and focuses on a heterogeneous sample, with a goal of making a generalizable claim. This method utilizes statistical probability to prove a hypothesis. The idiographic method aligns with interpretive/constructivist paradigm and focuses on a small homogeneous sample with the goal of performing in-depth analysis to identify themes with each participant and then analyzes the themes.
Interpretive phenomenological analysis contains three theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). Each source will be discussed in greater detail in the sections that follow.

**Phenomenology.** Phenomenology is concerned with the study of being and experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenological studies can be interpretive, descriptive or both (Van Manen, 1990). The focus of phenomenology is ascertaining the essence of the phenomenon through the experience of the participant (Moustakas, 1994). While phenomenology focuses on the participant’s account of the phenomenon, IPA attempts to understand the participant’s experience and sense-making with the phenomenon through the interpretation of the researcher (Smith et al., 2009).

Husserl, a philosopher, is often associated with descriptive phenomenology. His research and focus was on examining human experiences; focusing on the “thing itself”, rather than attempting to fit the participant’s experiences into a predefined category (Smith et al., 2009). In particular, he was interested in how a person makes meaning of their experiences and also on the experiences themselves at their most granular level. Under Husserl, for the researcher to recognize the participant’s sense making of their experience, the researcher needs to bracket their own experience and assumptions.

Bracketing is a mechanism of phenomenological inquiry that “requires deliberate putting aside one’s own belief about the phenomenon under investigation, or what one already knows about the subject prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Carpenter, 2007, p.80).” In doing so, the researcher is demonstrating the validity of the data collection and the analysis process (Ahern, 1999). Husserl’s student, Heidegger diverged from Husserl’s idea of
bracketing as he did not believe that the researcher can truly bracket all their assumptions. It is 
this prevalent opinion that IPA aligns with. The best that the researcher can do according to IPA 
is share their positionality and be cognizant of their assumptions through reflexivity (Smith et al., 
2009). Reflexivity is the process by which the researcher examines their assumptions and biases 
as they relate to their research decisions (Smith et al., 2009).

**Hermeneutics.** The next theoretical underpinning of IPA comes from hermeneutics, 
which is the theory of interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger is often cited as one of the 
seemingly contributive to the interpretive component of phenomenology. Heidegger emphasized 
understanding over descriptive analysis (Smith et al., 2009). He held that the meaning-making 
process does not work in isolation, but, rather, in conjunction with the participant experiencing 
the phenomenon, the context surrounding the experiences and the researcher’s interpretation. 
Heidegger believed that the process of analyzing and synthesizing the phenomenological data by 
the researcher required hermeneutics. The interpretive component is essential to IPA as it allows 
for the researcher to gain access to the constructed reality of the participant and then report 
utilizing the researcher’s sense-making of the participants accounts (Manen, 1990). In IPA, there 
are two levels of hermeneutics: the researcher is making sense of the participant trying to make 
sense of a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, in IPA, the researcher has a dual 
role called double hermeneutics.

**Idiography.** The final underpinning of IPA is idiography, which is the theory that 
focuses on the particular (Smith et al., 2009). For Husserl, it was important to move from the 
individual instances to establish the eidetic structure or essence of the experience. The process 
by which the researcher deduces meaning from the data is called eidetic reduction. Eidetic 
reduction is the process by which you get to the essence of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009).
This process works in iterations where at each layer, you uncover another deeper layer of the phenomenon until you get to the most granular aspects of the experience.

IPA considers the particulars from two different perspectives. First, there is an emphasis on the details as it relates to the depth of the analysis. Analysis should be methodical and thorough. The goal is to offer detailed nuanced analysis of a particular instance of an experience. Second, IPA focuses on how a particular phenomenon is understood from the perspective of a particular person, in a particular context (Smith et al., 2009). Considering this, an IPA research study would focus on a small purposive sample with the goal of extrapolating data with an emphasis on breadth and depth. The overarching goal is to peel each layer of the proverbial onion to get to the essence of the particular.

**Participants**

The sample size for this IPA study was purposive (Smith, Flowers & Osborne, 2007). Purposive sampling requires that people are deliberately selected with an explicit purpose in mind, namely to address the research aim and because they are rich sources of data in relation to a research aim (Marshall, 1996). The goal was to perform an in-depth examination and detailed analysis of the participants’ data and then identify similarities and differences in emerging themes. Considering these goals, IPA samples tend to be small and homogeneous (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (1999) states that a sample size of between 4 and 10 participants is ideal for interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This study had nine participants. This sample size was commensurate with other studies that have used IPA (Chapman & Smith, 2002; Bullen, Matthews, Edwards & Marke, 2008; Robinson, 2014).
Sample Characteristics

Criteria had been set to achieve a relatively homogeneous sample (Smith et al., 2009). Participants must have completed at least one semester of study at the community college. They should be incoming first-time transfer students, who are degree-seeking and have successfully registered for a fulltime class load at a large public four-year institution. The participants should have transferred at least 12 credits from their coursework at the community college. The overarching goal of these criteria is to select purposefully so participants could offer insight into their particular experiences with support services as they transitioned through the transfer process. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of participants and their characteristics to better understand the context of the participant’s quotes and analysis.

Table 3. Participants’ Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Associate’s Degree</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Community College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bismarck</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>Borough of Manhattan CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Kinesiology</td>
<td>Queensborough CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Hostos CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Health &amp; Nutrition</td>
<td>Bronx CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morrissey</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Borough of Manhattan CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>Borough of Manhattan CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Borough of Manhattan CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yess</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Multimedia Computing</td>
<td>Borough of Manhattan CC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Childhood Education</td>
<td>Kingsborough CC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Site

The study site for this research was a large, public, four-year institution located in the Northeast region of the United States. The college has a student population of over 17,000, composed of both graduate and undergraduate students. This institution is part of a larger conglomerate system and has several feeder public community colleges that are within the same system. This institution also has a system-wide articulation agreement called “Pathways”. The increasing trend in the transfer student population prompted the institution to learn more about any unique needs that may exist with transfer students in an effort to support their success. Thus, understanding the experiences of undergraduate transfer students will inform the institution’s plans to provide appropriate services that could help transfer students make a successful transition, and ultimately succeed.

This institution’s 2014, one-year attrition rate average for incoming transfer students from its sister community college institutions is approximately 28%. The four-year rate is approximately 41%. This data shows that more than a quarter of the incoming class of transfer students from the institution’s sister public community colleges are not persisting. This data suggests that this institution’s participants fit the profile necessary to answer the research question.

Procedures

The decision to use IPA as a methodology influences each aspect of the research design (Smith et al., 2009). Prior to data collection and analysis, the researcher secured approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in accordance with Northeastern University policy, and permission to recruit at the institution where the study was performed. This study’s data
collection and analysis procedures followed standard IPA research recommendations (Smith et al., 2009) and are described in detail in the following sub-sections.

**Data Collection**

There are multiple approaches to collecting data utilizing the IPA method. However, semi-structured interviews seemed to be the consonant approach (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). This form of interviewing is flexible and allows the researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby the questions in the interview protocol can adapt to allow the researcher to extrapolate data that contains depth and nuance. The technique that would best fit this approach is responsive interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Semi-structured interviews consist of lists of open-ended questions, which are used to support the research questions and the purpose of the study. The open-ended nature of the questions provides opportunities for both the interviewer and interviewees to discuss the student experience and their feelings about their experience with support services during the transfer process. The goal is to capture the nuances at the semantic level (Smith et al., 2009) and to have enough data so that the researcher can peel the proverbial onion to get to the essence of the participant’s sense-making of their experience. The interviews took approximately one hour and to encourage participation a $20.00 gift card was offered as an incentive.

To ensure that the critical aspects of the research question are answered, an interview guide was used. To ensure that the participant answers questions with depth and scope, prompts were used to delve deeper into the participant’s understanding of their experience. The goal of follow up prompts is to keep the interview focused and to ascertain important nuances. To ensure that the researcher understands the points being conveyed by the interviewee throughout
the interview, probing was used to clarify the interviewer’s understanding of certain responses. All interviews were recorded with the permission of each participant. The interviews were recorded on a handheld digital recording device with a secondary digital device as a backup.

An important part of data collection is data security. Creswell (2003) outlined that data storage is an integral aspect of a research study’s integrity. At the beginning of the interview process, all participants selected a pseudonym, which was used to protect their identity throughout the research process (Creswell, 2013). The data that aligns the participants’ names with their pseudonyms was stored in a password protected file. All audio files and analytical notes were stored on a computer in a personal folder, which were also password protected. Finally, the data was backed up to a secured external drive.

Data Analysis

All voice recordings were transcribed using a third-party transcription service, rev.com. Following the transcription by the third-party service, the researcher reviewed the accuracy of the data on a text file by listening to the taped recordings and following along, line by line on the text file. This step was taken so that important nuances in the participant’s tone were captured and that the transcriptions were accurate. Once the data on the text file was deemed accurate, data analysis proceeded in several iterations.

The analysis for this research study was aided by the MAXQDA computer program. MAXQDA software was effective in finding patterns across transcription data. Another mechanism that assisted in organizing and synthesizing data was the contact summary sheet as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The contact summary sheet was an excellent way to
eliminate a lot of the noise in the data and hone in on key points by taking out all of the salient quotes and codes and placing them on a single sheet.

Smith et al. (2009) suggests that the examination of transcript data occur one participant at a time in an asynchronous manner. The analytic process of examining the data can take multiple iterations. This follows the idiographic approach to analysis, beginning with particular examples and only slowly working up to more general categorization or claims (2009). The goal is to identify themes, cluster the similarities and then illustrate differences amongst the participants.

In IPA, there is no single prescribed approach to analyzing data (Smith et al., 2009). While, the analytical process is flexible, the focus remains on the participant’s sense-making of their experiences with a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). For this particular study the analysis was iterative and inductive, and the step-by-step guide recommended by Smith et al. (2009) was applied. It is important to note that while the analytical steps are sequential, they can be synchronous. In addition to the IPA guide, an analytical memo was used by the researcher throughout the analytical process to assist with the inductive process and with reflexivity (Birks, Chapman & Francis, 2008).

The first step in the IPA analysis involved the immersion of the researcher in the original data (Smith, et al., 2009). This entailed reading and re-reading the interview transcript, as well as listening to the audio recording at least once. The goal was to become familiar with the participant’s content and to immerse oneself into their world through better understanding of their transcript (2009).
The second step involved reviewing the transcript data line by line and beginning the initial coding process. During this process, exploratory comments were made on the transcript and descriptive summaries were made on the analytical memo. The objective of this step was to begin formulating context by reviewing the transcript text, the language, the nuances in tone, and the nomenclature used by the participant to describe or label things. In this step, the researcher wrote codes in the right-hand margin of the transcript to identify salient points made by the participant. The In Vivo coding method; the process by which you use the participant’s own words as codes, was used during the initial code process (Saldana, 2016). The overarching goal with step one and two was to extract an analytic story from the participant’s responses (Creswell, 2012).

The third step focuses on the salient points documented on the notes, codes and analysis performed in steps 1 and 2. The goal of this step was to begin identifying emergent themes and connection between themes. The analytical memo was key to synthesizing the data to develop themes. An important aspect of theme development in IPA is the double hermeneutic, which occurs through the researcher. Considering this, the author took reflective notes in the analytical memo as a means to establish evidence of authenticity in the theme development. The overall aim was to delineate clear connections between the data and the emergent themes.

The fourth step focused on analyzing connections and differences across the emergent themes. This step continued to build on the inductive process of the previous steps; the researcher was moving from the particular to the general in the data analysis process (Trochim, 2006). In this step, formal themes were established from the most salient points made by the participants. The goal at this level was to capture themes that reflect the sense-making of the participants’ experiential accounts (Smith et al., 2009). Steps one through four were repeated for
each participant. It was important to move to the subsequent participant’s transcript only when the previous participant’s emergent themes were completed. Smith et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of analyzing each case on its own merit by bracketing the ideas emerging from the analysis of the first case while working on the second case.

The fifth step focused on identifying themes and patterns of meaning that occurred across all of the participants in the study (Smith et al., 2009). The goal of this step was to analyze the themes to infer relationships between them, identify dominant themes, identify themes that impact one or two participants, and see how a theme in a study can illuminate themes in another. This step moved beyond the individual participant and began to cluster and categorize themes amongst the participants in the sample (Smith et al., 2009).

**Ethical Considerations**

The researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University and from the research compliance office at the research site before recruiting participants for the study. The procedures for the study were carefully applied according to the human subject guidelines and included the protective practices of debriefing participants on the purpose of the study and their rights to deny or discontinue participation in the study. The researcher disseminated consent forms and only began the research process after they were signed and collected.

During the qualitative process, participants may disclose personal information. In this vein, the researcher established pseudonyms with participants to protect their confidentiality. Interview data collected in the form of voice recording, transcripts and notes were safeguarded in password protected folders and files.
Trustworthiness

The purpose of this IPA study was to explore the subjective experiences of community college transfer students with institutional support services as they transition through the transfer process at a public four-year institution. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit that trustworthiness of a research study is important to evaluating its worth. Trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The researcher outlined several measures that were taken to ensure trustworthiness throughout the data collection and analysis process.

The researcher utilized a modified version of Seidman’s (2012) three interview structure. The objective for this structure was to establish a rapport and trust between the researcher and the participants. The first two phases of the structure were used for recruitment to solidify the study sample; collection of the participant’s bio and demographic data; the purpose of the study was discussed to establish context; and the primary interview was scheduled. Once the researcher synthesized the transcript data into themes, a subsequent meeting was scheduled for the participant to review their summary sheet to offer confirmation and feedback. This feedback from member checking was incorporated into the final analysis. The prolonged engagement with the participant coupled with member checking were important means to establish credibility in this research study.

To establish confirmability, the researcher provided adequate excerpts or block quotes from the participant’s data that support the researcher’s interpretation and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish dependability, the researcher used a journal to keep reflexivity notes,
and as an instrument for analysis and thematic synthesizing. The analytical information housed in the journal could be used for an audit trail (1985).

To establish transferability, the researcher used a thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which includes substantial detail about the participants, context, phenomenon and other relevant information so that readers can make informed conclusions about the study’s findings.

**Potential Research Bias**

The researcher’s interest in this topic was grounded in his role as a higher education administrator within the division of enrollment management. In this capacity, the researcher had worked directly and indirectly with the transfer student cohort, and has participated in implementing policies that have impacted these students. In addition, the researcher was in a unique position because he had worked for over ten years at the site where the study took place and was aware of many of the struggles that transfer students experience.

Machi and McEvoy (2012) assert that research authors often hold preconceived ideas about their research based on their own background and experiences. To this extent, it was important that the researcher disclose his personal alignment with this research topic. The researcher is a white male, immigrant, who grew up in a poor, single parent household within a Russian community. He was determined to go to college and become the first member of his family to get a college degree. However, when the time came to choose a university, affordability played an integral part in his decision to choose a public state university. He attended a four-year traditional university. He believed that his interest in equity and access stems from this aspect of his background.
Fennell and Arnot (2008) discuss western societal ideas that are ingrained within us that are also fallacies and can sway our study. The researcher believes that awareness of his predispositions and using a reflexivity journal to some extent can assist with this (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smith et al., 2009). Overall, the researcher maintained an open outlook on perspectives and was open to any possible outcomes.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. First of all, IPA emphasizes the importance of an idiographic focus and as a result, the work in this study was intended to reflect the subjective experiences of nine participants who experienced the phenomenon under study. The goal was to use a small purposive sample to glean in-depth detail to achieve a unique understanding of the participants’ understanding of their experience with a phenomenon. Because the sample was small and purposive, the generalizability and transferability of the findings to like institutions may be constrained. Secondly, this study was limited to an urban public university and was conducted in one of 17 campuses within that large university system.

Finally, participants differed in their level of comfort discussing their experience with support services during the transfer process. Therefore, the depth and breadth of the interview data collected will vary, and may make it challenging to identify cross-case themes.

**Summary**

This study explored the experiences of transfer students with support services as they transition through the transfer process. IPA methodology was utilized to give voice and make-sense of the participants’ accounts, as shared during in-depth interviews. Standard IPA procedures were followed to collect and analyze data in a predominantly inductive manner. The
researcher made ethical and trustworthy considerations throughout the study. Considering the role of the researcher in IPA, preventive steps were taken to restrain researcher bias.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this IPA study was to understand how community college transfer students perceived and experienced institutional services during the transfer process as they transitioned to a large urban public four-year institution. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to elucidate participants’ reflections and perceptions on their expectations and experiences with the transfer process. The analysis of the data yielded three superordinate themes: 1. Support, 2. Navigating the New Environment, and 3. Dilemmas Through the Process. In turn each theme included a variety of sub-themes which were: 1.1 Community College Support, 1.2 Influence of Family and Peers, 1.3 Institutional Support, and 1.4 Academic Department Support; 2.1 Sentiment Towards the Process, 2.2 Agency, 2.3 Expectations Versus Reality, 2.4 Organizational Awareness, and 2.5 Registration; 3.1 Associate's Degree Dilemma, 3.2 Transfer Credit Conundrum, and 3.3 Unresolved Issues. Table 1 represents a listing of the themes that emerged during the analysis process, as well as the recurrence of each theme across participants.

The themes and analysis were guided by the research question: How do first-time transfer students from a community college perceive their experience with support services during the transfer process at a public four-year institution? A purposive sample of nine transfer students participated in this study. Block quotes were used to demonstrate trustworthiness with thematic development.

To align the thematic development with transition theory, some themes or sub-themes will be labeled in the analysis as assets or liabilities based on the participant’s perception of their experience or interaction with the theme as it relates to the transfer process. If the interaction is perceived as positive or enabling, it will be considered an asset. If the interaction is perceived as
negative or impeding, it will be labeled a liability. In addition, the phases of transition (moving in, moving through and moving out) were used throughout the analysis to align movement of the participant within the transfer process. Table 2 illustrates theme alignment with the phases of a transition.

The subsequent part of this chapter discusses the themes that emerged, and concludes with a summary.

**Table 1. Theme/Participant Distribution**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes</th>
<th>Bismarck</th>
<th>Davis</th>
<th>Eli</th>
<th>Leonard</th>
<th>Morrissey</th>
<th>Nora</th>
<th>Sara</th>
<th>Yess</th>
<th>Zoe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subthemes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Support</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Community College Support</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Influence of Family and Peers</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Institutional Support</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Academic Department Support</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Navigating the New Environment</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Sentiment Towards the Process</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Agency</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Expectations Versus Reality</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Organizational Awareness</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Registration</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Dilemmas Through the Process</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Associate’s Degree Dilemma</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Transfer Credit Conundrum</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 Unresolved Issues</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Theme Alignment with Theoretical Framework

Transition Phases

Move In

Navigating the New Environment

Move Through

Support

Move Out

Dilemmas Through the Process
Support was the first superordinate theme revealed in the study. Specifically, support relates to the perceived experiences with guidance and help, or the lack thereof. Participants experienced aspects of this theme as they moved into, through and out of the transfer process. This superordinate theme was subdivided into four sub-themes which included community college support, influence of family and peers, institutional support, and academic department support.

While support could be considered an asset, if the information disseminated was incorrect, marginal, or untapped, it could be a liability for the student. As participants moved into the transfer process, some of them experienced support at the community college. Some participants solicited guidance from family and peers as they moved into and through the transfer process. During the move through phase, participants may have sought guidance or interacted with institutional and academic department offices, and staff members. Institutional support includes offices such as: The Office of Admissions, Transfer Support Services Center and Center for Academic Advisement and Student Success and the Enrollment Services Center. Academic department support included offices such as: Childhood Education, Theater, Computer Science and any other academic office that oversaw a major or program. Each one of these sub-themes were examined in depth according to when and how the participant experienced each one.

Community College Support

Oftentimes, the transfer process from a community college to a four-year institution begins while the student is still enrolled at the community college. Thus, the advisors at the community college can play a significant role in the overall transfer experience of the transfer student. While discussing the transfer process experience to the four-year institution, some
participants recounted the support they received from their community college. Although this study aims to understand the transfer student experience at the four-year institution, the transfer support at the community college can play an essential role in the overall transfer experience to the four-year institution.

On the topic of guidance about the transfer process, Leonard stated:

I learned some stuff. They briefly talked about how certain majors it's easier to transfer to a four-year with certain majors. That was one of the things they let us know. There is a class called OCD that people take in community colleges. I don't know if they have it in four-year, but the class is called OCD. They talk about the whole college and how to transfer from high school to colleges, and they talk about how certain majors are better to transfer to four-year, like nursing and accounting. Those are the ones that I think that they mentioned will be easier to transfer with. They did talk about how it's easier to transfer with certain majors than other majors.

The participant conveyed that the community college support for transferring was limited to suggestions of majors with higher success for transfer credits to the four-year institution.

When asked if there was any assistance or guidance they felt was lacking, several participants indicated that they would have appreciated more assistance and guidance from an academic advisor, and information about transferrable course offerings. Bismarck candidly shared his experience at the community college:

I would say the advice or the assistance I felt I should have gotten when I first started school was from [Borough of Manhattan Community College] in terms of comparing the BMCC advisor to the Brooklyn College advisor. I wish the advisor could have said, "No. Don't do this course, even though you can do it. But I don't wish you do this course
again." Here, I got that advice, but over there, I did not get it. So I wish I could have gotten that advice earlier.

The participant expressed frustration with the transfer experience because of the lack of guidance he received at the community college about which courses he should take to satisfy requirements at the four-year institution. Consequently, the participant felt that he took courses that were unnecessary towards his potential degree requirements at the four-year institution.

Similarly, Morrissey indicated:

I went to a little information session over there at BMCC. They helped me out to fill the form. The CUNYFirst I think it is for the transfer. Then I came here for an open house or something like that. That was pretty much it.

When the researcher probed a little further to gauge the content of the information session, Morrissey added, “No, just the application. That's all.” The researcher probed further and asked the participant whether other steps were discussed, Morrissey responded, “No, that was not discussed. No, they just showed us to the website, the CUNYFirst. They just told us to go and read, I guess.” In this exchange, the participant stated that the only support that she received from her community college towards transferring to a four-year institution was on the application step of the transfer process.

Another participant Sara stated:

Anyway, they pretty much were the ones that helped me. Suddenly I find myself in this place where I'm like oh my God I have to graduate. I don't know what to do. I had an advisor, an academic advisor who actually just happens to leave the semester that I ... My last semester he transferred to a different college. No one contacted me about graduating
or anything, or if I need help or whatever. He thought he told me that he was moving on, but he didn't.

Pretty much I had to take things in my own hands. If not for this lady who spoke to me about what's your situation, told me how to apply for graduation, which isn't hard but who's going to tell you if not your advisor. Not everybody had that cope advisor person.

Then she helped me do that common app and the regular one for CUNY so that I can apply to Brooklyn College. That was definitely difficult. It's overwhelming. Not having an advisor is a big deal.

Sara stated that her academic adviser at the community college left and that she had limited assistance with filing for graduation, ascertaining degree requirements and initiating the transfer process to the four-year institution. She felt overwhelmed and the transfer process was perceived as difficult because of the circumstances surrounding her experience at the community college.

In this instance, the community college support was a liability for the participant.

Another participant Eli stated:

Not really. After going through the transfer office in Hostos, where I feel like, where they were pushing me to stay. I don't know, the reason they were pushing me to stay was because, they said I should get my Associates in case anything happens when I transfer. If I transfer out and something happens here, then I'm completely left out with no degree. I think that was their concern with it. I don't know. I personally think that it was like a, just like try to get up the graduation rate, personally. I don't know if it's true or not, because Hostos does have a low graduation rate and it does equal the transfer rate. I bet they would love to bump up the graduation rate any way they can. That's what I, I don't
know if they do have a personal agenda, I don't know if there's an institutionalized agenda there, but that was just how I felt about it.

Eli perceived that the transfer advisor at his community college did not advise him about the transfer process and instead urged him to complete his Associate’s degree. This interaction with the transfer advisor at the community college made Eli suspect of the support towards the transfer process. This sentiment towards the transfer advisement office would deem it as a liability from the student’s perspective as he began the transition process to a four-year institution.

Collectively, these statements illustrated that community colleges play an important role as an access point in tertiary education. The transfer process begins for many students while they are still enrolled at the community college. At this early juncture, community colleges have the opportunity to set expectations and springboard students into the transfer process. Unfortunately, these findings suggest otherwise; community colleges do not seem concerned about supporting students who intend on transferring.

The statements from these students described marginal support as it relates to the transfer process. Participants concurred that there was minimal support provided or available to help them make informed decisions about the transfer process. The lack of support from the community college could have a cumulative impact and make the process feel circuitous and perplexing as students do not have the essential guidance to make-sense of the subsequent steps in their transfer experience. As students begin to transition into the transfer process, lack of support from the community college is a liability
Influence of Family and Peers

The influence of family and friends was another theme that emerged from the data. Over the course of the study, some participants cited their family and peers as being influential in their decision to select the four-year institution. They also served an instrumental role in guiding them through the transfer process to the four-year institution. Family and friends therefore played a key role in how participants perceived and experienced the transfer process.

On the topic of transferring credits, Bismarck stated:

Then, my credit ... A friend of mine also said, "When you come to Brooklyn College, it's more likely that they won’t take all your credit." I know a friend that goes to Queens College, she told me that they took all her credit from BMCC. So, I was a little bit worried, since I've done some courses, I don't want to repeat doing the same courses. For instance, Intermediate Accounting. I wouldn't waste doing this same class two times. I was like, "You know what? I will just try my luck."

Bismarck noted that he received disparate advice from his colleagues about transferring credits. The latter advice in Bismarck’s quote seems to have influenced the participant to try to transfer more credits from his community college.

Bismarck also learned about some aspects of the transfer process from his peers:

The process or procedure ... I learned it through a friend. She was at BMCC. When I met her, I had intent to transfer, but I didn't know much about it. She directed me that, "You can apply for a transfer through the CUNY portal," and then indeed, I did it through the CUNY portal. And when I applied through the CUNY portal, it was more or less like updating just your documents on the CUNY portal. That's exactly what I did.
The participant learned about the application part of the transfer process, through a friend. In this capacity, the friend played a supporting role for the participant.

Similarly, Eli responded:

Yes, I didn't do anything with Brooklyn College in that sense. I did a lot of online research, I did College Board, I read a lot about Brooklyn College. I talked to a lot of friends who were going here, their experience here, because what I was looking for was although, like you said, we've got 17,000 students. I wanted to, because at Hostos I felt like I wasn't part of the community. Here I wanted to be part of a community. I wanted to start joining more clubs, I wanted to be an active voice in the campus. I started talking to a lot of my friends who went here, and they said, "Yeah, it's big, I know what you mean by that. You can definitely find your safe space here and your voice here." That was a lot of encouragement to me choosing Brooklyn College.

This participant weighed his friends’ experiences before deciding to pursue transfer to a four-year institution. Positive feedback from his friends about this four-year institution influenced his decision to select it.

In addition, Leonard responded:

I have some older relatives that attended college and I asked them for some of their opinions and how they liked it in order to choose the four colleges in order to make a decision on choosing which four to apply for. I spoke to some relatives. Some of them went to City College. Some of them went to this one, Brooklyn College, of course. Some of them went to Baruch. I asked them how they enjoyed it and how their experience was in the school. Basically, some relatives and friends also.
When the researcher probed further to gauge what influenced the participant’s decision on selecting this four-year institution, the participant responded, “My relatives. My oldest sibling went to this school and she graduated. I actually ... She mentioned that she enjoyed it a lot. I took her advice and tried to apply.” In both of these responses, the participant said that his friends and family, and their experiences with this institution, played an important role in his decision.

Another participant, Zoe talked about her transfer:

Brooklyn College is known to be the Ivy League of the CUNY schools, so after I had gotten my acceptance letter to Columbia University and I realized I could not accept the offer because I couldn't afford the tuition, my girlfriend said, "You should go to the other Ivy League." I said, "What other Ivy League?" She says, "Brooklyn College." I said, "Okay."

This response illustrated that the friend’s perception of the caliber of the four-year institution impacted the participant’s decision on selecting it. When the researcher probed further about the factors that contributed to her decision, the participant responded:

Close to home, high quality education ... oh man. Support. Support was very big for me, because I'm a big ball of stress. When my good girlfriend told me about this school, she told me how helpful it was, and for every time that I come here, the more support I get. If any time at all I get here and I get some kind of support, that makes me want to stay even more. Even if it was far from home, I would still want to choose this college.

The participant felt that her friend’s advice was a key antecedent in her selecting this four-year institution. She also used the word “support” in describing the role of her peers.

Nora also received guidance from her peers:
I did receive some help but it wasn't so much from faculty than it was from other students, so I was actually pretty grateful about that. Granted a handful of the students were already my friends, but I had to get some info from other people on campus too.

Collectively, these responses illustrate that family and peers play an important role for students during the transfer process. These responses indicate that family and peers can influence a student’s decision to select a four-year institution, and that friends and family were used for guidance on the transfer process overall. Family and peers were also a support source for participants as they moved in and through the transfer process. Students leveraged the advice, experiences and espoused values of family and peers to make informed decisions on the transfer process.

This finding also demonstrates the extent of the weight placed on the advice from family and peers by students as they formulated decisions. Students utilized information from family and peers in salient manner. The advice from friends and family members could be an asset, liability or irrelevant depending on the type of information, the accuracy of the information and the overall outcome of the information being shared. Thus, family and peers could influence how students perceived and experienced support throughout the transfer process.

Institutional Support

This theme highlights participants sense-making of the support they received during the transfer process. Participants found support from various channels including peers, staff members and support offices. The subsequent quotes described participants’ perception of the support at the four-year institution.

Davis was asked about how he learned about the processes and procedures needed to transfer. He responded, “Well, the Office of Admissions really helped me out with that. They
explained it, and they had documentation to show me step by step.” When the researcher probed further, Davis added:

Right. Especially with Admissions, like even when it came down to the small details like filling out the registration, not the registration form but the CUNY application, there were like two people ahead of me using the computers and they were kind of going slowly and a woman had taken like concerned when she saw me and she tried to get a computer for me, and I was able to fill out the application quickly.

In both of these quotes, Davis described the BC Office of Admissions as being extremely helpful and supportive. Thus, for this participant, the support from the Office of Admissions was a key aspect to his success in transitioning through the transfer process to the four-year institution.

Nora responded:

It was when I first did the SMART thing in the transfer evaluation and the academic advisement and everything. He personally emailed me, he basically emailed me everything on the last two courses that I should take, the professor I should talk to about the theater classes and every other information that I need. I actually really did appreciate that, that actually made things like a little bit easier.

While I was there I didn't have to wait that long, so I wasn't really upset. I didn't have to stand up and wait, which was great. The guy that helped me, he was very helpful. He basically went through everything, basically went through all the Ps and Qs, told me how this is going to work, how that's going to work, and everything like that.

Nora related that the key support that she received through the transfer process was through an advisement and registration process known as SMART (Self-Managed Appointment Registration Tool). The advisor that assisted her during this event resonated with the participant.
Yess responded:

Well, initially, it met my expectations, because I went in. It was all very fast, all clear. There weren't too many classes that I could pick from, because I need prerequisites. He also told me that the department is switching to a different language in the Fall, so he advised me to just wait for the Fall and pick up the new language, otherwise I'd be in the old curriculum. I'd have to finish the old curriculum. That was good to know, but it kind of got me a little stuck, because now I cannot choose from this class, and the one that I needed that was closed out of. So, I expected for there to be more communication. "I was just here. I know you're here. Help me." I had to do a lot of running around that day, and I couldn't get any answers for my problem. I went to the library. The library said I should speak to the department. I went to the department. The department head wasn't there. I emailed him. He didn't answer right away, and said, there's nothing he can do. Now I'm calling and emailing my advisor, because I was here taking care of my ID and my financial aid. When I got through to the secretary she said he was on lunch, so I left and just hoped that he would answer my email.

There were two distinct parts to this participant’s response. In the first part, Yess was satisfied with the support associated with meeting with her advisor. However, when she was confronted with a dilemma dealing with prerequisites and registration that could only be solved by a specific academic department, her perception of support changed. The participant felt that she was given the runaround by the institution. The initial feeling of support transformed into a feeling of frustration and helplessness. The participant described her experience as being in a predicament with no one available to assist her.

Leonard stated:
The enrollment service center. They're very professional as compared to, not to say anything about [Bronx Community College]. I love BCC, but they're very, very professional, very helpful immediately. Immediately when you ask them something they give you an in-depth description of what they want, they give eye contact. A lot of places, I know it sounds petty, but eye contact is big. When they're talking to you they communicate with you, they say ... They help you really. They're engaged. They really interested in letting you know the whereabouts of the school, how to get where you need to go. They're very helpful, specifically that. That stands out for me.

This participant pinpointed the BC Enrollment Services Center (ESC) as a place for support. The ESC is a one-stop for students that has representatives from multiple areas of the institution and offers a full range of assistance. Leonard felt supported by the ESC area because he felt that they were professional, and had a response to his inquiries. The participant also illuminated that his expectation on support, was in part, influenced by his experiences at the community college.

Zoe responded:
I did speak to the Admissions counselor. 222 I believe is the room is? He was very nice. He was actually very, very nice when I went in. He greeted me hello with a smile, he told me his name, and he says, "How can I help you today?" I told him, "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do. I'm a transfer student; I don't know where I'm supposed to go, I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I'm nervous." He says, "Don't be nervous, I've got your back."

He showed me to the computers that were in the room with him. He helped me pull up my CUNYfirst portal, and he told me, "Well, you don't have to pay to transfer, because you're coming from another CUNY school. What you need to do next is this. After you
do that, do this, and this place, in terms of the IDs, the IDs are closed now because it's after it's after a certain time, so I would advise you to come before the start of the semester because it tends to be a really long line." It was really pretty awesome.

Zoe said that an Admissions staff member assisted her with learning the stages of the transfer process. According to this quote, the Admission’s staff member went beyond the function of Admissions and offered the participant guidance and next steps on the transfer process. The Admission’s staff member also set expectations for the participant. For example, the staff member discussed hours of operations and peak periods for “long lines” for other areas. Zoe was very satisfied with the support she received from this staff member at the Office of Undergraduate Admissions.

Collectively, these responses indicate that some participants found support from various channels. Participants found support from individuals that work within the Office of Admissions. Others found support with individuals who coordinated specific functions like registration. And others found support from the Enrollment Services Center one-stop. Some participants were not seeking support. The additional support they received was in some cases incidental but important. This finding also revealed that institutional support was not a static experience. But rather, a dynamic one that can evolve as the student moves through the transfer process. For some students the perception of institutional support improved over time. For other students it worsened over the transfer period. Additionally, this theme illustrated that any staff member that interacted with the participants at the four-year institution could become a conduit of support representing the entire institution.
Academic Department Support

During the transfer process, some students sought guidance from the academic departments that supervised their major. Some were referred to the department by another support office, and some took the initiative to do so. Students were seeking guidance with major and degree requirements, course prerequisite requirements, and registration assistance such as permissions and overalls. The following quotes indicate how participants made-sense of their experience with academic departments during the transfer process.

Davis stated:

I was able to register for four out of five of them. The last one, it gave me some difficulty. It said that I wasn't able to sign up for the course, and when I had come I couldn't see the head of the department because she wasn't in that day, so I missed her again the following Wednesday and I haven't visited her since so I made the decision to take 12 credits this semester.

The participant visited the department because he needed assistance with registering for a course in his major. When the participant visited the department on two different occasions, the chairperson was not available. Thus, the participant settled for a 12-credit course load instead of a full 15-credit course load. In this scenario, the department was a liability for the participant due to the unavailability of the chairperson to offer assistance to the student.

Nora stated:

They told me to meet with another professor involved with my major. She wasn't there at the time. I wasn't too mad about that. It was just a lot of walking around because this is a big-ass fucking campus… When I finally got in touch with the professor. Granted the professors that were there did give me some really good information and they gave me
the packet that I need to understand the major and how to fully apply to it and everything.

Even though I didn't meet with the professor I needed to, I still got the info that I needed. Nora experienced some difficulty finding a professor for advisement. Her faculty advisor was not available. However, another professor was able to assist her. The participant was content with the advice she received, even though it came from another faculty member. Thus, in this instance, the interaction with the department would be an asset because it enabled the participant to continue through the transfer process.

Leonard stated:

…The Department of Health and Nutrition. They played a big role, yeah, because of course my major is going to be in Health and Nutrition. I needed a lot of information from them. They were very important as well as along with the financial aid. They were also professional. They helped me out a lot. They were a little bit ... It was a little bit of a confusing process going on with that though specific, because I didn’t know at all that I needed to go to an info session. They have a lot of [prerequisite] things that needed to be done before you even get into the health and nutrition. That one was a little bit confusing, but they were very helpful. I'm still ongoing the process of it.

This participant found his interaction with the major department to be informative and important. For this participant, the role of the academic department within the transfer process was an asset.

Yess stated:

I went to the library. The library said I should speak to the department. I went to the department. The department head wasn't there. I emailed him. He didn't answer right away, and said, there's nothing he can do. Now I'm calling and emailing my advisor, because I was here taking care of my ID and my financial aid. When I got through to the
secretary she said he was on lunch, so I left and just hoped that he would answer my email.

This participant’s response illustrated a circuitous process as she sought support from the academic department. Her answer exhibited a level of runaround; the student went to the library, to the department, made phone calls and sent emails to no avail. When she approached the department for support, the department Chair was unavailable. When the department finally responded, it occurred in an untimely manner. Consequently, leaving the student with a dilemma. Thus, this participant was dissatisfied with her experience with support from the academic department. In this instance, the role of the academic department was a liability for the participant.

Morrissey responded:
I went to the transfer center and they sent me to the English department. There's nobody there until I think they told me the very last week of January. Something like that. Then they said that I have until April 7th or something like that to sort it out, but I just wish I could do it now, I guess.

This participant could not find any member of the English department to assist her. She was disappointed with the lack of available faculty advisors. In this instance, the role of the department was a liability.

This sub-theme described how participants made-sense of their interaction with the academic department that administers their major. The major department played a key role for these participants. Some of the participant were required to meet with the academic department during the transfer process. Some of the participants found that their interaction with the
department was supportive. For these participants, the role of the department in the transfer process was an asset.

Other participants had a hard time finding support from their major department, in part, due to faculty availability. And some participants received information from the academic department in an untimely manner leaving the student with a dilemma during the transfer process. The findings showed that some participants had to visit the academic department offices multiple times and make multiple inquires to receive necessary information and support, which made the experience circuitous. Moreover, students illustrated a sense of urgency when dealing with the department. However, the academic department response to these students did not show the same urgency or effort during the reciprocation. For these students, the role of the department was a liability.

Conclusion

The support superordinate theme described how participants made-sense of their interaction with various aspects of support during each phase of the participants’ transition through the transfer process. The sub-themes explored within the superordinate theme of support included community college support, influence of family and peers, institutional support, and academic department support. Depending on the participants’ experience, support could be perceived as a liability, an asset or irrelevant.

Community college support towards the transfer process was perceived by the participants as marginal. Some participants received no support towards the transfer process. Community college support was important because it could act as a springboard for participants beginning the transfer process. This support could have helped transfer students set correct expectations for the transfer process. The lack of support from the community college could
have a residual negative impact on how students experienced the rest of the transfer process. Some students stated that they would like to have received additional support from the community college in hindsight towards the transfer process.

Additionally, the role of the community college as it relates to support was particularly troubling because these two-year and four-year institutions are part of the same higher education public system. Thus, there was an expectation for cooperation to make the student transfer experience smoother for the student. The findings showed otherwise; students received little to no support from the community college.

Family and peers played an important role on how participants experienced the move in and move through phase of the transfer process. Family and peers influenced a student’s decision on selecting a four-year institution and contributed on setting expectations on aspects of the transfer process. At the beginning of the transfer process, students looked at family and peers for guidance on making important decisions. The role of the family and peers was more prominent when you consider the fact that students received little to no support from the community college. Thus, the student’s emphasis on family and peers could impact how the student perceived and experienced support throughout the transfer process.

For most participants, institutional support was not utilized in the classical sense, where students would visit an institutional office for guidance. Rather, some participants found support incidentally from various channels within the four-year institution’s community. For other participants, support from institutional offices was left untapped because the participant was unaware of it. This may have made the transfer process more perplexing as participants sought out guidance for next steps on the process. Lack of institutional support could also impact how the participant navigates the transfer process, whether or not they experience dilemmas, and how
they cope with dilemmas. This finding also suggested that while an institution might have resources available to assist students, if a transfer student was unaware of these recourses, then the outcome is still negative.

Participants generally perceived that the academic department played a key role during the transfer process. Some participants experienced constructive support. Other participants had a hard time finding support from their major department, in part, due to faculty availability. Some participants received key information in an untimely manner, leaving them in a predicament. For these participants, the experience was circuitous and unsupportive. Consequently, the lack of support from the academic department created an obstacle for some participants since it was required in some instances for major declaration and registration for courses.

Ultimately, any constituent within the institution that interacted with the participant or any member of the participant’s friends and family could become a conduit of support representing the entire institution. Constructive support could enable and guide a participant through each required step in the transfer process, but marginal or untapped support could make the transfer process circuitous and be a liability.

**Navigating the New Environment**

Navigating the new environment was the second superordinate theme revealed in the study. Specifically, this theme related to the perception of participants as they made-sense of their transfer experience at their target four-year institution. Participants embodied some aspect of this theme as they moved in, moved through and moved out of the transfer process. This superordinate theme was subdivided into five sub-themes which included sentiment towards the process, agency, expectation verses reality, organizational awareness, and registration. Each one
of these sub-themes were examined in depth according to when and how the participant experienced each one.

**Sentiment Towards the Process**

To better understand students’ perception of their experience with the transfer process, it was important to determine their sentiments towards the overall process. Each participant in this study had some type of concern as they embarked on the transfer process. Most participants expressed that they had some negative feelings towards the transfer process. The negative sentiments towards the transfer process made it a liability for the participant.

Sara, for example, stated:

I think I was expecting stress. I think that's what comes with it. Financial aid and deciding a major, I just was worried. Deciding a major because I was slacking on doing this major that I planned on doing for a long time, it would be hard to figure out what I was going to do until then, if I was going to even go to that other major. Financial aid just stresses me out because they always have these little things to give you to fill out.

Sara exhibited a general feeling of stress towards dealing with financial aid and with declaring a major. The financial aid process is sometimes considered cumbersome because it requires completing paperwork and bringing personal documents for verification. Students are anxious with the process because any mistake can have a potential financial consequence. Declaring a major is also intimidating because the decision impacts your coursework at the four-year institution and can have long term ramifications with your career. Thus, Sara was confronted with making a long-term decision, in a short-term period.
Similarly, Morrissey stated:

Bureaucracy. Yeah, I guess. We were watching Brazil the other day. I don't know if you've ever seen that movie. It's all about a critique of bureaucracy. Obviously, it has its place. It's just that this problem with the transfer, I was worried about that…

Morrissey used the word “Bureaucracy” to encapsulate her perception and the mindset that she developed about the transfer process. Bureaucracy is often associated with runaround and miscommunication, and Morrissey saw this as creating problems in the transfer process. Thus, Morrissey’s attitude towards the transfer process was that it was going to be convoluted and circuitous.

Some participants described the inherent fear, anxiety, doubt and intimidation they felt about the transfer process. Davis stated:

Yeah, there was a lot of fear because I didn't think that I was going to be able to register for the spring semester. I thought that I would, they would've given me the runaround and told me that I wouldn't have been admitted to college, or it would have been too late. I was skeptical… my expectations? I think it was a negative expectation.

Davis exhibited a negative attitude towards the transfer process. In part, due to his perception of being given the “runaround” and skepticism about the support he was going to receive. Davies also felt that he might not be good enough to be admitted to this institution. Four-year institutions are considered more rigorous and prestigious than their two-year counterparts. Davis might also be experiencing this sentiment because he does not yet feel like he belongs at the four-year institution. The transfer process occurs in a period that is considered in betwixt, where the student no longer feels like they are part of the community college but they still do not feel acclimated to the new institution.
Another participant, Yess said:

The process is intimidating for me. Not knowing what to do, not having much guidance. Also, the financial aid process ... My fear of my credits not being covered and having to pay out of pocket or take out loans, that's pretty intimidating.

Yess illustrated that she found the transfer process to be "intimidating". The fear about how credits will transfer is prominent amongst most of the participants. As such, it is discussed at length in the sub-theme, the transfer credit conundrum. As it relates to this theme, transfer credits and the fear of credit loss impacts negatively the students’ sentiment towards the transfer process.

Bismarck stated:

Yes. I was very concerned about my credit, and being admitted. I was checking out how you have ... The amount of GPA that you have to get before you can get admitted ... I was checking about it and so I was a little bit nervous as to whether I would be able to get that GPA or not. My very expectation was ... I wasn't expecting as positive a feedback...

The participant expressed concerns with being admitted and transferring credits. Bismarck’s comment about not expecting to be admitted illustrates the idea that he might not be good enough for the senior college. Indirectly, it shows how the four-year institution is elevated in terms of prestige and quality in the participant’s mind over the caliber of the two-year institution.

Eli stated:

I mean, there is that anxiety that comes with the application process, where you don't want to mess up, but there's a couple of questions that you don't know how to answer and you yourself feel very intimidated. Because I did a lot of them myself, and I was very intimidated with a lot of it. I don't want to put any wrong information that would fuck
anything up. Well, I mean, the transfer thing, because I came in, I didn't come in with my Associates, so therefore, I was right under the 60 credits mark. But there's this weird little twilight zone, I didn't realize now, where you're like, you're yet to choose your major, but you kind of have to choose your major because of TAP and your financial aid. I don't know for me, but I'm pretty sure a lot of transfer students have gone through this, especially if you're under that little 60 mark, that you would deal with this anxiety of, okay, I got to, what classes should I take, what classes shouldn't I take?

Eli’s response illuminated a couple of reasons why students feel anxious about the transfer process. He first cited the application process. College applications can be difficult and intimidating. An invalid answer or a skipped question could impact your admittance to the institution. Thus, the anxiety associated with completing a college application is warranted. Secondly, Eli discussed credits. He mentioned the “60 credit mark”. The 60-credit mark is the point in which you are required to declare a major in CUNY (City University of New York). In fact, not declaring a major has financial aid implications that impact the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) eligibility in New York State. As a result, Eli has to make a long-term decision in selecting a major in a short-term period.

Zoe responded, “My only concern was that I wouldn't be able to get everything accomplished. I thought it would be a difficult process, a bunch of runaround, and a bunch of rhetoric.” The researcher probed further and Zoe added, “I'm telling you, I was 100% intimidated, and even now I still am a bit. Just a tad.” In these responses, Zoe exclaimed feeling overwhelmed and intimidated by the transfer process to the four-year institution. Zoe expected the process to be “a bunch of runaround.”
Nora stated, “I can be kind of a pessimist, I guess was slightly negative because I'm thinking to myself, Okay, what if these credits don't transfer too? I might have to start all over again…” Nora’s expectations on the transfer process were slightly negative because she feared the outcome of her credit transfer during the transfer process. More specifically, she feared credit loss and the consequence of having to repeat courses.

Collectively, these responses illustrated that some of the participants embarked upon the transfer process with negative predisposition towards it. This inclination aligned with feelings of being intimidated, overwhelmed and fearful towards the transfer process to a four-year institution. The attitude towards the transfer process illustrated the mindset that participant had as they began to transition. For some aspects of the transfer process, the feeling of anxiety was warranted. Dealing with the college’s application, transferring credits, declaring a major and applying for financial aid are all important steps and can have a lasting impact throughout the student’s academic career. Most of these participants exhibited a sense of apprehension with at least some parts of the process. Thus, this sentiment towards the process is a liability.

Agency

Some participants perceived a greater sense of agency as they transitioned through the transfer process to the four-year institution. This sense of agency comes about as some students recognize that aspects of the enrollment process at the four-year institution was less structured and allowed them more autonomy than the enrollment process at the community college.

Sara was asked about her experience enrolling at the four-year institution versus the community college:
It's just different. Here, downstairs you have that whole setup which helps ... It's not everything, but it helps with that. Making your appointment, like online it was just you make it and you show up and you get your time, if you show up on time.

Sara illustrated that the autonomy she felt when she made the appointment online meant something positive to her. This response also shows how something so simple as making an appointment online can impact a student.

Davis also shared the same sentiment, “Yeah, I feel like I'm becoming a little bit more responsible cause now I have to take initiative and actually go out and find out about different things.” The participant suggested that now, in this new environment, there is less structure than at the community college. Thus, he has to take more initiative as he learns to navigate the new environment.

Bismarck shared the same sentiment as Sara:

One thing that I like about it and I think is very positive is that all the CUNY schools should maybe incorporate is the fact that you are able to make an appointment [online]. For instance, financial aid, orientation, advisements and others, you are able to make it over online, on the internet.

Bismarck felt that having the ability to make an appointment online was a positive experience. In another response, Bismarck added:

Enrollment in this college is easier than BMCC as in terms of most of the days, you have to book appointment online, or maybe even with that one, now, you can call. Like with financial aid. With your financial aid counselor, you can call and then you speak to your counselor over the phone, and then they will assist you. At the BMCC, it's more or less like more of paperwork. When you are first-time student, you don't know what to do and
the advisor will say, "Take this course. Take this course. Take this course," and then that's it.

Bismarck associated the ability to make an appointment online to meet with various offices at the four-year institution with a greater sense of agency. Whereas, his experiences at the community college was more structured with less autonomy. Additionally, he perceived that making an appointment online made the transfer process easier and more efficient as he juxtaposed this experience with his experience at the community college.

Eli answered:

What I do enjoy a lot that this is a lot different than what Hostos does is that, so instead of you having to come into this office and kind of not really know what you're doing, and just kind of like ... Hostos had kind of like this whole line experience that made you feel more like you were waiting in the DMV than it was actually like an academic setting. I do like that you could go on your BC Central and make an appointment. That is something I love about this.

I'm like, oh, finally. I don't have to just like, maybe I have to go there and wait three hours, because at Hostos there were times where it would be really packed. You wouldn't know if you'll be there for ten minutes or for like, I've been there for two and a half hours. I think that whole "make an appointment through your BC Central" is the most amazing thing that's ever happened.

This participant, juxtaposed his enrollment experience at the four-year institution with his enrollment experience at the community college. He appreciated the ability to make an appointment online to meet with personnel at various support offices at the four-year institution versus waiting in potentially long lines to get similar support at the community college. He
compared his experience at the community college to the DMV, which has a reputation for being very structured. Eli exhibited a greater sense of agency.

Zoe responded:

Kingsborough was definitely easier by far. Kingsborough's enrollment process, everything is done ... it's like a, what do you call it? What Henry Ford did it with the cars? Yeah, it's pretty much like that. It's one step after the other. They're literally right next to each other. Yes, so it moves along like a conveyor belt. You don't miss a step. It's impossible for you to miss a step, and they also have, what do you call it ... For instance, in my cases where I don't have a class, the classes that I need? In Kingsborough, if I did not have the classes that I needed for the spring course, they have the summer courses available. They have a first session and a second session that you don't pay extra for.

Zoe also identified her experience with the community college as more structured. She used words like “Henry Ford” and “conveyor belt”, which are both associated with assembly lines and structure. She illustrated that she had a greater sense of handholding from the community college. Whereas, at the four-year institution, there was less handholding and less structure. In this instance, the participant appreciated the greater sense of structure at the community college, versus, the greater sense of agency at the four-year institution.

The feeling of agency in the context of transition theory is not exclusively an asset or a liability. Rather, the participants’ perception identified it as an asset, liability or irrelevant. In this study, the latter participant showed that a greater sense of agency was perceived as a liability since she preferred more structure. On the other hand, the initial few participants perceived the greater sense of agency as an asset.
The ability to make an appointment online was important for several of the participants in this study. This experience gave them more autonomy over what they experienced at the community college. Participants juxtaposed their current experience with their experience at the community college to illustrate the greater sense of agency at the four-year institution. Indirectly, this finding illustrated the difference in approach between the two-year institution, which is more structured, when contrasted against the four-year institution, which is less structured. Overall, this theme elucidated that some participants perceived a greater sense of agency as they made sense of their experience through the transfer process to the four-year institution.

**Expectations Versus Reality**

This theme was built on the premise that some of the participants’ expectations during the transfer process were established by their experiences with similar functions and offices at the community college. Thus, participants expected the approach, outcome or level of service at the four-year institution to be similar to what they experienced at the two-year institution. Participants were asked a series of questions about their expectations with various offices and functions at the four-year institution. The goal of these questions was to gauge how the participants’ initial expectation compared to their actual experience.

Leonard responded on expectations for Admissions:

It was a little bit of excitement. Yes. I was a little bit excited, because I was thinking it would be the same way as [Bronx Community College’s] admissions, but they were a little bit different. They had more of an in-depth description of what was needed to be done. Yeah, they were more detail oriented.
Leonard reiterated this point when discussing course registration at the four-year institution:

Well, I thought it was going to be similar to, again, to the two-year, but it wasn't. I had to take a core, I had to take a core requirement classes, two of them. One in I believe reading and one I think science. Yeah.

Leonard’s responses illustrated that his experiences at the community college with the Office of Admissions and with taking core courses set his expectations at the four-year institution. The divergence from Leonard’s expectation with his experience created sense of conflict as he made sense of his experience at the four-year institution. Leonard was informed by his community college experience in part, due to the fact that he received minimal support from the community college towards the transfer process. Thus, Leonard only had his community college experience to leverage how he negotiated with various experiences at the four-year institution.

Similarly, Zoe stated:

My only concern was that I wouldn't be able to get everything accomplished. I thought it would be a difficult process, a bunch of runaround, and a bunch of rhetoric. Fortunately, enough, I didn't get that. Everything that I needed, I had gotten my very first time…

With my other college, I've realized that you can go to one department and they don't have everything there, so you would need to go to another department, and when you get to that department, well, your process isn't done yet because you have to get this, or you have to go all the way across the campus to make sure that you get so and so to sign this paper off, and then if you get this paper signed off, then you can come back here and we'll give you what you need. I didn't get that here. Everything that I needed, I got in the one spot that I was told to go.
Zoe used words like “runaround” and “rhetoric” to express her expectations at the four-year institution. These were the words that encapsulated her experiences at the community college. This response conveyed the fact that the students’ expectations of the transfer process to the four-year institution was impacted by their experiences at their previous institution. In this instance, perceived negative experiences with various departmental offices at the community college created an expectation of a negative experience with the transfer process to the four-year institution. Zoe, exclaimed relief when her experience was more positive than her initial expectation.

In discussing barriers in the transfer process, Zoe stated:

I mean, I came in here with a GPA over 3.2, can I have a scholarship for that? The Junior College that I'm coming from, I owed this school, but I didn't have to pay them anything because I had a good GPA. In that school, when you have a GPA over a certain amount, this college gives you money towards your tuition if you can't afford it. They don't have that here. At least not that I know of.

The participants’ expectation of financial aid at the four-year institution was set by her experiences at the previous institution. In this example, the participant was expecting a positive outcome towards financial support at the four-year institution because she had a positive experience with financial aid at her previous institution.

Another important factor was the expectations on advisement at the four-year institution. Bismarck outlined:

Yeah, advisement ... My thought on advisement, it was really undecided. But more likely, I wasn't expecting it to be this positive, and very smooth. I compared it ... Since I'm coming from the CUNY system, I have this advisement experience ... I mean, [Borough
of Manhattan Community College], to me, in terms of advisement, sometimes you don't get the right people to tell you what courses to take, or something. Everybody is in a form of rushing to advise somebody, so they will not get time to explain it to you further. But then when I came here, my advisor explained it to me very perfectly, to the point that she told me that, "I don't want to advise you to take the same course again." I had a conflicting thought, but then when I started it, I met advisor, I had a very positive thought. I would recommend everybody to come to Brooklyn College.

Bismarck’s initial expectation on advisement at the four-year institution was based on his experience at his previous institution. He used his experience at the community college to inform his expectations at the four-year institution. Bismarck juxtaposed his experience with advisement at the four-year institution with his experience at the community college. In this instance, the student perceived that his experience with advisement at the four-year institution was better than his experience with advisement at the community college.

Morrissey juxtaposed her experience at the community college experience with the four-year college, “English advisors because I have an AA in English from BMCC. They were always available. I think there are people available right now. That would be a big difference.” The participant showed a sense of frustration because of the lack of availability of faculty from her major department at the four-year institution during the transfer process. At the previous institution, the participant felt faculty members were readily available. This fueled her expectation that faculty should also be readily available at the four-year institution.

Participants also recounted their expectations with course selection, availability and registration. Davis stated:
I thought that like at Queensborough usually they'd have different courses, different course selections and more times than not, once you complete like the basic requirements, you could take writing intensive for different classes. I just, it needed to be both a writing intensive and a creative expression course, and I was only able to get the creative expression course.

Davis exhibited an expectation for a similar outcome with a course requirement at the four-year institution. This response showed the link between his expectation at the four-year institution with his experience in a similar setting at the community college.

Participants who had negative experiences with processes at their community colleges had the same level of expectations for the four-year college, which turned out to be contrary to their preconceived notions. Another participant, Sara stated:

Lines. I'll tell you this. With academic advisement, I thought I'd be waiting in a room with crowded people, just a bunch of people. I waited a few minutes, that's it. I just really thought that the lines would be out the door. Financial aid, I also waited a few minutes. I waited downstairs by that thing, and that's the financial aid office? Yeah. The whole efficiency downstairs is so cool. I thought I, again, would be waiting in line. That bugs me. It didn't happen.

When the researcher probed further, Sara added, “Yeah. [Borough of Manhattan Community College] has, oh my God. The financial aid office has this humongous long line out the door. You look at it and you're like run. It's not ... Yeah.” In this instance, the participant had a low expectation of how she was going to experience academic advisement and financial aid at the four-year institution because of her prior experience with those offices at the community college.
She expected long lines because she experienced long lines at the community college with similar offices.

Collectively, these findings illustrated that students used their community college experiences to inform their expectations with similar offices at the four-year institution. For some of these students, their community college experience was the only information they had to make-sense of their experience at the four-year institution. These findings showed that participants could develop positive and negative expectations for various aspects of the transfer process based on their experiences with similar offices, functions and processes at the community college.

If student’s expectations and experiences were divergent, the outcome could create confusion and frustration, and could be perceived as a liability for students. Moreover, experiences at the previous institution could impact how students perceived support at the four-year institution. An antecedent to this theme is the lack of support from the community college at the impetus of the transfer process. It is at that point where correct expectations could be set to help guide students.

This finding also showed from another facet that community college students were unaware of what to expect even though they have some college experience. There is a clear difference in approach between how the community college approaches students and in the way four-year institutions approach students.

**Organizational Awareness**

Over the course of the study, participants were asked questions about support offices that facilitated different aspects of the transfer process to the four-year institution. These offices include Office of Undergraduate Admissions, Transfer Support Services Center, and Center for
Academic Advisement and Student Success. The questions were posed to explore participants’ experience with navigating their new environment and understanding the functions of these offices. There were mixed reactions and responses from participants. Some of the participants had difficulty identifying these offices and articulating their functions. Other participants expressed that they were unaware of these offices, or never interacted with them. While the participants expressed an unawareness of the office name, they were keen on some of the actual tasks or functions that needed to be performed in the transfer process and the location of those tasks or functions. The subsequent quotes highlight some participants experience with organizational awareness.

The researcher asked the participant, Eli, about Transfer Support Services Center? Eli responded, “Yeah, I don’t know… The transferring thing, that office I didn’t know existed.” The research asked the same question on the Center for Academic Advisement and Student Success, otherwise known as CAASS. Eli responded, “No, that’s not the same thing as the first thing I went to.” The researcher asked the same question on the Office of Undergraduate Admissions. Eli responded, “No, I never stopped by that office. I mean, it’s hard to have an impression of something you’ve barely seen.

In another response, Eli discussed his confusion with the nomenclature at the four-year institution:

Oh, yeah. I mean, here everything is called, everything has a different acronym and a different name. I think like the Smart and Fast and this and that. I remember getting a couple of e-mails saying set up an appointment, and you have to go to like different acronyms, and I'm like, "What the fuck is all of this?" Then you answer, you got to Web Central and you just call in. There was a point where you no longer look through the
offices, you just look for the acronyms to make these appointments. That was for me like the biggest jump. They have like a shitload of offices, with a shitload of acronyms.

You're just like, this is a lot going on. It's not a lot, but it's like, okay, this is like, I have to make sure this is the right stuff.

Having a collaborative work flow among offices is important to facilitate a seamless process for transfers as they advance through the steps of admissions, advisement, and registration. In this exchange, the participant was having a hard time associating the transfer process steps that he took with the subsequent departmental offices that facilitated those steps. The participant mentioned SMART, which was the BC Self-Managed Appointment Registration Tool and FAST, which was the Financial Aid Scheduling Tool. In the latter response, the participant was critical of the office names and their acronyms. In addition, the participant exhibited a sense of frustration and was overwhelmed with the complexity of the office names and acronyms.

Zoe was asked about the services that exist at this institution to help transfer students, “I genuinely do not know.” When the researcher asked the participant, what were her thoughts on the Transfer Support Services Center, Zoe responded, “Where is that?” The researcher asked about the Center for Academic Advisement and Student Success, otherwise known as CAASS? Zoe responded, “I don’t know that.” However, when the research asked the participant about the function of advisement? Zoe had a plethora of feedback on her experience with advisement. In these exchanges, this participant showed minimal organizational awareness, which could make navigating the new environment challenging.

Leonard was asked about academic advisement, “I don’t think I have dealt with them. I didn't have ... I don't think I ... Did I have an advisement? I don't remember. I don't think I went through that.” The researcher probed further and asked the participant how did you know what
courses to register for? The Leonard responded, “Oh, yes. I did have an advisement. I think it was in the library when they helped me. Okay, yes. I remember now. Yeah, it was in the library. They helped me out to decide what classes was needed.” In this exchange, the function of registering triggered the support of advisement. When asked about the services that exist to help transfer students? Leonard responded, “Definitely the downstairs ... I forgot what it was called. They were very helpful. Again, the ... What's the 222? That's financial aid? I think it was one in this building, 222.” In the latter exchange, this participant was more comfortable identifying the office by its location then its name. This theme recurred in multiple parts of Leonard’s transcript.

Yess also had a hard time identifying offices that assisted transfer students:

I saw a pamphlet. I mean, I believe it's here ... Is this Roosevelt Hall, right here, behind? I think it's James, then. I think there are services there for students, such as if you need any help with health insurance or housing and stuff like that. I haven't checked it out, yet.

James and Roosevelt Hall are buildings in this four-year institution. This participant used the building names to identify locations where service existed, not the office or department name. This participant was asked to give an impression of the role of the Center for Academic Advisement and Student Success, otherwise known as CAASS. She responded, “Not familiar with.” These exchanges showed that participants recognized locations and functions, not office names. This aligned with low organizational awareness.

When the researcher asked Sara about her impression on the role of Center for Academic Advisement and Student Success, otherwise known as CAASS? Sara responded, “is that the place I was advised? I guess if it was the place that advised, I was advised, what is my what? What's the question? I guess it's just for advisement, I don't know.” The researcher then asked
Sara about the Office of Undergraduate Admissions? She responded, “honestly, I'm just confused. I can't remember. I don't remember these offices yet. They're not so clear. Office of undergraduate admissions is ... Damn. It's like transfer people I guess.” Sara showed some confusion with the function of advisement and the office that oversees that function. In addition, she exhibited frustration with the office names. In other instances, Sara referred to other offices by their location. When she referenced the Enrollment Services Center, she said, “the office downstairs.”

For many students, the development and acclimation to the new institution began during the transfer process. The quotes in this section were evidence that during the transfer process, some participants had a low organizational awareness. This theme illustrated that while the institution might have offices that support students during the transfer process, these resources may have been left untapped because the students were unaware of them. This finding also illustrated that transfer students, similar to their freshman counterparts were not familiar with the four-year institution’s environment and nomenclature. The difference was that transfer students have some college experience. In fact, some of these students have Associate’s degrees, which suggested that they have at least four semesters of college experience. Thus, this lack of organizational awareness was troubling.

Not understanding the offices and their roles made navigating the new environment difficult and circuitous, and left the participant feeling frustrated and confused. Consequently, this experience was a liability for the participants.

**Registration**

This theme considered the participant’s ability to register, as well as their sense-making through their experience. Some of the participants in this study were not able to register for all
the courses that they were advised to take. Other participants had difficulty registering altogether.

For many participants, the transfer process culminated with them successfully registering for courses. In the context of transition theory, the act of registering could be aligned with the move-out phase of the theory. Participants were asked if they were able to register for the courses that they were advised to take?

Morrissey responded:

I chose some courses. I wasn't properly advised on which courses to take. Now that I have access to my DegreeWorks, I need to go back and talk to at least Peggy or one of those people from the general ... CAASS, I think you called it. I'll have to talk to her and see what other changes I can make.

The participant conveyed a sense of frustration because she felt that she was not properly advised and also did not have access to a degree planning tool hitherto registering. Thus, in this instance, the participant was able to register, but not to her satisfaction.

Sara responded, “Yeah. I think I registered for, and then when I emailed her and said I couldn't get into this one and she cleared it up for me and put in my card, I think.” The researcher probed further for clarity as to what transpired during registration.

Sara added:

I don't remember exactly what happened, but I know that ... I think I got at least two or three. Then two I had to pick from. They were lame because there was common core for this school, or something like, that I didn't like that. There were dumb classes. It's also very last minute. The one that I couldn't get into my cart, I just emailed her and said,
"This one isn't going in." She said, "Check your cart. It's in now." I think she put in ... I don't even know how she did that.

Sara exhibited a technical hitch with her registration, but was satisfied with the ultimate outcome. However, this response highlighted obstacles in the registration process that required additional steps to be resolved.

Davis responded:

I was able to register for four out of five of them. The last one, it gave me some difficulty. It said that I wasn't able to sign up for the course, and when I had come I couldn't see the head of the department because she wasn't in that day, so I missed her again the following Wednesday and I haven't visited her since so I made the, based on that experience I just made the decision to take 12 credits this semester.

This participant was unable to register for all of the courses. To rectify the issue, the participant attempted to meet with the academic department to no avail. Thus, the participant settled with taking four courses instead of five. For this participant, the experience of registering was circuitous.

Yess responded:

I did have a positive experience with Advisement, initially. I thought it was quick, it was easy, great. But then I went to the library to register for my classes, and I was locked out of one class. They had two other sections that were open, but they're reserved for College Now and, I think, STAR students. I didn't like that because I really needed that specific class. It's going to kind of hold me back, because it's a pre-requisite…

Yess exhibited some frustration because she was not able to register for all of the courses that she was advised to register for.
Eli responded:

Yeah, the core classes are the only problem, but that's it. Like I had a problem with the core classes, and I e-mailed the advisor I was seeing, and she said, "Yeah, I got you, it looks like," in the e-mail she said, "It looks like, I just logged in, I just see this, I saw that. I just e-mailed this." The following day, the whole problem was fixed. I'm completely satisfied with my classes and the courses I chose.

When the researcher probed further, Eli added:

No, it appeared. It just, they didn't let me register. It was in my basket, but it wasn't the final registering process. When I e-mailed her about it, I'm like, "Hey, this is very confusing. Because as you know, I'm not there on the 60-credit mark." She's like, "Yeah, I'm going to go fix it up, I'm going to go look into it," and she completely...

The participant was content with the outcome. However, at the granular level, the participant was not able to register for the “core” type courses that he was advised to take. He needed to follow up with adviser for assistance.

Zoe responded:

No, I was not. I was not able to register for the classes I needed because they were no longer available, and I don't understand. Why is it that there aren't more classes available for Majors that are in high demand? If you have a Major that you know that a lot of people are going to take, there needs to be more classes. More.

The researcher probed further and Zoe added, “it is what is, and what is, is that I'm wasting my time because the classes I need pertaining to the degree that I'm trying to achieve, is no longer available. Why? There aren't enough classes.” In this exchange, the participant exhibited a high level of frustration with course availability for registration. The participant was not able to
register for the courses that she was advised to take. Instead, she took placeholder courses to satisfy financial aid credit requirements. This left Zoe feeling like she was wasting her time with placeholder courses that satisfy elective requirements, not major.

These findings elucidated that the registration component of the transfer process could be circuitous and problematic. While some participants were satisfied with the overall outcome, their registration experience was not linear. In some cases, participants were not able to register initially for at least one course that they were advised to register for. In those instances, participants needed to follow up with their advisor for assistance. While the issues were resolved for some, students were not given any reason as to why they could not register for all the courses in the first place. This made the registration experience seem haphazard. This experience also caused the student to exert additional effort and time to resolve it. The same is true for the university. Ultimately, for participants who felt frustrated during registration, this step in the transfer scheme could be deemed a liability.

Conclusion

As participants embarked on the journey to transfer to the four-year institution, some of them illustrated a negative predisposition towards it. These participants felt intimidated, overwhelmed and fearful. This sentiment towards the transfer process or some aspects of it demonstrated the mindset that participants had as they began the process. Students were intimidated with the application process, dealing with transferring credits, and experiencing runaround and bureaucracy. Some of the sentiment towards the transfer process was informed by the students’ experience at the community college. The negative sentiment could act as an impediment and create unnecessary anxiety for participants early in the transfer process. Consequently, this feeling could impact subsequent expectations and experiences.
Some participants experienced a feeling of agency as they moved through the transfer process as compared to their experience with the community college; they felt empowered by being able to make appointments online and visit the college’s Enrollment Services Center. Some participants preferred more handholding and structure. The feeling of agency that students experienced at the four-year institution highlights the different approach of the four-year institution towards students. Overall, the feeling of agency could be an asset or a liability depending on the student’s perception.

In addition, participants developed positive and negative expectations for various aspects of the transfer process to the four-year institution through their experiences with similar offices, functions and processes at the community college. With the lack of support through the process, students used their experience at the community college to inform their expectations at the four-year institution. If student’s expectations and experiences were divergent, the outcome created confusion and frustration, and could be perceived as a liability for students.

As students began to navigate the new environment, some of them had a hard time making sense of office names. Students were confused with the nomenclature and acronyms of their new environment. While transfer students have some college experience, this finding showed that their four-year college acumen was still developing. Not understanding the offices and their roles made navigating the new environment difficult and circuitous, and left the participant feeling frustrated and confused. Consequently, this experience was liability for the participants.

The transfer process culminated with registering for courses for many participants. For some of these participants, the registration was not a smooth process. Participants were not able to register for all of the courses that they were advised to register for. Some participants
experienced a technical hitch. In some instances, participants needed to follow up with their advisor for assistance. Some participants settled for partial course loads. For participants who felt frustrated during registration, this step in the transfer scheme could be deemed a liability.

Ultimately, navigating the new environment at the receiving four-year institution proved to be challenging for incoming transfer students. Students found the process to be circuitous and frustrating. Participants had a hard time acclimating to the new environment. They used their knowledge of their experience at the community college to inform their expectations. The different approach and office naming convention of the four-year institution created a sense of incongruence and conflict for participants as they made-sense while navigating the new environment.

**Dilemmas Through the Process**

Dilemmas through the process was the final superordinate theme revealed in the study. Specifically, this theme related to how participants experienced and made-sense of various dilemmas that they encountered throughout the transfer process. Participants embodied some aspect of this theme as they moved in, moved through and moved out of the transfer process. This superordinate theme was subdivided into three sub-themes which included the Associate’s degree dilemma, the transfer credit conundrum, and unresolved issues. Each one of these sub-themes were examined in depth according to when and how the participant experienced each one.

**Associate’s Degree Dilemma**

The steps necessary to begin the transfer process from a community college to a four-year institution could occur prior to or after earning an Associate’s degree. At the initial phase of the transfer process, participants accepted the idea of transferring to a four-year institution.
However, some of the participants who were in the midst of earning an Associate’s degree, began assessing the efficacy of completing their degree at the community college.

The decision to complete an Associate’s degree or not created conflict for some of the participants. When asked to openly reflect on when they decided to transfer to a four-year college, most participants expressed the concerns they had during the decision-making process. Eli stated

Yeah, that was for me, that was like a hesitation for me. Should I get my Associates, should I finish at Hostos and get my Associates, or should I just transfer out now? I think there's a lot of deciding factors when it came to this, so a lot of it was like, I'm 23, I personally feel like, as a Hispanic coming from the South Bronx, not the most impoverished area, and I was like, it was an economic decision at that point. It was like, I want to ease into employment as fast as possible, and knowing how long it takes to get through school, so I'm probably going to have to do two-and-a-half years here at Brooklyn. I'll probably be 25, 26 entering the job market.

Then if I stayed at Hostos another year to try to get my Associates, I would have been 27-ish, 28-ish now. I decided I needed, for me to transition and over long-term plans to get into, to enter the job market. I needed to be in a school where I could get my major as fast as I can. Also, a school that offers a lot of resources. With that, I decided to opt out of getting my Associates.

Eli described his struggle trying to decide whether to transfer with or without an Associate’s degree. He considered multiple factors in formulating his decision to transfer early to the four-year institution. One of the key factors was the opportunity cost of his overall time spent in higher education versus being done earlier and getting a job. The opportunity cost of spending
extra time in higher education was the catalyst for the participant to transfer without an Associate’s degree.

Another participant, Sara was also conflicted about the decision to earn an Associate’s degree hitherto transferring to a four-year institution. Sara noted:

It's been a back and forth thing. It was just like what should I do? Should I finish my two years and get my Associates? Back and forth. I guess in the past year I really figured out that I was going to finish there and my Associates, and then come to a four-year college and get my BA. Transferring, apparently, means two things. It either means getting your Associates and going into college, or transferring mid wherever you are, which is confusing to me because I'm never sure.

Sara made a conscious decision to earn her Associate’s degree prior to transferring to the four-year institution, but her reasons are ambiguous and she clearly was conflicted about the choice. The uncertainty posed a dilemma for these participants. Consequently, the experience of negotiating whether to earn an Associate’s degree was a liability for this participant.

Overall, the responses surrounding their decisions on the value of earning an Associate's degree prior to transferring was an important factor in the transfer process for some of the participants. The sense-making process on assessing the benefits of earning an Associates or transferring with credits created some internal conflict for the participants. Underscoring this experience was the need to decide on the best possible option given their individual circumstances and goals. This was an important first step for participants as they prepared to begin the process of transferring to the four-year institution.
Transfer Credit Conundrum

Over the course of the transfer process, some participants experienced lack of clarity about how their credits would transfer and what credit course equivalency the credits would have at the four-year institution. Within this context, participants transferred from a community college within the CUNY system to a senior or four-year college within the same CUNY system. The system has an overarching articulation agreement called “Pathways” that was implemented by all institutions within the university system. Thus, the transfer credit ambiguity that some participants experienced occurred in the presence of this articulation agreement as they transferred within the system. The subsequent quotes illuminated how participants experienced transfer credit ambiguity within the transfer process to the four-year institution.

Nora shared her concerns about transferring to a four-year institution:

It was mainly if I would have to do all four years, or if since I actually had credits that I could transfer over there if I had to do all four years, or if I had to only do like two or three.

Nora outlined that when she began the transfer process, she was concerned about the number of years it would take her to complete her baccalaureate degree based on the credits that would transfer. She further stated that:

Only which ones would transfer through, which ones I had a feeling that all of my basic ones were transferred to because for the most part with community schools they all basically have the same core requirements that are either worded differently or numbered differently or have some difference, and I guess the syllabi, whatever the case may be. I'm thinking, I'm like, "Okay, so if this class doesn't transfer to ... This credit doesn't transfer to this school then I don't know what the hell, then I did something wrong
somewhere, something's got to give," but I'm thinking to myself, "There's no way that all
of my course won't transfer over. I wasn't sure about my electives because I did take
different electives from some different majors despite me not being a liberal arts major,
and I think to myself, "Okay, what about my theater credits? Will this one transfer over,
would this one transfer over?"

The participant felt uncertainty with her credits from the community college. While this
participant earned an Associate’s degree, she was uncertain of how the credits earned at the
community college would be evaluated at the four-year institution. Both responses by the
participant illustrated a level of ambiguity with transfer credits.

Yess responded:

Something I didn't understand was that I ... I'm coming into the college with an
Associate's, and I heard that my core requirements weren't done with. But I'm still
required to take two core classes, and I was given the choice between Literature, Social
Studies, or Science. And I didn't quite understand why I'd have to take two more core
classes if I already met the core requirements.

This participant described the ambiguity she perceived in the transfer credit rules. She tried to
make sense of the general education requirements, noting that despite transferring in with an
Associate’s degree, she was still required to take additional general education courses at the four-
year institution.

Bismarck responded:

The only one that has not been accepted yet is the Chemistry and the History. I'm a little
bit surprised in that has not been accepted, because I'm not a Science major and I'm
coming from another CUNY school. I took a Chemistry course at BMCC. It's a non-science major chemistry course, and so I was a little bit, "Why has not been accepted?"

This participant was surprised that the general education science course that he took at the community college did not meet the general education science requirement at the four-year institution. This seemed to the participant to be a misalignment in the curriculum between the community college and the four-year institution within the same university system.

Leonard responded, “I didn't know how much of the credits that I took before they would take. It wasn't really unease. I was willing to retake the classes.” This participant was unsure of the number of credits that would transfer over to the four-year institution.

Zoe responded:

I thought that more of my credits would be transferred over, but unfortunately, it isn't. I was told that I had to take a lot of senior courses for whatever reason. For this school, I had to take a lot of senior courses while I was here. The English courses that I had taken, the speech courses that I had taken, the math courses that I had taken, they are pretty much going to [remove] those and I have to take other ones, which are more advanced credits.

Zoe had an expectation that more credits would transfer over to the four-year institution. She was also surprised that she was required to take addition general education courses.

Collectively, some participants exhibited some ambiguity with transfer credits through the transfer process. In some instances, participants thought that more credits would transfer over because they had an Associate’s degree. In other instances, participants thought that their credits from the community college met the requirements for certain general education courses at the four-year institution. This lack of clarity for the participants about which courses at the
community college aligned with courses at the receiving four-year institution showed that there were inconsistencies with the information on transfer credits. Thus, the transfer credit conundrum was a liability for the participant.

**Unresolved Issues**

Emerging from the data were unresolved issues participants had to deal with after registering. These issues encompassed aspects of the transfer process, such as: dealing with transfer credits, registering for courses, financial aid and academic department major requirements. From an institutional perspective, participants were viewed as completing the enrollment and had successfully transferred. However, from the participant’s perspective, they were still in the move-through phase of the transition due to unresolved issues they experienced after registering for classes.

The subsequent quotes addressed some of the unresolved issues that transfer students faced after registering for classes. Participants were asked, if they still needed assistance with the transfer process, or had questions that were not yet answered. The participants’ responses included concerns about financial aid, credit transfer and evaluation and program requirements.

Yess responded:

I want to know more about the financial aid, about my credits, if there's anything that can be done for that course? Will I know if it'll be available in the Summer, at least, so that I can be on track for Fall? I still have to do the transfer evaluation today, and yeah.

This participant registered for courses and still had questions on financial aid, transferring credits and course registration. The tone in this answer suggested that Yess was worried about these unresolved issues.
Bismarck responded, “yes, I would say I do need assistance, especially I need assistance from the Transfer Evaluation Office to help me to get my transfer evaluated, or to be able to transfer my credit. That is what I need, yeah.” In this instance, the participant still had unresolved issues that related to transferring and evaluating credits from the community college to the receiving institution.

Zoe responded, “That is it. The only issue I may run into again is the financial aid, but that has nothing to do with the college. It's more so of my tax receipts.” Zoe still had to take additional steps to get her financial aid awarded.

Morrissey responded, “Yeah. I need to sort out the credit thing that I'm telling you about and that's all.” The researcher probed for further elaboration. The participant added:

The general advisor because the core classes ... I want to talk to her or somebody about which ones I ... Okay. You know how it's literature and then world or global connections or whatever and then science? Anyway, I have questions about that. I'd rather not take science. Anyway, that one and then I need to speak with advisors from the different departments that I'm considering doing either a minor or a double major in.

The participant had questions about the general education requirements that she needed answered.

Collectively, these statements illustrated the diversity in questions and unresolved issues some participants had after registering for courses. Depending on whether these questions and issues were resolved to the satisfaction of the participants, they could present a barrier for the participants as they began their semester and moved out of the transition of the transfer process. Moreover, if these issues fester into the semester, they could increase the likelihood of experiencing transfer shock since students are still focused on the transfer process - not the rigors
of their coursework. These findings also suggested that some participants do not simply move out of the transition phase by completing their course registration.

Unresolved issues are not exclusively a liability. They depend on the participants’ perception of their experience as they wait for answers or a resolution, and on the outcome. However, if the participant felt anxiety or ambiguity as they waited for a resolution, this may impact how they start their semester.

**Conclusion**

Overall, this theme illustrated that some participants experienced a dilemma as they weighed the value of completing their Associate’s degree during the move in phase of the transfer process. Students considered the opportunity cost of the extra time it would take to complete their Associate’s as opposed to transferring sooner to the four-year institution. Additionally, students illustrated that they were unaware of the benefits of earning an Associate’s and then transferring. Moreover, students received little to no support from the community college in assisting with this dilemma.

Participants were also unaware of how their credits from the community college would be counted at the receiving institution. This created a sense of ambiguity and posed a dilemma for participants in the move-in and move-through phases of the transfer process. Students were afraid of experiencing credit loss and its consequence, of having to repeat courses and stay at the university longer. This finding is even more troubling because it is occurring in the presence of an articulation agreement and both institutions are part of the same system.

After registering for courses, some participants still had questions and issues that were unresolved. This put the participants in a peculiar situation since the institution saw them as having completed their transition, but the participants felt otherwise. Participants felt as though
their backs were to the wall since the beginning of the semester was nearby. This sub-theme also illustrated that students received marginal support throughout the process from the community college, four-year institutional offices and the academic department, which put the student in a predicament at the end of the transfer process. Issues that students experience at the end of the process can impact how students begin the semester. The timing of the dilemma can perpetuate into the coursework and cause stopping out or transfer shock.

The dilemmas through the process superordinate theme elucidated that transfer students experienced multiple dilemmas through the transfer process. Some of these dilemmas were caused in part by the difficulty of navigating the new environment. Other dilemmas were caused by the lack of support the participant experienced through the transfer process.

**Summary**

The findings and analysis for this study yielded three superordinate themes: 1. Support, 2. Navigating the New Environment, and 3. Dilemmas Through the Process. In turn, each theme included a variety of sub-themes which were: 1.1 Community College Support, 1.2 Influence of Family and Peers, 1.3 Institutional Support, and 1.4 Academic Department Support; 2.1 Sentiment Towards the Process, 2.2 Agency, 2.3 Expectations Versus Reality, 2.4 Organizational Awareness, and 2.5 Registration; 3.1 Associate's Degree Dilemma, 3.2 Transfer Credit Conundrum, and 3.3 Unresolved Issues. The research question that guided this study was: How do first-time transfer students from a community college perceive their experience with support services during the transfer process at a public four-year institution?

The findings showed that as the participant began their transition, family and peers played a strong role in influencing the participant’s decisions and on establishing expectations. Students leveraged the advice, experiences and espoused values of family and peers to make
informed decisions. Family and peers were a significant source of support for students throughout the process.

Participants felt they received minimal support from their community colleges. Community college support was important because it could act as a springboard for participants beginning the transfer process. The lack of support from the community college could have a cumulative negative impact on how students experienced the rest of the process. Moreover, the lack of support from the community college was an antecedent to some of the dilemmas the students faced.

Some participants began to question the efficacy of completing their Associate degree as they began the transfer process. Students weighed the opportunity cost of completing their Associate’s degree in the context of transferring to the four-year institution. Most participants perceived the transfer process to be intimidating in some aspects. This inclination aligned with feelings of being intimidated, overwhelmed and fearful. Participants also applied their previous experience at the community college to make sense of their experience at the four-year institution. Sometimes, this created a sense of incongruence. This finding also showed that participants could develop positive and negative expectations for various aspects of the transfer process based on their experiences with similar offices, functions and processes at the community college.

As the participants moved through the transition, some of them experienced a sense of agency; participants were able to make appointments online and visit the Enrollment Services Center at their own volition. This made them feel more empowered versus their experience at the community college. This finding also illustrated the difference in approach between the two-
year institution, which is more structured, when juxtaposed against the four-year institution, which is less structured.

Throughout the participants’ experience, they felt a sense of ambiguity with their credits; participants were not sure how their credits would translate or apply at the receiving institution. Some of the students who experienced ambiguity with credits had an Associate’s degree. This lack of clarity for the participants about which courses at the community college aligned with courses at the receiving four-year institution occurred in the presence of an articulation agreement and within the same college system.

Participants sometimes did not recognize support, in part, due to their lack of organizational awareness. Some participants had a hard time making sense of office names. Instead, they were more comfortable referring to locations and functions. Not understanding the offices and their roles made navigating the new environment difficult and circuitous, and left the participant feeling frustrated and confused.

For most participants, institutional support was not utilized in the classical sense, where students would visit an institutional office for guidance. Rather, support was found incidentally, through a peer, a stranger or through a single staff member. Some participants left vital support resources untapped because they were unaware of them. The sentiment towards institutional support was dynamic and evolved as the student moved through the transfer process. Lack of institutional support could also impact how the participant navigates the transfer process, whether or not they experience dilemmas, and how they cope with dilemmas.

Academic department support was perceived by the participant as important for registration and major related questions. However, participants experienced minimal support
from the departments due to unavailability of faculty advisers. For some participants, academic support was a required function. Not receiving this support left the students in a predicament.

As participants moved out of the transition, they registered for courses. Most participants had some difficulty completing their full registration. This experience also caused the student to exert additional effort and time to resolve issues associated with registration. After registration, most participants still had unresolved issues, in part due to the lack of support they received.

Overall, the participants’ narratives showed that they perceived the transfer process to be circuitous. Participants found support from individual staff members or from members of the institutional community, who became conduits for support representing the entire institution. Having a collaborative work flow among offices is important to facilitate a seamless process for transfers as they advance through the steps of admissions, advisement, and registration.

The next chapter will discuss the meaning and significance of the findings and the themes that emerged from the interviews with participants. These will be examined in consideration of the theoretical framework and relevant literature of the profession.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research was to investigate community college transfer students’ perceptions and experiences with institutional services during the transfer process, as they transitioned to a large urban public four-year institution. The knowledge generated from this study should inform higher education practitioners who oversee and implement the policies and processes that impact transfer students. As such, the content and structure of this thesis was created to best answer the research question, as well as provide a detailed corpus of data from which findings could be drawn.

Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory provided a theoretical framework that illuminated, through the data analysis and findings, the key aspects of the experience of transfer students as they transitioned through the transfer process from a community college to a four-year institution. This detailed approach illuminated important perceptions and experiences of transfer students as they made sense of support, navigated the new environment, and coped with dilemmas during the transfer process.

This study applied a qualitative approach to understanding the research problem. Qualitative methods were most compatible with the research goals of understanding the aspects of an experience and meaning-making process (Creswell, 2012). For transfer students experiencing the transfer process, this approach highlights how students made sense of their experience, and how they perceived support. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used as a methodology to understand how transfer students experienced and made sense of the transfer process. IPA allowed the researcher to use semi-structured, in-depth interviews to gather data from participants in order to focus on a particular phenomenon and use a double
hermeneutic approach to make sense of this phenomenon. These interviews allowed participants to make sense of their experience during the transfer process.

This research study yielded three findings. Support was the first finding revealed in the study. This finding related to the perceived experiences with guidance and support, or the lack thereof. Navigating the new environment was the second finding revealed in the study. Specifically, this finding related to the perception of participants as they made sense of their experience at the receiving four-year institution with the transfer process. Dilemmas through the process was the final finding revealed in the study. Specifically, this finding related to how participants experienced and made sense of various dilemmas that they encountered throughout the transfer process.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the findings related to each theme and its position within current literature. The implications of these findings for higher education practitioners and university personnel will be provided, along with suggestions for improving practice and recommendations for future research.

Support

Throughout the transition (move-in, move-through and move-out phases) within the transfer process, students may have interacted with, or expected support, for guidance as they negotiated with various steps, requirements and procedures. The main ways in which students expected and encountered support was with the community college, family and peers, institutional offices at the four-year and academic department offices.

While community colleges play an important role for college access and as a starting point in higher education (Altbach et al., 2010), their efficacy has been questioned as it relates to
transfer students (Handel, 2013). In this study, students reported that community colleges do not seem eager to provide quality support for students who plan to transfer to a four-year institution.

In Gard, Paton and Gosselin (2012), some students labeled the advisement they received in the transfer process from their community college as “incompetent” and “inefficient”. Some students did not receive any support for the transfer process (Townsend, 1995). Tatum (2001) found that students at the community college were unaware of resources available to transfer students, and students did not receive any encouragement to transfer to a four-year institution. Similar to the literature, some of the students in this study received minimal or no support for their efforts to prepare for the transfer process. Participants concurred that there was minimal support provided to help them make informed decisions about the transfer process.

Family and peers play an import role for students as they navigate the transfer process (Ellis, 2013). This role can impact the student in the form of support and guidance, decision making, and in setting expectations for the process (Ellis, 2013). Espoused values and the family’s culture can also impact the transfer experience (Rendón & Valadez, 1993). This study results support the literature on the key role family and peers play in influencing participants’ perception and experience with the transfer process. Students relied on their family and friends for help selecting a four-year institution, and with strategies to navigate the new environment at the receiving institution. Students also explored espoused values and experiences of family members as a model for their actions through the process.

While friends and family play an integral role in providing support and guidance, they can unintentionally disseminate invalid information, set false expectations or limit the student from taking the necessary steps into and through the transfer process (Gard et al., 2012). The findings in this study related to information dissemination and expectation-setting also support
the literature. Despite the efforts of family and peers to guide them through the transfer process, some participants were ultimately misinformed and given false expectations.

Institutional support has been aligned with students successfully transferring (Berger & Malaney, 2003). This study found that minimal or no support can make the process perplexing and circuitous. As it relates to seeking support and awareness of support resources, this study found that participants did not always visit institutional offices for guidance. Rather, some participants found support only incidentally by navigating through various channels within the four-year institution. Students also outlined that they were unaware of key transfer resources. Both Townsend (1995) and Laanan (2007) documented that some transfer students did not actively seek out support in part due to their being unaware of available resources.

This study also illustrated that participants found support from individuals that work within the Office of Admissions. Townsend (1995) also found that transfer students most valued and expected support from the Office of Admissions. This could be due to the fact that the Office of Admissions is in many ways the gateway to the college.

This study found that at the beginning of the transfer process, students have not yet acclimated and developed the acumen to navigate the new environment. However, institutions overestimate the college readiness of transfer students (Grites, 2003). This disconnect can impact the quality of support the student receives (Davies & Dickmann, 1998) and the support the institution puts forth to help transfer students with their particular needs (Swing, 2000).

Academic departments often play an instrumental role evaluating upper-division coursework, and coursework within the discipline (Grites, 2013). When it comes to support and guidance of transfer students, faculty availability and responsiveness is a problem (Ellis, 2013).
Some faculty responses to inquiries are not timely (Townsend, 2008). As is noted in the literature, this study found that faculty availability and the quality of their response impacted transfer students negatively. Students found the transfer process more circuitous because they had to visit faculty offices multiple times due to the lack of faculty availability. Students received responses to their inquiries late. Some students settled for partial course loads for the semester because they could not get a response from the department.

Collectively this finding and the literature illustrate that the lack of support from the community college could have a cumulative impact and make the transition feel circuitous and perplexing, since students do not have the essential guidance to make sense of the subsequent steps in their transfer experience. Students value family and peers as integral in providing support. This support however could also negatively impact students’ experiences with the transfer process. At the four-year institution, there is a need for more readily accessible support. Academic department support is paramount for transfers; it can impact how the student starts the semester and how students complete their studies at the institution. This channel of support needs to be readily available throughout the process.

Overall, this study confirms the literature that support from community colleges, senior colleges, and academic departments are often inadequate. Family and peers play an influential role in guiding and setting expectations for transfer students, however, effective support is needed throughout the process. The next section will discuss the finding, navigating the new environment as it relates to the literature.
Navigating the New Environment

Navigating the new environment was the second finding that resulted from this study. This finding represents the transfer students’ experiences as they negotiate aspects of the transfer process at the receiving four-year institution. Participants’ accounts embodied some aspect of this finding as they shared their sentiment towards the process, expectation, organizational awareness, and experiences with registration.

The many steps and processes that comprise the transfer experience can be confusing for students (Turner, 1992). The disparity between how the community college and the four-year institution approach students impacts the student’s perception of the process (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Each participant in this study had some type of concern as they embarked on the transfer process. Students were worried about being admitted, about the extent to which their community college credits would transfer to the receiving institution, about selecting a major, and about financial aid. Laanan (2007) found similar sentiment. Students with a negative inclination towards that transfer process can experience difficulty adjusting to the rigor of the receiving four-year institution (Laanan, 2007).

Many community colleges’ approach and culture towards students are more student-centered and nurturing than senior colleges (Turner, 1992); students might experience more handholding and support as they deal with administrative and academic tasks (Berger & Malaney, 2003). Senior colleges have been considered more process and academic oriented than their two-year counterparts (Townsend, 1995); there is less structure and the work is more self-directed (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000).
The findings in this study agree with the literature and highlight those different approaches. They also highlight that the support disparity can create a sense of agency for participants when they navigate and negotiate various aspects of the transfer process at the four-year institution. More specifically, the autonomy associated with self-scheduling an advisement appointment online and the availability of the Enrollment Services Center one-stop support center, contributed to the participant’s feeling of empowerment.

This study also found that the knowledge that transfer students use to negotiate various steps in the transfer process, is in part informed by their experience with similar offices and functions at the community college, which coincides with Townsend (2008). In addition, this study found that student’s expectations of the approach by the academic departments and institutional offices at the receiving institution are the same or similar to their experience with similar offices and processes at the community college, which coincides with Grites (2013).

When students use their community college experience to assist them with completing tasks at the four-year institution with unsatisfactory results, this can create a sense of shock (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000). Thus, in this study, some participants expected a positive outcome from a task, but instead experienced an undesirable one because they depended on their community college experience. Participants felt frustrated when they expected to register for certain courses, but could not, or expected a certain amount of support that never materialized.

For many students, their acclimation to the new institution begins during the transfer process. This study found that while transfer students are already at college level, their knowledge of the senior college environment can be minimal at the start of the transfer process in terms of navigating the physical environment and understanding the terminology used.
Similarly, Grites (2013) also found that transfer students had difficulty adjusting to and navigating the new environment of the four-year institution.

Participants in this study revealed that they had a hard time finding resources and even understanding what resources exist to assist them with various aspects of the transfer process. This finding agrees with the student experiences in Davies and Dickmann (1998) and also demonstrates that nearly twenty years after Davies and Dickmann (1998) completed their study on transfer students this issue persists.

For some students, the development of the knowledge necessary to navigate the receiving institution can take a while (Laanan, 2007). Thus, the lack of knowledge to navigate the new environment can linger throughout the process. This finding showed that some students at the tail end of the transfer process were still adjusting to the new environment and its nomenclature. This finding concurs with Laanan (2007).

Some students go through the transfer process unaware that resources exist (Tatum, Hayward & Monzon, 2006). One major reason for this is that many institutions have no dedicated transfer advisor or facilitation office (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Laanan, 2007). This study concurs. Several participants in this study wanted a mentor or coach to assist them in various parts of the process.

For incoming transfer students, the enrollment process culminates with the student successfully registering for courses. This study found that some students experienced difficulty registering for courses. Eggleston and Laanan (2001) had similar findings. Their study adds that part of the problem is that some transfer students receive their degree conferral and completed transcripts from the community college late in the transfer process leaving the student with minimal course availability (2001).
Some participants in this study were frustrated that relevant courses in their selected major were full. Another participant received advice late, at which point the course was already full. Britt and Hirt (1999) found that students who do receive advisement about registering for courses, stated that the advice was late or incorrect, and that this impacted their ability to register for courses.

Collectively, the literature and this finding highlights the inadequate support students receive to help them navigate the new environment. Students use limited resources, which in this finding include assumptions based on their community college experiences, to make informed decisions as they negotiate various aspects of the transfer process at the four-year institution. This finding is compelling because students in this study were not aware of important resources, and experienced navigating the new environment to be circuitous. Moreover, the literature on the post-transfer experience connects the lack of resource awareness by transfer students with poor academic decisions, which can have a lasting effect (Gard et al., 2012).

The next section will discuss the final finding, dilemmas through the process as it relates to the literature.

**Dilemmas Through the Process**

Dilemmas through the process was the final finding that resulted from this study. This finding illuminated how participants experienced and made sense of the dilemmas that they encountered throughout the transfer process.

In the traditional transfer pattern, student would earn an Associate’s degree and then transfer to the baccalaureate degree granting institution (Townsend, 2001), but many students no longer follow this pattern (Handel, 2013). Some of the participants in this study transferred with
an Associate’s degree, and others transferred without. This study found that community college students will often weigh the efficacy of earning an Associate’s degree before transferring to the four-year institution. This deliberation created conflict for participants.

This study concurs with the Handel (2013)’s findings that this dilemma exists in part, due to the student considering the opportunity cost of their time in higher education. The second reason was the lack of support from the community college for transferring, which coincides with Davies and Casey (1999). Thus, the student is often left alone to make this decision. Underscoring this experience was the need to decide on the best possible option given the student’s individual circumstances and goals. This was an important first step for students as they prepared to begin the process of transferring to the four-year institution.

Another dilemma deals with transfer credits. Community college students naturally accumulate credits as they complete courses. When some of these students decide to transfer to the four-year institution, they would like all of their accumulated credits to transfer too. This study found that when their credits are not transferred fully at face value, students feel that their community college time and financial investments were a waste, which coincides with the findings of Townsend (2008) and Monaghan and Attewell (2015). Ellis (2013) found that over 40% of transfer student reported some credit loss. Both the literature and this study found that participants felt frustrated with the handling of their credits (Townsend, 2008).

Missing or limited articulation agreements have also been blamed for credit transfer issues (Doyle, 2009; Stern, 2016). This study was executed in the presence of a cross-system articulation agreement called “Pathways”, and the community colleges and receiving institution are part of the same University System. Thus, this finding adds to literature that the presence of an articulation agreement is not enough. Students need to be aware of it and how it is applied.
At the community college level, inadequate advisement can lead to a student taking courses that are irrelevant at the four-year institution (Flaga, 2006). This, in turn, can lead to credit loss during the transfer process (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Some participants in this study complained that they were not properly advised at the community college about which courses are transferrable.

At the four-year institution, the credit evaluation process can be arbitrary and capricious (Davies & Dickmann, 1998). Lack of faculty support can impact how credits transfer since faculty play an important role in examining credits and deciding whether or not they meet departmental standards (Grites, 2013). This study concurs with the literature. Over the course of the transfer process, some students experienced lack of clarity with how their credits would transfer to the four-year institution. Students cited lack of support from advisement at the four-year institution and lack of support from academic departments. Some students felt that the transfer credit outcomes were capricious. This can have a lasting impact on students, as they may need to repeat courses at the four-year institution and need extra time to complete their discipline.

Another dilemma occurs after registration. This study found that once registration is complete, students might still have unresolved issues with transfer credits, registration issues, financial aid and departmental major requirements. Some participants outlined that their unresolved issues were the result of marginal, incorrect or no institutional advisement at the four-year institution. This coincides with Gard, Paton and Gosselin, (2012). Other participants felt that their unresolved issues resulted from the lack of academic departmental availability for assistance with transfer credits, which coincides with Eggleston and Laanan (2001). Other
participants cited the registration process and the lack of support surrounding it as the cause of unresolved issues, which concurs with the literature (Britt & Hirt, 1999; Monroe, 2006).

Unresolved issues can present a barrier for the students as they begin their semester. This finding illustrates that as the transfer process concludes, transfer students are still dealing with unresolved issues, possibly into the beginning of the semester. Additionally, unresolved issues can snowball from issues that began from the lack of support at the community college (Flaga, 2006).

Collectively, this finding coupled with the literature illustrated that students experienced dilemmas at various points during the transfer experience. Students received marginal support throughout the process from the community college, four-year institutional offices and the academic department, which put the student in a predicament at various points in the transfer process. Moreover, the timing of the dilemma can perpetuate into the coursework and cause stopping out or transfer shock. The next section will discuss the conclusion.

**Conclusion**

This study was guided by the research question, “How do first-time transfer students from a community college perceive their experience with support services during the transfer process at a public four-year institution?” The purpose of this research was to understand how community college transfer students perceived and experienced institutional services during the transfer process as they transitioned to a large urban public four-year institution. This study answered the research question through qualitative inquiry and the application of interpretative phenomenological analysis, which interpreted the participants’ experiences and perceptions of the transfer process to ascertain how transfer students made sense of their experience with support.
While the literature is rich in broad transfer student content that can be encapsulated into the pre-transfer and the post-transfer experience, there is a deficiency in the literature with respect to understanding the expectations and experiences of transfer students during the transfer process, and how they make sense of support services. Some articles have shown a relationship between transfer student support and transfer outcomes (Townsend, 1995; Laanan, 2007). This study delved deeper and found how students made sense of support; how students used support, the resources they identified as support and what aspects of the transfer process experience was used to formulate and inform their perceptions of support. As such, this study contributes to the literature on transfer students and attempts to bridge the gap between the role of the community college and the four-year institution, as it relates to the transfer process. This study also illustrated an effective means to utilize Schlossberg’s transition theory in the higher education setting, while opening the door to further empirical research at other institutions and intuitional systems regarding the transfer student experience.

Data from this study was situated in the current literature to determine three main findings: support, navigating the new environment and dilemmas through the process. The perception of support was dynamic and was informed by the entire transfer experience. Students considered their community college, four-year institutional offices and academic department offices as sources of support. In most instances, support from most of these sources did not materialize, or was ineffective, due to lack of awareness by the student (Tatum, 2001), insufficient support (Gard et al., 2012) or the absence of the support altogether (Townsend, 1995). Some support was found incidentally (Townsend, 1995; Laanan, 2007). Students combined suggestions from their family and peers with their own experience at the community college to negotiate many of the steps of the transfer process (Ellis, 2013). Unfortunately, this
information was not always accurate or complete enough to make informed decisions throughout the process (Gard et al., 2012). The lack of information coupled with the lack of support placed the student in various predicaments as they moved in, moved through and move out of the transfer process. The transfer credit dilemma and unresolved issues after registration have long-term ramifications. Bowls (1988) found that transfer credit issues prolong the student’s studies at the institution and having to retake courses makes the higher education experience more expensive. Unresolved issues can snowball into transfer shock (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000) or the student stopping-out of the institution (Long & Kurlaender, 2008).

In closing, while transfer students are coming from one college to another, their knowledge of the nomenclature and nuances of the environment at the four-year institution has not yet developed. Transfers are leveraging advice from family and peers and their previous experiences to negotiate all of the parts of the transfer process. Unlike their freshmen counterparts, some transfers are required to make long-term decisions such as whether or not to complete their Associates’ degree and declaring their major during the short-term period of the transfer process. Additionally, transfer students lack resources freshmen enjoy, such as first-year programs and a specialized orientation.

This study’s intention was not to place blame on the community college or the four-year institution. Rather, it was to illuminate the gap in support that transfer students perceive and experience throughout the transfer process in their own voice and through their own meaning-making. This lack of support made the experience seem arbitrary and circuitous. Furthermore, these findings serve to inform practitioners at the community college, four-year institution and other higher education professionals on the real experiences of transfer students during the
transfer process. Therefore, the next section will address how the findings of this study can be applied to relevant practice as well as explore future avenues for additional research.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The purpose of this research study was to investigate and identify the experiences and perceptions articulated by transfer students during the transfer process, as they transitioned to a large urban public four-year institution. Based on the findings that were derived from the experiences of nine transfer students and the extant literature, the following recommendations are proposed for professionals in the higher education community.

**Recommendations for the University System**

It is evident from the findings that the initial transfer process could impact students experience beyond the enrollment process. An increasing number of four-year institutions are experiencing a shift in the enrollment trend towards more transfer students and have since become reliant on the transfer pool to improve enrollment targets. However, if these receiving institutions are unable to meet the needs of this student population during the transfer process, it increases the likelihood that students will become disillusioned and quit the institution. Jones and Lee (1992) studied transfer student degree attainment in the California State system. They found that the cooperative planning amongst institutions and the presence of transfer programs were linked to successful degree attainment by transfer students. Both types of institutions should work in concert with each other and collaborate wherever possible (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000). To illustrate the disconnect between both types of institutions, the researcher will share the findings and recommendations from this study with the Enrollment Management team at the CUNY Central System office. Additionally, the researcher will request to make a presentation of
this study at the Enrollment Management Council monthly meeting where Enrollment Management executives from every CUNY institution meet each month.

While a transfer articulation agreement called “Pathways” exists in this University System, the participants in this study were unaware of this agreement. The findings from this study imply that even with the presence of a system-wide articulation agreement, it is necessary to generate awareness and educate students about transfer policies and their application. This can be accomplished through advertising and through information sessions by the System office. The University System in this study represents over 25 institutions and nearly 500,000 students. An advertising and marketing campaign can create a general awareness of the articulation agreement and its purpose. The researcher will make this recommendation to the Enrollment Management division of the CUNY Central office. The researcher will also help identify salient points based on the findings of this study to include in the marketing campaign.

The System office should also consider hosting information sessions at both community colleges and four-year institutions to inform prospective transfer students on the articulation agreement. The researcher will develop a template based on the findings of this study for the information sessions. The research will also volunteer to facilitate the information sessions and act as a preceptor for other potential trainers. Information sessions can be hosted at the community college or the four-year institution. The researcher will also be available to work with the System office or any institution within the System to establish a longitudinal assessment program to gauge transfer student’s experiences and sentiments towards the transfer process.

Another option would be to create a short online video that covers the synopsis of the articulation agreement and should be emailed to all undergraduate students. The researcher will work with the Office of Communication and Marketing at the University System to help guide
the development of a basic online video. The System office can use the repository of students’ email addresses that are located in the CUNYfirst ERP system to identify prospective transfer students and as a medium to disseminate the video URL or webpage.

Increasing awareness will empower students to make informed decisions about course selection during registration at both the community college and four-year institution. Additionally, students would be able to use the information, and knowledge gained, to influence their decisions regarding institution choice and fit. This would help to limit the element of surprise students experience when they try to align perceived expectations and reality of the transfer process.

Articulation agreements are designed to eliminate credit ambiguity and arbitrary credit evaluations by mapping courses and their equivalence throughout the University System. In many institutions, newly admitted students are required to meet with an academic advisor to plan their course schedule for the term or semester. It is precisely at that point when advisors should articulate students’ transfer options, and help them to make more informed decisions. Information on the articulation agreement can also be disseminated through a leaflet or flyer within the enrollment packet. The researcher will identify pertinent facts about the articulation agreement to include in the flyer. The researcher will also create a template for the flyer.

Advising practices are equally important at the four-year institution, and senior colleges should provide the personnel, structures and resources transfer students need. Advertising information about the articulation agreement would serve to increase the level of awareness, and equip students with the information they need to create their academic plans. This should be a recurring campaign since new courses are constantly created and older courses require revisions.
Recommendations for Four-Year Institutions

Four-year institutions should assess their overall approach and sentiments towards transfer students, and implement changes that would improve the transfer experience. Changing the process and support structure could require changing the institution’s culture and understanding about transfer students. The destination institutions should highlight the importance of transfer students to the mission. The researcher will share the findings of this study with the College President of the Brooklyn College. This could raise an important discussion to reevaluate the college’s vision and strategic plan to be more cognizant of the transfer student cohort and their specific needs. The empirical data in this study serves as evidence that transfer students are having a hard time transferring and matriculating at Brooklyn College.

Reporting on transfer student enrollment and outcomes to senior administration, faculty, and staff can help to dispel misconceptions that may exist about transfer students. Shedding light on the transfer experience can help engage academic and student services offices to try to improve the transfer students’ experience. These institutions need to be aware that transfer students deal with multiple circumstances, which may impact how transfer students perceive and experience the transfer process. More importantly, transfer students are heterogeneous and should not simply be pigeonholed into a single cohort. The researcher will share the findings in this study with academic and administrative departments at Brooklyn College to increase awareness of transfer students and their experiences transferring.

Students in this study expressed concerns about the minimal support received and their unawareness of support resources at the institution, which suggests a need for more guidance in the process. Appointing and assigning transfer advisors who are experts on the various aspects
of the transfer process, and who could direct students to the appropriate channels for guidance would be a worthwhile investment. Advisors should be trained to clearly communicate essential information to prospective transfer students, and to also serve as mentors. The transfer advisor could help direct students to important transfer resources that would otherwise be left untapped. To help implement this, the researcher will work with the Advisement Office and the Office of Transfer Support Services at Brooklyn College to develop a job description that would satisfy this role. In situations where the budget is tight, some staff members in the office of Transfer Support Services can possibly extend their role beyond evaluating credits to include and advisement component for transfer students. A discussion of these findings will also occur with the Vice President for Enrollment Management who oversees Advisement and Transfer Support Services.

Another issue that emerged from this study were the misconceptions students shared about the process coupled with minimal information on the new institution. Establishing an early transfer orientation program could be helpful. Orientation programs tend to occur around registration or towards the beginning of the semester with the goal of acclimating students to the new institutions. However, participants concurred that these orientation programs are too late in the process. An early orientation program developed specifically for transfer students can serve as a medium to help the student acclimate to the transfer process and keep students informed about the transfer process from the onset. Additionally, the students’ apprehension and negative sentiment towards the process could be assuaged. To help this idea come to fruition, the researcher will work with the Vice President for Student Affairs at Brooklyn College who oversees the current orientation programs at the institution.
Part of the responsibility of the destination institution is to keep transfer students adequately informed about their transfer process. Holding information sessions while recruiting at the community college would help allay any fears or concerns students may have about the process. The researcher will work with the Office of Admissions to update the recruitment practices to include additional information pertinent to transfer students.

Transfer students may not be familiar with the vernacular of the receiving institution. The college should create a glossary of terms that are important. This resource can also include a directory pertinent to transfers with offices names, their functions and locations, which would help with resource awareness. There are many steps to successfully enroll as a transfer student. The institution should create a checklist that prioritizes steps. The goal is to create and develop a clear outline of the process and requirements, so students can be well informed and have clear expectations. Dedicating resources to establish and maintain communication with transfer students is vital to setting expectations and building a relationship with the students. The researcher will use the data from this study coupled with feedback from other stakeholders within Enrollment Management to develop a directory of key locations on campus, a glossary of terms and a transfer/enrollment checklist.

Faculty and staff members at the four-year institution need to be made aware of the adjustments that transfer students need to overcome to acclimate to the new environment. Educating faculty and staff can help them update their approach towards transfer students, which can improve the enrollment experience and effectively ameliorate the negative feelings that transfer students often experience. The researcher will offer to share the presentation of this study or repurpose the presentation for faculty, Chairs, Deans and the Provost.
Recommendations for Community Colleges

Community colleges have a responsibility to assist transfer students. These institutions need to be aware that most of their student population seek to transfer (Best & Gehring, 1993; Cejda, 2006; Wang, 2009). Being cognizant of this, community colleges can begin the transfer transition process by correctly advising students and preparing them for that outcome (Piland, 1995).

One of the major issues that transfer students deal with is the transfer of their credits. Community colleges need to advise students concerning which courses and disciplines are most appropriate if transfer is the goal. Additionally, students should be made aware of an articulation agreement by community college advisors. As stated earlier, the researcher will share the findings in this study with the CUNY Central System office. The goal would be for the System office to disseminate it to all College Presidents.

The community college is more student-centered and has more of a hand-holding approach. Community colleges should start the process of empowering students in the penultimate semester of an Associate’s degree program to minimize the shock they experience with the less structured and less student-centered approach at the four-year institution.

Students who are interested in pursuing their Associate’s degree should be made aware of all the options available to them should they choose to transfer prior to completing their program such as a reverse transfer. Reverse transfer is the process of retroactively granting Associate’s degrees to students who have not completed the requirements of an Associate’s degree before transferring from a two to a four-year institution. This is also an opportunity to interject the articulation agreement. There might be rules that ease the transfer of credits for students with Associate’s degrees. Thus, the goal is to present the student with comprehensive information so
that they can make an informed decision about whether to seek an Associate’s degree. The researcher will recommend to the community college feeder schools and the System office to create a general website that goes over all options surrounding an Associate’s degree.

Collectively, these recommendations can make the transfer experience better by assuaging negative predispositions towards the process, and by reducing the dilemmas that students face as they transition. According to the Department of Education, the number of students attending community college will continue to increase (Handel, 2013). This means that the community colleges will increasingly become significant feeders to four-year institutions (Andres, 1999). This, in turn, will increase the number of transfer students in higher education. Considering the current low success rate of transfer students receiving their baccalaureate degrees, it is important for community colleges and four-year institutions to address the issues that we have raised. It is in the best interest of both types of colleges that transfer students succeed (Anglin et al., 1993).

The next section will discuss recommendation for future research.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study focused on understanding how transfer students from a community college explain and make sense of support during the transfer process to an urban public four-year institution. The findings from the study, coupled with the literature, yielded important action items. However, it is also important to illuminate other facets of the transfer experience. This study found that some students had unresolved issues after registration. It would be informative to investigate whether these issues affect first-semester retention and persistence outcomes. Furthermore, a study considering the transfer process and its impact on the first semester might
be able to identify whether unresolved issues increase the likelihood of experiencing transfer shock.

Community colleges are important partners in the transfer process. Future studies should evaluate their role in preparing students to successfully transfer. Studies should gauge the alignment of courses students are advised to take at the community college with four-year curriculums. Studies should also evaluate the quality of advisement students receive towards transferring.

Some studies have shown that the lack of an articulation agreement can impact transfer students negatively. This study was conducted in a university system with an existing articulation agreement. Future studies should evaluate how the lack of awareness of that agreement impacts their transfer experience.

The transfer process is cyclical and each semester students transfer in. It would be helpful to take a longitudinal approach to evaluate transfer students’ perceptions and experiences, not just with support, but with multiple aspects of the process. The findings of this qualitative study were not meant to be generalizable. It would be beneficial to have a study with greater scope to illuminate transfer students’ perceptions and experiences of support with other institutions and within other institutional systems to provide a higher level of validity, reliability and generalizability.
Appendix A

IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION
Date: November 22, 2016  IRB #: CPS16-10-15
Principal Investigator(s): Joseph McNabb
                        Eduard Sidkyar
Department:            Doctor of Education Program
                        College of Professional Studies
Address:               20 Belvidere
                        Northeastern University
Title of Project:      Exploring First-Time Community College Transfer
                        Students’ Perception of their Experience as they
                        Transition to a Large Public Four-Year Institution
Participating Sites:   Brooklyn College approval forthcoming
DHHS Review Category:  Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents:     One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval:   12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: NOVEMBER 21, 2017

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
   recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must
   be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month
   prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
   other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
December 8, 2016

Eduard Sklyar
Ed.D. Candidate
Northeastern University

Re: Participant Recruitment at Brooklyn College-City University of New York

Dear Mr. Sklyar:

Your request to recruit participants from the Brooklyn College campus has been reviewed. There were no issues noted, therefore, permission has been granted based on the approved protocol provided at submission.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Office of Research Compliance.

Best wishes for a productive research project.

Sincerely,

Natalie Wright
Research Compliance Specialist
Appendix C

Eduard Sklyar - E-mail Recruitment Letter

Name of Person

Now that you have enrolled at Brooklyn College, I am writing to let you know about an interesting opportunity. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study entitled Exploring First-Time Community College Transfer Students’ Perception of Their Experience as They Transition to a Large Public Four-Year Institution. I will be conducting this study as a requirement for completion of the Doctor of Education Degree at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. I am interested in learning about your experience with the transfer process and what it was like for you. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a transfer student and have enrolled at Brooklyn College.

The interviews will be conducted in two parts. The first part will be an intake interview discussing the informed consent process, confidentiality, risks and your biographic and demographic information. The second interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. During this part, I will ask you to talk about various aspects of your transfer process experience to Brooklyn College and the support the institution provided.

The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcription company. All findings from the interview will be used for the purposes of this study. All responses will remain confidential and will only be used to inform the researcher about students’ experience with the transfer process. Your name will not be connected with the study or with any of the findings. You will receive a $20.00 gift card for participating.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me by email at sklyar.e@husky.neu.edu and I will schedule the interview at a time and place that is convenient for you. I will explain the details of the study and an informed consent form will be provided for your signature during the meeting if you decide to participate. Your participation is purely voluntary and could be discontinued at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate has no bearing on your enrollment at Brooklyn College.

Thanks for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Eduard Sklyar
Appendix D

Internal Audit

Davis: I thought that I would, they would've given me the run around and told me that I wouldn't have been admitted to college, or it would have been too late.

Disposition that some aspects of the transfer process will be negative.

Sentiment Towards the Process

Eli: Yeah, that was for me, that was like a hesitation for me. Should I get my Associates, should I finish at Hostos and get my Associates, or should I just transfer out now? I think there's a lot of deciding factors when it came to this, so a lot of it was like, I'm 23, I personally feel like…

Assessing the efficacy of earning an Associate’s degree in the context of a transfer student.

The Associate’s Degree Dilemma

Sara: I just really thought that the lines would be out the door. Financial aid, I also waited a few minutes. I waited downstairs by that thing, and that's the financial aid office? Yeah. The whole efficiency downstairs is so cool. I thought I, again, would be waiting in line. That bugs me. It didn't happen.

The experience at the community college set an expectation that there would be long lines at the four-year institution.

Expectation Versus Reality

Leonard: My relatives. My oldest sibling went to this school and she graduated. Yeah. I actually ... She mentioned that she enjoyed it a lot. I took her advice and tried to apply.

The sibling’s experience and advice on the four-year institution influenced Leonard.

Influence of Family and Peers


An, B. P. (2010). The relations between race, family characteristics, and where students apply to college. *Social Science Research, 39*(2), 310-323.


Gerhardt, K., & Ackerman, M. (2014). Postsecondary Student Mobility from College to University: Student Expectations and Experience. College Quarterly, 17(1), n1.


Kovton, O. (2010). *International student adaptation to a U. S. College: A mixed methods exploration of the impact of a specialized first-year foundations course at a large midwestern institution.* Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses (UMI Number: 3432051)


Svanum, S., & Bigatti, S. M. (2009). Academic course engagement during one semester forecasts college success: Engaged students are more likely to earn a degree, do it faster, and do it better. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(1), 120-132.


