COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER AND THE PATHWAY TO A BACCALAUREATE DEGREE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF TRANSFER STUDENTS

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Abstract
Many students who start at the community college with the intention of transferring and earning a baccalaureate degree fail to accomplish this goal. This study, using IPA methodology, explored the experiences of seven community college transfer students currently enrolled at a public 4-year institution to identify how community college transfer students navigate successful completion of a bachelor’s degree. Findings of this study show that these participants depend on internal and outside resources for information, decision-making, motivation and support to persist along this pathway. Critical in the transfer pathway is to establish college and career goals, and then to persist as a result of committing to such goals. Participants experienced both times of struggle as well as enjoyable times. While lacking in social integration at the community college, transfer students found financial and preparatory value in attending. Transitioning to a new institution is difficult, but mediated with preparation, information and support. Contributing to a successful transition is an intense orientation particularly for community college transfer students. Once at the 4-year institution, students experience a rich social integration and a more intense sense of belonging. Support and information from peers, family, faculty and staff along the entire pathway is essential. Findings from this study suggest that students may benefit from ample information such as that regarding transfer pathways between institutions, having exposure to the post-transfer institution prior to transfer such as meeting faculty and staff on campus visits, and providing extensive supportive resources with accessible, caring faculty and staff as well as tutoring and study group opportunities.

Keywords: community college transfer, baccalaureate institution, bachelor’s degree
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I have great admiration and appreciation to the study’s participants, who met with a stranger to tell their stories. Their experiences matter.

This is dedicated to my, and to all, students on their pathways to living the lives they have imagined – may this help light their paths.
Dedication

This is dedicated to my Offspring, Taylor Vernoy Langlois Anderson, the most inspiring and encouraging son I could have asked for. You will never know how much you changed my life and my soul.

To MJ, the most supportive and generous life partner I could have desired. This “book” and this life are because of you.

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I also dedicate this work to any little girl who has a dream and a commitment to herself to build a great life, including earning a doctorate, and who somehow becomes a woman with the tenacity, perseverance, strength, and beliefs to make it all come true.
Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of community college students post-transfer at the baccalaureate institution. Specifically the focus was on the experiences influencing success in the transfer pipeline leading to a baccalaureate degree. For purposes of this study, those in the transfer pipeline were generally defined as students who began college coursework at a community college and transferred to a baccalaureate institution with the intention of earning a bachelor’s degree. Participants completed at least 15 credits at the community college and transferred within the past five years; all were current students at the 4-year institution. Knowledge generated was expected to inform practices and policies that will contribute to achieving that which will support student success in navigating this route towards a bachelor’s degree.

Context and Background

Earning a college degree has become crucial in our current society. Many of today’s careers and workplaces prefer, even require, baccalaureate degrees. However, considering that a college education is today’s, “golden-ticket,” Kuh et al. (2008) are startled that the rates of college completion are not increasing. The majority of college students attend community college during some portion of their higher education; most of these students will ultimately fail to earn the intended bachelor’s degree (Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013). Therefore, further study of the contributing factors for degree completion was imperative. This qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis examined transfer student viewpoints and experiences at two baccalaureate institutions.

Community colleges serve a number of important roles in higher education, including the pathway to a bachelor’s, workforce certification, remediation, and as a source of personal
development for students. Globalization has altered the mission and changed the structure of community colleges (Levin, 2001), moving beyond the traditional mission of access to that of meeting competitive workplace training. Workforce expectations have increased, for many fields, to require the baccalaureate (Bemmel, Floyd & Bryan, 2009; Gross & Goldhaber, 2009b; Reindl, 2005), in its importance to upward mobility in careers (Wang, 2009). In providing students the means by which to obtain the degree, community colleges have never been more critical.

Eighty percent of community college students report the intention of transferring to receive their bachelor’s degree, but only 29% (Ullman, 2011) eventually complete the degree. Considerable evidence of beginning the baccalaureate degree at a community college has demonstrated less likelihood of completing it (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2013; Canché, 2014; Doyle, 2006, 2012; Laanan, 2003; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014); thus, an obvious and urgent need emerged to further examine this phenomenon and to identify ways to increase the success rate of transfer intentions. Ellis (2013) called the low transfer rate from community college to university a, “national issue,” noting the result a loss of skill and talent (p. 74). While community colleges serve many functions, their central role has always been transfer to 4-year institutions (Lederman, 2012), yet community colleges have not been particularly successful in achieving their transfer mission (Gross & Goldhaber, 2009a).

Other recent data from the National Student Clearinghouse shows that over 80% of community college students state the intention of transferring to a 4-year institution, ultimately to earn a bachelor’s degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Within six years of enrolling at a community college, 33% of students will actually transfer and, of those, 42% will ultimately complete the baccalaureate degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Doyle (2006) found that 20% of those starting full-
time at a community college earn a bachelor’s degree within six years. According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2003-4, 10.6% of those starting at a 2-year institution earned a bachelor’s degree, compared to 58% of those starting at the 4-year institution earning a baccalaureate degree ("Percentage distribution of first-time postsecondary students starting at 2- and 4-year institutions during the 2003-04 academic year, by highest degree attained, enrollment status, and selected characteristics: Spring 2009," n.d.).

Thus, this pathway to the bachelor’s degree appeared to be fraught with barriers for students who sought to achieve their educational goals. These barriers included (1) the lack of transfer information readily available and accessible to students (De la Torre, 2007; Ellis, 2013; Gilroy, 2005; Hagedorn, Cypers, & Lester, 2006); (2) 4-year institutions not accepting transfer of community college credits (Doyle, 2006; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014); and (3) troublesome student adjustment to the baccalaureate institution (Gilroy, 2005; Laanan, 2007; Laanan & Hernandez, 2011; Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Pappano, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006a). Tinto (1993) asserts that failing to complete an intended degree stems from the roadblocks students face when transferring from one institution to another, stating that both oversite and intentional policy of the institution create the barriers transfer students face. The transfer process is quite complex, but credit transfer appears arbitrary, transfer admission requirements differ, and articulation agreements are inconsistent (Handel, 2013); transfer students often have differing needs than native students, thus necessitating further exploration of the phenomenon and additional strategies to support students in the transfer pipeline. The outcome of more transfer students earning bachelor’s degrees is essential for individuals and for society.

Literature on the student transfer in higher education primarily highlights the community college aspect of student transfer. Townsend (1995, 2001) and Townsend and Wilson (2006,
2009) studied the transfer mission of community college, the current demographic and societal urgency for success with the transfer mission, and factors impacting student transfer. Laanan (2003, 2006, 2007) extensively researched community college students, their transfer aspirations, and the characteristics influencing their transfer. While these studies have an important role in illuminating the issue of student transfer, comparatively few studies investigate the issue of finally earning the baccalaureate, having gone through the student transfer pipeline. In this chapter, the theoretical framework used to guide the study is presented; the problem statement and justification; the significance of the research problem; the researcher’s positionality statement; and a definition of terms, all of which will explain the setting for the study. Therefore, this study contributed to an understanding of the phenomenon of transferring from a community college to a baccalaureate institution and earning a bachelor’s degree.

**Rationale and Significance**

A significant number of college students intent on earning a baccalaureate degree begin their endeavor at a community college. There are many reasons influencing this choice, including the financial cost of higher education, lack of academic preparation and skills, and populations such as minority, non-traditional age, and low-income students who attend community college for a myriad of reasons. Much of today’s workforce, and society itself, expects the majority of individuals to have college degrees, and individuals themselves benefit from a baccalaureate: they might more easily earn higher wages, gain more opportunities, and enjoy improved socioeconomic status. However, many of those intending to start at a community college, then transfer to a 4-year institution, ultimately fail to earn a baccalaureate. Some discontinue in the initial institution and leave the community college without completing even an associate’s degree. What keeps them from their goal?
Selected research shows that factors influencing persistence include academic engagement, social engagement, institutional factors such as student advisement, and the availability to students of information relevant to transfer. Additionally, Transfer Student Capital—a term that encompasses the knowledge, skills, and relationships students have that support them in persisting in the pathway to a bachelor’s degree provided a constructed lens by which to examine evidence this research uncovers.

In this qualitative phenomenological study, the lived experiences of students post-transfer were examined. The study explored the factors perceived as supporting and influencing transfer students to ultimately earn their degrees, and identified factors as well as experiences that could potentially be improved to further support transfer students.

**Problem Statement**

The main problem addressed in this study was the lower number of community college transfer students earning a bachelor’s degree as compared to native students (students beginning as freshmen). Specifically, this study focused on the student experiences and the institutional factors, post-transfer, at the 4-year institution that impacted whether or not a student earned their baccalaureate degree. The Transfer Student Capital theory was used to highlight the student and institutional factors that best supported transfer students in earning the 4-year degree.

**Justification for the Research Problem**

This study provided participants an opportunity to reflect on their educational experiences and goals. Having gained insight into the student experiences, institutions and policy-makers might also implement changes to policies and practices based on the findings of this study, garnering better understanding of the student experience to support transfer students to persist to graduation. Baccalaureate institutions could benefit from this study by using relevant
findings to best serve their transfer students. Finally, even via a small impact, the larger society could benefit from a higher education system that supports more students earning bachelor’s degrees.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2012) declares that student transfer has a substantial influence in the degree completion outcomes. Higher education is critical to individual careers, for much of our current workforce, and for our country’s well-being. Thus it is vital to support such an essential factor to the attainment of a college degree. Ruiz and Pryor (2011) urge further investigation into the “leaky pipeline” (p. 6) of student transfer in an effort to ensure more effectiveness in transfer students earning baccalaureate degrees. This qualitative study, through interviewing those students who had been affected by post-transfer obstacles, provided a better understanding of specific influences and their effectiveness. Thus we might create mechanisms that sustain an effective transfer system within higher education, not as optional but urgently necessary. This close examination of student experiences also provided insight into institutions serving transfer students as to the areas of success and to those needing improvement in their role in the transfer student pipeline.

The results of this qualitative phenomenological study contributed to understanding experiences of community college transfer students. This study potentially could encourage similar studies undertaken and those at institutions to investigate needs and experiences of specific populations of students in their pursuit of bachelor’s degrees. Additionally the findings have the potential to contribute to more students successfully navigating the transfer pathway and earning baccalaureate degrees, thus impacting individuals, the workforce, and society, even on a small scale.
Deficiencies in the Evidence

This study involved two aspects minimally explored in the current literature. First, it was qualitative, and it used a phenomenological approach. Second, this study focused on the post-transfer end of the pathway, whereas much of the research and attention had been directed towards the community college end of the transfer pipeline.

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis was to provide a deeper understanding of how community college students navigated the transfer process and successfully completed a bachelor’s degree. Specifically this study looked at factors supporting Transfer Student Capital, such as academic counseling experiences, relationships with faculty and staff mentoring and validation, financial mediators, as well as student coping styles, perceptions of transfer process, learning and study skills, and motivation. The following research question guided and informed this study:

- How do community college transfer students navigate successful completion of a baccalaureate degree?

Definition of Terms

*Articulation agreement:* Formal agreement between individual schools, or at a statewide level, between 2- and 4-year institutions guaranteeing transfer of individual courses, programs or degrees; while not required to transfer, they make the process easier and guarantee transfer of stipulated credits (Rowh, 2011; Snyder, 2012).

*Capital:* Non-economic resources that enable one, individually or collectively, to provide benefit.

*Community college:* Typically, a public institution of higher education, usually providing certification and associate degree (“2-year”) programs, often serving non-traditional, lower-
socioeconomic and underserved populations and most commonly with open admissions (Rowh, 2011).

*Countryside University:* Pseudonym given to public university serving as research site for this study.

*Early College Program:* A statewide program enabling high school seniors to attend community college full-time, completing both senior year of high school and initial year of college simultaneously.

*Eastern State Community College:* Pseudonym given for statewide community college system, comprised of numerous sites throughout the state.

*4-year institution:* A public or private institution of higher education, offering at least baccalaureate ("4-year") degrees.

*L-TSQ:* The Laanan-Transfer Students' Questionnaire, a reliable and validated research instrument designed by Laanan (2004) by which demographics, community college experiences and post-transfer experiences are collected; it has both quantitative and qualitative qualities. It is administered to students post-transfer.

*Native students:* Students who start at the 4-year institution, as opposed to those who transfer in.

*Non-traditional students:* Students who are older than students typically found in college; in this study, over the age of 25 (Zhang, Lui, and Hagedorn, 2013).

*Open-admissions:* College admissions status that requires little or no academic achievement, extra-curricular involvement, or standardized test scores; students with a high school diploma or its equivalency are accepted (Rowh, 2011).

*Persistence:* The idea that students continuing to enroll quarter after a quarter or term in order to achieve their educational goals (Tinto, 2015).
STEM: Fields involving Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

Student engagement: Student engagement, according to Marti (2009) is “the extent to which students are actively involved in meaningful educational experiences and activities” (p. 3)

Student transfer: The idea of students transferring from one institution of higher education to another, referred to in this study as from community college to a baccalaureate institution, although in other instances this is reversed, or between the type of same degree-granting institutions. Some students complete an associate degree prior to transfer, and others transfer credits prior to earning such a degree.

Transfer: To move completed coursework credits from one institution to another (Snyder, 2012). There are many types of enrollment patterns (Simone, 2014).

Transfer credit: A credit transferred from one institution to one other than where it is earned. The new institution accepts it, often not before meeting certain criteria, such as a minimal grade (Snyder, 2012).

Transfer student capital: The term denotes necessary knowledge and skills community college students acquire to navigate through the transfer process (Laanan et al., 2010)

Valleyview Community College: Pseudonym given to public technical college serving as research site for this study.

Theoretical Framework

A guiding framework both informs and influences the purpose and question of the research (Butin, 2010). The theoretical framework presents the theories used to inform the selection of the interview schedule (Creswell, 2013). The Transfer Student Capital Theory (Laanan, 2006) maintains that students need to acquire knowledge and skills that will assist them in navigating transfer from one institute of higher education to another. Additionally, Laanan
(1996) found that the transfer to a new environment means that, for at least some students, they are not prepared socially and psychologically and thus need specific services to best support successful transfer. This study was concerned with student transfer from a community college to a baccalaureate institution, and student experiences post-transfer leading to earning a baccalaureate degree. This theory informed both literature and data collected in this study; it described institutional factors and individual characteristics that supported successful student transfer leading to earning a bachelor’s degree. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, exploring the lived experiences of transfer students, enabled this study to describe identified factors and characteristics contributing to successful transfer experiences. Therefore, Transfer Student Capital was a relevant lens through which to view the literature and data collected in this study.

**Transfer Student Capital**

Transfer student capital is a form of capital, coined by Laanan (2006), and involves community college students developing the cumulative knowledge and skills needed to proceed through the process of transferring institutions (Moser, 2012); it includes academic counseling experiences, faculty and staff mentoring and validation, financial mediators, as well as student coping styles, perceptions of transfer process, learning and study skills, and motivation. Transfer student capital also addresses social adjustment as being important, and depends on social involvement on campus (Laanan, 2007). Transfer student capital begins developing at the community college, and as students progress through the higher education pathway, experiences and tools are both developed and utilized to assist them in transitioning between institutions.

Transfer shock, a temporary drop in grades during the first or second semester post-transfer (Laanan, 1996), only measures academic struggle or success as evidenced by GPA.
“Transfer shock” was first coined by Hill (1965) in his analysis of junior college transfer students. While recognizing an adjustment to a new environment can be complex and difficult, “transfer shock” is limited in its indication of adjustment and in its explanation of the transfer student experience. Laanan sees the phenomenon as larger than transfer shock, proposing that is more about the skill and knowledge to adjust to the new culture than it is to be temporarily offset by the change (F.S. Laanan, personal communication, September 9, 2013). Transfer Student Capital theory examines student transfer more comprehensively, considering the social, psychological and more complex academic aspects of transfer. As transfer shock is not an accurate indicator of transfer success, as it is measured only by a drop in GPA to indicate academic adjustment; Laanan’s L-TSQ considers the psychosocial experience (Laanan, 2004).

Laanan (2004) developed the L-TSQ, the Laanan-Transfer Students' Questionnaire, a research instrument by which demographics, community college experiences and post-transfer experiences could be collected. The 133-question on-line survey is mainly quantitative data, although has been used in a format where it qualitative-orientated questions are also asked. This instrument allows researchers to look beyond the “transfer shock” concept and collect data about the complex transfer phenomenon. Laanan developed it to have a multi-dimensional perspective beyond academics (F.S. Laanan, personal communication, September 9, 2013). The L-TSQ, developed from prior study instruments and related studies, measures attitudes, values, and interests of transfer students, and includes both Likert-type scales of levels of agreement, self-ratings and levels of involvement with activities. It has been found to be both reliable and valid (Laanan, 2004). This study is both a product of, and an influence on, Laanan’s theory (F.S. Laanan, personal communication, September 9, 2013).
Both Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement (1984) and Pace’s Quality of Effort (1980, 1984) influenced Laanan’s theory, as they view student involvement and effort (both social and academic) as being significantly influential on successful student adjustment. Astin’s (1984) theory maintains that a student’s involvement contributes to one’s own educational experience and was not concerned with psychological factors. The Transfer Student Capital theory was informed by Astin’s theory, as it shows social and academic involvement at both institutions increases the likelihood of a successful adjustment (Laanan, 2004). Pace’s (1980, 1984) theory presents the process of education is as important as the outcome (Laanan, 2004), and is an equal return to the time and effort invested into one’s education. According to Pace, student success is based on more than what an institution does, but also on the effort a student puts in (Laanan, 2004). Also influencing Laanan’s theory was Oberg’s (1960) “sojourner experience” theory (F.S. Laanan, personal communication, September 9, 2013). Oberg (1960) related this as culture shock in the need to adjust to a foreign, or new, environment. Each of these theories gave Laanan a foundation on which to base his Transfer Student Capital theory.

Laanan (2004) developed his theory to create a profile of the transfer student and also to be of use to both administrators in higher education as well as researchers. Important to this study was the understanding and confirmation of transfer student experiences, and the factors that contributed to transfer student success; these aspects of student transfer have informed Transfer Student Capital and thus the lens of this study.

Transfer students have an adjustment process involving academic, social and psychological aspects (Laanan, 2001). According to Laanan, Starobin, and Eggleston (2010), transfer student capital specifies the process in which community college students accumulate information and awareness needed to navigate the transfer process. This includes understanding
credit-transfer agreements between colleges, grade requirements for admissions into a desired major, and course prerequisites. As per Laanan (2007), the more transfer student capital a student possess, the more likely one is to transfer successfully. Critical in student transfer capital is proactivity of students both pre-and post-transfer in both learning and experiences, thus having autonomy and independence to traverse the complexities of educational institutions and their structures; this is a skill and knowledge necessary for students to learn and to master (Laanan & Starobin, 2004). Thus using Transfer Student Capital theory as a lens to identify and to support the factors known to contribute to the success of students transferring from one institution to another was an essential and important perspective.

Examples of Transfer Student Capital

<table>
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<tr>
<th>PRIMARY COMPONENT of Transfer Student Capital</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Academic Counseling/Advising                | • Specific transfer orientation  
• Relevant, accurate information available and accessible  
  • Appropriate coursework  
  • Credit transfer  
  • Degree requirements  
  • Admissions and transfer process  
• Knowledge of resources  |
| Perceptions of the Transfer Process          | • General attitudes & perceptions of university  
• Overall satisfaction with institutions  
• Sense of belonging  
• Adjustment process  
• Stigma as a transfer students  
• Perceptions of faculty prior to transfer  
• Actions and experiences at new institution  |
| Experiences with Faculty                    | • Perceptions of faculty availability and approachability  
• Interactions with faculty  
• Interacting with baccalaureate institution’s faculty prior to transfer  
• Meeting with faculty outside of class  |
| Learning and Study Skills                   | • Time spent studying  
• Doing homework  
• Effort made after transfer  |
Limitations of Theory

As the theory is relatively new, very few direct critiques of, or challenges to, the theory can be found. There were, however, some limitations to the theory. These limitations included those to the survey instrument itself that informed the theory, the aspects of the phenomenon the theory does not explore, and its basis on student perception rather than factual data.

The L-TSQ, of which the theory is largely based, has some limitations. Moser (2012), while acknowledging it is useful, valid, and reliable, did expand it in her study. According to Moser (2012), these modifications utilized current research on transfer student success, including various enrollment patterns, diverse student demographics, and outcomes of socio-emotional affects, resulting in an even more comprehensive view of the transition processes of student transfer. Sacksteder LaClair (2010) also modified the L-TSQ to study the reflections of transfer students from a pre-transfer perspective. Laanan himself revised the L-TSQ to include some open-ended questions, asking such questions as to what the respondent would recommend to other transfer students (Laanan, 2004). Additionally, the questionnaire itself was initially pilot tested on a small scale and then field tested in 1994 at a large urban university within the California State system (Lanaan, 2004), a system known for the ease of credit transfer between its community colleges and universities. Bahr et al (2013) acknowledge that the L-TSQ is not comprehensive, recommending a fuller perspective by adding the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Bahr et al (2012) qualitative portion of the mixed-methods research conducted with university transfer students. While its reliability and validity are not in question, it was noted that it was tested within part of a large system with renowned ease of transfer.
between institutions with articulation agreements and other successful mechanisms. In addition, it might be useful to reexamine the instrument in today’s community college transfer systems.

Furthermore, the theory does not fully explain the complex issue of student transfer. Laanan (1999) himself suggests a need for more qualitative and longitudinal research for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Bahr et al. (2013) caution that a perception-based study or theory on student transfer does not fully address the academic aspects of integration, and proposes that academic performance is essential to completing a degree. This theory does not take into consideration if a student takes advantage of community college services, such as advising, thus it cannot be accurately considered if a student receives correct or incorrect information, but whether they receive it at all (Rosenberg, 2015). Additionally, Laanan views the phenomenon as, “all about” transition success from one institution to the next (F.S. Laanan, personal communication, September 9, 2013), and does not directly address other factors such as student abilities and motivation, or institutional factors including structure, policies and services. The theory, however, does address the student experiences of such institutional aspects, indicating the impact of such factors.

Other theories contribute further explanation to the phenomenon of student transfer. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986) developed the concept of social capital involving networks of resources. One form of social capital is informational social networks (Coleman, 1988), including connections with peers, faculty, staff and administrators who can provide support and information to transfer students (Bensimon, 2007). Another relevant theory, Tinto’s (1993) Model of Institutional Departure, explains that numerous reasons account for why students leave (depart) an institution and, within these, factors institutions might employ to
counteract them. Tinto’s model shows that both social and academic integration, and a sense of belonging, are critical to retaining students in their pursuit of a degree (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). Tinto’s work was originally based on persistence theory, examining reasons students stay and persist in school. However, Transfer Student Capital provided a framework of clear, identifiable factors influencing transfer student success, and guided an alignment with the lived experiences of participants in this study.

Rationale

Community colleges’ open access enrollment and lower costs compared to 4-year institutions are factors critical to the role of community college in higher education. Other factors influencing the role of community colleges include the significant number of those who enroll -- minority, lower-socioeconomic, and first-generation students (those whose parents do not have a college degree). Those enrolled in community college have a variety of higher education goals, many ultimately desiring to earn a degree from a 4-year institution (Handel, 2014). This coupled with community colleges enrollment of a significant portion of these otherwise underserved students, makes imperative the recognition of community college students as least likely to have the information they need to transition between institutions; thus it is up to the community college and the baccalaureate institutions to provide to students the indispensable capital they need yet lack (Handel, 2011). Laanan (2007) declared the transfer function of community college as vital to providing access to higher education for many.

To help students navigate the transfer process, it was essential to identify effective institutional practices and policies in relation to student transfer, as well as the characteristics and experiences students might lack that contributed to an effective and successful transfer. Dika (2012) concurs with Handel (2011) that connections and relationships with faculty and staff are
critical for these most vulnerable student populations. Ellis (2013) found that transfer students viewed the most helpful information as coming from peers, faculty, staff, and on-line. While the theory does not directly address or correlate institutional practices and policies, it does measure student perceptions and responses to institutional factors, making it relevant to this study.

Laanan’s work has been utilized in other studies as a guiding framework. Miller’s (2013) quantitative student explored community college student transfer intentions at Texas universities. Sacksteder LaClair’s (2010) modification of the L-TSQ, the Mann Adoptive Survey, utilized both Laanan’s instrument and findings to further inform the understanding of community college transfer students. O’Brien’s (2011) mixed methods study of the informal networks of community college transfer students utilized Laanan’s work in its review of the literature. Tengrove’s (2014) quantitative study adapted the L-TSQ instrument and utilized Laanan’s work extensively in exploring community college transfer students’ experiences and the services they received at one university. Rosenberg’s (2015) quantitative study exploring the variation in age cohorts on the capital of community college transfer students utilized the Transfer Student Capital theory as its theoretical framework. Using the Transfer Student Capital theory as a framework in this study further added to the growing knowledge of transferring from a community college to a baccalaureate institution, and with that, more success in supporting such endeavors.

Laanan (2004) acknowledges there is often a shock with having to socially and psychologically adjust to new opportunities, new people, new academic experiences and expectations, and new personal and social demands. However, Laanan’s L-TSQ gives data for more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. His Transfer Student Capital theory provides not only a better explanation of transfer student than comparing GPAs, but it also gives policy and decision makers concrete ways to best support community college transfer students.
Therefore, utilizing a lens by which to consider the student capital needed, and the ways it could be provided, was particularly relevant to the understanding of student transfer from community colleges to baccalaureate institutions; these skills and information are critical to student success in navigating the pipeline. Furthermore, employing a lens that seeks the higher institutions’ environment as experienced by students that had supported their successful adjustments guided both the exploration of the phenomenon of this study and informed the subsequent results of the study. It was appropriate to the study to use a theoretical framework to guide the study that described student and institutional factors that impacted successful student transfer. In alignment with the purpose and the methodology of this study, Transfer Student Capital as the theoretical framework was relevant as it emphasized the critical role of the student regarding their success upon transfer (Laanan, 2007). The Transfer Student Capital (Laanan, 2007) theory formed the theoretical framework in the study.

**Application of Theory to Study**

This study’s theoretical framework was based on the Transfer Student Capital theory, which explains individual characteristics and environmental influences affecting transfer student success. Examining the complex and timely phenomenon of students transferring from community college to 4-year institutions to earn a bachelor’s degree was appropriate through the lens of Transfer Student Capital (Laanan, 2007). Laanan posits the more capital accumulated, the more likely a transfer student is to be successful, as it is not what about a student or institution is lacking but instead about the different forms of knowledge they have accumulated (F.S. Laanan, personal communication, September 9, 2013). In order to understand the student transfer phenomenon, looking beyond statistics and exploring what it is students experience post-transfer is necessary (Laanan & Starobin, 2004). Employing Transfer Student Capital theory as a
framework gave guidance and structure into the information sought and how it was gathered in an effort to better understand the phenomenon of student transfer. The theoretical framework guided and informed this study about institutional practices and student experiences known to support transfer student success. The participants’ experiences were framed in this theory of Transfer Student Capital by aligning results of the study with factors comprising the theory. Overall, this framework assisted in the awareness of other factors as they were found. In addition, it guided the study by seeking answers to the research question and in efforts to address the problem of practice.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented the setting for the phenomenological study, including its justification and context. It also provided a definition of terms. Additionally, the theoretical framework utilized was presented, with its limitations and rationale also explored. The next chapter will provide a review of the relevant literature available. This will give a background to align research that is available, as well as credence to this study’s need and focus.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis is to provide a deeper understanding of how community college students navigate the transfer process and successfully complete a bachelor’s degree. Specifically this study looked at factors supporting Transfer Student Capital, such as academic counseling experiences, relationships with faculty and staff mentoring and validation, financial mediators, as well as student coping styles, perceptions of transfer process, learning and study skills, and motivation. The following research question guided and informed this study:

- How do community college transfer students navigate successful completion of a baccalaureate degree?

This study encompassed interconnected bodies of literature, particularly the current need for post-secondary education, the role of the community college, and the student transfer pipeline to the baccalaureate institution. The theoretical framework, Transfer Student Capital, presented in the previous chapter, guided the selection, organization, and structure for the review of relevant materials.

This literature review presents the significant role of community colleges within the higher education pathway. This includes the current trend in “college for all” expectations and in the financial aspect of profound increases in the cost of college; both factors currently influence the need for students to utilize the community college as a 4-year institution pathway. Also presented are the institutional factors found along the pathway from community college to the baccalaureate degree. These include information and support available to students in both institutions as well as relationships between institutions, and the lack of, or limited, literature available focusing on post-transfer experiences. The chapter concludes with areas needing further study, including the increase in students utilizing this college transfer pathway; the
variety of nuances, such as private institutions; the experiences of non-traditional students; the lack of qualitative study on faculty and staff perspectives regarding student transfer; and the study of baccalaureate institutions transfer practices and policies.

The literature regarding community colleges, current trends, and issues in higher education, as well as student pathways was readily available. However, the literature examining the post-transfer, from community college to 4-year institution, was less extensive. Based on the available literature, it was evident that transferring from a community college to a baccalaureate institution plays an integral role in our education system. Additionally, because the 2- to 4-year institution transfer pathway is “complex,” a large portion of students attempting it are unsuccessful (Goyette, 2008). Currently, community colleges provide education to a substantial proportion of those claiming the goal of a baccalaureate degree; however, the numbers prove that a large portion of these students are not successful in completion of the pathway. With over 6,710,000 students currently enrolled in community colleges (Kena et al., 2016) and 81% with intentions to transfer, it is alarming that only 33% will transfer and, of those, just 42% will earn a bachelor’s degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2016).

This extensive exploration of the literature will provide evidence of the critical need of research on post-transfer from the community college to the baccalaureate institution. In an effort to improve the success of transfer college students in obtaining baccalaureate degrees, to influence practices of institutions, and to guide local, state and federal policies to support the transfer pathway this study and more like it is needed.

**Sources of Literature**

The literature review was conducted primarily via internet and database searches. The databases included Chronicle of Higher Education Online, Education Journals (ProQuest),
Academics OneFile, Educator’s Reference Complete, ERIC, JSTOR, LexisNexis Academic, SpringLink Journals, EBSCO, Scholar OneSearch, and Wiley Online Library. Additionally, in locating literature, libraries at Northeastern University, Johnson State College, Lyndon State College, Castleton University, and Vermont Technical College were consulted. Keywords used in these searches included “transfer students,” “community college,” “university faculty and transfer students,” “college transfer,” “college for all,” “higher education bubble,” and “college pipeline.”

**Attending College**

Today’s societal expectations in the United States infer that a college education is critical for all youth. These expectations include college graduates contributing to the country’s economic and technological success, and the necessity for the individual’s socioeconomic success; the latter is particularly critical for those most likely to attend community college: the poor and minorities (Goyette, 2008; Handel, 2013). President Obama has agreed that all should attend college, both for individual well-being as for the nation’s global competitiveness (Martinez, 2011).

**College for All**

The norm for all to seek a baccalaureate degree has also changed over time as more parents themselves having earned degrees and expect the same for their children, and because occupational fields themselves have increased educational expectations (Goyette, 2008). Carnevale, Cheah, and Strohl, (2012) maintain that a baccalaureate degree is essential in order to obtain employment and to receive good earnings. Baum, Ma, and Payea (2013) assert that higher education confers more than financial and societal economic benefits, because the benefits of attaining a college degree have a direct correlation to these adults being more active citizens,
having healthier lifestyles, spending more time with their children, increasing their chances to move up the socioeconomic ladder, and more likelihood of employment.

Tinto maintains that a college degree is an equity issue, calling it an important force influencing “work, leisure, and politics” (Spann & Tinto, 1990, p. 18). Domina, Conley, and Farkas, (2011) found the college-for-all ethos influenced students to motivate student effort, although to a lesser degree for low-achieving students. Wolf (2009), while not agreeing that college will solve the nation’s economic woes, acknowledges that it does increase one’s human capital, resulting in higher earnings as well as important to individual “minds and feeds their souls” (p. 17).

Lee (2012) found that the lack of college readiness for some students, particularly those in minority and low socioeconomic groups, did not support the college-for-all position. Because a high school diploma no longer suffices for the majority of today’s jobs, Kanter (2011) claims that the lack of a well-trained workforce has led to millions of jobs going unfilled each year. President Obama has encouraged all high school graduates to attend at least one year of college (Gewertz, 2011), with the goal of the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020 (Handel, 2013; Kanter, 2011). President Obama has maintained, and promoted policy, supporting the urgent need of “college for all,” the concept that all high school graduates should pursue higher education for both individual prosperity as well as for the nation’s global competitiveness (Crellin, Kelly & Prince, 2012; Gewertz, 2011; Kanter, 2011; Lee, 2012; Martinez, 2011). Vermont’s Governor Shumlin, recently addressing high school students, described the need for post-secondary education and the current trend, stating, “What is changed since then, and I'm not that old . . . the more training you get beyond high school, the better
chance you're going to have of making a good living for you and your family if you choose to have one” (Carson, 2015).

It seems that neither all individuals nor state economies benefit from having more college graduates (Crellin, Kelly, & Prince, 2012). However, with the standard of “college for all,” students who are ill-prepared, weakly motivated, and unlikely to succeed in college are still encouraged to attend, giving them unrealistic optimism (Alexander, Bozick, Entwisle, 2008). Nevertheless, it has become evident that the route to the lives many seek, college, not high school is necessary (Alexander, Bozick, Entwisle, 2008). If the norm is an expectation for all high school graduates to earn a 4-year degree, more research is indeed necessary to determine both whether or not, and how, these expectations are realized (Goyette, 2008). Carnevale (2007) maintains that the concept of “college for all” is here to stay as postsecondary education is a necessity in most current career pathways.

The Role of Community College Transfer to Baccalaureate Institution

Today’s society stresses the need for pursuing college degrees. Globalization is changing our economy, and an educated workforce is now essential (Baum & Kurose, 2013; Community College Trends and Statistics, n.d.). The current workplace, and even a societal, expectation that the youth of today pursue a baccalaureate degree, is higher now than ever before, as it provides an educated workforce and contributes to higher individual income (Baum & Kurose, 2013; Bemmel, Floyd & Bryan, 2009; “Fast facts,” n.d.; Carnevale, 2007; Cohen & Laanan, 1997; Eddy, Christie & Rao, 2006; Gilroy, 2005; Gross & Goldhaber, 2009b; Handel, 2013; Tinto, 1993; Reindl, 2005). Carnevale, Cheah & Strohl (2012) maintain that in seeking desired employment and wages, a Bachelor’s degree is essential. Furthermore, those most disadvantaged for this new societal and workforce expectation of college—minorities, low-income, and first-
generation students—are most likely to enroll in a community college; thus the need for smoother transfer pipelines in order to fill this degree gap are urgent (Handel, 2013; Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013). For individuals, a college degree has a significant role in upward mobility (Wang, 2009); Alexander et al. (2008) go so far as to claim that the route to a “good life” is no longer via high school, but now through college (p. 391).

**Student enrollment patterns.** In pursuit of the college degree, more than one-half of college students attend more than one institution during their college pathway (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Borden (2004) states that college and government decision-makers must acknowledge and accept that linear enrollment is no longer standard, and thus provide accommodating practices and policies to support students. However, patterns of student enrollment can be very difficult to identify (McCormick, 2003) and thus collecting accurate data is complicated. There are several patterns of transfer (Wassmer, Moore, & Shlock, 2004), including transfer from a 2-year to a 4-year institution, having completed the associate’s degree prior. This type of transfer might be part of a transfer agreement whereby the prescribed coursework or degree is guaranteed to be accepted by another, which is an ideal pathway.

Another type of transfer is “reverse transfer,” where one goes from the 4-year to the 2-year institution, often for remediation or financial reasons. “Swirling” attendance is where students attend a number of institutions without a specific pathway (Borden, 2004; Fain, 2012b). Transferring with an associate’s degree is shown to greatly increase the likelihood of going on to complete the bachelor’s degree, as opposed to transferring without a degree (Fain, 2012b; Townsend, 2001; Townsend & Wilson, 2006b).

**Community college enrollment.** With the majority of today’s college students enrolled in a community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012), and eight of ten
of those stating an intention to transfer on to obtain a baccalaureate degree (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Horn & Skomsvold, 2012; Ullman, 2011), transfer is the pathway of higher education for many. However, a low number of those with such a goal are successful, showing an urgent need for further exploration into what goes awry for these students, and what needs to go right within the pathways from community college to baccalaureate institution, and ultimately to a degree.

According to U.S. Department of Education data, in Fall, 2014, there were more than 17 million of students enrolled in college both full- and part-time; of those, over six million were in 2-year public institutions with over 2.6 million enrolled full-time (Kena, et al., 2016). Other current statistics indicate the majority of community college enrollees are female, 39% full-time students, 36% first-generation to attend college, and 48% minority (“Enrollment,” n.d.). Jenkins and Fink (2016) report that while 81% of community college students intend to transfer, 33% actually transfer to a baccalaureate institution within six years of enrolling and, of those, 42% (14% of that cohort of community college students) complete the bachelor’s degree. As Silver (2015) posits, the college pipeline is not just about access and being accepted, it is also about succeeding by ultimately graduating.

As Snyder (2012) and others point out, obtaining a baccalaureate degree by attending—for some portion—a community college is a decision that for some is financially smart or academically wise. Many choose this pathway for a variety of reasons, including financial savings, the need for academic remediation, a desire to remain close to home, or lack of clarity of academic goals. Acknowledging this trend, and its value for community college enrollees, should be further enhanced by understanding what is needed to ensure its effectiveness.
Cost of College

According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.a), the tuition cost of a community college is substantially less than at a 4-year institution. Table 1 shows the average costs of a community college, a public 4-year institution, and a private 4-year institution, with room and board for the baccalaureate institutions also included. In 2014, there were over 17.29 million undergraduate students enrolled in college, of which 10.58 million were enrolled in a 4-year institution, and 6.71 million students in community colleges (Kena, et al., 2016). The American Association of Community Colleges (2012), however, gives slightly varying statistics, stating that 7.3 million students are enrolled in credit-bearing community college courses. With a tuition-only annual savings of $5,588 to attend a community college versus a public 4-year institution, and a tuition-only savings of $23,785 between a community college and a private 4-year institution, it is no wonder many college freshmen are choosing to begin their degree at a community college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community College Tuition</td>
<td>$3,430</td>
<td>$2,995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public 4-year institution</td>
<td>$9,410</td>
<td>$8,543 (plus $10,089 in room &amp; board if applicable)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private 4-year institution</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>$26,740 (plus $11,250 in room &amp; board if applicable)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

With the cost of college increasing exponentially, consumers are choosing less expensive means to the baccalaureate degree, such as via the community college and online learning (Handel, 2013; Vedder, 2004). Sixty-one percent of community college students are enrolled part-time ("Enrollment," n.d.). Doyle (2012) has cautioned against part-time community college
enrollment, often the norm in order to avoid debt, as the success rates in that pattern of enrollment are low. Canché (2014) cautions us that most of those who attend community college, and especially those vulnerable to debt from student loans, will most likely drop out before earning a baccalaureate degree, thus are more inclined to default; this puts them into an even more precarious financial situation while they try to improve their human capital. However, the cheaper tuition of community college also influences an overburdening of teacher workloads as well as the lack of research undertaken by faculty (Vedder, 2004). Additionally, competitive, highly-ranked colleges are apprehensive about accepting transfer students as their quality is often called in to question considering the lack of rigor and research of community college as the sending institution (Ehrenberg, 2000).

Doyle (2012) argues that the idea that college costs and student debt are too high is false; education is a great investment, and one should wonder not whether college is affordable, but instead how can one afford not to attend. Leonhardt (2014) maintains that student debt is not the concern as much as student debt without the completed degree. However, according to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.b), for first-time for full-time degree undergraduates, student federal loan debt increased by 23% in 2013-14, with average loan aid of $7,100, compared to 2005-06.

With student loan debt in the U.S. over $1.2 trillion, and college tuition increasing at three times the rate of inflation, college graduates stand to earn substantially more than those without a degree (Rossi, 2014). Martin and Lehren (2012) concur that while college costs are increasing, a degree is still a good investment, yet caution students and parents to make wise and informed financial decisions. Carnevale, Cheah, and Strohl, (2012) caution students to carefully
consider their major as the prospects of employment and compensation vary greatly in differing careers.

The College Pipeline and Transfer

Statistics indicate that transfer students are less likely to earn their baccalaureate degree than those who are native to the institution, leading many to believe that starting at a community college is a hindrance to completing a baccalaureate degree (Dougherty, 1994; Doyle, 2006, 2012; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). However, the factors of who starts at a community college—mainly low-income, minority, or non-traditional students—might mean one is ill-prepared for the academic rigor of baccalaureate-level work (Baum & Kurose, 2013; Dougherty, 1994).

Dougherty (1994) calls this phenomenon “cruel” because it is misleading to the underserved community college students intending to earn a bachelor’s degree; he maintains that it must be determined how attending a community college is hindering attainment of the desired degree. There are many factors acting as barriers in the college pipeline from community college to the baccalaureate institution, including the lack of social and academic integration in community colleges, less contact with faculty, and a lack of extra-curricular activities and on-campus housing (Dougherty, 1994). These factors put non-native students at a disadvantage upon transfer.

Other potential factors that could decrease the likelihood of transferring from community college to the 4-year institution include a diminishing of the desire, or lack of encouragement of the desire to transfer, the lack of financial aid for transfer students, and the denial of admission (Dougherty, 1994). Some studies also view community college education as a means for many underprivileged (such as those from minority or low socioeconomic backgrounds), who otherwise would not be attending college; thus, they promote facilitating structures to make
transfers successful critical for individuals and for society (Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Wang, 2009, 2012).

Monaghan and Attewell (2014) maintain that the primary reason community college transfer students do not complete a baccalaureate degree is their lack of credits transferring from one institution to another, attributing the failure to complete the degree to the increased cost and time needed to retake courses, and the frustration that results. According to Monaghan and Attewell (2014), only 58% of transfer students have all or almost all of their community college credits accepted by the baccalaureate institution, with 14% losing more than 90% of community college credits. Doyle (2006) also found that the failure of credits transferring was a large factor for students not completing their intended bachelor’s degree: 82% of those whose community college credits all transferred graduated with a bachelor’s degree in comparable time as native students, and only 42% of students who had only some of their community college credits transferred attained a bachelor’s degree (p. 58). Acknowledging that many factors impact whether students succeed at transferring credits between institutions, including academic performance and agreements between institutions, recent U.S. Department of Education data shows that 32% of transfer students transferred all credits previously earned, 39% transferred no credits, 28% transferred some credits, and an average of 23 credits were lost in transfer between institutions (Simone, 2014).

The issue of credit transfer, which is not within a student’s control and is solely based on institutional practice and policy, is one that must be seriously considered by institutional and government decision-makers to make college student transfer pathways successful (Doyle, 2006). Tinto (1993), advocates rectifying the barriers involved in articulation of credit transfer.
Handel (2011) stresses the need for clear transfer policies in order to support success in the student transfer pathway to a baccalaureate.

Additionally, the open-door admission policies of community college contribute to the lack of success of community college students, as these students tend to be unprepared academically and are less-motivated as college students, thus leading to lower expectations of community college faculty, which in turn leaves students ill-prepared for the baccalaureate institution (Dougherty, 1994). Community college’s admissions criteria is generally “open access,” where all that is required is a high school diploma; students do not have to take the SATs or ACTs, generally do not need an essay or reference letters, and unlike baccalaureate institutions, academic achievements such as GPA or high school course rigor are not considered (Rowh, 2011).

It is important to keep in mind that many students enroll in community college without an intention to transfer, as they are seeking workforce training, certification or an Associate’s degree (Dougherty, 1994). David Silver (2015), CEO of CollegeTrack stated it is critical to remove barriers at every level of education in order for students to achieve success in earning a baccalaureate; these barriers include not just the financial and personal, but knowledge about the process of how to proceed in the educational pipeline as well. Throughout transitions in the educational pipeline support is essential, particularly at the key transition points, including starting at the community college with an intent to transfer, during preparations to transfer, and post-transfer (Silver, 2015). Because of the expectations and the need to significantly increase the number of those with baccalaureate degrees, it is urgent we remove barriers within the transfer pipeline, and make smoother transfer pathways (Handel, 2013).
Institutional Factors

A review of the literature showed several institutional factors that influence student retention and support transfer student success. These include faculty/staff and student interactions, including advising; practices, such as availability of relevant information; inter-institutional collaboration; and college culture factors. According to Tinto (1993), the entire college community is responsible for supporting efforts that reduce student departure.

In his book exploring the current malaise of our country’s educational system and what needs to happen to transform it into success, Christensen (2011) identifies several factors behind this massive failure of our current schooling mechanisms. As part of our educational system, higher education must certainly take note of Christensen’s exploration of the need for massive transformation of education and how it is delivered, and heed his suggestions. One such necessity is often related to changing organizational structures, enabling institutions to best solve problems. Other findings in many research studies, of which several are cited here, were consistent in showing that numerous institutional factors have an essential positive impact on students transferring from a community college to a 4-year institution and ultimately earning a baccalaureate; for example, collaboration between institutions, articulation agreements that specify credit transfer, accessible information systems, and specific programs for transfer students. Several factors presented in Transfer Student Capital involve institutional practices that influence and impact student persistence post-transfer. These factors include active learning in the classroom, orientation programs specific to transfer students, and quality and informed advising, and were readily presented in the literature.
Institutional Practices

Several studies in the literature concerned institutional practices impacting student transfer success. Among these were availability of relevant information, faculty factors, collaboration between institutions, and common course numbering between institutions. Braxton and Mundy (2001) state that institutional practices must be designed in ways that reduce student departure and support students through the pipeline through degree completion. Handel (2011) addresses the changing of institutions mid-college pathway as a transition necessitating reintegration as a new culture must be learned, stating it is sometimes a “radical” change. Thus, according to Handel (2011), the baccalaureate institution must have a culture that supports transfer students, including appropriate housing and social options, support for academic adjustment, and specific transfer orientation.

Several practices involve the relaying to management of curricular information. De la Torre (2007), Gilroy (2005), and Hagedorn et al. (2006) advocate for online information being readily available, such as on transferable courses, and found that ease of accessing information was instrumental for students to make informed decisions that contribute to successful transfer pathways. Ellis (2013) found that students extensively depended on the institution’s website for information, and that they had identified the post-transfer institution’s website as the most helpful. They noted, however, that it tended not to be updated, and needed more user-friendly mechanisms, and transfer information, such as about articulation agreements. Ellis (2013) implored institutions to respond to the heavy use of college websites for information, by making available and accessible online, current, accurate, and timely information.

Another institutional, and systemic, practice that contributes to successful transfer success is common course numbering (de la Torre, 2007; Gilroy, 2005; Soliz, 2015). Common
course numbering, or alignment, is generally found in public institutions; community colleges and 4-year institutions within a state system use the same course numbering for comparable courses, thereby increasing the likelihood that the post-transfer institution will recognize the course as an equivalent and thus accept the transfer credits. Handel (2011) advocated aligned curriculum between institutions as well as clear transfer policies. According to some studies (Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Falconetti, 2009; Handel, 2013; Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Kisker, 2007), providing students a more cohesive and seamless alignment of curriculum as well as readily available information would significantly support student transfer.

**Faculty and Staff**

Faculty and staff play an essential role in supporting and informing transfer students. The literature shows that having transfer-knowledgeable and accessible faculty and staff lends itself to more informed and supported students. Eagan and Jaeger (2009) found that part-time community college faculty, which is the norm in community college, limits student-faculty connections both inside and outside of the classroom, as these are integral to transfer success, thus supporting the minimal use of part-time community college faculty. Ellis (2013) urged training about transfer information of faculty and staff at both types of institutions so that everyone disseminated cohesive and accurate information. Kisker (2007) found that faculty is essential to transfer as they are often the means of both formal and informal information for students, and partnerships between institutions help to create a culture of transfer at the community college. Kisker (2007) not only urges collaborative work, but suggests extending the partnerships to high schools so that transitions from the high school through a bachelor’s degree are seamless. Findings such as these point to necessary change in practice for institutions and policy-makers, and warrant further study and understanding for effective practices. This review
of the available literature also showed that faculty advising was also an institutional factor impacting transfer student success; faculty advising is presented in the next section.

In order to navigate and succeed in the higher education environment, student-faculty interactions not only provide socialization of academic values and know-how, they also form a conduit for institutional information and resources (Dika, 2012; Kujawa, 2013; Laanan, 2007). In other words, transfer students enter the baccalaureate institution needing information, support, and particular services or conditions in order to best support them to earn the desired degree. By identifying the student capital—conditions created or supported by relationships—this current study will obtain a clearer picture of what transfer students need in order to succeed, and how the institution can best meet those needs.

Dika (2012) further describes student connections with faculty and staff as the chief means of providing access to the knowledge and resources in the institution which support students in meeting their educational goals. This position is also supported by Silver’s work (2015), which maintains that know-how within the education pipeline process is critical to successful accomplishment of degree goals.

In considering the Transfer Student Capital theory, it is essential to explore those aspects that relate to student relationships and connections to faculty and staff. For example, Eagan and Jaeger (2009) explored the impact of part-time faculty—an increasingly common practice, especially in the community college—on student transfer and found a negative correlation due to the lack of availability and access to relevant information, in turn because of the notable institutional disconnect from part-time faculty. Thus it is important for an institution to consider the significant use of part-time faculty in best meeting the needs of transfer students.
College and university employees play many roles and hold various relationships in supporting transfer students, including involvement in structures and processes. Such processes include those relating to course credit transfer; structures include those relating to services provided specifically to transfer students and to staff in positions who are identified and available to meet unique needs of transfer students. These kinds of structures and processes are useful resources for transfer students (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

**Faculty Advisement of Students**

Several findings in the literature stressed the importance of faculty advising in transfer student success. Hagedorn, Cypers, and Lester (2008) found proper advising to be critical to transfer student success. Braxton and Mundy (2001), and Tinto (1993), assert that advisement is critical to student retention, and further advocate proper training for advisors in order to provide quality advisement. Gilroy (2005) posits subpar advisement, with too little or poor information, as a top reason behind the failure in the student transfer pipeline. Ellis (2013) found that at both the community college and the baccalaureate levels, students reported advisors as unhelpful, providing inaccurate information, and even “rude.” While pre-transfer students needed extensive advisement on issues relating to successful transfer, including transfer options and correct choices of transferrable courses, post-transfer students needed advisement as personalized support in navigating the new institution (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2013).

Allen, Smith, and Muehleck (2013) also found that student have differing needs for advisement pre- and posts-transfer, and maintained that students have less satisfaction with advisement post-transfer than they did pre-transfer, because they felt advisement was less personalized. Freeman, Conley and Brooks (2006), as well as Hagedorn, Moon, Cypers, Maxwell, and Lester (2006) found advisement important, but noted that non-traditional and at-
risk students, in particular, must have specialized support services in order to facilitate successful transfer.

Silver (2015) advocates for “intrusive advising” as a means to provide necessary academic, financial aid, and transfer information to community college students. Silver describes intrusive advising as involving contact by a number of means, including in person, via email, and by telephone, particularly at critical times in semesters, including registration time and exams.

**Student Affairs**

Critical examination of the experiences of transfer students throughout their college pipeline must include factors around student affairs in the post-transfer institution. Laanan (1996) urged administrators and those working in student affairs to prioritize efforts that support, encourage, and assist students in the transfer pipeline as they transition into the organizational complexities of a new institution. The literature presented several aspects of student affairs that impact transfer students.

Brazton and Mundy (2001) stress the importance of students having a role in campus decision-making, including sitting on committees and having a voice in student affairs, as a means by which to support student retention. Deil-Amen (2011) stresses the importance of making connections with other students and faculty outside of the classroom, especially for commuters, and managing daily life both in and out of college as essential to community college student success. Ashar and Skenes (1993) also maintain that non-traditional students have different learning and social needs, and benefit from small classes, and social integration within the classroom environment, because their social connections fall mostly outside of the school environment.
Studies in the literature also supported orientation programs specifically for transfer students (Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Handel, 2011; Laanan & Starobin, 2004; Laanan, 2007; Miller, 2013; Tinto, 1993). From the beginning of a student’s experience orientation programs contribute to a sense of belonging, which is critical to student persistence (Tinto, 2015). Ellis (2013) found that students found orientation programs specifically for transfer students more helpful than those for in-coming students overall. Tinto (1998) advocated for extending orientation programs for transfer students beyond those offered to freshmen.

Collaborations Between Institutions

The literature also notes that collaboration between institutions is essential to support student transfer success. Several studies indicate the importance of partnerships between community colleges and baccalaureate institutions (Alfonso, 2006; Ellis, 2013; Freeman, Conley, & Brooks, 2006; Handel, 2011; Marling, Herrera & Jain, 2013; Miller, 2013; Silver, 2015; Wang, 2009). Laanan (1996) advocates for linkages between the institutions that will directly impact students, such as visits to the post-transfer institution while still enrolled at the community college, and mechanisms that connect students with relevant contacts at the future institution. Handel (2011) found that the main challenge to effective transfer is not academic, but the effects of unproductive transfer mechanisms that connect the institutions.

Institutional Culture

Another institutional consideration is that of its culture. Both Handel (2011) and Marti (2009) posit that community colleges have a different culture than 4-year institutions. According to Handel (2011), if these different and sometimes opposing cultures exist, then student need the precise information and awareness to maneuver through such a gap. Hagedorn et al. (2006) found that community college students lack culture capital involving knowledge of navigating
the institutional environment that those native to the baccalaureate institution possess. These studies, related to institutional practices and culture, are relevant to transfer student capital theory because they impact student access to critical information linked to transfer student success. Thus, to examine the differing sources of student capital, both via literature and in this study’s data, enables a more comprehensive understanding of factors which support student success.

**Post-Transfer Experiences**

Very few studies focused on post-transfer experiences of students (Lester, Brown Leonard, & Mathias, 2013). Laanan’s (2007) findings, however, stress that students must learn to navigate the 4-year institution environments; furthermore, once a student transfers, her involvement is important to her social adjustment. Laanan (2007) found that the decisions and actions of a student post-transfer will either negatively or positively impact how he or she adjusts. Similarly, Flaga (2006) found that making connections prior to transfer, transfer course equivalency information, and living on campus and student involvement, are all essential to successful transfer from community college to a 4-year institution. Handel (2011) also found that specific student services, including appropriate campus housing, have an impact on the post-transfer student.

Wilson (2006a) found that transferring to a larger institution from a community college is likely to be the source of many transfer student difficulties. In that study, almost all participants experienced social integration difficulties, although fewer had academic struggles. Tinto (1993) defines social integration as participating in a college’s social events and co-curricular sports or events. According to Pappano (2006), many transfer students struggle socially and emotionally in the new environment. Laanan et al. (2010) found some transfer students experienced stigma, and while it had a negative impact on academic adjustment, it is unclear if it impacts
performance or graduation. Townsend and Wilson (2009) further found that students who lived off campus, post-transfer, struggled with social integration, mainly because of time constraints with work obligations; academic integration, however, mattered more in supporting students to earn the degree. Thus, while native freshmen starting at a 4-year institution might find social integration as essential to persisting in college, community college transfer students bring to the baccalaureate institution different experiences from the community college, such as a lack of social activities there; thus, they have different needs in terms of whether they persist in earning their degree than do native students.

**Student Engagement**

Student engagement, defined by Marti (2009) as being actively involved in experiences and activities in the educational realm, has been shown in extensive research to have direct links to desired outcomes, including student persistence and graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Student engagement is seen in both social and academic realms, with social engagement supported by the likes of student involvement and interacting with diverse social groups, and academic engagement occurring through learning communities, co-hort experiences, relevant curriculum, and cooperative learning activities (Tinto, 2015). Tinto (1993) finds that the more satisfying the academic and social integration, the more likely one will persist to degree completion. This demonstrates even more critical importance for institutions to support policies and practices found to lead to academic and social integration.

Lester et al. (2013) found that community college students experienced college engagement differently than do students who begin at the baccalaureate institution, as they tend to depend on classroom engagement to provide a sense of belonging, and are less focused on
social engagement. Tinto (2015) posits that a sense of belonging, developed from the perception and meaning from engagement itself, is even more important than engagement.

Flynn (2013) defines academic engagement as interacting with faculty and advisors outside of class, participating in study groups, and meeting academic challenges. Social engagement for post-transfer students tends to come from their personal lives, not educational life, according to Lester et al. (2013), with challenging academics, collaborative learning, and relationships with faculty as the primary factors in academic engagement for these students. Tinto (1993), and Braxton and Mundy (2001) assert that active learning strategies in classrooms, including cooperative, experiential, and problem-based learning, are critical to student retention. Kujawa (2013) maintains that faculty influences whether or not students stay in college, stressing the importance for active engagement in the classroom, having supportive and encouraging relationships with students, and providing information on college transfer, as well as on long-term career planning; all of these are critical to college students, pre- and post-transfer. Lester et al. (2013) also maintain faculty influences student success, particularly with high-quality teaching strategies and active learning pedagogy, even stating it is more influential than campus activities. Furthermore, Lester et al. (2013) concludes that classroom experiences are paramount to the success of transfer students, whereas native students are more impacted by social engagement.

Flynn (2013) acknowledges that academic and social engagement matter to students in attaining a college degree, and suggests that, should a higher education institution have to make fiscal priorities, it should prioritize financing that supports at least one of the two. Spann and Tinto (1990) urge an integrative and supportive college community is especially important for at-risk students. Furthermore, Lester et al. (2013) also maintain that the demographics of
community college post-transfer students, such as minority, full-time work, family commitments, and non-traditional age, put them at-risk for persistence, and thus meeting the unique needs of transfer students is critical to supporting them in obtaining their college degree.

While some literature findings were more focused on community college experiences, they also have an impact on the post-transfer institution. Both Townsend (1995) and Laanan (2007) found students reporting that the community college had ill-prepared them academically, and that the university academics were of a higher standard; thus, they recommended that community colleges increase focus on writing, research and critical thinking in order to best prepare students. Hagedorn et al. (2008) found that the best predictor of transfer success was a transfer-focused community college with students being equipped to transfer; when such efforts were lacking during pre-transfer, certainly the post-transfer institution would need to provide additional services and resources to compensate.

This review of the literature supports the idea that more research is needed to fully understand successful student transfer that leads to a baccalaureate degree. While many of the studies produced interrelated and complimentary results, most of them had limitations, such as a focus on a particular type of site or isolated system, or using data that offered no explanation. But it is clear there are policies, processes, services and actions institutions can adopt to better and effectively support students in their higher education pathways.

**Theoretical Framework in the Literature**

Several aspects of the Student Transfer Capital were found in the review of the literature. Transfer Student Capital, the knowledge and experiences in higher education environments to promote successful post-transfer adjustment, including advisement, relationships with faculty and staff, and knowledge about the transfer process, includes elements featured in the review of
the literature. The literature showed, regarding the issue of attending college—including college for all and the cost of college—stressed that not all students will have the capital (support and resources) to navigate the means of affording college or to continue attending, and moving along the pipeline. However, the literature findings reiterate the importance of an institution offering services, policies, practices, and resources, to have the best network and needed resources.

The search of the literature to topics relating to this theoretical framework was narrowed, including the factors contributing to transfer student capital, such as the college pipeline and transfer, advisement and availability of relevant transfer information, institutional practices supporting academic and social integration, and post-transfer adjustment. Also found were studies using Transfer Student Capital, the knowledge and experience of students in the post-secondary environment that promotes successful adjustment to the post-transfer institution, includes advising and counseling, relationships with faculty and staff, and knowledge about the transfer process. The literature suggests that these factors are essential to the success of students transferring from community college to a baccalaureate institution and ultimately graduating. The literature stressed the importance of pre- and post-transfer advisement, especially regarding transfer issues, with amplified emphasis on transfer student capital for accurate and accessible advisement, particularly pre-transfer. Overall the literature conveyed that the expectation for most to attend college necessitates an increased number of those enrolling in college to utilize the pipeline from community college to the baccalaureate institution, in efforts to earn a baccalaureate degree. This survey of the literature described the influence of many factors that supported and others that hindered students in this process in achieving their educational goals.

In the literature review the theoretical framework perimeters did not include certain factors that influence students. For example, the literature review showed no studies that
explored the role of student academic skills and abilities in college success. Additionally, the review weakly represented what a baccalaureate institution or individual student might do remedially if lacking in the transfer student capital needed. The research, however, provided a solid framework based on the Transfer Student Capital Theory, thus informing the design of the current study’s research methodology. By utilizing this theory in the study’s framework, this study will focus on the exploration of the student transfer phenomenon through identifying and discovering such factors in the experiences of participants.

**Themes**

Themes emerging from the literature review informed the current study’s focus on community-college student transfer to the baccalaureate institution, and subsequently in applying the findings from the literature review to exploring the lived experiences of post-transfer students. Three themes emerged from this literature review: (1) factors of why students are attending college, and how students move through the transfer pipeline; (2) institutional factors impacting transfer students, including advisement, availability of relevant information, and collaboration between institutions; and (3) post-transfer experiences, particularly focused on the social and academic adjustments of students. These distinct themes informed the research methodology and questions, as they indicate important factors in the student transfer phenomenon. Additionally, they provided a foundation and a lens on which to base findings and conclusions of the experiences of the student participants.

**Literature Review Conclusion**

This review of the literature demonstrates that more qualitative data is essential to fully understand the student transfer phenomenon. While the quantitative data shows that student transfer is widely utilized and is not always successful, qualitative would lend itself to deeper
understanding upon gaining explanations. More recent data and research will help to explain the current trends and issues associated with the student transfer pathway to the bachelor’s degree, as well as to examine influences of current practices, such as the advent of the internet. Tinto (1993) advocates further study to provide more explanation and more concrete answers about what needs to happen to successful address student retention. Finally, it is clear that the focus of student transfer research has primarily focused on the community college perspective, and that more research needs to concentrate on the student’s baccalaureate experience and factors that provide smooth sailing or raise barriers. By exploring the baccalaureate phenomenon through a phenomenological design in the current proposed investigation, my aim is to contribute a useful perspective of the baccalaureate institution perspective of the transfer pathway, and factors supporting the success of student perspective in completing their baccalaureate degree after enrolling at a community college.

In this exploration of current research and literature, regarding the phenomenon of student transfer from community college to 4-year institution and ultimately leading to a baccalaureate degree, numerous valuable insights in the literature regarding successful and essential practices were identified. With the current trend in the transfer pathway, the increased demand by the workforce for higher education, and the rising concern about the cost of college, demonstrates the importance of better understanding effective practices that support student success. This expanded review of the research, and a further investigation of the phenomenon, is critical for student success, the country’s workforce, and the missions of higher education institutions.

The review of the literature also contained some contradictions in findings. There were varying findings on which student engagement has the greatest impact on their success: social
engagement (Laanan, 2007) or academic engagement (Lester et al., 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2009), with Flaga (2009) determining that they both matter. This three-part contradiction indicates transfer student engagement as a complex issue with varying influence.

Another contradiction involves statistics; while many sources indicate transfer students have a lower graduation rate than do natives (Dougherty, 1994; Doyle, 2006, 2012; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014), Nutting (2011) found that, taking in to account all other factors, transfer students have the same rate of baccalaureate graduation as do native students. Monaghan and Attewell (2014) found the graduation rates between natives and transfer students to be similar, and maintain that they would be more comparable if only more community college credits were transferred. Nutting’s (2011) assertion contradicts the premise of my proposed study; is a limited finding. These minor contradictions found in the literature point to other studies that might have opposing views, although not necessarily invalid, considering the influence of varying factors.

Much of the current literature utilizes quantitative data, offering little explanation of the student transfer phenomenon. Additionally, the data available focuses mainly on community college practices and experiences. Thus, this current study will fill an important gap in its exploration of the post-transfer aspect of the student transfer pathway, utilizing qualitative methodology; the results can contribute to practices and policies that support successful transfer, and provide a better understanding of this current trend of transfer from community college to baccalaureate institutions.

Presented in this chapter were the relevant research literature of my review, focusing on the factors outlined in the theoretical framework. Also show were the numerous institutional practices impact community college transfer students who persist, post-transfer, as well as topics
warranting further study. In the next chapter the research methodology of this study will be presented.
Chapter Three: Research Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis was to provide a deeper understanding of how community college students navigated the transfer process and successfully completed a bachelor’s degree. Specifically this study examined factors supporting Transfer Student Capital, such as academic counseling experiences, relationships with faculty and staff mentoring and validation, financial mediators, as well as student coping styles, perceptions of transfer process, learning and study skills, and motivation. The following research question guided and informed this study:

- How do community college transfer students navigate successful completion of a baccalaureate degree?

The aims of research in this particular doctoral program was to examine a complex problem of practice, generate knowledge from data gathered at the research sites, and provide context and strategies for introducing systemic change to help resolve the problem of practice. This study explored the phenomenon of college student transfer from community college to the baccalaureate institution, identifying factors post-transfer that best support degree completion. Community college transfer students were interviewed; interview questions sought to gain an understanding of their experiences as transfer students and asked participants to identify factors or characteristics that contributed to successful transfer and earning the baccalaureate degree, as well as the contributing institutional factors that facilitated or hindered this pathway. As it provided a better understanding of the needs and experiences of students transferring from community college to 4-year institutions, this research study could contribute to improved strategies, practices, and policies of institutions and policy-makers.

In this chapter the research methodology used in this study will be explained. Also explained will be the research paradigm, the nature of qualitative phenomenological research,
and the interpretive phenomenological analysis approach as relevant to the study. Additionally, the participant sampling and selection are presented. Finally, research protocol such as data storage and the analysis process will be described. Each of these elements was critical to a quality study.

**Constructivist-Interpretivist Paradigm**

A research paradigm is influential in a study because it guides the selection of the methods, participants, tools and instruments selected for use (Ponterotto, 2005). Bassey (1999) describes the research paradigm as a way to make sense of the world and to enable researchers to give structure to thinking patterns, thus to influence research actions. For this study, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm set a relevant context to explore the phenomenon under investigation, by enabling multiple realities and viewpoints of participants. The goal of a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm is to understand the world people live in by interpreting their experiences and giving meaning through reflection (Ponterotto, 2005). By exploring the views of the phenomenon through the participant views, and subsequently developing a pattern or theory of meaning (Creswell, 2013), this paradigm lent itself to uncovering meaning in the experiences found in the student transfer pipeline. Coming from a position of relativity (Ponterotto, 2005), the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm supports multiple realities, as opposed to arriving at one “right” truth. Thus, the perspective of the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm enabled this researcher to present the reality (viewpoint) of each of the study’s participants regarding the phenomenon of student transfer. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm’s focus on the, “lived experience” perspective (Ponterotto, 2005) was apparent within this study’s design, exploring the individual’s own experiences regarding student transfer.
The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm advocates a transactional and dynamic interaction between researcher and participant, and perhaps both are changed by these relations based on dialogues (Ponterotto, 2005); the reflection via researcher-participant dialogue brings hidden meaning to the surface from deep reflection on the phenomenon and forms a unique feature of the paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). By exploring participant perceptions and experiences in this study, knowledge about the student transfer pathway from community college to a baccalaureate degree was constructed. Thus, by interacting with participants in their natural surroundings (Bassey, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Sharts-Hopko, 2002; Yin, 2009), the interchanging dynamics brought forth greater depth of results.

**Research Design: Qualitative Research**

According to Bassey (1999), research involves an assertion produced from systematic query resulting in a previously unknown discovery, with the finding ultimately communicated to others. Krauss (2005) posits that qualitative research is appropriate in contributing to the construction of meaning of a phenomenon. Qualitative methods are appropriate in studying the issue of successful student transfer from community college to baccalaureate institutions because they provide a complex and detailed understanding of the phenomenon; according to Museau (2007), qualitative methods are relevant when studying the holistic nature of an institutional culture on individuals and groups.

Merriam (2009) maintains that improving quality of practice can be carried out with applied research, the very process of research allowing one to know more about something. Thus, in this study, the matter of effectively supporting community college transfer students in meeting their goal of attaining baccalaureate degrees was the focus, as exploring their lived experiences contributed to a fuller understanding. In relation to this, Creswell (2012a) advocates
using qualitative research when a problem or issue needs to be explored, with Locke and Guglielmino (2006) and Museus (2007) supporting the use of qualitative research as an appropriate approach in understanding culture. Merriam (2009) views qualitative research as appropriate for understanding the individual’s interpretation and meaning of her experiences, with the researcher as the main mechanism for collecting and analyzing data, with the product as “richly descriptive” (p. 14).

Green (2007) describes qualitative study—as opposed to quantitative—as allowing for a development of several viewpoints, resulting in a description that is complete, intricate and honest. Harper and Kuh (2007) advocate using qualitative methods to study student experience in order to better understand institutions and outcomes. Furthermore, qualitative methods allowed the researcher to explore the, “how” and the, “why” of the phenomenon (Pifer, 2011), as well as the institutional process issues that impacted students (Green, 2007).

Creswell (2012a) posits that philosophy brought to the research greatly impacts the study, and thus the philosophy chosen must be appropriate to enable the study to answer the question(s) posed. Forman, Creswell, Damschroder, Kowalski, and Krein (2008) maintain the goal of qualitative methods as understanding a complex picture of a phenomenon, rather than measuring variables and their cause and effect through quantitative methods. Creswell (2012a) advocates utilizing qualitative research when a problem or issue must be explored. Harper (2007) supports using qualitative methods as the experiences of people are described from insiders’ points of view, including the “what,” the “how” and how they made sense of the consequences of experiencing the phenomenon.

According to Creswell (2012a), the subsequent process of sense-making is accomplished by relying solely on the authenticity of the participant experiences for the interpretation, and
therefore a rich, descriptive collection of experiences might be useful. Thus, for this study, qualitative research methodology provided an appropriate mechanism for examining student transfer, adding an essential and valuable perspective to the research and the phenomenon. To explore the study of student experiences regarding transfer, particularly the factors that affect its success, a phenomenological IPA study was appropriate.

**Rationale**

Creswell (2012a) posits that philosophy brought to the research greatly impacts the study. When exploration of a problem or issue is undertaken, Creswell advocates utilizing qualitative research. Toy and Ok (2012) maintain that qualitative research is important in educational issues because it delivers detailed information to illuminate a setting, a situation, or practices. Thus, qualitative research was relevant to examining the issue of successful student transfer from community college to baccalaureate institutions because it provided a complex and detailed understanding of this phenomenon. Sharts-Hopko (2002) maintains the advantage of qualitative research is the collection of people’s experiences, and that by exploring a phenomenon from a variety of viewpoints provides the most potentially complete veracity. Thus, qualitative research methodology provided an appropriate mechanism for examining the student transfer pathway, adding an essential and valuable perspective to the research and the phenomenon.

**Research Tradition: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, abbreviated as IPA, approach was selected in this investigation. It is a qualitative approach to phenomenological psychology (Wagstaff et al., 2014). Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) describe IPA as an approach employing qualitative research that examines people making sense of their major life experiences. Since IPA is based on how people make sense of their life experiences, particularly big issues and major
experiences, the meaning given to an experience can thus be viewed as an actual representation of the experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 33). IPA involves not just a reaction to the experience, but getting to know what it was like to actually live it (Connelly, 2010). According to Ivey (2013), an understanding is gained from utilizing exact words and expressions of individuals as the source of data. In this study, with a focus on an in-depth understanding of the experiences of community college transfer students, the lived experiences of transfer students and how they make sense of them, informed the phenomenon of the transfer student pipeline.

IPA is a relatively new approach, with its roots in the fields of health and most recently, psychology (Pringle, Hendry, & McLafferty, 2011; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2014). The key concepts informing IPA are phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Phenomenology is, according to Smith et al. (2009) an approach examining lived experiences. Callary, Rathwell, and Young (2015) describe phenomenology as describing the “what” and “how” of what individuals experience. Hermeneutics is explained by Shaw (2010) as the theory of interpretation, and by Callary et al. (2015) as interpreting textual meaning. Idiography involves knowing that an experience is like for an individual and how they are making sense of it happening (Smith, et al, 2009). Shaw (2010) defines the idiographic concept as studying the individual, and viewing each as unique. Callary et al. (2015), Fade (2004) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) view IPA as idiographic, as a case is analyzed before analyzing the next, thus initially keeping each case individual. While there are some descriptive aspects in an IPA study as it is phenomenological and thus focused on the data representing itself (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014), it is the interpretation levels that make it a unique approach (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Nicholson, 1984; Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014). Pringle, Hendry, and McLafferty (2011) and Rapport and Wainwright (2006) note that descriptive approaches involve an interpretive process.
While it is a recognized and respected approach, the methodology involves recommended guidelines but not strict mandates and is adaptable by the individual researcher (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

IPA has evolved from various sources including Husserl and Heidegger. Husserl, a German philosopher, influenced the development of phenomenology as one that involves examining human experience. According to Husserl, understanding another’s experience in-depth enables one to understanding the essential qualities of that experience and thus of others as well (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). Moving beyond empirical science, Husserl believed the world should be understood through lived experience (Fade, 2004). Heidegger, a student of Husserl, contributed to phenomenology’s evolving to having a hermeneutic focus and thus the lived experiences of one person are connect to the lived experiences of others (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger’s philosophy “believed that we are all self-interpreting beings – that to live is to listen and derive meaning” (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2011, p. 29) and that it is all relevant in time, space and context. Both contributed to the development of an approach that values the experiences of those who lived them.

A critical component of IPA is that of double hermeneutics. This involves the researcher making sense of the participant who is making sense of one’s experience (Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2015; Shaw, 2010; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Double hermeneutics is a two-stage interpretation process used to produce sense from the data (Pringle, Hendry, & McLafferty, 2011). The principle of double hermeneutic is valuable to the IPA approach as it allows both researcher and participants to look at the same phenomena yet from different angles (Wagstaff et al., 2014). Fade (2004) notes the double hermeneutics aspect of IPA lends itself to a unique contribution in research, both an insider’s and an outsider’s point of view. Understandably, there
might be times that the researcher’s interpretation differs from the participant’s account, yet Smith et al., (2009) maintain that the researcher’s knowledge enables a differing perspective leading to a congruent deeper meaning.

IPA involves a small number of participants (Connelly, 2010; Fade, 2004; Reid, Flower and Larkin, 2005; Shaw, 2010; Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009; Wagstaff et al., 2014). Since the IPA approach involves great depth, and the researcher must be deeply involved in the data, a small sample size is appropriate (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) note that six to eight participants is appropriate, and will allow for comparisons and contrasts between participants even if the quantity of data is not overwhelming. Smith et al. (2009) recommend up to six participants for the novice researcher. Callary et al. (2015), Fade (2004), Kleiman (2004), and Reid et al., (2005) state IPA studies typically involve less than 10 participants. Several recent studies engaging in the IPA approach regarding experiences of college students have had fewer than 10 participants, including Conroy and de Visser (2015) with five participants, Torbrand and Ellam-Dyson (2015) with seven participants, and Denovan and Macaskill (2013) and MacNeela and Gannon (2014) each with 10 participants. This study had seven participants.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) posit that it is necessary for the researcher to reflect on the justification for choosing IPA as an approach. In the problem of practice of community college transfer as access to a baccalaureate degree, IPA is an appropriate strategy. Making sense of the experiences of transfer students informs the issue of student transfer as their voices are integral to policies, procedures and strategies to support students along the pipeline. Additionally, the researcher’s background in counseling psychology aligned to the strategies of open-ended questioning as well as the in-depth interpretation and analysis for context and semantics as well as identifying themes. With the double hermeneutics involved in IPA, the
researcher made sense of transfer students making sense of their experiences with mitigating successful transfer among institutions and propelling to earning the desired baccalaureate degree.

Utilizing IPA influences the components of this study, including the questions asked, data collection, and data analysis. The questions of the interview schedule led to insight into an in-depth understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the participants. Collecting data via structured, in-person interviews, utilizing such techniques as active listening and open-ended questions, gave the participants a means by which to share personal stories and reflections of their experiences. Finally, analyzing data in a prescribed, yet flexible way involving repeated examination and processing of the data, as well as the researcher’s own analysis, shaped the results to be informative, useful and applicable. By using the IPA approach, it enabled the researcher to gain information and insight in order to have quality and depth in exploring and answering the research question as posed, and lent itself to having the researcher take an active, important role in gathering such useful information.

**The Role of the Researcher**

Merriam (2009) asserts that the investigator is the most critical element in qualitative research. Chan, Fung, & Chien (2013) describe the qualitative researcher as the main mechanism for data collection and analysis. Creswell (2012a) maintains that the researcher is a key instrument, as the role includes asking open-ended questions, facilitating emergent design—as the process might change as the data is collected and themes are uncovered—and that researchers must “position themselves” by conveying their own interest in the topic, as well as their personal gains from the study.

In the IPA approach, the researcher has a central role in the process (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). Reid, Flower and Larkin (2005) view the researcher as part of the research
process via the interpretation. Essential skills to a researcher in fulfilling this role include developing quality interviewing skills, including open-ended questioning and active listening, critical to an IPA study (Connelly, 2010; Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014). Additionally, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) state it is the ethical role of the researcher to monitor participants for distress during the interviewing process. Double hermeneutics, in particular, involves the researcher in a very active role (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The researcher’s role in analyzing and presenting the data is essential, as by making sense of the participant trying to make sense of one’s experiences (Shaw, 2010), the researcher has a significant contribution to the study’s outcome. McConnell-Henry et al. (2011) state it is the researcher’s role to develop shared understandings of participant’s experiences by entering their world, although it is the researchers, not participant’s, role to interpret the experiences.

Another concept integral to IPA, and a role of the researcher, is bracketing. It involves setting aside preconceptions during different stages of research, including in the analysis of each participant’s case and during subsequent analysis (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014; Pringle, Hendry, & McLafferty, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Chan, Fung, & Chien (2013) maintain that one cannot be totally objective nor able to keep assumptions about one’s research topic from the process and give several strategies to acknowledge and minimize their influence, including engaging in reflexivity, described as honestly examining values and interest that might interfere with researcher. Fade (2004) notes that researcher beliefs are not biases to be dismissed but actually contribute to making sense of others’ experiences. Callary et al. (2015) do caution that it is not possible to completely bracket one’s biases, and suggest that by acknowledging them, one will recognize how they inform interpretations in analysis. Connelly (2010) agrees that in interpretive phenomenology, unlike descriptive, the
researcher cannot completely put aside presuppositions and biases as they are part of the person and thus the researcher must be aware of them and acknowledge their influence. Since the purpose of an IPA study is to convey what the participants mean as much as possible, bracketing is a fundamental premise (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).

Another critical responsibility of the researcher in the IPA approach is that of keeping a reflective journal throughout the research process (Callary, Rathwell & Young, 2015; Shaw, 2010). In this task, the researcher reflected on thoughts, questions, curiosity, and analytics regularly and extensively throughout the process of designing, carrying out, and culminating research.

IPA as an Approach for This Study

There are several reasons IPA was an appropriate approach to studying the community college transfer pipeline as a means to earning a bachelors degree, and better understanding how to support its effectiveness. It provided an in-depth exploration of student experiences, and importantly, what these experiences meant to students in pursuit of bachelor’s degrees. By examining the phenomenon in this light, it brought a greater understanding of how to better support community college transfer students. Its, “thick description” lends itself to add light to the human experience, and can also be used in developing theories and contribute to informing policy (Fade, 2004). Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith (2013) suggest IPA is appropriate for “research that aims to understand and interpret participants’ experiences, to determine the meaning of the experiences” (p. 20). Kleiman (2004) views the result of IPA as “a text or story that gives insights in to the phenomenon under study and meaning associated with it” (p. 8), supporting its appropriateness for the purpose of this study – to give understanding into community college transfer pipeline and the experiences of those who live it. As Pietkiewicz &
Smith (2014) and Shaw (2010) each describe, an IPA researcher is attempting to walk in another person’s shoes, acknowledging that this is never fully possible.

Furthermore, IPA was aligned with the skills and interests of this researcher. In choosing the research design, the investigator aligned it with the goal of what is wanted to be known (Merriam, 2009); the goal of this study was to have a better, in-depth understanding of the experiences of community college transfer students, making IPA an effective approach. IPA was relevant to the focus of this study as, “the results produced when following IPA are incredibly rich and allow for an in-depth understanding of the particular phenomenon being investigated” (Callary, Rathwell & Young, 2015, p.73). Wagstaff et al. (2014) posit the IPA approach draws great strength with its, “complex interplay and interweaving of the phenomenological account of the participant through the interpretative role of the researcher in giving voice to specific experiences” (p. 10). Thus the IPA approach lent itself to a fuller, rich understanding of the lived experiences of those intending to earn a bachelor’s degree by way of transferring from a community college.

**Participants**

The research consisted of interviews, with a total of seven students who transferred at least 15 community college credits to the baccalaureate institution within the last five years. Participants were still students at the baccalaureate institutions. The interviews were in person and done individually.

There is no prescribed sample size in qualitative research (Nakkeeran & Zodpey, 2012). Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbon (2015) maintain that qualitative research requires smaller sample sizes than does quantitative, as specific statistics are not required, and differing methodology purposes, where the “general aim of sampling in qualitative research is to acquire
information that is useful for understanding the complexity, depth, variation, or context surrounding a phenomenon, rather than to represent populations as in quantitative research” (p. 1782). According to Fusch and Ness (2015) and Gaskell (2000), the depth of data collected is the benchmark to consider, not the number of participants. Creswell (2012b) cautions that a qualitative study should not become unwieldy in the sample size because the objective is to provide an in-depth depiction of the phenomenon, thus requiring a focus on only a few individuals or cases. Voss, Tsikriktsis, and Frohlick (2002) suggest that greater opportunity for depth is found with a fewer number of cases. Russell and Gregory (2003) acknowledge that sample size is often debated and a critical question in research studies, but that often smaller sample sizes are more effective, stating “even studies with small samples may help to identify theoretically provocative ideas that merit further exploration” (p. 37). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) maintain that the appropriate sample size depends on several factors, including pragmatics such as time and access to participants, but that depth of studies is more important than breadth. Russell and Gregory (2003) also posit that smaller sample sizes allow for fuller exploration of an issue with a broader range of participant experiences, with judgment regarding sample size appropriately determined by, “the adequacy of a sample for a given study by how comprehensively and completely the research questions were answered” (p. 37).

Forman et al. (2008) caution that larger samples sizes result in an unwieldy amount of data; they view gathering “rich” data as the goal of qualitative study. Saturation, the point where new information collected is redundant, i.e., not contributing new information to the research, is a common criteria for adequate sample size (Gentles et al. Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbon, 2015; Nakkeeran & Zodpey, 2012). While saturation is difficult to determine, and sample size not universally prescribed, saturation is not reached until no new data appears, meaning no new
themes, no new coding, and when the research is both rich in data and thick in quantity (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

As previously presented, IPA involves a small number of participants. Thus, this study’s sample size was acceptable for the purpose of the study, the IPA approach, and in the exploration of the issue of student transfer.

**Recruitment and Access**

This research study set criteria, using criterion sampling strategy (Creswell, 2012a), limiting participants to those who are transfer students from community college. Purposeful sampling (Callary, Rathwell & Young, 2015; Creswell, 2002; Creswell, 2012b; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) allowed this researcher to intentionally, rather than randomly, select individuals who could best help to understand the transfer student phenomenon. Forman et al. (2008) maintain that the purposeful sampling enables the quantitative researcher to best understand the phenomenon being investigated. Use of opportunistic sampling (Creswell 2012b), or “snowball sampling” (Creswell, 2002), occurred after the research begins when participants referred to others who added valuable experiences to study.

Participants were initially recruited at Countryside University via referral from two staff members, one in the career counseling department and the other in transfer admissions. Flyers were hung throughout campus. Several participants were recruited via opportunistic sampling and were referred by either participants or others aware of the study. At Valleyview Technical College, flyers were hung throughout campus, and a notice put in a campus electronic bulletin. A large database of transfer student names was provided to the researcher, and an individual email was sent to each; the lone participant was recruited via this method.
IRB Approval and Protection of Human Subjects

The researcher gained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at Northeastern University prior to conducting any data collection or contacting any participants; each research site required its own IRB approval, the researcher then completed these before engaging in participant recruitment and subsequent site research.

All necessary institutional forms were completed and submitted prior to the intended start of data collection; no data collection proceeded prior to obtaining IRB approval. Investigator completed the required NIH Office of Extramural Research training for all human subject research in September, 2013.

Protection of Human Subjects

A number of necessary procedures were in place to protect participants, with every effort made to eliminate risk to them whether psychological, physical, social, or other aspect (Butin, 2010). These risk factors included standard ethical practices as set by professional associations, such as the American Association of University Professors and the American College Personnel Association, and by research practices, including those of the American Psychological Association and the American Educational Research Association. These standards are related to honest data reporting, not plagiarizing own or others work, avoiding conflicts of interest, and willingness to share copies of the reports with participants (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2012b). Additionally, as Creswell (2012b) states, participants were respected, nondiscriminatory language used, and confidentiality maintained. The researcher also respected the participants and cooperating institutions by gaining appropriate permission and by causing minimal disruption. Confidentiality was maintained in data storage (Butin, 2010). This study uses pseudonyms for participants and institutions. No participant was a minor.
Informed Consent

Informed consent gives participants an explanation of the study and of the role of the researcher, as well as what is requested from them. Informed consent procedures were followed (Creswell, 2012a; Merriam, 2009); those included giving participants information on the potential risks, of the purpose and intention of the research, and participant rights, including informed consent information, confidentiality, and the right to leave the study at any point. All participants in this study were given informed consent information orally and asked for signed permission in written format, ensuring format and language was understandable to the participant. The consent document included general information about the research, listed the potential risks, a description of confidentiality practices, and the voluntary nature throughout the study. It will also provide contact information for both Northeastern University and the researcher (See Appendix B). Contact information was distributed in writing during the informed consent process. The consent document was scanned into the researcher’s secure password protected computer, to be kept for three years. The signed, hard-copy informed consent forms will then be shredded. No participant was contacted prior to all necessary IRB approval. An incentive was nominal, a $5 gift certificate to a local food/coffee establishment, and was presented within informed consent procedures.

Data Collection

It is critical to use multiple sources of evidence in the qualitative study approach; they provide both a depth of rich and detailed information on the topic, but also assist in obtaining triangulation (Creswell, 2012b). Bassey (1999) identifies three methods of collecting data: interviewing, observing events, and written documents. This study data will be collected through interviews and documents.
Interviews

As the primary means of data collection, the importance of the interviews cannot be overstated. As per the IPA approach, the interviews were transcribed verbatim (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Pringle, Hendry, & McLafferty, 2011; Reid, Flower and Larkin, 2005), using Rev.com as a transcription service. McConnell-Henry et al (2011) view IPA interviews as the means to, “expose the inner voice” (p. 34) of participants, with an aim to get them to share as much relevant breadth, depth and their own words as possible. In this study, the researcher conducted in-person, individual, in-depth interviews, which were audio-recorded. IPA interviews are semi-structured, and the researcher prepared a schedule in advance (Callary, Rathwell & Young, 2015). The schedule allowed the researcher to plan the, “flow” of the interview, but was also flexible as an interview unfolded; the schedule also included possible prompts (Bailey, 2007; Callary, Rathwell & Young, 2015; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Bailey (2007) also notes semi-structured interviews can be more of a dialogue than just questioning. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) also note the importance of interviewing skills such as being comfortable with moments of silence, having an awareness of non-verbal communication, and facilitating a flow of conversation.

Following Rubin and Rubin’s (2012) the researcher employed an in-depth qualitative interviewing model, open-ended questions, unfolding as each individual interview unfolded, in order to seek rich, detailed information that produced incidences, descriptions, and experiences. These semi-structured interviews focused on the specific topic, with a limited number of questions prepared prior, and follow-up questions used during the interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The semi-structured interviews encompassed open-ended questions that reflected a range of the structure, all used flexibly, and in no prescribed order; some specific questions were asked
of all participants (Merriam, 2009). This study of a real-life contemporary issue (Creswell, 2013) entailed questions within the responsive interviewing approach, one that encouraged detailed and in-depth replies from participants and that focused on the individual’s own experience (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants were asked to describe:

- Their experiences as students along the transfer pipeline
- How they made sense of these experiences influencing completing a bachelors degree
- How they experienced the transition from one institution to another

The interviews, lasting 60–90 minutes each, were semi-structured (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014). Each participant was interviewed once. While Connelly (2010) state participants can be interviewed more than once, depending on the study’s breadth and depth, it is not a rigid expectation. McConnell-Henry, Chapman, and Francis (2011) discouraged more than a single interview with participants, citing pragmatics, delays, and time constraints, as well as the possibility participants will disagree with analysis, withdraw from study, or feel embarrassed or exploited. Furthermore, McConnell-Henry et al. (2011) caution that clarification interviews are perhaps a cover for what were poor interviewing techniques.

The researcher also took field notes, although refrained from taking copious notes during the interview so as not to be a distraction. Bailey (2007) insists that if you are not taking notes in the field, then it is not to be considered “field research” (p. 113), and notes they should be taken the day of the interview or otherwise lost forever. Fade (2004) advocates keeping field notes to have timely notation of non-verbal communication and general impressions from the interview.

The seven interviews took place individually. The participants each identified the location of the interview. Three were held in various locations on campus: in the library, a
hallway lounge, and the student center. Two were held in the participant’s homes, and two others were held at local fast food establishments.

**Documents**

Connelly (2010) notes that, while the data consists mainly of interviews, artifacts such as statistical data or policies and procedures, other materials, and observations can also be utilized when appropriate. The researcher managed digital recordings of interviews, the reflective journal, and field notes of observations of the environment in accordance with interview and observation protocols. These items were analyzed for rich, detailed information that contributed to an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

**Participants**

Seven participants were interviewed. Six were community college transfer students at Countryside University, a public university with under 2,000 full-time undergraduate students. One participant was a student at Valleyview Technical College, a public technical college with 1,000 full-time undergraduate students. Both institutions, part of the same state college system with a systemwide articulation agreement with the Eastern State Community College system, are in rural settings, have “less selective” admissions, and have an average class size of less than 20 students. As presented in Table 3, participants varied in age, gender and whether or not they transferred having earned an associates degree. Two were non-traditional age, two were male, and all were Caucasian.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mariah</th>
<th>Julian</th>
<th>Tobias</th>
<th>Amanda</th>
<th>Emily</th>
<th>Jill</th>
<th>Krista</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Traditional Age</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
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<td>NO</td>
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<tr>
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<td>YES</td>
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<td>NO</td>
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<td>NO</td>
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<td>YES</td>
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<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferred from Eastern State Community College system</td>
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<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<tr>
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<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veteran</td>
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<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3  Participant Characteristics

Participant Descriptions

- Mariah was traditional age, and started community college as a high school senior as a way to leave her, self-described, dysfunctional family. She attended Upward Bound (UB) through high school and it was clearly influential. Her current 4-year was actually where she attended UB. She worked full-time. She does not have any connection with the 4-year, other than attending classes and said she is very unhappy there. She stated that she felt, "burned out" several times and prioritized decisions based on whether it fit her schedule and/or if there was a financial incentive. She talked a lot about being
financially savvy and not having debt from college (thus having led to no other "choice" than her pathway, which she does actually recommend).

- Julian had not had a linear path – he was homeschooled, went to Seattle for theater college, left after a year, and moved into his parents basement and enrolled in community college. He was miserable at community college, stating it was designed for non-traditional aged adults – he had no social life and only attended classes. Julian never seemed to have a plan to attain a baccalaureate as a goal. He, “fell” in to the pathway of community college to 4-year institution, assuming he should have the associates degree prior to transfer. Julian lived in college housing, but off-campus, and was very pleased with the social life he had created for himself. He believed this pathway was useful for those who may be unsure of what they want for college or for a career.

- Tobias transferred with an associate’s degree from another state’s community college system. He changed college majors three times at community college, twice post-transfer, and facing college graduation a few weeks after the interview, was still uncertain about his career pathway. He began at community college because he was uncertain of what he wanted to do and did not want to spend significant money on exploration. He worked full-time in a meat-packing plant as a community college student, and despite having no social life, viewed the experience as a valuable way to learn both work ethic and time management skills. Choosing the 4-year institution was based primarily on the ability to pursue his favorite leisure activity and whether the college would accept his transfer credits. He took out student loans at the baccalaureate institution to avoid working full-time. Of great importance for him was taking advantage of opportunities to meet others and to be involved in campus activities. A successful student academically,
Tobias made an effort to build a rapport with faculty outside of the classroom at the 4-year institution; he had found the part-time community college faculty was not as available although provided beneficial real-work connections. For Tobias, the full college experience was more than what was learned in the classroom.

- Amanda was a non-traditional age student with children. She began at Countryside University out of high school, but left after an unsuccessful freshman year. As a single parent, over a decade later she was seeking a career and decided to take part-time coursework at the local community college to explore possibilities. She was surprised to find she excelled in science, prerequisites for a nursing program. She also found she liked the instructors and had developed a peer group. However, a move and new relationship brought a change in plans for nursing school and she nervously enrolled in her prior college’s nursing program. She took some elective courses at that local community college, but found it to be a less desirable environment and returned to her original community college site, despite a commute of over an hour. Amanda has experienced great success at the 4-year institution, excelling academically and having a strong peer group. She was surprised to find herself enjoying being on campus and with strong family support was able to bridge both worlds. As a college junior, Amanda was making preparations and connections for her nursing career post-graduation, having a solid foundation set by community college and quality experiences at her 4-year institution.

- Emily’s experience was unique in that she lived on campus. It was clear she held her friendships and relationships with her professors with great value. She repeatedly stated how much she loved the university. Going to community college first, however, was
influential. It gave her time and opportunities to determine career goals, and meeting them was a driving factor for her. It made her education more affordable as well.

- Jill was a non-traditional age student who retired from over 20 years in the military. She transferred in over 70 miscellaneous credits, earned mainly in community colleges throughout her career, not necessarily intending on earning a baccalaureate degree. Facing retirement, she stumbled upon the idea of enrolling in college. Uncertain of a major or of the likelihood of success, she explored colleges where she had relocated and found a welcoming and helpful transfer admissions counselor at her current university and enrolled. She experienced great anxiety and nervousness in starting, but very quickly found herself excited and successful. She felt very welcomed by other students, faculty and staff, and felt a deep sense of belonging. She was active on a sports team and in campus activities. Jill had a strong feeling of acceptance and had not experienced any stigma as an adult student. She considered her group of friends, who were of traditional age, to be a powerful support who were essential to her success, and had a deep sense of comradery with them. She also found great support from faculty, staff, and her family. For Jill, being a transfer student meant advance standing in course registration, and giving her a sense of perspective in the value of education and in her current opportunities. Jill’s initial anxiety quickly evolved into excitement and a sense of privilege in the opportunity to be part of a wonderful community.

- Krista was a traditional-age student attending the state’s technical college. She transferred from the local community college after two years, although she did not earn a degree. Krista attended community college full-time as a high school senior, and saw great value in attending college that year at no cost as well as a time to gain confidence in
her ability to be a college student. While at community college, she was unsure of her major or career goals, but after exploring several courses, she discovered what she wanted to pursue. Transitioning from high school and from the community college were times she felt ready to move to a different environment, although the transitions were an adjustment. Krista stated her preference of the community college because of its small classes and personal relationships with faculty; her advisor also offered substantial guidance. Krista’s social life was outside of college, as she lived at home and worked part-time. For her, being a community college transfer student meant saving money, giving herself the opportunity to identify her career goal, and a fast-track pathway to earn a baccalaureate degree.

Data Storage

Storage of data collected must be secure (Bassey, 1999). The researcher stored data from this study’s interviews as recorded tapes and transcripts in a locked file cabinet, except when shared with a transcription service, where she used only pseudonyms on labels and recordings. As per Creswell (2012a), the researcher backed up computer files on a password-protected online file storage site (dropbox.com), and used a data collection matrix for locating and identifying information. The computer used was a personal, password-protected laptop kept in the researcher’s residence.

Confidentiality was maintained by keeping all products, including tapes and notes, in secure storage, using pseudonyms in reports, and secure transmission of data to the transcription service, Rev.com, which also maintains strict confidentiality agreements with their transcriptionists. The interview files were sent to Rev.com for word-for-word transcribing to provide both accurate renditions and more practical use of the information (Rubin & Rubin,
2012). These tapes and other products will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is critical to the research process, the mechanism by which the raw data of interviews and other evidence collected unfolds, to provide “clear and convincing answers to (the) research question” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 190). Data analysis is a means to make sense of the data, and in which the research questions are answered (Merriam, 2009). Bassey (1999) views data analysis as taking the significant amount of raw data and summarizing them in useful statements. Merriam (2009) posits qualitative data analysis as both inductive and comparative; in other words, it generates a probable conclusion based on the evidence and on comparison. The simultaneous collection of data and its analysis, as an ongoing process from the very beginning of collecting data, enables the investigator to refine questions and to ultimately produce trustworthy findings (Merriam, 2009).

With IPA, the process of analysis is specified to this approach. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) recommends total immersion in the data so that the researcher can step into the shoes of the participants. It involves becoming familiar with the data by reading and rereading the verbatim transcripts, reflecting, coding, identifying themes and then patterns amongst all transcripts. According to Callary et al. (2015), data analysis begins with the transcript from each interview and, because of its idiographic nature, individually as each interview happens in the IPA approach. Callary et al. (2015) caution those engaging in IPA research to be aware of the challenge posed by having to ignore what was analyzed in the prior individual cases, and the necessity to also bracket (put aside) those while analyzing each interview as separate. Analyzing the data in the IPA approach is an iterative process, with cyclical adapting and reexamining data
and interpretations, leading to new interpretations and depth in analysis (Rapport & Wainwright, 2006). IPA data analysis involves six steps:

**Step 1: Transcription, reading and re-reading.** After an interview is complete, the audio recording was immediately sent to rev.com for verbatim transcription. A time-consuming step, the hard copy of the transcript was read and reread, and the audio tapes listened to multiple times so that the researcher was immersed in the data, continually developing new insights (Connelly, 2010; Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Descriptive, not interpretive, summaries of content were noted, and utilized in later interpretation (Shaw, 2010). In this step notations were made in the left-hand margin of the hard copy transcript as recommended by Fade (2004) and Shaw (2010).

**Step 2: Initial note-taking.** Throughout the process of reading and listening, the researcher took extensive notes about language use, context and initial interpretations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In addition, personal reflectivity, distinctive phrases and emotional responses were noted (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014). These notes were taken on the right-hand margin of the hard copy of the transcript (Shaw, 2010; Smith et al., 2009). In this step, the researcher considered inferences to be used to answer the research question (Shaw, 2010). Smith et al. (2009) offer an urgent reminder that the interpretation is rooted from the words of the participants. Shaw (2010) states that interpretive claims need to be evidenced in data, and this correspondence is part of the audit trail. As suggested by Smith et al. (2009), the researcher used different colored highlighters to denote descriptive, linguistic and conceptual concepts.

**Step 3: Develop themes.** Working primarily from the notes and not from the transcript, the researcher transformed them into themes (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al, 2009). Bailey (2007) and Shaw (2010) posit that themes do not, “emerge,” with Shaw further stating
that they aren’t discovered but are developed by intense readings of data and by interpretations that are carefully crafted. Others, such as Fade (2004) and Smith et al., (2009), do refer to themes as “emerging.” Fade (2004) recommends themes be listed in hard copy and laid out on a table or adhered to a wall so that the researcher can best view and manipulate them. While it might seem to be moving away from participants’ contributions, this step is actually the means to bring the parts back to a whole in the subsequent write up (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher printed the themes, cut them out individually, and adhered them to a wall where they were arranged and rearranged repeatedly throughout the process. At this step, the themes mirrored both the participants’ contributions as well as the researcher’s analytic interpretations (Smith et al., 2009).

Coding is categorizing (labeling) the data once themes are identified (Forman et al., 2008). Merriam (2009) defines coding as, “nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (p. 175). Coding was done on the hard-copy transcripts themselves, and in the reflective journals. Software was not utilized; Wagstaff et al. (2014), noting the flexibility of the IPA approach, state coding software has advantages and disadvantages, leaves it to the individual researcher to decide. Bailey (2007) and Smith et al. (2009) do not recommend use of coding software for novice researchers.

**Step 4: Connecting themes.** In this step, the researcher identified connections between the themes, grouped those that were similar, and descriptively labeled each cluster, grouping them in meaningful ways (Fade, 2004; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The patterns and connections between themes included abstraction, subsumption, polarization, and numeration (Smith et al., 2009). Clustering themes led to a further reduction in data (Shaw, 2010). Smith et
al. (2009) note that reflective journaling in this step is critical to eventual credibility; the researcher reflectively journaled throughout the process.

**Step 5: Proceeding to next case.** Having completed this for the interview, the researcher bracketed the analysis and proceeded to repeat the process for the next case (Fade, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). New themes emerged with each new case (Smith et al., 2009) and as new themes were identified, previous analyses were reviewed to determine if the theme exists there as well (Fade, 2004).

**Step 6: Identifying patterns across all cases.** As per Smith et al. (2009) recommendation, codes were printed hard copy and taped to a wall to effectively look for connections. A table of identified themes and super-ordinate themes was created, and to illustrate each of them, included verbatim passages from participants (Smith et al., 2009). As per Fade (2004), the “super-ordinate,” the overarching, themes were identified from commonalities in sub-themes. Smith et al. (2009) caution that one must be cautious of being too descriptive, and to encourages the use of deeper levels of interpretation. When the number of themes needed to be reduced, Fade (2004) recommends basing it on keeping those that best light other themes, and how rich and powerful those corresponding extracts were to the study.

**Writing Up the Analysis**

Also specified in the IPA approach is the write-up of the results. According to Callary, et al. (2015), it serves as the final analysis of the data. Smith et al. (2009) note there is not a “right” way to write the IPA analysis. Shaw (2010) describes this as producing a description of the participants’ stories and the researcher’s analytic interpretations of them. This critically important component for IPA interweaves “analytic commentary and raw extracts” (Smith et al., 2009, p.110).
In the writing of the results, an overview was given before specifics (Smith et al., 2009). Then, each super-ordinate theme was written as a narrative, described in considerable depth participants’ experiences (Fade, 2004). According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014), an IPA study concludes with a narrative account, a discussion session relating existing literature and the identified themes, and a reflection on the research, as well as limitations of the study, its implications and future ideas. In this section, the identified themes were placed into a final table with descriptions and, importantly, excerpts from each interview (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). Each theme was presented, defined briefly, and theme’s significance for understanding the phenomenon articulated (Shaw, 2010). The written findings are essential, and allow the study to fulfill its IPA mission, as when done well the findings, “should convey the participant’s experience clearly to readers, at least as fully as they can understand another’s experience without experiencing it themselves” (Connelly, 2010, p. 128).

**Trustworthiness**

Methodological rigor is essential both in research design and in the research process (Forman et al., 2008). Throughout data collection and analysis, it was essential to ensure the study was ethical, trustworthy, and valid (Creswell, 2012a). Ethics, according to Bassey (1999), include being truthful in collecting, analyzing, and reporting data, as well as ensuring participants are respected with dignity, privacy, and honor that the data is owned by the relevant participant. Rigor, as evidenced by reliability and validation, gives the research, “conviction and strength” (Long & Johnson, 2000). Since the investigator in qualitative research is designing the research and creating the reporting of data—thus the subjective processes—rigor is of “paramount concern” (Sharts-Hopko, 2002, p. 84).
Several procedures for ensuring trustworthiness and verification were in place for this study. Creswell (2012a) explains that maintaining validation provides credibility, and recommends the use of at least two validation strategies to document the accuracy of a study. This study used the following strategies.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation, a validation strategy, corroborates the evidence by using different sources (Forman et al., 2008; Merriam, 2009; Pringle, et al., 2011; Sandelowski, 1993; Sharts-Hopko, 2002), such as related studies or peer-reviewed publications, aligning them with a code or theme that became evident this study, to further validate the accuracy and credibility of the study. Forman et al. (2008) describe triangulation as, “converging evidence” (p. 768). As Frost (2011) describes, qualitative research does not involve in proving a definitive truth but instead presenting an understanding of individuals’ perspectives; thus “triangulation” in a broader sense can move beyond validity and as means to add depth in understanding the phenomenon. Pringle et al. (2011) also describe triangulation in IPA as a means to complete data and to enhance findings, and is accomplished by having more than one form of collecting data. Triangulation in this IPA study provided further depth and richness, involving data collected from more than one source: interviews, by researcher analysis, and in reflective journaling. Reflective journaling significantly contributed to triangulation as it provided reflexivity and illustrated the process of analysis as it occurs, further providing depth and alignment of the research. In particular, this is presented in chapters four and five in showing that the findings relate to, and enhance, what was found from the various sources of data, and in aligning the different data collected.

**Reflexivity.** Another validation strategy employed was to clarify the researcher’s biases and assumptions, also called, “reflexivity” (Merriam, 2009). This study included clarifications
from the researcher regarding her personal biases, prejudices, and past experiences that might have influenced the interpretations and study’s approach (Creswell, 2012a; Merriam, 2009; Sandelowski, 1993; Sharts-Hopko, 2002). Pringle, Hendry, and McLafferty (2011) note reflexivity assists in avoiding preconceptions. Fade (2004) views reflexivity as option as part of one’s interpretive role, but not a required means of removing biases. Clarification included the researcher’s own experience as a community college instructor and parent of a community college student transferring to a baccalaureate institution.

**Audit Trail.** An additional validation method conducted was the use of memos and reflective journaling in the analytic process to keep track of the reasoning throughout the study, referred by some as an, “audit trail” (Bassey, 1999; Fade, 2004; Forman et al., 2008; Long & Johnson, 2000; Sandelowski, 1993; Sharts-Hopko, 2002). This detailed account of how the research was conducted and data analyzed (Merriam, 2009) enabled the authentication and dependability of findings. Thus the actions taken in conducting the research and the rationale uncovered were recorded via the memos and reflective journaling to substantiate authenticity.

**Member Checking.** Additionally, member checking (Bassey, 1999; Forman et al., 2008; Long & Johnson, 2000; Merriam, 2009) was conducted, with each participant receiving the transcript via email to confirm its accuracy as to what transpired in the interview (Callary, Rathwell & Young, 2015); no participant responded with issues or concerns. With the concept of double hermeneutics critical to IPA, the researcher’s interpretations did not need participant confirmation. As such, McConnell-Henry, Chapman, and Francis (2011) maintain that validating researcher’s interpretation is “illogical” as it is the researcher’s role to interpret. McConnell-Henry et al. (2011) go further, calling it a “potential threat to rigor” (p. 30) to revisit data or interpretation with a participant as it will likely encourage participants to say ‘the right thing.’
Instead, McConnell-Henry et al. (2011) offer utilizing clarifying strategies such as probing questions, paraphrasing, open-ended questions and respecting silence as alternatives to member checking as they allow for immediate clarification by participants.

**Addressing Potential Threats to Internal Validity**

Merriam (2009) stresses the need for internal validity to give the findings credibility for the data presented. According to Creswell (2012b), potential threats to internal validity are serious as they might compromise an otherwise quality study. The researcher employed several strategies to prevent and address potential threats to internal validity in this study. The first potential internal threat is familiarity (Creswell, 2012b), or of close connection; however, the researcher did not use a site or participants where she had potentially direct conflicting or influential relations.

Another potential threat to internal validity is in sample selection (Creswell, 2012b). This was addressed by not employing a random selection, but by approaching and selecting participants based on qualifications such as direct, personal experience with the phenomenon of student transfer (Forman et al., 2008; Merriam, 2009), rather than on their potential to influence the studies outcome by other factors (Creswell, 2012b).

An additional potential internal threat is mortality, or participants leaving the study before it is complete (Creswell, 2012b). This study was conducted within a relatively short timeframe, lessening the likelihood of participants leaving the study. Additionally, the researcher employed standard ethical practices, such as fully informed consent and confidentiality measures, throughout (Merriam, 2009), thereby strengthening participant comfort levels and
knowledge about the study’s intent and purpose. None of the participants opted to leave the study. By intentionally and continually employing strategies described ensured trustworthiness, credibility, and verification, the researcher increased the likelihood of the study’s validity and accuracy. As Creswell (2012a) states, ethically valid research will be more likely useful in its practical use and application.

**Potential Researcher Bias**

In my work with high school students, far too many have stated the intention to start locally and “transfer later.” In over fifteen years, I have witnessed very few students ultimately doing so. Many have been ill-advised by well-meaning adults that they can save money with this plan, and all have been under the assumption that credits and courses will seamlessly transfer from one institution to another. While many with these students’ intentions would likely have not been successful if they had started at the 4-year institution, it was evident and concerning to me that their plans for higher education were so ill-informed.

I also teach as an adjunct at our local community college, and have seen many students there whose plans for transferring are unclear at best. It was alarming to me that they toil through coursework, pay tuition, and spend time and energy in the community college, all the while unclear whether their pathways will lead them to their ultimate baccalaureate goals. As an educator with direct connection to those planning to enroll, as well as those attending community college, I believe it imperative to support them the best way to reach their goals and aspirations for higher education. I also hope to provide accurate information to others advising students and, some day, to bring this expertise and passion to a direct role in a post-secondary institution.

From a personal angle, I disclose that my son was an academic standout in high school, graduating in the top of his class with a challenging course load. All of his college applications
were accepted, including those to, “highly competitive” schools, in the competitive engineering major. Despite several generous financial aid offers, at the last minute he opted to attend a community college, an hour from home. Frankly, I was heartbroken; he had worked hard in high school and I was disappointed that he was not reaping the, “full benefits” of the college experience (such as living on campus and having a social connection to campus). However, he realized at the last minute that he was not ready to move away and live in the college environment, and he gave an honest look at dollars and cents. He made sure that he was enrolled in the right program with formal transfer agreements to his 4-year institution major at several potential schools.

Additionally, he contacted his most likely choice of the baccalaureate option and asked them if students were generally accepted and successful from the community college program, and if they had recommendations about the smoothest pathway. Thus, with a concrete plan and good information, he set himself up for the greatest chance at a successful transfer. While attending the community college, he drove two hours daily and had no college social life. He is pleased that he also has relatively little debt although he acknowledges he realized how much of a social life he missed as evidenced by his active social life at the baccalaureate institution. He recently graduated from a very competitive engineering school, having had all of his credits transfer because of the transfer agreement and having saved significant money.

Unfortunately, his roommate (who also went to the same community college) did not have the same experience because he did not ask specific informational questions and was not enrolled in the liberal-arts transfer degree, but instead in the “logical” engineering program. It seems to me that the knowledge my son received, through my work, allowed him to ask the right
questions and make the right choices in his plan to transfer with an associate’s degree from a community college to a competitive 4-year institution for his baccalaureate degree.

Thus, my biases involve my personal experience as a parent as well as an educator. As a teacher, seeing students make what are perhaps poor choices, which will not lead to their goals, has resulted in great skepticism, but also in curiosity. By engaging in this research, I hope to develop a better understanding that informs my work as a high school and a community college educator, while also contributing to the field of available research that influences practice and policies.

My professional background in human services and the counseling field is directly aligned with choosing a qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis, as uncovering individual experiences is fundamental for me. A phenomenological study allows me to better understand the experiences of community college students, and thus enable me to influence the experiences of some of my own students, as well as contribute to my employing institutions further success in educating its students.

**Limitations**

The limitations and constraints to this study are important to acknowledge. The researcher’s access to students and institutions was limited and constrained by her geographic region. The public statewide higher education system in the region was small. Additionally, it needs to be noted that the public system has linkages and articulation agreements between institutions within the system, and students enrolling in private institutions post-transfer might have differing experiences. Considering the small sample size, it cannot be representative of all community college transfer students nor representing many sub-groups including differing ethnic backgrounds, a particular gender nor age group, or an intentional type of transfer students such
as those in an identified major. The IPA approach’s idiographic focus provided a limitation as it was intended to reflect the experiences of a small number of community college transfer students; however the essence of IPA is the belief that the lived experiences of one person is reflective of the lived experiences of others. Additionally, IPA depends largely on the researcher’s interpretation, and despite best efforts to engage in bracketing, it was assumed that some researcher’s experience and bias influenced interpretation. The theoretical framework is relatively new, and thus not widely applied as of yet. It also is focused on student factors and does not consider institutional or systemic influences. Despite these limitations and constraints, the study as designed followed quality standards and expectations.

Conclusion

This study used qualitative methodology, specifically IPA to examine the experiences of community college transfer students, post-transfer. The goal was to gain an understanding of these students as they begin to make sense of their experience in the college transfer pathway. Utilizing the IPA framework enabled the researcher to examine the community college transfer pathway as an avenue to a bachelor’s degree, and concurrently the individual participants’ experiences in the process. Furthermore, the IPA approach supported an understanding of the transfer students’ experiences as they navigate the pathway.

This chapter presented the research methodology, a description of participant involvement, intentions for interviewing, and strategies to ensure ethical research. Additionally, the researcher’s positionality statement provided disclosure and rationale for the study and its context. The next chapter presents the findings of the study.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of community college students post-transfer at the baccalaureate institution, particularly experiences influencing success in the transfer pipeline leading to a baccalaureate degree. The analysis of the interview data yielded five super-ordinate themes and 14 corresponding subthemes. The super-ordinate themes and their subthemes were: 1) Perceptions Impacting Continuation (1.1 Self-Efficacy, 1.2 Means to an End; 2) Significance of the Community College (2.1 Explore Majors and Career Goals, 2.2 Financial Savings, 2.3 Provided Foundation 2.4 Integration; 3) Transitions (3.1 Orientations, 3.2 Moving from One Institution to Another, 3.3 Emotions; 4) Experiences at the 4-year Institution (4.1 Social Integration and Peers, 4.2 Faculty and Staff, and 5) Supportive Resources (5.1 Peers and Family, 5.2 Faculty and Staff, 5.3 Institutional Factors. Superordinate themes and subthemes were recognized as those that recurred in at least three of the seven participants’ interview data. Table 1 provides a listing of the super-ordinate and subthemes that were identified through the analysis process, in addition to the recurrence of each theme across participants.

Table 1 Identification of Recurring Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes</th>
<th>Mariah</th>
<th>Julian</th>
<th>Tobias</th>
<th>Amanda</th>
<th>Emily</th>
<th>Jill</th>
<th>Krista</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Perceptions Impacting Continuation</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.1 Self-Efficacy</td>
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<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Means to an End</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Significance of the Community College</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>Julian</td>
<td>Tobias</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Krista</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Explore Majors and Career Goals</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Financial Savings</td>
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<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Provided Foundation</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Social Integration</td>
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<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Transitions</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<td>3.1 Orientation</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.2 Moving from One Institution to Another</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>3.3 Emotions</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>4) Experiences at the 4-Year Institution</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>4.1 Social Integration and Peers</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>4.2 Faculty and Staff</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>5) Supportive Resources</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>5.1 Peers and Family</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Faculty and Staff</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>5.4 Institutional Factors</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perceptions Impacting Continuation

College students who are on the transfer pathway have beliefs and perceptions that can support, or hinder, navigation through the completion of a baccalaureate degree. The first superordinate theme that was identified in this study illustrated the influence of beliefs of oneself and one’s circumstances in order to meet an ultimate goal. Self-awareness of growth in academic skill, problem solving, confidence or college student attributes result in motivation and assurance to continue on the transfer pathway. Hardships, such as financial, high stress or dissatisfaction can be endured with a focus on an end goal. The researcher found two specific areas relating to perceptions across the participants. One perception was one’s own belief about capability in persistence, and the other was one’s perception of enduring the means in order to achieve the end-result of meeting one’s goal. Thus, the two subthemes discussed here are: Self-Efficacy, and Means to an End.

Self-Efficacy

All participants shared experiences indicating a belief in one’s own capability to persist along the transfer pathway and ultimately earn a bachelors degree. For some, it was an experience that indicated capability, and for others, it was an intrinsic belief or self-perception. Krista, who attended community college full-time as a high school senior, found the experience to be not just an exploration of majors but also an exploration of the feasibility of going to college and her capability to succeed. She stated,

I just wasn’t sure if I could handle it or you know if the work load would be too much or too difficult for me but when I went to early college it really kind of changed my outlook on college because you know first of all it was tuition free and then I also made Dean’s list both semesters which was like “oh maybe I can do this.” It was just a huge motivator
for me and it kind of pushed me to work harder and go to Valleyview Technical College for a four-year degree.

Krista’s initial efforts at community college convinced her that she was capable of being a successful college student, motivating her to continue along the transfer pathway. Furthermore, Krista believed that self-motivation and a commitment to a plan were essential for success as a transfer student, describing it as, “if you have a plan to get a bachelor’s degree, then you gotta stick with it you know there’s lots of things that can get in the way but like you know you just need to think like long-term.” Personal characteristics and fortitude were essential to Krista for success as a college transfer student, illustrating her experience that student perceptions and beliefs were factors in transfer student persistence.

Julian believed his ability to recognize and take advantage of all the 4-year institution had to offer was back on his “maturity and experience.” Julian was homeschooled through high school and was unsure how or if he belonged in a college environment. He gained comfort and confidence through his community college experience, describing it as,

I would be mortally afraid of just raising my hand and asking a question. A stupid question. Everybody might know, “Oh he doesn’t know this piece of knowledge.” Everybody would know it or whatever. People would just ask sometimes really stupid questions. I’m like “I can do that too.” I would start asking questions in class and getting very vocal, which I had never done before. It was just a big confidence builder.

Julian’s newfound comfort and confidence was important for him to continue as a college student, and to integrate into the environment.

When asked about the cause of her academic success, Emily stated her motivation for doing well was being financially responsible for her education. She described it as, “the fact that
I’m paying for this myself. My parents aren’t helping me. So if I’m not pushing myself to succeed, who’s going to?” Emily believed she was capable and was self-motivated to be academically successful.

Krista believed that in order to be ready for transition between institutions, she had to convince herself that she was capable. She described this as,

It’s kind of like something you need to like decide in your mind, it’s kind of like a battle in your mind that you have to kind decide for yourself, like I can do this, when you finally decide ‘I can do this.

Krista acknowledged having a belief in her own capabilities was important to persist in the transfer pathway. For Krista, having a sense of self-efficacy was essential.

Amanda adamantly described her nursing program as rigorous with extremely high expectations for its students. She has worked very hard to maintain stellar performance, and was under great stress. However, she recognized her capabilities and her tenacity; she did not doubt her ability to successfully complete the nursing program. She described the stress she was under, and her persistence, as growth from last semester to this one with, “My med-surg book’s taped together. I threw it so many times. Cry weekly. Meltdowns. I haven't had a single meltdown this semester. Haven't had a meltdown.” Amanda’s growth in confidence and coping skills, with the knowledge she would persist, was important to her successfully continuing in the rigorous nursing program to earn her BSN.

Mariah repeatedly described herself as, “I've always been very determined” and in achieving her educational goals, she shared, “Determinism is always something (for me).” She also described herself as, “Very, very driven.” Her self-described strength and sense of independence was part of her self-identity and a contributor to her persistence as a college
student. Mariah admitted to currently struggling to manage balancing being a college student and working full-time, and would soon be changing jobs to one with a more flexible schedule to accommodate her college classes. However, she recognized gaining even more independence and the extent of her capabilities by being able to handle herself what she’d previously sought help to do. She described having a, “meltdown” each semester and going to her former Upward Bound counselor about finances as well as about managing both full-time work and college. For the first time this semester, “I didn’t go to her this semester. I figured it out on my own.” For Mariah, a further sense of independence and self-sufficiency contributed to a sense of self-efficacy.

Tobias’ priority was social integration post-transfer. Upon enrolling at Countryside University, he knew strategies for meeting people were essential. He illustrated self-confidence in meeting his goal when he shared, “Definitely making friends was difficult at first. I can do it easily because I really don’t care what other people think.” This self-confidence enabled him to be proactive in meeting others and achieve successful social integration as part of his transfer pathway experience.

Jill, retired from a military career, viewed her self-efficacy as part of her comradery. She viewed her peer group as essential to helping her be academically successful and as a means to meeting her goals as a college student. She described studying with others where they offered one another support, and where she experienced it as a critical factor in her success. In preparing for exams, in particular a subject where she struggled, she described being capable of success with challenges by working as a group,

We were all trying together … When it came time for our exams and this back room back here, we would actually arrange it. I have pictures of where we set up tables and we
would all take portions of things that we were strong on and we would teach it on the board and then we would take turns teaching it. That's how we learned. That helped break down barriers and walls, to do things as a group.

Indicative of her military background, her sense of self-efficacy came from having found a strong peer group and working with them as a team to achieve her goals. Each participant experienced a sense of personal responsibility or confidence in continuing along transfer pathway to ultimately earn a bachelors degree.

**Means to an End**

For five participants, a perception keeping them in college and moving along the transfer pathway was keeping the end goal, a baccalaureate degree, in the forefront. For some, this ultimate goal supported their persistence in enduring, despite challenges or difficulties. For others, a career goal inspired continuing on the transfer pathway. Three of these participants viewed the community college as simply a stepping stone, or even within an unpleasant circumstances, on the way to earn a bachelor’s degree

Emily was committed to earning her BSW in order to meet her career goal. Despite financial hardship, this goal propelled her to continue in college. She stated, “(I continued on after earning an associate’s degree) because I wanted to be a social worker and that’s what drove me to just go do it … I know I want to be a social worker. I know that’s what I’m here to do. If I don’t get my degree, what am I going to do with my life?” Completing a baccalaureate degree is a tremendous accomplishment for Emily, and despite uncertainty about finances and initially about her pathway, earning her BSW is a milestone. Emily articulated the significance of the end result with, “I didn’t have the money, nor did I have any idea where I was going at first. It’s just like being here, and being finally finishing is the best thing in the world to me.”
Mariah expressed a, “disconnect” from campus, physically and emotionally, leading to a cycle of struggling without seeking assistance, and without assistance she continues to struggle. Working full-time had contributed to burn out, and resulted in lack of motivation and effort. With no social integration at Countryside University, her goal was to complete a degree, without acknowledging importance of quality or of any college experiences outside of class. She described it as, “(Being a college student is) stressful irritating. I don’t enjoy it … I am burnt out. I am trying harder, but I struggle with that. I’m trying to be a better student, that’s for sure.”

Krista, one of the two participants who enrolled in community college full-time as a high school senior, will be taking summer courses back at community college, an example of “swirling admissions,” as they will transfer back towards her baccalaureate degree. Her goal is an earlier graduation, as she reasoned “(I) just want to get it done.”

Julian remained at community college for his final semester before earning his associates degree with dread, as he had a commitment to completing the degree prior to transfer. However, the intense, unpleasant experience illustrated a means to an end, as continuing on the transfer pathway would ultimately result in a baccalaureate degree for him. He expressed the experience as,

It was really just a matter of getting through it … it was a smarter choice to stick with it, carry through, acquire the associate’s degree. It would just be cleaner … I was beyond the point of no return. If I pulled out then, it would have been stupid. I’m like “Okay, just a couple more months.” I have to get through. It’s like eating your nasty vegetables. You’ve just got to get through.

In contrast to other participants, Julian believed that college was more than a degree in the end, but about growth and experiences as well.
Two other participants described community college as a, “stepping stone.” Emily illustrated the role of community college for her, contrasting with that of the baccalaureate institution. She did not attend her graduation from Eastern State Community College as she viewed it as insignificant, as it was a means to an end, whereas graduating from Countryside University was a major accomplishment. Emily shared, “Eastern State Community College wasn’t very important to me, because it was just a stepping stone. This is the big one. This is the one I’m going to remember for the rest of my life…it’s always been eye on the ball, this is the one you want.” Amanda described Countryside University as “a higher education place,” and community college as a, “stepping stone to (higher education).” For her, the transfer pathway was more than a means to end but a necessity to achieve her ultimate goal of a bachelor’s in nursing degree.

**Conclusion**

Each of the participants shared perceptions relating to continuing along the transfer pathway, with the end-goal of a baccalaureate degree. Beliefs about one’s capabilities, experiences indicating potential for success, and attitudes that support continuation are all perceptions that assist navigation in the transfer pathway. Struggles and hardships experienced by community college transfer students, like self-doubt and stress, financial issues, and dissatisfaction, can be endured with the knowledge of capabilities and growth with a focus on goals. Participants’ beliefs and perceptions about themselves and about being a transfer student influenced their willingness to continue on the transfer pathway. The next superordinate theme, significance of the community college, also provides factors that influenced students navigating the transfer pathway to complete a bachelor’s degree.
Significance of the Community College

Students who attended community college as part of earning a baccalaureate degree found value in their community college enrollment. It provided opportunities to explore college majors and future careers. Community college gave exposure to many options and the chance to try different fields without commitment in a financially feasible way. Community college also built a foundation of academic skills, prerequisite coursework, transferable credits and personal characteristics, such as maturity, that were beneficial post-transfer. While social integration might lack at community college, its absence does not necessarily interfere with student persistence. The second superordinate theme identified in this study illustrates the significance of enrolling in community college as part of the pathway to earning a baccalaureate degree. The researcher found four specific areas relating to attending community college across the participants. One area was an opportunity to explore majors and career goals. Another was the financial savings experienced; for several participants, the financial savings while exploring majors and careers was presented. A third area was providing a foundation, for some academic and for others emotional, for the baccalaureate institution. The fourth area involved social integration at the community college, or for most of these participants, the lack thereof. Thus, the four subthemes discussed here are: Explore Majors and Career Goals, Financial Savings, Provided Foundation, and Social Integration.

Exploring Majors and Career Goals

Five participants shared experiences exploring majors and career goals at community college. They described the opportunities at and the affordability of community college as a good chance to explore what to major in and ultimately what to pursue as a career goal. Professors and course content lent themselves to exposure and exploration of majors and careers for these
participants. These experiences carried them forward to their baccalaureate experiences with clearer goals for themselves.

After graduating high school, Emily was uncertain what she wanted to do. She took a year off from school, decided to go to college, and enrolled in a summer class at the local community college. She initially wanted to major in early education, but after a job shadow, it was clear it was not the career for her. This career exploration resulted in her changing her mind, and she described the result as, “Right away I transferred to liberal arts studies degree, so I could just take whatever I wanted, and explore around.” While in a community college class, Emily had an instructor who told stories of her workplace which were so influential to her that she based her career decision on these shared career experiences. Emily described it as, “She just kept telling us stories about her job, and I fell right in love with it right away.” Emily believed community college can give a direction, a plan, for a baccalaureate degree, stating, “Starting at a community college does give you more of a chance to just figure out what you want to do with your life.”

Amanda did not see community college as a true college experience, but a place to explore options without a commitment. However, it did provide her with essential academic skills and pathway foundation. Amanda initially intended to major in education, but after becoming a parent herself, decided she did not want to work in the education system. While nursing did not seem to be a likely fit for her personality, she wanted to work with people. Community college offered her the chance to try coursework in the field, and explained it as, “I was like well, worst-case scenario I start the process and either I can do it or I can’t. I found that I excelled in science.” When asked if she’d recommend this pathway to others, she responded, “If you don’t know what you want to do, don’t go to school. Go to Eastern State Community
College. Do a – or any – community college. Do it little by little. Go part-time.” Amanda’s experience illustrated that community college played a critical role in the higher education pathway for those who are uncertain of their abilities and/or goals.

In contrast, Julian did not have a solid plan prior to starting the pathway, and decided the next step as he went along. He described himself repeatedly as, “I know I’m not a good planner. I don’t think ahead very much.” When faced with his final semester at community college, Julian remained unsure of his long-term goals. Upon meeting with his advisor, he “stumbled” onto the articulation agreement with Countryside University and thought, “‘Hell, that sounds like a great idea, at least for the interim.’ I figured I’d come and try it out.”

Community college gave Tobias an opportunity to identify career goals in an affordable way. He described it as, “I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I thought I’m not going to shell out 35 grand a year for something I’m not 100% sure I’m going to do. It was difficult for me to figure out what I wanted to do.” Tobias believed spending money for uncertainty would have been unwise. When trying an initial major in nursing, he realized, “The science classes just weren’t really for me.” Acknowledging community college lacked a social aspect for him, Tobias did find the strength of community college was, “Experiencing as much as you possibly can, as far as different majors. They don’t really have a lot to offer as far as extra-curriculars …But as far as figuring out your career, it’s a great way to figure out what you want to do or you don’t.”

For Amanda, community college was a good place to try out foundational coursework for nursing, to see if she was capable and interested before committing to it as a major and as a career. She explained, “If I didn’t do well, if I wasn’t able to do well in A & P certainly I’m not going to be able to do well in any of the other nursing classes. And if that wasn’t gonna work for
me, then yeah, I’d have to figure out what I’m gonna do.” She viewed community college as a means for anyone to explore, with her final interview statement being,

I think Eastern State Community College is a great stepping stone. Get your feet wet, see what you want to do, take a bunch of different classes, and then say, “Oh I really like those classes I took … maybe that’s what I want to do.”

Her experience illustrated the role of community college in giving students a financially reasonable way to explore majors and careers.

Krista also found community college to be a good choice for exploring options at an affordable cost. Her experience at community college involved, “I just tried different things out, seeing what I liked.” She described it as,

(the transfer pathway means) you’re able to kind – like understand what you want a little more in life. You’re able to understand what classes you want to take and its able to give you a little more direction, I feel…It definitely gives you direction I feel if you’re like unsure of what you want to major in college I would tell anyone to do to community college, take like a variety to classes and a variety of subjects and figure out what you like best, go from there.

Ultimately Krista used her community college course exploration to find a major she liked and did well in, explaining it as, “I took a couple of business classes at (community college) and I realized those are the ones that I like them most, I did really well in them so I kinda just decided to continue off of that and I ended up really liking it.” Krista believed this pathway to be a wise choice as an affordable means for her to gain a sense of direction and to explore majors and career goals.
Financial Savings

Four participants shared their experiences with saving money by initially enrolling in community college. For one, Mariah, was independently paying for college and took pride in her financial acumen by attending community college. The other participants found community college to be an affordable avenue to start college, giving each of them an opportunity to explore majors and careers.

Mariah was extremely aware of money, and repeatedly stressed her financial savvy in saving money. Working full-time, Mariah prided herself in being independent, stating, “I’m independent. I have to pay my bills on my own. I have to make the money. I have to feed myself. I don’t have anyone.” Mariah was adamant that taking your core classes by starting at a “cheaper” school was the wise choice. She explained, “It was definitely, definitely, definitely smarter to do community college. You save so much money. One semester in tuition at Eastern State Community College is entirely different than a semester of tuition at Countryside.” She also recognized that being fiscally wise also influenced her future, and did not want to be saddled in student debt. She stated, “I don’t want to take out loans. I don’t want to be stuck in debt for the rest of my life.” For Mariah, the savings in initially attending community college versus a 4-year institution has a long-term impact, seeing it as “definitely a smart investment, a smart idea.” The financial savings was so powerful to Mariah that she illustrated the meaning of being a community college transfer student as, “The best image I can say is just someone who saved a ton of money.” Mariah’s focus on financial savings was brought to fruition by the community college transfer pathway.

Emily recognized that the money she saved as a positive to utilizing the transfer pathway, particularly that it made it an affordable way to explore options, describing her experience as
“It’s great. You’re going to save money. You’re going to be able to take different classes, and know what you want to do before going off and spending 20 to 40,000 per year …” Like Emily, Tobias also found starting at a community college to be a financially feasible way to explore college and careers, and to develop concrete goals. Tobias described starting at a community college, “mainly because I didn’t know what I wanted to do. Other than that, cost was very big … I was either going to (a 4-year college) or the (community college). $35,000 a year for something I wasn’t really sure that I wanted to do or $3,500 for (community college)? It was a no-brainer.” Krista also connected the financial savings with an opportunity to explore options and to gain a goal for one’s major, describing it as,

   At the same time (as exploring) you’re saving a substantial amount of money going to community college and that kind takes a burden off of you know that you’re taking these classes and you’re not wasting a ton of money for something you might not want to do.

Krista saw value in working hard as a high school senior by enrolling in the early college program. Describing it as, “early college definitely helped me out and put me on a fast track and it saved me a lot of money too because it was all tuition free,” she did not view it as missing out on senior year, but instead as a way to complete college in less time, and to save money. For Krista, Emily and Tobias, investing heavily in a college, without a definitive major or career goal, was not a viable option.

**Built a Foundation**

Six participants experienced building a foundation at community college. For some, it gave them a chance to mature before taking on the 4-year institution. Others found building academic skills important for post-transfer experiences. And some found it a good foundation in establishing goals for their pathway.
The only participant to live on campus, Emily, believed that attending Eastern State Community College first was an opportunity to mature as that experience primarily involved adult students. She described it as, “a lot of them (community college students) were older … I was really okay with it. I think it actually helped me mature a lot” in comparing herself to less-mature behavior of her peers at Countryside University. Tobias also experienced the time spent at community college as an opportunity to become ready for the 4-year institution, stating, “I think I’d be a little less mature” if he’d started there as a freshman. While Tobias worked full-time in community college, he also found that it was a valuable experience as “it was some growing up and learning some work ethic.”

Krista also believed community college was an influential foundation for her. When asked if community college prepared her for Valleyview Technical College, she responded, “Yeah. You know it helped me realized what I liked and what I didn’t like and what I saw myself doing for the future.” For her, she felt prepared with having developed a clear goal. Like others, Emily found community college to be the basis for her pathway, and ultimately her career. She stated, “Eastern State Community College was just a stepping stone to find out what I wanted to do with my life.”

Mariah believed community college gave her numerous tools to prepare her for success post-transfer, including independence and transfer credits. She stated, “I got all my core classes done. They weren’t hard. They helped me.” Mariah described it as,

Eastern State Community College was a wonderful opportunity and it really helped me out. I’d be so much farther behind if it wasn’t for Eastern State Community College and all the tools they’ve given me. If I just jumped right into Countryside, I just don’t think it would have been the best situation, but Eastern State Community College, I got so many
credits under my belt. I became independent. That’s the first time I was independent and not under my parents wing.

Mariah recognized the benefits of attending community college before the baccalaureate institution, and believed it to be instrumental for her.

For Amanda, community college was the place in her pathway where she completed the prerequisites needed for her BSN, as illustrated with, “Now I’m not in a prerequisite place. I’m now in a higher education place.” She saw community college as a preparatory place to build an educational foundation. In describing her nursing coursework, she articulated the importance of her community college science courses building up to those at Countryside University with, “those are the foundation of your house.” Amanda believed community college gave her the academic foundation and skills she needed, stating, “I don’t think anything can prepare anyone for full-blown nursing school. You can’t. You just have to go in it, and you either make it or you don’t. But I think Eastern State Community College prepared me.”

When asked if community college prepared him for Countryside University, Julian replied, “Yeah, I do.” Julian found that learning to use the online portal for the state’s college was helpful. He stated, “It was good knowing that coming into Countryside.” He further explained that writing-intensive courses were an essential preparation. He described it as, I wrote papers every week, which I wasn’t used to. I guess that got me into the mode. I’m glad that I came straight from community college into this. I don’t know if that would have … The momentum would have carried over if I hadn’t. Also just being in the classroom.
Julian’s preparatory foundation was not only in academic skills, but also in the energy to function as a college student. It was an essential experience for Julian to have the impetus to continue on the higher education pathway.

**Social Integration**

One aspect often experienced by college students is interacting with others. Social integration would encompass having relationships with peers, campus involvement, and a sense of belonging. However, three of the participants experienced a lack of social integration at community college. One participant attended two community college sites, and opted to commute to one where she felt integrated versus the local one where she did not. Most of those who reported a lack of social integration also found they would have preferred to experience it.

Tobias, who worked full-time in community college, also experienced a lack of social integration there. For him, he found the students were mainly non-traditional age. While Emily had found this environment provided her an opportunity to mature, Tobias found it difficult. Committing to a robust social life post-transfer, social life at community college was, “It was tough, no social life” for him. When asked about clubs or a social life at community college, Emily stated, “Not at (community college). You kind of hang out in class with everybody.”

Krista, who began at Eastern State Community College as a high school senior, also experienced a lack of peer integration. For her, she believed she would have benefited from more structured opportunities to interact with other early college students. Krista described her experience as, “we’re kind of just thrown in there as normal students …I feel like they could have like maybe like I don’t know, had meetings or get-togethers with all the early college students so we can all meet other early college students.”
Julian’s lack of connectedness at community college was profoundly unpleasant for him. Julian did not experience a sense of belonging at Eastern State Community College, as, “I felt like the whole system was set up for a particular lifestyle or whatever.” He emphatically described, “There’s NO social aspects of community college whatsoever. Not that I had.” He referred to staying there as being like, “eating your nasty vegetables” and just getting through. Julian explained, “It was just that I didn’t feel like that … I didn’t get a sense of belonging there.” Julian described going to community college as,

It wasn’t exactly what I wanted at the time, especially when it comes to social life, which there was none... you have your one day a week that you go into class. You sit through your three-hour lecture and then you go home and you have your homework.

Julian, living at home, had no social life and just went to class as a community college student. He explained, “I felt like I was missing something in a lot of different areas. Maybe socially.” Julian found that it was, “just too much of one thing. It was so compartmentalized. I’m sure that part of it was living at my parents’ place.” For him, there was no balance of school and social lives. As someone who had been homeschooled through high school, he longed for a social aspect to schooling, which was lacking for him at Eastern State Community College.

Amanda attended two different community college centers in the same system, Eastern State Community College, moving partway through her enrollment. However, she did not like the new center and opted to drive over an hour to return to the one she previously attended, preferring both the instructors and students at the other. She described, “I didn’t like a lot of the professors. Some of them were okay. I didn’t find the student population to be as friendly (as the first one). Never felt like I fit in in any of the classes. (I) just didn’t match.” For Amanda, a sense of fitting in at community college was important. For her, it wasn’t community college
itself where she did not fit in, just one of the sites. A sense of integration was so important to her at community college that she drove over an hour to experience it. Thus the lack of social integration for participants indicated something they might have preferred, but it was not essential to their experiences of persistence.

**Conclusion**

The community college experiences provided several factors that influenced participants continuing on the transfer pathway. Participants found that it offered valued opportunity to explore careers and majors, provided foundational skills and confidence, and was a less costly option towards completing a bachelor’s degree. While some participants identified a lack of social integration, they realized it was not a critical aspect in this stage of the transfer pathway, considering the other beneficial factors of community college. The next superordinate theme, transfer transitions, presents participants’ experiences with transitioning between institutions.

**Transitions**

When transitioning from one institution to another, it is assumed that there will be a time of adjustment. All of the participants described their experiences transitioning from one institution to the next. Transitioning from one setting to another involves adjusting to a larger environment with new experiences. Institutional processes and procedures, such as orientation and transfer of credits, can support or cause struggle for students navigating the transition. A variety of emotions experienced by transferring students are both normal and surmountable. The third superordinate theme identified in this study illustrates the experiences involved in going from community college to a baccalaureate institution. The researcher found three specific areas related to the process of transitioning between institutions. The first area was orientation. The second area was the adjustment and experiences of changing institutions. The third area involved
the emotions experienced during the process. Thus, the three subthemes discussed here are: Orientation, Moving from One Institution to Another, and Emotions.

**Orientation**

Orientation was an introduction to the college campus, the college’s procedures, and to peers, staff and faculty at the college. Often times it also involves course selection and other necessary processes. All participants shared their experiences at the 4-year institution, and several stated it differed from those who began as a freshman.

Two participants experienced transfer orientation as more than an introduction to campus, as they determined their major and future career there. A revolutionary and life-altering change for Jill happened during orientation when she stumbled upon a different career field than the one she assumed she would continue from her military career.

I came here and of course, I went for the accounting aspect because that’s what I was comfortable with, that’s what I knew. While I was just getting ready to leave and they said something about ‘For those interested in science.’ I thought, ‘No, no science!’ and I heard ‘exercise’ somewhere and I was like, ‘I’m going to follow this group.’ … I met (the professors and) was just like oh my gosh, I can’t believe I just totally changed careers. I had no idea.

Tobias decided on his baccalaureate major based on courses he wanted to avoid. He decided not to continue in criminal justice, the field of his associates degree, and decided to major in teaching. At orientation, he perused the courses for different majors, and shared, “I looked at the lady and said, ‘For environmental science, I have to take physics and for English I do not.’ She said, ‘That’s correct.’ I said, ‘English it is.”’ This pivotal time for Tobias and for Jill took the experience of orientation to a different level of influence at the baccalaureate institution.
Amanda and Mariah had both attended Countryside University prior to transferring there after Eastern State Community College. Amanda had initially attended after high school, and left after her freshman year. Mariah stayed on campus several summers as part of the Upward Bound program while a high school student. Neither Amanda nor Mariah initially found orientation to be of value. Amanda described her attitude, “I didn’t do a lot because I’d already been there. I’d gone there…I’m in my thirties. I’m here for an education and that’s it.” Amanda believed transfer orientation was an effort to have transfer students feel a sense of belonging. She reasoned, “They want transfer student to feel like they are part of the Countryside community.”

Amanda illustrated her attitude with orientation as, “I don’t want to go hang out on campus. I’ve done my time. But they want to get you involved.” She subsequently met her cohort at orientation, and her continued relationship with them contributed significantly to her college success. Mariah attended campus orientation with freshman, not the transfer orientation as it came with a financial incentive. Mariah illustrated her experience with,

It (orientation) was a very pointless week. I really only went because you were guaranteed a scholarship or grant … I know everything they were talking about. I didn’t value it. I was like ‘this is all repeating. This is annoying. I don’t want to be here.’ I had to live on campus for the week. I felt out of place because I already knew everything. I was kind of there for the fact of the scholarship, not to help me.

Already familiar with the campus, she was motivated by the monetary reward even though attending orientation for several days was inconvenient and to her, unnecessary. While Amanda had long-term gains with the social connections she made at orientation, Mariah did not see any positive gain from attending the more extensive freshmen orientation.
Some participants found transfer orientation to be significantly less-than that experienced by freshmen. Emily hesitated to even call it, “orientation,” and when asked if she attended one, she responded, “Not so much. It was very different. I had a half day where they just do these orientated you in, and that was that. It wasn’t what they got.” Tobias experienced adjusting to the new environment as more difficult because of the lack of substantial orientation for transfer students. Recognizing that freshmen benefited from a multi-day orientation, Tobias lacked information about the college that would have allowed him to integrate sooner and easier. He explained,

I was very confused my first semester or two here, as far as where things were. Not academic. Not like, where buildings were, any stuff like that, but more like “I want to start a club, how do I do that?” … I kind of felt like freshmen, they were given all of that because they have like a week of orientation. So transfers, it’s one day. So I missed quite a bit, as far as where the resources were and who to talk to and stuff like that. It’s not that the resources there weren’t offered. I didn’t know about our writing clinic until at least a whole semester in.

Tobias would have had an easier transition to the new environment if a more comprehensive orientation was provided for transfer students.

For Emily, being a transfer student meant that it was more difficult to come in as a transfer student than as a freshman, as the transition was less informed. In reflecting on the differences, she described it as, “It’s different. When you come as a freshman, you get everything basically thrown at you. I guess thrown at you isn’t really the right word. You get introduced to so much.” She described freshmen orientation as several days long, with transfer student orientation as a brief presentation. Not knowing how to get around campus made
transition into Countryside University difficult, with Emily stating, “I did not know where any of my classes were, any of my buildings. That was a rough start.” Emily’s experience illustrates the importance of facilitating transition between institutions as transfer students also need to be well-introduced to the new campus.

Julian attended mid-year transfer orientation with a parent. He described it as, “All the transfer students come in and the parents are invited. It’s basically just to explain what the basics of campus life were and choose the courses we were going to take.” Julian found it to be a mediocre experience, stating, “Everybody was really friendly, but then I had to choose my classes like that. Still everybody was like, ‘Hey, you should meet this person. You should meet that person.’ I felt welcome. I just felt like in my case, it was what I needed. It wasn't too hands off. It wasn't too cold either.” He did find it to be inadequate as a mid-year event, and believed “They put more of their resources into people coming at the beginning of the year.” Julian’s orientation experience was lackluster, although he attributed it to being mid-year versus being a transfer student.

However, Krista, a student at Valleyview Technical College, experienced orientation as more comprehensive and effective than at community college as it included numerous social activities. Valleyview Technical College included both freshman and transfer students. Krista described it as, “Orientation again was a lot different than Eastern State Community College’s because it was a bigger crowd of people and we actually did like activities on the campus where as at Eastern State Community College it was more of just like, kind of like getting your account set up and just doing all the online stuff.” Krista expressed identifying herself as a new student, regardless of credits earned or placement status, “It was a new student orientation so just, if you were a transfer student or if you were a student at the college for the first time it was all in like
one orientation.” Krista’s experience indicated that orientation is valuable to anyone new to campus.

**Moving from One Institution to Another**

All of the participants shared experiences moving from one institution to another. For some, it was navigating the campus. For others, it was a new culture. Several participants struggled with the transition, although none found it insurmountable.

Tobias saw transferring as an adjustment to a new culture and a time of transition. For him, it was a significantly new lifestyle. A priority for Tobias was social integration. This was illustrated when he stated,

> For transfer students, (it means) getting to know people. Being a transfer student, getting involved and learning what 4-year college is all about … I would say just getting into the swing of a routine, that’s really what it’s like. Transfer student (pause) it can be nerve-wracking. It can be difficult for sure.

For Tobias, transferring to a new institution meant reorienting oneself to a new and different setting.

Transferring meant learning a new culture and establishing a new social circle for Amanda. She stated, “Change is always hard. You get used to somewhere. I got used to Eastern State Community College and how they work and how their grade system is and what teachers expect from you there. And then you go somewhere else and it’s a whole new set of criteria you have to follow.” Amanda found transitioning to a new place to be frightening, especially not knowing anyone. She related it to, “it’s kind of like going from high school to college again. That’s how I took it.” For her, the transition between institutions was starting over. However, getting to know people eased the transition. When asked how long until she felt comfortable at
the new institution, she responded, “Not very long. I don’t even know. Maybe a month, tops. Not bad. Once you get into it, once you start meeting people, it makes going to school or class so much better.” While she successfully navigated the transition, her experiences illustrate that it is indeed a time of transition.

Emily viewed transitioning from one institution to another as having to engage in new behavior outside of her comfort zone. For her, it was difficult to be the new person at school, describing it as, “going into fifth grade in a new school, and not knowing anybody.” Feeling lost at first, Emily viewed the new institution as something to explore, to examine. She reflected,

I had no idea what I was doing around here at first, I have to say. I just remember thinking about it like a shiny new toy … I just kind of experimented. I met new people. I remember playing Frisbee with 10 people. I had no idea what their names were. It was strange. I mean normally I wouldn’t do that.

For Emily, transitioning to the new institution brought new opportunities and a new way to form a social life. However, she was not prepared for the significantly larger environment. Emily described it as, “you’re going from a big fish in a small pond to a small fish in a big pond. It’s very much like that.” She was not expecting the extent of this transition to a different institution. Emily explained it as, “I don’t believe I was prepared socially to come here. Like I was saying, I went to a very small school, because we only have maybe five or six rooms that are classroom size at (community college). Normally you take your classes with who you know anyway.”

Several participants viewed the time of transition as a struggle; all were able to navigate beyond the challenges presented by the change. The struggle for Emily transferring and being an upperclassman living on campus was having a freshman as a roommate. “I’d have to say that with going from a community college to a four-year college, the roommate thing was the worst
… I don’t believe a junior should have been paired up with a freshman at all,” Emily stated, “seeing freshmen and juniors as in very different places in life.” Tobias’ struggle was with time management, as without a full-time job, he now had more free time. The academic transition was easy for him but “it was difficult to get in the routine.”

Krista initially struggled with a larger campus. The institutions varied in size, and she described her first days on the 4-year institution’s campus as, “I had a little trouble walking around campus trying to find which building and which classroom my classes were in whereas at Eastern State Community College it was all in one building. I didn’t have to go outside.” While the large campus was a new experience, Krista quickly adjusted as illustrated by, “it was new to me. You know I never, I just haven’t had that experience before but after the first couple of days it was normal and it all set in.” While she cannot further identify how she adjusted to the larger setting, once she established a peer group she had a sense of belonging, stating, “I kinda found a friend group in my major and I kinda just followed the crowd. I don’t really know how I adjusted initially but you know it just kinda happened it was really natural and I felt like I fit right in after the first couple days.” For Krista, it was important to be able to find her way around the campus, and to feel like she fit in, in order to successfully navigate the transition between institutions.

Julian found initial troubles with his class on the first and second days, waiting in classrooms for professors who never showed due to misinformation, as, “a little bit awkward.” While he found, “I had to wander around for a couple of hours because I didn’t know anybody,” these experiences alleviated his angst about what turned out to be his actual first day of class. He described, “I came all the way down here and I was ready to go, which got me really ready to go on Wednesday.” The initial struggle of knowing how a hybrid course works at the 4-year
institution, and the anxiety about being a newcomer to campus prepared him for his actual first day.

Beyond social adjustment, five participants described different academic experiences in one institution versus the other. Emily found Countryside University as easier than community college with longer classes once per week at the latter and shorter classes several times a week at the former. She shared, “Countryside University is easier than Eastern State Community College ... Eastern State Community College is more paper written. I would be writing two 10-page papers a week at Eastern State Community College.” Krista preferred community college, finding it to be less difficult academically and its condensed class schedule more desirable. She described Valleyview Technical College as, “a lot harder and a lot more … the word is more ‘dense’ I feel whereas at Eastern State Community College I felt like I was able to manage my time and handle it a lot better.” Julian also found he preferred the longer, 3-hour, once-per-week classes at community college preferable to the shorter classes at Countryside University several times a week, stating, “as soon as you feel like you’re getting into it, it’s over.” Julian also found the courses as Countryside to be, “in general pretty easy. They don’t expect too much.” He further explained that he believed the students at the community college had other responsibilities. He explicated,

most of the other people (at community college) had other responsibilities in their life. I feel like its expected that when you’re going to Countryside, academics is the central focus of your life at that time. Those were people who had day jobs obviously and some of them were full-time parents coming in and doing classes when they could. It was just a different environment.
Julian’s adjustment to the new environment was not just academic or a new living situation, but a new culture of learners. In reflecting on the shift, Julian described his transition to Countryside University with, “I’ve been enjoying it quite a bit.”

Much like Krista, Mariah also preferred community college. She stated, “I don’t like Countryside. I’m not happy with Countryside.” As a self-supporting college student who works full-time, she found the community college schedule of longer classes meeting once a week to be more accommodating. She stated, “It’s definitely taken a toll on me, going to Countryside University. Compared to, if I were able to take these classes at community college. I’d be able to adjust my schedule better.” In addition, her commute to Countryside University is longer than it was for community college. She described her struggle,

I actually loved community college. I actually would prefer that over Countryside University…It’s been a complicated process in general to get my bachelor’s degree. I work full-time. Being that school, at Countryside University, is wherever the heck they want to put it (scheduling classes). Whatever times. It’s very hard to figure out your schedule. Then financially wise, it’s always been a struggle.

For her, the transition has made life more difficult and stressful as she struggles to meet financial responsibilities and goals. Mariah does not see the 4-year institution as accommodating, making the pathway difficult post-transfer.

Conversely, Tobias found his experiences at Countryside University to be a different kind of exhausting than community college. While he did not view it more difficult academically, he shared, “I think it’s amazing how much I can get mentally exhausted and how quickly that exhausts me versus physical work…Its very mental work.” Tobias worked a full-time manual
labor job at community college, he found that post-transfer, focusing on both academics and social life to be draining.

The transfer of credits when moving from one institution to another was also a factor experienced by six participants. No participant experienced a major barrier to transferring in credits from community college. While her credits ultimately transferred, some of Emily’s coursework was not aligned with Countryside University requirements and it took self-advocacy to get them accepted. When asked about transfer roadblocks, Emily responded with, “The credit transfer was a little rocky at first … I had to go through the paperwork of getting it to fill (the requirements).” Krista found that while all of her credits transferred, some were considered electives rather than towards her major, stating “they all transferred, some of them that I took didn’t directly transfer to my major because they were ore computer programming classes.”

Mariah also reported no issues with transfer of credits. She stated, “All of my credits transferred over because it’s an (in-state) college.” Similarly, Julian experienced no roadblocks, with all credits transferring, describing it as, “It was very smooth.”

Two participants transferred in from other states, and thus did not have state articulation or pathways in place. Unlike the other participants, Jill took the classes she transferred sporadically during her military career, describing it as, “I did classes periodically, here and there, just because I had to and it was the things I didn’t want to like stats and English composition, those kinds of things. I really had no idea what I was going to do.” For her, the courses were part of military expectations in her role in finance. She was surprised to find Countryside University would not only accept her transfer credits, but that she could utilize them to change career fields. “I looked at him and I was like ‘You mean, I don’t have to stay with finance?’ They’re like ‘No, you can do whatever you want to do.’” For her, this acceptance and
flexibility in utilizing transfer credits opened up possibilities for a new career. Tobias discovered that not all colleges, including his in-state university, would accept his transfer credits. He illustrated his recognition of the significance of transfer credits when he stated, “I’ve worked very hard for those credits. If I’m not going to get the credit for them, then really what was the point of going to community college in the first place.” Tobias was committed to utilizing his community college credits towards his baccalaureate degree, recognizing they have value as an investment of time, effort and money. Transferring of credits successfully and almost seamlessly from one institution to another was an important factor for participants in navigating the transfer pathway.

A few participants had issues with advisement and with registering for classes at their new institution. Two participants described Countryside University’s registering of transfer students as occurring after native students had registered. The participants described it as a minor difficulty during the process as they found courses they needed or wanted to take were already full. Emily described her advisement at community college as helpful yet its timing unfortunate, stating, “They helped me apply and they helped me get in. After we figured out that I was coming here, that I’d actually been accepted, they did help me get into the right classes but by then it was too late.” Julian described registering as a transfer student, mid-year as “I basically was not given the same choices that anyone who had been going here since the beginning of the year would have. I’d have to take whatever was left.”

Mariah also struggled with advisement for transferring to Countryside University. When asked if Eastern State Community College prepared her for transferring, Mariah’s response came after a pause, “I was very conflicted. I didn’t know when I was supposed to take the classes to begin in the social work program and I really wasn’t getting any guidance. That was both a
Eastern State Community College and Countryside matter.” She stated she would recommend the institutions had “better advisement over transferring and what classes.” Holding both institutions responsible, for Mariah there was a lack of information and advisement she needed to smoothly transfer. Mariah found her transition between institutions to be otherwise uneventful as she was returning to a familiar campus. She stated, “I honestly really didn’t struggle with the transfer process. It was just a longer drive. It really didn’t affect me in any sort of way.”

Two participants shared strategies for navigating the transition, including self-advocacy and coping with change. Amanda stressed the importance of self-advocacy as essential in navigating institutional transfer. She stated, “don’t let your advisor do it all for you. Be proactive. Call the school you’re planning to attend. Get your foot in the door. Speak to an advisor. Speak to someone because a lot of stuff there slips through the cracks. You really need to be on top of it.” For Amanda, her experience indicated transfer students cannot depend solely on institutions to navigate the transfer process, and students themselves must take ownership to seek information and answers. Krista acknowledged that students in the transfer pathway have to be able to navigate transitions. She described it as, “If you’re good with changing up your environment and changing up like you know, if you’re willing to meet new people, try new things you know transferring over to a different college is not that difficult to do.”

These participants experienced some transition issues with moving from one institution to the next. None of them found the obstacles they faced to be insurmountable. Their experiences indicated that moving between institutions was a change requiring adjustment and navigation.
Emotions

Six of the participants shared the emotions they experienced when moving from one institution to another. Some of them found the emotions to be positive, and other experienced more difficult emotions.

Krista found that, much like being ready for the new environment from high school to community college, she was also ready to transfer to the baccalaureate institution from community college, experiencing it as, “I was really excited for (the transition) and I was really looking forward to what it held for me.” Several of the participants found Countryside University to be a welcoming and accepting environment.

Jill developed a sense of belonging as a returning adult student who was changing career fields. She stated, “In one of my psychology classes, I met a young lady and she was my first friend here and I thought it was also unique that not only did she display kindness towards me and no segregation, it was like that throughout everybody here at school.” Jill’s perspective about education has contributed to transitioning to college as a positive experience, describing it as “Education is an ongoing process. I never stop learning, never … (laughter) I’m telling you, I used to think, ‘This is it, I never want to do it (go to school) again.’ No, not anymore.” For Jill, the transition both out of a twenty-plus-year career and attending college, was eased by social integration and the atmosphere of inclusion, “There was these opportunities being provided to me which helped me in my transition from military to civilian sector. There as a lot more going on mentally and emotionally that this type of, this step in my life, really was beneficial for me.” Jill’s emotions regarding transitioning to a new institution were positive.

Mariah did not experience social angst or needing time to become accustomed to the campus, as she felt familiar with it from her prior experiences with Upward Bound. She
described starting at Countryside University as, “I just kind of jumped into it.” However, she shared fear over transitioning without adequate advisement. Mariah described it as, “I struggled with my schedule and I didn’t know what classes I needed to take so that was scary.”

Several participants described anxiety or nervousness about entering the new environment. Some of these participants described mixed emotions in the transition, primarily anxiety and excitement. Julian felt, “a little nervous about going to class on Tuesday, but by Wednesday, I’m just like ‘Come on. I just want to go to class.’ I felt comfortable immediately when I did get into class.” For him, arriving for his first class, which ultimately was not held due to a mix up made him ready for his actual first day of classes.

Jill described initially feeling, “excitement. It had changed after the first little bit and went from anxiety to being excited to be here every day.” Jill, an adult student, assumed that traditional-age students must be more nervous in going to college, and did not seem to recognize that a career-changer adult student was an anomaly. She described that transition,

I had been 20-plus years in one career field and I was at the top of my game and I was like, ‘college?’ This sounded very intimidating. I can’t even fathom what someone who’s young has to go through and me being fortunate enough to experience the things that I had and still, I had anxiety about coming to school. I did it and it (anxiety) was like an overnight thing.

Tobias had similar feelings. He was nervous about leaving home and about staring somewhere new, but also ready for a change. When asked his reflections of starting at Countryside University, he described it as, “Definitely nervous. I was nervous, but I was also excited. Other than that, I was at such a place where I was ready to be done where I was.” When Amanda was asked if she was nervous about transitioning to Countryside University, she responded with, “I
was. I didn’t know anyone…but I was so scared to start (community college) too. I was like I’m 31 years old. What am I doing?” Amanda acknowledged that fear was normal when beginning at a new institution and as an older adult, to be reentering college.

None of the participants believed their emotions to be alarming or unusual, but instead as a normal response to a new environment, and quickly moved beyond any difficult emotions.

**Conclusion**

The institutional mechanism offered to traverse between institutions, orientation, was seen as needing improvement in the perspective of many participants, and utilized by all participants. Transfer students must adjust to a different and larger setting, and benefit from peer connections, self-advocacy and institutional factors like effective advisement. The new culture experiences at the 4-year institution presents a time of transition to adjust to the many aspects of change. The issues relating to transitioning from one institution to another were acknowledged to be normal considering the change, and quickly navigated with success. The next superordinate theme presents participants’ experiences at the baccalaureate institution that influenced navigating the transfer pathway resulting in a successful completion of the baccalaureate degree.

**Experiences at the Baccalaureate Institution**

Students experience a new environment comprised of connections with peers, campus, faculty and staff post-transfer. The fourth superordinate theme that was identified reflected relationships with people and the campus at the baccalaureate institution. Peers provided a sense of support, community, friendship and belonging. Campus involvement and a social life are important experiences for many transfer students. Initial staff contacts and accessible faculty also provide important, quality experiences at the baccalaureate institution. For some community college transfer students, connection with peers, campus, faculty and staff are irrelevant to
earning a baccalaureate degree via the transfer pathway. The researcher found two specific areas relating to post-transfer institutional experiences. Thus, the two subthemes discussed here are: Social Integration and Peer Relationships, and Faculty and Staff.

**Social Integration and Peer Relationships**

All participants described their social connections and peer relationships post-transfer. For most, it provided an essential source of connectivity and support. Several set social integration as a goal at the 4-year institution, particularly if it was lacking at community college.

Participants expressed the importance of the peer relationships they had at the 4-year institution. Jill, a retired military veteran, found her cohesive peer group to be a source of unity and support, a familiar replacement for what she had in her military career. She stated, “I think because I was looking to be part of a group again, from being in the military in something that was a passion, I was looking for something else and I happened to fall perfectly in line with a group people that it worked out for me.” Her peer group had been essential to both her positive experience and to adjusting to her new post-military life.

Emily treasured the social integration she experienced at Countryside University, seeing it as offering more than an education and a means to her career goal. She described it as,

I had an amazing experience here. That I obviously would not have traded for this world. If they asked me what my best part was, I’d have to say the friends I made, and the relationships I had with my professors, the all-nighters I’ve spent. I would not give any of those back because honestly a lot of them weren’t studying. A lot of them were just hanging out with friends.

As the only participant living on campus, Emily illustrated enjoying a sense of community and communal living, “I have great friends all over this campus. If I need something, it’s amazing
just to be able to go down the hall, and knock on one of my friend’s door, and be like, ‘Hey, can I sit and talk with you for a bit?’” The social life Emily’s established post-transfer was a critical part of her experience in her higher education experience. Other participants also experienced the importance of a peer group at the baccalaureate institution.

Amanda, a non-traditional age student, described strong and intense friendships she has formed in college, believing they were lifelong, “Oh your friends you meet in college you’re going to have for the rest of your life. I think that’s a real thing. And it doesn’t matter if you’re 18 going to college or you’re in your 30s.” Amanda experienced intense friendships as part of being an adult college student, post-transfer.

Jill’s primary peer network were the members of her sports team. For her, they provided a sense of belonging and comradery, with the connection reaching beyond the field as they also studied together. To Jill, the social aspect at the 4-year institution made her non-traditional age an asset and not a liability as students saw her as a peer, and occasionally as an advisor. She described her experience as, “I got to be an athlete and I got to meet so many other athletes. Not only did I know smart girls on an educational basis, but a majority of these girls were athletes with me. My spectrum of networking just opened up even more. We all studied together, we went to the library together, so it wasn’t as if I was like ‘Oh my god, I got to study. I’m the old lady in the crowd trying to get it done.’ That was not a factor, ever.” Jill continued her sense of teamwork and comradery as a member of an athletic team, leading to an essential positive element of now being a full-time college student.

For Tobias, having worked full-time at community college and experiencing no social life, the purpose of attending a 4-year institution went beyond going to classes. He believed he was responsible for his own social integration, taking action by purchasing an unlimited meal
Despite living off-campus, it was a means to meeting people on campus. He stated, “I did not want to come here and be alone. I got a meal plan. I met a lot of friends and that’s the majority of how I met my friends.” As one of his goals post-transfer was to have a social aspect as a college student, he had several strategies for initiating conversation in the dining hall. Tobias described,

So at least 3 meals was 3 opportunities to meet different people or three opportunities to get to know people better…Every time I went to the dining hall was an opportunity to either meet someone new or get some homework done, at least. I would not be friends with nearly the amount of people that I am not (if not for the meal plan).

Tobias recognized the importance of meeting others and having social interactions as part of the college experience. For him, he took action in fostering social integration post-transfer. Tobias’ social integration was so significant to him that when asked about what it was like to transfer to Countryside University, he responded, “Mostly just sitting in the dining hall talking with friends. Making new friends, you know? Remember where I met my friends that I’m very good friends with now.” For Tobias, he believed being a transfer student meant, “for transfer students, (it’s) getting to know people … Being a transfer student is getting involved and learning what a 4-year college is all about.”

Like Tobias, Amanda also found the cafeteria a place to meet other nursing students, and to meet with her peer cohort. She illustrated this as, “We hit up (the dining hall) where we met other student and found out, ‘Oh, you’re in the nursing program? Oh you’re in the nursing program?’ (and a friend) remembered people who went (community college with her). So that’s how I met everybody.” Amanda believed social integration on campus was an important part of
the college experience. Her social life at Countryside University was different than it was at community college, in part because of the larger setting. She described,

Eastern State Community College, it’s small, so you’ve got that one tiny building. So you go there and you’re in that building. You can go wherever you want in the building. You can go to the computer lounge or upstairs. I think there’s a little area, a vacant classroom, if you want. You go to Countryside University, you can go – you get outside, walk, or go like another – there’s tons of places to go. You’ve got the library. You go the Campus Center. You can sit in (the coffee shop, or dining hall or student lounge). You can go anywhere, really. There’s always something going on.

Amanda, despite initially being resistant to campus life, came to appreciate the offerings of a 4-year institution college campus, and spends a lot of time in common (food) areas, studying with peers. The activity and space was not available at community college, and has become an important part of her college experience.

The lack of connectedness at community college illuminated the critical importance of social integration at the 4-year institution for Julian. For him, the non-academic aspects of college were essential to a full college experience. He explained,

(The) student agency is a big part of what the college experience is. Going out and taking advantage of these opportunities for yourself. You have to make your own life out of what the school has to offer you … I want to grow in all aspects of my life. Intellectually, physically, socially. In fact, I would like to, before the end of my college career, do a study abroad program because I think that would broaden my horizons quite a bit.

Julian believed that college was not just about earning a degree, but also about taking advantage of opportunities and about growing in all aspects. He saw himself as responsible for pursuing
changes to grow and experience new things. While he recognized the importance of social integration as a college student, he pursued housing that allowed for a sense of some separateness by living in college housing offered 20 minutes off-campus. He described it as, “Balance is a wonderful word for it! It’s not just stuck on campus. I can get a breather. The best part about this is that I … for me, it’s important to have a space that’s my own.” Julian figured out how to have both the rich experiences of being a college student, and also meeting his needs for his own space.

Julian found a balance of both academics and a social life as a college student, something he did not have at community college. The time and opportunity for both has created an ideal experience for him. He has a, “manageable” amount of homework, and stated, “I have time for all the other things that I would want to do. It’s the perfect balance of busy, so I get that constant feeling of growth. At the same time, I have plenty of space for other pursuits outside of just the classroom.” For Julian, it is not just the time and balance of things to do, but the opportunities as well at a 4-year institution, versus what he experienced at community college. Julian, the only participant who was homeschooled through high school, found community college was a continuation of the lack of social aspects and of a sense of belonging. He found community college was primarily adult students and claimed, “I didn’t want to feel like that.” He described, not that there’s anything wrong with older people trying to get … acquire a degree of some kind, but it’s just I didn’t feel like was as my place. I wanted to be with other people my agenda I felt like that would give me a sense of momentum towards a future collectively with all these other young people. Going to college was a bigger step for me than most, I think.
When asked about any difference between institutions, Julian found the faculty to be “equally as passionate. It’s hard to discern, actually. It’s really just the student body that is the most different.” Julian had struggled with the older students at community college, and found a homogeneous peer group to be important to him. Attending Countryside University meant finally having social integration and exposure to being part of a homogeneous culture for Julian. It was of utmost importance for him to finally have the feeling of being with his peers.

Countryside University required all students to participate in a prescribed number of cultural events activities on campus, in part to increase campus integration. Two participants mentioned this program. Amanda not only found them interesting and having value, but based her choices on those relatable to her, describing it as, “I’d try to go to the ones that I could apply to my future career …so I learned a lot. It was kind of interesting. It wasn’t bad, and it was a nice break from studying.” Furthermore, for Amanda this requirement helped her to bridge her two worlds of home and school, as she brought her daughter to several of the events, including plays and a variety of musical events such as drummers, beat poets and a wind ensemble. She stated, “It’s good because it does bring everyone together.” For Amanda, that meant both people on campus, and for her, her and her daughter in a place where normally it was very separate worlds.

Conversely, Mariah found them to be yet another dreaded obligation on campus, and chose what fit her schedule. She described them as, “stupid” and found meeting the requirements as, “too hard because I work and go to school and I commute.” Unlike Amanda, Mariah was “not interested in a lot of the stuff I’ve been to. I go to convenience” and described making choices, “Just based on my schedule.” Mariah was adamant that she had no connection to Countryside University’s campus, stating, “I literally just go for my classes.” For Mariah, she could not, or
perhaps would not, find any connection to campus other than attend classes and required offerings.

In contrast to Mariah, despite being a non-traditional age student and a commuter, Jill felt a sense of belonging and even flexibility from others, including her athletic team, stating, “I’ve not come into a situation where someone has alienated me because I’m a commuter. They’ve always included me, including my coach, like ‘(Jill), we’re going to train here, can you make any of them?’” Jill wanted to, and valued, establishing a peer network for support and comradery. For her, it was an essential part of being a university student.

Three of the participants described making intentional efforts to socially integrate to the new campus. For Emily, the only participant to live on campus, it was initially difficult to find a social group. She described her struggle as, “You come as a freshman, you get your group quicker. I mean, me coming into a program where these people have already known each other for two year, they’ve established their relationships. It was harder for me to try to come in and establish relationships with them.” Tobias initially purchased a commuter meal plan as an intentional way to meet others. He stated, “At least three meals was three opportunities to meet different people or three opportunities to get to know people better…Every time I went to the dining hall was an opportunity to either meet someone new.” Julian, formerly homeschooled and displeased with the social disconnect in community college, found that after an initial concerted effort to meet people, his efforts to socially integrate had waned. After establishing, “a pretty solid social group” of a dozen people,

After the first four weeks, I think my momentum … I feel like I was coming off riding some kind of a wave coming here. Socially, it dropped. It just didn’t feel appropriate to
just put myself out there and shake whoever’s hand and be like “Hey, I’m new. Just trying to put myself out there.”

After transitioning to Countryside University, Julian quickly made adequate efforts to meet others, and decided to then focus on expanding via those he knew versus concerted intentions to meet new people. For him, his social transition was accomplished and successful. Intentional efforts to build a social network were successful for these participants.

Four of the participants also described campus involvement. Emily, who was involved in clubs and activities relating to her major, described her social life at Countryside University as, “I would have to say exhilarating. I mean there’s a lot going on here.” For her, it was a new experience to be socially involved, describing a lack of involvement both in high school and community college as, “I wasn’t very involved in high school. This was a whole different experience for me.” Julian got involved with sports on campus. He stated, “I wasn’t planning on doing that, but I saw an email for it about two weeks after starting.” For him, it was another way of expanding his social network.

Tobias did not have social integration when attending community college, and set it as a goal post-transfer. He not only had the initial plan of meeting others via dining opportunities, but also joined clubs. When asked if he had successfully met his goal, Tobias described his successful social integration at Countryside University as, “I definitely feel like I've done so much more in two years than I did at community college.”

Jill was asked to join a sports team and campus clubs. She indicated they were critical experiences for her, stating, “There was these opportunities being provided to me which helped me in my transition from the military to civilian sector.” Mindful of her status as an adult student, she often found in her involvement in clubs and campus activities her role to be that of a
support person and one who encourages other students to take advantage of the leadership opportunities. Jill believed she had opportunities in the military, and prefers to give students their chance at college. She explained it as, “This is their time to shine. This is their time to become leaders because there’s going to be a day where I’m not around… It's about just enjoying the world around me and seeing them grow. It's amazing to watch them grow.” Jill was able to continue to be a leader in the college setting, just as she was in the military, and yet take advantage of social opportunities as a college student.

Two of the participants were part of the early college program whereas they could complete their senior year of high school entirely at Eastern State Community College. They were also the only two participants reporting a lack of social integration at the 4-year institution, even considering they attend two different colleges. Krista stated, “I don’t really do much on-campus activities. I do my classes and leave and go to work.” When asked if that is how she wants it, she responded,

It works for me. I kind of just do what I like to do and I don’t really hang around too much because I don’t know too many people on campus other than people I have classes with. I have my own friends and family outside of school so I don’t feel like I have to stay on campus.

For Krista, her social life was fulfilled by her off-campus world, rather than campus life. In contrast to Tobias, Krista was uninterested in even finding out how on-campus dining works. Her lack of integration on campus was illustrated by her unawareness even of campus food options, describing it as, “I didn’t eat on campus just because I don’t really know how prices work in there, I never really looked but I usually either bring my own food or just go to Subway or McDonalds.”
Unlike others, Mariah did not have, and did not desire, a connection to or presence on campus. For her, attending class was a means to an end and she was connected instead to her apartment she had established for herself, 20 minutes from campus. She stated,

“I lived on campus when I went through Upward Bound but I did not like living on campus…I don’t do anything on campus. I go to class and I go home … Its not home. It’s not anything I want to live. I’d rather have the security of my own place.

Mariah uses “anything” not “anywhere” in referring to campus, signifying it was a concept, not a place for her. She’s disconnected from college campus, viewing it exclusively as a necessity to attend campus. In describing what it meant to be a college student, she described it as saving money and avowing “sharing a tiny little room with somebody” by living off campus and avoiding campus’ “nasty food,” illustrated her view of campus life. Mariah, referring to herself as “mature” several times, described herself as, “I’m a very mature person so I definitely relate better to adult.” For Mariah, she saw herself as different than other college students and did not see herself as fitting in on campus.

Each participant shared their experiences with a social network post-transfer. Those seeing one as an important part of the college experience were successful in establishing social integration. Those who did not see it as an essential part of being a college student expressed satisfaction with a lack of social integration, and did not see it as harmful to ultimately earning a bachelor’s degree.

**Faculty and Staff**

Each of the participants described experiences with faculty and staff at the baccalaureate institution. The participants presented professors as an important aspect of the baccalaureate
institution. Some participants had an initial contact with the transfer admissions counselor that set the tone for the institution, as well as offering services during the process of transferring. For Jill, applying to college was a new experience, and found the transfer admissions counselor to be a significant factor in the transition. She described,

I was very nervous, because I sent a letter because in the curriculum whenever they say apply to school, you have to write a letter to explain why you feel like you should be accepted and it’s just part of the acceptance process. I’ve never done anything like that before. He was like ‘(Jill), don’t worry about it. Just tell me about yourself.’ I have no idea where that letter is, but it worked and I got through.

Tobias also identified the initial welcoming environment impression came, “Mostly at first it was admissions” and continued to influence his experience by eliminating difficulties in the process as “He (transfer admissions counselor) has it all laid out.” For both Jill and Tobias, the admissions contact was essential, both to give an initial impression and to relay information through the transfer process.

Several participants experienced positive relationships with faculty, finding them to be accessible and having good rapport with them. Julian described liking all of his professors at Countryside University except one, hesitantly describing her as, “not an effective teacher” and not elaborating any further. Emily reported having a good relationship and rapport with faculty at both institutions. However, she found faculty as Countryside University more accessible as, “They have their office hours right on their door …(however Eastern State Community College faculty) didn’t have office hours where I could stop in and just say hi.” Emily described regular contact with the faculty in her department, and experienced personal, nurturing relationships with them, stating, “I feel like I have a deep care for all of them.” Amanda “loves” her professors at
Countryside University, finding them supportive, approachable and available. While she described her nursing program as rigorous and stressful, she credited the faculty as helping student cope. “You've got one professor who's like the grandma of the group and is the mom and hugs and loves. And they're all pretty supportive. And they all listen and understand.” Tobias had developed a rapport with his professors outside of class, making an effort to have relationships with them. He described it as, “I love my faculty…I try and talk to all of my teachers one on one in their office. Get to know where they are. They get to know where I’m at.” He found them more available as full-time faculty, as opposed to part-time at community college where they did not even have an office where to meet. Krista found classes at Valleyview Technical College to be larger than those at Eastern State Community College, but had found the faculty there also available outside of class, describing it as, “you can definitely set up a time to go meet with them or just like go to their office and see if they’re there. I’ve done that a couple of times.” For these participants, the positive experiences with faculty at the baccalaureate institutions were part of the quality experiences post-transfer in pursuit of bachelor degrees.

Not all participants had positive perceptions of faculty. Unlike the other participants, Mariah did not have a rapport with faculty or staff at Countryside University. She elaborated, “I kind of keep to myself. I don’t really deal with a lot of the faculty, but I have not had positive experiences. At Eastern State Community College they’re more individually-based because there’s not as many students as in Countryside University…Faculty wise, I’m not too fond of it.” Mariah admittedly did not make an effort at Countryside University to do more than attend class, yet was dissatisfied with the lack of connection with faculty and staff. She stated, “I don’t know any faculty at Countryside enough to approach them.” Krista wished faculty and staff at Valleyview Technical College acknowledged she is an experienced college student, stating “they
just assume I’m a new freshman college student which I’m not. I’ve actually completed quite a few courses beforehand.” Both Mariah and Krista were part of the program where they completed their senior year of high school at Eastern State Community College, and as the participants who had expressed a lack of intentions for social integration at the baccalaureate institution, they also experience an absence of connection with faculty and staff.

Conclusion

Most of the participants experienced positive peer, social, faculty and staff connections post-transfer. These included friendships, attending campus activities, and joining athletic teams and clubs on campus. Other aspects of post-transfer institutional experiences were positive experiences with faculty, finding them accessible, having rapport with them, and quality relationships between student and faculty. Additionally, an initial contact with the institution, such as with the transfer admissions counselor, provided a warm welcome, support and information. These experiences added to the satisfaction found as a college student. Those who did not pursue connections or experiences beyond the classroom did not believe it was lacking, nor to be a negative factor. The final superordinate theme, supportive resources, offers participants’ beliefs about the resources that have supported them in navigating the transfer pathway.

Supportive Resources

Those transferring from community college to a 4-year institution to earn a baccalaureate degree benefit from a variety of supports. All participants indicated they experienced supportive resources in the transfer pathway. Participants benefited from the support and advisement of family and peers as well as from accessible and helpful faculty and staff. Additionally, practices and services of both types of institutions contributed to the experiences of transfer student as
they served as supportive resources. The final superordinate theme that was identified in this study presents these resources that offered support for participants. Family, peers, faculty and staff were identified as helpful, and several institutional factors were recognized as positive elements to navigating the transfer pathway. These resources were found in both the community college and the baccalaureate institutions. The researcher found three specific areas relating to perceptions across the participants. One supportive resource identified by participants were peers and family. Another was faculty and staff offering support and advisement at both the community college and the 4-year institutions were found to be accessible and caring. Finally, institutional factors such as support services offered at the institutions as well as collaborative efforts between institutions were presented by participants. Thus, the three subthemes discussed here are: Peers and Family, Faculty and Staff, and Institutional Factors.

**Peers and Family**

Peers were noted as a supportive resource by three of the participants. The two non-traditional age students and the one living on campus were those who identified peers as a supportive resource. Peers offered academic and emotional support, and added to participant satisfaction in their experiences as college students.

Jill’s peer group of students provided her a sense of comradery, stating, “Once again, my lab partners were like ‘(Jill), we got this. We’re going to do this.’ They have patience with me, I have patience with them and we make it work.” Jill experienced a sense of reciprocal support with her peers, who are encouraging and reassuring that together they will get through coursework challenges. Her peers quelled her anxiety with her challenging courses, describing it as, “I had great lab partners. They helped ease my anxiety even though I was shaking a lot of times.”
Amanda believed her nursing cohort was essential to her persistence and success as a student. She explained, “if you’ve got some close connections, it can make it a lot easier. And that’s how nursing is.” In her opinion, the nursing program was extremely difficult and demanding. She depended on her peers for support and for studying. She described it as, “the only way you’re going to survive nursing school is if you find a good core group of friends to study with, to spend all your time with. And if you don’t find that, I think it’s hard.” Amanda and Jill, the two non-traditional age participants, found their peer cohorts to be integral in their experiences and success as college students. They were the only participants to describe peers as a supportive academic resource.

Emily, interviewed just days from graduation, illustrated the magnitude of her experiences. She described decorating her graduation cap, and in offering the quote used, it was evident her experiences involved a rich, caring, social community, and successfully brought her goal of a career in social work to fruition. She stated, “What I am doing is, ‘Here’s to nights that turned to mornings, friends that turn into family, and dreams that turn into reality.’” For Emily, her peers were a significant part of her experience in achieving her baccalaureate, and without them, her experience would have been less rewarding.

Five of the participants identified family as a supportive resource. Several participants, including both non-traditional age students, found family to be essential support. Others relied on family for advice.

For Jill, an adult student in the midst of a career and major life change, her family had been an important source of support. Crying slightly, she described, “My family’s been up at 3:00 or 4:00am in the morning on a couple of mornings to make sure I got here (in winter weather, with a normal commute of 40 minutes)...It was, to see them out doing that, there’s no
reason I am not going to make it. It’s been awesome.” Seeing the support of her family, she was committed to making a serious effort as a college student, and to finishing her degree.

Emily viewed her family as supportive, even though they could not help her financially, or, as a first generation college student, could not offer logistical assistance. When asked if they had been supportive she responded with, “Very much so. That’s one thing that I can say - they’ve been really good about supporting me.” For Emily, family support was primarily emotional and a source of encouragement.

Amanda has a home and family to balance alongside being a college student. She was torn between home and family, and being a student and life on campus. Some of the students in her nursing cohort, including those who were non-traditional age, actually lived on campus in dormitories. Her husband and extended family helped her with schoolwork, offered support, assisted with the household tasks, and helped care for her children. Going to campus to avoid being distracted by household responsibilities, Amanda relied on her husband and extended family members to run the household, so she could focus on being a successful student. She described this struggle,

Sometimes I got to campus if I don’t have a class. Because if I stay home, I’m doing laundry. I’m dusting. I’m not doing what I should be doing … sometimes it would have been easier to stay (live on campus), like if we were studying in the dorm or something for a test and I’d be like okay, now I have to leave. Or I can’t come until 6:00 because I don’t want to waste the fifteen minutes to drive there.

With a family who supported her as a college student, she was able to successfully bridge the two worlds.
Two participants depended on family for advice in addition to support. Tobias’ mother worked at his community college in admissions. He found that to be helpful when navigating college processes including those related to admissions. He stated, “Especially with my mom in admissions, it made that easier for the knowledge of that field or that area.” Julian also counted on his parents as a resource, including as a source of advice. When describing his decisions about college, he used “we” rather than “I,” as illustrated with, “I talked with my parents about it and we decided that we would reassess things.” Regarding financial aid, Julian also had his parents as a resource, stating, “I worked with my parents on that. They took care of most of it. I don’t think there were any issues with that. It was very smooth.” Having his parents as a supportive resource was further illustrated when describing orientation day at Countryside University, which he described as “They had an orientation day. I came with my Dad.”

For participants whose families were acknowledged as a resource, they offered support and advice. Participants viewed these as essential to their persistence and success as college students.

**Faculty and Staff**

Support from faculty and staff were cited as an essential resource by six participants, encompassing both institutions, as a positive factor. Faculty and staff seen as supportive were accessible, helpful, and had rapport with the participants. Faculty and advisors, in particular, were perceived to be supportive resources.

Faculty and staff were an essential source of support for Jill and contributed to her persistence as she described, “I really do like Countryside University, they’ve made it very easy for me.” Jill, after a career in the military, was surprised at how helpful those at Countryside University were, and how easy the institutional processes were to complete.
Krista found community college faculty more approachable than those at the 4-year institution, attributing it to smaller classes, and found “they took time with their students. If I had a problem I could, like, you know, approach them and get the help I needed and they had a lot of resources to get you academic help.”

Amanda found faculty at both levels supportive and part of her positive experiences as a college student. She described one of her community college instructors with, “I love him as a teacher. He’s awesome. He really is.” When asked about the faculty at Countryside University, she described them as approachable and supportive with, “I love the professors. They’re really here to help you … I think they have us in their offices a lot. Crying, stress …”

Julian found a professor, who was also his advisor, to be accessible, describing it as, “His door is always open and you can just knock on the door and be like ‘Hey, what’s up?’” Julian found he shared a common passion for film with the professor, lending itself to both a connection and a further interest in the course topic.

Jill found the faculty in her major, a challenging field for her, to be available to help and support her and to be effective teachers, stating, “They made it so easy here. Anytime I was uncomfortable, I went directly to the staff and talked to them.” She described it by approaching one professor as,

I had to go to him one or two times like, ‘I really don’t understand this and I’m not passing any of my exams.’ I was doing great on the homework and I was coming forward in lab and I still managed with a B. He would break it down but I’d even learn that since my time in his class, he was a young professor, and has made changes to him curriculum, too, to help others to be able to understand as well, so we’ve learned from each other.
Jill found her professors to be accessible and helpful, and also believed they were open to feedback. For her, this was different from her hierarchical experience from a career in the military.

Julian believed that a passion from a professor built his interest in the subject, stating, “I really feed off of … I don’t care what the subject is. If the teacher is really passionate about it, I can feed off of that and I’ll enjoy it.” Mariah also found that a professor’s passion was beneficial to her, influencing her academic performance. She stated that when the professor has a passion, those are the courses, “where I will try my hardest, I will do all the readings, and I will go above and beyond because I find it interesting and I like it.” For her, it mattered, “How much they make you want to learn and how interested they are in their topic, versus how they’re just teaching to teach.”

Emily believed that faculty was an important and influential part of her positive post-transfer experience at Countryside University, stating,

I like to tell people about ‘Claudia’ (a social work professor) giving us apples, and giving me socks one day when my feet were cold, and ‘Franklin’ (a social work professor) trying to encourage my photography by asking about title … I mean personally I know the social work team takes care of their own … I have a very caring community.

Calling professors by their first names (yet elsewhere by respectful titles), Emily found her department to be nurturing, creating a sense of a very personal community.

In contrast, Mariah was in the same social work program, but did not experience a relationship with faculty and staff, and described it as, “I currently am in the social work program and I don’t feel comfortable with my advisor because I don’t think she really understands the circumstances.” Her circumstances, being self-supporting and working full time,
limited her access to connecting with anyone outside of class. Mariah expressed a vehement preference to community college finding faculty and staff to be helpful and accommodating, and being more of an “individual-based thing” with smaller classes.

For Krista, the community college faculty were, “all very nice, very easy to get along” and felt that “all the teachers there really cared about their students and really wanted to see their students succeed.” In a caring environment, she also found they provided quality education, describing her experience as “the courses were really, really good and like well thought out and well-designed.” Mariah also found community college faculty helpful, illustrating with,

I took a math class. I suck at math. I had this one teacher who would take so, so, so many notes that she would make sure that people took notes. I had pages and pages of notes. I understood because of that. She took the time and was like “You guys need to do it.” For Mariah, building her academic skills while at community college was essential to her persistence and success, and found faculty to be supportive in building them.

Krista found that her Eastern State Community College advisors were essential support in the transfer process as they, “really helped me and kind of like pushed me to do it because they know I wanted to … they really helped me figure out what I wanted to do and (helped me) go through all the procedures of transferring.” For Krista, her community college advisor was the source of necessary information about transfer, helping her to proceed with her plan. She described it as, “I got most of my information from just talking to my advisor and just asking her for her opinion and for her input … she gave me all the steps and all the things that I had to do in order to make it happen.”

Mariah also found her Eastern State Community College advisor to be a great source of support. She stated, “My advisor was great…she was always there to help me out with all the
stuff.” Post-transfer, Mariah still sought guidance from her Upward Bound counselor she had at Countryside while in the high school program housed there. She described it as, “As for guidance now, I go to …the director of Upward Bound. She’s always been there for guidance.” Mariah had no rapport with her advisor at Countryside University, but sought out her prior counselor’s advisement instead.

A number of specific staff members were mentioned as supportive. The transfer admissions counselor in particular was cited as being supportive and a crucial entry into the baccalaureate institution. Jill found the Countryside University transfer admissions representative to be reassuring and accommodating during registration and the credit transfer process, calming her when she had anxiety on registration day, as she describes, “He says, ‘Jill don’t worry about it. You’ve gotten all this, you’ve proved to me…’ He was very understanding.” Tobias credited the (career counselor) as, “awesome. She is a great asset to the school. The financial aid people are great, which is definitely not average I’ve found, especially at (community college).”

**Institutional Factors**

All of the participants described institutional factors as supportive factors. These included the size of an institution, the class schedule, inter-institutional relationships, academic support services and a sense of community. For participants, these factors supported students in navigating along the transfer pathway.

Six participants presented factors within the institutions that they find supportive. These include size, schedule, policies and a culture. After struggling at the size and limits of his community college, Julian shared, “something that I do like about Countryside the best is the class sizes and the school size in general because it’s not too much. Its not overwhelming.” In describing the larger university his brother attends, he concluded, “There’s no way he can do
everything he wants to in a single semester. At least I can in a way grasp everything that’s going on and decided what I want to do for myself.” For Julian, Countryside University’s size offered more than community college yet more manageable than a large institution would have been.

For Emily, the schedule of classes contributes to her success, as it allowed more contact with faculty and it worked better for her learning style. In describing Countryside University’s schedule, she reflected, “I see my teachers more often. The periods are in shorter increments rather than trying to cram a week’s worth of knowledge into me in a three-hour class meeting.” This institutional factor was a supporting aspect for Emily post-transfer.

Krista found there was a good connection between the institutions, stating, “The connection is really good between the two colleges because I feel like a lot of students do some (community college) courses as well.” However, Amanda who attended two different community college sites, had a different experience. She found one site, closest to Countryside University had good connections, but found the other site worked more closely with the nursing school in closest proximity to its location. Amanda described trying to transfer from a community college without a connection with the post-transfer institution as, “difficult because they don’t know the inner workings of Countryside University. So it was a lot of, ‘I’m gonna have to call and ask,’ whereas (the closest one) was like, ‘Oh year, this is what you gotta do.” Emily also experienced that, despite being in the same state system, the two institutions seemed to have little or no connection. Instead, her community college site had a close connection with the closest state college, describing a connection between her community college site and a state college as, “It's really more about (closest state school) than anything.”

Julian described benefitting from an institutional partnership with a statewide program, the only participant to describe such a program. He did not have a plan to transfer until his final
semester at community college. He found when meeting with his advisor that he could enroll at Countryside University for the same tuition he had been paying at Eastern State Community College, and “I just stumbled into ‘This Thing,’ this partnership Eastern State Community College has with Countryside, where if you have the associate’s degree, you can go to Countryside for the same tuition.” It was then he decided to transfer to Countryside University.

Another supportive institutional factor presented by a participant was preparing them for current trends in careers. Amanda was pleased Countryside University discontinued their associates in nursing as that field will be requiring a bachelor’s degree, (according to her). She stated, “See the change that’s – that is where it’s (the field of nursing) heading. That what we’re being taught.” Additionally, students are assessed in ways to preparing them for the rigorous nursing exams, which Amanda explained as, “All our tests in nursing school are multiple choice, and they’re NCLEX-style.” This alignment with the current trends and practices in her career field was seen as a resource for Amanda.

For Jill, the deep sense of community at Countryside University was similar to that which she experienced in her military career, and values the community for more than just the education it provides, describing her experience, “If I had them (other students) on my teams in the military, I would definitely made my job a whole lot easier as a senior NCO … It’s been challenging as far as learning, by exciting and invigorating because they made it that way for me. It’s just a little school, big heart.” Amanda also found a sense of community at Countryside University. When asked if she felt like part of a community, she responded, “I do…They don’t lie when they say that when you go to Countryside … I do. I walk around campus. You see the same people over and over again. It’s small.” For Emily, Countryside University offered an environment she found to be a very positive experience having described it as, “I have a very
caring community.” Emily personalized the institution, seeing it as something she has, rather than referring to it as an inanimate object of, “it is …”

Five of the participants reported not experiencing stigma for being a community college transfer student at the baccalaureate institution, making the sense of inclusion a supportive factor at both institutions in this study. Tobias found Countryside University to be a very welcoming environment, to the extent where being a transfer student involved no stigma or feelings of being any different than a student who started there. When asked if he had any experiences signifying what it meant to be a transfer student, Tobias responded, with big pauses, “Hmmm …I’m going to have to think about that one … to be a transfer student. Not really here, just because they’re so receptive to people.” When asked if she experienced stigma as a community college transfer student, Mariah shared, “Not at all, actually. I don't see a difference at all.” When asked if she experienced stigma as a community college transfer student, or felt different than other students, Mariah replied, “Not at all actually. I don’t see a difference at all.” Julian’s response to the question was, “No, I feel like I fit right in.” Jill adamantly responded to being asked if she experienced any sort of stigma with a vigorous head shaking, “no,” and stated, “There's sometimes, there's some terminology maybe I won't understand.”

The only participant at Valleyview Technical College, Krista explained, “We all come from different backgrounds but we all want the same thing and it’s you know, we just are able to work together and I don’t feel any different. I don’t think anyone should feel different because we’re all working towards the same goal.” For Krista, a common goal of earning a degree lent itself to no shame in having started at a community college. Krista described, “some people are (in a program where they live on campus as freshmen studying STEM) students which are high
school seniors.” For her, the institution has a variety of high school student programs on campus, giving it a sense of diversity for her so she is not unique.

Four participants took advantage of tutoring services and group study opportunities, finding these services helpful in success and in persistence. Jill, majoring in a science-based field, experienced significant difficulty with science and turned to both her peers’ study groups and to the college’s tutoring services, describing it as,

I had really big struggles when I hit Chemistry, because science is not my thing ... My biggest anxiety was going into Chemistry lab, oh my goodness. Once again, those band of friends were there and they were like ‘(Jill), it’s a breeze. It’s easy, you’re going to do fine.’ When it came to the math and stuff thought, I did go to the academic tutor. When we would have our group study groups, there was times I just didn’t get it.

For Jill, having support services available were critical to her academic success.

Krista also took advantage of tutoring services as needed, as she explained, “I did tutoring a little bit last semester because of a math course, and I did go to like a writing workshop but other than that I’ve … I’m pretty set and I didn’t really need it but I do take advantage of it when I realize it’s necessary.” Krista benefited from having academic services available, utilizing them when she encountered difficulties.

Amanda sought help for math at community college, stating, “I needed the academic center ...I did a couple of times at (community college) for algebra. So now math and I are friends.” As a nursing major, her improved math skills have been essential. At Countryside University, she described the learning center and tutoring services, and clarified, “I’ve never gone. I’ve never needed to. But I know it’s there and available.” For her, community college gave her the writing and math skills she needed to succeed post-transfer.
Mariah described these services as, “The academic support center on campus is definitely a great tool.” She also sought assistance in community college. From community college she gained “How to go about financial aid. Study tips. Tutoring.” She also acknowledged using Countryside’s academic support center as well, but only if it was required or if it resulted in a scholarships. Despite admitting she was struggling academically and with, “burn out,” Mariah had not recently turned to academic support services for assistance.

**Conclusion**

As the final superordinate theme presented, supportive services were identified by all participants. Many of them fell under intentional institutional factors, such as academic support services. Others were cultural, such as a lack of stigma towards community college transfer students. Faculty and staff at each institution were also seen as accessible, helpful, and supportive. Other resources, peers and family, were outside of the institutions but were experienced by participants as valuable, offering support and advice. Each of these, separately and together, created an essential sense of support to community college transfer students navigating the pathway to earn bachelor degrees.

**Conclusion**

Community college transfer students experienced many factors influencing them along the transfer pathway. During this process, successful navigation to ultimately completing a baccalaureate degree was comprised of many different experiences. Perceptions about persisting along the transfer pathway, including believing one is capable of achieving the baccalaureate goal, impacted participants’ persistence. Despite encountering struggles, keeping the goal of completing a bachelor’s degree in the forefront provided momentum to keep participants continuing in college. Experiences at the community college also contributed to helping
transferring students in navigating onward in the pathway. Community college provided opportunities to explore majors and careers at a lower cost than the 4-year institution, and also to develop essential skills and self-confidence. While community college experiences lacked social aspects, it was not seen as essential considering the value of the other positive aspects of this portion of the pathway. The transition from one institution to another was also a critical aspect of the pathway, with experiences that impact student persistence. Transfer orientation was seen to have the potential to be a very positive contributor to student success in navigating the transition, provided it meets their needs in learning about the new institution and in meeting peers, yet was experienced as inadequate by most participants. In adjusting to the new and larger setting, participants benefited from peer networks and institutional factors such as effective advisement. While transfer students might experience some initial struggle transitioning from community college to the 4-year institution, participants’ experience indicated they are short-lived and manageable. Once transferred to the 4-year colleges, participants experienced positive peer, social, faculty and staff connections which assisted their effective transitions to the new institutions. Successful social integration post-transfer included developing peer networks, engaging in campus activities, and belonging to campus sports and clubs, and contributed to positive experiences. Post-transfer, positive relationships with faculty and staff, who were found as accessible and supportive, contributed to successful continuation at the institutions. Finally, family, peers, faculty and staff at both institutions, as well as institutional services, were perceived as supportive resources for participants in their pursuit of earning bachelor degrees. Each of these factors contributed to participants’ successful navigation of the transfer pathway leading to a baccalaureate degree.
Having studied seven post-transfer participants by utilizing both the standards of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology and in meeting all Institutional Review Boards’ principles, this study offers valid and trustworthy results. The final chapter will present aligning the findings with research literature on the subject of earning a baccalaureate degree via the community college transfer pathway.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this qualitative interpretive phenomenological analysis was to provide a deeper understanding of how community college students navigated the transfer process and successfully completed a bachelor’s degree. Specifically, this study examined factors supporting Transfer Student Capital, such as academic counseling experiences, relationships with faculty and staff mentoring and validation, financial mediators, as well as student coping styles, perceptions of transfer process, learning and study skills, and motivation. The following research question guided and informed this study:

- How do community college transfer students navigate successful completion of a baccalaureate degree?

The analysis of the interview data yielded five superordinate themes and 14 corresponding subthemes. The super-ordinate themes and their subthemes were: 1) Perceptions Impacting Continuation (1.1 Self-Efficacy, 1.2 Means to an End; 2) Significance of the Community College (2.1 Explore Majors and Career Goals, 2.2 Financial Savings, 2.3 Provided Foundation 2.4 Integration; 3) Transitions (3.1 Orientations, 3.2 Moving from One Institution to Another, 3.3 Emotions; 4) Experiences at the 4-year Institution (4.1 Social Integration and Peers, 4.2 Faculty and Staff, and 5) Supportive Resources (5.1 Peers and Family, 5.2 Faculty and Staff, 5.3 Institutional Factors. This chapter is organized by superordinate themes, and discusses the findings situated within the theoretical framework and the current literature. The implications of these findings for practice, as well as areas for future investigations, as suggested by this study, will also be presented.
Against the Odds: Perceptions Impacting Continuation

Students transferring to the baccalaureate institution from community college have perceptions and beliefs that can support, or hamper, navigation through the completion of a bachelor’s degree. Each participant of this study shared experiences indicating perceptions of the ability, and the motivation to continue post-transfer to earn a degree. All of the participants experienced beliefs and thoughts indicating they felt capable to persist along the pathway. Self-efficacy, one’s beliefs about one’s capabilities that impact thinking, feeling, motivation and behavior, was evident in positively impacting participants’ in navigating their transfer pathway. Awareness of, and confidence in, one’s abilities provided motivation and assurance to continue. While these participants experienced hardships as community college transfer students, keeping a focus on the end result of a baccalaureate degree was a beneficial perspective for participants to be able to continue on the pathway. Findings of this study indicated that community college transfer students are impacted by beliefs about one’s own capabilities that are often evolving along the pathway, and by being motivated by the larger goal of earning a bachelor’s degree.

Believing in one’s own capacity to persist on the transfer pathway impacts navigation and success. All participants shared experiences of self-beliefs, including how they changed during the course of being a college student from experiences of success. Participants acknowledged growth and maturity during their initial college years. In particular, the time spent at the community college gave them confidence and self-assurance in their capabilities to continue on the pathway. Some recognized better coping strategies, and others a sense of independence and self-sufficiency. Some participants had experiences where their self-doubts about capabilities and feasibilities of actually earning a baccalaureate degree were affirmed, leading them to continue with their studies. Participants also had instances where they realized they had not only
capabilities, but attributes as well that enabled them to achieve their educational goals. Whether it was academic skills such as completing a difficult course relating to one’s major, or it was an ability such as confidently partaking in class discussions, participants believed they could be successful as college students. As it was presented by all participants as part of their experiences, it indicates it is of significant importance in understanding how community college students navigate the pathway to earning a baccalaureate degree. These experiences of the study’s participants are in congruence with the literature about self-efficacy and about the influence of have a goal-focus.

The findings in this study support the literature on self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as the belief in one’s ability to complete actions that then impacts behavior, aspirations and the extent and length of efforts one will expend. According to Bandura (2006), self-efficacy is instrumental in adjusting to change, and contributes to perseverance when faced with challenges. Thus, one’s sense of competence impacts one’s efforts, response to challenges, and on-going progress towards one’s goals.

In alignment with the findings of this study, Conley and French (2013) found that self-efficacy was among the key learning skills that comprised a sense of ownership in learning. Other key learning skills included goal-setting, motivation, help-seeking, persistence and self-awareness, all skills experienced and identified by the participants as beneficial experiences. According to Conley and French’s research, these skills allow students to take on challenges and persist through difficult learning tasks; subsequently with a sense of accomplishment and success, they are then motivated and engaged to take on the next set of challenges and learning tasks. Believing one is capable impacts how they pursue accomplishing the task in pursuit of a goal (Fenning and May, 2013).
Schunk and Zimmerman (2009) found problems are seen as challenges, rather than insurmountable, when one has high self-efficacy. When met with challenges, Bandura and Estes (1977) posit that one’s self-efficacy expectations will influence the effort and length of time needed in sustaining such efforts. Furthermore, their findings indicated that self-efficacy is a better predictor of how one will behave in new challenges than will past actions. Fenning and May (2013) found that self-efficacy in college students, particularly the belief in one’s ability to complete difficult tasks, can predict their academic performance. Harder, Czyzewski, and Sherwood (2015) suggest self-efficacy impacts student success and thus is linked to student persistence to graduation. The stronger one believes in their academic competence, the more they are to engage in and actively act in their learning (Lee, Lee, & Bong, 2014). Madonna and Philpot (2013) found that self-efficacy does not impact social or academic satisfaction in college students, but that there is a relationship between self-efficacy, perceived control and self-regulated behavior. In aligning with the findings of this study, the more self-efficacy a student possesses, the greater their level of self-confidence and motivation to continue on the transfer pathway. According to Bandura and Estes (1977), the strength of one’s beliefs in effectiveness influences whether they even try to face difficulties or opt not to meet the challenges; if one does not feel capable of mastering whatever challenge is presented, one is likely to give up without trying. In accordance with the literature, participants who experienced self-doubt and problems along the pathway were able to persist beyond those challenges, having gained and recognized their capabilities to successfully continue.

Participants in this study experienced self-doubt as to their own abilities and the likelihood of meeting their academic and career goals. Throughout their educational journey, participants encountered stress and challenges. Their self-beliefs and strategies as how they
should continue impacted their persistence along the transfer pathway. These findings are consistent with Shi and Zhao (2014), and with Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade (2005), who posit that a strong sense of self-efficacy allowed college students to see difficulties as challenges rather than problems, and subsequently choose effective coping strategies and experience persistence. Self-doubt leads to a lesser effort toward difficult tasks (Bandura, 1994). Brady-Amoon and Fuertes (2011) found that self-efficacy contributes to adjustment and noted in their findings that interventions such as mentoring, peer support groups and learning communities are indeed warranted, as they can contribute to self-beliefs which in turn impacts adjustment and academic performance.

In addition to contributing to persistence, self-efficacy also influences one’s goals. Believing in one’s capabilities, self-efficacy impacts aspirations and goals one sets (Bandura, 1994). Kelly and Hatcher (2013) posit that career indecision is a potential occupational barrier; their findings indicate that as one’s self-efficacy increases, challenges in career-decisions decrease. One of the non-traditional participants found her experiences at a community college indicated she was capable of the demands of a nursing major, and then felt confident to continue on the transfer pathway to ultimately earn her BSN. This was indicated in Fenning and May’s (2013) study, who found the more confident one is in academic and career-related abilities, the more likely they are to see their college and career goal as achievable. This is in alignment with the findings of this study, as participants experienced increases in self-efficacy, they possessed greater clarity and confidence in their career-goal decisions which in turn contributed to increased certainty and commitment to projection on the transfer pathway.

Perceptions regarding continuing in spite of struggles were experienced by most of this study’s participants. In addition to believing in one’s capabilities, they also strove to continue in
spite of difficulties because of the end-goal of completing a bachelor’s degree. This study’s findings, as well as findings found in current literature, indicate college and career goals are motivators to continue on the community college transfer pathway. Madonna and Philpot (2013) found an attractive goal that is believed to be obtainable is more likely to bring the motivation needed to act on it. Strom and Savage (2014) found that a commitment to graduating did indeed impact an intention to persist. Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, (2005) found that motivational factors in attending college, such as intellectual curiosity and desiring the ability to have a rewarding career, are key factors in college adjustment and commitment, even after controlling other features such as gender, ethnicity, economic status and high school GPA. As shown in both the literature and in this study’s findings, a goal to earn a baccalaureate degree can influence persistence along the college pathway.

The goals one sets are influenced significantly by one’s self-efficacy, as a stronger sense of abilities of oneself, the higher goals one can aspire towards, and the firmer the commitment towards them; thus, even when faced with a difficult task they will see it as a surmountable challenge (Bandura, 1993). Wilson (2014) found that one’s aspirations to earn a bachelor’s degree can motivate a college student to push past barriers, difficulties and distractions to persist along the community college pathway. Motivation impacts what students invest in their learning which then influences academic achievement (Zimmerman & Scheunk, 2008).

The participants who were enrolled in the early college program experienced social dissatisfaction as college students, and had the clear mindset they were only going to college to earn a bachelor’s degree. Attewell, Heil, and Reisel (2012) and Wang, Chan, Phelps, Allen, and Washbon (2015) found that the initial speed, momentum, with which an undergraduate progresses positively impacts the likelihood of completing a degree. In alignment with this literature, with
the early college program and its students completing an entire first year of college while a high school senior, it is feasible that these participants gained such momentum that college completion, not a multi-dimension experience (academic and social) as a college student is their focus.

This study’s findings indicated that a motivating factor for some students in the transfer pathway is the end-goal of a bachelor’s degree, and students will persist even when they encounter problems and challenges, in order to reach their academic and career goals. In congruence with this study’s findings, Liao, Edlin, and Ferdenzi (2014) found that extrinsic motivation, such as potential earnings based on career choice, and self-regulated learning efficacy, influence persistence. According to their findings, academic achievement was not a direct motivator to persist, although it is indirectly as confidence in one’s ability to succeed is strengthened by potential future rewards. These findings were based only on a study of community college students; with this study’s participants having persisted beyond that point in the pathway, it is unknown how applicable they might directly be, although they certainly contribute to informing a fuller understanding of transfer students’ experiences. Nielsen (2015) found that college students maintain their degree and career aspirations even when faced with barriers due to plethora of benefits beyond a degree and a job, including independence, stability, and having choices. Taking into consideration these more intangible aspects of the gains from persistence, more research is needed to identify the potential complexity of what keeps students persisting in the community college pathway, even when confronted with difficulties and barriers.

The theoretical framework utilized in this study, Transfer Student Capital, is evident in this study’s findings. Participants accumulated knowledge that allowed them to negotiate the
transfer process, and the more they are able to do that, the greater likelihood for success (Laanan, Starobin, and Eggleston, 2010). Participants experienced increasing self-confidence, which positively impacts navigating the transfer pathway (Laanan, 2000). Participants experienced incidences of academic success due to study habits, seeking tutoring and participating in study groups, essential elements of transfer student capital (Laanan, 2007), which in turn heightened perceptions of both capabilities and the feasibility of college and career goals. By making an effort to get help, participants took responsibility for successful learning strategies (Laanan, 2000). This, in turn, brought greater success and an increase in self-efficacy, further projecting them along the pathway. Both the literature and this study’s findings support the transfer student capital’s premise that self-concept influences success (Laanan, 2003).

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study and the literature indicate students will set, strive towards, and subsequently achieve higher goals when they have a strong sense of belief in their own abilities. Given that students on the community college pathway might begin unsure about their capabilities, opportunities to build self-efficacy including academic successes, strengthen one’s sense of abilities and consequentially support one to continue to meet the end-result goals. This sense of confidence is particularly critical for students who begin at the community college with doubts about their potential to meet the goal of a bachelor’s degree, and further to then successfully transition to a different, often more difficult, institution. The mindset of achieving a goal, an ability to explore in order to find areas of success, receiving of academic supports such as tutoring and peer study groups, and the sense of achievement gained in the classroom, all supported this study’s participants to continue on the way to a baccalaureate degree, even when met with difficulties. The findings of this study indicate self-efficacy and having an achievable
goal of a baccalaureate degree both influence navigation through the community college transfer pathway. The next section will present participants’ experiences at the community college and their alignment with the literature.

Off to a Good Start: The Significance of the Community College

Community college transfer students find their experience at the community college to be both beneficial and significant. It is an opportunity to save money, particularly during a time of uncertainty about one’s choice of majors and future careers. The community college also allows a personal and academic foundation valuable to post-transfer to be built. While social integration at the community college is commonly minimal or even absent, it is not necessarily an insurmountable barrier to successful transfer.

Enrolling in a community college when one is undecided about a major or a career provides an affordable means to explore options, and an environment suited to support such exploration. Without a solid plan or goal upon entering college, community college offers a variety of course options without commitment, and small classes typically taught by practitioners who weave stories from the field into the curriculum. Determining what they found appealing and where they had success, as well as what they did not like or where they were unsuccessful, supported transferring community college students in making decisions regarding majors and careers, at a cost and a commitment less than that of a baccalaureate institution.

Part of this influential exploration was faculty who provided information and shared their professional experiences, which in turn impacted students’ decisions. D’Amico, Rios-Aguilar, Salas, and Gonzalez Canche (2012) posit that community colleges have an integral role in providing career information, particularly via college personnel and services, in college-career
alignment and in career decision-making. Laanan (2000) suggests that community college is an “ideal” place to explore educational and career goals (p.19). Grubb (2006) concurs that community college provides an ideal opportunity for exploring educational and career goals. Participants in this study found immense benefit in exploring college and career goals at the community college, as the courses and the faculty provided rich opportunities by which to assist in decision-making.

Enrolling in community college is a means to save money, as compared to the cost of a 4-year institution. This is in alignment with the current literature as the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.a.) shows the 2014-2015 community college tuition alone to be an average of over $5,000 less than that of a public 4-year institution and over $23,000 less than that of a private, 4-year institution. According to the College Board, in the 2015-16 school year, the average community college, in-state tuition was $3,970 with that of the average public four-year institution $9,410 (Ma, Baum, Pender, & Bell, 2015). This study’s participants experienced initially attending community college as a, “smart” way to go to college, and saw value in the long-term impact of avoiding financial debt.

Career exploration at an affordable cost transpired via exploring a variety of courses and informal faculty influences, with the literature however presenting the greatest success at developing career goals for student occurring in formal career advisement and programs. As aligned with the role of community colleges in contributing to economic opportunities and improving living standards for today’s society, D’Amico et al. (2012) urges formalized career advising for optimal results. Talib, Salleh, Amat, Ghavifekr, and Ariff (2015) found that a systemic career exploration is the most successful means to support community college students in career planning and self-efficacy.
The foundation built at community college goes beyond determining educational and career goals. It allows for valuable personal growth to mature and develop a sense of independence. While the findings of this study highlight the role of community college as an opportunity to grow, mature and become independent before leaving home to attend a 4-year institution, an extensive review of current literature showed a lack of research in this area, indicating a need for further research. Community college is also an opportunity to build academic skills, earn transferrable credits, and complete prerequisites. In addition, students gain essential information regarding the transfer process. With the time for growth and experiences at the community college, the findings suggest that enrolling at a community college as part of earning a baccalaureate degree can allow for increased success at the 4-year institution.

A significant role of the community college in the transfer pathway is to provide opportunities to earn transferrable credit and to complete prerequisites at a lesser cost prior to transfer. This study’s findings indicate that earning these credits and completing curricular requirements are of great value to transfer students. This aligns with the research indicating the benefits of this substantial role of the community college (Doyle, 2006).

The small classes commonly found in community college allow for various interactions between students and faculty, part of which is an informal conduit of information received by students. Current literature indicates community college faculty and staff are essential to relaying transfer information to students. Ellis (2013) and Kisker (2007) found that community college faculty must have cohesive and accurate transfer information as they are significant sources of dissemination. Dika (2012), Kujawa (2013), and Laanan (2007) also found community college faculty act as a channel for essential institutional information and access to resources that contribute to students navigating the transfer pathway. Rhine, Milligan, and Nelson (2000) found
that the limited amount of time students spend on campus make it even more imperative that the faculty have, and disseminate, accurate transfer information, as it is likely the main contact students have to college personnel. In contrast to the literature, none of the participants in this study articulated specific programs or being provided explicit transfer information; much of it seemed informal or haphazard. One participant “stumbled” on transfer information while meeting with his advisor during his final semester at community college and subsequently took advantage of the statewide articulation agreement between the community college and Countryside University.

Nevertheless, community college faculty are often part-time employees with limited connection to the institution and students outside of class. This can render them both less informed and less accessible than full-time employees, thus having a diminished impact on student experiences. Some participants in this study found community college faculty less accessible than those they encountered post-transfer faculty, particularly with a lack of office hours. This aligns with Eagan and Jaeger’s (2009) findings that part-time community college faculty have limited student-faculty connections, citing in particular a lack of both office space and incentives to be available outside of class. Jacoby (2006) found a correlation between an increased use of part-time faculty at a community college and a decrease in the institution’s graduation rate and claimed its practice to be harmful to both students and faculty under the guise of, “financial savings.” Eagan and Jaeger (2009) and Jacoby (2006) urge institutions and policy-makers to reconsider the current overwhelming reliance on part-time community college faculty as an attempt at financial savings due to the substantial negative impact on students, particularly those on the transfer pathway. It is evident in this study’s findings that the community college faculty had an important role in students navigating the transfer pathway.
Also important in building a foundation is receiving necessary information and support. Current literature indicates that pre-transfer advising is crucial in navigating the transfer pathway. Myers, Starobin, Chen, Baul, and Kollasch (2015) found that a significant relationship between advisor and student was influential to the success of community college students majoring in STEM transferring to the 4-year institution. Allen, Smith, and Muehleck’s (2013) study found that students had a critical need and desire for pre-transfer advisement about connecting career, life and academic goals, as well as advisement about meeting general education requirements necessary for the post-transfer institution. Furthermore, Allen et al. (2013) maintained that “paramount” (p. 340) to successful advising is giving accurate information about successfully navigating the institution’s policies and procedures. Participants of this study who were involved in the early college program specifically identified their community college advisors as being helpful and providing useful information. One participant of this study experienced receiving information about the articulation agreement with Countryside University from his community college advisor, but not until his final semester. The other participants did not share specific assistance from their community college advisors, and although it might have occurred, it was not identified as significant during the interviews. Despite a lack of pre-transfer advisement, participants were able to successfully navigate the transfer pathway.

This study’s findings indicate that students who were enrolled in the Early College Program had more positive connections with the community college than the participants who did not engage in dual enrollment during high school. Students who continued their enrollment in community college after graduating from high school having completed at least some of their college studies as high school seniors already had a connection with the community college, including an advisor. Grubb, Scott, and Good (2017) found that dual enrollment students are
more likely to complete community college on time and without the need for remediation. An 
(2013) found that dual enrollment for high school students increases the likelihood of ultimately 
earning a bachelor’s degree, even after accounting for variables such as income status, high 
school GPA, and being a first-generation student. As formal dual enrollment programs are 
relatively new, and their role in increasing the number of those who enroll at the community 
college in the transfer pathway to earning a baccalaureate degree, their longitudinal impact 
warrants further study.

Enrolling in community college often means forgoing social integration as a student. 
With minimal campus offerings beyond academics, a lack of extra-curricular activities, a 
significant portion of adult students enrolled, and the absence of housing, community college is 
often limited to engagement within the classroom. Tinto (1993) posits that both academic and 
social engagement are critical for student retention. The lack of social integration is often a 
significant barrier for successful community college transfer (Dougherty, 1994). However, 
Maxwell (2000) and Deil-Amen (2011) suggest that at the community college, social integration 
might be found more in academically-related activities and by interacting with faculty and 
students within the classroom. Mertes (2015) suggests that perhaps it does not matter whether 
social interactions occur within or outside of the classroom, but just that they occur. The results 
of this study are not in alignment with theories and literature stressing the importance of social 
engagement for student retention. The participants in this study acknowledged a lack of social 
involvement at the community college. While it would have been preferred, the absence of such 
interactions did not interfere with their persistence. The extent of the impact of a deficit of social 
engagements for others who left community college prior to transfer warrants further study. A
dearth of social engagement for some participants in fact influenced them post-transfer, as it motivated them to make it a priority at the 4-year institution.

Also reflective of social engagement is a sense of belonging. Some participants in this study experienced a sense of not fitting in, in particular because the student population at the community colleges attended was primarily non-traditional in age. Fitting in, a sense of belonging, is known to be instrumental in student success, as it results in a sense of connection, support and motivation (Kranzow, Foote, and Hinkle, 2015; Townley, Katz, Wandersman, Skiles, Schillaci, Timmerman, & Mousseau, 2013). Tinto’s Model of Institutional Departure indicates that a sense of belonging is important to retention (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). The findings of this study suggest the lack of this aspect of social engagement while at the community college might have not been the desired experience for participants, it was not an insurmountable barrier for them.

At the community college, students build transfer student capital, the knowledge and skills necessary to successfully transfer (Laanan, 2006). The findings of this study suggest that community college does play a significant role in developing and building knowledge and skills that will be essential to continue along the pathway. Connections and interactions with faculty and staff support students in gaining information critical to successful transfer and is an important element of Transfer Student Capital (Moser, 2012). This was somewhat apparent in these findings. Although not identified by most participants as specifically related to the transfer process, it was clear that all received sufficient information to successfully transfer. Many identified specific faculty and staff who provided academic, career and transfer information key to their progress along the pathway. Laanan et al. (2010) identified the lack of transfer advisement and weak transfer policies as barriers to successful transfer. Several participants
identified gaining academic skills, confidence in abilities, and seeking academic assistance while enrolled at the community college, all indicating gaining transfer student capital (Laanan et al., 2010). In contrast, however, was the transfer student capital characteristic of social adjustment, which depends on campus social involvement (Laanan, 2007). This was found to be minimal or absent in this study. Participants, however, did not see its lack as detrimental to proceeding along the pathway, although its deficiency was evident and a social connection was desired by most participants. As all participants successfully transferred to the baccalaureate institution, it was clear they had built sufficient transfer student capital at the community college.

**Conclusion**

Most participants in this study shared positive or beneficial influences of having enrolled at community college during the baccalaureate pathway. While it did not contradict the available literature, participants’ experiences did not expand on the factors presented in the literature, such as specific transfer advisement or programs at the community college. Although it may have occurred, participants did not identify specific career guidance programs at community college, in contrast to best practices recommended by current literature. Instead, participants primarily focused on such exploration and decision-making in the realm of affordability and practicality. Additionally, participants did not identify significant access to transfer information or programs, instead “stumbling” on it within the process. Again, this is in contrast to the recommendations for institutions to intentionally offer information at the start of the transfer pathway. It is possible that institutions do have systems, programs and services in place for transfer planning, career guidance, and social engagement, and these participants were either unaware or disinterested in them. Despite the lack of recommended systems and services presented by current literature, participants in this study did not present significant barriers in the community college portion to
successful navigation of the transfer pathway. In the next section, aspects of transitioning between institutions will be aligned with participants’ experiences.

**Big Changes: Transitioning Between Institutions**

Transitioning to the baccalaureate institution from a community college is a time of significant change and adjustment. The institutions can ease the transition with offerings for students prior to transfer such as campus visits, quality orientation programs, and by providing ample information. Transferring students experience a variety of aspects of adjustment, including new academic expectations, acclimating to a larger campus, and navigating essential processes such as finances and transferring credits. Typically, students also experience a major adjustment in new living arrangements, often away from home for the first time or perhaps moving into campus dorms. As with many major transitions, students experience a plethora of emotions, including excitement, fear, anxiety, and even a sense of readiness. It is important for students, faculty, staff and institutions to acknowledge the time of transfer as a significant change and to ensure students’ needs are being met.

There is a substantial indication in the literature indicating transferring from one institution to another is a major period of adjustment, even a difficult one for many (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Ellis, 2013; Handel, 2011; Laanan & Starobin, 2004; Laanan, 2007; Miller, 2013; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000; and Tinto, 1993). Current literature regarding post-transfer experiences emphasizes the social and emotional struggles of transfer students (Pappano, 2006). Wilson (2006a) found navigating a larger institution post-transfer as the primary cause of difficulties, with the study’s participants experiencing primarily social, not academic, difficulties. Additionally, Townsend (2008) posits that the transition to the
new environment requires adjustment to a larger campus, faculty seemingly distance in larger classes, and new expectations to be sources of struggle.

However, no participant in this study indicated the adjustment to be insurmountable and ultimately having a negative impact on persistence. Despite the struggles encountered, the participants continued. It was noted that only two participants were in their final semester and preparing for graduation, and as the study was not longitudinal, it was assumed that the remainder will persist to graduation. Further study of transfer students who do not persist post-transfer, so as to delineate the coping skills, structures, or experiences necessary to support retention is clearly warranted.

Transfer shock is commonly identified with a drop in grades in the first semester post-transfer (Hill, 1965), (Peng & Bailey, 1977; Porter, 1999; Rosenberg, 2016); most students do recover from the initial drop in grades (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Diaz, 1992; Glass & Harrington, 2002). Ishitani (2008) found that the higher the grade point average (GPA) post-transfer, the more likely the student is to stay in college. Cejda, Kaylor and Rewey (1998) found an initial drop in grades post-transfer only for those in science and mathematics majors. Cameron (2005) found that students experienced, “transfer shock” with a drop in GPA post-transfer, leading to a decline in confidence about academic abilities. Transfer Student Capital looks at the phenomenon of student transfer as a larger, primarily psychological, experience than the concept of “transfer shock” indicated by a drop in grade point average. Contrary to the common expectation found in the literature, no participants stated they experienced the common indicator of transfer shock, a drop in grade point average (GPA). This might be due to it being seen as an insignificant experience by the participants of this study, or because it did not occur, both of which indicate it as irrelevant in the experience of these transfer students.
College orientation is the introduction to a college – its campus, procedures, peers, staff and faculty. It is also often an opportunity to select courses, complete necessary processes, and seek useful information. For transfer students, orientation is typically an abbreviated version of what freshmen experience. Current literature strongly supports orientation to be specific to transfer students (Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Ellis, 2013; Handel, 2011; Laanan & Starobin, 2004; Laanan, 2007; Miller, 2013; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000; Tinto, 1993). Eggleston and Laanan (2001) strongly advocate that freshman and transfer orientation not only be separate, but that programs for transfer students be specifically designed to meet their unique needs and experiences. Flaga (2006) further suggests the role of orientation to the new campus is so essential that it be expanded to include an orientation on the new campus prior to transfer, and that post-transfer, it be in a seminar format throughout the semester. Tinto (2015) posits orientation contributes to a sense of belonging, a critical element of student persistence. Flaga (2006) maintains that orientation is essential to building peer connections. Townsend (2008) advocates for specific transfer orientation for both commuter and residential transfer students, with an intensity in building peer connections to last beyond orientation. Ellis (2013) and Tinto (1998) maintain that transfer student orientation should be specific to the needs of transfer students, thus more extensive than that offered to freshmen. This study’s findings supported the critical need for specific transfer orientation, although participants’ experiences indicated they had unfortunately only had a minimal orientation.

This study’s participants also acknowledged the importance of orientation, as some determined a major or identified future careers during the registration process experiences. For others, they made connections with their cohort and sustained them after the orientation.
One participant participated in the full week for freshmen as it involved a financial incentive; she believed she was already familiar with the campus from prior experiences there as a high school student and thus did not experience it as it being particularly useful. With the exception of this participant, orientation was identified as less intense, and less useful than what freshmen experience, and articulated the need of transfer students to have a more powerful orientation to their new institution. As one participant stated, just because they have already been college students, it does not mean they were college students at that institution. The findings of this study indicated the critical importance of transfer orientation for students, and the need for it to be a rich, useful experience with more information about the campus, its services, and opportunities to meet peers.

Part of the process of transitioning to a new institution of higher education involves transferring credits. Articulation agreements are becoming more commonplace between institutions and within a statewide system. Doyle (2006), Handel (2013), Kranzow, Foote, and Hinkle (2015), Monaghan and Attewell (2014), and Rhine, Milligan, and Nelson (2000) identified credit transfer as a significant piece of the community college transfer program being problematic. Carter, Coyle & Leslie (2011) and Townsend (2008) identified the denial of credits transferring as a tremendous barrier for transfer students. Current research shows that 14% of community college students lost more than 90% of community college credits upon transfer, with only 58% of community college students having most or all credits transfer to the 4-year institution (Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). Both Countryside University and Valleyview Technical College are part of the same statewide system as Eastern State Community College and have a blanket transferability of credits among institutions.
In contrast to the presentation in the literature of the significant issues with transferring credit, this study’s findings did not show it to be an issue for the participants. While one participant needed to self-advocate to have one course’s credits be applied within her major, none the other participants who presented transferring of credits experienced prohibitive barriers, including those who transferred from outside of the state system. This study does not discern the processes or policies of the institutions or the system, but it is evident that the common barrier of credit transfer was not experienced by these participants in contrast with many other relevant studies.

A proponent found to be relevant to the success of transitioning between institutions in regard to credit transfer involved earning an associate’s degree prior to transfer. Current literature (Fain, 2012b; Townsend, 2001; Townsend & Wilson, 2006b) indicates that transferring having earned this degree increases the likelihood of success in ultimately earning a bachelor’s degree as opposed to transferring individual credits. Four participants of this study’s participants transferred without earning an associate’s degree, none of whom experienced issues with transferring of individual credits. Again, it is unclear if it is reflective of this study’s institutions, if there are more complex characteristics of these participants as opposed to those in other studies, or if the premise that earning an associate’s degree is indeed a factor in the success of the community college transfer pathway.

The current literature indicates collaborations between institutions to be essential for students navigating the transfer pathway (Alfonso, 2006; Ellis, 2013; Flaga, 2006; Freeman, Conley, & Brooks, 2006; Handel, 2011; Marling, Herrera & Jain, 2013; Miller, 2013; Silver, 2015; Wang, 2009; Wilson, 2014). Flaga (2006) and Laanan (1996) specifically advocate for these linkages to include campus visits pre-transfer and helping students to develop institutional
contacts pre-transfer. Transfer Student Capital (Laanan, 2007) maintains pre-transfer connections have a direct impact on transfer students as it results in building resources. None of the participants in this study indicated they had intentional or organized experiences with the post-transfer institution prior to transfer; one participate did have experiences on the campus as a high school student. The findings of this study suggest that while participants did not directly experience linkages between institutions, they were still able to navigate along the transfer pathway. It is, however, likely they would only have benefitted from such experiences and collaboration, including less shock and struggle in the transition.

Transitioning to the new institution is a major change, requiring adjustment in many areas (Laanan, 2004, 2007; Wilson 2006a), and the experiences of participants of this study experienced indicated it was a transition requiring adjustment and adaptation. Students are faced with a new, and significantly larger, campus. They encounter new faculty, new academic expectations, and often a new housing arrangements. Transfer students must meet new people and establish an entirely new social circle thus, starting all over. Current literature concurs that the community college and 4-year institutions have differing cultures (Handel, 2011; Marti, 2009).

All of the participants in this study struggled with the transition to their new institution. According to Pappano (2006), many transfer students experience social and emotions struggles in their new environment. Laanan (2007) and Napoli and Wortman (1998) acknowledge the adjustment needs necessary for managing the differing academic standards between the institutions. For some participants, the struggles were with new academic expectations and systems, such as larger classes and a larger institution. Some participants also experienced a lack of advisement, as well as a struggle with the new institution’s schedule being so fundamentally
different than that of the community college. Several participants felt they were at a disadvantage to native students, as the timeframe for their course registration occurred after the native students had registered, narrowing their course choices; Kranzow, Foote and Hinkle’s (2015) study identified this as a common barrier experienced by transfer students. Several found establishing a new lifestyle, particularly the social aspects and making new friends, quite challenging. Most participants changed housing by moving away from home to live alone in a new place or into the college housing. For several participants, the change in living arrangements was a tremendous adjustment, and for some it was a difficult transition. Some of the participants identified strategies for coping with the transition, including self-advocacy in the institutional processes, and recognizing that one must take ownership for navigating the changes. Flaga (2006) also found self-advocacy essential during the transfer process. Despite the struggles one faces moving to a different culture, none of the participants found them to be impossible obstacles. There was a dearth in the literature of studies specifically focused on what students’ experience during the time of transition, indicating a need for further study narrowed to that specific experience in the pathway.

Change, including changing schools, can bring both positive and difficult emotions. It can create excitement, anxiety, fear, and a sense of readiness. These emotions can be navigated with preparation for the impending change, and by the new environment’s reception and subsequent experiences. The participants in this study experienced a range of emotions, with none of negative ones, such as fear and anxiety, lingering or so significant as to serve as a barrier. Many participants experienced the 4-year institution as immediately welcoming and accepting, certainly easing the transition, aligning with Laanan et al. (2010) who stressed the
critical importance of the 4-year institution offering transfer students a welcoming environment, as it has a positive impact on students.

Several participants experienced mixed emotions, with excitement to begin anew and ready to make a change, but with fear about leaving home and meeting new people. Acknowledging their feelings as normal responses to such significant change supported participants in continuing onward post-transfer, and made the adjustment phase brief. It is possible that the mechanisms of transfer student capital supported students and their coping strategies in overcoming any negative emotions. Pappano (2006), posits that many transfer students struggle emotionally in their new environment. However, there is a lack of literature available about the emotional aspects of transferring between institutions. Assuming emotions impact students, and thus their ability to navigate the transfer pathway, more studies regarding the emotions experienced during the process of change would be useful to better understand the transfer phenomenon, and how to best support students.

The theoretical framework utilized in this study, Transfer Student Capital, posits that there is an adjustment process for transfer students involving academic, social, and psychological aspects as they experience a larger institution, a new culture, increased rigor and new friends (Laanan, 2001, 2004). Possessing the knowledge and skill pertinent to navigating the transition from one institution to another and encountering such changes impacts the success of a transfer student (Laanan, 2006). Transfer orientation is an absolute necessity to build transfer student capital, as it offers important information and strategies for successful integration (Laanan, 2007; Laanan et al., 2010; Rosenberg, 2016); this was strongly supported by the findings of this study, as participants articulated a lack of adequate transfer orientation and a clear need for the information and experiences they missed. The findings of this study supported that the capital
students possessed, information, connections, support networks, and adaptation strategies, all contributed to persisting beyond the challenges experienced in transition.

**Conclusion**

Changing institutions may be considered to be a significant social, emotional and educational adjustment. Participants in this study experienced a new culture, including the need to make new friends, adapt to new living arrangements, learning new systems, adjusting to new ways to manage their time, and becoming familiar with a new campus, classroom environments and expectations. Despite having no pre-transfer preparation with the new campus prior to limited orientations, participants managed to overcome barriers and persisted. Literature acknowledges changing institutions is a significant transition, necessitating time for both adjustment and adaptation. Further studies on the specificity of this timeframe of the transfer student experience would contribute to a further understanding of the phenomenon. The next section will present participant their experiences at the baccalaureate institution.

**Moving On: Experiences at the Baccalaureate Institution**

Transferring to a new institution offers new experiences. The new college offers a campus to become familiar with, people to meet, faculty and staff to meet, systems to learn, and classroom cultures to recognize and understand. Transferring from a community college to a 4-year institution is often a significant change between the institutions, with the new college being larger, having more social opportunities to offer, and different academic experiences. Participants of this study had very different experiences post-transfer than they did at community college. In the new environment, participants experienced social integration, new peer relationships, and interactions with faculty and staff, all of which impacted success in the transfer pathway.
Townsend (2008) described transitioning to the new institution as occurring in two stages, and after the initial transition, the next is immediately connecting with peers and faculty. These connections, as shown in this study’s findings, are critical to satisfaction, and thus persistence, at the new institution. Several studies, including Berger and Malaney (2003) and Kranzow, Foote, and Hinkle (2015) maintain that social integration, including involvement in campus activities, significantly impact satisfaction and ultimately persistence.

Participants found connectivity and support from peers and social integration, and identified it as important to their post-transfer experiences. The sole participant living on campus attributed her overwhelmingly positive experience and success post-transfer to the sense of community she experienced. This feeling aligns with Berger and Malaney (2003), Laananan (2003), and Utter and DeAngelo’s (2015) findings that transfer students benefit from living on campus. However, it was for her initially a challenging adjustment as she felt like an outsider to an already-established community (as well as having a freshman roommate). The remainder of the participants lived off-campus, including both non-traditional age students. In stark contrast to the findings of this study, several studies found negative experiences with living off-campus. Utter and DeAngelo (2015) found that living off campus created a sense of isolation. Townsend and Wilson (2009) found that off-campus students struggle with social integration, mainly due to work obligations resulting in time constraints. Ishitani and McKitrick (2010) found living off-campus to have a negative impact on faculty-student relations. Lester et al. (2013) found that social engagement post-transfer tends to be focused in one’s personal life off-campus, with academic engagement resulting from classroom experiences and relationships with faculty as the form of engagement experienced; the findings of this study contrasted with this, as even commuting participants reported on-campus social engagement. The findings of this study
indicated that students living off-campus could still have strong and rewarding connections to campus, peers, faculty and staff. This might be indicative of the participants’ attitudes, behaviors and goals as to what it meant to be a college student, or it might suggest Countryside University’s culture and offerings meets the needs of off-campus students. Further study to explore how 4-year institutions can provide environment offering social and academic integration for community college transfer students, including non-traditional age and military veterans, would be of benefit.

Only the participants who had been early college enrollees reported a substantial lack of social involvement on campus, and neither indicated a desire for more time or opportunity to have social integration. Further study as to whether early college participants have different goals and mindset about the college experience than do other college students would be warranted to further explore this finding. Additionally, while ample studies explore the positive impact of dual enrollment on college retention and degree completion, including Allen and Dadgar (2012); Morrison (2008); D’Amico, Morgan, Robertson, and Rivers (2013); and Grubb, Scott, and Good, (2017), available studies featured dual enrollment as taking one or a few college courses in high school, not full-time enrollment for senior year, as these participants experienced. Thus, this study’s findings regarding social and academic integrations experiences of these particular participants might be unique to them, or perhaps they may be indicative of other early college enrollees. Further studies regarding this type of these early college programs would be informative to create a richer understanding of the transfer pathway.

Non-traditional age students at the baccalaureate institution are believed to have different needs and experiences than traditional-age students, including a lack of connection to campus. This can be attributed to work and family obligations, maturity, and different goals. In contrast to
findings and common beliefs about non-traditional students, this study’s findings indicate these students can be socially and academically integrated, and that academic activities in particular such as study groups, can provide a sense of connection, support and integration. Deil-Amen (2011) presented the urgency of connecting with faculty and peers outside of the classroom and managing daily life as important to student success. Ashar and Skenes (1993) found adult students have learning and social needs, including having social integration within the classroom as their social connections are not within the school community.

In contrast with much of the literature, the non-traditional age participants in this study experienced significant positive impacts of social integration at the baccalaureate institution. In alignment with the findings of this study, Laanan (1996) found that while the traditional and non-traditional student had different experiences, their adjustment processes were similar. One participant, a military veteran, experienced a continued sense of comradery by studying with her peers and participating in a sports team. Several studies (Ackerman, DiRamion, & Garza Mitchell, 2009; Durosko, 2017; Fishback & Kirchner, 2015; Griffin, K.A. & Gilbert, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, Ackerman, & Diramio, 2009) indicate military veterans struggle on the college campus, as the transition from the military to civilian life as a student is significant. In contrast, the veteran participant in this study acknowledged, but did not experience, issues with the major changes, attributing the ease to the services she received and the welcoming, inclusive college campus. While the literature indicated veterans need specific, supportive services (Durosko, 2017; Fishback & Kirchner, 2015; Rumann & Hamrick, Ackerman, & Diramio, 2009; Whitley & Tschudi, 2014), this study’s veteran participant knew of their existence but did not believe she had a need for them. It is not possible for this study to identify whether personal or institutional factors influenced her successful transition and experiences at Countryside
Allen and Zhang (2016) found that being an adult student was advantageous in that life experiences created different worldviews compared to that of traditional-age students, allowing one to be a source of perception and information for younger students. Interestingly, this was the very role this participant felt she often played on the sports team. Another participant, a nursing major, also developed a supportive peer group. She studied with other students and was successful in balancing a family and life as a college student. Zhang, Lui, and Hagedorn (2013) posit engagement as a student takes different forms for adult students, however the findings of this study did not indicate a marked difference in engagement among participants, as both of these participants spent significant time outside of class on campus studying, interacting with peers, and participating in campus activities. Conversely, in contrast with this study’s findings, Allen and Zhang (2016) found that adult transfer students who were actively engaged in campus activities had a resulting negative academic impact. This study’s participants experienced high levels of academic success due, in their view, in part because of their active connections to campus, resulting in satisfying experiences as college students. Neither of these participants worked full-time, unlike nontraditional-age students typically presented in the literature, however the one participant of this study who did work full-time experienced no connection with campus or peers outside of the classroom; this was in alignment with the literature of non-traditional age students who worked full-time (Allen & Zhang, 2016; Zhang, Lui, & Hagedorn, 2013). Zhang, Lui, and Hagedorn (2013) recommend established learning communities for adult students, in relative alignment with this study’s findings, although the participants themselves created learning communities which brought for them a sense of belonging and social integration. Rosenberg (2016) found the multiple roles managed by non-traditional transfer students presents a need for specific interventions to transition into the new institution. However, neither non-traditional student in
this study indicated a need for specific interventions to support them in balancing family and household responsibilities beyond a generally supportive college environment.

Participants of this study identified the social experiences and involvement at the 4-year institution as different from those at the community college, with the connections made with others to be a very positive experience contributing to post-transfer satisfaction and success. Some participants of this study prioritized social integration and having a peer network, particularly if it was lacking at the community college. One participant purchased a meal plan in order to interact with others in the dining hall; this intentional strategy allowed this commuting participant to meet his clear goal of making social connections post-transfer, and concurs with Harper and Yeung (2013) who found most initial cross-cultural peer interactions occurred in residence halls and the dining room. Whether socially integrated, or lacking such, participants were satisfied with their post-transfer experiences.

Academic integration, including relationships with faculty and staff, also contribute to post-transfer success. Most participants of this study experienced positive relationships with faculty and staff, and attributed their support as part of their success post-transfer. In alignment with this study’s findings, Dika (2012), Handel (2011), Volkwein, King and Terenzini (1986) concurred that connections and relationships with faculty and staff are critical for student success. As reflected in this study’s findings, Mery and Schioring (2011) found that faculty, both inside and outside the classroom, support transfer student aspirations and thus contribute to persistence towards earning baccalaureate degrees. They posit that connections that go beyond academics in the classroom are particularly influential. Current literature aligns with this study’s findings regarding the role of faculty on student experiences.
Other current literature concurs that active classroom learning strategies contribute to student persistence, implicating faculty influences student persistence in both relationships and the academic experiences offered (Braxton & Mundy, 2001; Kujawa, 2013; Lester et al, 2013; Tinto, 1993). Participants of this study did not share their in-class experiences, but did have positive experiences overall academically and in relationships with faculty, whom they found to be both caring and accessible. Current literature indicates academic and social involvement on campus positively impacts student persistence (Pacarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Luo, Williams, and Vieweg (2007) and Wang (2009) found that having greater involvement or perceived connectedness with campus contributes to post-transfer success. This study’s findings strongly aligned with involvement and connectedness to the baccalaureate campus as having a positive impact on persistence and success post-transfer on the transfer pathway.

Several post-transfer experiences presented in the literature were not shared by participants of this study. These included increased academic rigor, which would imply the potential for lack of preparation (Baum & Kurose, 2013; Compton et al., 2006; Laanan, 2007; Laanan, Starobin, and Eggleston, 2010). Additionally, Allen, Smith, & Muehleck (2013); Freeman, Conley, & Brooks (2006); Hagedorn, Moon, Cypers, Maxwell, & Lester (2006); Kranzow, Foote, and Hinkle (2015). Rosenberg (2016) identified post-transfer advisement as essential; none of the participants described specific advisement experiences beyond having caring, supportive advisors. While participants did not expressly describe such experiences, it cannot be assumed they did not occur, but instead that they were not identified by them to be significant experiences as community college transfer students.

Post-transfer, participants of this study continued to receive information, support and experiences that assisted them in continuing along the transfer pathway. These behaviors and
experiences continue to build transfer student capital. According to Laanan (2000, 2007) post-transfer actions can positively or negatively have academic and social impacts; this study’s participants continued to seek support, build networks, and engage in actions that contributed to academic success. Seeking experiences and actions indicative of transfer student capital increase students’ desires to persist (Rosenberg, 2016), as did participants of this study who engaged in such behavior as interacting with faculty outside of class, time spent studying, and seeking information necessary to succeed. Thus, the findings of this study concur that the post-transfer characteristics of transfer student capital provide support and experiences that assist transfer students in navigating the pathway towards the baccalaureate degree.

**Conclusion**

Participants experienced a sense of belonging post-transfer, something most had not experienced at the community college. Having significant connections with peers, whether through social or academic activities, gave participants of this study rewarding and satisfying experiences as college students. Relationships with peers, faculty and staff added great depth to being a college student, making it a much richer experience beyond academic accomplishments. The findings of this study are in alignment with the literature presenting the social and academic integration and support of students in navigating the transfer pathway. The integration and support received likely indicates the impact of an expanded college campus and subsequent experiences as adding a beneficial depth to what it can mean to be a college student. The next, and final, section will present supportive resources indicated by this study and the applicable literature available.
It Takes a Village: Supportive Resources

Students on the community college transfer pathway to a baccalaureate degree experience many supportive resources. Peers, family, faculty and staff all provide helpful information and support. Institutional factors, including policies, services and culture, also supportively contribute to students’ experiences and persistence. Supportive resources were experienced by all of this study’s participants in the transfer pathway. They benefited from support and advisement from both family and peers. In addition, participants found faculty and staff to be both accessible and helpful. Both the community colleges and the baccalaureate institutions had services and practices in place that participants found to be beneficial.

This study’s findings suggest that peers and family offer support, encouragement and comfort, particularly during coursework challenges. Participants shared treasured memories of social integration with college friends at the baccalaureate institution, making college an experience that was more powerful and memorable than had it be experienced via academics alone. Peers were essential for studying, academic support and encouragement. Families were seen as essential sources of support, and for the nontraditional students, practical assistance with parenting and household responsibilities so they could focus on studies. Additionally, peers and family offered useful advice along the pathway. Participants’ experiences indicated that peers and family offered various forms of support and influence, and assisted their navigation on the transfer pathway.

The findings of this study were in alignment with the literature, indicating the community college transfer pathway requires a support system for successful navigation. Strom and Savage’s (2014) research found that peers and family not only influence the initial decisions about college, such as where to attend and having a goal to graduate, but that family support in
particular has a subsequent impact on students as to remaining committed to the goal of graduating with a college degree. Cheng, Ickes, and Verhofstadt (2012) found that perceived family social support had a positive impact on grade point average. Bank, Slavings, and Biddle (1990) found the support of peers and family had more influence on student persistence than did faculty support; the findings of this study did not quantify which sources of support had more significant impact. Zhang, Lui, and Hagedorn (2013) found that family support is critical for non-traditional age college student success, which was also found in this study’s findings. This study’s findings and the literature concurred that peers and family are critical sources of support in continuing on the transfer pathway.

Participants also found faculty and staff to be sources of support and information. Faculty and advisors were seen as caring, supportive, accessible and helpful, and participants reported a strong rapport with them. Other staff, including transfer admissions counselors, career advisor, and financial aid staff were identified as offering essential assistance, information and support. Other studies found similar results, with faculty identified as informative, supportive and caring. Relationships with faculty and staff were found to be influential to student persistence in both this study and in others. Berger and Malaney (2003) found that faculty and staff at both levels of institutions can positively influence successful transfers and transitions by providing information, having sufficient advisement, and provide students will pre-transfer connections to the post-transfer institution. Williamson, Goosen and Gonzalez (2014) posit that student advisement and on-going support is critical to student persistence, and thus emphasize that all faculty must be trained to contribute to the efforts to advise and support students outside of faculty’s classroom role. Similar to Cameron’s (2005) study of nursing students transferring to the baccalaureate institution from the community college, one participant in this study attributed the successful adaption to the new environment to, in part, a sense of caring from close
relationships with supporting and nurturing faculty. Some participants in this study also attributed caring and supporting faculty in their major departments to be a source of easing the transition and contributing to positive experiences at the 4-year institution.

In addition to faculty and advisors providing essential support, participants of this study specifically identified student affairs personnel in financial aid, career counseling and transfer admissions as offering substantial information and support which were influential to navigating and continuing on the transfer pathway. The impact they made included not only offering information, but also a sense of caring and reassurance. Literature concurs that student affairs personnel can serve roles larger than their immediate responsibilities, and their efforts impact student experiences. Ciobanu (2013) posits that student affairs personnel contribute to the support and enhancement of students’ academic and social experiences from their initial contact with the institution until they are alumni; their efforts contribute also to student retention as they provide academic, social and emotional connection to the institution. Paine (2013) found that the role of student affairs, regardless of which type of services were being provided, was about caring for students needs, individually and collectively. The literature supports the findings of this study, highlighting the importance of faculty and staff in caring for and supporting students, essential in their navigation of the transfer pathway.

Specific services on campus are also supportive resources. Participants engaged in tutoring services and group study activities, finding them helpful for academic success and a sense of self-efficacy. Several participants also identified peer study groups as their social cohort offering support, a sense of belonging, and enabling academic success. This is in alignment with the literature, which indicated activities supporting academic success have a positive impact on transfer students. Ellis (2013) found that academic support services and tutoring were important
for transfer student success, particularly post-transfer. Miller and Marling (2013) also found the positive impact of tutoring on transfer student success. Tien, Roth, and Kampmeier (2002) and Wamser (2006) found that peer study groups contribute to improved grades and to student retention. Peer studying not only assists in academic success, but also provides a sense of social integration. In alignment, Shaw (2011) noted that learning occurs through the social interactions of a peer study group.

The culture of the environment post-transfer was identified as a supportive factor for participants to navigate the pathway. Participants identified a sense of community at the 4-year institution impacting them positively. Current literature notes the importance of the post-transfer institution being an accepting and supportive institution (Handel, 2011). Participants experienced a lack of stigma as community college transfer students at the baccalaureate institution. In contrast to these findings, Laanan et al. (2010) found that stigma was experienced by some transfer students, impacting their academic adjustment, although it was unclear if it consequently impacted persistence. Laanan, Starobin, and Eggleston (2010) found that stigma for being a community college transfer student negatively impacted students. It is possible the lack of stigma reported in this study was reflective of the institutions’ cultures, however the sample was too small to be a true comparison, or there was a difference in perception by these participants.

The experiences of the veteran participant were overwhelmingly positive, as she experienced a strong sense of community and belonging, which she saw as similar to that of her military career. Durosko (2017), however, found that developing a sense of belonging was often a challenge to veteran college students, and having specific services available for veterans, ideally from other veterans, was critical to transitioning from the culture of the military to that of the college. Another challenge typically experienced by veterans related to a lack of financial resources, particularly with the GI bill. Furthermore, Durosko posits that veterans are
accustomed to structure and clarity in the military, and as students, veterans need to know steps and contacts throughout the transfer pathway. The findings of this study are too insignificant to assume to be representative of all veteran students, but it does lend itself to continued study as the population of veterans enrolling in college is substantially rising.

In other studies, several institutional practices were deemed advantageous to community college transfer students. Imperative to transfer success is not only connecting students with the post-transfer institution prior to transfer, but on-going collaboration between institutions as well (Flaga, 2006; Rosenberg, 2016). The findings of this study indicated a lack of connection with the 4-year institution prior to transfer, and participants were unable to identify collaborations between the institutions. While other studies (De la Torre, 2007; Ellis, 2013; Gilroy, 2005; Hagedorn et al., 2006) indicate the importance of easily accessible information, including online, regarding the transfer pathway, no participants shared experiences utilizing such resources. While literature indicates these are essential institutional practices, this study cannot discern whether they were actually lacking, or if they did occur and participants were unable to identify them.

Transfer student capital, skills that contribute to being able to navigate the transfer pathway, involves the factors identified as supportive resources. These include support of peers and families, supportive staff and faculty, and helpful institutional practices. These findings are supported by the literature regarding transfer student capital. Laanan, Starobin, and Eggleston (2010) found faculty could have a significant, positive impact on transfer adjustment by making connections with transfer students. When transfer students find faculty as accessible and easy to approach, they are more likely to seek assistance which ultimately contributes to more successful academic adjustment (Laanan, 2000). Post-transfer involvement in academic groups, such as
study groups, or cultural groups, such as peer cohorts, are important as they foster a sense of belonging and help build a new network of friends (Laanan, 2007). Each of this study’s findings regarding supportive resources indicated factors that assisted students in successful continuation on the transfer student pathway from community college to ultimately earning a bachelor’s degree.

**Conclusion**

There are several factors this study presented as supportive resources with which the literature corresponded. Peers, families, faculty and staff provided support and advisement that assisted transfer students at both institutions, when transitioning between them, and in continuing along the pathway to earn a bachelor’s degree. Institutional practices such as offering tutoring services, also offer students influential support. Lacking in the findings were practices such as collaborations between institutions and easily accessible transfer information, although it cannot be assumed they do not actually occur but instead might be either unapparent to participants or perceived as insignificant in their experiences. The findings of this study indicated that several factors supported students as they navigated the transfer student pathway, requiring many people to support and guide them. The next sections will present recommendations for future practice and for future research as a result of the findings of this study.

**Conclusion**

The research question that this study answered was: how do community college transfer students navigate successful completion of a baccalaureate degree? Based on the data collected for this study, it appeared community college transfer students relied on a number of internal and outside resources to make decisions, to receive necessary information and support, and to persist along the college pathway. Much of how they experienced the transfer pathway included
clarifying college and career goals and then committing to these goals and persisting as students. The experience described by the community college transfer students in this study was having both enjoyable times as a college student intertwined with times of struggle, uncertainty, and challenges. They found that there were valuable benefits from initially attending community college, transitioning between institutions was difficult, the institutions differed, social integration added to one’s experience, and that they needed support from family, peers, faculty and staff. Overall, these community college transfer students were satisfied with their decision to earn a baccalaureate degree by starting at a community college, and described their experiences as rewarding, successful, and worthwhile.

This is consistent with previous studies indicating utilizing the community college pathway as a sensible means by which to earn a baccalaureate degree (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Handel, 2011, 2013; Moser, 2011; Snyder, 2012; Wang, 2012). Saving money, strengthening academic skills, confirming college and career goals, completing initial coursework, and becoming ready for the 4-year institution support the sensibility to completing a bachelor’s degree by starting at the community college. For those who desire a baccalaureate degree for personal or for professional goals, beginning at the community college can be not only a necessity, but a wise option.

For those utilizing the community college transfer pathway to ultimately earn a bachelor’s degree, beliefs about their capabilities regarding abilities and persistence are essential, as is a focus on the end-goal of a degree. These perceptions help to propel students along the pathway, even when encountering challenges and transitions. Attending the community college is beneficial and significant to students, as it provides a financial savings, opportunities to explore career options, strengthening of personal and academic foundations, and earning
valuable college credits. While social integration is typically lacking, its impact is not necessarily insurmountable. Transitioning between institutions is a challenge of varying degrees. The significant changes and adjustments present struggles to adapt to a different and larger institution and to make new friends. Essential in supporting students during this transition is an intense orientation specifically for transfer students. Once transferred, students find it to be a very different culture, presenting ample opportunities for social integration and accessible faculty. In this particular study, even nontraditional age students experienced significant and rewarding social integration post-transfer. Faculty and staff at both institutions play critical roles to students successfully navigating this pathway, as they offer support, information, guidance, and share their wealth of perspective on career fields. Community college transfer students also need support from peers and family in order to navigate this pathway. The findings of this study indicated starting at the community college and transferring to the baccalaureate institution to ultimately earn a bachelor’s degree involved a number of transitions, potential barriers, and a goal-orientation, all of which required information and support to navigate.

It is evident that the community college transfer pathway serves a critical role for students, the workforce, and our society. With many intending to, and needing to, utilize it as a means to earn a bachelor’s degree, the factors, practices and policies that best support the pathway must be understood and supported. In order to best support the community college pathway, there are several recommendations for practice and for future research that would strengthen the pathway.

**Recommendations for Practice**

This study identified several institutional practices that would further support students navigating the community college pathway to earning a baccalaureate. The researcher will share
the results of this study with the community college and baccalaureate institutions presented in
the study, and with others who might benefit from this information. The researcher will look to
present these findings at conferences and in literature where the information would be useful.

**Prepare students.** Efforts to prepare students to navigate the transfer pathway are
imperative. From the time they decide to start at the community college, information and a
planning process through advisement provide students options and directions. Having knowledge
about post-transfer institutions, in particular admissions and credit transfer requirements, assist
them in better planning in order to meet their end-goal. In addition, it is evident that students
receive information from more than just formal advisement. Having information available to
them independently, such as user-friendly, current information online would better help them to
plan and to make decisions that allow them to successfully navigate the pathway in a timely
matter, and lessen the change of departure. Furthermore, having faculty accurately informed as
they often provide information and support to students is important. Students not only need to be
prepared in coursework planning, but also in making the transition between institutions as this
time is rife with difficulty. Several opportunities to engage at the new institution are imperative,
including pre-transfer introductions to the campus and its faculty. Familiarity will lessen the
angst brought about by the unknown and to orient to an entirely new setting. Students who are
well-prepared to transfer will encounter less barriers, be more capable of handling those that do
arise, and continue less burdened on the transfer pathway until reaching their degree goal.

**Have collaborative efforts between institutions.** In supporting students navigating the
community college pathway, institutions have a great responsibility to work together for the most
seamless transitions possible. Aligning curriculum, both in content and in expectations, will help
prepare students for changing institutions with less shock. This will require both the larger
organizations to share programming alignment, provide information, and set policies to support unified agreements, and the academic departments to work together in sharing and connecting curriculum. Efforts to make transition between institutions smoother, such as clear credit transfer processes and articulation agreements, greatly assist students in more successful transitions with less problems to overcome. While students do not necessarily all transfer along the same pathway, likely connections can be identified.

**Provide supportive resources.** It is imperative that community college transfer students have supportive resources. There is great value in offering welcoming, caring atmospheres; institutions need to commit to providing such cultures. Faculty and staff offer information, academic and personal support, and career-oriented opportunities; highly beneficial is the information on navigating institutional requirements and processes. Thus faculty and staff must have accurate and timely information, as well as be accessible to students with posted hours of availability and a welcoming attitude. Critical to the role as a supportive resource is understanding the magnitude of this function, thus educating faculty and staff in an on-going way on the crucial part they play for these students to navigate this pathway is helpful.

Services, such as tutoring and intentional peer study opportunities, assist students with building academic skills as well as a social network which is essential for support and a sense of belonging. Additionally, accessible psychological services which assist students in strategies to cope with stress, adjustments, and strengthen perceptions of self-efficacy are essential.

A critical practice for community college transfer students is offering a substantial orientation, specifically for them. Similar to that of freshmen students, transitioning to the new environment requires informing students of the new campus and its offerings, as well as opportunities to meet others. A precursor to this are orientation opportunities prior to the transfer
itself, either in-person or on-line. In these programs, students can gain familiarity with the campus, resource people, faculty, and processes before they transfer. It is also an opportunity to be aware of what to expect emotionally in the transition process and to begin to meet peers and develop a social network.

Students who engaged in dual enrollment as high school students might have differing needs from other students, including more sensitivity to their familiarity to campus, yet also to not assuming that they are fully integrated. For example, offering a specialized orientation program, as well as opportunities to network with other peers from such programs, would meet their unique needs. Non-traditional age students are likely to gain social engagement through academic connections with peers, thus intentional efforts to offer a multitude of study groups, group efforts, and other social activities relating to curriculum are beneficial. Other targeted groups, such as veterans, also benefit from having institutions meet their needs with identified resources and intentional opportunities for peer networking.

**Use information to ensure best practices.** Knowing the needs of community college transfer students are fluid. As students’ needs and goals change, and as institutions change, what students require to be successful will vary. When presented by particular subgroups utilizing the community transfer pathway, such as nursing students or veterans, services and practices also need to adapt to best meet their needs. Ongoing data collection of both larger systems and at individual institutions, such as persistence data as well as explanatory information, needs to be utilized to provide best practices and policies. Mechanisms should also be in place for these students to give feedback and to share their experiences so that institutions can identify how they are serving them well and how their needs are being unmet. The community college transfer
pathway is currently a substantial system of earning a bachelor’s degree, and thus deserving of effective practices and systems to support it.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study informed the understanding of students pursuing baccalaureate degrees via the community college transfer pathway. Its’ focus was limited to two small, public northeastern baccalaureate institutions. Additional qualitative studies could be done on a variety of other campuses, including private as well as substantially larger institutions. Examining different institutions would offer a richer understanding of community college transfer students pursuing bachelor degrees. Are all institutions welcoming and caring? If campus culture supports students with a sense of being cared about and of belonging, there is a greater sense of satisfaction that would impact student persistence. Connections between institutions also impact student progression on the pathway when they present minimal barriers for students. Further studies would provide a fuller understanding of which institutional practices impact students navigating this transfer pathway. Do articulation agreements matter? Do institutions from differing systems offer relatively seamless connections? Information articulating differences among other types of institutions and systems would provide a fuller understanding of how to best support students navigating this pathway.

Further study of various types of students and of differing perspectives in this phenomenon are also essential. It is important to engage in focused study on subgroups of students, such as veterans, early college program students, particular majors and nontraditional students, as they would provide increased understanding and thus better practices in supporting students. Experiences of faculty and staff are lacking in the research about this phenomenon, and are necessary to understanding the community college transfer student trends from an
institutional perspective. Another group underrepresented in the literature are the many students who intend to earn a baccalaureate in this way and yet leave before accomplishing it. What caused them to leave? What would have assisted them in the continuation of their studies?

Furthermore, studies in real-time, rather than retrospect would allow for a more in-depth understanding of what these students experience, such as during the time of transferring between institutions. What is it really like as they are experiencing it, not from memory? Finally, longitudinal study of what community college transfer students experience from initial decision to take this pathway until they reach baccalaureate graduation is a necessity to truly understand this phenomenon.

This study’s findings also suggest an augmentation to Transfer Student Capital would be appropriate. The subgroups of students in this study, including veterans, nontraditional age students, and early college students, indicate consideration that diverse types of students have differing needs and experiences that support them along the pathway. Extending the components of Transfer Student Capital to subgroups of community college transfer students would make it further applicable in identifying means of support for their unique needs. This would warrant further study of these subgroups, and aligning the findings with Transfer Student Capital.

This study has presented the experiences of community college transfer students pursuing baccalaureate degrees. These findings add to the knowledge of this phenomenon, thus contributing to an understanding about how to best support student navigation. With its substantial role in our society, further study to understand and to support it is imperative.
Hello,

I would like to interview you about your experiences as a community college transfer student. I wish to explore how students understand and navigate their experiences with as a transfer student seeking a bachelors degree. Your participation in this study will assist me in making recommendations for how the colleges can best support community college students in graduating with a bachelors degree. Your participation will help me to suggest improvements in communication, student services, organization, and policy.

This study will consist of one interview that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. I believe an interview is the best way to understand student experiences. All information gathered through the interview will be anonymous. Your identity will be protected and any information which could identify you will not be released. The duration of this study is estimated to be 6 months in duration. There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this research nor are there any foreseeable risks for your participation. I would be happy to share my results with you once the project is complete. I have attached an Informed Consent Form to this email for your review. This form would need to be signed by you if you choose to participate in the study.

Please contact me if you would like to participate. You can simply reply to this e-mail (peters.step@husky.neu.edu) or call my cell phone at 802-379-4112 and we will arrange a convenient time to meet. You may also contact the Principal Investigator and my advisor for this research, Dr. Joseph W. McNabb, PhD, at j.mcnabb@neu.edu.

Should you agree to participate, you will be compensated a $5 gift card to Dunkin Donuts for your time.

Thank you,
Stephannie Peters, Adjunct Instructor at CCV, VTC and Castleton University
Appendix B – Signed Informed Consent

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

**Name of Investigators:** Stephannie R. Peters, Doctoral Student  
Principal Investigator: Joseph McNabb, PhD.

**Title of Project:** College Transfer and the Pathway to a Baccalaureate Degree: The Lived Experiences of Transfer Students

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

**Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?** You are being invited to participate in this research project because you have been identified as a community college transfer student who completed at least 15 community college credits prior to transfer, and transfer more than one year ago.

**Why is this research study being done?** The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of community college transfer students who pursue a bachelor’s degree.

**What will I be asked to do?** If you decide to take part in this study, you will be invited to participate in one audio-recorded interview.

**Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?** The interview will be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you, lasting 60-90 minutes.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?** There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, you will be contributing to an understanding of the experiences of those transferring from a community college to pursue a bachelor’s degree. This in turn could influence practices and policies of institutions to best serve transfer students.

**Who will see the information about me?** Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

Audio recordings from the interviews will be stored on the researcher's password protected equipment and data storage, and will be destroyed as soon as they are uploaded to the researcher's computer. All electronic data from the audio recording and interview transcripts will be kept on the researcher's password protected computer for three years, at which time, these files will be deleted.
Any identifying characteristics of the participants will be removed from the report and pseudonyms will be used during the data collection to identify each participant’s data. This form will be scanned into the researcher’s secure password protected computer and stored for three years. The signed, paper informed consent forms will then be shredded.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?** The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate, and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time prior to data analysis.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me, Stephannie Peters, at 802-379-4112 or peters.step@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Joseph McNabb, PhD., the Principal Investigator at j.mcnabb@neu.edu.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?** If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact: Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, 617-373-4588, irb@neu.edu You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Is there anything else I need to know?** You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

I agree to take part in this research.

________________________________________  Date

________________________________________  Printed name of person above

______________________________  Signature of person agreeing to take part
Appendix C -- Interview Schedule

1. Can you describe your college pathway?

   Prompts: Did you always have plans to start at a community college and transfer? What words come to mind?

2. What is it like to be a college student?

   Prompts: How are you as a student, such as how much effort do you put into your studies? What have your relationships with faculty been like? How have they been helpful? Have you experienced a difference between those at a community college and those at the baccalaureate institution?

3. Can you tell me what it’s like to transfer to a 4-year college from a community college?

4. How did the community college prepare you to transfer?

   Prompts: Academically? Receiving the information you needed?

5. If you had to describe being a community college transfer student, what would you say?

   Prompts: What words come to mind? Do you think you’re a “typical” student?

6. How does it feel to be a community college transfer student?

   Prompts: Has this changed over time? Is there a stigma?

7. Did you experience any roadblocks to transferring?

   Prompts: Did you credits transfer easily? Did you take the community college courses you needed? How did you handle the courses? Financial aid? Living situation? How did you handle these roadblocks?

8. Can you describe what it was like to come here initially?

   Prompts: Feelings? Images? Particular memory?

9. Can you describe the non-academic aspects of your experience?

   Prompts: living on campus? being involved in the campus activities? Socializing?

10. What is an example that comes to mind as to what it means to transfer from a community college to a 4-year college?

11. What does it mean to you to have attended community college as part of earning a bachelor’s degree?
Prompts: Financial advantage? Were you “ready” then?

12. If you had a chance to offer advice to others about transferring from a community college, what would it be?

Prompts: To students? To the institutions?

13. Is there anything else you’d like to share with me?
Are you a former COMMUNITY COLLEGE student? Would you be willing to participate in a study & share your experiences in an interview?

Contact Stephannie Peters at peters.step@husky.neu.edu or 802.379.4112
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