THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE OF TRANSFER

STUDENTS: ONBOARDING AT A METROPOLITAN

UNIVERSITY

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"Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee;
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!"

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"Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee;"
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!"

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Title of Study: THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE OF TRANSFER STUDENTS:

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Abstract: As students transition from one phase of the education pipeline to the next, support programs are often put in place to make the transition and onboarding process as smooth as possible. While support programs for first-year students entering college directly from high school are common place at most institutions, onboarding practices for transfer students entering institutions are less consistent. The purpose of this study is to explore the onboarding experiences of transfer students as they prepare to begin coursework at a new university. This case study will be conducted at a Metropolitan institution with a student population that is historically comprised of a large number of transfer students.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As the student population becomes increasingly diverse, the needs of students

entering institutions of higher education become more diverse as well. The traditional

path to degree completion is now anything but traditional. With this diversion from

tradition, colleges and universities are experiencing a change in the enrollment patterns

and matriculations patterns of students who are seeking a path to degree completion that

caters toward their unique set of needs. Part of this growing group of diverse students

includes students who earn credits from multiple institutions to complete a bachelor's

degree. These students, known as transfer students, are not a homogenous group of

students, but a group comprised of unique individuals with very different paths to degree

completion. Recent research suggests that transfer activity has increased in higher

education and its patterns are less predictable than previous transfer patterns (Furbeck,

2015). As these patterns become more common, a notable transfer student population is

seen as a new normal for higher education (Marling, 2013).

Increased numbers of transfer students and the importance of The First-Year

Experience (the year immediately following transfer to a new institution) in academic and

social adjustment suggest that transfer students' experiences in the onboarding and orientation process have an effect on their subsequent retention and graduation from the institution. The proposed study seeks to further the body of research surrounding transfer students by exploring the transition experiences of students as they moved from one institution of higher education to another. The study examined the lived experiences of transfer students from their first interaction with the university through the first time they attended classes, defined by this study as onboarding. This time period included, but was not limited to, recruitment activities, academic advising, enrollment, financial aid processes, and programmatic academic and social orientation. This study provided a view of the transition experience from the transfer students' perspectives. Transition, for this study, was defined as moving in, moving through, and moving out of a life phase (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, pp 44).

Background of the Study

While student transitions in education are an area of interest for contemporary educators and policy makers, it is the transition from high school to college that is emphasized by policy makers at the federal, state and local levels. This focus, spurred by a desire to have high school graduates who are better prepared for college, continues to highlight the importance of supporting students in their educational transitions. However, although much emphasis is placed on the transition from high school to college, many transitions take place throughout the educational career of a student.

Although there is not a single educational transition that is considered most important, there are some transitions that are more researched than others. One such transition is The First-Year Experience which, by definition, is inclusive of students entering

the university environment from a variety of life phases, not just entering a university directly from high school (Campbell, Saltonstall, & Buford, 2013). At the institutional level, however, not all First-Year Experience programs take into consideration the vast array of life phases from which students are transitioning to the university. As a result, many First-Year Experience programs are skewed heavily toward providing support for a traditional student transitioning directly from high school to a university.

Recent research shows an increase in the number of transfer students in the United States. Transfer student, in the context of this study, is defined as any student who transfers college credit from one post-secondary institution to another. The National Student Clearinghouse (Hossler, Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Chen, Zerquera, & Torres, 2012) shows that within five years of beginning college, at least one third of the 2006 first time, full time student cohort transferred one or more times. Considering the 2008 cohort, the trend remains the same with high numbers of transfer students; however, the 2008 research shows fewer students are completing degrees at the two-year level (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015).

The population of students who complete their education via coursework at more than one institution is growing at a rapid pace. This rapid growth is changing the milieu of higher education and bringing to light areas of the system that require additional support and growth. The increase in transfer students affects many aspects of higher education from admission and advisement practices to retention and graduation initiatives, and current literature shows that transfer students require different practices and procedures than do native students entering higher education directly from high school. In contrast to transfer students, native students are those who begin their college career at an institution and have no

other context for college other than their experience that is native to their single institution. Chapter Two discusses the current status of education transition and First-Year programs while exploring how transfer student research is situated within the larger corpora of literature known as First-Year Experience.

Problem Statement

Most higher education campuses provide programming dedicated to assisting students who are transitioning from high school to college. This includes the period of time from the first interaction a prospective student has with the institution through the time he or she begins coursework, termed onboarding in this study. However, many universities have a diminished focus on the transfer student's onboarding experience despite the increasing numbers of transfer students who also experience transition to a university. It may be lack of understanding of the peculiarities of the transfer student's onboarding experience that contributes to the lack of consistent support and services.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore transfer students' onboarding experiences as they prepared to begin coursework at Midwestern Metropolitan University (MWMU). The following research question was addressed:

What were transfer students' experiences with campus support designed to assist them in making the transition to (i.e. onboarding at) a new campus?

   a. What support efforts did transfer students characterize as positive or useful practices?

   b. What support efforts did transfer students characterize as unhelpful, detrimental, or missing in their onboarding experiences?

Significance of the Study

This study addressed the educational transition of transfer students into university culture. Significance exists for research, theory, and practice. Many studies on educational transition focus on the transition from high school to college. The study addressed the lived experiences of transfer students through exploring their perceptions of their transitions to a new institution, specifically during the onboarding time period. Although the results of a qualitative study are not generalizable, a qualitative approach allows for in-depth understanding, and the results of the proposed study toads to the existing body of literature regarding transfer student transitions and transfer student support. Additionally, the outcomes of the study provide additional research for enrollment management and student services within Student Affairs.

The study provided additional perspective on issues related to transition, which may lead to further scholarship in the field. This study contributed to the theory surrounding transition, more specifically, student transition. These areas of theory include Schlossberg's Transition Theory as applied to student transitions through the education pipeline and process evaluation for onboarding and orientation experiences of transfer students at the university level. The contribution to theory is relevant for stake holders such as faculty and staff involved in various parts of the onboarding process at the university level.

In addition, the study contributes to the practice of First-Year Experience and transition studies. With little research related to the lived experiences of transfer students and their interactions with various university resources during the onboarding experience, it is difficult for practitioners to make data driven decisions regarding these students. Contributions from this study include improved service models for working with unique

student types such as transfer students as well as recommendations for collaboration between two-year and four-year institutions.

Overview of the Study

Although qualitative methodology is presented in detail in Chapter Three, the following section briefly details the research philosophy and approach.

Research Philosophy and Approach

Centered on the epistemological position of constructionism, this study assumed that individuals construct meaning based on the way they interpret the world around them (Crotty, 1998) and are influenced by different elements of their world such as culture, context, and experiences (Patton, 2002). Further, constructionism recognizes the inability of individuals to separate culture from meaning making, thus allowing individuals to construct their own meaning from their own perspective (Crotty, 1998).

Influenced by Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1995) and First-Year Experience literature, the study did not ascribe a single theoretical framework. Later choices about theoretical approach were guided by the data gathered through participants and are discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

The study utilized qualitative methods to explore the onboarding experiences of transfer students as they made the transition to a new institution. Qualitative research is uniquely suited to providing participants the opportunity to make meaning of their own experiences as they interact with campus support designed to assist them in the transition. The use of qualitative questions that were exploratory in nature allowed the researcher to investigate the perceptions of the transfer students involved in the onboarding process.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study employed two primary methods of inquiry: administration of an online questionnaire and participant interviews. Additionally, participants utilized their own note taking and mapping skills to further explicate their process of transition to the institution. These methods allowed the researcher to gather general demographic information about the transfer population at MWMU on a large scale, as well as explore the in depth selected students' perceptions of their transition to the institution. The researcher transcribed interviews and analyzed all data through an open-coding and sorting process.

Delimitations of the Study

Numerous delimitations exist for the study. First, the study is limited to the perceptions of transfer students during their onboarding experiences at MWMU. The study does not attempt to explore the perceptions of faculty or staff related to transfer students or onboarding. Next, the study is time bound only exploring the perceptions of specific transfer students during a specific period of time, resulting in a snap shot in time from this group of participants at MWMU.

Definitions of Key Terms

Specific terms used in this study may take on different meanings in different contexts. To specify how these terms were used in this context, the following definitions provide meaning as relative to the proposed study.

Transition: Includes the steps of moving in, moving through, and moving out of a life stage. This movement facilitates growth and development but does not necessarily ensure a positive outcome (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Postsecondary: Traditionally defined as any institution that provides education for students who have completed a high school degree. For the purpose of this study, the definition was narrowed to include only postsecondary institutions of higher education limited to community colleges, public four year universities, and private four year universities.

Native Student: The term refers to students who begin their college career at an institution and who have no other context for college other than their experience that is native to their single institution.

Transfer Student: Any student who transfers college credit form one post-secondary institution to another.

First-Year Experience: Programming for students entering a university that involves increasing student interactions with other students and faculty inside and outside of the classroom, increasing engagement for students on campus and helping them connect coursework to experiences outside of the classroom, and supporting students who are not academically prepared for college level coursework (Barefoot, 2005).

Onboarding: The integration of new students to a new institution beginning with the first interaction with the university through the first time they attend classes. This includes experiences and interactions related to college that take place prior to a student beginning coursework. These experiences may include formal and informal interactions with faculty, staff, and students at the university.

University: An institution of higher education that offers baccalaureate degrees, not a community college or technical school.

Summary

This qualitative study emerged from research in the field of education and transition studies that suggested the traditional pathway into higher education is in a state of change. The study took place at MWMU, an institution also impacted by an increase of transfer students in higher education and the overall change in the student population. The study was based upon the worldview of constructionism and influenced by multiple bodies of literature and theory including First-Year Experience literature and Transition Theory. The increase of transfer students in higher education and the overall change in the student population served as a point of interest for the study. The study centers on Midwestern Metropolitan University and the transfer student population. The proposed study utilizes a brief online questionnaire and participant interviews to explore the perception of transfer student transitions in this context. Chapter Two explores in more detail the literature surrounding educational transition and the growing field of First-Year Experience literature as it related to transfer students.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In his 2011 State of the Union Address, President Obama declared that by the end of the decade America will have the highest percentage of college graduates in the world (Obama, 2011). Encouraging this increase, President Obama in a later State of the Union continued his emphasis on college access and degree attainment by proposing an idea to make community college free for American students (Obama, 2015, 2016). Accompanied by education initiatives such as Race to the Top, Complete College America, and Achieving the Dream, the importance of post-secondary education is continually being re-enforced on a national level (AASCU, 2011, Center on Education Policy, 2011). The idea of higher education as a national priority and a step toward being competitive in a global society places a weight of responsibility on American students and educators alike. With increased demand for higher education comes increased attention to the movement of students through the education pipeline. This movement through the education pipeline includes multiple educational transitions including, for many students, the transition from one institution of higher education to another.

The call for national attention on higher education and degree completion is not a new initiative. Sixty-four years prior to President Obama's declaration regarding college completion, President Truman brought national attention to higher education through

the Truman Commission Report of 1947. Born out of a response to the influx of veterans returning to school following World War II, this commission established the need for a community college network that would open access to a wider variety of students and serve as a starting point to completing a degree (Truman, 1947). This action spawned increased development in the community college system that was already in place.

Although enrollment at both two-year and four-year institutions plays an important role in increasing national graduation rates, degree completion specifically at the two-year associate's degree level increased rapidly in recent years. Serving nearly half of the United States' undergraduate population, (American Association of Community Colleges, 2014; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2013) two-year institutions play a vital role in post-secondary education. The National Center for Education Statistics (2014) reports 618,115 associates degrees awarded in the 2012-2013 school year. With such high percentages of students attending two-year institutions, the transition from a two-year institution to a four-year institution becomes increasingly important. In the 10 year time span from the 2000-2001 academic year to the 2010-2011 academic year, the United States experienced a 63% increase in the number of associates degrees awarded. Due to factors such as increased accessibility for underrepresented populations and affordability, enrollment at a two-year institution is a first step for many students who seek to transfer to a four-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree (College Board, 2011). Although many students transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution, not all transfer students chose this route. The transfer student population also encompasses students who transfer from one four-year institution to another, have been out of higher education for a long period of time, or are attending

multiple institutions at once. The transfer student population represents a diverse group of students.

Transfer students present a unique challenge for higher education institutions as scholars and practitioners deal with questions regarding how to invest in transfer students (Davies, Rex, & Gonzalez, 2015). The needs of transfer students vary greatly from the needs of native students who begin and end their college career at the same institution. However, the typical transfer student is anything but typical; transfer students vary in many areas and do not represent a homogenous group (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Experiencing a first year of their own, transfer students seek increased attention and support at the university level as they attempt to navigate the transition from a one institution to another.

This chapter will examine the corpora of literature related to transfer students and their onboarding at a new institution. After a brief review of the search process used for this study, the current state of The First-Year Experience literature will be discussed with regard to onboarding processes for traditional freshmen as compared to transfer students. Next, the concept of educational transition and the concept of transition in general will be explored with regard to its relevance to transfer students making their way through the education pipeline. Finally, the research regarding transfer students and their specific needs and characteristics will be explained to better understand the unique onboarding challenges they present to higher education institutions throughout the onboarding process.

Search Process

Research for the literature review came primarily from five sources: The ERIC database, works cited in relevant studies, Google Scholar web search, Professional Organizations in the field of Student Affairs, and United States government websites. The first source involved a search of the ERIC database using various terms related to the main vein of research. The terms *educational transition*, *transition theory*, and *education pipeline* provided research to look at the general concept of transition in the field of education. Drilling down further into more specific bodies of literature, the terms *First-Year Experience* and *transition studies* were searched in the ERIC database to find research on these specific areas of interest. Finally, through the ERIC database, terms related specifically to transfer students were used including *transfer student transition*, *transfer student retention*, and *transfer shock.*

The sources that were located through the ERIC database were used to expand the search for relevant literature. Additional resources used in these studies were located via the ERIC database, Google Scholar, and web searches through ProQuest and Project MUSE. Combing through the references for related studies expanded the web of relevant literature. To expand the research, the search terms mentioned above were entered into Google Scholar to locate additional results. Professional organizations in the field of student affairs provided particularly helpful and specific resources related to their areas of focus. More specifically, the National Orientation Directors Association, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition, and the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers provided helpful and comprehensive handbooks related to their specific areas of research and practice.

United States government websites such as the Department of Education, National

Archives, and National Center for Education Statistics were then accessed. These types of

sources helped provide relevant data to focus the review of literature and directly address

what is happening based on recent numbers from students nationwide.

The Scope of Educational Transition

The United States education system can be viewed as a series of transitions. The

education pipeline, as defined by Toraco & Hamilton (2013), begins with the transition

from middle school/junior high into high school and ends as students leave the education

system (at any point) to enter the workforce. This series of transitions is the established

process for moving through the public education system in the United States. Between

the beginning of high school and transitioning out of the pipeline to the workforce, many

different types of transitions take place. These areas of transition are the focal points for

many educational researchers and it comprises its own body of literature.

Early in the education pipeline comes the transition into high school. This

transition point has been identified as the most substantial leak in the education pipeline

(Haney, Abrams, Madaus, Wheelock, Miao, & Gruia, 2005; Torraco & Hamilton, 2013).

Haney et al., (2005) show a sharp increase in the rate of loss in the transition from grade

nine to grade ten within the last 30 years. The number of students who did not continue to

grade ten tripled during this time period. For students who do continue into high school,

some challenges remain. Although the established levels within the PK-12 school system

consistently transfer students from one level of education to the next, not all students

enter and exit educational stages at the same competency level. In many cases, students

are entering high school underprepared, and high schools bear the responsibility of

moving those students from ill-prepared high school freshmen to college and career ready high school graduates (Dougherty, 2010; Murray, 2012).

Data show the highest dropout rate in grades nine through 12 for the 2009-2010 academic year occurred for high school seniors (United States Department of Education, 2013). This high dropout rate in the senior year impacts the next large transition in the education pipeline: high school graduation. In recent years, the high school graduation rate in the United States is trending upward. The high school graduation rate in the 20090-1010 academic school year showed an increase in graduation rates of all ethnic groups, posting the highest rate in 30 years. (United States Department of Education, 2013). Continuing the upward trend, the 2013-2014 numbers show that the increase was maintained with 82% of high school students graduating. This number represents the highest graduation rate on record (United States Department of Education, 2016).

The transition from high school to college represents another phase in the transition through the education pipeline. With over half of American high school graduates transitioning directly from high school to college (The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2009) [NCHEMS], preparation for the transition is crucial. In 2009, NCHEMS reported that 63.3% of high school graduates transitioned directly to college. With large numbers moving through this phase of the pipeline, the transition from high school to college has merited much attention in recent years. On a national level, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) created a major platform for education reform. The ARRA provided grant money for innovation and reform in education to states that are working to make changes in their education system that produce students who are more prepared to graduate high

school and succeed at the college level or in the workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

State policy makers and higher education officials viewed this transition, and the preparation of students for the transition, as a key policy issue for state education systems and state government over the past six years (AASCU 2016, 2015, 2014, 2013, 2012, 2011, 2010) The issue of college readiness and the transition from high school to college is receiving increased attention nationally by policy makers, educators, and politicians.

While high school graduates are needed to increase college enrollment and graduation as a continuation of the education pipeline, graduation from high school does not necessarily ensure college readiness (Green & Winters, 2005; Kirst & Venezia, 2001, 2004, 2005; Perna & Thomas, 2009). Unfortunately, many high school students remain under the impression that graduation requirements are in line with collegiate standards and course placement (Kirst & Venezia, 2005) and will lead to a smooth transition from high school to college. Although progress has been made to close the gap between secondary and post-secondary institutions, a significant gap still exists. In a nationwide survey, 40% of Americans blamed high schools for the lack of preparation that students receive for college level work and indirectly, for the lack of retention of college students (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Through the same survey, only 11% of Americans related any of the blame for low rates of retention in higher education to the institution of higher education itself.

The current testing structure for high school graduation and college admissions is a source of confusion for students as they navigate their way from high school to college. Because educational expectations for graduating high school are not necessarily aligned

with college level expectations for students once they reach the college classroom, students often feel ill prepared for college level work; even those who passed all required exams and test for high school graduation and college admission. In addition to being confusing, testing is costly, inconsistent, and lacking in terms of efficiency (Achieve, Inc., 2012; Doughtery, 2010). Testing is just one more element that adds to the confusion regarding the gap between high school coursework and collegiate expectations.

Many claim that the confusion in the transition between high school and college and lack of preparation of students can be directly linked to the lack of communication between secondary and post-secondary education and the lack of curricular alignment between these two major sectors of the education pipeline (Boyland, Bonham, & White, 1999; Howell, 2011). Collaboration on many levels, including secondary, post-secondary, and involvement at the state government level is required to prepare adequately students for the transition academically and with accurate information regarding the transition process (Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008) This lack of cohesion within the pipeline impedes the ability of individuals to make the next educational transition from high school to college. The high school to college transition and other types of educational transition can be better understood through the existing research on the topic of transition.

Transition Research

Regardless of the point of transition within the education pipeline, the common element is the process of transitioning from one level to the next. The concept of transition is deeply established in literature and research. The field of adult development, with its roots in psychology, contributes to the body of literature surrounding the concept

of transition (Clark & Caferella, 1999). Based on the four major theoretical perspectives of context, development, life span, and transition, the theory of transition established by Schlossberg et al. (1995) helps define transition, identify stages of transition, and provides a model of transition that is applicable to many different fields including educational transitions.

Schlossberg (1995) defines transition as a change in life stage that facilitates growth and development. These changes include shifts in behavior, attitude, motivation, routines, assumptions or a myriad of other changes. Based on a life phase, transition is not necessarily tied to a specific age or age range (Clark & Caferella, 1999). The key to this type of transition is that the individual experiencing the transition identifies it as a transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Although the opportunity for growth and development exists, it does not necessarily denote the probability of a positive outcome. Life changes, as defined by Schlossberg are not associated with a positive or negative result.

Transition can be categorized into three different types: anticipated, unanticipated, and non-event. In general, anticipated transitions are expected transitions that come to fruition. Preceded by a warning or notification, these transitions are generally expected as part of a life cycle of events (Schlossberg et al., 1995) For example, in education, graduation from a community college would be an anticipated transition. This transition is planned in advance and is expected by those who meet the requirements.

Unanticipated transitions occur without warning and can be positive or negative. Unanticipated transitions can cause extreme distress in adults and could potentially lead to a crisis (Gordon, Habley, Grites, 2008). Examples of unanticipated transitions include

the death of a loved one, getting an unexpected promotion, or having a home hit by a natural disaster. Not all unanticipated transitions are negative.

The non-event occurs when an expected transition does not take place. Classified as personal, ripple, resultant, or delayed, non-events can alter the way an individual views him or herself or how he or she behaves (Schlossberg, 1995). Personal non-events are a result of personal expectations. For example, expecting to be chosen to serve on a research team and not actually being selected would qualify as a non-event. Consequently, ripple non-events are caused by someone else's expectations. For example, parents who expected to be grandparents, but have grown children who have decided not to have children experience a ripple non-event. Resultant non-events occur as a result of another action. Schlossberg et al. (1995) uses the example of being denied admission to medical school as a resultant non-event. This non-event results in the applicant not becoming a physician. Delayed non-events have not yet happened, but are possibilities for the future.

Transition model

Taking into consideration the varying theoretical perspectives on transition, Schlossberg et al. (1995) created a Transition Model to illustrate transition as a process. The process identifies three parts of a transition: moving in, moving out, and moving through (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In its most basic form, transition begins with moving into or out of a phase of life. Moving into a phase would initiate a transition to a new level of responsibility or a new role. Moving out would involve separating oneself from a previous role or situation. Moving through is the process of learning new roles and responsibilities and navigating the new phase.

Identifying the distinct parts of the transition model allows for an understanding of transition as a process. Transition theory not only includes identification of the process, but also factors that aid individuals in dealing with the change that accompanies transition. The four factors that allow an individual to cope with transition are known as the 4 S's: situation, self, support, and strategy (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Schlossberg (1995) addresses the idea that these factors are used as a balance in coping with transition and can be seen as either benefits or liabilities in a situation. The way that an individual copes with transition is influenced by these four factors and is different for each individual. In transition, a factor that is seen as an asset for one individual might be a liability for another.

Although the original Transition Model (Schlossberg et al., 1995) evolved throughout the years through more research, the basic pillars of the model reviewed above remained the same (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 2012, 1995). Based on the definition established by this transition model, the process of moving from one level of education to the next qualifies as a transition. Furthermore, based on the definition outlined by the theory, the process does not necessarily ensure a positive outcome for all who attempt it. This model is useful in identifying transition points throughout the education pipeline and consequently, identifying points of transition that could present problems for students within the pipeline. The movement of students through the education pipeline from high school to college and beyond, and the ease (or lack thereof) with which the movement occurs led to an increase in research on educational transition. One such area of educational transition that has received focused attention, to the point of

developing in to its own corpora of literature, is the transition to the first year of college known as The First-Year Experience.

First Year Experience: Origins, History, and Development

The 1980s were a time of evaluation and reflection for American education. With reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), the state of American education appeared dim. In terms of the collegiate experience, there was a greater emphasis placed on the transition from high school to college and the freshman and sophomore years. Because of the perceived link between early college experiences and retention to graduation, educators nationwide began to seek a model for improving the freshman experience for their students. Leading the way, the University of South Carolina created the freshman seminar course that became the standard for early Freshman Year Experience programming. "The Freshman Year Experience" was born out of the movement surrounding this new area of emphasis in education (Gardner, 1986).

The national conversation surrounding The Freshman Year Experience intensified as campuses across the nation continued to look for the best practices on which to build their own programs. From the desire for more information, John Gardner and Stuart Hall established a series of conferences that revolved around the topic of The Freshman Year Experience. Later, due to the need to advance the research and practice in the developing field, John Gardner launched the National Resource Center for First-Year Experience at the University of South Carolina (Swanson, 2003; The National Resource Center First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2014). Although the initial intent of the National Resource Center focused on freshman and The First-Year Experience, the

Resource Center continued to develop to address additional educational transitions. The establishment of the National Resource Center was a historical first step in the development of the burgeoning field of transition research in higher education.

Freshman Seminar Course and Journal

Following the creation of the National Resource Center, two important developments, the growth of first year seminar courses and the creation of a journal, helped spur the movement of The Freshman Year Experience (Strommer, 1989; Swanson, 2003; The National Resource Center First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2014).

The Freshman Year Experience, in its inception, aligned very closely with the Freshman Seminar course. Although a freshman orientation type course was not a new concept, the movement in the 1980s brought new found purpose and vision for the role this type of course could play at the university level. The goal of early freshman orientation courses was to improve student attitudes toward university officials, extend the orientation process, and provide academic and social support for freshmen (Gardner, 1986). Additionally, increased retention from first year to second year was a desired outcome of freshman seminar courses. Although these pillars are still integral parts of the first-year seminar experience, other goals of the course include increasing retention, providing academic support for freshmen, cultivating institutional pride, facilitating new connections among freshmen, and encouraging participation in co-curricular events (Gardner, 1986). Levitz & Noel (1989) consider this type of program to be one that helps make a connection to the institution through academic, degree, and career support as well as support in the transition to the institution (p. 71).

The growth of freshman seminar courses established a greater need for a means through which to share the common practices in the growing field of The First-Year Experience. Questions regarding how to grow the field and provide more research on The First-Year Experience surfaced. The need for grounded research was evident; however, the challenge was how to transform practitioners in the rapidly growing field into researchers in the field (Swanson, 2003). As the new field of research grew, it gained credibility by utilizing data to support the idea of The Freshman Year Experience. In the late 1980s, shortly after the inception of The Freshman Year Experience conferences and the establishment of the National Center for The Freshman Year Experience, focus turned to the need for an academic journal for The Freshman Year Experience (Swanson, 2003).The *Journal of the Freshman Year* was the result and began the official and consistent call for research specific to the burgeoning study of The Freshman Year Experience.

Along with increased institutional support, research in The First-Year Experience has expanded since its start in the 1980s. Recently celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary, the journal experienced a shift in the type of research submitted throughout the years. The general pattern shows a decline in research regarding overall freshman cohorts and an increase in research regarding specific cohort groups or subgroups (Campbell et al., 2013). This shift in research moves the journal toward a more inclusive journal that spans the spectrum of transitions in higher education, not just the transition from high school to college. The expansion of research in the journal has grown to include transitions such as the transition from first year to second year, the transition from one institution to another, and transitioning out of higher education (Campbell et al.,

2013, Keup, 2013, Strayhorn, 2009). Additionally, the scope of the journal has expanded to include more emphasis on student success and student development (Keup, 2013).

Development of the Movement

The First-Year Experience movement continues to grow and develop. In 1998, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition and the journal became the *Journal of The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition* (The National Resource Center First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2014). This name change was inclusive of different student types and was a better fit for including students in various groups at the post-secondary level (Campbell et al.; 2013; Kreup, 2013; Swanson, 2003). Continued research, conferences, expanding publications, and established best practices have led to the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition to become an important resource for First-Year Experience. Although the new field emerged as a study of freshmen, the development throughout the years has led to changes that have benefitted the higher education community and developed into an ever-expanding area of research.

The changes in The First-Year Experience field have culminated in increased support at the institutional level for first year students. Providing support for first year students is an important part of the university mission for many institutions. Institutions strive to provide academic, social, psychological, and personal support to first year students in a variety of ways (Barefoot, Gardner, Cutright, Morris, Schroder, Schwartz, Siegel, & Swing, 2005; Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012). The major developments in the field of First Year Experience include increased and systematic institutional support and an expanding scope of research within the field.

The First-Year Experience is an important part of the student life cycle in higher education. With increased support from upper level administration, The First-Year Experience also is an important part of the institutional marketing and recruitment plans. The prominence of First-Year Experience programs and support on campuses represents an area of interest for many including prospective students, parents, and the general public (Barefoot et al., 2005; Campbell et al., 2013). Barefoot et al. (2005) highlights that while not all campuses place an emphasis on the First Year Experience, those that successfully integrate First-Year Experience plans receive institutional support from administration.

In 2003, The John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education piloted a self-study process for institutions to evaluate and improve their First-Year Experience programs (John. N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, 2014).The Institutions of Excellence in The First College Year project conducted by the Policy Center on the First Year of College aimed to put more focus on First-Year programs. This project, using a select group of institutions, established five criteria to evaluate First-Year programs. These criteria include:

- Proof of an institutionally appropriate plan for the First-Year that is intentional and comprehensive

- Assessment planning to evaluate the comprehensive approach

- Proof of an inclusive plan that impacts different types of First-Year students

- A measure of support from administration for First-Year initiatives that will allow for sustainability and institutionalization and

- Cross-departmental collaboration from faculty, staff, and other campus

   group (John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate

   Education, 2015).

This evaluation tool expanded in 2009 to include a self-study specifically to address the treatment of transfer students and the support that exists for this large population of students on campuses nationwide. These self-studies provide an additional outlet for institutions to establish a large scale plan for First-Year Experience implementation and evaluation as well as bring to light the importance of supporting students during this particular phase of educational transition.

Overall, it is evident that The First-Year Experience is not a single event or program, but a combination of events, programs, and personnel (Barefoot, 2005). Transfer students experience many phases throughout the transition process, including the prospective phase, admitted phase, and enrolled phase (Davies, et al., 2015). Although orientation programs, including First-Year seminars, initially served as the standard for aiding students in the transition to an institution (Upcraft, 1984), the services required to support and retain a student in transition have become as diverse as the student populations that they serve. These existing programs provide a foundation on which to build further programs that are catered toward specific groups such as transfer students (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Additionally, harvesting information from transfer students enrolled at an institution serves as a foundation for future programming and support initiatives (Crews & Jensen, 2015). The movement toward research aimed at specific groups of students in the first year experience led to increased research on transfer students as a specific population.

With increased focus on transfer students as a specific population, research specific to transfer students in becoming increasingly important to the field of First-Year experience and transition studies. The theories used to create programs for new types of student groups, such as transfer students, need to expand from the traditional student base to include a wider variety of student types. Transfer students in transition face a unique set of challenges in their transition from one institution to another, however, not all transfer students experience the same issues in transition. Just as students vary, so should the research and programs provided for transfer students.

Transfer Student Support

Transfer students make up a large portion of undergraduate students in the United States. Within the fall 2008 cohort of first time/full time students, 37% of students enrolled at an institution other than their original institution within a six year time period (Shapiro et al., 2015). Students who begin their education at a four-year public institution are more likely to transfer, with 85% of these students transferring to another public institution (Clemetson, Furbeck, & Moore, 2015). This group of students presents a unique challenge for researchers and practitioners as their mobility patterns have become more complex and varied (Marling, 2013). Three major considerations for transfer students transitioning to a new institution to another include understanding the different types of transfer students, identifying the current research and research trends regarding transfer students, and exploring support efforts designed specifically for transfer student support and retention.

Types of Transfer Students

Although transfer students represent one student group, the variability that exists within this student group is vast. Transfer students can come from many different stages in their educational career. There is no typical path for transfer students, as the demographics for transfer students have become more diverse throughout the years (Owens, 2010). The path to degree completion is rarely linear, as identified by the variety of transfer students (Clemetson et al., 2015). Many of the different types of transfer student populations have been identified and given specific names to help researchers understand the transfer situation from which they come. These segments of transfer student types include vertical, lateral, reverse, swirler, and non-traditional transfer students.

The most traditional of all types of transfer student is a vertical transfer student. A vertical transfer student moves through the educational pipeline in a sequence from high school, to a two-year institution, to a four-year institution. This movement through the education pipeline is seen by many as the most traditional way to transfer. Most programs that exist for transfer students, including articulation of courses, are catered toward this type of transfer student (Kintzer & Wattenbarger, 1985; Manz, 2015).

Continuing in the vein of directional nomenclature, the next group of identified transfer students are lateral transfers. This type of transfer student does not necessarily begin at a two-year institution. Lateral transfer students move from their current institution type to the same institution type. For example, a lateral transfer student would move from a four-year institution to another four-year institution. Additionally, a lateral student could be a student who transfers from one two-year institution to another. These

types of students make a similar transition as vertical students, often having to re-learn processes at a new institution that might vary from their previous institution, even though they are enrolling at the same type of institution (College Board, 2011).

Reverse transfer students have multiple transitions in their college education. These types of transfer students move through the education pipeline transferring from a four-year institution to a two-year institution. They are also called drop downs, as they drop from a higher level of institution to a lower level institution (Kintzer & Wattenbarger, 1985).

Swirlers are a newer classification of transfer students. In their college career, swirlers attend multiple institutions transferring in multiple directions. Another term within this classification is double dipping. Double dipping refers to a student who attends two institutions at the same time (Mccormick, 2003). The reasons for swirling through the higher education system vary. Some reasons include trial enrollment periods, enrollment in special programs, enrollment in additional classes to expedite the path to graduation, and serial transfers who bounce back and forth between institutions. This type of attendance at multiple institutions is on the increase (McCormick, 2003). Although swirling can have a negative impact on program retention numbers and institutional retention numbers, it can also have a positive impact for students. Swirlers often choose to take courses at multiple institutions to save money and increase their enrollment options (Clemetson et al., 2015). Additionally, this type of enrollment pattern allows some students to raise their likelihood of being admitted to more selective programs or institutions than their high school standards would initially allow (Johonson & Muse, 2012).

Finally, there is a category of transfer student classification devoted to non-traditional students. This term, commonly used in the 1980s to describe transfer students, is familiar vocabulary among higher education institutions today. Kintzer & Wattenbarger (1985) identified this term as an overarching term that includes many different types of students that do not easily fit in another category (p. 3). Non-traditional students can include corporate students returning for job related training, stop out students who come back to complete degrees as adults, or a variety of other reasons that would cause a student to re-enter higher education.

The various types of transfer students help illustrate the diversity that exists within the transfer population itself. The multitude of transfer student definitions raises questions about how institutions measure success. Traditionally, student retention and graduation rates are the indicators used to measure success at specific institutions. To calculate retention and graduation rates, institutions use data based only on students who were enrolled for the first time at their specific institution, remained at that specific institution, and graduated from that institution (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). As the types of transfer students continue to vary and students choose less direct paths to a four-year degree, it is important to re-examine the type of research that is being conducted regarding transfer students and the measures that are being used to define success at the institutional level (Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013). Although increasing numbers of research publications show the traditional idea of a college student is shifting and changing, much of the research and expectations for college students, especially transfer students, remain based on the idea of a traditional aged, homogeneous group of college students (Crissman Ishler, 2005). As students and transition patterns change over time, so

must the research related to students in transition (Kinzie, 2013; Owens, 2010; Reason &

Gansemer-Topf, 2013; Torres & LePeau, 2013).

Transfer Student Mobility

Transition patterns and transfer student movement from one institution to another

has been studied in small segments, but large scale studies looking at the national state of

transfer students in the United States have been lacking. Previous studies have been

limited to examining only a single type of transfer student or movement at a single

institution (Shapiro et al., 2015). While these students provide a basis for beginning

research on transfer students, they do not illustrate the national landscape of transfer

students in the United States. Current retention reporting methods make it difficult to

include transfer students who have attended multiple institutions and matriculate at

different rates than native students (Ishitani, 2008). Although it is common for students to

attend multiple institutions in a variety of patterns and timing, many retention studies do

not take these factors into consideration when determining retention rates (Johnson &

Muse, 2012). Most transfer students are currently considered drop-outs according to the

current retention reporting methods, despite their eventual success and degree completion

(Clemetson et al., 2015).

One major obstacle in tracking and reporting of transfer student movement is the

current national reporting system used to track retention. As required by the United States

Department of Education through the Institute of Education Science, institutions are

required to report very specific cohort information to the National Center for Education

Statistics through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System each academic

year. The required reporting includes defining the Student Right to Know cohort for each

institution nationwide. This cohort is used as the national standard of comparison among institutions. The Student Right to Know Cohort consists of first time, full time undergraduate students who enter a specific institution in the summer or fall semester. The Student Right to Know cohort specifically excludes transfer students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The graduation and retention rate of each institution is then defined by this group of first time, full time students alone and is measured for the next six years. This six year period represents the 150% of normal time to degree completion as defined by the Joint Commission on Accountability Reporting (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In a series of Signature Reports, the National Student Clearinghouse began to address the short comings of this national reporting structure through shifting the way transfer student movement is tracked at the national level.

The National Student Clearinghouse Report represents a significant shift in the way researchers view transfer students. These reports, beginning with the study of the 2006 cohort, define a transfer as any movement between institutions in the six year retention period. The reports also track all types of transfer transitions, not just focusing on a specific subgroup of transfer students. While this report begins with the same cohort parameters as the IPEDS national data, students who move through the system and enroll at different institutions are not disregarded, but tracked through the entire six year time period. They are not tracked specifically as part of a cohort at a single institution, but as a part of a national cohort. This type of study allows researchers to have a big picture view of the movement of transfer students in the United States.

The National Student Clearinghouse released a report on transfer student patterns based on the fall 2006 first time, full time cohort in the United States. The findings show five trends in transfer student patterns, including:

- Within five years, one third of students completed at least one transfer

- Public two-year institutions are the most common transfer destination

- The second year is the most common time that students transfer

- Full and part-time students transfer at similar rates, and

- Just over one fourth of transfers crossed state lines (Hossler, et al., 2012)

Unlike many other studies regarding retention, this study utilized the student as the unit of analysis to analyze transfer patterns as opposed to the institution as the unit of analysis. This approach more accurately tracks the progress of the student and not just the movement in and out of a specific institution.

In an updated report tracking the fall 2008 first time, full time cohort, data show that fewer students are completing degrees and certification programs at the two-year level before transferring to a four-year institution (Shapiro et al., 2015). The study of the 2008 cohort revealed a more diverse cohort that includes more adult learners due to the national recession. The diversity in student type combined with a lower completion rate at the two-year level shows an approach to degree completion that is less linear than previous cohorts and merits additional attention to provide support services to increase retention and spur degree completion.

Transfer Student Retention and Support

Fostering academic and social adjustment among transfer students is necessary to maintain high retention rates for each institution (Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012).

Institutionally, retention rates serve as a quantifiable way to report student success (Mille et al., 2007). Current reporting structures show student departure from post-secondary institutions is high; nearly half of all enrolled students leave the institution before completing their degree (Strayhorn, 2009). Of particular importance in student retention is the transition from the first year to the second year (Miller, Janz, & Chen, 2007). Retention studies remain an important part of the research on transfer students and students in transition; however, more work is needed to address student development as a part of the retention puzzle (Campbell et al., 2013). Retention data and research serve as the basis for many First-Year and transition programs that exist (Strayhorn, 2009).

Most current studies involving transfer students show a lack of research on the lived experience of transfer students (Owens, 2010). Additionally, much of the research regarding transfer students originates from the two-year institution or addresses the role of the two-year institution in the transfer process. A much smaller amount of the research examines the role of four-year universities in the transfer process (College Board, 2001). With students making multiple transitions throughout their college career, it is increasingly important to examine the level of support at four-year institutions that is offered to this student type.

Following the transition from one institution to another, transfer students receive varying levels of support through programming and services on four-year campuses. Although transfer students make up a large percentage of students at four-year institutions nationwide, not all campuses strive to support or engage this specific student population (College Board, 2011). Despite increases in associate's degree attainment and increases in a wide variety of transfer student populations on university campuses, overall

institutional efforts lean heavily toward helping students in transition from high school to college by committing university resources to programming for these first-time freshmen (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Institutional support for a shift in programming or a reallocation of services to provide increased support for transfer students, First-Year Experience, and transition programs requires administrative support as well as a culture that is open to change (Barefoot et al., 2005). The role of administration is to inform the campus community of the difference between the support provided for native students versus the support provided for transfer students (Davies et al., 2015). Support programs for native students are integral to most campuses and similar support is needed to help transfer students as they face both academic and social challenges at their new institutions (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Miller (2013) identifies five challenges specific to transfer students at the four-year level. These challenges include:

- Lack of integration and engagement in the campus community

- Difficulty with financial aid process

- Academic challenges with credit transfer and academic preparation

- Specific systems to address the needs of transfer students, and

- Curriculum integration with previously earned credits (Miller, 2013).

Although articulation agreements can aid students in the transition, the difference in academic expectations between their new institution and their current institution can be problematic (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). This adjustment period to the academic rigor of the university is an area of interest for researchers in the field. The phenomenon of

Transfer Shock (Hill, 1965) has garnered much research on the topic of academic adjustment of transfer students.

Transfer Shock is defined as a drop in academic performance for transfer students that occurs upon entering the university academic environment. This dip in academic performance is noted by a decline in the student's grade point average (Hill, 1965). This decline usually occurs during the first semester that a student enters a four-year institution (Owens, 2010). A wide variety of studies on transfer student shock surmise that student affairs professionals at receiving institutions can help ease the transition stress by providing a combination of academic and social support for transfer students (Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonso, 2011). The support of student affairs personnel is crucial in the transition of transfer students and helps increase graduation and retention rates of new transfer students (Melguizo et al., 2011). Transfer shock is exacerbated by the difference in relationships between native students who began their college career at the institution and transfer students who began their college career at another institution. Native students typically have closer relationships with faculty and staff than do transfer students. Additionally transfer students often struggle with the increased difficulty required for upper division courses related to their major, course selection, and enrollment in courses (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Transfer shock not only involves academic factors but is also impacted by the social challenges and adjustments that transfer students must face in entering a new campus culture (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Transfer students also face the challenge of adjusting socially to a new campus environment. Due to the diversity in the transfer student population at the university

level, not all students will benefit from every program regarding transition that is offered. Additionally, social adjustment cannot be established through a one-time event or program. Social adjustment is fostered through a series of support throughout the collegiate experience (Campbell et al., 2013). Both formal and informal interactions with faculty, staff, and peers that occur inside and outside the classroom can help transfer students develop an identity at their new institution and feel a sense of belonging (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). These types of interactions often occur for freshmen at orientation, however, data are now showing that orientation programs are beneficial for transfer students as well (Manz, 2015).

Providing orientation opportunities for transfer students encourages engagement with their peers and promotes a sense of belonging. Additionally, separate orientation programs for transfer students allow for accommodation of the specific needs of transfer students, including alternative scheduling, transition support, career counseling, and campus involvement information. Although orientation programs are needed for transfer students, it is important to note that not all transfer students need the same types of interventions (Manz, 2015), and it is important not to isolate transfer students through orientation efforts.

Orientation Opportunities for Transfer Students

Many of the earliest institutions in the United States had some type of additional support for freshman students (Gardner, 1986; Gordon, 1989) as they arrived on campus. A 1940s survey of orientation programs indicated that almost half of the surveyed institutions reported that they required some form of a freshman orientation course for their students (Gordon, 1989).

The goal behind orientation is two-fold: academic and social (Mack, 2010; Mann, Andrews, & Rodenburg, 2010). Most orientation programs encompass elements to aid students in development in both of these areas as both are necessary to succeed at their new institution. Mullendore and Banahan (2005) established four primary goals for orientation programs. These goals include helping students by:

- Encouraging them to succeed in academics

- Supporting their adjustment to college through encouraging involvement

- Engaging families in the process by helping them understand the transition of their student

- Encouraging institutional involvement with incoming students through formal and informal opportunities (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005).

Through these four goals, many elements of campus life are addressed including culture, traditions, history, and institutional pride (Jacobs, 2010; Mack, 2010).

The approach for reaching these goals of academic encouragement, support through involvement, engaging families in the transition, and institutional involvement both formally and informally with transfer student orientation is determined by the individual institution and has much less consistency nationwide than traditional freshman orientation. Some institutions choose to include transfer students in the traditional freshman orientation while others choose to provide a separate orientation catered specifically to transfer students. Additionally while many freshman orientation programs are a required part of the onboarding process for new students, transfer students are often given the option to participate in the process. (Mann, et. al., 2010). This optional approach can prove to be misleading to transfer students, as many opt out of these

onboarding experiences, relying on their experience and assumptions from their previous institution to navigate the transition to a new institution (Wilson & Dannells, 2010). Some campuses offer an alternative online orientation specifically geared toward transfer students who are unable to attend a traditional orientation experience in person. In terms of student populations, more campuses offer an online orientation option for transfer students than those that offer the same online experience for traditional First-Year students (Brown & Hernandez, 2010).

A crucial element of transfer orientation programs that differs significantly from traditional freshman orientation programs is the validation of prior educational experience (Hoover, 2010). Transfer students bring in prior credits and academic work that will be evaluated for use toward their degrees. This creates a higher need for academic support and specific academic advisement at the onset of the onboarding process. Once students have made the decision to transfer to an institution, it is important to provide academic advisement that is specific to transfer students and their unique issues and challenges in the process of transferring academic credit from one institution to another (Clemetson, et. al., 2015).

Through the transfer process, transfer students are forced to navigate a new system and learn new processes for a new institution. This process of adjustment and learning affects the student's development. Although often initially frustrated and challenged by learning the new system, transfer students experience increased self-reliance and acceptance of their new environment because of the challenge (Owens, 2010). Increased adjustment to the new learning environment and social environment positively contribute to the success of students at the transfer institution.

Onboarding of Transfer Students

Onboarding, a term used in the corporate community, refers to the process of bringing new employees to an organization through the hiring process. Lee (2008) more specifically defines this term as integrating new employees through engaging them in the culture of the organization and integrating them to succeed in their new position. Although incoming students are not employees of the institution, the same type of structure is required to help students acclimate to the new environment and new tasks at hand. In the context of this study, onboarding is defined as the integration of new students to a new institution beginning with the first interaction with the university through the first time they attend classes.

Because of the variability in transfer admissions, recruitment, and orientation practices, the onboarding experience for transfer students can vary from student to student at the same institution. While orientation is a part of the onboarding process for many transfer students, it is not the only element of the process. Because transfer orientation varies so widely from institution to institution, orientation (in its many formats) is a single part of the onboarding process for some transfer students.

The time period of onboarding as defined by this study includes many formal and informal interactions with the institution and its faculty, staff, and students. Because of the lack of consistency in experiences for transfer students throughout this process, onboarding may include interactions with staff in areas such as recruitment, academic advisement, orientation, financial aid, and Veteran's Affairs. Some transfer students may interact with faculty in their specific discipline during this process as well. These interactions contribute to both the social and academic integration of transfer students to

the institution. Modern research shows that campuses continue to offer and build upon the onboarding tradition of orientation that has been described as a crucial link in the transition from recruiting a student to retaining a student at a specific institution (Schupp, 2006).

Conclusion

The field of First-Year Experience and Students in Transition has established itself as a major area of study in higher education. With increased emphasis on providing services to students as they enter the university environment through the onboarding process, continued research in the field is needed to advance the programs and support available to students. This chapter provided an overview of the scope of educational transition, including general movement through the education pipeline in the United States. This movement includes significant transitions such as the transition from secondary education to post-secondary education and the transition from a two-year institution to a four-year institution. Furthermore, the chapter provided an overview of the development of The First-Year Experience area of research, including its history, current research, and major programs that have developed in the area. Finally, the chapter presented literature regarding transfer students and the research that surrounds their transitions to a new institutions and the onboarding processes that takes place for transfer students through interactions on campus including, but not limited to, orientation. Ultimately, the research that exists regarding transfer students in transition is largely based in the field of First-Year experience and transition studies; however, many of the underlying assumptions on which the research is based were specifically established to address the needs of First-Year freshmen. The number of transfer students on four-year

campuses is high, yet the programs to support those students are minimal; thus, there is limited knowledge to guide practitioners. Although the research shows that these types of students are entering four-year institutions from the two-year college programs and other four-year programs at high rates, little has been done to create programs that specifically address the unique needs of onboarding the transfer student population. To address the needs of transfer students, special attention must be given to this specific student population. Research specific to this type of student needs to be expanded to span the wide range and variability that exist within this student classification.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

As indicated by the literature in Chapter Two, educational transition is a pivotal time period for students, specifically transfer students. This chapter provides the study design, purpose, research setting, participants, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, data reduction, and reflexivity.

Problem Statement

Most higher education campuses provide programming dedicated to assisting students who are transitioning from high school to college. This includes the period of time from the first interaction a prospective student has with the institution through the time he or she begins coursework, termed onboarding in this study. However, many universities have a diminished focus on the transfer student's onboarding experience despite the increasing numbers of transfer students who also experience transition to a university. It may be lack of understanding of the peculiarities of the transfer student's onboarding experience that contributes to the lack of consistent support and services.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore transfer students' onboarding experiences as they prepared to begin coursework at a single institution and through the

early stages of the first semester of transition. The following research question was addressed:

What were transfer students' experiences with campus support designed to assist them in making the transition to (i.e. onboarding) at a new campus?

a. What support efforts did transfer students characterize as positive or useful practices?

b. What support efforts did transfer students characterize as unhelpful, detrimental, or missing in their onboarding experiences?

Study Design

The study was grounded in the literature presented in Chapter Two, and employed a qualitative research approach to explore transfer students' perspectives about their experiences with the onboarding process at a specific institution, Midwestern Metropolitan University. This study was designed with the assumptions embedded in constructionism -- that transfer students create meaning based upon the way they interpreted their experiences with the onboarding and transition process (Crotty, 1998). More specifically, Constructionism centers on the idea that individuals construct their understandings of reality based on many different influences such as culture, context, and experiences (Patton, 2002). These different types of influences on individuals may result in different viewpoints of the same experience. It is important to note the existence of constructivism, a similar epistemological stance to constructionism. While the two words themselves are easily confused because of similar sounds and implications by the root word, the schools of thought vary. Patton (2002) distinguishes between the two ideas by examining the difference in the view of reality. Constructivism separates the human

world from the natural world, making the assumption that humans must be looked at in a different way because of the fundamental difference between the two realms. Additionally, Crotty (1998) draws the distinction that constructivism refers to a focus more on the individual mind and the process of meaning making, whereas constructionism focuses more on collective meaning making (p. 58). Crotty (1998) further espouses the epistemology of constructionism and the inability of individuals to separate culture from their abilities to make meaning of a situation. Thus the meaning making of transfer students at MWMU was influenced by their experiences within the environment around them. In this study, the focus was on their environment and experiences within a specific span of time – that of the onboarding experience for a four-year university (MWMU).

Based in qualitative methodology, this study utilized case study research. Crotty (2009) identifies case study as one of five traditional forms of qualitative inquiry. This single case study was designed to look in depth at the experiences of transfer students. While Stake admits there are negative biases toward case study research when looking for explanations and law, he states that these disadvantages are no longer present when seeking a method to explore experiences, understanding, and conviction of participants (Stake, 2000). Such was the case in this study.

Stake (1995) describes two major types of case study: intrinsic and instrumental. Intrinsic case study is utilized when the case is given for a study for a particular reason. For many researchers in certain types of settings, the study may even be pre-selected. Instrumental case study is utilized to seek an understanding that can be furthered through studying a specific case. In this type of study, the case is used to understand something

other than just the specific case. While not generalizable to an entire population, the instrumental case study acts as a tool to learn more about a particular phenomenon. The role of the researcher is that of an interpreter and the researcher seeks to disrupt the environment as little as possible. Stake (1995) says that the researcher is likely to encounter multiple realities and contradictions, and it is the role of the researcher to maintain the integrity of this information without imposing her own values on them to alleviate the contradictions. Instrumental case study, as defined by Stake (1995), was utilized for this study, and the findings provided insight into the experiences reported by transfer students and their perspectives of the onboarding process at MWMU (i.e. the phenomenon).

Single case studies require specific bounding. This case study was bound by a single institution, by a focus on newly transferred, non-freshman transfer college students, and by a data collection time frame of the fall 2017 semester.

Although the focus of this study was informed by theory available in the literature, such as Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1995) and First-Year Experience literature, no single theoretical framework was imposed. Rather, this exploratory study was deliberately left fully open to the direction that was provided through participant reports. Participants provided rich data in the form of participant created maps and/or diagrams of their own unique onboarding experience at MWMU. The physical data was supported by interview data from a reflective interview. This data was analyzed for themes and patterns that were shared among the unique participants.

Research Context

This research study was conducted at MWMU, a moderately selective four-year public university in the Midwest United States (collegesource.org). MWMU is classified as a metropolitan university due to its inclusion in the greater metro area of the state's capital and its desire to connect students from the metro area to the institution. Inclusive in its stated beliefs and values, MWMU connects to the metropolitan mission by defining a sense of responsibility to connect research and scholarly activities not only to students, but to the larger metropolitan community and its residents and stakeholders (Factbook 2014-2015, 2015).

MWMU is the third largest institution in the state with an enrollment of 16,840 total students, including masters and undergraduate students. Of this population, 14,998 of the students are undergraduate students (Factbook 2014-2015, 2015). As a regional institution, MWMU grants associate's degrees, bachelors, and master's degrees.

The transfer student population at MWMU comprises more than 50% of the university's undergraduate population each year, historically. From an undergraduate admissions standpoint, transfer students at this institution are defined as students who have earned more than six hours of college credit from a previous institution. This does not include any hours earned prior to high school graduation through concurrent or dual enrollment or hours earned through CLEP, Advanced Placement, or any other extra-institutional credit. Data show that new transfer students have outnumbered new freshman students 4 of the last five years (Factbook 2014-2015, 2015). MWMU is comprised of mostly in-state students; the top five higher education institutions from which students transfer to MWMU are all in-state institutions. The top three feeder

schools for new transfer students are local community colleges located in the same greater metropolitan area. Completing the top five institutions from which new students transfer to MWMU are the state's largest and second largest four-year public institutions at four and five respectively (Factbook 2014-2015, 2015). This transfer data indicates that students are not only making the transition from two-year community colleges to MWMU, but are also transferring from the larger four-year institutions to a smaller four-year institution.

Transfer students entering MWMU interact with many different offices, faculty, and staff throughout the onboarding process. Seven out of eight participants' interviews and other data collection took place on campus at MWMU to allow for participants to reflect on their experience within their specific context at MWMU. A single participant was interviewed off-site at an alternate public location to accommodate her work and school schedule. The first contact and recruitment of participants began at the end of the summer semester. Data collection took place during the fall semester with a new class of transfer students who had just made the transition to MWMU.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select participants. This type of sampling ensures that the participants facilitate maximum information about the specifics of the case (Merriam, 2002). All students were new to the institution as of the fall 2017 semester, which means their onboarding experiences began sometime prior to the semester of data collection. All participants were non-freshman transfer students. These students represented a combination of a vertical transfer student, lateral transfer student, returning transfer student, and a military transfer student. Fifty- participants agreed to move

forward to an interview process, so purposive sampling was further used to select a

participant group that was representative of the variations that existed in the types of

transfer students and who would represent a variety of perspectives on the transfer

student transition and onboarding process at MWMU. Eight were selected to represent

the variety of transfer students that exist on the MWMU campus. Efforts were made to

assure this set of participants:

- Represented both men and women

- Represented a range of ages

- Represented diversity in socioeconomic status

- Represented a variety of pre-college experiences

participants were selected to move forward with the study.

Vertical transfer student.

For the purposes of this study, a vertical transfer student was defined as a student

who had completed an associate's degree from a community college and was

transitioning to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor's degree. This type of

student is often seen as the most traditional transfer student. For the purposes of this

study, vertical transfer students made the transition directly from the community college

to the four-year institution, having been enrolled at the community college during the

spring 2017 semester.

Lateral transfer student.

For the purposes of this study, a lateral transfer student was defined as a student

transitioning from one four-year institution to another. Although this type of transfer

student attended a four-year university previously, he or she still experienced onboarding

at the new institution. For the purposes of this study, lateral transfer students made the transition directly from their previous institution, having been enrolled at their previous institution for the spring 2016 semester.

Returning transfer student.

For the purposes of this study, a returning transfer student was defined as a student who was out of higher education, from either a community college or a four-year institution, for a significant length of time (5 or more years) before returning to courses at MWMU.

Military transfer student.

For the purposes of this study, a military transfer student was defined as a student who had transitioned out of the military and is returning to school. This type of transfer student may transfer with hours from a military institution or just be beginning a college career. Due to the variability in military credit and service, no specific amount of time needed to have elapsed between military service or schooling and enrollment at MWMU for the purposes of this study.

Recruitment of Participants

Prior to recruitment of participants, permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Oklahoma State University was obtained. Once the researcher received permission to conduct the research study, the IRB process was completed at MWMU. Research did not begin until permission was granted from both institutions. Given the organizational structure of MWMU, the cooperation of the Vice President of Student Affairs and his staff were needed to begin the recruitment process, which began with

distribution of the electronic questionnaire. Eligible participants were determined using the admission code assigned for transfer student admits entering in the fall 2017 semester.

Interested participants were identified through a yes or no question on the electronic questionnaire asking if they would be willing to continue their involvement in the study through an interview. I sent interested participants who chose to provide their contact information an email outlining the proposed study and the academic intent of the interviews (see Appendix A). I then made phone calls to participants to answer additional questions if necessary. To participants who were willing to participate in the study, I sent a follow up email containing a consent form (Appendix B). I worked with individual participants to schedule interview dates and times during the time that I was on the MWMU campus. Sufficient numbers of participants volunteered though the questionnaire, so no additional sampling methods were used.

<h2 style="text-align:center">Data Collection</h2>

This study employed qualitative methods and the researcher was an instrument of data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data collection for the study. Additional methods of data collection were questionnaires, participant created maps, and relevant documents. Member checks were also used.

Questionnaires

An email with a link to a questionnaire including information about the study and general demographic questions was sent to transfer students admitted to MWMU by July 20, 2017, for the fall 2017 semester. In total 901 transfer students received the email,

which came from a university account, and 78 students responded to the associated online questionnaire.

The online questionnaire provided general demographic information about the participants and helped determine those interested in moving forward with the interview process. The questionnaire was distributed with the cooperation of the Student Affairs division at MWMU. The researcher provided a link to the questionnaire. The link was distributed via email by the Student Affairs Division. Participation was anonymous except for those participants who voluntarily provided their names. Participants were not required to move forward with the interview phase of the study. A sample of the questionnaire is included in Appendix C

Interviews

Each one-on-one interview started with a review of the consent form that was emailed to the participant prior to the interview. A copy of the consent form can be found in Appendix B. The form detailed the academic nature of the study and explained the confidentiality, access to study findings, and the rights of the participant. The consent form also included information regarding how the data were to be collected and securely stored.

Stake (1995) describes the qualitative interview as an integral part of understanding the participant's view of reality (p. 64). A semi-structured design allowed me to predetermine certain questions (structure questions), and to further explore the participants' onboarding experiences through probing questions that were not pre-planned (Merriam, 2002).Interviews took place during the first three weeks of the semester and at mid-semester.

For the eight participants, thirteen interviews were conducted on the campus of MWMU. Two interviews were conducted off-site at a public space at the request of a participant. Interviews conducted on the MWMU campus were in the common areas of campus within the student union. The first round of interviews took place after the beginning of the fall semester. Questions focused on participants' onboarding experiences at MWMU and guided them to create a map of their onboarding experience at the institution. The second round of interviews served as reflective interviews occurring mid-semester to allow participants to think back on their onboarding experiences. The interview protocols appear in Appendix D. Interviews were approximately one hour in length. A voice recorder was used to record each interview and I took hand written notes; both were transcribed by me.

Documents and Artifacts

Documents and artifacts related to the onboarding experiences of transfer students participants were utilized as another data source. Documents and artifacts mentioned by the participants during interviews as being relevant to the onboarding process were requested by the researcher, however, only two participants submitted documents and artifacts. This included correspondence received by participants during the onboarding experience (electronic, paper, or otherwise). These documents were not predetermined by the researcher, but collected as part of the interview process as they were deemed relevant and were made available by the participants. Some documents that were mentioned by participants were not maintained as part of their records and were, therefore, unavailable to the researcher.

Field Notes

Field notes were maintained by the researcher. Jottings were maintained to add dimension to the transcript (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).The steps for jotting field notes included initial impressions regarding physical environment, evaluation of personal sense of what was significant or unexpected when compared to the experiences of the researcher, observation of how people in the setting reacted to events, observation of how actions in the setting were organized, and observations of variations and exceptions in the patterns (Emerson et al., 2011).

Reflective field notes were written throughout the course of the study when interacting with participants, but also upon conclusion of each interview. Reflective field notes included questions, thoughts, or additional ideas that arose throughout the study. Field notes were related back to the research questions.

Member Checks

To contribute to the trustworthiness of the study, member checks were used and transcripts of the data were made available to the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants provided additional information from review of their interview transcripts.

Data Management

Data including written field notes, interview notes, participant created maps, documents, and recordings were stored in a secure file on my personal, password protected computer. Audio files were uploaded using Windows Media Player. The secure files were also password protected. To provide multiple copies of the data, all documents and recordings were also placed in an Oklahoma State OneDrive folder accessible only by password.

Details regarding confidentiality were included in the participant consent form. Pseudonyms were used for each participant, to conceal participants' identities, and for the university. Participant pseudonyms were included on the consent form to maintain a record for the researcher. Consent forms were scanned to electronic PDF and stored in a separate password protected file on the researcher's computer and Oklahoma State University OneDrive system. Once documents were saved digitally, original paper consent forms were shredded. Likewise, once an accurate transcriptions of interviews was created, recordings were destroyed.

Data Analysis

The data analysis section explains the process that was used for the study. This includes the process of data analysis, data reduction strategies, and trustworthiness considerations.

Data

The data analysis process began with intensive reading and re-reading of field notes, interview data, and jottings (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). The data analysis followed the four-step analysis strategies recommended by Stake (1995):

1. Categorical aggregation
2. Direct interpretation
3. Correspondence and patterns
4. Naturalistic generalizations

To execute this data analysis strategy, open-coding through an electronic sorting system was used to identify emerging themes and patterns. At the point of analysis,

excerpts were not identified as positive or negative in regards to campus support. Specifically, the researcher:

1. Transcribed all data using Microsoft Word software

2. Identified specific excerpts of rich data and copied and pasted the data excerpt into a notecard sized box in Microsoft Word template

3. Coded excerpts to include the participant name and specific data source

4. Categorized each excerpt based on initial analysis and noted the general category

5. Sorted fields and re-analyzed data to identify additional categories and patterns

6. Categorized themes as helpful or positive support, unhelpful or detrimental support, and missing support based on participant experiences

Data Reduction

Stake (1995) reminds researchers that not all data can nor will be analyzed. The most time should be spent analyzing the data that is most relevant to the research questions. Conducting fifteen interviews produced large amounts of data and not all was relevant to the research questions. Data reduction strategies were used to pare down the data to maintain relevance to the study. Additionally, document analysis and electronic questionnaire data were paired down to include only data that was relevant to the study. Specifically, I determined what was most relevant to the research questions and excluded details that were only tangentially related or mundane (Patton, 2002).

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness is crucial to qualitative research. The standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as established by Lincoln

and Guba (1985) were used to address the trustworthiness of the data and methods. Table 1 below aligns the research with the specific standards for trustworthiness.

Table 1

Techniques for Establishing Trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

Standard	Technique	Example from my Study
Credibility	Prolonged engagement Persistent observation Triangulation	Multiple interviews with individual participants Multiple data sources
Transferability	Thick description	Purposive Sampling
Dependability	Inquiry audit	Member checks
Confirmability	Reflexivity Triangulation	Reflexive field notes Multiple data sources

Methodological triangulation was used to strengthen the credibility and confirmability of the data and establish trustworthiness for the study (Stake, 1995). This type of triangulation uses different methods of data collection to triangulate data. Additionally, the use of multiple data sources, such as questionnaires, interviews, and data analysis, strengthened this area of trustworthiness. Conducting multiple interviews with participants and creating interactions that span the semester (prolonged engagement) contributed to the credibility of the study. The selection of these participants contributed to the transferability of the study in that purposive sampling was used to provide a representative, yet random sample.

Providing participants the opportunity to review transcripts as part of member check ensured that the dependability of the data was increased and the data was confirmed by the source. This provided the participant with an opportunity to correct any errors or clarify pieces of information, thus confirming the data. Finally, confirmability

through reflexive field notes using the jotting techniques and triangulation of data sources strengthened the trustworthiness of the study findings.

Researcher Reflexivity

I have not personally experienced the transfer student experience, so I was not naturally inclined to study this group of students. Initially, my research interests lead me to the topic of college student transition in general. More specifically, I was interested in high school students' transitions to college and their college preparation. However, my professional paths, as well as my research interests, led me to an interest in the transition experiences of transfer students.

I have worked in higher education for over nine years, serving in four different professional positions. My role as a higher education professional provided direct experience with transfer students. In a previous role as an administrator, I managed a Transfer Student Support Center at a four-year university. This position provided me with direct experience with transfer students. Through this role and my research on this topic, I began to notice the lack of information about transfer students' lived experiences as they transition from one institution to another. Through further conversations with those in the field of higher education, I affirmed this gap in information for the transfer student population. This prior experience with transfer students helped me analyze the data as I was able to use prior experience and knowledge of the onboarding process to assist in categorizing the participants' experiences with the onboarding process.

Through my previous positions I grew a professional network of colleagues who are also interested in issues that affect transfer students in transition. Work as both a

researcher and a practitioner in the field helped me develop an interest in this area and ultimately guided me to pursue this area of study.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the onboarding process of transfer students at MWMU, a four-year university. The study used a case study design utilizing participant interviews, a questionnaire, documents and artifacts, and field notes. Participants were chosen based on their unique characteristics as an incoming transfer student at MWMU. Using purposive sampling, the researcher recruited eight participants for interviews. The research intent was to explore participants' onboarding experiences, which began prior to their first semester and continued throughout the semester. The data were analyzed to determine patterns, consistencies, and meaning.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF DATA AND THEMES

The purpose of this study was to explore transfer students' onboarding experiences as they prepared to begin coursework and engaged in the first semester at a single institution. Methodological triangulation in data collection contributed to the trustworthiness of the study outcomes (Stake, 1995). Purposive sampling, member check, reflexive field notes, and multiple interviews with participants also contributed to trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This chapter presents the participant interviews as well as analysis of relevant documents through thick, rich description supported by participants' own words, supporting documents, and participant created maps of the onboarding process. Finally, the chapter identifies the five qualitative themes that emerged from the data. Further exploration of these themes and discussion regarding their classification as helpful or positive, unhelpful or detrimental, and missing for transfer students during the onboarding process is found in Chapter Five.

Overview of Participants, Questionnaire, and Documents

Through purposive sampling, I chose participants who represented the diverse profile of transfer students including students of different ages, genders, majors, classifications, and previous institutional types. A total of eight participants were a part of the study, however, one participant only completed the first round of interviews. This

resulted in a total of fifteen interviews for the study. A brief description of each

participant, organized by type of transfer student, is included with his or her data.

Lateral Transfer Students

As defined in Chapter Three, for the purpose of this study, lateral transfer students

were defined as students who transitioned from one four-year institution to another. Of

the 78 respondents to the online questionnaire, 26% classified themselves as lateral

transfer students. Shannon, a female Psychology/Science major in her twenties, provided

perspective from her experience as a lateral transfer student.

Shannon. I met Shannon for our first interview August 24, 2017, during the first

week of classes a MWMU. Shannon arrived approximately 10 minutes early and emailed

me to let me know her exact location in the food court area. Via email, she presented as a

professional and proactive personality. Her interview lasted just short of an hour,

however, we talked for an additional 10 minutes after the recorder was turned off. I jotted

down minimal notes while she spoke, but wrote more thorough notes after she left. At

the time of the first interview, Shannon had been in the state for approximately one week.

Her appearance aligned with her west coast background with her long hair loosely

braided and casual clothing including a tank top.

Shannon completed three years of college in her home state prior to transferring

to MWMU. She came to MWMU specifically for a specialty science degree and lived on

campus in apartment style housing. She participated in many of the onboarding activities

on campus that led up to the first week of classes. Shannon spoke highly of her

experiences with MWMU, however, she mentioned numerous challenges with online

resources, staff members, and situations throughout her onboarding process. She was

careful with her words, almost as if she was trying to protect the institution from me as a researcher. I did not tell her I had any connection to the institution, but maybe this was out of a sense of self-preservation and lack of familiarity with me as a researcher as opposed to protection of the institution itself. This became more evident after the formal interview when I turned off the recorder and she stated "If we don't tell them, how will anything ever change?" She offered this statement during a spontaneous discussion about why I was conducting this research and who would be reading the final results. She spoke more freely and candidly once the recorder was turned off. After she left the food court area, I remained at the table to try to capture through jottings in my field notes the conversation that took place after I turned off the recorder.

My second interview with Shannon took place October 4, 2017, at the midway point of the fall 2017 semester. This interview took place in an empty office suite in the Academic Advisement Center at MWMU and lasted just over an hour. A desk and two chairs provided a more private setting than the first interview. Shannon arrived 22 minutes early so we began the interview earlier than scheduled. Shannon's appearance was noticeably different than in her first interview. She was wearing a camouflage hat and shirt paired with jeans and cowgirl boots. Had I not been expecting her, I may not have recognized her. During the second interview, she was much more realistic about her experience with MWMU and spoke candidly about her experiences with certain offices and departments on campus. She seemed to be struggling with the transition to a new institution and even doubting her choice to transfer as she made many statements that compared the reality of her experience to her expectations prior to transferring. She

seemed very deflated and disappointed as she made less eye contact than in the first interview and used an almost forceful tone at some points.

Military Students

For the purposes of this study, a military transfer student was defined as a student who transitioned out of the military to college. Participants need not transition directly from military service to MWMU, but have prior military service before attending school. No defined amount of time between military service and schooling was specified as a requirement for participants in this category. Jennie, an English major in her twenties, provides perspective from her experience as a military transfer student. Due to the overlapping nature of transfer classifications, Jennie was also a vertical transfer student.

Jennie. I met Jennie for her first interview on August 29, 2017 in the First-Year Experience & Student Success office suite in the student union at MWMU. The interview protocol for interview one was divided in to two separate interviews to accommodate Jennie's schedule, so we first met for only 30 minutes. The second half of what was designed as the first interview took place in the same location on September 5, 2017, and lasted 48 minutes.

Our communication prior to the first interview felt very formal and rigid. Jennie mentioned having limited time and only being able to meet for half an hour. She used military time and spoke very succinctly and precisely. This tone of the interactions made me nervous about this interview. I responded by being especially organized for Jennie's first interview, even making sure the pens on the desk were lined up perfectly with the seam in the desk. I perceived that precision was important to Jennie. When Jennie arrived, she seemed generally flustered, couldn't remember the name of the person she

was supposed to meet, and mentioned something about an interview for non-traditional students. Her more relaxed, "human" presentation helped me relax as I realized Jennie's precision in email was probably just a bi-product of her military service. In person, she did not appear to be at all a stereotypical rigid militaristic personality.

At the beginning of the interview, Jennie seemed nervous and even appeared to be shaking a little. She shifted in her chair as though she were trying to find a comfortable way to sit. I set a timer for our interview so Jennie would not be late to her next class and so neither of us had to worry about repeatedly checking the clock. I classified Jennie as a military transfer, as she self-reported military service prior to attending school, however, she was also a vertical transfer student. She completed her associates degree at State Community College prior to transferring to MWMU. She separated from the United States Air Force after two years and seven months of service. As a working single mother, she used her Post 911 GI Bill to pay for school and other living expenses. This impacted her scheduling decisions as she took a large course load each semester to finish her degree before her GI Bill funding timed out. After transferring to MWMU to pursue a bachelor's degree in English Education she changed her major to English after a discussion with her academic advisor. In addition to service in the military Jennie grew up as a military child and lived all over the world with her father who was career military. Jennie shared that the reason she was pursuing a degree in English was so that she could teach English abroad and allow her daughter to experience the world like she did as child.

Jennie missed the next scheduled interview but re-scheduled for one week later. For our second interview on October 17, 2017, we met in the Student Affairs conference room in the student center. The interview lasted 51 minutes. Jennie apologized profusely

for missing the interview the week prior. Her words seemed heavy as she took deep breaths throughout the interview before each answer. She seemed very distracted throughout the interview and would trail off during sentences, apparently lost in thought. Her words and her actions lead me to believe that the semester had been difficult both academically and in terms of life transition as she began to bring up challenges outside of the context of MWMU and her coursework. In this interview, Jennie was more open about the personal side of her transition saying that the move to the state happened quickly and she didn't have any family here. She mentioned her daughter often and the difficulties that come along with being a single parent and a student. She admitted to having difficulty focusing on school work as she was just beginning to deal with feelings and personal issues that she had suppressed in her rush to get to this state, get enrolled in classes, and complete her degree before she loses her GI Bill benefit. She mentioned using some of her personal struggles as topics for class assignments, allowing her to write about them. It seemed to be a positive outlet for her. Jennie's nervous laughter and sighs summarized the tone of the interview. She seemed to struggle throughout, leaving many sentences unfinished and long moments of silence throughout the interview.

Returning

For the purposes of this study a returning transfer student was defined as a student who was out of higher education for five or more years prior to returning to MWMU. Only 6% of students who responded to the email questionnaire were classified as returning transfer students. Although students in this category could also be classified as lateral and vertical transfer students, the two participants in this category were best classified as returning students due to the break in time between institutions. Misti who

was a Sociology major in her twenties and Keri who was a Speech Language Pathology student in her thirties provide perspective from their experiences as returning transfer students.

Misti. My interview with Misti took place off campus at a Starbucks just outside of the metro area on Friday evening, September 1, 2017, and lasted just under one hour. This location was close to where she lived and worked. She was only on campus one night a week from 4:30-10:30 p.m. and was not able to come to campus early for an interview, as she left directly from work and arrived minutes before her class began. Althought this location was not ideal for an interview, I wanted to make it convenient for Misti to participate. The background noise inside Starbucks was loud, so we conducted the interview in an outdoor seating area on the patio to assure a better recording and limit distractions. Misti arrived approximately 10 minutes early for the interview. She was friendly, appeared self-confident, and seemed excited to participate.

Misti transferred to MWMU five years after completing an associate's degree from Metro Community College. She completed her Associate of Arts in Psychology in 2011. In the five years between completing her associate's degree and beginning her courses at MWMU, Misti worked full time, moved across the country, returned home and had a baby. While she had been thinking about returning to school, and specifically MWMU, Misti received information about a federally funded grant program that provided support for students returning to school. She initiated contact with the grant program and the university, originally applying for admission for spring 2017 but then deciding to wait until her child was a little older to return to classes. Her first semester at MWMU was fall 2017. Her experiences on campus and with campus services were

limited as her classes occurred outside of regular business hours. The institution did not provide many, if any, services after 5:00 for students exclusively enrolled in evening classes. Both of her classes were located in the same building and were held back to back. Misti was also enrolled in an online course that did not require her physical presence on campus.

My second interview with Misti took place at the same off-campus location just south of the metro area on the evening of Friday, October 13, 2017, and lasted 48 minutes. Due to the colder temperature and earlier sunset, we conducted the interview inside Starbucks. It was loud, but this time there was a corner table available that helped shield us from some of the noise and distraction. Now at the half-way point of the semester, Misti was calm, self-assured, and reflective as she thought back on her experiences. It appeared clear by her answers and the way that she spoke about school that being a student was just one of the many roles she had and that she must juggle with being a full time working mother. Misti articulated some challenges with her onboarding process but did not seem negative about her experience. She saw the challenges as just part of the processes and was proactive in resolving any issues she had.

Keri. I met Keri for her first interview in the First-Year Experience & Student Success suite on the afternoon of August 30, 2017. The interview lasted 48 minutes. Keri arrived on time but mentioned she had trouble finding the office. When we began the interview she seemed slightly nervous, sitting very formally in her chair with her hands clasped in her lap. As I began to talk and ask questions, she relaxed her position and appeared to be more comfortable. She was articulate and direct with her answers. She seemed cautious, stopping to think about what words she could use that were not

negative. It appeared that she did not want to complain about her onboarding process, even though not all of her experiences were positive. She used careful language to articulate what the issue was and not place blame on any one person or department. Keri presented a maturity throughout the interview that was different from other participants. It appeared that her previous experience with higher education had provided a foundation and context for this new academic pursuit.

Keri was also different from other participants in that she already had a bachelor's degree. She returned to MWMU as a non-degree seeking student to take the prerequisite courses required for a specific master's program. Although the group that she most identified with was the returning transfer students, she was also, according to the definitions used in this study, a lateral transfer student. Keri's program was comprised of undergraduate degree seeking students but also a group of graduate applicants completing prerequisites for the Master's program, thus Keri had identified a group of other graduate applicants who were on the same academic plan. Keri's program was unique in that it was a cohort model and she was only enrolled in courses for her major. She did not have classes with a diverse group of students, but only with the students in that specific degree track.

My second interview with Keri also took place in the First-Year Experience & Student Success suite on the afternoon of October 4, 2017, and lasted just under one hour. In this interview, Keri mentioned performing well academically, but continuing to learn the process of returning to school. Keri's ability to compare and contrast her very traditional college path from her first degree to the less traditional path of being a returning transfer student and graduate applicant in her current program aided her in

reflecting on her experiences as a transfer student. Although Keri appeared to be a strong student academically, mentioning making A's on quizzes and assignments, she still saw school as just one of her many roles. Keri specifically mentioned making time for her children's homework as well as her own. She articulated a desire to participate in some on campus activities to feel connected as the reason she volunteered for this study. She specifically mentioned feeling overcommitted at this point in the semester and her slight regret about agreeing to participate in the study due to the time that was required.

Vertical

The vertical transfer student was defined as the student who completed associate's degrees at a two-year institution before moving to a four-year institution. Of the MWMU students who responded to my questionnaire, 73% identified as vertical transfer students, making them the largest group of respondents. Four participants provided perspective based on their individual experiences as vertical transfer students: Dorothy, a female Humanities major in her early twenties; Shawn, a male Finance major in his early twenties; Michael, a male Music major in his mid-twenties; and Michelle, a Sociology major in her mid-thirties.

Dorothy. I met Dorothy in the Office of First-Year Experience & Student Success suite at MWMU on August 24, 2017. She arrived on time wearing a MWMU t-shirt. Similar to the tone of her emails, she was polite, formal, and to the point. These qualities, combined with my inexperience as an interviewer, led to a short interview lasting only 30 minutes. However, I felt that the words that Dorothy spoke were oftentimes taken directly from the literature regarding transfer students. Even within the vertical transfer group of participants, Dorothy represented the most traditional student path.

Dorothy graduated with her Associate's degree in Cultural Studies from Midwest Community College. She was the first student to graduate with this degree at her previous institution and had close connections with the faculty in the department. At the time of our interview, she was pursuing a bachelor's degree in Humanities with a minor in History. Dorothy commuted approximately 30 minutes to campus five days a week to attend her courses. She was involved in Student Support Services, a federally funded grant program, at her previous institution. She was able to connect with the Student Support Services programs at MWMU and continue her participation with this group. She found this to be a huge support as she made the transition stating that, "They're a lifesaver".

Dorothy arrived at her second interview on October 10, 2017, wearing another MWMU shirt. Her consistent attire suggested a commitment to the institution. At the halfway point of the semester, Dorothy mentioned her increased understanding of the academic expectations at MWMU and, more specifically, within her department. She mentioned reaching out to resources such as professors and other students in her major and also using a variety of campus resources such as the cafeteria, computer labs, and study areas. Although Dorothy seemed much more confident in herself and her abilities in this interview, she still articulated a lack of connection with the campus and her department. However, what appeared to be a growing confidence was evident in her ability to articulate more about her experience during this interview that lasted just under one hour.

Shawn. My initial interview with Shawn took place on September 6, 2017, in an empty office suite in the MWMU student center. Although he arrived on time, he was

apologetic for not arriving early. Shawn was friendly and full of energy, especially for an early morning interview, and in some contrast to other participants. He did not seem intimidated by the interview process and seemed genuinely happy to help. Shawn's interview style was very casual with short responses and quick answers. His quick answers seemed to make the answers less reflective. This interview lasted 45 minutes. Shawn was pursuing business at MWMU and majoring in Finance. He was part of a leadership scholarship cohort during his time at Midwest Community College and when he transitioned to MWMU, he was nominated by his previous institution for one of two premier leadership scholarships. As an institutional nominee for this scholarship, he received the award without participating in the regular interview selection process. Shawn spoke highly of his scholarship experience at both institutions. Of all of my participants, Shawn was the most connected to campus, and that appeared largely due to the scholarship group of which he was a part. Shawn referenced this group often. He also referenced multiple interactions with MWMU recruitment and admissions staff members while still at his previous institutions. He was the only participant who mentioned specific interaction with recruiters while still at their previous institution.

My second interview with Shawn, at the halfway point of the semester, took place the morning of October 4, 2017, and lasted only 35 minutes. He was dressed in khakis and a button up shirt as he mentioned he had to work later in the day. He yawned throughout the interview and seemed tired; his eyes had bags underneath and he even rubbed them occasionally. As the interview progressed he mentioned involvement in MWMU homecoming activities that were requiring late night hours of practice and preparation which may have accounted for what appeared to be fatigue that made it

difficult for him to focus not only on the interview but on coursework as well. Shawn

mentioned his intent to quit his off campus job because it was interfering with his

activities on campus and he reported he was enjoying his business courses. Overall, the

second interview with Shawn centered on his involvement, activities, and leadership

scholarship group.

Michael. My first interview with Michael took place in an office suite in the

student center at MWMU on September 5, 2017, and lasted just under an hour. Prior to

the interview Michael texted me to ask if he needed to have anything prepared. This

formal tone also influenced our first meeting. He was not shy but was very reserved and

wore a polo shirt and had his slightly longer hair pulled back in a tidy pony tail. As we

spoke he articulated himself very well and spoke about his experiences in a very detailed

way.

Michael transferred from Metro Community College completing his Associate of

Arts in Music. He continued to MWMU as a Music Education major. He mentioned

having friends who followed a similar track from Metro Community College with the

encouragement of music faculty. Michael also mentioned multiple instances when his

path crossed with MWMU faculty and staff at Metro Community College including an

education event on campus and various events and clinics. He said he experienced

difficulties with MWMU's advisement and enrollment process. As he discussed these

challenges he did not appear angry, but seemed to think there must be a better way.

My second interview with Michael took place the morning of October 10, 2017,

in an empty office in the MWMU student center and lasted 46 minutes. Michael's

appearance seemed much different from the first interview. His long hair was pushed

under a backward ball cap, and he wore jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. Although his appearance seemed more informal, he was still polite and informative. He spoke realistically about his onboarding experiences and even vented some frustrations during the interview. As a music education major, the majority of his MWMU coursework and requirements come from the music department. However, at the mid-point in the semester, he was having a specific issue with the education department regarding some of the requirements for the education portion of his degree. This issue was due to a mistake he made in the application process for the education program. His primary frustration was that the process took him outside of his regular department with his regular faculty, and he believed that more could have been done by the education department to assist him with his challenges. Overall, Michael presented as a self-directed student who took responsibility for himself and his education.

Michelle. My first interview with Michelle took place August 28, 2017, around noon and lasted 42 minutes. Michelle was one of the first to respond to my email request for an interview. She arrived at the interview on time and needed to leave immediately following the interview for class. She asked in advance if she could eat a snack during the interview as she was pregnant. She brought her snack and ate as we talked. Michelle was confident and forthcoming with her information, an approach that was suggested in her previous emails. She did not seem to hold back information and was very clear that she was an adult, mentioning it multiple times throughout the interview. She seemed to feel much older than those in her classes and reported that she felt different from them based on her life experience.

Michelle completed her associate's degree at Metro Community College. After she completed her associate's degree, she applied for admission and enrolled at a metro area private Christian university to pursue a Bachelor's degree. She went through the entire admission and enrollment process during the spring 2017 semester, but mentioned not having enough control of her own choices and feeling as though "they were micromanaging" her experience. She remained enrolled for four weeks but withdrew from the institution at that point. She had heard good things about MWMU and began making preparations to transfer during the summer of 2017 to begin courses in the fall of 2017.

The day before my second interview with Michelle, I emailed to remind her about our appointment. She emailed back saying she had withdrawn from MWMU and would not be available. She stated that she became sick during the semester and the professors didn't care to help her. At the time of the email, she was unsure she would return to MWMU. I replied to this email and asked if I could send the questions for the second interview to her via email but she did not reply. This ended my interaction with Michelle and I was unable to get additional information from her past this point.

Document Analysis

Many participants mentioned relevant documents during their interviews and some provided documents to assist in data analysis. All participants mapped their onboarding experience at MWMU. Table 2 below details the documents submitted by participants.

Table 2

Document Analysis

Participant Name	Document Name and Description
Shannon	Onboarding Map – participant-created map of the onboarding experience at MWMU
Jennie	Onboarding Map – participant-created map of the onboarding experience at MWMU
Misti	MWMU Cares Application – Application for federally funded grant program at MWMU Personal Email Communication – personal email communication with MWMU staff regarding the application process and fee waiver Onboarding Map – participant-created map of the onboarding experience at MWMU
Keri	Onboarding Map – participant-created map of the onboarding experience at MWMU
Dorothy	Onboarding Map – participant-created map of the onboarding experience at MWMU
Shawn	Onboarding Map – participant-created map of the onboarding experience at MWMU
Michael	Onboarding Map – participant-created map of the onboarding experience at MWMU
Michelle	Onboarding Map – self-created map of the onboarding experience at MWMU Word Document – personal document with typed timeline of interactions/correspondence with MWMU throughout the admission and advisement process Personal Email – email from participant stating that she was no longer enrolled at MWMU and not available for a second interview

Themes Resulting from Analysis

I began the data analysis phase with organizing my field notes taken during

interviews, participant-produced maps, documents, and interview transcripts and I

revisited the original research questions to re-center the research (LeCompte & Priessle,

1993). I extensively read and reviewed interview data to establish codes (through open coding) that became categories as patterns and themes emerged from the data. I identified relevant excerpts from interview transcripts and copied them in to an excel document. I reviewed relevant data excerpts and re-read to identify themes. I assigned a primary and secondary category to each excerpt and used the sort feature on Microsoft Excel to arrange the excerpts by categories. I created separate tabs for each category so I could easily manipulate the excerpts from each specific category. As a data reduction strategy, portions of the data were eliminated and excluded from analysis due to their lack of relevance to the research questions (Stake, 1995). At the end of the process, five major themes remained. The themes are identified by the participants' own words and mappings as they articulated their experiences throughout the course of the study:

I'm not a freshman.

I don't know anything. I've never been here.

It's just the way the game is played at a larger institution

But to experience it in my way is different.

You're not a transfer anymore.

These five themes are discussed and defined in the following paragraphs, supported by excerpts from the data.

I'm not a freshman

*...they have like freshman open house at the colleges and **I'm not a freshman**, so I didn't go I didn't know where, none of my classes were, I didn't know where anything was. I don't know. Sometimes I think transfer students should be treated*

a little more like freshmen. They don't need like a parent figure hovering over

them but they still need some stuff. (Dorothy)

Many participants experienced being classified with freshman throughout their onboarding at MWMU. Although participants were in their first year at MWMU, they felt that their previous experiences with college made them more informed than a first-year freshman student. This affected the way they experienced formal orientation options at MWMU as well as where they found positive support throughout the onboarding process.

Michelle experienced feeling like a freshman again when she met with her academic advisor. She felt she needed a different "launching point" as a transfer student, following up with "I'm sure she's really, really good for first-year students but as a transfer student I want to tell you my academic advisor spent way too much time talking about the basics" (Michelle).

Shawn was classified with freshmen when he entered his leadership scholarship cohort. Although he had previous college credit and two years of previous college experience, he was grouped with the freshman class. He stated "I was paired with the freshmen which I was like that's weird…the freshmen are all meeting each other for the first time too, and so, yeah we just went from there" (Shawn).

The prior college experience that set the participants apart from freshman was sometimes detrimental when it came to onboarding at MWMU. Although many participants articulated an experience of being frustrated about being classified with freshman, some still felt that they needed parts of the freshman onboarding experience.

Dorothy recalled understanding that she was not a freshman, but experienced a lot of new information upon arriving at MWMU. She stated,

"It was just a lot of new all at once. And being when you transfer, people they're like oh you've been in college you know what you're doing so they don't, you don't do things like freshman orientation. That shows you around campus or where you might find something to eat or something like that" (Dorothy).

Shannon had a similar experience stating "being a transfer student they don't give you the same attention as they give a freshman, which I understand. I'm kind of glad I don't have to go through all the freshmen stuff" (Shannon). The experience of being a first-year student but not a freshman appeared to be a struggle for participants.

Many participants articulated that an orientation specifically for transfer students was missing from their onboarding experience. Some remembered orientation opportunities but did not feel that they were geared specifically toward transfer students. The participants' experiences ranged from no formal orientation program to an online orientation many appeared to find unhelpful. Shannon stated "there really wasn't an orientation for transfers" (Shannon) while Dorothy experienced "a little slide show thing that said how to get your ID card" (Dorothy). Keri also experienced "something online. I don't even remember what it was called" while Michael recounted more of the details of the online orientation experience stating "It talked about campus resources and student health facilities and mental health programs and the Broncho card that ID card but also you can get one that's like a debit card or whatever" (Michael). Michael's experience with online orientation seemed to be unexpected as he recalled being told that it was a requirement for enrollment. He remembered "They said here's where you need to go next

and so I walked in here and said hey I was told to come here and they were like are you new and I was like yeah and they are like sit in this chair and do this and I was like okay" (Michael). Overall, participants who remembered participating in orientation described it as unhelpful or not memorable as they struggled to recall details regarding content.

Although participants articulated unhelpful or missing formal orientation experiences, many of them recalled receiving support from individuals or groups at MWMU throughout their onboarding experience. Because the formal onboarding process for transfer students seemed less standardized, participants' experiences with staff and programs across campus varied widely. Shannon and Jennie experienced positive interactions with staff members at MWMU. Shannon remembers multiple emails with her academic advisor where "she told me like where to go and what to do. If I have any questions to email her back or call her. Really just like a good experience with going through it. Especially when I had questions (Shannon). Jennie referred to her experience with her academic advisor as "very helpful" (Jennie). Dorothy connected with a friend of the family who worked at MWMU who had a positive impact on her onboarding experience. She stated "it's not even really her job to be a help…She told me to feel free to come down and ask any kind of questions I might have. Because I don't know who to ask. She's been a really big help" (Dorothy).

Misti, Shawn, and Shannon had positive experiences with groups on campus that provided support during the onboarding process. Misti connected with a grant program that assists students as they return to school. She connected with a counselor from the program she described as "super nice…really knowledgeable" (Misti). Shawn was awarded a leadership scholarship and found support in his leadership cohort stating that

"they are like family now" (Shawn). Shannon remembered positive experiences with the people who "wear their badges that are like helpful around the school" (Shannon).

Overall, it appeared that initial onboarding was inconsistent -- participants were sometimes treated as freshmen and other times treated as transfer students throughout the transition to MWMU. Although they were not freshman they were still first-year students who appeared to need some of the same information as freshmen. Formal programs and services seemed to be catered more toward the traditional first-year freshman. Although many of the practices associated with formal onboarding programs for transfer students at MWMU appeared to be unhelpful, missing, or even detrimental experiences; participants coped by finding positive support in informal ways on an individual basis. The onboarding experience continued for participants as they interacted and communicated with various campus services and departments at MWMU.

I don't know anything. I've never been here.

> *Okay so they sent me an email that confirms my appointment and I would have assumed, by the way, that this is the place where you say hey here's where you should park. I'm just saying for future reference that's where that should go. I'm a new student.* **I don't know anything. I've never been here.** (Michael)

Communication was an undertone in the conversation around participant experiences with campus resources. For most participants, formal communication with MWMU began at the application process. Upon admission to the institution, participants received notification via email and United States Postal Service regarding their admission decision. Jennie articulated the content of the email casually as "now you have a MWMU ID, now you need to login and do this blah, blah, blah," (Jennie). Multiple participants

experienced confusion when they received the email assigning a MWMU ID number and username. Keri remembered when she received this login information via email prior to receiving her physical admission packet in the mail. She stated,

I had gotten some email that said you know you should be or whatever or you need to do this and I was like, 'it was telling me to do this but I don't even know if I've been admitted yet.' And they were like 'If you got that email you've been admitted.' I was like 'Do they not like send an email saying you've been admitted? I'm still not even sure if I was admitted or not.' (laughs)" (Keri)

The admission packet sent via mail included a letter of congratulations from the MWMU president and a document with information regarding what steps to take next. Multiple participants described the experience of receiving the admission packet in the mail as positive. Michelle described it as

a colorful package…I think there was maybe just one or two pieces of paper. I think there was something in there about I got a scholarship and a welcome to MWMU please meet with an academic advisor kind of developing a bridge kind of letter. (Michelle)

Michael described the resources in the application packet as useful stating

It had like a list of things that you needed to do before the semester started like come and make an appointment with an advisor. And I can't remember other than that. But there are lists of like four or five things. (Michael)

Although the checklist was mentioned as helpful as a starting point, many participants' lived experience did not follow the checklist. Michael reflected on his experience stating

I think the problem is when they send that packet of like the steps to take I think it just generically says academic advising but they didn't realize how early I had applied because there just wasn't a lot I could do. (Michael)

Shannon's experience was similar as she described the list as "step by step. It was more of like you know so now you're accepted so now here's everything you need to do find your classes apply for this go to financial aid do this" but also explained "I just kept emailing my counselor hundreds of times. I don't know what to do I don't know where to go" (Shannon).

Along with the apparent lack of clarity regarding the checklist and order of events for onboarding, participants appeared to experience difficulty transferring their academic records to MWMU. Jennie experienced challenges getting required transcripts submitted stating "Because MWMU needed a bit more documentation that my previous school. The only thing that held up, no it was transcripts that's the only thing that held me up a little bit to enroll and finally when I got my transcripts from the Air Force as slow as they are" (Jennie).

Vertical transfer students experienced difficulty with their academic records when many of them were admitted to MWMU prior to finishing their associate's degree at their previous institutions. This appeared to cause challenges for academic advisement. Dorothy met with her academic advisor prior to her degree from Midwest Community College posting to her transcript. She remembered thinking "They're not waiving my core requirements like they're supposed to and they're like did you see if it's posted your grade and your degree? And I said no, I didn't even know that happened" (Dorothy). Similarly, Michael met with his academic advisor like the checklist instructed, but

remembered "Metro Community College did not have my transcript finished with my degree yet so some things I still was unable to finish up but I had to come back for that" (Michael). Michael ran in to further difficulty explaining this situation to his academic advisor,

> So then it was a lot of trying to explain like about where I was coming from how many credits I had because she's got the degree sheet but she's trying to figure out what I've taken that they consider transferred and also at that time my degree wasn't finalized from Metro Community College so certain classes don't transfer unless you complete the whole degree so she was like doing different types of markings by some of them that were like this should be going through eventually.
> (Michael)

The admission packet appeared to be useful in the transition experience of participants, but seemed to communicate a generic message that was not customized for each individual student and their unique onboarding process.

Participants also experienced a gap in knowledge inside the classroom in terms of the communication of academic expectations. Dorothy stated,

> Those professors expect me to know what they want and I don't because I didn't start here. So, it's a lot of going to professors offices and explaining that I didn't start here. I don't know what you want. I don't know what your standards are.
> (Dorothy)

Keri's academic transition to MWMU seemed void of helpful support. When asked about her experience with support related to the academic transition and what if anything helped her, she replied "the actual like getting ready…like getting ready and all that. Not

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that I can think of to say oh I'm so glad this happened. No, not necessarily" (Keri). She experienced a period of adjustment in the classroom,

> Yes. I'm like I don't know what you're talking about and I don't know. Even like they said 'OK, you need to go get scantrons.' I mean, I knew what a scantron, those have been around forever but is there a specific one, or do I go get it. Like, all the little things like that. Most things everyone knows what they're doing now. (Keri)

> Lastly, participants appeared to have a gap in communication regarding general campus knowledge that was detrimental to their onboarding experience. Keri recalled feeling like an "outsider" and remembered feeling like

> Well everyone else probably knows where to park, and everyone knows like which way to walk, and . . . welcome week was or whatever and like they all these booths and everyone's going up trying to talk to you and I was like I have no clue what's going on. (Keri)

Shannon experienced similar feelings when she thought about asking questions to learn more about what was going on. She claimed "If I say that and everyone else knows what's going on then I am the outsider who has no idea what she's doing" (Shannon). Jennie experienced similar interactions with peers where "everyone assumes I know where everything is. And I'm just like, no, but thanks though. I'm glad I don't look like I'm lost" (Jennie). From admission information to general information about campus, transfer student experiences with communication in the onboarding process appeared to leave significant gaps in information.

It is just the way the game is played at a larger institution.

> *You know honestly I don't think it surprises me. I think this is a bigger more spread out campus and I think that the nature of this institution versus the nature of the two-year institution means that I'm going to not get as much one-on-one interaction. I think **it is just the way the game is played.*** (Michelle)

Participants' experiences at their previous institutions often varied from their experiences at MWMU. Many participants experienced less personal interaction throughout onboarding at MWMU and considered it unhelpful at times. When Shannon experienced difficulty with her financial aid, she stated "I don't know. I just called the number to figure out what's going on and have to talk to them once I can get ahold of them" (Shannon). Dorothy was overwhelmed by her initial experience with the size of MWMU. Her experience was "unfamiliar and not what I'm used to". She summarized,

> I notice it everywhere. My class sizes are bigger, the people walking around are bigger, when you're walking down the sidewalk there's a whole bunch of people instead of just like 2 or 3. Like how much bigger it is and how more independent you are on this campus, like, Midwest Community College would kind of hold your hand and walk you through it and you're much more independent to do whatever you see here. (Dorothy)

Michael's experience was similar as he felt the less personal approach due to the larger student population stating,

> With the incoming students and kind of just be like ok we need to send them through push them through because we have this other stack of people so. I think that's probably the main difference is probably just the size. (Michael)

Participants also felt the difference in the way the game is played in terms of academics. Jennie recalled being worried about being able to prepare for an upcoming exam using her previous study methods. She stated "actually cramming, cramming the material. It's not smart but hey it works…I don't know. But I'm worried" (Jennie). Similarly, Misti experienced increased academic expectations stating "I'm not used to having to spend that much time or I guess try that hard on a class, so, it's hard. But, yeah." (Misti).

Shawn found a difference between the extracurricular opportunities at his previous college and MWMU to be a positive part of his onboarding experience. He noted the difference saying "there's a lot of stuff to do here. Like at Midwest Community College if you're involved in leadership you're doing most of the stuff…but here there's literally something every night" (Shawn).

Although participants were familiar with college, having previous experience on a different campus, processes and expectations were not always the same at MWMU as the bigger campus represented a different way of doing things. Participants experienced having to learn to navigate new processes and expectations at MWMU throughout the onboarding process. In general, participants seemed to expect this difference because they were at a different institution. This difference from prior experience to new expectations appeared to be a common experience for participants and continued in relationship to social support and integration on campus.

But to experience it in my way is different

> *I'm going to have this personal touch. I'm going to have, you know, inclusion*
>
> *here. And look at this and you know, it's a school so you know what it's really*

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*like. **But to experience it in my way is much different**…I have no friends. I didn't*

go through any orientations so I ended up going to that Campus Welcome Back

Party…I didn't know anyone. It was just a big crowd of people and they all stayed

in their little circles and gave zero craps about everything else going around. You

*know school is really what it is. (*Shannon*)*

Many participants' expectations of the transition to MWMU and the reality of their

experience were very different in terms of social support and integration on campus.

Some participants experienced forming a connection to campus as positive support in

their transition. Shawn, who came to MWMU as part of a leadership scholarship group,

experienced connection to campus through his proactive approach stating,

> The only way it is going to feel natural is if you actually make friends and make it
>
> your experience because you just assume somebody is going to hand like, the
>
> college experience to you. It's not going to work. So just put yourself out there
>
> and be willing to make new friends. (Shawn)

Keri's experience inside the classroom appeared to help her feel connected to campus.

She felt connected with a professor in her major stating "I've been impressed. They are

very just, we are here for you, you know. We want to help you like on a personal level,

not just in class." (Keri).

> Dorothy experienced growth throughout the onboarding process through personal

interaction with others as she learned to navigate her new environment. She reflected

that,

> I think just like, there's been a lot of growth in my life. Trying to transfer and
>
> trying to figure out how to do stuff…So it's been a lot of growing to figure out

how everything works and how to ask the right questions to the right people.
(Dorothy)

Similarly, Michael experienced a need to be proactive stating,

Be prepared to seek, just be prepared. You're going to have to go out and find your own stuff. You're going to have to. It would be cool if when you transferred they gave you like someone who is like I am all knowing and will answer all your questions and will give you knowledge you didn't even know you needed. Here it is. But that's not the thing (Michael)

Shannon found her involvement with campus events and personal interactions to be detrimental to her transition. She seemed to feel misled by marketing materials aimed toward new students during the recruitment process and found her personal experience to be much different. Her experience was missing the personal touch and she felt that students "gave zero craps" (Shannon) about her as a new transfer student. Similarly, Michelle's experience with misinformation from a MWMU department was detrimental to her onboarding experience. She remembered "I even like reached out like 'Please help me' and then, I did not get the right answer" (Michelle).

Misti's experience connecting to campus was not detrimental to her transition, but seemed absent. Although she was aware that there were opportunities available to connect with others on campus through events and resources, she did not experience the connection. As a student who was only on campus one day a week in the evening, she stated "It's like almost impossible for me to participate in anything so, anything I hear about, I can't really. And I don't see much going on campus because I'm not there" (Misti).

You're not a transfer anymore

> *Like you're not even identified as a transfer student when the semester starts. It's all before when you met with your advisor and all those guys you gotta see and that is it.* ***You're not a transfer student anymore.*** (Jennie)

Transfer student participants' feelings that they were never classified as transfer students throughout their onboarding experience continued as they began classes and interactions on campus. In participants' experiences, they struggled to identify other transfer students on campus noting "you can't look at someone and know if they transferred or not" (Dorothy). Shawn even stated "No. There's no scarlet letter." (Shawn) when asked about his experience identifying and talking with other transfer students at MWMU. He went on to describe his experience as "Once the semester started it's kind of like okay. Assimilate" (Shawn).

Jennie did not experience a culture that welcomed transfer students. She maintained "I don't see it. I don't see it as a culture. I see it more as a, maybe like, a one day orientation day. That's about it. You're not a transfer anymore" (Jennie). Shannon's experience was similar as she stated "I feel like it's a bit of a misconception because you don't do anything for the transfer students. You know, you don't pay any attention to them" (Shannon). She referred to her experience of feeling "overlooked, you're invisible" (Shannon).

Keri did not seem to experience any difference in her onboarding because she was a transfer student. She felt the culture was "very accepting because like I said, I didn't feel any like, oh she's a transfer so she doesn't belong. I felt very welcomed and like one

of them" (Keri). In her experience she did not feel different than her peers, but stated "I don't know if I should" (Keri).

Misti did not seem to experience anything different because of her identity as a transfer student. She stated "I don't think anybody is like oh, look at that transfer student or look at that adult student" (Misti). Dorothy experienced mixed feelings about the label calling it "Good and bad. Good because I didn't want people to point out oh, you're a transfer student, because that's weird. But at the same time, bad because sometimes you need a little extra help (Dorothy).

With a lack of programming specific to this student type and a lack of opportunity for transfer students to connect with other transfer students at MWMU, transfer student participants struggled to develop an identity on campus. The identity of participants seemed to be shifting through the onboarding process -- entering feeling like the institution treated them more like freshman, but never feeling that they had the same amount of support as freshmen throughout the process. Although they were labeled at the institutional level as transfer students at the time of admission, it was more of an internal label for the admission department and less of a helpful identifier as participants moved through the onboarding process.

Summary

Chapter Four provided a summary of the questionnaire data, a detailed description of the eight participants and a summary of relevant documents submitted by participants. Next, the chapter presented the themes that emerged from open coding of the interview data, field notes, and relevant documents. These themes included (1) I'm not a freshman, I don't know anything. I've never been here. (2) It's just the way the game is played at a

larger institution (3) But to experience it in my way is different (4) You're not a transfer anymore. The chapter that follows will be a discussion of the findings as they related to the research question, What were transfer students' experiences with campus support designed to assist them in making the transition to a new campus? Additionally, the chapter that follows will discuss these findings in relationship to the research question and their classification as positive or negative support for transfer student participants.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Previous chapters of this dissertation presented the purpose of the study and the literature surrounding first-year experience and students in transition, as well as transition theory. Also outlined were my data collection, methods, and analysis, including relevant themes from the data. This final chapter provides discussion regarding the findings of my study and their relationships to the relevant literature surrounding the topic of transfer students to address my research question "What were transfer students' experiences with campus support designed to assist them in making the transition to a new campus?" as well as the sub questions, "What support efforts do transfer students characterize as positive or useful practices?" and "What support efforts do transfer students characterize as unhelpful, detrimental, or missing in their onboarding experiences?" Finally, this chapter addresses implications for research, theory, and practice, and it concludes with addressing the limitations of the study and opportunities for future research.

Case Study Findings

The findings of this case study are categorized by the specific research question and sub questions. These questions guided the research and provide a scaffolding for organizing the findings. As I reviewed the data and the related themes, the voices of the

students guided me to the key points of their experiences and helped me identify which organizational practices had an effect on their transition to MWMU.

Transfer Students Experienced Some Positive Support

1. Transfer students were referred to a clear starting point.

Participants indicated they received a clear start to their time at MWMU. Although confusion occurred with the electronic notification of admittance, transfer student participants received a definitive answer via mail with the MWMU admission packet. The packet provided information regarding what steps to take after being admitted to the institution. A "checklist" handout was referenced multiple times as a resource to find information regarding the transfer process as well as an overall picture of the steps necessary to complete the transition. For participants, the checklist was the clearest set of guidance they received in the transition process.

2. Transfer students found a point of contact on campus.

Participants recalled relying heavily on a specific point of contact during their onboarding processes. These points of contact were primarily contacts that students met throughout the onboarding process and found to be especially helpful. These individuals ranged from academic advisors, friends, faculty members, and student support services personnel. These points of contact were connected to MWMU as current faculty, staff, or students. Each participant identified a specific person who was instrumental in their transition to MWMU. The original point of contact for many students became the most utilized resource and connection to the campus in general. The specific points of contact helped link transfer students to additional resources and connect them directly with others who could assist them.

3. Transfer students found challenges produced growth.

Participants recalled multiple instances of facing and successfully responding to challenges in the onboarding process. Their individual responses to these challenges brought out personal strengths that they had not previously identified in themselves. These newly identified strengths and personal growth brought out a subset of new skills and abilities that participants could use as they continued to navigate the onboarding process.

Transfer Students Experienced some Unhelpful or Detrimental Practices

1. Transfer students felt like a number not a student.

Participants felt the support they received at MWMU was impersonal as compared to previous institutions. They felt less like a student and more like a number. The larger size of the campus permeated participants' onboarding processes, academic experience, and interactions on campus. Areas affected include parking, class size, student traffic on campus, and utilization of campus resources. This was evidenced in the way participants talked about the campus culture and campus resources explaining that they were often met with lack of opportunity or outreach from other campus departments and other MWMU students. When asked about what specific resources they were given to support their academic and social integration in to the campus, multiple participants asked for clarification. It was as though they had never considered that the institution would provide resources to help them on this personal level as a transfer student.

2. Transfer students received conflicting advisement.

Although students had various initial points of contact as a connection point to campus, formal advisement on academic course work from professional staff members

was still necessary as part of the onboarding process. Participants received conflicting information from different campus resources. This caused students to doubt the accuracy of the information they were receiving and increased their skepticism of the transfer process. Many times the answers transfer students were given in regard to advisement were contingent upon approval from other sources. Their advisement could be impacted by approval from various academic departments, delays in degree confirmation from other institutions, or articulation of specific coursework.

3. Transfer students were treated like native students.

Participants felt that MWMU faculty and staff expected them to know specific information about the institution and its processes throughout the onboarding process. In many cases, participants reported that native students understood what was happening while transfer students felt that they were not privy to the same information that native students had. Participants felt different from others on campus because they were transfer students. This presented itself in the onboarding process and in the classroom throughout the first semester.

Transfer Students Identified Missing Practices

1. Transfer student orientation was not available.

Participants articulated a lack of orientation opportunities specifically for transfer students. Participants felt that the information they received through their general orientation was, for the most part, irrelevant to transfer students and they struggled to recall details. Though multiple participants remembered "something online", they did not view the online orientation as a useful transfer student orientation opportunity, but as another item on their checklist to complete before enrollment. Additionally, participants

who did remember completing the online requirement felt that it was not impactful on their transition to MWMU as it covered much of the basic information they had already located on the institution's website. However, they thought it may be helpful to someone who had not done any research prior to the transition.

2. Transfer students were not connected with other transfer students.

Participants were admitted as transfer students but did not necessarily identify themselves as such. This disconnect between how the institution labeled them and how they were treated once on campus after admission made it difficult for transfer students to identify and connect with other transfer students on campus. Unless disclosed in an in-class discussion, participants were mostly unaware of which students in their classes and on campus were transfer students. No opportunities for transfer students to specifically connect with other transfer students were offered for newly admitted transfer students. Unless asked directly, the participants did not disclose their identities as transfer students, as they did not find it necessary for others to know.

3. Transfer students lacked institutional context.

Participants were not aware of the processes and procedures associated with being a student at MWMU. Having prior experience as students, they carried beliefs and knowledge about institutional context from their previous institutions to MWMU. At many points in their transition experiences, their prior contexts did not fit their new reality. This caused confusion for transfer students as they tried to navigate their new environment inside and outside of the classroom. Testing procedures, enrollment processes, and financial aid were examples of processes participants experienced at their

previous institution but experienced in different and confusing ways upon transitioning to MWMU.

Discussion of Case Study Findings

Transfer Students Experienced Some Positive Support

The three components regarding positive or useful practices were voiced by the participants as being helpful supports through their onboarding experiences. The first two findings involved institutional support to which participants were referred or institutional support participants found on their own through their onboarding experience. The final finding in this category was a positive outcome that came as a result of students' experiences with institutional support practices. Each will be discussed within the scope of our current knowledge about supporting college transfer students. Overall, transfer students did experience some positive support throughout their transition to MWMU.

Transfer students were referred to a clear starting point. As the movement of transfer students through the education pipeline has become less linear and more complex (Marling, 2013), it has become increasingly difficult to standardize experiences for this student type. At MWMU, receipt of the welcome packet for admission was a consistent experience for new transfer student admits no matter their pathways to MWMU. This packet was not specific to transfer students, but used for all students newly admitted to the institution.

For instance, the welcome packet was generally viewed as a positive step in helping push participants through the institutional phases of transition at MWMU, but pointed all participants, regardless of background, prior educational history, or major to the same starting point: academic advisement. However,   getting connected to academic

advisement was a helpful step for transfer participants and was made clear by the welcome packet, not all students agreed that it was an appropriate first step in their particular process. This one size fits all approach to onboarding left participants feeling confused and did not necessarily identify needs specific to their individual educational goals at the institutions. As transfer patterns have become more diverse as well as increased diversity among transfer students (Owens, 2010), it has become increasingly difficult for institutions to identify a single path for helping transfer students as they enter the transition to a four-year institution.

Similar to Owens (2010) study, participants in this study articulated the "checklist" in the welcome packet as a source of helpful information. In reviewing the findings, it appears that while students felt a sense of security having a checklist as a starting point, at the time of the first instance where their lived experience deviated from the checklist, the source was no longer seen as supportive or helpful. The practicality of a single checklist or process for all transfer students was desired by participants, however, the diversity in their own student population was also articulated, thus making this a challenging task for the institution.

Although the welcome packet and checklist were seen as helpful starting points for transfer students, they also reinforced the complex nature of transfer students. Although Davies et al. (2015) identify the gap between admitted and enrolled, it seems that the extent of the gap varies based on the different type of transfer students. Participants in this study experienced this gap to varying degrees and navigated it to enrollment, however, it took much longer for some students to find their ways than for

others. Identification of the gap is a step, but the vastness and variety of what makes up the gap varies due to the previously established diverse nature of transfer students.

Taking it a step further, participants in this study articulated the need for individualized attention during the time period between admission and enrollment. Although previous literature has called for a change in the research regarding students in transition (Kinzie, 2013; Owens, 2010; Reason & Gansemer-Topf, 2013; Torres & LePeau, 2013), the findings suggest that changes in practice are necessary as well to deal with the ever changing population and movement of this student group through the higher education pipeline. Without a single source of entry for transfer students, it is difficult to clearly define a single recommendation for what happens between admission and enrollment. Whereas existing literature has identified sub populations of transfer students and created some level of classification for vertical, lateral, reverse, swirlers, and non-traditional transfer students, participants in this study did not experience any different guidance during the onboarding process at MWMU based on these classifications.

Transfer students found a point of contact on campus. Although the welcome packet provided a consistent starting point for transfer students, it was not a source that provided ongoing support and information. After admission with the assistance of the checklist provided by the institution, participants identified points of contact on campus who provided support in the transition and served as a single point of contact for multiple transition related issues. These points of contact varied from family friends, faculty, and staff members associated with MWMU. Even though the transfer transition was an anticipated transition for all of the participants in the study, they still seemed to struggle with the idea of leaving behind their previous support. Utilizing the support factors of

Schlossberg et al. (1995) four S's of support, participants began building a new support network to navigate the transition to a new institution. As they transitioned from one institution to another, many participants articulated leaving what was familiar and the support system they had from their previous institutions.

Though multiple studies have helped define what type of institutional support is needed for first-year students, including transfer students (Barefoot, Gardner, Cutright, Morris, Schroder, Schwartz, Siegel, & Swing, 2005; Honkimaki & Kalman, 2012), the idea of informal support systems has not been addressed. This finding seems unique to this study and group of participants. Although most participants points of contact held a formal role at the institution as either faculty or staff, the way participants utilized their points of contact as a resource for any and all questions brought these interactions outside of the scope of the point of contacts' specific position and job title. As an initial point of contact, an academic advisor addressed financial aid and housing questions. Similarly, Student Support Services personnel addressed admission and advisement concerns. Because of the relationship and support that participants received from their initial points of contact, transfer students seemed to rely on those relationships rather than identifying and accessing other individuals with formal responsibilities in these areas where questions arose.

Transfer students found challenges produced growth. Whereas the previous sections considered institutional support, participant transfer students also relied on their internal fortitude to be successful in their transition to MWMU. Multiple participants including Dorothy, Jennie, Keri, Michelle, and Shannon reported feelings of intimidation, being overwhelmed, and facing challenges; however, they found ways to continue pulling

from their own personal skills and abilities. Michelle specifically described herself as "flailing" in her first semester, but immediately described it as challenging, not disheartening. Owens (2010) also noted an increase in self-reliance developed by transfer students as they navigated the transition and experienced a new institution.

In his study using participant ejournals to explore transfer students' experiences with the transfer process, Owen (2010) found a general level of cautiousness from his participants as they began the transition. This level of caution was affirmed by participants in this study who articulated that they anticipated challenges in the process. What appeared to be different from Owen's participants was the appreciation participants in this study had for the individual growth that was produced by the challenges they overcame throughout the transfer process. While Owen's participants articulated that they lacked self-reliance and a trust in their own abilities, participants in this study seemed proud to articulate what they had overcome in their transfer journey. Multiple participants in this study identified their own personal skills and abilities as the only reason they were able to succeed in the transfer process, not the support provided by the institution.

For six of the eight participants, the transition to MWMU was an anticipated transition as defined by Schlossberg (1995). Schlossberg defines an anticipated transition as one that is planned for and does not come unexpectedly. This anticipated transition created a different environment around the transition than those who experienced an unanticipated transition. Jennie and Michelle's transition to MWMU could be categorized as unanticipated (Schlosberg, 1995). While unanticipated transition can oftentimes lead to distress, Jennie articulated that she realized she did not have the option to choose failure. These feeling of distress can lead to crisis (Gordon, Habley, Grites, 2008), however,

Jennie's unanticipated transition evoked strong internal characteristics that helped her succeed in her academic pursuits.

Overall, participants experienced growth as they faced the challenges associated with transition to MWMU. Participants whose transition was anticipated experienced challenges but reflected on their growth that came as a result of the challenge. Additionally, participants who experienced unanticipated transition to MWMU experienced the challenges differently with mixed results as to their success and growth.

Transfer Students Experienced some Unhelpful or Detrimental Practices

The three findings regarding unhelpful or detrimental practices largely involve the interaction with faculty and student support personnel at MWMU. The first two findings involve the interaction of transfer students with different campus services and their feelings of disconnect to the personnel and institution. The final finding in this category involves participant's inability to get consistent information from campus support designed to assist them in their degree completion.

Transfer students felt like a number not a student. Miller (2013) cites lack of integration with the campus community as a specific challenge for transfer students entering a four-year institution. The experience of the participants in this study echo this challenge. This lack of integration left participants feeling more like a number than a student. Misti and Shannon recall feeling different or separate from others on campus due to their transfer student status. Additionally Michael and Michelle attribute the lack of personable interaction at MWMU to the larger campus size. Jennie reported feeling connected at her previous institution, but feeling a lack of connection with MWMU. Shawn, the participant who expressed being socially connected at MWMU, did not

articulate the same impersonal experience as other participants. Outside of Shawn, the remaining seven participants said they were not involved on campus for various reasons.

Similarly, Townsend & Wilson's (2006) study of transfer students transitioning from a community college to a four-year research institution found that transfer students experienced similar disconnectedness both academically and socially. My study supported this finding that transfer students felt a lack of belonging and faced challenges integrating into the social and academic culture of MWMU. What appeared to be different was that participants in my study attributed their feelings of disconnect to the processes and procedures involved with admission and enrollment rather than to academics occurring inside the classroom. While Townsend & Wilson (2006) found that learning was not a central theme in their study, participants in this study spoke highly of their experiences inside the classroom and the content and quality of their learning at MWMU. This suggests that institution type and size have an impact on the transition experience of transfer students. Unlike the institution in Townsend & Wilson's (2006) study, MWMU is not a large research institution. Therefore, factors such as class size, proportion of graduate assistants teaching classes, and emphasis on research are not as prevalent inside the classroom. Further differentiating from Townsend & Wilson (2006), not all transfer participants in this study were coming from a community college. Lateral transfer students who came from a four-year institution may have been more acclimated to these larger environments and academic experiences, thus focusing less on the logistics and more on the academics of their program.

Lastly, Townsend & Wilson (2006) identified the high first-year to second-year retention at the institution where their study took place as a barrier for the social

integration of transfer students in their study. With a first to second year retention rate of 86%, their research institution placed a heavy emphasis on social and academic integration of the first-year student cohort. This emphasis resulted in a strong bond between native students based on shared experiences and support they received at the institution during their first year. MWMU data would suggest the opposite. Based upon available data, MWMU has a significantly lower first-year to second-year retention rate of 61.1% (Factbook, 2017), however, participants in this study still felt it difficult to break through the culture and bond of native students. Although the first to second-year retention rate does not necessarily indicate an institutional culture at MWMU that creates a strong bond between native students through a common first-year experience, transfer students may still be hindered by the shared experiences of native students on campus and find it as a barrier to social integration.

The cultural barriers created by institutional processes extend beyond the institution itself. The idea that transfer students are just a number, not a student, is reinforced by the national tracking mechanisms put in place to track student success and retention. Annually, institutions are required to submit cohort information for the first-time, full-time student cohort to the Department of Education through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). This national tracking mechanism reinforces an institutional culture that places an emphasis on the success, persistence, and graduation of the institution's first-time, full-time student cohort.

Participants in my study recalled feeling different than a freshman at MWMU, but not being given an identity as a transfer student either. This lack of identity for transfer students might be attributed to the institutional focus on first-time, full-time freshman as

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a cohort on university campuses. The Student Right to Know cohort excludes transfer students (Ishitani, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016) from their tracking approach. This national structure is then echoed on local campuses as the transfer students feel the impact of the emphasis placed on freshman to the exclusion of transfer students in certain campus interventions, resources, and programming. Participants in this study articulated feeling that first-time, full-time freshmen received priority in terms of resources on campus. This seems like a juxtaposition as students who "don't count" in terms of national tracking articulated feeling like just a number.

Although institutional focus on the retention of first-time, full-time students may be an appropriate metric for student success, it is an incomplete picture of the overall student success at an institutional level. In the process of onboarding, new members of the organization should be engaged in the culture of the organization to succeed (Lee, 2008). Participants in my study articulated that there seemed to be this opportunity to be engaged in the culture for freshman, but not for transfer students. This was affirmed as participants struggled to articulate the opportunities specifically identified as being focused on transfer students. Specifically, Shannon attempted to participate in some of these campus events that were open to everyone, but generally focused on first-time freshmen, and felt as though she was invisible. This cultural shift toward the support of first-time full-time students has a negative effect on the retention and satisfaction of transfer students as they make the transition to MWMU.

Transfer students were treated like native students. Throughout the study, participants made it clear that there was no easy way to distinguish native students from transfer students or other student types. As reported by participants, transfer students did

not intentionally seek out other transfer students nor did faculty and staff. This lack of distinction from the general population made it difficult as transfer students began to enter the new institutional culture and expectations. The lack of differentiation between different student types contributed to the assumption that all students were native to the institution and had an effect on transfer students' social interactions and academics.

Although native students often receive training on co-curricular opportunities and resources as a required part of their onboarding experience, inconsistencies during the onboarding experience for transfer students made it difficult to determine who had received what type of information regarding these social and academic opportunities. Participants in this study experienced inconsistent training and information, receiving varying levels of information during their onboarding process at MWMU depending on who they spoke to, their major and academic department, and what onboarding events and opportunities they attended. For example, Dorothy mentioned a desire to get involved in a student organization, but did not know where to get started. Shannon attempted to get involved, but felt shut out by the native students who were already involved in certain programming that she attended.

The exact make-up of the incoming transfer student population is complex and difficult to predict from year to year, however, it is consistently a high percentage of the total incoming student population at MWMU. This suggests that increased resources and support marketed specifically to transfer students to increase their co-curricular experiences would be an appropriate use of institutional resources. Whereas opportunities were available for transfer students at MWMU, participants in my study did not feel that they were marketed specifically for transfer students and therefore did not feel a strong

desire to attend; in addition, when some of the participants attended events associated with orientation, they reported feeling that they did not belong.

Transfer students were also assumed to be native student in terms of their academic pursuits. Transfer Shock may be an apt description of the social transitions faced by the participants in this study (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). All participants mentioned feeling challenged by the transition in academics from their previous institution to MWMU. This increased academic challenge is a contributing factor to Transfer Shock (Hill, 1965), which refers to a dip in grade point average that usually occurs within the first semester of a transfer student's entry at a four-year university. Although access to GPA was not within the scope of this study, the more challenging academic environment may have resulted in lower grades than participants earned at their previous institution.

For many transfer students, the increased difficulty in academics is due to the level of courses being taken. Upper division courses, not generally offered at the community college level, create a struggle for vertical transfer students (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). This struggle is not necessarily due to their lack of ability, but could be due to the assumption that they are already aware of the academic expectations of the course and the institution. Participant experiences supported this assumption as participants voiced concerns over meeting expectations that were not fully explained or addressed for certain assignments. For example, Dorothy mentioned writing papers early on in the semester without having a full understanding of the departmental expectations or preferred style for writing at MWMU. Similarly, Michael referred to a certain assignment that was never mentioned in class, but native students

knew it to be an expectation based on previous semesters. It was the experience of participants in this study that not all academic challenges were curriculum related, but a product of a culture that caters toward the needs and expectations of native students in the classroom setting.

Transfer student participants seemed to struggle to navigate the unwritten rules of the institution. Transfer student participants experienced a transition academically and socially, however they also experienced a transition to a completely new institutional culture. Unlike native students, transfer student participants were not aware of cultural norms, traditions, and unwritten rules associated with their new institution. These cultural challenges had an impact on the social and academic transition of transfer student participants.

Transfer students received conflicting advisement. Challenges in academic advisement were articulated by participants as they sought accurate and timely evaluation of their prior earned credits and degrees. In her study on transfer students, Miller (2013) identified the transfer of academic credits and curriculum integration with previously earned credits as two of the biggest challenges specific to transfer students. This was affirmed by the participants in my study. Participants in my study were seeking expert advice regarding these credits and expected a customized advisement experience that addressed their specific needs as a transfer student (Clemetson, et. al., 2015). In reality, what the participants experienced was a general advisement appointment that failed to address many of their individual programmatic questions related to the transfer of credits from their previous institution. When this occurred, participants sought additional advisement from other sources to gather information regarding their specific course work

and their specific academic departments and programs. When students consulted multiple sources for their academic advisement, they were oftentimes presented with conflicting information between the student services academic advisement recommendations and departmental faculty advisement.

For example, vertical transfer students presented challenges for academic advisement in terms of accuracy due to the fact that there were still grades outstanding and their degrees from their previous institutions were not yet conferred. This was the case for Michael, Jennie, Dorothy, and Shawn. Although the education pipeline was designed specifically with vertical transfer students in mind, and most programming and articulation agreements were created to accommodate this transfer student type (Kintzer & Wattenbarger, 1985; Manz, 2015), it still seemed that there was a lack of clear information and guidance for this group of students. Participants found themselves having to explain their course work and their degree programs to the advisors at MWMU to help them understand what credits they were bringing in from their two-year institution. McCormick (2009) found vertical transfer students in his study reported higher levels of satisfaction with academic advisement than native students, however, my study seemed to contradict this finding at MWMU. Unlike transfer students in my study, McCormick (2009) utilized NSSE data from students' senior year. This represents the opposite end of the spectrum from their onboarding experience. It is possible that distance from the initial experience and increased institutional context and familiarity may lead to higher satisfaction levels among transfer students in regard to their initial academic advisement experience.

Options were limited for vertical transfer students as they met with advisors who were unable to give definite answers and suggest specific courses because they did not have the full academic history of these particular students. For these vertical transfer students, delayed advisement may have resulted in more accurate recommendation in terms of required courses but would have significantly delayed their enrollment for the fall semester and resulted in fewer options in terms of course availability. Advisors were helpful in terms of general information, however most recommended that vertical transfer students return after their degree had been posted to get the most accurate advisement experience. Most academic advisors at MWMU seemed to cater their individual advisement appointments to a traditional native student. Participants articulated feeling like they wanted to hear more details about their own personal situations and less generic information about the structure and components of degrees.

Lateral and returning transfer student participants also experienced variability in their academic advisement experiences. Even though their previous degrees and credits were on their transcripts at the time of advisement, their advisement sessions lacked clarity regarding the non-curricular requirements for their programs including success rates, admission rates in to selective majors, and availability of academic resources. Unlike many traditional students at MWMU, transfer participants were looking for information regarding long term planning and how to balance a course schedule with their other responsibilities as parents, full time employees, and commuters. This information was not available to them as part of their academic advisement, but they began to piece together information as they met with different faculty and staff on campus. These types of questions and information seemed to lie outside of the scope of

the academic advisement department at MWMU whose main focus seemed to be on degree audits and course selection. When students began piecing together information from different sources, it became more likely that they were presented with conflicting information.

Transfer students presented a challenges to the formalized academic advisement system. A shift is needed to best serve transfers students' advisement needs in their onboarding experiences. The findings in this study support the call for a shift in focus from an institutional based model to a student based model (Clemetson, et. al., 2015). This shift would create a more individualized advisement experience for students and be a step toward changing the institutional culture regarding transfer students. The shift to student centered policies would provide the opportunity for more collaboration between the two-year and four-year levels and provide a wider network of support for transfer students as they navigate the transition between institutions. The institutional based model that affected participants' advisement experiences at MWMU mirrors the national model for retention that considers the institution as the unit of measurement and not the individual student.

Transfer Students Identified Missing Practices

The three findings regarding missing practices provide a unique insight in to the transfer student participants' onboarding experiences. Although institutionally, not all practices were "missing", transfer students were not aware of the support that was available to them or designed specifically to help them. Whether true from an institutional stand point or not, it was the reality of the participants in this study that they did not have these experiences during their onboarding at MWMU.

Transfer student orientation was not available. Orientation and extensive onboarding practices are a hallmark of the freshman college experience. Many of the participants recalled their orientation experience at their previous institutions helpful. Keri, Shannon, and Shawn particularly remember the excitement and energy surrounding their previous orientation. None of the eight participants attended an in-person, on-campus orientation at MWMU. As is common for orientation nationwide, this type of orientation is generally required for freshman students, however, transfer students are most often offered an online orientation option (Brown & Hernandez, 2010). This online option is usually seen as a way to accommodate the variability amongst new transfer student admits.

In keeping with the literature, MWMU had a brief online orientation that was required prior to enrollment for transfer students. This less time consuming, more schedule friendly option for transfer students was intended to meet the needs of the diverse transfer students, however, the more flexible requirement was perhaps detrimental to the transfer students in this study. This was the experience for all eight participants at MWMU. Although the institution identified this online video as "orientation", the participants in this study did not view it in the same way, perhaps due to the fact that the online orientation module varied so much from their previous experiences with formal orientation programs at their prior institutions.

As noted by Wilson and Dannells (2010) in their study on orientation programs nationwide, transfer students may think orientation is not necessary for their onboarding experience as they have already experienced college life at a previous institution. Institutions, including MWMU, who provide an online orientation for transfer students

reinforce this idea by not providing the same depth of orientation resources to transfer students as they do for first-time incoming freshmen. When asked specifically about their orientation experiences at MWMU, participants struggled to identify a clear experience, but some mentioned the online video in reference to other parts of their onboarding experience. The online video was most often viewed as a barrier to enrollment by participants, not a helpful tool to prepare them to succeed academically and socially at MWMU.

In terms of content, participants recalled information related to the logistics of the institution. These topics included Title IX training, student ID card choice, and parking. When asked how their online session contributed to their academic transition at MWMU, all participants struggled to answer the question; they noted that none of the experiences with their transfer student orientation related to academics. It was particularly telling that Shannon stated there was no transfer orientation, suggesting that she did not associate her online experience with orientation at all. A transfer specific orientation, not a portion of the elements of freshman orientation converted to an online format, would be a helpful onboarding practice for transfer students at MWMU that would address their specific needs as transfer students in a systematic way.

Transfer students were not connected with other transfer students. The variability of students that characterizes the transfer student population makes their experiences markedly different from a more homogenous freshman student population (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001) and results in many challenges as they onboard at a new institution. As participants navigated the transition to MWMU their network of support from the institution and connections with their peers were lacking, so they relied heavily

on themselves in coping with the transition. Schlossberg et al. (1995) identified self as one of four factors that influences an individual's ability to cope with transition, along with situation, support, and strategy. Participants in this study appeared to rely most heavily on self in an effort to pull from their personal resources as well as psychological resources throughout their onboarding experience.

When asked specifically about their interactions with other transfer students, participants reported that they were not seeking out other transfer students. They also reminded me that transfer students do not have identifying factors that make them stand out as transfer students, as if many of them are trying to blend in and not be revealed as outsiders. Participants did not ask other students specifically if they were transfer students, however, many of them found out other classmates were transfer students in informal conversations that occurred throughout the semester. Institutionally, there was no programming in place to facilitate this connection, as not all four-year campuses seek to engage this large student population (College Board, 2011).

Another challenge in connecting with other transfer students on campus related to participants' beliefs and desires about assimilation; following admission most did not feel like transfer students anymore but rather that they were expected to assimilate as if they were native students to MWMU. The first-year experience of transfer students was lacking in programing and support, which hindered their abilities to informally connect with other transfer students and, to some extent, with non-transfer peers. By definition, the First-Year Experience includes increasing engagement for students through interactions with other students and faculty (Barefoot, 2005). With a less coordinated effort for first-year programming for transfer students, this opportunity is often missed

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for transfer students in the onboarding process. Although engagement with faculty and peers is a hallmark of traditional freshman orientation, transfer orientation is often less robust and does not include such interactions. This difference in onboarding for native and transfer students increases the divide between their engagement levels. Participants reported attending some welcome events and group meetings early on in their experiences, but felt that other students had already formed a bond, leaving transfer participants as outsiders.

Miller (2013) identifies lack of engagement and integration as nationwide issues with transfer students, not just specific to transfer participants from MWMU. It was unclear whether opportunities to connect specifically with transfer students would have engaged participants. Most participants either didn't have a high level of interest in connecting with other transfer students or opportunities on campus or felt that their status as transfer students hindered them in doing so. Thus, it was unknown if programming may have been a solution to their engagement challenges.

Transfer students lacked institutional context. Related to many of the challenges already mentioned, transfer students did not have the context that native students had in terms of institutional expectations, traditions, and processes. Multiple participants mentioned their lack of knowledge regarding traditions of the institution. Others mentioned encountering barriers throughout their advisement and enrollment process resulting in a lot of trial and error to complete their enrollment. They articulated feeling like others knew about these specific processes and procedures, but somehow, as transfer students they did not. In other more formalized onboarding experiences, these concerns would likely have been addressed in more of a big picture way. However, as

individuals navigating the processes alone, participants identified these roadblocks as significant and unjustified.

As transfer students began to experience frustration as a result of these experiences, it became more evident that the formal and information interactions that are fostered through orientation programs are not only beneficial for freshmen, but for transfer students as well. In her study, Manz (2015) points out the need to provide specific opportunities for transfer students without isolating them. Consequently the findings of this study show that isolation of transfer students at MWMU was due to a lack of support, not because they received a separate and customized orientation experience. Balancing these two findings is the key to providing an appropriate amount of support and helping transfer students feel included while not providing such different support that they feel like outsiders on their own campus.

Institutional context was also tied to the participants' sense of belonging on the MWMU campus. Lack of understanding of their new environment contributed to their sense of feeling like outsiders. Likewise, some participants considered their connection with MWMU faculty and staff as lacking compared to their previous institutions. Interactions with faculty and staff inside and outside of the classroom are important for the adjustment and connection of transfer students and to help them develop a sense of belonging on their new campus. Townsend & Wilson (2006) in their study of transfer students entering a large research institution, found that transfer students may need prolonged attention during the early weeks on campus to encourage and facilitate integration in to campus culture. A similar need was identified through my study at MWMU where participants were reluctant to engage socially inside the classroom or

outside the classroom and felt like outsiders on their new campus. In both studies, participants appeared uninterested in co-curricular events on campus, however, it is possible that they were ill-informed and thus not aware of the opportunities for engagement and integration.

Campbell et al. (2013) identified the lack of programming for transfer students as a key retention issue for this student group and noted that institutions still lack a cohesive approach to onboarding and integration of transfer students. MWMU is no exception. Whereas Campbell et al. (2013) calls for more than just a one-time event or program to foster social adjustment for transfer students, MWMU participants would have benefited from even a single event that provided institutional context and support. With little to no identifiable onboarding support for transfer students, participants found they were missing institutional context as they progressed from admission to enrollment. This lack of context hindered their ability to socialize with other students, interact with faculty and staff, and ultimately their satisfaction with the institution itself.

It is important to note that transfer students identified multiple practices that were unhelpful, detrimental, or missing. The research questions were created to look at institutional support, however, this was not a prominent theme in the transfer student participant experiences. Although the intent behind the study was to explore the support offered by the institution, transfer student participants seemed confused or lacked understanding of the roll of the institution in supporting them through the transition process. For the purposes of this study, the research questions were not changed based on the participant responses.

Discussion of Related Theory

The use of theory in this study was a posteriori deriving from the experience of transfer student as articulated by the participants in the study. This qualitative approach based in constructionism allowed transfer students to base their understanding of their experiences in their own reality based on culture, context, and experience (Patton, 2002).

Schlossberg Transition Theory (1995)

In Chapter Two of this study, I addressed the related literature and areas of study surrounding transfer students. These included research centered on Schlossberg's Theory of Transition (1995), the development of the First-Year Experience literature, and the general flow of the educational pipeline from common education to post-secondary education. The application of specific theories are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Schlossberg et al., (1995) Transition Theory can be used in relationship to transfer students as a guide to aid researchers and practitioners as they seek to understand and describe the transfer experience. The development of a transfer student specific transition theory could address the transition within the educational framework and identify the factors that specifically help transfer students as they move in, move through, and move out of one level of the education pipeline while simultaneously moving in, moving through, with the goal of moving out of the next phase of the education pipeline and graduating with a bachelor's degree from a four year university. This type of theory augmentation is not meant to create a brand new theory, but apply the psychology-based Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1995) to a specific educational setting that focuses on transfer students.

Used in application to the transition of transfer students, a transfer specific theory could include specific points in the transfer process that indicate the stages of moving in, moving through, and moving out, clearly defining where one stage ends and the next begins. For example, moving in would encompass leaving behind the previous institution and beginning phases such as admission at the new institution. Moving through would encompass the interactions with faculty and staff that occur after admission but before coursework begins. Lastly, moving out would encompass the processes involved in leaving the transfer institution having completed a degree. At which time, a new transition cycle would begin. Aligning these phases of transition with specific points in the transfer cycle would allow staff and faculty at the institutional level to more clearly identify where they can assist in the process and support transfer students toward success and assimilation at their new institution.

As a caution, it is important to note that the end of one transition and the beginning of the next are not necessarily clearly defined. For transfer student participants in this study, many were still moving out of one transition while simultaneously moving in to the next transition to MWMU. This complex transition pattern may have contributed to student's challenges related to connecting to the institutional culture, traditions, and involvement opportunities. It may also contribute to their lack of identity as a transfer student or as a member of the community at their new institution.

Transition Theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995) also articulates an individual's ability to react to transition utilizing the 4 S's of self, situation, strategy, and support. These four factors contribute to one's ability to cope with transition. These factors emerged as mechanisms for navigating the transition for transfer student participants in the study.

Participants articulated a heavy reliance on self throughout the transition. Many participants articulated experiencing personal growth and an increased ability to overcome challenges throughout the process of transferring to MWMU. Participants articulated their ability to navigate the situation, discussing their unique paths that brought them to MWMU. Strategy was evident from all participants as they took an individual approach to the transfer process and tried to navigate the transition using their own resources and skills to their advantage. Lastly, support emerged in many different participant data points as transfer students relied heavily on their own personal support systems from their friends and family, their previous institution, and the new support system they were building as they transitioned to MWMU.

Transfer Student Challenges (Miller, 2013)

Miller (2013) identified five challenges that transfer students face as they transition to a four-year institution:

- Lack of integration and engagement in the campus community
- Difficulty with financial aid process
- Academic challenges with credit transfer and academic preparation
- Specific systems to address the needs of transfer students, and
- Curriculum integration with previously earned credits (Miller, 2013).

Each of these fives challenges emerged as data points from the interviews with participants in this study. Although the theory was not imposed on the study from the beginning, as the data were gathered, the connection and relevance of this previous study was evident and could serve as a resource for four-year institutions developing their strategic plans and institutional missions.

However, Miller (2013) Transfer Student Challenges theory approaches the transfer process from the deficit model identifying challenges faced by transfer students and does not address the opportunities for improvement from an institutional standpoint. When taken in to consideration, these five challenges can become guide posts for policy and processes at the institutional level that would have a positive impact on the matriculation and retention of transfer students. Although Miller (2013) is a widely known study, four years later and at the time of my study, these same challenges emerged for my participants.

For example, my transfer student participants cited a lack opportunity to connect on campus, identified by Miller (2013) as a lack of integration and engagement with the campus community. This challenge, if addressed at an institutional level, could involve student affairs professionals, institutional marketing teams, and faculty in a process discussion regarding the role of each of these areas in the transition of transfer students.

While Schlossberg addresses transition as related to the individual experiencing transition, Miller (2013) addresses the specific transition of transfer students from an institutional standpoint. This same division was evident in the data. Participants articulated experiencing transition as an individual, however, they also identified practical challenges that they experienced that were related to specific institutional barriers and processes. Although Transition Theory (Schlossberg et al., 1995) and Transfer Student Challenges (Miller, 2013) do not fit together seamlessly, together they address the dualistic set of challenges faced by transfer student participants in the study. Participants experienced individual challenges while also facing challenges caused by the institution.

Implications

The findings from this case study on the onboarding experience of transfer students has important implications for research, theory, and practice. Although the implications for research and theory are important, my position as a student affairs practitioner creates a particular interest and understanding of the implications for practice. Each area is addressed individually in the sections below.

Research

Current tracking and reporting structures used in research for transfer students provides baseline information for researchers, but based on the findings of this research, national tracking and reporting clearly do not tell the whole story of the lived experience of transfer students in America. Though the national tracking provides quantitative data, the findings of this qualitative case study suggest that the lived experience of transfer students were perhaps *negatively* impacted by the way that higher education in America tracks and records student movement throughout the educational pipeline. This impact occurs from the resulting culture that places a heavy emphasis on the success and retention of the first-time, full time cohort at the national level. In order to provide more accurate quantitative information regarding transfer student matriculation and transfer patterns, it is necessary to re-structure the current reporting system that only accounts for first-time, full time student cohorts. Changing the national focus from a singular priority of first-time, full time student cohort would enable individual campuses to widen their foci and include transfer student support and retention as an institutional priority.

Although previous research has discussed the need to change national tracking mechanism, the findings from this study highlight a need for a cultural change at an

institutional level to apply a broader definition to student success. Considering how to measure success for student populations outside of the first-time, full-time cohort would present a big shift in the way many institutions think about success for their students. This culture change could be initiated by the previously mentioned changes in national tracking. This study highlights the need for increased focus at the institutional level on the retention and support of a diversity of students, including transfer students, through a change in institutional culture that brings transfer students out of the shadow of first-time full time students.

Additionally, future research is needed regarding culture as it relates to the educational transition of transfer students. Although Transfer Shock has been widely studied in the transfer student population, culture shock has not been applied to this specific group as a lens for exploring their transition.

Theory

As the student population in higher education changes, theories related to student development may need to be re-examined to include or address the diverse needs and experiences of the transfer student population. Schlossberg et al., (1995) Transition Theory can serve as a guide for researchers and practitioners as they seek to understand and describe the transfer experience. While many student development theories were based around traditional college students, the outcomes of this study show it is important to consider the changing demographic of the American college student and re-examine the application of these theories by student type to address the individual needs of student subpopulations such as transfer students.

When Schlossberg et al., (1995) is applied to transfer students, it would be helpful to identify specific resources, both at the sending institution and the receiving institution that would fall under each factor (self, situation, strategy, support) thus allowing transfer students to have a starting point to utilize their resources in the transition. This application of theory is not without reservation as the resources and path for transition is different for each individual transfer student. However, the resources that transfer students utilize are generally similar, just may not be utilized in the same order during the onboarding process. A general theory for use of these resources could help create a framework for students to help move them forward toward successful transition to a new institution.

Miller (2013) provides practical guidance at the institutional level to mitigate challenges for transfer students. In order to improve the process for transfer students, each of the five challenges identified by Miller should be investigated at the institutional level and processes and procedures surrounding that challenge should be evaluated for improvement. Application of this framework would be specific to each individual campus but would help institutions drill down to their own specific procedural and policy issues that create roadblocks or challenges for transfer students.

Practice

The findings of this study provide many practical applications for practitioners in higher education. Although there is not one specific area of higher education that interacts exclusively with transfer students, I have divided the implications for practice in to two major categories: faculty and staff. The implications are addressed within these two area of practice.

Faculty. The first implication for faculty is to identify, early in the semester, the transfer students in the classroom. This practice would allow faculty to put extra steps in place to ensure that these students know how to access the academic resources available to them that would help them succeed in their specific course. Identification of transfer students could be listed on class rosters so as not to require extra effort on the part of faculty. This would also not require a public identification of transfer students, thus not identifying them as outsiders within the classroom. Though my participants were not ashamed to be transfer students, participants also did not want to stick out amongst a crowd of native students or increase the feeling that they were outsiders.

Additionally, early identification of transfer students would allow for faculty to conduct specific outreach to these students. Outreach could include an acknowledgement of their status as a transfer student, which could open a line of communication between students and professors that may not otherwise be there. This is especially true in upper level major courses where faculty may already have relationships with native students that they have taught in previous semesters. Proactive communication on the part of faculty members would create more informal interactions between transfer students and faculty and allow these students to feel a sense of connection and belonging within the classroom setting at their new institutions.

Lastly, faculty should consider reviewing the work of transfer students in a one-on-one setting to help ensure that students are understanding the academic expectations of the institution, and more specifically, their individual course. Although this may be an intimidating situation for newly admitted transfer students in their first semester at a new institution, and time consuming for faculty members, the benefit for the student would be

significant. As academic expectations and standards change from one institution to another, this type of interaction early in the semester would allow students the chance to understand the differences and rise to meet these different expectations with future assignments. This may contribute to higher grade point averages and early success for transfer students in the classroom. This could also help combat Transfer Shock (Hill, 1965) in terms of the drop in grade point average transfer students generally experience within their first semester at a new institution.

Staff. The findings of this study have significant implications for staff, and more specifically, student affairs staff at the two-year and four-year level. The implications for practice are identified in two major areas including academic advising and orientation programs.

Academic advising provided an entry point for transfer students in the transition to the four-year institution, however, students also reported feeling uncertain about some of the information they received. In order to increase accuracy of academic advising and increase the confidence level of transfer students and academic advisors alike, more emphasis is needed on training academic advisors on the unique challenges experienced by transfer students. Although academic advisors are trained on how to evaluate credits and provide recommendations on classes that will move students toward degree completion, it seems as though many are not familiar with the unique challenges that transfer students may face in transferring academic credit from one institution to another. I suggest that training include thorough explanation on articulation agreements between two-year and four-year institutions and how they affect academic advising at the four-year level. Additionally, it would be useful to include some standardized language that

could be used to help transfer students feel that their advisors understand their unique needs as a transfer student. In many cases this does not represent a change in practice, but a change in approach to individual advising sessions.

At two-year institutions, it is also important for academic and graduation advisors to prepare transfer students for what to expect at their receiving institution. Even a simple acknowledgement that there may be questions about their transfer credits could go a long way in helping students understand that there may be challenges in the transfer process. It reframes the process and helps students create more realistic expectations. Acknowledging that the process may not be smooth is not intended to be a negative approach but a point of reference for students if or when they do experience challenges with academic advising at the next institution.

At four-year institutions, I suggest that advisors ask a series of standardized questions to all incoming transfer students.

1. Did you complete a degree at your previous institution?

2. If yes, what type of degree did you complete: Associate of Art, Associate of Science, or an Associate of Applied Science?

3. If not, do you plan on completing the degree at your previous institution?

These three questions can help identify how the associates degree and prior credits will apply in the pursuit of the four-year degree and provide an idea of how the transfer student intends to use these credits at the four-year level. These questions also allow the advisor to determine if there is benefit in the student completing the two-year degree or if it is best to utilize the previously earned credits as individual courses not as part of the associate's degree. Though it seems like a small difference, completed associate's

degrees are sometimes applied toward bachelor's degrees differently than if a student transfers in individual courses. This difference was a source of confusion for both academic advisors and transfer students in this study as many vertical transfer students met with their academic advisors while they were still enrolled at their previous institutions. Clarifying the academic goals at the two-year level or for vertical transfer students can provide some clarity to academic advisors as to the intent of the transfer student.

Orientation programs for transfer students should provide a layer of support for newly admitted transfer students. Though many institutions try to provide more flexible options for transfer students to meet their orientation requirements, I suggest stricter enforcement of transfer orientation requirements and improvement in content. Providing a more robust orientation experience for transfer students may result in initial push-back from prospective students, however, the benefit to the student is worth pushing through the resistance. Transfer students list that they have competing priorities and that they don't need to be treated like freshmen, however, the challenges they experience in their first-year could easily be addressed or mitigated with a customized transfer orientation experience.

In order to provide an in-person experience for transfer students, it may be necessary to provide multiple orientation options at various times, dates, and locations. Evening options as well as options available on the two-year campus, particularly the top feeder schools for the institution, may help transfer students who would not otherwise have the opportunity to attend an in person orientation. If online orientations are to be used to reach the transfer population, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of these

options and update the information when needed. Additionally, orientation should not be a one-time event, but an ongoing opportunity to connect transfer students with academic and social resources available to them at the institutional level.

Limitations

This single case study explored the onboarding experiences of transfer students at a moderately selective Midwestern institution in the United States. As a result, the study does not explore experiences of transfer students transitioning to a selective four-year institution that may have specific degree requirements for transfer students. The institution in this study does not require specific coursework or degree completion for admission of transfer students, only specific grade point average requirements. These requirements may vary based on admission requirements for transfer students at different institution types.

This study also addresses the transfer experience of vertical, lateral, returning, and military transfer students as defined by the study. These types do not identify every transfer student type and limits the scope of the study to these specific transfer experiences. It is important to note that transfer students may have a unique situation that does not fit in to a single category, but represents multiple categories of transfer students. Within the parameters of this study, only the four types mentioned were addressed and explored. Additionally, vertical students composed half of the participant sample. Although this is more representative of the total transfer student population at MWMU, it does present a limitation for this study. Not all transfer students types had equal representation within the study, so the findings are skewed toward the experience of vertical transfer students. Additionally, limited numbers of participants in each category

provide some representation for that category of transfer student, however, it cannot be assumed that the opinion of a single participant or a small number of participants is representative of all transfer students in that group. Findings are also based on the experiences participants selected to share. Although these experiences were lived by the transfer students, they are sharing the information from their perspectives and choosing which information to share. This is the nature of qualitative research, but does serve as a limitation.

The timing of the study creates a limitation as well. The timeline from the first interaction with the institution to the first day of classes varied for the participants. Some of them had difficulty remembering their experiences as they had begun exploring transfer options more than a year prior to their first interview. Conversely, some students were not very far removed from their time of admission to the institution, so their ability to reflect on the experience was more difficult.

Finally, this case study was a qualitative study. As is the design of qualitative research, the results are not meant to be generalizable to the broader population. The data and discussion are directly applicable to the specific institution, but may be able to relate to similar institution types with similar admission policies and structures.

<center>**Future Research**</center>

The opportunities for future research regarding transfer student onboarding experiences is vast. The study provided many areas of interest that could be explored to provide guidance and support for improving the practices related to onboarding of transfer students. Future area of research include the reverse transfer process and first-year experience of transfer students.

The reverse transfer process is a fairly new concept in terms of transfer student retention and degree completion. As national data shows more students are transferring from two-year institutions before completing a degree or certification (Shapiro et al., 2015), it is important for the four-year institution to be aware of how they can maximize previously earned credits and increase their applicability to future degrees. This process involves utilizing credits earned at the four-year level that meet degree requirements for the two-year degree often saving students time and money as it shortens the path to degree completion. The reverse transfer process is complex and requires cooperation from a network of community college and university personnel. Currently, the efforts are grassroots in many areas with small scale efforts on the local level between two-year and four-year institutions.

Nationally, the National Clearinghouse is working to implement a nationwide reverse transfer network to help transfer students receive the benefit of this process. Future research regarding the benefits of the reverse transfer would improve buy-in at the national level and encourage participation in the reverse transfer network. Research regarding decreased time to degree completion and the money savings the reverse transfer can provide would be a strong basis to increase usage of the process and the national system.

Future research is also needed to address the specific needs of transfer students in the first-year of college. Although orientation programs vary from institution to institution, current research identifies guideposts for orientation programs nationwide. Future research is needed to determine if these goals, widely accepted as best practice for freshman orientation, are as beneficial to transfer students in their orientation to a new

institution. This research could help establish best practices and create a guide from which institutions could model their transfer orientation programs. Establishing best practices through research would allow institutions to gather buy in from administration and other important stakeholders on campus and provide a clear plan for implementation of effective transfer orientation programs.

To allow researchers to monitor transfer patterns and behaviors, a nationwide system for reporting of transfer matriculation is needed. A nationwide system would allow institutions to track students through degree completion, not just track students who start and finish at a single institution. If a nationwide tracking mechanism is put in place, it creates fertile ground for future research and brings the growing population of transfer students to the forefront of higher education research.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore transfer students' onboarding experiences as they prepared to begin coursework at a single institution and in the early stages of the first semester of transition. I explored this transition of transfer students at a moderately selective Midwestern metropolitan institution using qualitative approach and a single case study design. Using open coding, I analyzed qualitative interviews, participant created drawings of the onboarding experience, and documents. Five themes emerged from the data that included: (1) I'm not a freshman (2) I don't know anything, I've never been here (3) It's just the way the game is played at a larger institution (4) But to experience it in my way is different (5) You're not a transfer anymore. These themes resulted in nine findings relevant to the overall transfer onboarding experience of participants.

The findings of the study consisted of three practices that transfer students found as helpful in their onboarding experience, three practices identified as detrimental or unhelpful, and three practices that transfer students articulated as missing from their experience. I discussed these findings and their relationship to the current literature and addressed implications for research, theory and practice. Finally, the limitations of the study, as well as opportunities for future research were considered.

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in Transition.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
Letter of Participation for Student Participants

Oklahoma State University

Dear _____,

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at Oklahoma State University. I am interested in conducting research regarding transfer students and their transition to a new institution. I am writing to ask you to be a part of a qualitative study on the onboarding process for transfer students at your current institution. This study is being conducted for research purposes to fulfill part of the requirements for the program of study for the Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Policy studies.

Because you were a transfer student at the University of Central Oklahoma, I believe you can provide valuable insight in to the transfer student experience. Participation in this study will include:

- Participation in two separate one-hour interviews to be conducted at a place and time determined by each individual participant.
- With permission of participants, interview will be recorded with a digital voice recorder and additional notes will be taken by the researcher using paper and pen.
- If needed, follow-up via email and/or phone will be requested for accuracy and/or clarification.

Participation in the study is voluntary and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for each participant to conceal participants' identities. All data, including written field notes, interview notes, and recordings will be stored in a secure file on my personal computer. All files will be password protected. As the research priority is purely academic, these files will not be made public and will be accessible only to myself and my advisor.

A written account of the interview will be made available to you to ensure accuracy. If you identify data that you would like to be removed from the transcript, the data will not be used in the dissertation.

I will serve as the primary researcher for the study. Please feel free to contact me with additional questions at (405) 650-8175 or via email at melissa.ingram@okstate.edu.

Sincerely,
Melissa D. Ingram Hayt

Informed Consent Form

Project Title: The Onboarding Experience of Transfer Students: Exploring student transitions

Investigators:
Melissa D. Ingram Hayt
Kerri Kearney, Ed.D.

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to explore transfer students' onboarding experiences as they prepare to begin coursework at a single institution.

2. **Interview Procedures:** This consent form must be signed before the interview can begin. The interview will be recorded with a voice recorder upon the participant's approval. Data will be transcribed, and made available upon request. The interview protocol will be emailed to you prior to the scheduled interview. You will have the right to review all transcribed data from your interview for accuracy and clarification. If you request that excerpts be removed from the study, it will be removed from the study.

3. **Risk of Participation:** There are no known risks in participating in this research which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

4. **Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to the respondents. The results of the study are expected to add to the existing literature surrounding the topic.

5. **Duration/Time:** Each interview will last 1-hour. Follow up questions for clarification (if needed) will be asked via email or phone. Two interviews will take place.

6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time. Your identity will be kept confidential. Data, including written field notes, interview notes, and recordings will be stored in a secure file with password protection on the researcher's personal computer. Written transcripts will be stored digitally in password protected files. Only the principal investigator and her advisor will have access to interview transcriptions and recordings.

7. **Compensation:** There will be no payment or monetary compensation for participation in this study.

8. **Contacts:** You may contact either of the researchers at the following addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses, should you desire to discuss your participation in the research study and/or request information about the results of the study:

Kerri Kearney
315 Willard Hall 208 W. 7th Street
Stillwater, Oklahoma USA 74078
405-744-2755
Kerri.kearney@okstate.edu

Melissa D. Ingram Hayt
11521 Village Ave.
Midwest City, OK USA 73130
405-650-8175
melissa.ingram@okstate.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact the IRB Office at 223 Scott Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, 405-744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu.

Participant Rights: Your participation is voluntary and you can discontinue the research activity at any time without any negative reactions or penalty.

Signatures:

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form has been given to me.

_____   _____
      Signature of Participant   Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

_____   _____
      Signature of Researcher   Date

APPENDIX C

Online Questionnaire

1. What type of institution did you come here from?

    a. Two-Year Institution or Community College

    b. Four-Year Institution

2. When were you last enrolled in college courses?

    a. I am currently enrolled in college courses at another institution

    b. I have been enrolled in college courses in the past year

    c. I have been enrolled in college courses in the past 4 years

    d. I have been out of school for 5 or more years

3. Approximately how many hours of college credit are you transferring?

    a. 1-15 Hours

    b. 15-30 Hours

    c. 30-60 Hours

    d. 60-90 Hours

    e. 90 or more Hours

4. What is your age range?

    a. 18-21

    b. 21-29

    c. 30-45

    d. 45-50

    e. 50 or older

5. I am willing to be contacted by a researcher to continue my involvement in this study. This would include an interview regarding my transfer process.

    a. Yes

    b. No

6. Email address and contact information (if answered yes to question 5)

APPENDIX D
Interview Protocol

Interview One - Onboarding

1. What college or university did you attend previously?

2. Why did you choose this institution?

3. What is one word that describes your on-boarding process at your previous institution?

4. Why did you leave your previous institution?

5. Why did you choose to attend MWMU?

6. Were you considering other options?

7. When did you apply for admission to MWMU?

8. How long after you applied were you admitted?

9. How did you know you had been admitted?

10. Tell me about your first interaction with a faculty or staff member at MWMU.

11. How did your first interactions with faculty and staff at MWMU compare to your first interactions with faculty and staff at your previous institution?

12. What challenges did you face when making the transition to MWMU?

    a. Admission

    b. Enrollment

    c. Advisement

    d. Financial Aid

13. Map the process of transitioning from your previous institution to MWMU.

a. Use words, pictures, symbols, or any form that would best describe the process

b. Include interactions with faculty, staff, and offices across campus

c. Reference the timeline in which these events took place if applicable

14. What is one word that describes your on-boarding experience at MWMU?

Interview Two – Reflection

1. What surprised you most about making the transition to MWMU?

2. In what ways did your transition experience prepare you to succeed academically at MWMU?

3. In what ways did your transition experience prepare you to succeed socially at MWMU?

4. Describe the biggest challenge you have faced in your time at MWMU.

5. Tell me about a time at MWMU when you felt different from other students because you were a transfer student?

6. What do you think is the biggest misconception regarding transfer students at MWMU?

7. How would you describe the university culture toward incoming transfer students at MWMU?

8. How does MWMU help transfer students fit into to the culture of the University?

9. Tell me about the individual or area of campus who has been the most helpful to you as a transfer student at MWMU?

10. What accomplishment are you most proud of since making the transition to MWMU?

VITA

Melissa Dawn Ingram Hayt

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE OF TRANSFER STUDENTS:
ONBOARDING AT A METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

Major Field: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Biographical:

    Education:

    Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Educational
Leadership and Policy Studies at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK in
December, 2018.

    Completed the requirements for the Master of Education in Adult Education at
University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma in 2009.

    Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Corporate
Communication at University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma in
2009.

    Experience:

    Success Coach
University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, OK
June 2016-Present

    Director of Student Success
Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee, OK
September 2015 – May 2016

    Manager of Transfer Student Support
University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, OK
February 2012-September 2015