THE CONTINUATION OF COLLEGE CHOICE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE 4-YEAR TO 4-YEAR COLLEGIATE TRANSFER EXPERIENCE

by

AMY KATHLEEN CLINES

(Under the Direction of Darris Means)

ABSTRACT

Recognizing that collegiate transfer occurs for over one third of all students pursuing a postsecondary education, this study considered how college choice was experienced among students who transferred from 4-year to 4-year institutions. Eight students from two different institutions participated in semi-structured interviews providing insight into how they navigated the collegiate transfer process. Use of the qualitative research methodology of phenomenology resulted in the inclusion and consideration of individual context, inductive inquiry, and making meaning in data collection. Several themes emerged during analysis and synthesis and included reasons to transfer, resources for transfer, and roadblocks to transfer. Findings also aligned the collegiate transfer college choice process with existing college choice models, requiring the additional consideration of college choice as a continual, instead of a one-time, phenomenon.

INDEX WORDS: College choice, collegiate transfer, lateral transfer, 4-year to 4-year, college admissions, recruitment, enrollment management, retention, phenomenology, student affairs

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory to my mother, Deidre Clines. She not only gave me the gift of life, she also instilled in me the continuous desire to learn and grow, as only one can through investigative educational practice. She dedicated her life to the betterment of others and was considered by all who knew her as a friend, an advocate, and their champion. A first-generation college student who experienced collegiate transfer, she committed herself to a life of education not only for herself, but for the benefit of others. In her roles as English Teacher, and later Media Specialist, she inspired countless of high school students to pursue their dreams and they became members of our extended family as we celebrated their successes. She was bright and talented, kind and compassionate, cheerful and optimistic. She was all these things and so much more. But above all else, she was, and will always be, my mama, and I am so much the better for it.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

More than one third of all students who enroll in postsecondary study in the United States will transfer to a different institution within a six-year timeframe (Lumina, 2015). In 2014, 1.47 million college students transferred between institutions at least once (U.S. DOE, 2016a). With less than one quarter of all U.S. postsecondary institutions classified as 2-year colleges (U.S. DOE, 2016b), it is likely that students are utilizing multiple pathways in pursuit of a postsecondary credential. While research does illuminate a variety of ways in which students complete a college degree, it perpetuates the 2-year to 4-year, or upward transfer model as the traditional or mainstream process, leaving the phenomenon of 4-year to 4-year, or lateral transfer model relatively unexplored (Lang, 2007).

These statistics require that consideration be given to the complex process of collegiate choice as it manifests in the process of transferring institutions. As a complex and multifaceted process, the decision to pursue a postsecondary education considers multiple variables, such as student demographics, community support, and institutional resources. For some, the first choice of where to attend is the only one needed, resulting in continuous enrollment at one institution of higher education. For others, secondary and tertiary decisions ensue necessitating the navigation of multiple enrollments at a number of institutions during the pursuit of a college education.

Statement of the Problem

Existing college choice models are situated with a specific time frame; the period of time when students are most likely under the age of 18, in the care of adults, and not yet eligible to

enroll in college or university study as a full time student due to age and/or academic qualification (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). Meanwhile, collegiate transfer is routinely discussed as part of the national college completion agenda (Lumina, 2015). However, these two subjects rarely appear together in qualitative studies exploring the individual experience of collegiate transfer as an ongoing college choice process.

As policy and funding decisions continue to focus on the collection of postsecondary credentials, it becomes even more important for higher education administrators and practitioners, as well as state and federal policymakers, to understand and consider more thoroughly the complex and nonlinear process that constitutes the college choice. Slow to systemic operational changes, colleges and universities continue to react to collegiate transfer rather than intentionally designing programs and services for increasing phenomenon. This is especially notable in the lateral transfer student who moves from one 4-year to another 4-year institution, as current ethical best practices by the National Association of College Admission Counseling (2015) prohibit the purposeful recruitment of students between 4-year institutions that do not have an existing articulation program.

With a substantial number of transfer students originating their college education at a community college, the demographics representative of this group is relevant to this study. In the 2011-2012 academic year, more than half of all students enrolled in community colleges were first generation students, single-parents, and possessed a documented disability (AACC, 2016). Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson (2009) found that students who transferred from 2-year colleges had lower SES and a less rigorous high school academic preparation than their 4-year college counterparts.

Community colleges are found to serve a dual purpose as they provide both academic preparation for further study and workforce training (Sydow & Alfred, 2013). They also provide access to 4-year institutions by offering remedial coursework to more than half of the students that enroll (Sydow & Alfred, 2013; Wyner, 2014). In fact, results from Lumina's (2015) *National View of Student Movement in Postsecondary Institutions* found "that community colleges are also an essential part of postsecondary pathways, regardless of where the student begins" (p. 20).

The instance of transferring and enrolling at different institutions during the pursuit of a postsecondary credential is high. According to a recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, over one third of the 3.6 million students who became first-time college students in 2008 transferred a minimum of one time within a six-year timeframe (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015). And though enrollment at 2-year and community colleges purposefully designed for transfer pathways remains close to 50% of total enrollment in the US (AACC, 2016), it is not the route, intended or otherwise, for the rest of college-going population.

It is difficult to find nationally representative statistics for students who participate in 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer. The leading source of completion data for postsecondary institutions (IPEDS) collects enrollment information on those who are considered full-time students and entered as first-year freshmen (Clemetsen, Furbeck, & Moore, 2015). Mobility and transfer reports provided by industry service providers such as CollegeBoard and ACT are limited since they only measure those students who took their respective college placement exams. These exams are usually not required for entry into a community college (AACC, 2016) and 4-year institutions with local area access missions may not require them either. It is primarily up to individual institutions to collect and analyze data pertaining to their transfer

student population (Clemetsen et al., 2015), resulting a lack of national representative information that is available to a larger audience.

The absence of literature regarding 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer and its connection to existing college choice models exposed the need for further exploration into this phenomenon. The sheer volume of students who transfer institutions at some point during their postsecondary education makes clear that the college choice process does not cease once an initial enrollment decision is made. While the more well-known and researched path follows the pattern of 2-year to 4-year institutional transfer, efforts at identifying reasons for 4-year to 4-year institutional transfer is key for identifying resources, improving practice, and providing services.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experience of the college choice process for collegiate transfer students at two distinct four-year, public institutions situated in the southeastern United States. For this study, college choice is generally defined as the multilayered process of gathering resources, information, and support in order to make a decision about attending an institution of higher education.

Three constructs informed the literature reviewed for this study: transfer students, college choice models, and collegiate transfer choice. Characteristics and demographics that define transfer students situate the population being studied while exploration of college choice models establish the internal and external influences that impact the process. The conceptual framework that guides this study is Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice that positions a student's decision to enroll in a postsecondary institution within economic and sociological perspectives.

Understanding how today's college students experience the collegiate transfer phenomenon is key to improving practice and shaping policy. This is particularly salient to the population of students who laterally transfer between 4-year institutions, as they are underrepresented in existing literature and national statistical reports. Having insight to how students approach this decision and its interplay with a comprehensive college choice model not only heightens the awareness of this experience, but also reveals areas for expansion in existing college choice models. Seeking an understanding of how students experience the collegiate transfer choice process, a phenomenological research methodology is utilized to examine the following research question: How does a lateral, 4-year to 4-year, collegiate transfer student experience the college choice process?

Research Paradigm

A constructivist worldview guides this study thereby accepting no single reality, but rather recognizing that individuals construct their own reality through knowledge that is gained through experience and relativity (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The emergent nature of knowledge formation inherent in constructivism supports the exploration of 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer choice using the qualitative methodology of phenomenology (Guido, Chavez, & Lincoln, 2010). With in-depth interviews acting as the primary data collection method, phenomenology allows the exploration of the lived experience of collegiate transfer by each participant and offers insight into how each one made meaning from that experience (King, 1994; Mertens, 2010).

Definition of Terms

The terms selected for use in this study have specific relevance to students who participate in 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer and include the following:

Transfer Students. Generally, the term transfer is meant to describe the enrollment at more than one institution of higher education during the pursuit of a postsecondary education, regardless if it results in a credential (Lauren, Miller, & Nadler, 2004; Miller & Hillis, 2006; Shapiro et al., 2015). The institution to which a student transfers dictates the terminology used to describe it and results in a directional vernacular. Vertical transfer describes the movement from a 2- year institution to a 4- year institution, lateral transfer refers to the movement from one institution to another that is the same classification that includes 4- to 4-year institutions, and reverse transfer reflects the movement from a 4-year institution to a 2-year institution (Clemetsen et al., 2015).

Collegiate Transfer. This term is used throughout the literature when discussing the movement of a college student between institutions, regardless of the institutional type they are transferring from or into (Marling, 2013). This same meaning appears for the term student mobility (Lumina, 2015).

College Choice Models. The process of high school students making postsecondary educational plans is generally referred to as college choice. Models designed to explain the college choice experience offer a multi-faceted view that informs the way in which students, practitioners, and policy makers approach the college search process (Arnold, 2012; Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Mwangi, 2015; Perna, 2006). Literature focused on college choice consistently maintains that students navigate specific and ordered steps as they consider postsecondary educational options.

Described as a set of sequential layers (Perna, 2006) and stages (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) these models attempt to capture the progression from college exploration to application submission, resulting in an enrollment decision. These steps encompass similar activities and

possess comparable qualities while the primary difference stems from the theoretical lens being used to describe each one (Bergerson, 2009; Renn & Reason, 2013). During this process, high school students migrate between gathering information from family, peers, and community members to receiving information provided to them from individual institutions of higher education.

Arnold's ecological model of college readiness. Situating college choice within the specific contexts of person, process, and time, Arnold's (2012) model uses an ecological lens to examine the college search and selection process of students and is more focused on issues pertaining to college readiness than college choice.

Hossler and Gallagher's three-stage college choice model. Resulting from a literature review exploring characteristics of the college choice process, this model describes the college choice process as progressing through three distinct stages in a linear fashion (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The three stages are predisposition, search, and choice.

Perna's conceptual model. Incorporating four contextual layers of influence throughout the college choice process, Perna's (2006) model emphasizes the interplay of a student's habitus, their school and community, the institution of higher education, and policies effecting access and affordability. These layers inform the cost and benefit comparison that ultimately results in an enrollment decision.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

As a qualitative study rooted in phenomenology, I act as the primary instrument for this research and my assumptions and biases must be acknowledged. While I cannot exclude these entirely from the exploratory and interpretative actions of this study, by listing them here I recognize their potential impact in my approach and findings. In an effort to establish my

integrity as a researcher, I am revealing personal attributes and demographics that are most salient to this topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I am a White, protestant, cisgender woman who was born and raised in a predominately White suburb of a major metropolitan city in the southeastern United States. Both of my parents attended college, accumulating multiple degrees, and were both state employees and able to provide a middle-class environment for their two children. I attended predominately White schools during my k-12 education and changed schools between 4th and 5th grade due to my family's move within the same county in which we already lived.

I pursued an undergraduate degree at a women's, catholic college in a wealthy suburb of a major metropolitan city in the Northeast. Though I filled out an application to transfer to another institution in the middle of my sophomore year, I did not follow through with it and earned my bachelor of arts from the same institution at which I originally enrolled. Both my parents and I took out loans to pay for my education, and I also had a work-study position on campus and a couple of other jobs both on and off campus to help offset expenses.

Having lived in several locations within the United States, I now reside in a small, coastal city in the southeastern region. I have worked at seven institutions of higher education with locations in New England, the Midwest and the Southeast and ranging from open access to highly selective in admissions criteria. Within the general realm of undergraduate recruitment and admissions, I have spent the past twenty years working with high school students and their families; guidance and school counselors; and higher education colleagues, administration and faculty primarily focused on the enrollment of first time, first year (also known as freshmen) students. However, I did spend a total of six years specifically working with transfer students, primarily in a 4- to 4-year transfer articulation program.

I share this information to admit that I do not have personal experience as a collegiate transfer student nor do I fit the social identities of students who participate in collegiate transfer. Financial concerns and distance were not at the forefront of my undergraduate college choice and I was able to gain admission at all of the institutions to which I applied. My choice of a small, private, single-gender, liberal arts institution situated within a religious locus of control in a small, wealthy suburb with a highly undergraduate and traditional-aged student body limited my exposure to the transfer process.

My experience as a practitioner has contributed greatly to my current understanding of and experience with transfer students. In my role as an enrollment management administrator, I have witnessed the emphasis of recruiting more transfer students as a way to supplement a declining or otherwise stagnate, first-year student applicant pool. Working in a state that has essentially disbanded the 2-year community college structure, finding ways of identifying and working with transfer students has been difficult since direct recruitment of students from a 4-year institution to another 4-year institution is prohibited by the National Association of College Admission Counseling (2015).

Limitations of this study include its scope and the intention of the selected methodology. Though qualitative studies are not performed with generalizability as a main goal (Creswell, 2012), the results of this research will be acquired from a small, specifically selected group of students who meet a particular set of characteristics or experiences under investigation. For the purpose of conducting semi-structured interviews and attempting to capture the lived experience of students who have participated in collegiate transfer, my focus as the researcher is to discover the essence of that shared experience. Phenomenology is not meant to solve problems nor generalize results, but rather to provide a way to express the "lifeworld" (Van Manen, 1990, p.

11) of an individual. Though selected based on relevance to the research topic and availability of both participants and accessibility for the researcher, the sites at which this study took place is itself unique and generalizing the results to other campuses that appear similar would negate the individual nature of the phenomenological approach taken with this study.

Significance of the Study

The exploration of collegiate transfer college choice will be additive to the existing scholarly literature regarding college choice and readiness. The models discussed in this study describe the college selection process as it applies to students who are not already enrolled at a college or university (Arnold, 2012; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006) thereby neglecting the explicit representation of the process for collegiate transfer students.

Understanding the lived experience of students who transfer from one institution to another, particularly involving lateral movement between two institutions, gives both k-12 and postsecondary practitioners valuable insight of this phenomenon, allowing for additional or modified college readiness and choice activities and support. These efforts can range from pre-college choice preparation activities, more explicit and accessible information discussing transfer admission, and collaborative recruitment efforts between 2-year and 4-year institutions for vertical, lateral, and reverse transfer pathways.

Policymakers and administrators can utilize the findings of this study to shape future decisions regarding educational funding and access programs. Aligning these with information gathered from lived experiences rather than generalized statistics takes into consideration the needs at a more individual level for those seeking to pursue a postsecondary education. Sharing the stories of individual students allows policymakers and administrators, who generally lack direct contact with these students, a more personal understanding of the phenomenon.

Students who consider or participate in collegiate transfer will benefit from the increased interaction between postsecondary institutions and more comprehensive recruitment materials and information. As practitioners, administrators, and policymakers acknowledge that college choice is more of a continual rather than episodic exercise, students can negotiate different approaches to their college choice process, feeling less pressure to make a 'final' decision at the age of 18. As their interests change and expertise heightens, students will be better situated to make a choice to transfer without fearing the loss of academic credit, spending more money, and navigating a complex process virtually on their own.

Conclusion

Pursuing a postsecondary education is a different process for everyone. The flexibility and diversity of enrollment options in and between institutions in the United States makes a college education possible for millions of students. However, the path to a degree or a credential is not necessarily an easy one to navigate. While much time and many resources are applied towards a more traditional means of entering college, either through direct enrollment into a 4-year institution or into a 2-year institution with an intention to transfer, far less is spent for a myriad of alternate enrollment patterns.

By exploring the lived experience of students who participated in 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer, this study seeks understanding of the college choice process as it extends beyond the initial selection of a postsecondary institution. The essence of these experiences will contribute to the existing literature regarding college choice and transfer students by bringing awareness of the emergent and fluid nature of enrollment patterns current college-bound students practice. Taken into account when designing transfer pathways, articulating coursework, improving recruitment practice, formulating policy, and allocating funds, these insights can be

powerful advocates for positive change towards a more comprehensive and equitable process for all students.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Existing literature regarding collegiate transfer students is primarily focused on the process of students moving from 2-year into 4-year institutions. With limited studies focusing specifically on the 4-year to 4-year lateral transfer choice experience, this literature review begins with a general overview of transfer students, describing this population's characteristics, enrollment patterns, and influential policy. An examination of the elements constituting college choice models follows, providing insight into how students and families navigate the process, the practices employed by higher education institutions, and policies that impact both entities. The discussion of collegiate transfer choice joins the two contexts together allowing further exploration of experience encountered once a student is removed from the high school.

The conceptual framework that guides this study is Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice. Constructed using Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage college choice model, Perna (2006) adds the element of context throughout the stages and incorporates elements of human capital investment into the decision making process. This allows for the unfolding of numerous pathways to college enrollment and bases this upon varying influences encountered by individuals. Arnold's (2012) ecological model of college readiness supports Perna's (2006) conceptual model, emphasizing motivations, activities, and decisions made throughout the ebb and flow of time and context as they impact college choice.

Transfer Students

The National Center for Education Statistics reported that over 1.47 million individuals considered transfer-in students enrolled in postsecondary institutions during the fall of 2014 (U.S. DOE, 2016a). Although collegiate transfer impacts so many students pursuing a college education, the literature surrounding the phenomenon of collegiate transfer is predominately represented by demographic statistics and the social and academic adjustment of students purposefully moving from a 2-year to a 4-year institution. Though limited in the comprehensive inclusion of all students who transfer, the available statistics provide a general picture of those students who are most likely to transfer due to their initial postsecondary enrollment choice (Marling, 2013). This exploration of the literature identifies and discusses common transfer-specific, demographic attributes, enrollment patterns, and factors that influence the collegiate transfer process.

Characteristics

The prevailing definition of transfer as it appears in literature regarding postsecondary education is the action of enrolling at an institution that is different from the one attended previously (ACT, 2014). Miller and Hillis (2006) offered a more flexible definition of transfer as the activity of enrolling for credit at several institutions while the Lumina Foundation described transfer within the context of mobility and change (Shapiro et al., 2015). Though transfer students have been categorized in literature alongside populations that are historically older, as such non-traditional and returning students (Silverman, Aliabadi, & Stiles, 2009), transfer students are generally found to be of traditional college-student age (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009; Clemetsen et al., 2015).

Using the data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey, Goldrick-Rab and Pfeffer (2008) found that 33% of traditional aged students who entered college immediately after high school transferred at least once within eight years of enrollment. This is consistent with findings from more recent data sets such as the Lumina Foundation's (2015) confirmation that a third of all postsecondary enrollment is a result of transfer. In this particular snapshot of collegiate mobility, over half of all 4-year, public institution transfer students enrolled at 2-year institutions, while 42.2% of 2-year, public institution transfer students entered 4-year, public institutions (Lumina, 2015). While individual social identities such as race, ethnicity, and gender were not included in these findings, between state mobility of institutional transfer was examined. Regardless of the first institutional type attended, transfer occurred across state lines at rates of 18.5% for students initially enrolled in 2-year institutions and 24% for students initially enrolled in 4-year institutions (Lumina, 2015).

Enrollment Patterns

Identified broadly as transfer students, literature provides additional classifications that reflect enrollment patterns. Lateral transfer describes students who move "between the same institutional types" (Clemetsen et al., 2015, p. 130), includes 2-year to 2-year as well as 4-year to 4-year institutional transfers (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2008; Hood, Hunt, & Haeffele, 2009) and is sometimes termed peer transfer (Miller & Hillis, 2006). Representing transferring from a 2-year to a 4-year institution, the term vertical is employed (Clemetsen et al., 2015; Hood et al., 2009; Poisel & Joseph, 2011) while reverse transfer refers to the movement between a 4-year to a 2-year institution (Clemetsen et al., 2015; Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2008; Hood et al., 2009; Miller & Hillis, 2006). The transfer pattern that includes students transferring out of and back into an institution while taking courses at other institution either concurrently or separately is

considered swirling (Clemetsen et al., 2015; Hood et al., 2009; Shapiro et al., 2015), with Miller and Hillis (2006) calling students following this behavior "quilters" (p. 299).

Exploring the ways that transfer students navigate the transition process, McGuire and Belcher (2013) described four clusters based on shared characteristics, expanding the most frequently used definitions for transfer students to include both 2-year and 4-year transfer patterns. The clusters included: old hand at transfer, taking care of basics, quick return to 4-year institution, and community or technical college. This study discovered differences experienced by transfer students based on their cluster membership when enrolling at a new institution (McGuire & Belcher, 2013). The results also provided insight to the actual approach taken for continued postsecondary enrollment by students pursuing various transfer pathways, suggesting additional psychosocial reasons beyond the scope of the study.

External Factors that Influence Collegiate Transfer

Students enrolled in postsecondary institutions have varied and numerous motives that influence their decision to transfer. Internal reasons are oftentimes considered alongside external factors when contemplating whether to transfer. While personal preferences and needs may exert a strong probability towards taking action to transfer, this decision is also directly and indirectly impacted by state policies, federal regulations, and institutional practices (Perna & Titus, 2004).

Policies. State and national initiatives and policies are in place with the intention of providing improved access and increased mobility to students seeking a college education. The amount of financial support that a student receives while pursuing a postsecondary degree not only influences the decision to attend, but also factors into the institution selected (Fishman, 2015). While federal regulations for student aid are distributed and enforced through the United

States Department of Education, state and institutional funding availability and eligibility requirement vary greatly. Scholarship opportunities for students who transfer institutions are lacking (Poisel & Joseph, 2011) and general absence of financial aid creates barriers for the continuation of study (Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012; Kim, Saatcioglu, & Neufeld, 2012).

Using a focus group and follow-up survey to assess challenges experienced by community college students before, during, and after their transition to a 4-year institution, Gard, Paton, and Gosselin (2012) discovered that financial concerns surfaced in every area of their study. One of three major issues that obstructed successful transition was identified as financial aid. Though the study itself was limited in generalizability, the findings were considered relative to the general transfer process and warrants additional investigation.

Staffing and resources dedicated to the recruitment, admission, transition, and retention of transfer students does not match that of first-year students (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Welsh, 2002). Between the already high percentage of students who transfer at least once and national and state financial incentives to enroll at 2-year institutions, this unequal distribution of institutional resources impacts the student's enrollment experience (Bergeron & Martin, 2015; Clemetsen et al., 2015). In an attempt to help students navigate the transfer process as well as address an understaffed transfer office, Appalachian State University implemented several low cost adjustments such as staffing priorities, strategic office location, scheduled communication touch points, and hosting a campus-wide transfer symposium (Davies, 2013).

Articulation agreements. Transfer articulation agreements are frequently cited as an effective means to facilitate transfer between institutions, particularly within a state system (Anderson, Alfonso, & Sun, 2006; Bers, 2013; Fincher et al., 2013; Hood et al., 2009; Poisel & Joseph, 2011). However, the inconsistency of course credit transfer among postsecondary

institutions is cited as a contributing factor to low graduate rates associated among transfer students (Clemetsen et al., 2015; Lumina, 2015; Welsh, 2002), particularly so of community and technical college credits (Doyle, 2006). Administrative leadership in facilitating institutional, as well as state-wide course credit articulation is critical for positive change and improvement (Maliszewski, Crabill, & Nespoli, 2012; Welsh, 2002).

New Jersey's statewide initiatives to improve the transfer pathway for students provide an example of collaborative partnership across institutional types to promote student success. Embedding the importance of postsecondary educational opportunities, the state legislature secured scholarships to cover the cost of tuition at any of the state's community colleges for high school seniors who placed in the top 15% of their graduating class (Maliszewski et al., 2012). This effort was further supported by the creation of a statewide transfer agreement that required 4-year institutions to submit annual reports, monitoring the intake of credit and the programs impact on enrollment. Presidential leadership at senior institutions were credited with the successful implementation and maintenance of this statewide effort (Maliszewski et al., 2012).

Transfer students play an increasingly important role in both collegiate enrollment and degree completion. Knowing all of the ways in which students who transfer navigate this process is challenging, as pathways and options are so varied and complex. Understanding the characteristics of the overall population provides insight to the multifaceted process of collegiate transfer and emphasizes the importance of this qualitative study.

College Choice Literature

The decision to pursue and enroll in a postsecondary institution is a considered a comprehensive, multi-phase process that involves educational, psychosocial, and socioeconomic factors (Bergerson, 2009; Mwangi, 2015). While there are several models that explore and

explain this phenomenon, most salient to this study are Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three phase model of college choice and Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice. Features common among these and additional college choice models include individual social identities, higher education institutional recruitment practices, and policy implications. These shared qualities offer insight to the opportunities and barriers that students encounter when they are navigating the college choice experience.

Social Identities and Resources

Most salient in the initial stage of college exploration, individual characteristics often determine the parameters of the college choice process. Exploring specific characteristics of student clusters and their behavior during the search stage. In their study, Shaw, Kobrin, Packman, and Schmidt (2009) found that aspects such as gender, race, and SES are not sole predictors of how students individually experience the college search process, supporting research that explores the interplay of multiple characteristics as predictors. Additional factors specific to individual characteristics that impact the college choice decision process include: geographic location (Griffith & Rothstein, 2009; Hill & Winston, 2010; Nora, 2004; Park, 2013), resources available in the home (Burkander, 2014; Carnevale & Rose, 2004), and resources available in the high school (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Hill &Winston, 2010; Hoxby, 2012; Rodriguez, 2013; Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, & Swan, 2011; Sherwin, 2012; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

Building upon Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice, Engberg and Wolniak (2010) situated secondary school context as the facilitator of college choice and enrollment decisions. They found that the high school's socioeconomic status and the ability of a student to establish "college-linking networks" (p. 149) among individuals associated with the school were

strong predictors of college enrollment. The potential for more and stronger partnerships between low-resource high schools and postsecondary institutions as a means to promote a college-going environment is discussed (Engberg & Wolniak, 2010; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2011).

In a thorough review of the college choice process, Bergerson (2009) discussed emerging models that include the use of a capital and cultural wealth lens. This context in both the school and home environments seems lacking in previously established comprehensive models where the assumption is that all students have similar levels of access throughout the process. Differentiating levels of access and equity while considering how it supports or restricts the students engaged in the college search process lends perspective as to how cost and perceived benefit interplay with the decision to enroll in college (Perna & Titus, 2004).

Higher Education Context

Just as students differ in resources and access during the college choice process, so do colleges and universities (Clinedinst, Koranteng, & Nicola, 2016; Lang & Lang, 2002; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016). Admission and recruitment practices are as varied and multifaceted as are the students seeking entrance into them. On average, 4-year private institutions spend more money to recruit an undergraduate student than 4-year and 2-year public institutions (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016). Highly selective institutions focus recruitment efforts on students who perform at a high level academically (Griffith & Rothstein, 2009). For these, and many other reasons, it is difficult to succinctly define the parameters of what institutions do to attract and enroll students.

Marketing and recruitment. Institutions of higher education have direct interaction with and influence on students throughout the college choice process (Hossler and Gallagher,

1987; Perna, 2006). Both entities are actively seeking a fit and are influenced by pre-search characteristics. A frequent practice of colleges and universities is reaching out to potential students through marketing (Lynch & Baker, 2005; Moogan, 2011). This can be through publications, open houses, phone calls, and visits to high schools (Hoxby & Turner, 2013). Similar to how geography affects the decision a student makes during the college choice process, it also dictates where schools target their marketing efforts (Hill & Winston, 2010). For many students, college information may be also be distributed by or sought through high school guidance counselors (Carnevale & Desrochers, 2003; Park, 2013).

This dissemination of information is problematic for a couple of reasons. Both guidance counselors who work in high schools and admission officers who work in colleges receive little, if any, professional training for college-guidance activities (Clinedinst et al., 2016; McKillip, Rawls, & Barry, 2012; Rodriguez, 2013). While licensure requirements and ethical standards guide basic functionality within this environment, it is often at the discretion and motivation of individual counselors to educate themselves on the various policies and programs available to their students (McKillip et al., 2012).

Increasingly charged with a variety of different responsibilities such as class registration and testing administration, counselors are finding less time available to provide college advisement to their student cohort, which averages over 400 students per counselor in the public secondary sector (Clinedinst et al., 2016). This increases the importance of marketing and recruitment efforts from postsecondary institutions. However, which higher education institutions essentially competing with one another for students, that information can be limited in scope and not as comprehensive as students may need.

Application review. Students eventually develop a "choice set" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 214) and the institutions on this list are serious contenders for admission applications. The application review and admission decision process differ significantly among institutions. While some institutions are considered open access and enroll any student who seeks admission (AACC, 2016; Clinedinst et al., 2016) other institutions practice a holistic and selective review process, meaning that non-academic criteria are considered along with academic or merit-based qualifications for the admission decision (Clinedinst et al., 2016; Ehrenberg & Liu, 2009; Gilbert, 2008). When reviewing academic credentials, some institutions favor one standardized test over another (Hill & Winston, 2010), while some do not require them at all (Shanley, 2007). Non-academic components include, but are not limited to, extra-curricular activities, leadership roles, honors and awards (Clinedinst et al., 2016).

Even though these items are used to boost an applicant's non-merit based admissibility, it can be a detriment for those students of lower SES as their lack of access to or ability to pay for participation in these activities results in less impressive records (Bowen, 2006). To this point, Bowen also points out that "admission offices lack the data needed to rigorously compare characteristics" (p. 27) of those students admitted with every single applicant, resulting in a less holistic review than espoused. Additionally, while an increased focus on "economic diversity" (McCuddy & Nondorf, 2009) persists on many campuses, Carnevale and Rose (2004) questioned the occurrence of institutions actually strategizing through recruitment activities to target lower SES students.

Policy Influence

The college choice process has been impacted by various policy and programmatic interventions geared towards establishing more equitable means of access for students who have

historically experienced barriers to college attendance. Initiatives such as Federal TRIO programs, Middle and Early College High Schools, Dual Enrollment, and Common Core State Standards have mixed outcomes that vary upon the populations targeted (Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

An intervention strategy called College Match was designed as a college preparation service and provided to high school juniors of low SES, enrolled at public, inner city Chicago schools (Sherwin, 2012). College guidance and choice activities typically found in more affluent school systems were delivered to students so that students and parents reached earlier and more informed decisions. The expansion of this pilot program across several secondary schools saw an increase of selective college choices by academically qualified students and a decrease of less selective and non-college enrollment options among participants (Sherwin, 2012).

The provision of accurate and timely information regarding the admission application, total cost, and financial aid availability is critical during this part of the college choice process (Monroe, 2002; Mwangi, 2015). Considered the final step, students make a decision about where to matriculate after graduating high school by evaluating and comparing the options revealed by their choice set. Factors that play a role in the college choice decision include: geographic location (Griffith & Rothstein, 2009; Park, 2013), resources available in the home (Burkander, 2014; Carnevale & Rose, 2004), and resources available in the high school (Bergerson, 2009; Hill & Winston, 2010; Hoxby, 2012; Rodriguez, 2013; Sherwin, 2012; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013).

The way in which institutions of higher education incorporate transfer recruitment, enrollment, and retention into their practice has many implications for policies and operation procedures. While students and their families need guidance and assistance through the college

choice process, high school counselors and enrollment professionals are found to have significant workloads and less time to work one-on-one with students. The results of this study will add insight as to when students first begin to consider the transfer route as part of their college choice process, allowing both secondary and postsecondary practitioners to identify potential programming and recruitment activities to assist in the progression through higher education.

Collegiate Transfer Choice

While literature abounds regarding the transition and persistence of transfer students, far less exists that concerns the reasons why students arrive at the position of being a transfer student. Much research has been conducted to explain the demographics of students who generally enroll at 2-year institutions, however this information predominately comes from quantitative analysis using longitudinal assessment instruments. The absence of more qualitative exploration into the experience of students making the conscious decision to transfer from one institution of higher education to another results in an incomplete understanding as to how students navigate their pursuit of a college degree (Lang, 2007; Poisel & Joseph, 2011; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

Several studies recognize the need for more qualitative studies pertaining to the college choice process specific as it applies to students who experience collegiate transfer (Bahr, 2006; Gerhardt & Ackerman, 2014; Kurlaender, 2006; Lang, 2007; Sandiford, Lynch, & Bliss, 2003; Townsend, 2007; Wood & Harrison, 2014). The majority of the research discovered during this literature review focused on statistical representations of student demographics based on longitudinal, quantitative-based instruments. Studies that focused on specific underrepresented populations offered support to the statistical information found in previous research about

transfer student demographics (Gonzalez, 2012; Kurlaender, 2006; Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003; Wood & Harrison, 2014). Examining the transfer choice gap of Latino students, Bensimon and Dowd (2009) found that students who were otherwise qualified for admission into a 4-year institution gave reasons for enrolling at less-selective institutions ranging from being burned out from high school, to following a siblings' college pathway, to pursuing a career in the military.

2-year to 4-year Collegiate Transfer Choice

Comparing the decision to attend a 2-year institution after receiving acceptance at a 4-year institution, Lang's (2007) study of college choice within the Canadian college and university system offered insight to this reasoning by recent high school graduates. Among research that provided both quantitative and qualitative results, a number of categories representing reasons for participating in collegiate transfer through initial enrollment in a 2-year institution emerged. Broadly defined they can be categorized as academic and career aspirations, financial savings and policy incentives, and personal considerations. The explanations and examples discussed here follow the 2- to 4-year transfer trajectory as is represented in the majority of the literature.

Academic and career aspirations. Many 2- year institutions, often called community, junior, or technical colleges, follow an open-access or open door enrollment policy that allows all individuals who can benefit from their services to enroll, regardless of their previous academic achievement (Kurlaender, 2006; Shannon & Smith, 2006). For some students, this non-selective admissions process gives them the opportunity to attend college, particularly if they struggled academically while in high school (Gerhardt & Ackerman, 2014; Kurlaender, 2006). Poor academic performance in high school was not found to be an explicit reason for transfer college choice, but rather the literature provided evidence of students selecting a 2-year

enrollment option for a number of reasons similar to those used to select enrollment at a 4-year institution.

These reasons include the academic majors and degrees offered (Kurlaender, 2006; Lang, 2007; Wood & Harrison, 2014) and the academic reputation of the institution (Wood & Harrison, 2014). Some students enrolled at a 2-year institution as a way to transition between high school and a 4-year institution (Leana, 1994; Townsend, 2007; Zhang & Ozuna, 2015) while others were taking a break from education, feeling overwhelmed from their academic experience at the secondary level (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009). Students in Zhang and Ozuna's (2015) study felt that initial enrollment at a 2-year institution allowed them flexibility in exploring majors and career paths as well as acting as an academic milestone in their pursuit of a baccalaureate degree.

Citing the environmental changes occurring at many 2-year institutions, Townsend (2007) credited the establishment of honors programs and select baccalaureate offerings to the increasing presence of traditional aged students entering the 2-year institution landscape. Along with the addition of residence halls, Townsend (2007) argued that entry into higher education through a 2-year institution is becoming a desirable path. Considering not all students who are academically eligible for admission into a 4-year institution are necessarily ready for enrollment at those institutions, 2-year institutions can provide a "bridging experience" (Townsend, 2007, p. 130), allowing time for exploration and development before moving into more concrete future plans.

Financial savings and policy incentives. Affordability and availability of financial aid is an important factor for many individuals when considering enrollment in postsecondary institutions (Bers, 2005; Perna, 2006; Shaw et al., 2009). The socioeconomic status (SES) of students greatly impacts the decision of where to continue their education (Kurlaender, 2006;

Lang, 2007; Nyhan, 2015; Wood & Harrison, 2014). Parents who were involved with their student's college choice process also recognized the importance of affordability when considering options (Bers, 2005). Leigh and Gill (2004) found that enrollment at a 2-year institution was beneficial and had a positive effect for increasing the enrollment of lower SES students.

Institutional, state, and national policies provide guidance and influence in collegiate enrollment as well. As admissions becomes more selective at public flagship and private institutions, students must enter higher education at a different institution from their first choice if they are not granted admission during their senior year in high school (Urso & Sygielski, 2007). Lang (2007) contends that the higher education system is a binary system, resulting in college choice being an either/or scenario, rather than a continuously evolving endeavor. Some states, such as California, Florida, and Texas, limit the number of first-year students who can enroll at the 4-year public institutions and provide incentives for 2-year enrollment with the expectation of transfer after the required coursework is completed (Gonzalez, 2012; Kurlaender, 2006; Lang, 2007; Leigh & Gill, 2004).

Personal considerations. Numerous additional reasons account for the decision to begin postsecondary study at a 2-year institution. Some students were influenced by expectations from and previous experiences of family members and peers (Bers, 2005; Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Gerhardt & Ackerman, 2014; Lang & Lopez, 2014; Townsend, 2007) while others lacked access to information altogether (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Zhang & Ozuna, 2015). A study considering parental involvement in the community college choice process found comfort, lifestyle fit, and academic match were influential factors to those parents involved in postsecondary enrollment decisions for their students (Bers, 2005).

In some instances, students relied on the media and representation of higher education through the entertainment industry (Gerhardt & Ackerman, 2014). Lack of communication from postsecondary institutions regarding the difference between 2- and 4-year institutional enrollment also impacted students' decisions (Gonzalez, 2012; Lang & Lopez, 2014; Marling, 2013). Not knowing how they would perform in college, some students choose to attend a 2-year institution and then transfer due to a fear of failure and lack of confidence (Zhang & Ozuna, 2015).

Recognizing the positive benefits of 2-year institutions, parents admitted that access to academic support and a match of the institution and the student's lifestyle were influential in their support of this enrollment pattern (Bers, 2005). For both parents and students, smaller class sizes and feeling comfortable on campus were also important factors taken into consideration (Bers, 2005; Townsend, 2007; Wilson, 2014). The location of the institution in relation to where the student resided played a key determining factor (Lang, 2007; Townsend, 2007), taking into consideration not only monetary factors, but also transportation, access, and ability to work while taking courses.

4-year to 4-year Collegiate Transfer Choice

The act of transferring from a 2-year to a 4-year institution is termed vertical transfer (Poisel & Joseph, 2011). Most studies discussed reasons that students transfer between 2- year to 4- year institutions with just one focusing on the choice and transition process for students who transfer from one 4- to another 4-year institution (Li, 2010). This type of collegiate mobility is called lateral transfer (Clemetsen et al., 2015).

The previously discussed reasons for collegiate transfer are robustly supported in the literature for students who begin their postsecondary study at a 2-year institution. However, far

less is known about the reasons for and experiences of students who begin at 4-year institutions, later choosing to transfer into another 4-year institution. While many, if not all, of the reasons already presented can apply to students in this enrollment situation, it is likely that different factors impact the decision to transfer between institutions of higher education that are similar in their classification.

Sandiford, Lynch, and Bliss (2003) examined the factors considered most important by community college students seeking to complete a baccalaureate degree through collegiate transfer in the state of Florida. The findings from this case study suggest that students who decide to transfer after initial postsecondary enrollment may not be as methodological in their search and decision process as their first-year entry peers. One interpretation of this study is that the decision to transfer is pre-determined and students complete requirements to put the plan into action. Another explanation is that transferring emerges as the student navigates the educational landscape (Lang, 2007; Lang & Lopes, 2014).

The sheer lack of both quantitative and qualitative research surrounding the 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer process supports the need for this particular study. If students are deciding to transfer prior to enrollment in their first postsecondary institution as suggested by Sandiford et al (2003), policies and practices that guide admissions and recruitment personnel may need revision. If the choice is made as students progress through their first collegiate experience, what impact can practitioners have on helping students to consider their choices and progress on their path to college completion? Understanding how this unfolds for students who both begin, continue, and potential complete their collegiate journey at different 4-year institutions will provide a much needed perspective through which to consider the transfer process and its impact on collegiate choice.

Conceptual Framework

Literature surrounding college choice describes a process that concludes with the selection of, admission to, and enrollment in an institution of higher education (Arnold, 2012; Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Bergerson, 2009; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). While this is an expected outcome, it is not necessarily an accurate depiction of the educational journey of all students. With increasing numbers of students who transfer between one or multiple institutions, this terminal view of college choice does not reflect the current behavior patterns of thousands of individuals enrolled in postsecondary institutions (Lang, 2007; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

In order to contemplate how the choice to participate in collegiate transfer enters into the college choice process, the evaluation of existing models is helpful. Though not a comprehensive college choice model Arnold's (2012) Ecological Model of College Readiness warrants inclusion since it incorporates the concept of readiness throughout a time continuum and is additive to the overall discussion of college choice behaviors. Offering a more linear, step-by-step approach, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) College Choice Model provides additional context for consideration. The Conceptual Choice Model proposed by Perna (2006) is used as the conceptual framework of this study, providing expansive and more comprehensive layers of internal and external influences on the choice process for students.

Hossler and Gallagher Three-stage Model

This three-stage model established by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) is frequently used to illustrate the college choice process and is considered a pioneer in the development of comprehensive models (Bergerson, 2009). This model identifies three distinct stages that students move through as part of the decision-making process pertaining to enrolling in college. These stages are sequential, thought to occur starting later in middle school and continuing until

high school graduation, and are called predisposition, search, and choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Representing a distinct, linear progression through preparation, access, and selection, the three-stage model encompasses a number of variables important to the complete process (Bergerson, 2009; Perna, 2006; Renn & Reason, 2013). The predisposition stage focuses on preexisting attributes of the student that include socioeconomic status, parental experience with college, and academic performance (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Institutions of higher education have the most impact on students during the search stage. During this phase, marketing and recruitment efforts lead to interactive educational opportunities between students and institutions. Before moving on to the third and final stage, students develop a "choice set" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987, p. 214) of institutions to which they will apply and potentially enroll. The choice stage concludes as a final decision about where to enroll is made and factors such as cost and scholarships contribute to a student's ultimate decision (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Perna's Conceptual Model

Centered on the model established by Hossler and Gallagher, Perna's (2006) conceptual model adds a layer of situational context to the process. Represented as constructs nestled inside multiple layers of influence, the four layers of context include habitus, school and community, higher education, and societal, economic, and policy influences. The assumption that multiple pathways lead to college enrollment is emphasized throughout Perna's (2006) model.

Centered around the human capital investment model, Perna (2006) recognizes that the perceived benefits and costs of attending (or not attending) college exerts powerful influence over the decision of whether or not to enroll. The differentiating factor of this conceptual model

is that the determination of these costs and benefits is not made in isolation, but rather "nested within several layers of context" (Perna, 2006, p. 116). These layers exemplify the intricate interplay of individual, organizational, communal, and societal factors, motivations, and barriers that constitute the complex process of college choice.

As the first level of the college choice process, habitus underlines the importance of ones' identity, culture, and its resulting impact on behavior and choices (McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004; Perna, 2006). Gender, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity are particularly salient in this layer (Perna, 2006). Constituting the second layer, the school and community context dictates what resources are available to a student during the choice process, including access to information and community support, as well as barriers. In this level, McDonough's (1997) representation of organizational habitus is evident. Referring "to the impact of a social class on individual behavior through an intermediate organization" (McDonough, 1997, p. 156), high schools facilitated the continuation of disparate college choice processes for students in communities with varying levels of access to social and cultural capital.

Attributes of the higher education institution is the determining factor of the third layer and allows multiple opportunities for institutional influence on the choice process. Acting as source of information, colleges and universities provide this through recruitment and outreach efforts (Perna, 2006). The institutional reputation, degree programs, and admission requirements offer another source of information that students use when considering their college choice. The fourth and final layer of Perna's (2006) college choice model includes the larger context of economic and societal characteristics and encompasses the entire process. Changes to factors such as the region’s employment rate, an individual’s geographic location, and state-wide or federal policies are examples of the direct and indirect influences impacting college choice.

Policies that impact the k-12 curriculum and federal financial assistance for postsecondary education are included in this fourth layer.

Perna's (2006) integrated, four-layer conceptual model is further supported through Arnold's (2012) ecological model of college readiness. While not exclusively focused on college choice, this model situates Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development within the scope of person, process, context, and time as it applies to students entering the college choice process (Arnold, 2012; Renn & Reason, 2013). This integrative approach to describing college readiness reinforces the contextual layers that Perna's (2006) conceptual model described and reflects different environmental levels simultaneously influencing each other. In this sense, Arnold (2012) states that environments are "more than additive: they are mutually constituting" (p. 93), stimulating change in individuals through engagement within these different systems. Arnold's (2012) college-readiness model acknowledges that "students are embedded in multiple contexts" (p. 98) which directly impact their decisions and actions. This assumption is supported by Perna's (2006) conceptual model that recognized college choice as being directly and indirectly influenced by four primary stakeholders of the process, emphasizing "the multiple layers of context that influence an individual's college-related decisions" (p. 120).

Human capital investment and sociological-cultural theories inform the constructs guiding Perna's (2006) conceptual model. Providing insight to the influential factors that span all layers of the model, economic and sociological approaches attempting to explain college choice are inadequate when considered individually (Park & Hossler, 2015; Perna, 2006). Integrated through the design of Perna's (2006) model, these elements illuminate their impact on individuals, communities, institutions, and policymakers, providing a more inclusive representation of the college choice process. Informed by these theories, Perna's (2006) work is

more inclusive than previously established models that did not explore these concepts as they impact college choice in depth.

The prominence of situational context across various layers of influence encountered throughout the college choice process situates Perna's (2006) conceptual model as the most fitting for this study. Through individual interviews with students who have navigated 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer, I will seek to understand how students made meaning during their college choice process. Recognizing the interplay of students and their families, secondary institutions and communities, institutions of higher education, and societal, economic and policy decisions, allows for deeper exploration and better understanding of the individual student experience.

Conclusion

This literature review provided a glimpse into existing conversations and research surrounding collegiate transfer. Information pertaining to 2-year to 4-year transfer students established a framework for understanding resources and obstacles shared among the various transfer enrollment patterns. College choice research, prevalently referring to first-year students seeking college enrollment immediately following high school, explored the economic, socio-cultural, and psychosocial reasons that influence initial college selection. Though limited, insight into the 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer experience examined the intersection of college enrollment patterns and individual student choice.

Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice is the conceptual framework for this study. Reflecting a multilayered approach through the decision making process that is influenced by a variety of internal and external factors, this model emphasizes the impact of context as it impacts the result of the college choice process. This model provides a more

comprehensive and thorough overview, allowing for its use when examining this process for 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to understand the college choice experience of 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer students. Achieving this required individual interviews with students exploring their lived experience with and their interpretation of this process. Methodologies that focused on inductive inquiry, making meaning, and individual context supported this end goal (Creswell 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenology, a qualitative research methodology that examines an individual's lived experience through descriptions provided during in-depth interviews, was selected to as the conduit for this study (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990).

The individualistic and personal nature of this research methodology required purposeful selection of both research site and participants (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). The primary research instrument was the researcher and as such, a number of steps were taken to insure validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of both the process and the findings. This chapter begins by identifying the researcher's worldview, explains the selection of phenomenology as the research methodology, and provides details of the methods, context, participants, data analysis, and goodness of the results.

Research Paradigm

As the researcher, I brought certain beliefs and assumptions about the way that knowledge is acquired and how reality is perceived to this study. This set of philosophical beliefs informed the selection of a research paradigm that guided the methodological approach of

this study (Mertens, 2010). I possess several dominant social identities, including social-economic status (middle class), race (white), gender orientation (cisgender), and recognize that these greatly impact my worldview and interpretation of my experiences. These social identities also influence how I approach research, my relationship with participants, and my interaction with and knowledge of the research topic (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Based on my experiences within the realm of my social identities and in the context of this research subject, I approached this study with a constructivist lens, believing that there is no single reality and that knowledge is individually constructed through experience and relativity, rather than found as a predetermined fact (Guido et al., 2010; Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2010).

The constructivist paradigm, also called interpretivism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), maintains that multiple realities exist simultaneously, and are socially constructed by individuals through interactions and interpretations within specific historical and societal contexts (Guido et al., 2010; Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2010). Given its interconnected design, researchers lack separation from and objectivity of the participants being studied (Guido et al., 2010; Mertens, 2010). As such, constructivist researchers must diligently and consistently put aside their own preconceived ideas and experiences with the phenomenon during data collection and analysis in order to focus on the experience of the individual participant.

Constructivists practice basic ethical standards that guide most research involving human subjects in the United States. An added level of axiology practiced by constructivist researchers includes the consideration of positionality and acknowledgment of privilege and power (Mertens, 2010). Recognizing and respecting individual and cultural differences while engaged in

nonmaleficence research methods in the exploration of a person's lived experience is a foundational value in constructivism (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Believing that reality in not confined to one interpretation of an experience or object, constructivism asserts that knowledge is a result of multiple, socially constructed meanings that individuals acquire through experiences in specific contexts (Mertens, 2010). This requires acceptance of emerging and fluid discoveries of meaning and knowledge based on differences in time, as well as individual, cultural, and societal contexts (Guido et al., 2010). Knowledge, or what is known, culminates from the interaction between the researcher and the participant as they influence each other through the sharing and collection of data (Guido et al., 2010; Mertens, 2010). Through a constructivist lens, objectivity, and a single, universal Truth is not sought nor expected (Guido et al., 2010). The interplay of any number of variables among individuals within the context of time and place results in multiple realities acquired through interactions and interpretations of experiences.

The preceding tenants of ethical behavior, what is known, and how it is known establish the methodological practice followed by constructivists. In order to thoroughly explore how a person makes meaning and constructs reality, in-depth exploration into the lived experience and the context in which is occurred is critical. Interactive engagement between the researcher and the participant facilitates this and is generally acquired through interview sessions and observational activities (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2010). These methods allow for the co-construction of knowledge regarding the research topic and support the evolution of patterns and theories that emerge throughout data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2014; Guido et al., 2010).

Investigating the lived experience of 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer through a constructivist lens supported the in-depth method of phenomenological interviews as a means to

discover meaning through experience. Approaching this study through Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice, I already acknowledge and agree that multiple realities exist and context is key in not only facilitating, but also understanding this fact. This study aimed to be additive to college choice literature by exploring how students who participate in 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer experience the choice process and the constructivist paradigm will facilitate this desired outcome.

Research Design

Believing that individuals construct meaning and reality from their personal experiences, I find qualitative research methodologies most appropriate for in-depth exploration of a specific phenomenon. Qualitative research focuses on discovering how and understanding why individuals make meaning of their experiences (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2002). A variety of inquiry strategies are utilized for qualitative research and in each type the researcher “acts like a detective or novelist” (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 419), using techniques for collecting data that are open-ended and flexible.

As a qualitative methodology, phenomenology concentrates on the totality of an experience, aims to discover the essence(s) of experience, and acknowledges the relationship between the participant and researcher (Moustakas, 1994). Established by Edmund Husserl who targeted “the investigation of human experience and behavior” (Wertz, 2005, p. 167), phenomenology seeks to define the essence of an experience shared by a number of individuals. Developed within the study of human sciences "as a philosophy concerned with epistemological issues" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 87), phenomenology "attempts to explicate the meanings as we live them in our everyday existence" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 11).

Phenomenology requires that the researcher suspend or bracket their own knowledge, ideas, and notions about an object or phenomenon in order to truly be present in the experience that is shared by the participant (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Knowledge is constructed when the phenomenon is experienced and then re-experienced through sharing in narrative by an individual. Co-present in the exploration of the lived experience, the researcher provides flexible and emergent prompts assisting the participant to consider the true essence of the experience (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Identifying the essence of a lived experience and the commonalities of these among multiple participants allows the researcher to give voice to the participants and is additive to existing quantitative and qualitative studies.

The principles and techniques that govern phenomenology complemented this study's research topic. Attempting to know how 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer students experience college choice required the suspension of preconceived reasons and the acceptance of emergent meaning making. Findings from this study will raise awareness of this important phenomenon and allow practitioners and researchers to consider implications in their own endeavors.

Research Sites

Throughout this study, I took steps to mask the identity of the sites for this study, including removing citations that reveal the research sites' identity. This was done in order to protect both the participants and the institutions from identification and subsequent ramifications from the data presented.

The sites for this study are Research University (pseudonym), a large-sized, four-year, selective-admission institution and State College (pseudonym), a small-sized, four-year, open-access admission institution. Situated in the southeastern United States, both are public institutions and members of the same governing system. Curious if the 4-year to 4-year

collegiate transfer experience would vary by institution type, I selected these two institutions because of dissimilarities involving their classification and admissions selectivity. Additional transfer student enrollment characteristics of each institution are provided below (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Undergraduate Transfer Student Enrollment Statistics by Research Site

	Research University	**State College**
Undergraduate enrollment	28,848	3,546
Transfer Student Enrollment	4,819	387
% Transfer Population	17%	11%
% Transfer in from other system institutions	40%	40%
% Transfer in from in-state, non-system institutions	21%	18%
% Transfer in from out of state institutions	39%	42%
Average GPA of new transfer students	3.15	2.76

Both Research University and State College are located within a state governed system that does not support a traditional 2-year community feeder-school structure. For a little over a decade, the ten state colleges have offered both 2-year and 4-year degree programs and continue to add additional baccalaureate degree programs each year. This results in a high number of high school students beginning their collegiate career at 4-year institutions and laterally transferring into another 4-year institution for degree completion. In the fall of 2018, the university system enrolled 328,712 students through its 26 member institutions with 17.7% of all newly enrolled students identified as collegiate transfers. Of those students, 48.7% transferred between system institutions.

Participants

The qualitative nature of this study supported a nonprobability, purposive sampling technique to select participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In order to reach an acceptable number of potential participants, I worked with administrative offices at each research site to secure access, either directly or indirectly, to recently enrolled transfer students. The two recruitment methods utilized to solicit participation were informational fliers and emails.

The initial recruitment tactic was sending out an informational email and required the assistance of administrators at each institution for both approval and distribution of the message through an institutional listserv. A research study participation solicitation email (Appendix A) was sent to students who had recently transferred into each institution. Supplementing the recruitment email, a participation recruitment filer (Appendix B) was distributed across each campus in locations frequented by students. As potential participants responded, I clarified the purpose of the study and determined their eligibility to participate based upon their previous collegiate enrollment being at a 4-year institution. This parameter was critical in soliciting participants who could share their experience of lateral transfer.

Those students who meet the 4-year to 4-year lateral transfer requirement were contacted through their institutional email address. The invitation to participate provided an overview of the study's purpose, the time commitment and general overview of the data collection process, as well as contact information for the researcher. Since this study's primary purpose was to collect and analyze the lived experience of 4-year to 4-year transfer students, a saturation or redundancy point is not the guiding principal of determining the sample size (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Focusing on individual stories through in-depth interviews while following phenomenological methods of data collection allowed for a smaller sampling size. The ideal range for participants

fell between three and ten, with six being an ideal number (Creswell, 2014) though the number of participants could alter through the course of data collection based on findings from initial data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Since this phenomenological study did not incorporate the analysis of any data other than that gathered through in-depth interviews, I interviewed eight participants. This number provided both an ample provision of qualitative findings as well as allowed for the completion of this research within timeframe allowed for this study.

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative interviews are the most effective way to provide "in-depth information about a participant's thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, reasoning, motivations, and feelings about a topic" (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 233) and are the primary means of data collection in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2014). Using in-depth interviewing techniques, I promoted discussion concerning each participant's engagement in the collegiate transfer choice process. Gaining access to an individual's involvement in the phenomenon, known also as lived-experience, resulted in the gathering of valuable information (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Wertz, 2005; Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015).

I employed a semi-structured interview guide approach for this study, entering into the interviews with a list of questions and prompts explored during each interview session (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Using a less structured method allowed the participant more control over the conversation, potentially providing information that is relevant to the study, but which was not considered previously by the researcher (Creswell, 2014; Knox & Burkard, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Though particular questions were identified in the interview protocol prior to the interview, this approach allowed for the flexibility of them being reworded and reordered as dictated by the conversation (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). I actively took notes and memoed

during these interviews and they were recorded for later transcription and member checking (Creswell, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each participant was interviewed one time during a time frame not exceeding 90 minutes and with permission, each interview session was recorded using a digital recording device provided by the researcher.

Several questions meant to guide the conversation with each participant were crafted in advance and included in the submission to the Institutional Review Board for approval (Appendix C). Any additional relevant observations and comments collected through the interview process, such as memo notes, codes, significant statements, and discovered shared essence, were recorded and included in the results section. The purpose of these predetermined questions was to direct the participant to speak about the phenomenon being studied (Giorgi, 2009) with the intention of gathering "as complete description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through" (p. 122).

The interview could have occurred in a number of ways such as in-person or face-to-face, on the phone, and through online-chat or video technologies (Creswell, 2014; King, 1994; Knox & Burkard, 2009; Opdenakker, 2006), allowing flexibility and convenience for both the participant and the researcher. The benefits of face-to-face or in-person interviews, such as building rapport, observing non-verbal behaviors, spontaneous responses (Knox & Burkard, 2009, and "synchronous communication in time and place" (Opdenakker, 2006, p. 3) supported the decision to conduct the interviews for this study in this manner. Challenges posed by in-person interviews included standardization and ambience of interview space (Opdenakker, 2006), as well as management of reactions to participant responses (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

All eight participants were interviewed in-person on site at either at Research University or State College. Careful and purposeful selection of an interview site that was available during

all scheduled interviews insured site standardization. At both Research University and State College, the interviews were conducted in a study room in the library. Self-awareness, internal monitoring of emotional reactions, and memoing assisted in negating the impact of the researcher's physical responses during the interview process.

Data Analysis

Each interview was recorded using a digital recording device and then transcribed by a transcription service provider. Immediately following each interview, I recorded all my thoughts and reflections in my research journal in order to revisit them once I had the transcribed data. Before commencing with the actual analysis, I practiced phenomenological reduction, bracketing my preconceived knowledge and ideas about the subject (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Each transcript was read individually multiple times, with the first review including playing the audiotape to confirm the validity of the transcription.

Part of the data collection process included the development of participant profiles. Using demographic information that I collected during each interview, I summarized the general characteristics of each participant using a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. This profile served as a means to understand the individual participant in relationship to the collection representation of all participant through discovered themes and essence(s) of the 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer experience.

Every time I reviewed the transcript I analyzed the data in order to understand the lived experience of collegiate transfer as described by the participant. During these reviews, I made notes in the margin of the document as I find "units of meaning" (Giorgi, 2009) or phenomenological themes, described by Van Manen (1990) as "structures of experience (p. 79). This exercise necessitated the creation of a codebook.

Described as "a set of codes, definitions, and examples used as a guide to help analyze interview data" (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011, p. 138), a codebook allowed the researcher to document key words, phrases, and themes that appear throughout the multiple data sets and assists with connecting them together through common elements. During my initial review I open coded by assigning words to various parts of the data that appeared relevant to my research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I utilized both inductive codes (researcher assigned) and in vivo codes (actual terms used by participants) during this process allowing for a more emergent and organic assignment of key phrases (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). Once finished with open coding I reviewed the transcript again and began the process of axial coding, bringing together those descriptive, open codes that were similar and created groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I reviewed each subsequent transcript in the same way as previously described with the added process of comparing the codes and groups generated for each one to the first, searching for commonalities between participant responses and the eventual development of themes. Employing Van Manen's (1990) selective approach to phenomenological thematic analysis, I captured and highlighted specific statements that were particularly revealing about the collegiate transfer experience. These statements were considered across all transcripts, seeking connections with other participant's experiences and potentially acting as categories for the larger data set (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As an iterative exercise, I frequently revisited the codebook, data, and my notes to insure consistency and accuracy in my analysis.

In the final part of the data analysis process, I examined the themes to identify meaning and the essence of the phenomenon. Having previously practiced epoche by suspending my own knowledge of the phenomenon, I provided the essence(s) using descriptive, but true to the

experience, language attempting to "neither add nor subtract from what is present" (Giorgi, 2009).

Positionality

As the researcher conducting a phenomenological inquiry, I acted as the primary instrument of data collection and was diligent in reducing researcher partiality and bracketing my preexisting ideas and opinions about the phenomenon being studied (Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015). Before entering into any type of data collection, I "assume the phenomenological attitude" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 87) in which I considered all things from how they were perceived by the person experiencing it, regardless of the whether it is the reality of the experience. In other words, regardless of how the experience was interpreted by the participant, it was considered as truth and all preconceived ideas or information that may impart a different interpretation was suspended (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

I established this stance by participating in phenomenological reduction through recognizing the separation between an object as it is and how it is experienced, as well as bracketing, called epoche, and involved taking inventory of what I believed to be true based on experience and interpretation. Also called bracketing, this exercise allows the researcher to identify their knowledge and opinions about the subject and in doing so, be aware when these assumptions attempt to interfere with extricating the lived experience of the participant (Van Manen, 1990).

Trustworthiness

While generalizability is not the focus of qualitative research, validity tactics employed in this study allowed the results to be considered as contributory to the research literature surrounding the phenomenon of 4- to 4-year collegiate transfer. It was critical that the findings

were accurate and true to the actual account provided by the participants. In order to insure validity in the findings from this study, I engaged in three distinct practices: member checking, reflexivity, and audit trail (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Christensen, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Member checking is the process of asking the participant to review the researcher's representation of the data provided by the participant (Merriam, 2002). Participants should have been able to recognize their story through the researcher's interpretation and if not, they provided suggestions or corrections to them. During this review, additional insights may be presented by the participant and then incorporated into the final report (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

During member checking, I used low-inference descriptors to further promote validity as it presented the findings using similar language and phasing that the participant used (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In some instances, I incorporated direct quotes, which are considered a type of low-inference descriptors. Themes derived from the findings were shared during member checking as well. This exercise allowed participants to provide feedback on whether or not the themes made sense and represented their own experience with the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Six of the eight participants participated in member checking, providing some corrections to their specific findings and agreed that the themes represented their experiences.

The practice of reflexivity was utilized to address issues pertaining to the validity of this study. This not only stemmed from my "suspending, any preconception or learned feelings" (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 445) about the collegiate transfer process through bracketing, it also took the form of field notes and self-reflection journaling (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This activity provided me the opportunity to reflect upon my understanding of the topic, my role as researcher, and how it overall impacted my approach to research. The intent was to insure

that I captured the true meaning and experience of each participant while managing personal preconception, resulting in establishing interpretive validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Establishing an audit trail enhanced reliability by acting as a record of how I conducted the research study, from soliciting participants, to arranging interviews, through the data collection process, and presentation of the findings (Merriam, 2002). Keeping a journal that included my experience throughout the study regarding questions, considerations, issues and problems, interactions with participants, the data collection process and interpretations of the findings allows others to navigate the process as I experienced it. While not meant to be used for replicating the study, it provides external readers an insightful way in which to understand the systematic planning and execution of the study itself (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Conclusion

Exploring the lived experience of 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer through phenomenological interviews at Research University and State College provided insight to the collective process through individual accounts. The site and participant selection process attempted to be representative of the population impacted by this practice. Not meant for generalization, the results were analyzed using qualitative methods of coding and theme assignment. Considering this experience through the lived essence(s) provided by this study, students, practitioners, and scholars are able to better understand this phenomenon of lateral transfer between 4-year institutions, impacting practice and policy to the benefit of today's college student.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

This study sought to understand the lived experience of students who participated in 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer using a phenomenological research design. Eight participants, three enrolled at Research University and five enrolled at State College, were interviewed using semi-structured questions (Appendix C) designed to explore the lived experience of 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer. Seven participants were women, one was a man, and their ages ranged from nineteen to thirty-seven. At the time of the study, all participants were residents of the state in which they were currently enrolled in college (Georgia) and half of them first attended a college in a different state. Six participants are White, two are African American and instances of transfer ranged from one to five. Total academic credits hours attempted at the time of transfer ranged from 30 to over 120. Of the eight participants, only one intended to transfer to another college when first enrolling in college for the first time.

Participants

In an effort to provide context of and insight to each participant, brief descriptions of each participant are below (See Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Research Participants Demographic Information

Participant pseudonym, current institution, gender, race, first-generation college student, age, and number of time transferred.

Participant Pseudonym	Current Institution	Gender	Race	First-Generation College Student	Age	Number of Times Transferred
Abagail	Research University	Female	White	No	19	1
Brittany	State College	Female	White	Yes	24	2
David	State College	Male	White	Yes	24	1
Jennifer	State College	Female	White	No	37	5
Monica	Research University	Female	White	No	19	1
Naomi	State College	Female	African American	Yes	22	2
Rachel	Research University	Female	White	No	19	1
Viola	State College	Female	African American	Yes	22	1

Abagail

Abagail's high school experience included dual enrollment at a state university near her suburban area home. She selected her first college because it was small, focused on the liberal arts, and was different than all her classmate's college choices. After the first two months of attendance, Abagail began feeling that the college was too small and the required program specific for freshman students left her feeling that she was not being treated like a college student. Realizing that she could save money by enrolling at a public institution instead of another private college, she used cost and academic reputation when deciding where to transfer. Abagail enrolled at Research University after completing the first two semesters at her first institution.

Brittany

Growing up in a border state that is less than an hour from State College's location in Georgia, Brittany graduated high school in a rural, coastal community and enrolled as a first-generation college student at a local college that had recently transitioned from being solely a 2-year institution to offering a limited number of 4-year bachelor degrees. She originally wanted to attend college in another state but decided to stay in-state and near home in order to save money. Having saved enough money to offset the tuition difference, Brittany transferred to the college she originally wanted to attend after a year and a half at her first college and stayed there for three years. Just a few semesters away from graduation, she found herself needing to move in with a relative who had relocated near State College and transferred there to finish her degree.

David

David, a first-generation college student, graduated from a high school located in a rural area several hours away from any major cities. He first enlisted with the Marines, and, while stationed at various bases, he became aware of educational opportunities provided through the Educational Center. These centers are commonly found at military bases and generally host both in-person and on-line courses from postsecondary institutions with which the military has agreements. He enrolled at a public, flagship university located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, taking his classes both on base and online.

Once his active duty commitment was met, David returned home and wanted to continue using his military educational benefits. In order to maximize these, he needed to attend a brick-and-mortar institution, or rather enroll in classes that were delivered in a physical space on a college campus. He began seeking out transfer institutions nearby and though he applied to two institutions for transfer, he enrolled at State College. He selected State College because it was

smaller and it would allow him to commute from home if he wanted to save money by not living on campus.

Jennifer

Living in an urban area near the eastern border of Georgia, Jennifer selected her first college because she was offered a scholarship for computer science and technology due to her academic performance in the subject during high school. After one year at the technical college, she wanted to change her major, which required paying full price or transferring out. Attempting to figure out what she wanted to do, Jennifer took courses over an eight-year period at both a 4-year public institution and a for-profit college that has since closed. After being away for 15 years, she returned to her initial institution to pursue her new found major choice. During this timeframe Jennifer had also gotten married, had four children, gotten divorced and worked on and off until she had to rely solely on government assistance and child support. She transferred to State College because she was able to live with a nearby relative, which reduced her expenses and provided support to her family.

Monica

A graduate from a magnet high school in a suburban area, Monica first enrolled at a public regional university that was ten minutes away from her home in Georgia. Undecided in her major when she began taking classes, she felt that she was wasting time and money taking courses that may not apply to what she wanted to do. After taking a semester off, she decided she was interested in environmental engineering and would need to transfer elsewhere to pursue that degree. She considered two public research-focused universities for transfer and selected Research University because she would be able to enroll as a transfer student instead of a freshman.

Naomi

Naomi experienced transfer as a high school student, moving from one suburban area to another of the same metropolitan area. She is a first-generation college student who chose to enroll at her father's preferred college instead of her first choice institution. Naomi's father felt that the college he supported had several preferred attributes such as location, nearby family, and affordability, however Naomi's choice was closer to home where she could live at home and save even more money during enrollment. However, she ended up enrolling at her father's suggested institution simply because he kept pushing it and Naomi tired of the back and forth.

Approaching the end of her second year and seeking admission into the nursing program, Naomi discovered her grades were too low. She decided to transfer to her original college of choice but was not able to pursue her major there either due to prior academic performance. After several semesters, Naomi realized that she did not want to sacrifice her choice of major and sought transfer to an institution where she would be admissible into a nursing program. She ended up applying to and enrolling at State College because the institution had an academic pathway that allowed her to pursue her goal of being a nurse.

Rachel

Rachel graduated from a high school in a suburban area. She participated in dual enrollment while in high school and both her parents and older brother attended 4-year postsecondary institutions. Rachel discovered the college at which she first enrolled during a college tour for her brother and though she applied to several others during her senior year, she enrolled at a small, private, liberal arts college located in a Kentucky. She began thinking about transferring in the spring semester of her first year because of several factors that included distance, cost, and a mandatory January term. Requiring all freshmen to enroll in one course in a

condensed three week course in early January, Rachel felt trapped in a classroom during this academic content-intensive experience. She ended up pursuing transfer and enrolled at Research University where several of her friends, as well as her boyfriend, from high school were currently attending.

Viola

Viola attended high school directly across the street from State College and never considered it an option when first pursuing college. She visited only colleges that her high school boyfriend was considering for an athletic scholarship, all of which were out-of-state. The first in her family to attend college, she left home and enrolled at a small state college on the western border of Alabama. Viola decided to transfer at the end of her third semester and enrolled at her first transfer institution in the next semester. Having not visited the school nor done any research about the cost to commute there, she withdrew after the first day, moved back to her hometown in order to live with her parents. Since State College was so close and her parents had wanted her to enroll there initially, she decided to pursue admission there and this became her second and last transfer institution.

Findings

The lived experience of 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer as described by the eight participants revealed three common themes. The first is *reasons for transfer* and includes common elements of affordability and the unpredictability of life events. The next theme is *resources for transfer* and encompasses sources of support and information to facilitate the transfer process. Lastly, *roadblocks for transfer* is a theme that covers varying enrollment policies and procedures among institutions that complicated the collegiate transfer process.

Reasons for Transfer

Each participant shared numerous reasons related to their decision to transfer. Though experienced in different ways, these reasons possessed commonalities from which two themes emerged. Affordability and unpredictable life events captured the essence of these experiences and though specific examples are given for both, some overlap between themes occurs. Before exploring reasons for transfer, understanding how participants navigated their first encounter with college choice while still in high school adds a level of insight to their future experience.

All of the participants admitted that they either did not know of or did not use the resources available to them at their high schools when making their initial college choice. These resources included guidance counselors, materials in the guidance office, and college representative visits or informational sessions offered at the high school. Naomi recalled "I didn't really use my school for anything except getting my transcripts," and Viola stated that her busy academic and extracurricular schedule kept her from these activities. Monica and Abagail felt their guidance counselor's college expertise was limited to in-state institutions and that they primarily focused on the completion of high school graduation requirements. David recalled "I remember a lot of colleges coming and recruiting, but it was more like, come to our college," whereas he was more interested in learning about paying for college and understanding the whole process.

The participants relied heavily on self-directed research and input from family and friends. With the exception of one participant, transferring from one college to another was not part of the original plan when deciding where to enroll in college. Brittany purposely enrolled at her first institution because it was close to home and allowed her to save money both on tuition and housing. This money would be needed to pay the in-state tuition differential when she

transferred into her first choice college as an out of state student. Abagail, having no intention of transfer when she attended her first institution stated:

> No. I didn't want to have to be a transfer student. Because I figured no, I don't want that because I thought it would disrupt my college career like with getting a major and what not. So, that wasn't really in my plans when I started applying to schools – that maybe I would have to consider a backup at some point.

Rachel shared that collegiate transfer was a family affair as both her mother and her older brother transferred from one 4-year college to another 4-year college prior to her own experience.

Affordability. Affordability of a college education was a consideration for half of the participants when considering their first college choice; however, it became a primary factor for all participants when transferring. For example, David originally intended to attend college and become a commissioned officer in the military but, as a self-described average student without access to resources, he decided to enlist as active duty and utilize his educational benefits to pay for his college education. While he was able to begin this process at one institution, to fully utilize the benefits and avoid taking out loans, he had to transfer to a more affordable option once his service was complete. Additionally, Rachel originally enrolled in an out-of-state private school and did not consider cost a deterrent because:

> You only get to go to college once and I would rather go to the right college once and be in debt and pay that off the rest of my life, than not have the experience I would have wanted.

However, once she started thinking about transferring for reasons not related to cost, she discovered that the college's tuition rate was going to increase in the next year and this fact contributed greatly to her final decision to transfer back in-state.

Many of the participants shared the desire to not waste money due to taking courses not counting towards a degree or that were less expensive elsewhere. Naomi recalled that even though she did not want to transfer for a second time she felt she was wasting her family's money by taking classes and doing poorly in them because she was in an academic program that she did not like. Viola questioned why she was taking out loans to pay for courses at an out-of-state college instead of utilizing a merit-based scholarship offered by her home state that covered the same courses. Jennifer, though qualified for substantial financial aid due to her estimated family contribution (EFC) being zero dollars, she was having difficulty covering college costs while supporting her four children on government funds and child support. Transferring to State College allowed her to move in with her mother and provided her the opportunity to save money while pursuing her degree.

Unpredictable life events. Another common reason for transfer among the participants can be categorized as unpredictable life events. Used broadly, this is meant to capture events, those considered minor or major and everything in between, that caused a shift in priorities as it pertained to college enrollment. Though not experienced by every single participant, two commonly shared life events included a desire to be closer to home and the need to change majors. The decision to transfer for five participants was highly influenced by a desire to be close to family for either inclusion in family traditions, emotional support, or cost-savings reasons, while three participants transferred specifically to change their major

Closer to home. When initially selecting their first institution, three participants mentioned the location of the institution as being a key factor. Rachel and Viola wanted to be away from home, while Brittany stayed home to save money before transferring out of state.

However, when discussing reasons for transferring location became important for most participants, in both being near family and saving money contexts.

The location of Viola's first institution was over nine hours away from her home and family. She and her high school boyfriend enrolled together, however by the fall of her sophomore year their relationship had ended. Before the holiday break, Viola experienced a serious case of strep throat that she neglected to treat appropriately and became very ill. Realizing how isolated she was from family and friends in a time of need, she began to wonder if staying at her first institution made sense. She considered why she was attending a college so far away and that required her to take out loans, even though she had been offered in-state tuition and scholarships. This prompted her to search transfer options for institutions back in her home state and closer to family.

Brittany's first collegiate transfer was done intentionally, however her second was brought on by a series of life events. Her first transfer institution was her dream school and she was very close to finishing her degree there when her grandmother, with whom she was living while in school, was placed into a full-time care facility. Brittany was asked to vacate the property and attempted to live on campus, but found both the cost of this change and the introduction of living with a complete stranger, problematic. Shortly after this occurred, her mother, who had suffered mental health issues for years, encountered a setback. These events prompted Brittany to move back home in order to be closer to her ailing mother and save money while she completed her degree.

Other participants wanted to be closer to home for varying reasons. David returned to his parents' home after completing his military service and narrowed his collegiate transfer search to institutions within a specific geographic location "just in case I didn't want to stay on campus, I

could drive from home." After missing several family events due to her distance from home Rachel admitted:

> everyone was just going home on the weekends…and I just really didn't like that I couldn't do that, so that ended up being something down the road that started bugging me, which was ironic because it was something that I really wanted, was to be far away. It turned out to not be what I wanted.

Spanning from being able to attend family gatherings to saving money by living at home, participants shared several commons reasons for transferring based on being closer to home.

Changing majors. Each participant's major technically changed when they transferred because of each institution's unique academic nomenclature of similar programs. Though not a specific reason to transfer for each participant, they all were able to find majors similar to those previously being pursued. However, two participants did decide to transfer due to changing their major and one participant's choice to change major was dictated by her enrollment at State College. A breakdown of each participant's initial major, subsequent transfer major, and indication if the major initiated collegiate transfer is found in below (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2 Research Participants Academic Majors

Participant pseudonym, academic major at initial institution, academic major at transfer institution, major change initiated transfer.

Participant Pseudonym	Academic Major at Initial Institution	Academic Major at Transfer Institution	Major Change Initiated Transfer
Abagail	Creative Writing	Consumer Journalism	No
Brittany	English	Psychology	No

David	General Studies	Business Administration	No
Jennifer	Computer Science & Technology	Medical Assistant Pre-Nursing Nursing Health Promotions & Disease Prevention	Yes
Monica	Undecided	Environmental Engineering	Yes
Naomi	Pre-Nursing	Respiratory Therapy Nursing	Yes
Rachel	Environmental Studies	Ecology	No
Viola	Biology	Biological Sciences	No

Monica chose her first school because it was close to home, and she wasn't sure what academic area she wanted to declare as a major. She discovered her passion during a job shadowing experience in which she participated instead of attending school in the second semester. Occurring at her father's software engineering firm, Monica met and worked with numerous types of engineers and found herself able to participate in conversations with them based on her educational background in physics and environmental science classes in high school. She recalled "I had never considered a science career for myself because I focused on art in high school" but after this experience, "I realized that maybe that could be a track for me that I had never considered for myself". Though she enrolled at her first institution with an undeclared major, it did not offer the program of study she now wanted which was environmental engineering, requiring her to transfer.

Jennifer's educational journey was interrupted multiple times for a variety of reasons and resulted in her transferring five times. These reasons included starting a family, switching jobs,

financial needs, and changing her major. Jennifer enrolled at her first institution as the recipient of scholarship for a computer science program. After her first semester she realized she did not want to pursue that major, but could not continue her enrollment there without the scholarship. When she left, she began working at a doctor's office and eventually realized she wanted to help people and felt that a major in the health professions field accomplished that goal. Her subsequent enrollments at the four other colleges she attended included majors in the health care field.

Having not achieved the required GPA for entry into the nursing program at her first institution, Naomi decided to transfer in the attempt to pursue that degree elsewhere. She discovered after being accepted at her first transfer institution that she would have to repeat most of her previous courses in order to be considered for admission into their nursing program. Under guidance from an academic advisor, she changed her major to respiratory therapy, but ended up not enjoying the coursework, which resulted in her not going to class and performing poorly. After a conversation with her father and self-reflection, she realized "Nursing is what I want to do. I need to figure out how to get there…and I was finally happy." She then began searching for nursing programs based on academic performance requirements and discovered State College's program.

Even though the specific reasons for transfer differed for each participant, they shared common elements inclusive of affordability and the occurrence of life events. While not necessarily as important during their initial college enrollment decision, these reasons later played significant roles the participants decision to transfer. When considering her reasons for transferring, Rachel's surmised:

> I guess it's not so much about picking the right one to start, but it's kind of about making sure it stays the right one. For a while it was the right one for me and slowly over time that changed.

This statement truly resonated with each participant's experience in collegiate transfer. Regardless of the reason, once the participants decided to transfer they found themselves revisiting the college choice process and began considering transfer college options using a variety of resources described below.

Resources for Transfer

Searching for a college to transfer into followed similar patterns that the participant's previously experienced. Commonly used resources during this process included the input from family and friends, utilization of online resources, and accessing institutional resources spanning from admissions information to academic student services. The participants described an experience where a combination of these recourses came together helping to form their decision of not only where, but how, to transfer.

There was a shared opinion among several participants that the institution from which they would be transferring would not support their efforts to leave. Monica stated "I definitely found that the school you are transferring to – they want students to come so their counselors are more helpful." Rachel refrained from telling too many people at her first institution that she was thinking about transferring out because "I didn't want everyone getting all up in arms if it didn't end up going through." This common perception provides insight to the utilization of resources not affiliated with the participant's transfer-out institution.

Family and friends. Whether used as sources of information or savings opportunities as previously discussed, support and advice from family and friends factored into the transfer

decision for several participants. Both Rachel's mother and brother transferred during their time in college, so transferring was not an unfamiliar experience. David's family supported his becoming a commuter student at State College to avoid additional loan debt from living on campus. Three participants had family members suggest specific colleges for them to consider based on their own proximately to the campus, offering to provide housing to them. Living close to a major city wherein several universities were accessible, Viola's aunt suggested she live with her and attend one of the nearby schools. When that option did not work, Viola's parents encouraged her to live with them and attend State College instead. Jennifer's mother lived close to State College and assisted in gathering information for Jennifer to consider for transferring there.

Rachel and Abagail both relied on input from friends who attended Research University about transferring to the institution. When first considering college, they both purposely did not apply there because "everyone I know goes there" and "I really did not like the idea of a big school." They both knew people who enrolled there and enjoyed their experience, so they utilized those connections to learn more about the University. Rachel made "a pro-con list and talked to everyone about it," and Abagail reached out to her close friend from high school who was enrolled at Research University to seek advice and opinions about her experience.

Online resources. Search engines, specific college websites, and higher education search databases were referenced by all participants. This is similar to how their initial college search were conducted. Research for the transfer process was predominately performed independently and primarily online. Monica said her search process consisted of "90% researching stuff online" and Naomi shared:

> How I got to where I am, it's been me. I've done everything. I might ask someone in my family a random question or something, but everything that I've done to get here is because I did it…I did everything myself. So it was just kind of me and the internet.

Generally, initial research for transferring was done online through searches based primarily either on academic major, location, or admission requirements. The online searches were all confined to specific parameters influenced by the specific needs of each participant and in some cases, were limited to one particular institution.

Abagail used online resources to determine "what are the requirements and can we afford this. Then a couple of times I would just like go on the US college news thing and just kind of look at the (web)site sometimes for just like class size or some of the demographics." Finding most of the information he needed online, David described the most helpful online resources as "the catalogs, like what classes you needed to take." Offering a different perspective based on using both online and institutional resources, Rachel felt that supplementing online information with one-on-one interaction with an admissions representative was "helpful to get a better idea of what the process would be like."

Institutional resources. As previously discussed, institutional resources span both online and in-person formats. Though most commonly utilized by the participants at the transfer-in institution, a couple did seek and receive help at their transfer-out institution. The participants recalled primarily interacting with staff traditionally located in academic student service departments such as academic advising and the registrar's office, while a few specifically utilized admissions related resources as well.

Academic student services. Inclusive of services such as academic advisors, department coordinators, faculty members, and Registrar office personnel, academic student services

repeatedly emerged as helpful resources during the collegiate transfer experience. The majority of the participants utilized this resource at the transfer-in institution instead of those at the institution from which they were transferring.

Several participants enlisted the assistance of academic advisors. Unlike most of the participants, Abagail's experience included assistance from an advisor at her first institution:

> I happened to have a really great advisor who…like he helped me through the process. He was understanding and compassionate about me wanting to transfer and so he was willing to help me sort of look ahead and help me through the process.

More in line with other participant's experience, Naomi initially reached out the academic advisor at the transfer-in institution. She ended up calling them "at least once or twice every week just asking more questions," during her pursuit for admission into her second transfer institution. Similarly, Rachel relied heavily on an academic advisor remembering "I sent her like eight emails the next two weeks by the end of it I knew I annoyed her so badly because the last email was just two words, like, "sounds good." Having accumulated a great deal of credit hours between previous enrollments at four institutions, Jennifer sought assistance directly from a faculty member in her area of academic interest. Once enrolled at their final transfer institutions, all participants were unanimous in considering their academic advisors the best resource they had at their respective institutions.

Another resource utilized at both the transferring-out and transferring-in institutions was the registrar's office. For both Brittany and Jennifer, the Registrar's office provided helpful information and guidance on what would transfer into another institution and how to request and send transcripts. Using the registrar's office at both her transfer-out and transfer-in institutions, she explained "I went to the registrar's office to see what I needed, got everything I needed,

turned it in and that was it…and then I called [State College] to verify." When attempting to determine what credits would transfer, participants used online transfer equivalency tools, either provided by the institution or through a state-wide articulation database. These databases are periodically updated by the registrar's office or another academic services department at the institution.

Admissions Information. Though only specifically referenced by two participants, admissions information was generally utilized by all participants though primarily in the online environment. Admissions information includes application deadlines, admissions requirements, cost of attendance, and listings of academic programs. However, both Rachel and Monica attended information sessions offered at Research University specifically designed for transfer students. Neither of them had previously visited the campus and the information session provided an opportunity not only to learn more about the transfer application process, but also to see the campus.

Monica recalled "I reached out to Research University…for help with transferring. So, I went to a meeting, like the transfer meetings they would hold." She also attended an information session at another potential transfer institution. Her primary takeaway was that the admissions process there "is crazy and they are super expensive." She also realized that she would essentially have to apply as a freshman due to the minimum academic credit transfer requirement.

Rachel found the information session incredibly helpful as she continued to engage with the admissions representative throughout the application process. She was initially denied at Research University and when she inquired with the admission representative she met at the information session he explained "it's because the way that they're [AP credits] represented on

your college transcript." He described how she could rectify the situation and reevaluated her application, leading to the final decision of acceptance.

The opinions of and input from friends and family were considered valuable resources when determining where participants would transfer. Online as well as institutional resources were an additional resource for assistance in the navigation of specific requirements for both admissions and the transfer of course credit. Even though a variety of resources proved helpful, the participants did encounter some difficulties during the pursuit of collegiate transfer.

Roadblocks for Transfer

The participants indicated that overall, transferring was easier than what they had expected it to be, however there were specific items that proved more difficult than others. Generally, these items can be categorized as academic transcript retrieval, articulation of academic course credit, and the collection of enrollment paperwork. None of these items individually affect the admissions process for transfer students at Research University and State College, however they do have a significant impact on items such as academic standing and cost of attendance. Each participant encountered a variety of these roadblocks during their collegiate transfer experience.

Academic transcript retrieval. Both Research University and State College required each participant to submit a transcript from every postsecondary institution previously attended. In some cases, depending on the specific admissions requirements and the participant's incoming course credit level, a high school transcript was also required. Between those who dual enrolled in college while in high school to those who transferred more than once after graduating high school, all participants retrieved more than one transcript for the purposes of transferring. Several indicated that this process presented a challenge to their enrollment efforts.

This was particularly salient for Jennifer as she transferred four times prior to her enrollment at State College. With her first few instances of transferring being in the early to mid-2000's, electronic delivery of transcripts was not as common as it is now. Though advancement in technology has, in part, ceased the need to request transcripts in person, it does have its own limitations as Jennifer discovered when the transcripts she requested online were not received by the transfer institution:

> I learned not only to do it electronically, I have done it by mail and I have handed it in in person. So one of three options will always work. And I even bought a stamp that said received and made them put an initial on there. But literally, you have to check, double check, and triple check not only them, but yourself.

Rachel and Abagail both had to physically pick up their transcripts from the state universities they attended as part of their dual enrollment during high school and deliver them either in person or through the mail to Research University. For Rachel, this was needed in order to get credit for Advanced Placement courses that the state university had awarded her but her first college had not. Abagail recalled that she requested the transcript online, however she was told she had to pick it up in person. In both cases, only the student, and not a parent or otherwise designated person, could pick up the transcript.

Naomi also encountered problems when ordering transcripts from her first transfer institution:

> I had to call so many different people at State University, so many different offices to get my transcript of everything. 'Cause every time I'd order a transcript it'd be my official transcript but it would only have classes that I've taken there on them. I was like, that's not what I needed…I need Naomi's college history transcript.

She ended up ordering two so that she would have a backup. Other participants did this as well, however they mentioned that it was an additional cost to them, as most of the college's they attended charged a fee for each transcript requested.

Articulation of academic course credit. The articulation of transfer credit was another obstacle for each participant. All of them lost some amount of credit hours in the transfer process. Rachel was initially denied admission because her first college did not notate advanced placement credit on her transcript in a way that was acceptable to Research University, resulting in her lacking the admissible number of credit hours for transfer admission. When Rachel asked the transfer counselor at Research University (pseudonym) why they considered her delinquent in credit hours:

> He said it's because the way that they are represented on the college's transcript and it happens with several schools; they don't show the class that it transfers to, they just show it as AP credit and they can't take it that way for some reason.

David and Viola both appealed to faculty in their academic major at State College for credit to be applied for courses taken at their previous institutions. Viola was not concerned with some of the courses not transferring because they were "career path classes" and "freshman seminars." However, she was upset when Chemistry I was not going to transfer:

> I made an A in Chem I and general chemistry has always been tough for me…I really worked hard to get the grade that I got in that class, and it was a difficult course. But they said due to the catalog they had posted, it didn't suffice for State College. And so I was like hey look, I'm going to go to a different school. I'm not retaking Chem I.

She was advised to see the department chair who eventually granted her credit for the course based on a more thorough review of the course catalog.

Jennifer, Naomi and Brittany lost the most transfer credit of all the participants. The significant difference between their previous majors and their selected majors at State College caused the loss of program-specific course credits for Jennifer and Naomi. Naomi shared, "the only credits that didn't transfer were, of course my respiratory therapy credits because nothing I did there applied to nursing school." In essence, Naomi's academic experience at her second transfer institution did not produce any transferrable academic credits at State College. Jennifer's situation was similar "not everting transferred…but there were just a lot of other classes that were just not needed." Brittany's credit loss "I had like a total of 30 credit hours…and only 21 of them transferred" resulted from her first institution being in a different state than her first transfer institution.

Enrollment paperwork. After transcripts were received and evaluated for transfer credit, the participants encountered additional barriers to enrollment at their transfer institutions. These took the shape of documents that provided proof of immunization records and lawful presence for tuition classification purposes. Both Research University and State College are required by their shared governing board to provide evidence that each student is lawfully present in the United States in order to be classified for in-state tuition. If a student is not found lawfully present, Research University cannot allow them to enroll. State College can allow these students to enroll, however they will be charged out of state tuition.

David encountered this roadblock due to his transferring in academic credit from his previous institution, which was located in another state. However, he had not lived outside of the state in which State College resided except for his military deployments. He recalled "the only real roadblock was getting my financial aid straightened up, because I've been a [state] resident all of my life, but because I was transferring from [previous institution] they were trying

to mark me as out of state." While not as much of a roadblock for the other participants, they did describe having to collect supporting documents to satisfy this requirement when submitting enrollment documentation.

While immunizations were required of all participants, Jennifer and Naomi were both transferring into nursing programs that required additional immunizations not mandatory for general institutional enrollment. They incurred additional costs from having to make doctor's appointments and order specific blood work. Naomi recalls:

> The vaccinations that I had been getting had been specific to whatever school I was going to and so nursing school, they have their own set of vaccinations and their own set of ways to go about getting these…I literary had two and three doctor's appointments every single week…I was paying like $25 co-pay for every one so I was just going broke.

This requirement was not associated with admission to the college nor to the academic program, but rather required for enrollment in courses with a specific academic major, in this case nursing.

Securing financial aid in the form of the state-wide, merit-based scholarship was a challenge for several participants. For those who had not yet utilized the scholarship due to becoming active duty military or attending an out-of-state college or an in-state private institution, additional paperwork and extended processing time was required. This presented significant stress and worry for several participants because of potential conflicts with payment deadlines. Rachel, Viola, Abagail, and Monica received scholarships at their first institutions that were not transferrable to their transfer institution. Faced with less financial support for their enrollment at transfer institutions, the cost of attendance became a significant determining factor for these participants. David actually applied for scholarships at State College but did not receive any. Determined to defray the cost of attendance as much as possible, five of the

participants either continued working or found jobs once enrolled at their final transfer institutions.

Though enrollment hurdles affected each participant differently, they added complexity to the overall collegiate transfer process. The assignment of transfer academic credit, varying transcript request procedures, and the collection of required enrollment documentation presented challenges in each instance of transfer for all participants. Embarking on their transfer journey independently, sheer determination and utilization of various resources provided most solutions to these obstacles. David and Viola took action upon discovery that some academic courses were not accepted for credit at State College. They both appealed through faculty and secured the previously unawarded transfer credit. After initially being denied to Research University, Rachel reached out to the admissions office, discovered why, and took action to be reevaluated.

While applying for transfer admission was considered an easy part of the process, the gathering of all supporting documentation for enrollment was thought to be most difficult. However, the participants agreed that transferring allowed them to continue to pursue their education as their various preferences for academic major, location, and monetary commitment evolved. Reflecting upon her enrollment at State College as a transfer student Viola stated:

> I found myself in a rut that I wasn't enjoying. I felt like I needed a change and I was allowed to do that through the transfer process. I didn't feel like the hoops were too much. I felt like it was worth it and it was a positive change. I think transferring is a beautiful thing that you're allowed to start a college and then say, hey, maybe I need to switch directions.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of understanding the lived experience of the 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer phenomenon for eight participants, I have described three themes: reasons for transfer, resources for transfer, and roadblocks for transfer. Though the reasons for transfer varied among the participants, shared motives included affordability and unexpected life events. Some resources for transfer seemed similar to those used during the first college choice process. However, the scope of what was important had changed. Participants focused on preserving the maximum amount of transfer credits and primarily used online sources of information to facilitate the search. Divergent policies and practices at institutions both being transferred out of as well as into contributed to the roadblocks commonly experienced during 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer. These spanned from requesting and delivering transcripts, receiving transfer credit for similar coursework, to providing the appropriate enrollment documentation in order to satisfy institutional requirements.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This phenomenological study explored the lived experience of eight individuals who participated in 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer. Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice served as the theoretical framework for this study. Though each lived experience was as unique as the individual sharing it, detection of themes emerged during data analysis and synthesis. Several themes generated subcategories that added structure and provided description to that particular theme.

The first theme, reasons to transfer, included affordability and unpredictable life events as common elements that resulted in collegiate transfer. Unpredictable life events explored those related to wanting to be closer to home and changing academic majors. Resources for transfer, the second theme, spanned subcategories of family and friends, online resources, and institutional resources. Academic student services and admissions information emerged as subcategories within the institutional resources theme. The last theme, roadblocks to transfer, supported categories including academic transcript retrieval, articulation of academic course credit, and enrollment paperwork. The findings of this study are additive to existing literature as they provide evidence that the college choice process does not conclude at the point of first matriculation into a postsecondary institution, but rather that college choice is an iterative process as experienced through collegiate transfer.

This chapter explores the themes as they supported and challenged existing literature. Implications of this study's findings in relation to Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college

choice, current practice, and existing policies exposes opportunities for advancing the understanding and support of 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer. Recommendations for future research in areas concerning collegiate transfer, the articulation of transfer academic credit, and the use of online resources during the college choice process provides direction for further exploration.

Discussion of the Findings

While attempting to capture the essence of the 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer experience through this phenomenological study, I discovered that the participants moved through the collegiate transfer choice process in a very similar manner described in existing college choice literature (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). However, several nuances emerged and stemmed from a place of reflection as each participant experienced some type of event during their initial enrollment at postsecondary institution. For some, it was the realization of how far away they were from family, while for others it was needing a more affordable option. Regardless of the reason, the participants found themselves once again engaged in the college search process and, for the most part, navigating it independently.

Affordability was a recurrent theme in the collegiate transfer decision process even though it was not as critical in the initial college search process for most of the participants. Broadly defined, affordability for participants included paying in-state tuition, using state-wide merit-based scholarship benefits, availability of jobs on or near the campus, and defrayed cost by living with relatives or friends nearby. Participants in this study sought to transfer the maximum number of credit hours during the collegiate transfer process in order to save on tuition cost. These factors, while consistent with Lang's (2007) findings relating to the intentional choice of students who decided to transfer between a 2-year to a 4-year institution, are presented in this

study as the reason to transfer between a 4-year and 4-year institution. This is significant because it supports the fact that college choice is not an isolated, time-constrained event. It extends beyond high school and the initial enrollment at a postsecondary institution.

In addition, though the participants navigated financing their collegiate experience differently, they each reflected on the financial aid process and shared their regret that they did not know more about it when first making a college choice. Upon initial entry, financial considerations were not at the forefront of most participant's decision making process. However, when faced with transferring, this factor took priority. Consistent with Gard, Paton, and Gosselin's (2012) findings for 2-year to 4-year transfer students, financial concerns were also relevant in the 4-year to 4-year transfer process. Some of the participants felt unprepared for the financial aid while those who incurred loan debt during time spent at private institutions wanted to minimize their financial indebtedness.

All eight participants relied on the support from either family or friends during their collegiate transfer process. Literature exploring the 2-year to 4-year transfer process confirms the influence of peers and family members (Bers, 2005; Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Gerhardt & Ackerman, 2014; Lang & Lopez, 2014; Townsend, 2007) and Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice includes this as part of the habitus layer. This plays a significant role in the college choice process as it reflects immediate and familiar resources available to students (Burkander, 2014; Carnevale & Rose, 2004). An interesting finding in this study is that four of the eight participants were first-generation college students and they too relied on the support of others who had not previously attended a postsecondary institution. Further investigation into the formation of opinions and preferences for particular postsecondary institutions when

previous attendance is not a factor may illuminate additional influences that guide college choice.

Although family and friends were part of the initial phase of collegiate transfer, similar to the predisposition stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-stage model of college choice, the remainder of the process was navigated mostly online by each individual participant. Participants shared that they did nearly all of their research for collegiate transfer online. The literature reviewed for this study provided little information regarding the use of online resources in the college search process and this likely resulted from the rapid increase of accessibility to portable technological devices that have connectivity to the internet. This reliance on virtual delivery of information regarding collegiate transfer results in students embarking on this process in isolation and attempting to navigate complex and multi-page websites which oftentimes have conflicting information or sends them to additional websites.

For six of the participants, the only in-person contact they had with their transfer institutions before acceptance involved communicating with the registrar or handing in required documents. Two participants attended transfer admission information sessions after they applied but before they were admitted. As previously mentioned, the National Association of College Admission Counseling (2015) prohibits the recruitment of students enrolled at a 4-year postsecondary institution where there is not an existing articulation agreement. Considering that previous literature discussed inequitable staffing and resources designated for assisting students through the transfer process, the results of this study are not surprising (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Welsh, 2002). Institutional resources were not necessarily available and the responsibility of trying to figure out where to transfer and how to do so was placed upon the student.

Once the participants completed their research and submitted their admissions application, a number of obstacles materialized. All eight participants agreed that retrieving their academic transcripts and providing additional enrollment documents presented a significant challenge. The subsequent articulation and awarding of academic course credit presented an additional challenge with each participant losing some amount of previously earned academic credit. None of the participants enrolled at an institution with the intention of utilizing specific transfer articulation agreements, so there was no guarantee that courses would transfer to another institution. When subsequently engaged in the enrollment process, the participants encountered inconsistent course transfer policies as described in previous research (Clemetsen et al., 2015; Lumina, 2015; Welsh, 2002).

Inconsistency of academic course credit articulation between institutions negatively impacts transfer students (Clemetsen et al., 2015; Lumina, 2015; Welsh, 2002). Not only does it result in the loss of credit previously paid for, it can result, as it did for several participants, in a delay of anticipated graduation. While existing literature acknowledges the importance of transfer credit articulation practices (Maliszewski, Crabill, & Nespoli, 2012; Welsh, 2002), there is a lack of literature related to the perception of academic credit existing as a monetary value to students.

The loss of academic credit is an example of additional costs associated with transferring that is not reflected in tuition and fees. In this study, these spanned both monetary and psychological spectrums. In addition to the financial and academic standing loss related to academic course transfer, required fees for admissions and enrollment processes and confusion and worry over differing requirements and deadlines were examples of this additional cost of transfer.

Attempting to lessen the effect of these additional costs, several participants engaged in activities to secure the approval of the maximum amount of transfer academic credit. These activities included retrieval of transcripts from institutions that awarded academic credit in an acceptable way and appealing directly to faculty in specific academic departments. While this endeavor was pursued by several participants, it requires determination and persistence, as well as access to the information that the opportunity exists. Not knowing or not possessing traits required to pursue this option, many students could lose significant amounts of transfer academic credit. These practices lack representation in existing literature and warrant additional consideration regarding how they impact student retention, progression and graduation.

Each institution required an application fee as well as additional enrollment documents that oftentimes required payment for retrieval. Many postsecondary institutions charge a fee for academic transcripts that are required for academic course transfer articulation. This is true even for institutions that are part of the same governing system, which included Research University and State College. For example, Brittany, Naomi, and Monica all transferred within the same university system and encountered this academic transcript fee, as did Abagail and Rachel when submitting transcripts from their dual enrollment institutions that were also within the same university system. In some cases, the participants had to drive to the campus to pick up the transcript which incurred additional costs of both money and time. Additionally, several participants eluded to the fact that they were supposed to be a different student status (junior vs. senior) at their transfer-in institution, but were not because of the discrepancy of transfer academic credit.

Varying deadlines of these different items caused uncertainty and induced stress, while additional enrollment documents and requirements added not only cost, but also confusion.

Proof of immunizations posed a significant barrier for participants pursuing particular majors in the health sciences even when transferring between institutions belonging to the same governing system. Verifying lawful presence also required redundant submission of documentation among institutions that enforced the same legislative mandate. The literature reviewed for this study provided little insight on these varying practices and their impact on collegiate transfer.

Generally speaking, the roadblocks encountered by the participants were created by existing, and possibly outdated, systems and structures put into place by individual postsecondary institutions. Ranging from complications in obtaining transcripts to receiving transfer credit for academic coursework and the submission of duplicative enrollment documents, these processes are systematic, obstructive policies and practices that can confuse, frustrate, and discourage students. The lack of institutional support for students seeking to transfer-out compounds this already complex process and encourages the isolated nature of virtual research at the onset of the collegiate transfer experience.

The shared experience of the participants exposes several deficits not only in existing literature, but also in current practice. Overall, the lack of intentional support for the collegiate transfer process, the limitation of enrollment and funding options, and the conflict of institutional retention initiatives in light of nationwide completion goals negatively impacts students who participate in 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer. Recognizing this study's findings that college choice is a continual process that is revisited when collegiate transfer or additional enrollment in postsecondary institutions occurs, these gaps create unnecessary challenges and barriers for students pursuing a postsecondary credential.

Implications

Theoretical implications as they pertain to transfer course credit articulation, access to financial aid, and hidden enrollment costs were considered in light of this study's findings. A number of implications for general practice are shared, while specific, system-wide implications are explored. Topics for future research that further inform practice and policies related to the 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer phenomenon are recommended.

Theoretical. Perna's (2006) conceptual model of college choice was used as the conceptual framework for this study. The inclusion of situational context and its interaction with the model's four layers of habitus; school and community; higher education; and social, economic, and policy provided a more comprehensive and inclusive lens through which to consider college choice. By incorporating sociological-cultural and human capital investment theories with the contextual layers, Perna's (2006) model reveals the importance of cost, both perceived and actual, during the college choice experience. Focused on the value placed on attaining (or not attaining) a college education, theoretical implications pertaining to affordability through financial aid, transferrable academic course credit, and hidden enrollment costs are examined.

Financial Aid. Broadly defined as any type of financial assistance meant to supplement the cost of pursuing a postsecondary credential, financial aid sources include federal funding, statewide merit-based scholarships, loans, and availability of jobs. While some participants in this study considered the cost of attendance during their initial college choice process, it significantly factored into the decision to participate in collegiate transfer for all of them. Financial aid is situated across all four contextual layers in Perna's (2006) conceptual model, thereby solidifying its importance as an influencer in the college choice process.

The perception of cost for pursuing or not pursing a postsecondary education is rooted in the habitus layer and is continuously challenged or confirmed as the student perpetually moves through their own situational context. Access to financial aid information prior to enrolling in college, the processing and awarding of financial funds, and fluctuating policies and shifts in the economy influence decisions about pursuing postsecondary education. The findings from this study indicated that this behavior not only continued during collegiate transfer, but also became more influential in subsequent decision making processes.

Transferrable academic course credit. Though transferrable academic course credit is not specifically mentioned in Perna's (2006) conceptual model, the financial ramification of academic course transferability impacts both the higher education and social, economic, and policy contextual layers. The institutional characteristics of postsecondary institutions include their internal policies regarding transferrable academic courses from other institutions. Students contemplating collegiate transfer may consider how many courses will carry over to their transfer institution when beginning the college choice process. Participants in this study did not share that their decision to transfer was directly influenced by which academic courses would transfer, however during the admissions and enrollment process, credit articulation dictated certain outcomes.

Attempted and accumulated credit hours not only impacted time to graduation, but also financial aid eligibility. The accumulation of too many transferrable credit hours made federal funding unattainable, while too few resulted in lower class standing. Both results lead to additional costs to the student, and is particularly relevant to students who change academic majors during the collegiate transfer process.

Hidden enrollment costs. Ranging from fees associated with the admission application and academic transcript retrieval to the cost of doctor appointments and gas for picking up and delivering these items, these costs were not explicitly identified in the cost of attendance at both Research University and State College. All of the participants encountered these hidden costs related to enrollment through collegiate transfer and for some, the additional financial burden threatened to negatively affect their continuous enrollment efforts. These costs create unnecessary barriers for students who, as collegiate transfer students, are already hypersensitive to the affordability of a postsecondary education. Reducing or eliminating these fees through changes to policy and practice lessens the financial burden for students while supporting their pursuit of collegiate transfer.

Practice. College choice models (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006) situate institutional resources as an active part of the search and choice process. Upon initial enrollment and their first institutions, the participants had access to staff and faculty members who assisted with enrollment and retention activities. Once the decision to transfer was made, the participants found themselves navigating the collegiate transfer choice on their own.

Consideration of the postsecondary institutions role in promoting and assisting collegiate transfer is warranted given the findings of this study. Should students who need or want to transfer to another postsecondary institution be left to navigate the process on their own or should their current postsecondary institution offer to assist? Is institutional retention more important than student completion? These are significant questions for administrators and policy makers to consider since they influence existing systems and processes, and have the ability to effect change. Since the findings of this study uncovered a substantial reliance of online

resources and a general unassisted nature of the collegiate transfer process, the following were identified as implications for practitioners and policy makers.

Create and maintain robust online resources for collegiate transfer processes. During their collegiate transfer experience, each participant revealed their utilization of online resources provided by both public search websites and individual institutional websites. While a few participants did engage with other resources, the majority of their information came from sources in an online environment. With increasing availability to the internet and to devices that can access it, practitioners might consider critically examining their presence in virtual spaces.

This includes structuring the website's site map so that the location of and access to relevant information is easy to find and understand. Websites that link to other websites may inadvertently redirect students leaving them unclear about what office to contact for additional information. A comprehensive website containing all of the information a collegiate transfer student needs to successfully navigate the transfer-in process from initial research to application to enrollment reduces confusing multi-site redirecting and possibly conflicting or outdated information.

Adding short how-to videos featuring recent colligate transfer students and offering real-time online chats during non-traditional office hours provides engaged learning opportunities for potential transfer students. These additions not only help the transfer-in student better understand the process, they also introduce the institution's culture and climate through exposure to students and staff earlier in the process. Additional online resources could include a virtual campus tour, pre-recorded or live-broadcast collegiate transfer specific information session, and an online module for orientation.

Shift the college choice mindset to include completion. Given the volume of students who participate in collegiate transfer, practitioners and administrators in admissions, enrollment, and academic affairs should consider how to identify and best serve students who find themselves needing or wanting to transfer. Providing a space where students can openly explore transfer options while receiving guidance from staff and faculty knowledgeable in academic course credit articulation, financial aid, and other enrollment processes may alleviate stress and prevent loss of financial resources. Potentially this could reside in academic advising or function as part of a transfer student center designed for both incoming and outgoing students. While this may be more difficult to implement at private, individual, and non-affiliated institutions, it may be an effective practice among institutions belonging to the same governing system.

Several of the participants indicated that they did not feel supported when attempting to transfer-out of their postsecondary institution. This forces students to pursue collegiate transfer on their own with potential consequences of missed deadlines, enrollment in non-transferrable coursework, and increased anxiety regarding the process. Four-year postsecondary institutions, should evaluate their current policies and practices to determine their level of support for students who either want or need to transfer-out. Most often, practice includes attempts to retain students at the individual institution rather than assisting in the transition to another institution that may be a better option for the student. As part of the national completion agenda, postsecondary institutions should align their missions to support these types of enrollment paths even though a student's departure impacts the institution's retention and progression statistics.

Centralized enrollment centers. Often called one-stop-shops, these centers typically house key enrollment offices and departments in one location. These services span from those offered by offices of admissions, financial aid, registrar, academic advising, and bursar. These

departments often report to different divisions within the postsecondary institution ranging from enrollment management, student affairs, academic affairs, and fiscal affairs. With different administrative leadership managing these divisions, the potential for differing experiences pertaining to customer service, policy, and procedure is high and this leads to a disjointed experience by students interacting with each of them separately. Neither Research University nor State College have a centralized enrollment center which resulted in the participants having to call or visit different departments across campus during their efforts to submit enrollment paperwork.

The establishment of these centralized enrollment centers would not only situate the comprehensive resources needed to facilitate admission to and enrollment at the postsecondary institution, it also lessens the load placed on students trying to navigate the process on their own. These centers would allow these different enrollment-centered divisions to coordinate their practices and improve their sharing of information about their policies to each other and to the students. The need to send students across campus or transfer their calls would be minimized and students would have a more streamlined and student-focused experience.

System-wide Policies. Both the research sites used in this study were part of the same governing system and a number of the transfer-from institutions the participants attended were also part of that same system. However, policies, procedures, deadlines, and requirements varied and lacked consistency. The participants encountered a number of obstacles during their collegiate transfer experience that provided implications for system-wide policies regarding inter-system transfer.

Establish a centralized enrollment and academic credential database. Retrieving and submitting a variety of enrollment documentation posed a challenge for all of the participants.

This was true even though six of the eight participants previously enrolled in postsecondary institutions that were part of the same governing system. For those who transferred multiple times, this particular challenge was even more pronounced. The continued collection and submission of the same documentation at each institution seemed redundant, accumulated additional costs, and prolonged the enrollment process.

For postsecondary institutions that are governed by a centralized, state-wide administration, the creation of a centralized enrollment and academic credential database may be a viable solution to this particular challenge. This would provide several advantages for multiple audiences. Students would only have to submit enrollment documents, such as immunization records and lawful presence verification, once. If the student transfers, they could submit a request for their records to be shared with the institution to which they are transferring. This would save both the sending and receiving institution a step of having to perform primarily manual tasks by allowing the downloading of previously archived information.

Creating a system-wide academic course credit articulation database provides critical information about transfer equivalencies that allows students to consider their transfer credit and class status before pursuing transfer. This would drastically reduce the amount of time it takes an individual postsecondary institution to receive paper transcripts, scan them, manually enter the coursework into a student information system, and articulate the coursework. Knowing sooner which courses will transfer provides students an opportunity to prepare should they wish to petition for credit of those courses not previously approved.

Leveraging economies of scale through instituting centralized software and functionality would result in both institutional and system-wide savings. This practice could significantly impact those institutions that do not have the resources or the staff to match the demands of a

growing transfer population (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Welsh, 2002). Students would also save both money and time by not paying multiple fees and physically visiting a campus for document retrieval and delivery.

Develop 4-year to 4-year system-wide articulation agreements. While existing literature finds this practice common among postsecondary institutions belonging to the same governing system (Anderson, Alfonso, & Sun, 2006; Bers, 2013; Fincher et al, 2013; Hood et al, 2009; Poisel & Joseph, 2011) there remains a lack of consistency, particularly for 4-year institutions surrounding coursework designated for specific majors and upper division courses (Clemetsen et al, 2015; Lumina, 2015; Welsh, 2002). Some participants were required to take courses at their first institution that did not have an equivalent elsewhere and this occurred between institutions belonging to the same governing system.

The statewide transfer initiative implemented in New Jersey is a potential model to reference if considering this type of policy shift. Designed to promote accountability of academic course credit articulation between the state's 2-year and 4-year colleges, it may provide a malleable framework for 4-year to 4-year institutions consideration (Maliszewski et al. 2012). This may be particularly effective for academic majors that are shared between the varying types of institutions situated within the same governing system.

Recommendations for Future Research

A more thorough understanding of the 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer process requires additional research using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings of this study, while additive to the limited existing literature, provided insight to the continuation of college choice as students transitioned from high school into postsecondary options multiple

times. Additional inquiries exploring this phenomenon will add relevance and increase reliability to the experiences shared in this qualitative study.

Further investigation into institutional resources and policies that impact collegiate transfer is warranted. Marketing efforts, enrollment requirements, academic course credit articulation, and accessibility of funding were integral parts of the 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer process. Focusing on these elements and examining them across different institutional governing systems can inform practitioners and policy makers of effective practices. Potential streamlining or consolidating of requirements and procedures will benefit students seeking to continue their collegiate education through transfer.

Existing literature provided insight on institutional resources such as on-campus events and print collateral marketing materials (Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Lynch & Baker, 2005; Moogan, 2011) however they did not explore the availability or impact of institutional resources provided virtually. The results of this study support both Hossler & Gallagher (1987) and Perna's (2006) findings that institutional resources have the greatest impact during the time period of researching and selecting institutions for application submission. Powerful analytical data from search engines and individual websites may offer valuable insight to the influence they impress on visitors.

Findings associated with the use of college ranking websites and searchable databases may help guide practitioners in determining how rankings are impacting their enrollment and which databases are generating potential new or prospective students. Whereas traditional marketing efforts have limited geographical reach (Hill & Winston, 2010), the online environment spans worldwide. Increasing our understanding of how this vast and fairly accessible resource is used during the 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer process not only

provides better services and experiences for the students, it also facilitates smarter use of limited financial resources of postsecondary institutions.

Conclusion

With over a third of all college-bound students participating in collegiate transfer, this study provided insight to the experience of those students who transferred between 4-year institutions. Discovering that the decision making process is similar to that of making an initial college choice decision while in high school, this study presented evidence that the college choice process is not a stand-alone experience for high school seniors. Rather, it is a continual occurrence, lasting as long as the student is actively seeking an alternate enrollment opportunity at another postsecondary institution. The participants in this study possessed a variety of reasons to transfer and followed a process similar to that of their own initial college choice process. After experiencing unexpected life events, they renewed their focus on postsecondary enrollment options and participated in the college choice process again as a collegiate transfer student.

As the participants shared their collegiate transfer experience, common themes emerged related to their reasons to transfer, resources accessed supporting transfer, and the roadblocks encountered during transfer. These findings provided the foundation for several implications related to the expansion of theoretical constructs, shifts in professional practice, and development of system-wide policies. Future research is needed to generate additional qualitative and quantitative findings to facilitate and support the successful pursuit of 4-year to 4-year collegiate transfer.

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APPENDIX A

Research Study Participation Solicitation Email Template

Dear <Insert Name>,

You are receiving this email because of your enrollment at the <Research Site> as a transfer student. I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Means in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled The Continuation of College Choice: A Phenomenological Study of the 4-year to 4-year Collegiate Transfer Experience. The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience of the college choice process for collegiate transfer students.

Participation in this study involves an in-person interview either at the <Research Site> or via Skype/FaceTime, lasting no longer than 90 minutes. A follow up conversation and review of interview notes will require between 30 to 90 additional minutes, for a maximum possible time commitment of three hours. Participants will not be directly identified in the results of this study.

If you would like additional information about this study, please feel free to email me at xxx@uga.edu or call me at xxx.xxx.xxxx.

Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Amy K. Clines

**Participants are able to discontinue participation in the study at any time and can cease involvement through verbal or written notification.*

APPENDIX B

Research Participant Recruitment Flier

* Research Participants Needed *

Transfer Students—share your story!

- Did you attend a 4-year college or university prior to enrolling at <Research Site>?
- Would you be interested in sharing your experience and contribute to a research study?

If so, please consider participating in *The Continuation of College Choice: A Phenomenological Study of the 4-year to 4-year Collegiate Transfer Experience* being conducted by Amy Clines, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia under the direction of Dr. Means. Participation requires an interview and follow up conversation. Additional information will be provided when you contact Amy at xxx.xxx.xxxx or xxx@xxx.xxx.

APPENDIX C

Semi Structured Interview Guide

1. Please tell me about yourself, including your educational background.

Information desired: demographic information, including educational experience through and beyond 12th grade.

2. At what point in time did you start preparing for the college application process at your first postsecondary educational institution?

Information desired: availability of and access to resources, information, etc.

3. What factors influenced your decision to enroll at the first institution you applied to?

Information desired: rationale of initial enrollment decision, importance of influential factors, sources of influence

4. When did you first consider transferring? Tell me more.

Information desired: timing of decision and factors that initiated thoughts of transferring institutions, inclusion/importance of institutional or personal factors

5. Please describe how you entered into and pursued the transfer process from your initial institution into Research University.

Information desired: resources sought/utilized throughout the search and choice process

6. Were there parts of the process that were easier than others? More difficult? Please share and describe these instances.

Information desired: challenges or barriers that influenced or impacted the choice process, parts of the process that assisted the student through the process

7. Thinking back on your experience with collegiate transfer, what advice would you give yourself?

Information desired: reflective consideration of reasoning, timing, activities, information, resources, etc.

8. Were there individuals or programs that were helpful or informative throughout the collegiate transfer process? Please elaborate where you can.

Information desired: specific programmatic initiatives or professional/academic staff that were influential or helpful in the collegiate transfer process.