

TRANSFER TRANSITIONS: TRANSFER STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE
OF THE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

by

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(Under the Direction of Timothy R. Cain)

ABSTRACT

This study contributes to existing research on transfer students through an examination of transfer students' perceptions of their new campus environment and any resulting impact of the environment on their transition. Transfer students are an increasingly significant percentage of all degree-seeking students nationally, and substantial research has been conducted in this area. However, the resulting literature primarily addresses correlations between transfer demographic characteristics and their academic success, and overlooks the role institutions play in facilitating this success as well as these students' self-described needs and goals. While isolated transfer-focused interventions have surfaced on many campuses in the past decade, few studies have explored the effects of these interventions on transfer outcomes. In this qualitative case study, a campus ecology framework was utilized to investigate how transfer students experience their new campus environment, and what environmental supports or barriers they believe contributed to their transition. Fourteen new transfer students at Kennesaw State University (KSU) participated in two rounds of semi-structured interviews and responded to two short prompts about their perceptions of the campus environment from

November 2019–March 2020. Three campus administrators were also interviewed and, along with campus observations, these data sources served to provide supplemental context to the student voices.

The findings from this study illustrate how varied these students' experiences of the campus environment were, highlighting the importance of not overly homogenizing the transfer population. Despite their unique perceptions, several common themes did emerge. Generally, these students found the size of both the campus and student population disorienting, and they had difficulty navigating systems and processes, particularly those which they perceived as deprioritizing transfer students. Students' level of access to campus—which varied based on housing type, employment status, and responsibilities—significantly impacted their development of a sense of belonging, ability to engage, and perceived community membership. So, too, did meaningful individual interactions and identity-based experiences. These findings suggest a need for institutions to consider improving access to resources, rethink existing transfer initiatives, and imbed personalized support into their transfer transition processes.

INDEX WORDS: transfer student(s), transition(s), belonging, involvement, community, campus environment(s)

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DEDICATION

To the students in this study who shared their stories, and to all the transfer students I have had the pleasure to know: you matter.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Over the past century, institutions of higher education in the United States have opened their doors to provide opportunities to a broader and broader swath of the population. Access to a college degree today is far more attainable, and the options more diverse, than at any other time in the nation's history. Along with this expansion of access has come an expansion of institutional type and number, and with this, an array of paths to degree attainment. However, this growth has not always been met with the adjustments and expansions necessary to support the new, diverse landscape of college students pursuing a bachelor's degree. One such group of students—those who transfer credits from one institution to another with the goal of degree completion—are a large and still growing percentage of this new college student landscape. College student transfer can be defined as any change in a student's institution of enrollment. College students transfer institutions for a variety of reasons during their pursuit of a degree, including academic, social, and financial, and the opportunities for transfer have never been more numerous. However, barriers to students' successful transition from one institution to another lead to a host of negative outcomes, ranging from increased time to degree to dropping out altogether.

Statement of Problem

Transfer students are much more numerous than is widely perceived. According to recent studies by the National Student Clearinghouse, a full third of all currently enrolled college students transfer at least one time during the course of their college career (Shapiro et al., 2017). Even more surprising is that of these students who transfer, over 25% transfer more than once while pursuing their degrees (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). In the 2015–2016 academic year, almost half of all students who completed a four-year degree had been enrolled at a two-year technical or community college within the previous decade (Ma & Baum, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2017). These findings all emphasize that college student transfer and credit mobility are prominent aspects of higher education in the United States today and that policies and practices need to adapt to these movement patterns for college students. Providing tailored, holistic support for members of this growing student population is vital to their success and degree completion, yet the current body of knowledge on transfer—while useful—is limited in scope and perspective. To start, existing research on transfer students focuses primarily on community college “vertical” transfers, overlooking the other growing transfer mobility patterns. In addition, most studies only explore how common transfer student characteristics impact student success, either by placing the responsibility on students to overcome these perceived shortcomings and adapt to fit the existing campus culture, or by proposing targeted and isolated transfer-specific support services that often center around a deficit mindset of an inaccurately-homogenized population. What existing research fails to address is the incredibly nuanced composition of the transfer population,

and how those complex identities impact what students need from their campus environment in order to learn, grow, and thrive.

As part of a dynamic learning environment, Strange and Banning (2015) argued that campus environments all have the following key components that “serve to prod, bend, and shape behaviors” of the students contained within them (p. 5):

- Physical (condition, design, layout/spaces)
- Human aggregate (characteristics of the people within the environment)
- Organizational/structural (policies, procedures, hierarchies, etc.)
- Constructed (Individuals’ “collective perceptions or constructions of the context and culture of the setting”)

If intentionally designed, these aspects of the campus environment serve to build the levels of environmental hierarchy which support student success, according to Strange and Banning (2015): beginning with a foundation of inclusion and safety, followed by engagement, and concluding with the establishment of community. Since the campus environment itself can make or break a transfer student’s feelings of safety, inclusion, involvement, and community—all vital to student success—it is imperative for higher education professionals to become better informed on these students’ experiences and perceptions. What is missing in our understanding of transfer students is more information about how they as individuals perceive and navigate the collegiate experience holistically, so that each campus can take responsibility for providing complete support systems to meet the needs of safety, inclusion, involvement, and community for all their students.

Who Are Today's Transfer Students?

Today's transfer student population is anything but homogenous. Transfer students often also identify with one or more diverse and historically underserved backgrounds, including students of color, first-generation college students, nontraditional students (i.e., students beyond the eighteen to twenty-two age range of recent high school graduates), veterans, commuter students, rural students, and/or those from a lower socio-economic background, among others (Ma & Baum, 2016; Taylor & Jain, 2017).

Transfer students also follow a variety of paths toward degree completion, not just the community-college-to-bachelor's-degree route that most envision when hearing the term "transfer." Although vertical transfer students (those who transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution) still comprise about 30% of transfer student pathways, the remaining 70% of mobility patterns for transfer students represents other types of transfer.

Although complex and intersecting identities make each transfer student unique and each transfer pattern is different, transfer students typically experience a host of issues that are either created or exacerbated by the transfer process itself. These typically fall into one of three areas: academic, financial, or social. Academically, credit loss is a huge issue for transfer students. Credit loss refers to students' inability to successfully transfer some of their previously earned credit hours to the receiving institution; relatedly, there are widespread issues of inadequate transfer credit articulation information and policies which contribute to credit loss. Even if credits are successfully transferred, however, articulation issues often prevent those credits from applying to any degree requirements outside of general electives; if they are not considered to be

equivalent to the new institution's existing coursework, say, or they do not align with curricular plans at the receiving institution, these credits likely end up being wasted time and expense. Another common academic hurdle transfer students encounter is called "transfer shock," first coined by Hills (1965). "Transfer shock" primarily refers to a noted dip in grade point average that most vertical transfer students experience during their first semester after transfer.

Although this grade point average drop manifests academically, it and other academic issues are often inextricably linked to other social and financial issues related to transfer. Students who experience credit loss or articulation issues may feel pressured to enroll in a higher course load in order to maximize time and/or finances, for example, particularly since very few institutions offer the same financial aid opportunities to incoming transfer students as they offer to incoming first-year (native) students. Social adjustment issues also abound for students transitioning to a new institution, which can be compounded by strains on time and money such as commuting, part- or full-time employment, or other personal responsibilities. Recent research suggests that transfer students are rebounding academically more so than in previous decades, but these students must still live with the consequences of initial academic issues, and continue to experience feelings of exclusion, isolation, and disconnection from their new institution that prevent them from becoming involved, engaged, and supported throughout their degree program (Dawson & Dell, 1997; Diaz, 1992; Ishitani, 2008; Keely III & House, 1993; Thurmond, 2003, 2007).

Access to higher education for traditionally underserved populations—many of whom transfer—has increased significantly; however, continued attention must be paid to

these students beyond initial access and throughout their time on campus in order to support their success (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Despite this increase in the transfer student population and scattered attempts toward a more inclusive and supportive environment for these students, most common campus environmental features continue to be designed for and targeted toward “traditional” students coming straight from high school. Although transfer students may benefit from services designed for first years, the transfer student population brings unique characteristics and faces distinctive challenges that require more intentional, specialized support that simply relying on a one-size-fits-all model cannot provide. Many campuses nationwide have adopted isolated transfer-specific and transfer-exclusive initiatives and programming in an attempt to address the complex needs of this student population; however, student affairs professionals must understand the entire campus environment—and more importantly, how transfer students engage with it—in order to fully support these students’ transitions.

Purpose of Study

In order to better support the large and growing population of transfer students nationally, transfer students’ holistic transition experiences must be studied more extensively from their perspective, instead of relying on small, isolated interventions that are most often created to address problems that these students allegedly bring on themselves. The aim of this study was to understand how transfer students perceive the campus environment at the receiving institution as a whole, and how that perception impacts their transition experiences and feelings of safety, involvement, community, and inclusion. Through the experiences of these students, I identified aspects of the campus

environment that provide the most effective support for, or create barriers to, the transfer transition process.

My research questions are as follows:

1. How do transfer students experience the physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed components of their campus environment at the receiving institution during their first year after transfer?
2. Based on these experiences, what environmental supports do transfer students believe aid in their transition by facilitating safety and inclusion, involvement, and community membership?
3. Based on these experiences, what environmental barriers do transfer students believe hinder a successful transition by impeding safety and inclusion, involvement, and community membership?

Given the diversification of transfer student experiences and mobility patterns in recent years, particularly the shift from majority vertical transfer to majority non-vertical (lateral, reverse, swirl, etc.), and the resulting shift toward more institution-level support on the receiving end of transfer, my goal was to understand how transfer students' environmental experiences upon transfer affect transition and hierarchical progression.

To investigate the experience of transfer students' transition to a new campus environment, I conducted a qualitative, single site case study using the framework of campus ecology (Strange & Banning, 2015). For this study, I collected and analyzed three types of data: interviews, journal entries, and observations. Using the narrative of the participants as a guide, I conducted interviews with fourteen incoming transfer students and analyzed responses to emailed journal prompts. In addition, I observed the

campus environment and interviewed three campus administrators to gather additional context.

A campus ecology model is useful in this context because it recognizes that students and institutions co-exist in an ecosystem, where each affects the other. This is contrary to a more traditional view, which suggests that the student must learn and grow to adapt to the institution in order to reap the benefits of the general college experience. Rather, a campus ecology approach asserts that the institution has an equal responsibility to adapt itself to meet the needs of its students (Strange & Banning, 2015). Moreover, using a campus ecology model to address transfer student needs is appropriate because it acknowledges the unique environmental traits of a single campus, instead of assuming all campuses share the same environmental characteristics. This framework also encourages adaptability in shaping the environment of that individual campus to match the changing needs of its continually diversifying student body. As such, I employed Strange & Banning's (2015) model of campus ecology, which "is a conceptual framework focused on the dynamic relationship between students and the campus environment. It is a framework that allows the student affairs profession not only to think about its work as encompassing students and their development, but also to develop and change campus environments to foster student learning and development" (Banning & Bryner, 2001, p. 9).

This framework helped position incoming transfer students within their larger campus environment, rather than in isolated transfer-specific contexts, and allowed me to explore the role that the existing environment as a whole plays in transfer students' ability to successfully transition. This is in contrast to the majority of existing literature

on transfer students, which typically focus on what role students' demographics and behaviors play in their own transition, or only on the effects of transfer-specific policies and programs in isolation from the broader campus environment.

Significance of Study

Transfer students' ability to shape their own experience at the receiving institution has been studied widely, including research on student demographics and characteristics, involvement, and engagement; what has been undervalued and overlooked, however, is the impact of the existing campus environment on student success. Possibly even more important than acknowledging the impact of the environment on students is recognizing that it is not the students, but the "institutions themselves [which] bear responsibility for the design and creation of campus environments, arranged appropriately or otherwise for meeting educational purposes" (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 2). The experiences and perceptions of these students have implications for improving existing services and aspects of the campus environment at the institution in this study and beyond.

Determining the challenges faced by transfer students when entering a four-year institution, and the corresponding aspects of the campus environment that could be redesigned to address these challenges, adds to the literature on transfer students and is crucial to understanding and supporting student engagement and development.

In the upcoming chapters, I present a review of the existing literature related to transfer students and their success, highlighting the areas where additional research is needed; an overview of the theoretical framework and methodology of this study; a description of the data and findings of the study; and a discussion of the results and

implications for future. The participants in this study were first and foremost found to be far less homogenous than often characterized; rather, these students' experiences were largely defined by the environmental impact of their relationships, salient identities, and campus access. Harnessing the power of these three areas to expand transfer student connections with the campus environment may be valuable for institutions aiming to improve their support of this significant subpopulation from matriculation through graduation and beyond.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study investigated new transfer students' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward the holistic campus environment during their first year at the receiving institution. This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature surrounding this topic. Beginning with an exploration of the current national landscape for transfer students, the chapter reviews types of transfer mobility patterns and provides a demographic breakdown of national transfer student characteristics. Next is a section summarizing available data on outcomes for transfer students, including retention, graduation rates, academic performance, career outcomes and alumni engagement. This is followed by a section on factors contributing to or supporting these outcomes, including the academic, social, and financial challenges faced by transfer students nationally and existing policy intervention at the national and state level. The final sections focus on the receiving institution, beginning with an examination of campus-level targeted interventions for transfer students, and concluding with the impact of the campus environment on these outcomes as posited by Strange and Banning's (2015) theory of campus ecology.

Landscape

While most institutions continue to focus on first-time, full time enrollment, retention, and completion, students who transfer institutions while pursuing a degree

comprise a large and only increasing percentage of the higher education landscape. Recent studies have shown that upwards of 30% of all college students transfer at least once during their undergraduate career, and almost that many transfer a second or even a third time before graduating (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2017, 2018). Given the prominence of these movement patterns, existing policy and institutional practices should refocus efforts to better support this population of students.

Arguably, the expansion in college student transfer and credit mobility can be linked to the expansion of access to higher education in general, as the transfer student population tends to be comprised largely of students from diverse and historically underserved backgrounds (Ma & Baum, 2016). The past century has seen the emergence of a wider range and number of institutional and types, credentialing options, and the creation and expansion of federally funded student financial aid options. These new opportunities have allowed and encouraged many students to pursue a college degree for whom it previously would not have been possible. In particular, students who transfer institutions are often students of color, first-generation college students, nontraditional students (i.e., students beyond the eighteen to twenty-two age range of recent high school graduates), veterans, commuter students, part-time students, rural students, and/or from a lower socio-economic background, among others (Archambault, 2015; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

While the general transfer population is itself diverse, a major component of the expansion of the transfer landscape in the United States is related to another diversification: that of transfer types or mobility patterns. Vertical or upward transfer, a one-time transfer of credits from a two-year institution to a four-year, bachelor's degree

granting institution, is what most associate with transfer students. Beyond vertical transfer, multiple other patterns have emerged: students now transfer “in reverse,” i.e. from a bachelor’s degree-granting institution to a two-year institution; they also transfer laterally, meaning to an institution with the same degree options as their previous school. Finally, two other mobility patterns are often observed: what is known as “swirl,” where students move back and forth between institutions, and concurrent enrollment or “double-dipping,” in which students are enrolled in courses at multiple institutions simultaneously (Bahr, 2009; Baldwin, 2017; de los Santos & Wright, 1990; Hossler, 2012; McCormick, 2003; Townsend, 1999). While vertical transfer continues to be the mobility pattern most widely studied and broadly supported at national, state, and institutional levels, it is no longer what dominates transfer student patterns today, as students create and explore new transfer patterns. Nonetheless it remains a prominent pathway, and an intention that the majority of community college students indicate upon entry (Horn et al., 2011).

The preparation of students for transfer to a bachelor’s degree-granting institution is often described as a historical mission and primary focus of community colleges (Cohen & Braher, 1996; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Phelan, 1997). “The transfer function was, and still is, one of the most important functions of community colleges. The success of college transfer students, from an academic standpoint, long has been used as an important measure of the quality of a community college education,” Glass and Harrington (2002, p. 416) stated. Although that mission is debated and has certainly expanded to include vocational training and certificate program credentialing, over 80% of students entering community college still claim that they plan to earn a bachelor’s degree, which supports the enduring nature of this transfer type (Horn et al., 2011).

Community colleges tend to enroll students who, for a variety of reasons, believe themselves to be better served by an institution that is close to home, less expensive, and/or perhaps an easier transition from high school in terms of class size, faculty interaction, and academic rigor (Hossler et al., 2012).

Despite the immediate benefits that community colleges may offer students, vertical transfer and eventual bachelor's degree attainment remains a common goal; transfer students are often from low-income backgrounds, and beginning their path to bachelor's degree completion at a lower-cost institution closer to home is a common strategy for saving money and living expenses. Community colleges remain the most affordable option for higher education, and in fact, 67% of all community college students had family incomes below \$50,000 in the 2015–2016 school year (Radwin et al., 2018). During the same year, 42.7% of students who enrolled at more than one institution received Pell grants, and 62.8% received some type of federal Title IV aid (Radwin et al., 2018). Similarly, 38% of first-generation students—students who did not have a parent with a college degree—choose community colleges as their first institution, compared with only 20% of students who were not the first in their family to attend college (Lauff & Ingels, 2014).

While community colleges may provide an easier entry and lower cost point for underserved, nontraditional, and lower-income students who aspire to complete their bachelor's degree, only a third of these students successfully transfer within six years of initial enrollment (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). In addition to personal issues the students may face during this time, many scholars connect this drastic percentage disparity to a process known as “cooling out,” whereby faculty and staff of community and technical colleges

essentially steer their students away from the transfer path (Clark, 1960). This process has been explained as both a measure to discourage students who are perceived as less academically capable from pursuing programs beyond their ability, as well as a method of increasing degree completion and graduation rates at the sending institutions. In recent years, however, an opposing phenomenon called “warming up” has emerged. “Warming up” refers to the idea that students may increase confidence in their academic abilities through initial community college attendance, and then apply that newfound confidence to propel them toward higher degree attainment (Adelman, 2005; Alexander et al., 2008; Deil-Amen, 2006).

Crisp & Nunez (2014) have also found a huge difference in the rates of vertical or upward transfer based on racial breakdowns, with students of color successfully transferring to a four-year institution at much lower rates than their White counterparts. Although overall transfer rates across race and ethnicity are relatively equal, differences emerge when the data is broken down by sector and mobility pattern. Asian and White students are much more likely to begin at a four-year institution (public or private) prior to transfer—about 65% of each ethnicity transfer—whereas Black and Hispanic students more often begin at a two-year institution, with less than half of each first enrolling at a bachelor’s degree-granting school (Shapiro et al., 2018). Similarly, while close to half of transfers who moved from a 4-year to a 2-year institution were what is known as “summer swirls,” transferring just for a summer term and then returning to their 4-year institution, Asian and White students comprise the bulk of summer swirls while Black and Hispanic students were much more likely not to return to their previous 4-year school (Shapiro et al., 2018). For those who begin at a community college, again, White and

Asian students were much more likely to transfer vertically to a 4-year (48.1% and 47.7%) than Black and Hispanic (28.4 and 37.2%). Overall, this suggests that Asian and White students more often end at a four-year institution than Hispanic and Black students, regardless of where they began and whether they supplemented with credits from a two-year; this is known as the racial transfer gap, which identifies racially-based inequity in vertical transfer rates (Crisp & Nunez, 2014).

Even for those students who are successfully able to transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution, transfer students typically take longer to complete their degree than native students (students who began their career at the receiving institution)—60% of these native students complete their degree within six years, compared to only 30% of students who transferred (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Jenkins & Fink (2016) also found that less than half of all students who transferred from a two-year institution to a bachelor's degree-granting institution ever completed their bachelor's degree at all.

As defined previously, in addition to vertical transfer, there are four emerging patterns of transfer mobility seen across the country: lateral transfer, transfer “swirl,” “double-dipping” or co-enrollment, and reverse transfer (Bahr, 2009; Baldwin, 2017; de los Santos & Wright, 1990; Hossler, 2012; McCormick, 2003; Townsend, 1999).

Students who transfer laterally are those that transfer their credits and/or enrollment from institutions of the same type, such as from a two-year to another two-year institution or a four-year to another four-year institution. The National Student Clearinghouse report found that almost 40% of students who began at a two-year institution transferred to another two-year, and a similar percentage from four-year to four-year, so this is not a negligible transfer type (Shapiro et al., 2017).

Transfer student “swirl,” or movement back and forth between institutions, and double-dipping, or enrolling in more than one institution simultaneously, are common within lateral transfer, particularly at the community college level (Bahr, 2009; McCormick, 2003; Rab, 2004). Bahr (2009) found that a primary motivating factor for these students was the availability of certain courses at the various community colleges during the semester in which students needed or wanted to take them, and that little research has been done on lateral transfer as it relates to outcomes for these students. Using National Education Longitudinal Survey data, Rab (2004) found that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to engage in “swirling,” and that “swirling” contributes to longer time-to-degree. Swirl and double-dipping patterns are particularly interesting as they do not fit the implied one-time transfer of credits and enrollment from one institution to another that most think of when they define transfer students.

Reverse transfer, or transferring enrollment from a four-year degree granting institution “back” to a two-year institution, is another growing pattern in transfer student mobility. Reverse transferring has similar rates according to the same National Student Clearinghouse study—about 40% of students who transfer out of a four-year institution are transitioning to a community college or other two-year institution (Baldwin, 2017; Shapiro et al., 2017). Reverse transfer is associated with extremely low completion rates, and with students from less educated families; however, scholarship in this area is moving away from this deficit-mindset given the plethora of factors that may cause a student to transfer from a four-year institution to a two-year institution (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009). Similar but distinct from reverse transfer enrollment is the process of

reverse credit transfer, where students who have previously transferred from an associate degree-granting institution prior to obtaining the associate degree to another institution transfer some of their newly earned credits back to the previous institution in order to retroactively receive their associate degree (Taylor & Giani, 2019).

Outcomes

After the study of higher education became an academic field in its own right in the twentieth century, defining and measuring student success in college became a priority, and theories of student development and outcome measures emerged based on research of the traditional college student. These assessment outcomes include campus- and national-level statistics on student retention, academic performance, and time to degree, among others, and are used heavily by college ranking systems such as U.S. News and World Report. While the makeup of the national population of college students has grown to include traditionally underserved populations, these theories and measures of success in college have not kept pace with the students they aim to describe. Even as recently as the 1990s, compilations of research on college student outcomes were based largely on samples of these “traditional” students—White, full-time, on-campus students who were recent high school graduates, financially secure, and had few to no other responsibilities beyond their pursuit of a degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005).

Academically, transfer students see similar negative outcomes connected to persistence and retention, graduation rates, and grade point average compared to native (non-transfer) students—all quantifiable measures equated with student success. Transfer student persistence and retention refers to both the retention of transfer students at the

receiving institution, i.e. continued enrollment at the receiving institution, as well as the retention of students struggling academically, i.e. placed on academic probation and subject to academic dismissal based on poor performance, or those that drop out due to the perception of academic failure or inability to succeed academically.

In the 2018 Transfer and Mobility report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, the cohort of community college students who started postsecondary education in fall 2011 were tracked over six years. From this national cohort of 2.8 million first-time community college students, only 42.2% of those who transferred vertically completed a bachelor's degree within six years of initial enrollment. During that same time period, only 36.3% of incoming transfer students across mobility types completed a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution (Shapiro et al., 2017). This study provides some of the only national data on transfer retention and time to degree, and yet only shows the data broken down by gender, enrollment status, and income bracket. It does not include age, race, military status, first-generation status, rural-urban classification, or other demographics shown to correlate with transfer.

Several smaller studies from the 1990s echo issues with persistence and completion for vertical transfer students. Best and Gehring (1993) looked at community college transfers to a four-year Kentucky university and found that 60.4% of the native students completed their degree compared to only 40.1% of the transfer students. Similarly, a study investigating admissions standards at the University of Missouri–Columbia found that both the one-year retention rate and six-year graduation rate for transfer students were significantly lower than those of their native counterparts (Saupe & Long, 1996).

Beyond these studies on vertical transfer, limited research exists that tracks transfer outcomes related to retention and time-to-degree. A 2010 study by Dai Li used Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS: 96/01) data to examine bachelor's degree attainment for lateral transfers (four-year to four-year, in this case). Li (2010) found that lateral transfers who stop out—i.e. take a semester or more off—are 71.2% less likely to complete their bachelor's degree within six years; however, even lateral transfer students who attend continuously are 31.9% less likely to graduate than native students. Also noted in Li's (2010) study is that older students, males, and Hispanic students are slightly less likely to complete a degree than their counterparts (2.5%, 5.4 %, and 11%, respectively). Interestingly, Li (2010) did not find that socio-economic status had a significant impact on time to bachelor's degree completion for four-year to four-year lateral transfer students, contrary to Rab's (2004) findings that "swirling" lateral transfer students have a higher likelihood of being low-income and have lower completion rates than students who did not transfer.

Another common academic issue related to grade point average and experienced by transfers is that of "transfer shock," first coined by J.R. Hills (1965) after a review of more than twenty studies of academic performance of the community college transfer in the first half of the twentieth century. "Transfer shock" refers to a noted dip in grade point average experienced by most vertical transfer students during their first semester after transfer at the receiving institution (Cedja, 1997; Cejda & Kaylor, 1997; Frederickson, 1998; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Hills, 1965; Ishitani, 2008; Knoell & Medsker, 1965; Pascarella, 1999). Hills (1965) compiled studies that spanned the period between 1928 and 1964 and found that during a transfer student's first semester at the

receiving institution, the student could expect a decline in GPA of anywhere from .30 to .50.

While initial studies examined this phenomenon in the 1960s, there has been a resurgent interest in the topic as the nation sees a substantial increase in students transferring between institutions. More recent studies have both acknowledged the continued presence of transfer shock and attributed the phenomenon to many different factors, including demographic variables such as race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, and age; behavioral factors such as full- or part-time attendance, stopping out, and employment status; and most often, academic preparation, class standing, major, and the increase in academic rigor at the transfer institution (Cedja, 1997; Cejda & Kaylor, 1997; Hills, 1965; Ishitani, 2008; Keely & House, 1993; Knoell & Medsker, 1965; Pascarella, 1999; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000).

Keely III and House (1993) undertook a study to measure the effect of transfer shock on academic performance at Northern Illinois University, specifically examining the impact of academic class, gender, ethnicity, age, major, resident status, and previous degree achievements. Their findings confirmed the existence of transfer shock, but revealed differences based on gender (women outperformed men), degree attainment (those who had previously earned an associate degree performed better), academic class (sophomore transfer students experienced greater drops in GPA than those who transferred as juniors), and age (those aged >21 and <25 performed better and experienced a less significant drop in GPA). Age was also positively correlated with a higher GPA for transfer students in a study of Connecticut community college transfer students, although age negatively correlated with time to degree (Moumouris, 1997).

Keely III and House (1993) also found that there was wide variation based on student major, which is consistent with other findings where transfer students in STEM majors and business have larger GPA dips than those in education, fine arts, humanities, and social sciences (Cejda, 1997, 1998; Frederickson, 1998).

The term transfer shock has also been used to encompass other social and academic behaviors observed in transfer students that may play a part in student attrition and ultimately, the failure to complete an undergraduate degree program (Davies & Casey, 1999; Frederickson, 1998; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Piland, 1995; Pascarella, 1999; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000; Thurmond, 2003, 2008). These studies discussed how the above behaviors contribute to difficulty adjusting to the academic standards of a four-year institution after sub-par academic preparation in a community college setting. In a 1995 study of recent San Diego State University transfer graduates, Piland found that transfer students who successfully completed their bachelor's degree shared some characteristics: they enrolled full-time more often, they took fewer semesters, off, and dropped fewer courses. These students also graduated more quickly if they entered with a clear major and career path in mind. Piland (1995) noted that being undecided on major can be a significant contributor to increased time to degree for transfer students, particularly as it relates to course selection, schedule creation and curricular sequencing/progression.

In addition to quantitative research on transfer shock and contributing factors, some qualitative surveys and interviews have been done to assess the perceived preparation levels of these students (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Davies & Casey, 1999; Townsend, 1995; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Sibersky, 2018). Davies and Casey (1999)

conducted focus groups that looked at academic and social factors for students who transferred to a four-year institution after beginning at a community college—one student reported that compared to the ease and safety of the community college, the university was like “a bewildering, lumbering beast” (p. 60). In a survey of 372 vertical transfer students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Berger and Malaney (2003) assessed transfer student satisfaction across five categories: social life, sense of community on campus, academic support, academic progress, and overall university experience. Their results indicated that the best predictor of both satisfaction and academic success post-transfer is the level of pre-transfer preparation done by the student (Berger & Malaney, 2003). Similarly, Townsend and Wilson (2006), building off of a 1995 Townsend study, interviewed 19 transfer students at a large state research institution, and found that these students were overwhelmed by the size and complexity of the new university and therefore struggled to integrate. They suggested that the four-year institution must take responsibility for supporting these transfer students’ transition (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

In a qualitative study of students transferring into Iowa State University, six focus groups of 8–10 transfer students revealed common academic and social challenges that contributed to transfer shock (Sibersky, 2018). These students commonly experienced social isolation, lack of knowledge about the credit transfer process, and a lack of personal relationships with faculty that they attributed to larger class sizes (Sibersky, 2018). It is likely that all of the above has played some part in the academic performance and social integration of community college students after transferring to a larger university.

Other studies on transfer shock have found that though transfer shock occurs almost universally in transfer, it is not usually severe—transfer student GPA tends to dip only slightly and usually bounces back by the end of their first year on campus (Diaz, 1992; Dawson & Dell, 1997; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Keely III & House, 1993; Thurmond, 2007). However, the experience itself may cause “some transfer students [to] leave the four-year institution due to presumed failure and drop out” (Glass & Harrington, 2002, p. 417). Diaz (1992) performed a meta-analysis of 62 studies on transfer shock and found that although almost 80% of students within these studies experienced a dip in GPA upon transfer, the numerical drop was typically smaller than half a grade point. Additionally, over two thirds of the studies contained within reported at least a partial GPA recovery within the students’ first year at the receiving institution (Diaz, 1992).

Even when transfers persist, the lingering effects of this GPA dip may lead to ongoing problems (Dawson & Dell, 1997; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Keely III & House, 1993; Thurmond, 2007). Glass and Harrington (2002) found that North Carolina community college students who transferred to a large, four-year in-state institution did recover academically from observed transfer shock in terms of GPA, but were still less likely to be retained than their native counterparts, consistent with other research where transfer students are less likely to graduate than native students (Best & Gehring, 1993; Saupe & Long, 1996). In fact, those who dropped out tended to do so before the end of their second transfer term, suggesting that the transfer shock they experienced may have contributed to the decision (Glass & Harrington, 2002). Dawson and Dell (1997) tested the effectiveness of recently created “transfer guides,” documents that outlined relevant

transfer policies, programming, and support, on transfer student success and degree completion at Montana State University Billings. In a quantitative analysis of 127 transfer students' transcripts, they found that all three groups experienced a GPA dip regardless of pre-transfer characteristics, but that those who had transfer guides persisted at significantly greater rates than those who did not, emphasizing the potential impact of transfer shock on persistence and the need for enhanced post-transfer support.

Despite the body of research on outcomes for these students upon transfer, research on post-graduation outcomes such as job and graduate school placement rates and alumni engagement and giving is extremely limited. Some older studies provide analysis of national datasets that did not reveal a gap between native and transfer graduates' career paths; a study by Smart and Ethington (1985), using National Longitudinal Study data from the high school class of 1972, found no significant differences in early career outcomes between native and vertical transfer students. Similarly, in their second volume of *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) summarized three studies that found little to no negative effect on earnings for vertical transfers. According to these studies, which analyzed National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 79:96 data, transferring from a community college does not significantly impact earnings when compared with students who completed their degree at a single institution (Gill & Leigh, 2003; Light & Strayer, 2004; Thomas, 2003).

Conversely, one of the few recent studies that even mentions transfers in relation to these outcomes was conducted in 2014 by Stephenson and Yerger, and did find differences in career outcomes for transfer students. When surveying alumni of a mid-Atlantic state university about their employment opportunities and donation behaviors,

they were able to identify differences based on whether alumni identified with the institution “brand.” According to their findings, native students had a stronger connection to the university and also were employed at “higher status” jobs than those who began their time at a community college and never fully connected with the university brand (Stephenson & Yerger, 2014).

Outside of these studies, however, little else is known, and notably missing is any literature on job attainment for transfer patterns beyond vertical. Research on alumni engagement is similarly lacking, although several other studies did support Stephenson and Yerger (2014) in finding that transfer students were less likely to feel connected to their university, which correlated with lower rates of giving (Clotfelter, 2001; Drew-Branch, 2011).

Transfer Challenges and Policy Interventions

As referenced above, the limited existing research on transfer student outcomes is not encouraging and much more information is needed about how these students fare compared to their native counterparts. Although it would be easy to say that these differences in outcomes are due to a lack of academic preparation or ability on the part of transfer students, research shows that this is more likely a result of a combination of factors impacting transfer students more so than native students. Despite a significant increase in the transfer student population and a move toward more targeted support for these students, most common student support services continue to be designed for and targeted toward traditional students. Although there is some overlap in the services that are most beneficial to traditional students and those that benefit students who have

transferred from another institution, the transfer student population generally exhibits some unique characteristics and faces some distinctive challenges that require more specialized support.

For most transfer students regardless of mobility pattern or demographics, a host of issues are either created or exacerbated by the transfer process. Although these issues may have overlapping and compounding effects on each other (financial instability may also affect academic outcomes, etc.), they can loosely be categorized into three general areas: financial, social, and academic. These factors include financial stressors such as living away from home for the first time or commuting, working full- or part-time, and/or contributing financially to family; social issues with transfer transitions such as feelings of isolation; and academic issues such as adjusting to larger class sizes, less faculty interaction, or a more rigorous curriculum (Thurmond, 2003, 2007; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

If institutions want to promote success for all of their students, attention needs to be paid to outcomes for transfers and how they can be better supported to improve those outcomes. In working toward creating a “transfer-receptive culture,” however, institutions should be careful not to assume that all transfer student needs are equal. Despite facing some common issues, they are a diverse group in need of background, experiences, needs, and transfer type and do not uniformly share all characteristics (Handel, 2011, 2013; Herrera & Jain, 2013; Taylor & Jain, 2017). In the following discussion of factors contributing to transfer outcomes, examples will be given to illustrate the individual but often overlapping issues these students face as it relates to student success, as well as areas where more research is needed.

As discussed above, academic outcomes such as retention, graduation rates/time to degree, and academic performance are quantifiable metrics equated with student success. What constitutes success in relation to these metrics needs to be reexamined, however, in light of transfer student needs, goals, and patterns that are here to stay (Baldwin, 2017). Retention and grade point average as they relate to academic success (i.e., students maintaining good academic standing and not being placed on probation or dismissal) remains useful, but retention at the sending or receiving institution in evaluating persistence and completion is now much more complex. In addition, although academic and social integration are still predictive of academic success and persistence toward degree for these students, the same supports that are provided for native/traditional students are not always available for transfer students, or if they exist, they are not always effective at facilitating their distinct goals and needs (Baldwin, 2017).

Vertical transfers who come from community or technical colleges often struggle academically due to adjusting to the size and complexity of their new school, experiencing the “transfer shock” drop in GPA during their first semester; first-generation students may lack the knowledge of available campus academic support resources; veterans and older students’ desire for self-sufficiency may prevent them from taking advantage of the resources available; and students with outside responsibilities such as commuters, students with families, and working students may try to maximize the cost of tuition and/or living expenses by overloading their course schedules and not have the time to utilize academic support even if they are aware of it (Davies & Casey, 1999; Frederickson, 1998; Glass & Harrington, 2002; Hills, 1965; Lanaan, 1996, 2007;

Pascarella, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Piland, 1995; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000; Thurmond, 2003, 2008).

Graduation rates and time to degree are also lower and longer for transfer students, as mentioned above, which may indicate a lack of support for these students' success. Certainly, there are negative factors which slow graduation time for these students such as lack of transparency in transfer policies or credit articulation, loss of credits in transfer, lack of financial aid opportunities, missing or outdated information on curricular requirements, etc. (Austin, 2006; Flaga, 2006; Townsend, 2008). However, students with other responsibilities or reasons for multiple transfers may require extended time to complete programs due to stopping and starting or part-time enrollment; if these students are pushed to complete degree programs within a shorter timeframe, such as initiatives like 15 to Finish (Complete College America, 2019), it may have a negative impact on their grade point average, developmental outcomes, and persistence in general. There is a need for better accounting of attendance patterns as they relate to retention, graduation rates, and time to degree, particularly for non-vertical transfers—lateral, reverse, swirl, and concurrently enrolled students (Bahr, 2009; McCormick, 2003).

Whether a student persists post-transfer is significantly affected by how their earned credit hours transfer and apply, or do not apply, to the degree they pursue at the receiving institution, and includes issues of credit loss and transfer credit articulation. In fact, students who transferred almost all of their earned credits were 2.5 times more likely to complete a four-year degree than those who transferred fewer than half (Austin, 2006; Flaga, 2006; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015; Townsend, 2008). The concept of credit loss is a huge issue for transfer students and occurs when students are not able to successfully

transfer a portion of their previously earned credit hours to the receiving institution. Practically, this means that students have paid for and worked to earn college-level credits that, in their eyes, are wasted. Not only is this unnecessary effort and expense; it also contributes to feelings of frustration, futility, and a decrease in motivation to persist (Jenkins & Fink, 2015; Townsend, 2008).

Relatedly, there are widespread issues of inadequate transfer credit articulation information and policies, which contributes to credit loss and/or unnecessary accumulation of general elective credits beyond degree requirements. Even if credits are successfully transferred and counted toward total credits earned at the receiving institution, articulation issues may prevent those credits from applying to any degree requirements outside of general electives if they are not considered to be equivalent to coursework or do not align with curricular plans at the receiving institution. This is particularly problematic as degree programs become more and more specialized and reduce or eliminate general electives in the process. Both credit loss and inadequate articulation of transfer credits contribute to lower persistence and retention rates among transfers (Austin, 2006; Flaga, 2006; Jenkins & Fink, 2015; Townsend, 2008).

Transfer shock, as defined previously, relates to transfers' academic performance and has been attributed to many different factors, including demographic variables such as race or ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender, and age; behavioral factors such as full- or part-time attendance and employment status; and most often, the increase in academic rigor at the transfer institution (Cedja, 1997; Cejda & Kaylor, 1997; Hills, 1965; Knoell & Medsker, 1965; Pascarella, 1999; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000). Although this phenomenon is observed academically, it and other academic issues are

often connected to social and financial issues related to transfer. Students who experience credit loss or articulation issues may feel pressured to enroll in a higher course load in order to maximize time and/or finances, particularly since very few institutions offer the same financial aid opportunities to incoming transfer students as what is offered to incoming first-year (native) students (Townsend, 2008). Adjustment issues also abound for students transitioning to a new institution, as they experience isolation and a struggle to connect which can be compounded by other strains on time and money such as commuting, part- or full-time employment, or other personal responsibilities.

Factors such as student development and involvement contribute to tangible outcomes such as persistence and retention, as discussed previously, and are also related to less tangible goals of a college education, such as producing informed, productive, and engaged members of society and developing social and life skills for whatever lies ahead post-graduation. Both Tinto (1975, 1993) and Astin (1984, 2001) provided foundational research and theory surrounding the importance of engagement and involvement to student success. Tinto (1975, 1993) found that in order to succeed, students must acclimate to the culture of the institution, and conditions such as institutional student support, student involvement and interaction, and student learning are correlated with persistence and retention. Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement posited that student inputs, or the student's own background, characteristics, and experiences, when engaged with the college environment itself, lead to student outcomes for students. Although the student's own characteristics do impact their success, equally important is the environment provided by the institution, and the extent to which the student feels academically and socially connected to that environment (Astin, 1984, 2001). Pascarella

and Terenzini's (2005) work supported this, specifically citing peer interaction and extracurricular engagement as correlated with persistence.

Research on transfer student engagement is more limited, but what exists supports a positive relationship between engagement and persistence. Ishitani and McKittrick (2010) studied community college transfers in comparison to native students on a four-year campus and found all transfers to be less engaged than those who began at the four-year institution. They also found that the later in their career students transferred, the less engaged they were, and that part-time enrollment led to decreased engagement. In a study of transfer student perceptions of belonging and engagement at George Mason University, Lester et al. (2013) did not find differences across age groups, but did find a sense of belonging in academic activities to be critical to success, consistent with Kuh et al. (2005), Townsend and Wilson (2006), D'Amico et al. (2013) and others. In a study of transfer students at a large, urban institution in the southeastern United States, D'Amico et al. (2013) defined academic and social engagement as perceived academic and social fit after the first six to eight weeks of enrollment at the receiving institution. Their findings showed that transfer students' perception of whether they "fit in" academically and socially was the most consistent predictor of success (D'Amico et al., 2013).

Much of the literature on transfer student engagement comes from the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and places the responsibility to engage on the student. Kuh et al. (2005) found a positive correlation between engagement and persistence and argued that engagement is defined by the investment students make in their own college experience rather than acknowledging the institutional role in facilitating engagement. Ignoring the

impact of the campus environment and focusing all onus on the student is problematic, as illustrated by the findings from Laanan's (2007) Transfer Students' Questionnaire. This questionnaire revealed several significant environmental factors contributing to academic and social adjustment challenges, including negative perceptions of the 4-year environment, organized social activities, and clubs and organizations (Laanan, 2007).

Institutional support is crucial to transfer student academic and social engagement particularly because of the variation in incoming transfer student characteristics and experiences. Depending on their characteristics, academic experiences and preparation, and transfer patterns, transfer students may enter the receiving institution much more developed in certain areas than "traditional" or native students, but much less in others. To illustrate, many transfer students transfer from a school close to home in a rural area and may also be first-generation or from a lower income bracket. These students may be vertical or lateral transfers, but often bring "transfer capital"—more developed autonomy and resiliency than native students due to the self-propelled path taken to reach the receiving institution (Davies & Casey, 1999; Berger & Malaney, 2003; Lanaan et al., 2011). They may also be more financially literate and possess life skills beyond their peers due to caring for or supporting family financially, particularly if they are of nontraditional age. However, they may be less prepared for other aspects of their postsecondary experience due to a lack of social or cultural capital and may be less able to become involved and integrated into campus life due to commuting, working, or other commitments (Berger & Malaney, 2003; D'Amico et al., 2013; Davies & Casey, 1999; Lanaan, 1996, 2007; Lanaan et al., 2011; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Even if they have the desire, time, and financial resources to actively engage on campus, transfer students have missed out on the first-year transition experience facilitated by the institution, including interactions, initiatives, events, and marketing designed to support their acclimation. Getting transitional support for the transfer experience was found to be the best indicator for both satisfaction and academic performance in a study of almost 400 community college transfers to a four-year university, despite many institutions not providing the same supports for transfers as they do incoming first-years (Berger & Malaney, 2003). This institutional transfer preparation should include advice and counseling from institutional staff, connection to faculty, and guided understanding of academic policies and requirements, Berger and Malaney (2003) found.

Even if these resources exist, transfer students also experience isolation and feelings of inadequacy due to the invisible stigma of being a transfer student, and not being surrounded by others going through the same experience (Lanaan, 1996, 2007; Townsend, 2008). Other factors may impact their ability to get involved: first generation students lack of knowledge about or support for college may impede their understanding of opportunities; racial and cultural minority students may struggle to find groups with whom they identify; and veterans and older students tend to be more focused on academic goals rather than social connection. Students who are enrolled in multiple institutions simultaneously, or swirl between them, may never be on one campus long enough to explore opportunities, or may find the effort needed pointless considering their anticipated tenure; and students who are used to one institution type or specific campus

opportunities may struggle to engage when they find themselves in a very different environment.

These and other issues have prompted policies and initiatives at the national, state, and institution level, and national studies surveying these practices. A fifty-state comparison analysis was completed this year which created an inventory of four different transfer-related policies and practices across the country: a transfer-friendly core curriculum, the existence of common course numbering, associate degree transferability, and reverse transfer policies (Education Commission of the States, 2018). This comparison found that more than thirty states do facilitate core curriculum transfer within state institutions along with the guaranteed transfer of an associate degree, and that almost forty states have some version of reverse credit transfer policy, either at the state level or other opportunities outside of state policy. Although these numbers seem promising, there have been very few studies that go beyond inventory to examine and evaluate the effectiveness of state-level policies surrounding transfer. Additionally, even if these policies are useful for students transferring within state systems of higher education, the study did not examine institution-level supports or consider transfer across state lines.

In 2012, College Board created recommendations for both sending and receiving institutions to help facilitate the process both pre- and post-transfer. In addition to areas previously mentioned such as better articulation and financial aid opportunities, this report recommended institutional support from both the sending and receiving institution to help students navigate the process. A national effort to impact state and institution-level transfer support, Complete College America (CCA), is a nonprofit funded by

foundations such as Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation with the goal of increasing time to degree and overall college completion rates across the country.

At its core, CCA and the state-level offshoots (Complete College Georgia, etc.) advocate for state-level funding that is based on outcomes such as graduation rates rather than enrollment numbers to incentivize strategies to facilitate faster and higher degree completion rates. Some of their recommendations that align with other transfer-related research include better communication of state- and institution-level policies surrounding curricular requirements and options, as well as transparent academic plans and intensive academic advising services (Complete College America). A related initiative, mentioned earlier, is “Credit Where It’s Due,” which encourages the reverse transfer of credits from a four-year institution back to two-year institution in order to award students with associate degrees.

Campus-Level Interventions

In addition to these state and national policies and initiatives, many individual institutions have begun adopting programs and support to help facilitate transfer student success. Transfer-specific outreach and recruitment, including prospective student advisors and counselors, is one such measure, along with post-transfer academic support advisors and units. Along with this comes institutions working to redesign their transfer credit evaluation processes to be more efficient and easier to navigate.

Although it is important to refrain from homogenizing all transfer students’ experiences, research that controls for institutional and student characteristics still found

that students who transfer are less likely to attain a bachelor's degree, and the need for a "transfer-receptive culture" at both sending and receiving institutions is critical (Long & Kurlander, 2009; Taylor & Jain, 2017). The bulk of the responsibility for preparing community college students for transfer has been ascribed to the sending institutions, and many two-year institutions have created transfer pathways and support mechanisms for their students; however, supports on the end of the receiving institution have historically been ignored. In that same vein, sending institutions that may not anticipate their students transferring out typically do not have any formal supports for transfers, and the same for two-year institutions who do not expect to receive transfers.

Regardless of the type of institution a student transfers from or to, the new institution differs in myriad ways that can on their own or in tandem present challenges to transfer student success. Dawson and Dell (1997) theorized that transfer guides and pre-transfer programs might keep students from experiencing transfer shock, or at least provide them with the direction they need to weather the storm of the first semester of transfer. Institution-level supports designed to facilitate this transition have begun popping up on campuses across the country, but are typically still too new to have been evaluated in relation to outcomes (Kerr et al., 2004).

In the 2015 report from the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CASE), guidelines for transfer support stated that programming specific to the transfer student's first semester was critical for adjustment and included specific recommendations such as intrusive academic advising and other academic support, transfer seminars, and formal mentoring programs, among others. Of these supports, targeted and enhanced academic advising services for transfer students has the most

research-supported connection to improved outcomes (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Lester et al., 2013; Townsend, 2008). Since advising exists on virtually all campuses in some form, taking advantage of this existing route of relationship-building seems wise as a foundation of transfer student support.

Another feature of transition services that is ubiquitous across campuses is that of the new student orientation. Versions of orientation for transfers have existed for some time, but for many years were merely perfunctory events that assumed transfer students' baseline of college experience implied a reduced need for transition support. However, in recent decades, institutions have begun utilizing this mandatory event to target transfer-related needs and advertise other transfer-intended engagement opportunities (Finley & McNair, 2013; Foote, 2018; Laanan, 1996, 2007; Marling & Jacobs, 2011). These redesigned transfer orientation sessions often advertise new transfer-focused curricular and extracurricular options such as transfer transition seminars, transfer student organizations, transfer residence halls, and peer or faculty mentoring. Some institutions have also begun offering financial aid that is not only equivalent to those scholarship opportunities available to first-year students, but some financial aid that is available exclusively to transfer students. Other transfer-focused opportunities include transfer student seminars which mimic first-year transition courses designed to help students acclimate to campus life; transfer student organizations; peer or faculty mentoring programs; and on-campus residence halls dedicated to transfer students (Flaga, 2006; Grites & Farina, 2012).

Literature Gap

Although promising to see these institution-level efforts to support transfer student success, there is still much work to be done. Despite these moves to better study and facilitate the transfer process for today's students, there is still much missing from the existing literature and more research needed to fill these gaps. Most of the data available on transfer is at the student level, and more needs to be done at the institution level. What does exist has focused on the responsibility of the sending institution, with little said about the equal responsibility of the receiving institution to partner in the transfer process. With the extent to which students are incorporating credits from multiple institutions into their degree plans, it is critical to streamline pathways for transfer, which must be a partnership rather than a one-way process (Baldwin, 2017). Secondly, the research on student motivation and outcomes related to transfer student patterns is scant, and most policies are based around the assumption of a linear, vertical transfer path. More research is needed that investigates the "why" of new transfer patterns and incorporates those patterns into policies. Transfer students are pursuing these complex paths for a variety of reasons that often go beyond the traditional understanding of transfer, and pathways must adapt to facilitate the new transfer student's needs.

Due to the relatively recent implementation of many of these programs and initiatives, there is little research available on their effectiveness, or how students integrate these targeted programs into their experience of campus holistically. Additionally, most of these programs are merely offshoots of programs originally designed for first-year, traditional students, and may not be considering the diverse needs of transfer student characteristics, nor the various patterns of transfer. Campuses should

aim to provide support addresses all aspects of student experience with campus, rather than creating bubbles or pockets of support for each particular student type that do not represent students' experience of the environment as a whole. To truly understand these experiences, much more research is needed that privileges the student perspective and incorporates that into theory and practice.

Impact of the Campus Environment

The ability of college students to impact their individual own experiences at the receiving institution has been studied widely, including research on student demographics/characteristics, involvement, and engagement; however, what has been undervalued is the impact of the campus environment on transfer student success. Banning and Kaiser (1979) introduced an ecological perspective for designing college campuses, noting not just the student's ability to shape his or her experience but also "the influence of environments on persons and persons on environments" (p. 371). In 1979, Bronfenbrenner applied the ecological model to human development, emphasizing how a child's inherent qualities interact with his or her environment to impact growth and development across ecosystems. Kaiser (1975) and Moos (1986) discussed how the quality of the student experience was partially dependent on improving the quality of campus environments, and that these environments influenced human behavior. Strange and Banning's (2001) *Educating by Design* explored and expanded the idea of campus ecology, creating a framework that could be applied toward any institution type, which they then further developed in 2015.

To explore how college transfer students experience the campus environment holistically, Strange and Banning's (2015) model of campus ecology is useful. "Campus ecology is a conceptual framework focused on the dynamic relationship between students and the campus environment. It is a framework that allows the student affairs profession not only to think about its work as encompassing students and their development, but also to develop and change campus environments to foster student learning and development" (Banning & Bryner, 2001, p. 9).

Possibly even more important than acknowledging the impact of the environment on students is recognizing that it is not the students, but the "institutions themselves [which] bear responsibility for the design and creation of campus environments, arranged appropriately or otherwise for meeting educational purposes" (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 20). Strange and Banning (2001, 2015) recognized four primary aspects of the campus environment which contribute to the student experience and promote or impact learning: the physical environment, the human aggregate, the organizational environment, and the socially constructed environment.

The physical environment involves the actual physical places and spaces of the campus. Physical factors impacting the environment include both geographical and architectural features, both of which can be examined at the macro-design and micro-design level (Moos, 1974; Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015). Macro-design in a geographical sense encompasses climate, terrain, and whether the campus is in an urban, suburban, or rural setting; geographic micro-design refers to location of buildings and rooms on campus, as well as lighting and visibility. Unsurprisingly, architecture is another significant factor in the physical environment; it matters whether buildings and

spaces, signage, aesthetics, etc. are intentionally and thoughtfully designed, along with more practical concerns of scale, utility, accessibility, etc. Important and interesting to note are physical campus spaces and features that have developed organically, such as repurposed spaces or paths between buildings that have been worn down by students over time instead of paved. Similarly, graffiti and vandalism, while not designed by the institution, play a large role in influencing campus culture (Moos, 1974; Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015).

Next is the human aggregate, which is comprised of the collected characteristics of all who inhabit the campus with attention to how similar or different they are. “The character of an environment is implicitly dependent on the typical characteristics of its members,” Moos (1986, p. 286) argued, and can dramatically impact students’ sense of safety, inclusion, belonging, and community. Aspects of the human aggregate that may contribute are vocational interests, personality types, learning styles, talents and strengths, and engagement types (i.e., how students use their time on campus; Strange & Banning, 2015). Environments are said to exhibit a higher or lower degree of differentiation depending on the relative dominance of types in an environment—the more equal distribution of types, the lower the differentiation, etc. Level of consistency is also noted in relation to the human aggregate, where environments that are heavily populated by similar types—i.e., types that share some characteristics—are more consistent than those with divergent types—types with little overlap or few similarities (Strange & Banning, 2015). Strange and Banning (2015) posited that a student’s satisfaction with an environment correlates to the degree of person-environment congruence, or how closely their type(s) align with the type(s) of their environment’s

human aggregate. Although homogeneity may provide comfort, and relate to retention, it may not always be in the best interest of the student as it relates to student development and diversity education; this proves to be a sticking point for several reasons, which will be explored later.

Third is an organizational view of the environment, both in terms of formal organization and structure such as how centralized or decentralized the campus is, along with a view of power and decision making and where those lie within the organization (Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015). Many factors contribute to the relative flexibility or rigidity of a campus's organizational environment. Complexity (how many units exist and how they are arranged) and centralization (at what level decisions are made) relate to the overarching organizational structure and hierarchy are perhaps the most visible of these factors. Formality, or the importance and usage of rules, regulations, and policies, is the next piece of an organizational environment, and answers three questions: how many rules are there; how specific are the rules; and how strictly/consistently are the rules enforced? Stratification, or the degree to which status levels are defined and rewarded, contributes to the relative flexibility of an organization, as does the value placed on production. For example, does increasing "production" (i.e., admitting more students) impact quality (higher student:faculty ratios, lower academic standards, fewer resources per student, etc.)? Both routinization (how predictable or innovative roles and tasks are) and efficiency (how well resources are being used to accomplish goals) are related to productivity, but that can be difficult to measure in an academic setting where goals are often lofty, vague, or inconsistent across campus units. Lastly, all of these organizational factors relate to the morale of those contained within the environment. Strange and

Banning (2015) suggested that in order to be responsive to student needs, campus environments need to demonstrate flexibility, innovation, and involve students in organizational decision-making.

Finally, the socially constructed aspect of a campus environment conveys how the environment is perceived by its students, regardless of whether these perceptions are grounded in facts (Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015). This aspect is particularly important, as it notes that the same piece or aspect of a campus's environment may be interpreted in multiple, potentially conflicting, ways. "Whether individuals are attracted to a particular environment or are satisfied and stable within that environment is partially a function of how they perceive, evaluate, and construct the environment; in effect, their perceptions are the reality of that environment for them," explained Strange and Banning (2015, p. 117). Three frameworks are often used to discuss and assess an environment's social construction: environmental press, social climate, and campus culture. All of these emphasize how students perceive and evaluate their environment, and note the importance of consensual interpretations, or the commonly understood beliefs and perceptions of a campus—noting where these common interpretations either align or diverge from factual environmental factors is a good starting point for environmental redesign (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Strange and Banning's campus ecology model conceptualized these four aspects on a hierarchy of three levels: first one must establish safety and inclusion, which then allows progression to engagement, and lastly, community. These align with Abraham Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of human needs, which posits that all humans have basic needs of safety and shelter, needs of love and belonging, and a higher level need to

actualize one's potential. Likewise, Strange and Banning (2015) proposed that students cannot progress to other goals without a basic sense of safety and inclusion, "free from threat, fear, and anxiety" (p. 141). If this foundation has been established, it is possible to create an environment conducive to student engagement, where students become involved and gain responsibility within the campus. Once students feel safe, included, and engaged in their own learning, campus community may emerge, and "it is through the conditions of community ... that participants experience a complete sense of membership in a setting" (Strange & Banning, 2015, p. 141). As theorized by Strange and Banning, each of the previously defined components of a campus environment—the physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed—has the power to positively or negatively impact a student's ability to progress through the environmental design hierarchy, and campuses should employ intentional assessments and environmental design strategies in order to best serve the needs of their unique student populations (2001, 2015).

A campus ecology model is useful in this context because it recognizes that students and institutions co-exist in an ecosystem, where each affects the other. This is contrary to a more traditional view of college student development, which suggests that the student must learn and grow to adapt to the institution and general college experience. Rather, a campus ecology approach asserts that the institution has an equal responsibility to adapt itself to meet the needs of its students (Strange & Banning, 2015). Moreover, using a campus ecology model to address transfer student needs is appropriate because it acknowledges the unique environmental traits of a single campus instead of assuming all campuses share the same environmental characteristics, and encourages adaptability in

shaping the environment of that individual campus to match that of its student body. Although campus ecology models have been used for decades in relation to student development and campus design, over time it has been applied more often to specialized campus spaces, programs, or populations. Recent research using a campus ecology model has primarily focused on three populations: multiracial students, students experiencing mental health issues, and community college students.

In her analysis of multiracial student development, Renn (2003, 2004) employed Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) ecology model of development to assess the impact of campus environments on multiracial identity development. In a qualitative study of 56 students at several institutions, Renn (2004) documented five overarching patterns of racial identity that emerge for students living on campus, but ultimately states that achieving a singular identity outcome may not be desirable or likely due to the many variable interactions between environmental factors and individual characteristics.

Recent research surrounding mental health issues for transfer students illuminates a larger mental health crisis for transfer students than native, both in behaviors and services sought (Beiter et al., 2015; Bogardus, 2017; Mehr & Daltry, 2016). Transfer students exhibit behaviors consistent with anxiety, stress, and depression at a much higher level than non-transfer students, found Beiter et al. (2015). In a study of 700 students who sought counseling services at a public, four-year institution in the northeastern United States, Mehr and Daltry (2016) found that transfer students had significantly higher rates of depression, social anxiety, academic distress, family distress, and overall distress, compared to native students. Similarly, Bogardus (2017) found that

transfer students experience higher rates of risk factors associated with distress and mental health diagnosis.

Given this rise in documented mental health issues on college campuses, several recent studies have examined the role of the campus environment in supporting students through difficult situations. Students experiencing a loss, trauma, or death are likely to feel excluded and disconnected from the “work hard, play hard” attitude that is so common on today’s campuses (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2008). “This ever-present pressure makes the college campus a difficult environment on which to grieve,” Taub and Servaty-Seib (2008, p. 21) found, leaving these students feeling overwhelmed, alone, and even unsafe, rarely feeling supported enough to ask for the help they need. For those students in need of more intensive mental health services, Drum and Denmark (2012) presented strategies to reduce and prevent suicidal ideation and completion on college campuses. Specifically, as part of their Intervention Continuum, they suggested that campuses should employ an “ecological prevention” to promote mental wellness for students proactively. “Various environmental qualities may help [students] develop a sense of belongingness that prevents or ameliorates depression, and [they] may never enter the suicidal continuum at all,” Drum and Denmark (2012, p. 216) proposed, saying that social connection to others must be immediately and consistently promoted in all aspects of the campus environment.

Recent studies have also examined aspects of the campus environment and their influence on community college student attrition and success. Heverly (1999) found that a negative experience with the campus environment was correlated with community college student attrition; Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) posited that if colleges adjust

themselves to the needs of students, particularly during the first semester, retention could be improved; and the initiative Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Count (2004), supported by the Lumina Foundation and the American Association of Community Colleges, focused on connections between student success and campus environment. However, campus ecology has not been examined in the context of the transfer student transition to their receiving institution.

While Strange and Banning's theory is valuable in this context, it is not without shortcomings. This model does not provide specifics for supporting students who may not be able to spend much time on campus, whether they are online students, commuting, or have other financial or family responsibilities that limit their ability to engage with the campus outside of coursework—all of which are common experiences for transfer students. Additionally, the campus ecology model and path toward community focuses heavily on “sameness”—whether students feel a part of a whole, see their own identities and experiences represented in a group, and find others who share their interests and values. While this is clearly important for students to feel safe and supported, it is just as crucial that this focus does not hinder diversity and equity education on campuses.

Although developing safety, inclusion, community, and belonging are in part based on shared characteristics and connecting students to those with whom they identify, equal focus should be given to expanding students' experiences and valuing diversity of thought. Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin (2016) argued that overly emphasizing “social comfort” in the context of campus ecology prevents White students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) from understanding, addressing, and overcoming contemporary racism. There is a significant difference between experiencing discomfort, which leads to

growth, and feeling unsafe and isolated. Strange and Banning's theory neglects to address how to guide students in experiences and choices that facilitate growth through occasional discomfort while maintaining their foundation of safety, support, and inclusion.

Critiques of this theory go on to comment that it is difficult if not impossible to create a cohesive campus environment that is equally supportive of the needs of all students; often, when environmental factors make one group of students feel comfortable, they are simultaneously causing another group to feel excluded or isolated – in describing the largely unconscious microaggressions experienced by Students of Color on a PWI campus, Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin (2016, p. 127) explained that “a safe space for White students is frequently a hostile, and sometimes linguistically violent environment, for Students of Color.” Similarly, any study of campus environments and how they do or do not support the students contained within should be careful not to approach any student population with a deficit model of thinking. Such an approach may only identify areas where these populations could struggle and ignore the unique strengths these students contribute to the campus.

Chapter Summary

As this chapter illustrates, research on transfer students is widely undertaken and available, but is extremely limited in several significant ways. First, it primarily focuses on vertical transfer and ignores the many other directional pathways transfer students are pursuing; second, it places the responsibility for successful transition on either the student themselves or in targeted, isolated programming and policy. Similarly, research on the

impact of the campus environment on student success is well documented but limited in relation to its impact on transfer students, and the transition to the receiving institution specifically. Considering these limitations of existing literature, an assessment of how transfers experience their campus environment regardless of transfer direction would add to the knowledge of how campuses can better support transfers.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

In order to better support the large and growing population of transfer students nationally, much more research is needed that focuses on a holistic view of transfer students' transitions from their perspective, in contrast to the largely small, isolated interventions that exist currently. This study undertook that goal by gathering and examining the experiences and perceptions of recent transfer students as they navigated their new campus. Using this data, the purpose of this study was to better understand how transfer students perceive the receiving institution's campus environment as a whole, and how that perception impacts their transition experiences and feelings of safety, involvement, community, and inclusion, which are critical to transfer success. Through analyzing these students' experiences, I aimed to identify aspects of the campus environment that provide the most effective support for or create barriers to the transfer process.

The study asked the following research questions:

1. How do transfer students experience the physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed components of their campus environment at the receiving institution during their first year after transfer?

2. Based on these experiences, what environmental supports do transfer students believe aid in their transition by facilitating safety and inclusion, involvement, and community membership?
3. Based on these experiences, what environmental barriers do transfer students believe hinder a successful transition by impeding safety and inclusion, involvement, and community membership?

Through the collection and analysis of this data, I attempted to understand how incoming transfer students experience the various aspects of their new campus environment, and the perceived impact of these environmental aspects on their transition experience. The environment of a college campus has a significant impact on the success of its students; a campus ecology model posits that campuses must work to create environments that support and facilitate the learning, growth, and development of its student body (Strange & Banning, 2015). Particularly in light of emerging transfer patterns, focus needs to shift the responsibility from the students themselves to the institutions that admitted them. These institutions have an obligation to provide holistic support for their students, rather than the other way around. Considering that most sending institutions have little to no incentive to prepare their students for transfer, ensuring that the appropriate environmental supports are in place at the receiving institution is even more essential—and yet, there is a significant gap in the research on this topic.

To investigate the experience of transfer students' transition to a new campus environment, I conducted a qualitative case study using the framework of campus ecology (Strange & Banning, 2001, 2015). A qualitative approach focuses on process,

understanding, and meaning, which aligns with the goal of understanding and gleaning meaning from these students' specific experiences using their perspectives, stories, and words. Additionally, qualitative research uses an inductive approach to data collection and analysis, as opposed to positing a hypothesis of what might be found (Merriam, 2009). Equally important in a qualitative study is acknowledging the researcher's role as primary instrument. Lastly, rich description is key to investigating the research questions of this study and should include relevant, insightful quotes that help form the basis of the story being told; by collecting rich data, I was able to illustrate the complex experiences of the student participants, and how these perceptions affected their transition and success (Stake, 1995, 2006; Merriam, 2009).

Within the qualitative methodology, I chose a single case study design. A case study is an in-depth view of a case, or bounded system. Case studies are context specific and the case selected is contained within boundaries (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009). In the field of higher education, case studies are frequently utilized since they largely focus on understanding people, topics, issues, or programs within a specific setting and timeframe (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). The research questions guiding this study required an in-depth exploration of how transfer students experience the campus environment as they transition to a new institution; Yin (2018) recommended a case study approach when "a "how" or "why" question is being asked about a contemporary set of events over which a researcher has little or no control" (p. 13).

A case study was fitting for this study due to the necessarily contextual nature of investigating the phenomenon of the transfer student transition experience within a unique campus environment (Miles & Huberman, 2014). Further, using a case study

approach fits the campus ecology framework as it bounds the system and acknowledges the essential interconnectedness of all parts of the system (i.e., the four aspects of the campus environment—physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed). In addition to being bound by a single campus site, additional parameters that bounded this case study include the focus on a specific student population—incoming transfer students—and the timeframe, which captures just the first year of these students' experience of their new campus. This approach also suggested itself from the purpose of the study: due to the unique characteristics of each campus environment, it seemed necessary to bound this study to one particular campus rather than attempt to compare campus environments or generalize student experiences across environments or institutional types. Using a single campus site to gain a broader understanding of this phenomenon makes the case study's purpose instrumental in nature (Stake, 2006). A case study can be described as instrumental if, through analysis of a case, it aims to gain insight into a phenomenon contained within said case (Stake, 2006).

As is detailed below, for this case study, I collected and analyzed four types of data over a six-month period—October 2019 to March 2020. These data include two rounds of student interviews, two rounds of student written responses to emailed prompts, one round of administrator interviews, and two rounds of campus observations. In order to privilege the student perspective and experience of this phenomenon, student interviews and written responses were the primary data sources analyzed; administrator interviews and notes taken during campus observations served to further frame the student voice within the bounded campus setting.

Site Selection

When selecting the setting for this study, two components were considered: the state setting and the institution setting. In selecting the specific state and campus, as well as in selecting participants, it was important to use a purposeful selection technique. To do so, the purpose of the study drove both of these selection processes (Merriam, 2009).

In selecting a setting that fit the purpose of the study, it was appropriate to implement some state-level eligibility requirements. First, I identified states that already have standard state-level supports in place to facilitate transfer. Selecting a setting which provides support on the state level helped isolate transfer transition issues experienced on the receiving institution's campus from those caused by state- or national-level policy issues. Examples of these state-level supports include transferrable core, common course numbering, guaranteed associate degree transfer, state-based financial aid, etc. In particular, state-based financial aid provides a huge incentive for in-state students to pursue a college degree within their home state; it also allows students to retain their financial aid when transferring to another institution within the state. Since financial aid eligibility is a documented issue for transfers, conducting this study in a state where financial aid is theoretically covered for students should facilitate transfer if desired and help isolate transfer-related issues of campus environments. Lastly, while selecting the state setting, it was useful to consider states with few two-year institutions and/or institutions with motivation to provide support for transfer pathways on the sending end of transfer, emphasizing the lack of transfer-out guidance from sending institutions and the critical role of receiving institutions to provide this support for their incoming transfer students. Georgia is a state that has all of these characteristics.

In Georgia, the merit-based HOPE and Zell Scholarship Programs cover between 80–100% of college tuition at in-state institutions for eligible Georgia high school graduates, respectively; students qualify based on their GPA and/or standardized test scores upon completion of their high school diploma and are reevaluated for eligibility at the end of every thirty credit hours earned (Georgia Student Finance Commission, 2019). Therefore, as long as students maintain eligibility, they can transfer their HOPE or Zell Scholarship award with them if they transfer from one qualifying in-state institution to another. Based on data reported by the University System of Georgia (USG), the most recent six-year cohort of HOPE scholarship recipients (first time, full time freshmen who started in fall 2014) started with just over 25,000 recipients system-wide, 80% of whom maintained eligibility after the first 30 hours and 50% of whom graduated having never lost eligibility (University System of Georgia, 2020). The Kennesaw State HOPE recipient population showed similar eligibility retention for the fall 2014 cohort, with 77% maintaining the HOPE after the first 30 hours and 42% graduating without having lost eligibility (University System of Georgia, 2020). Unfortunately, the USG does not break down these data for the transfer population, so it is unclear whether these numbers vary by intra-USG transfer pathway patterns.

Although two-year institutions have previously borne the brunt of the responsibility for preparing students to transfer, transfer patterns are increasingly more diverse; for the national transfer cohort who started in 2011, only 41.4 % of students transferring from a two-year institution moved to a four-year (vertical transfer); over half of those leaving a four-year institution transferred to a two-year (reverse), and a full third of four-year institution transfers moved laterally to another 4-year institution (Shapiro et

al., 2018). Georgia has felt this significantly in the past decade as institutional consolidations occurred across the state. Few to no two-year institutions even exist within the University System of Georgia today; almost every two-year institution has been consolidated with a four-year institution such that they now offer bachelor's degrees. Although the University System of Georgia (USG) provides state-level transfer supports such as mandated core-to-core and associate degree transferability and common course numbering, sending institutions no longer are motivated to provide institution-level transfer support since they now aim to retain their students through bachelor's degree completion. The responsibility must shift, therefore, to receiving institutions to supplement these state-level transfer pathway policies by providing holistic environmental support for their incoming students. All of this made the state of Georgia an ideal place to study transfer transitions and the role of the receiving institution.

In order to employ purposeful case selection, I chose to narrow my scope by using criteria which represent a common transfer student experience. To do so, I focused on students who transferred at the beginning of an academic year (fall semester) to a large, public, four-year institution in Georgia that is one of the top recipients of transfer students in the state. According to University System of Georgia (USG) data, four institutions consistently enroll over a thousand full-time transfer students each fall. Of these institutions, Kennesaw State University (KSU) was selected as the site for this study due to its central location just north of a major metropolitan area and the large percentage of on campus, full-time transfer students they enroll each year.

Participant Recruitment and Characteristics

When considering participant selection, my goal was to recruit students for this study that represented a variety of characteristics, experiences, and patterns of transfer, along with students who will interact with a wide range of campus areas and structures, in order to explore a diverse range of student experiences within the campus environment; however, I limited participants to those who began their first term at KSU during the fall 2019 semester, had previously been enrolled at least one previous institution, and enrolled as full-time, on-campus students. These criteria align with the campus ecology framework; students who are not enrolled full-time or on-campus would not be exposed to nor interact with the four aspects of the campus environment in the same ways as full-time, on-campus students (Strange & Banning, 2015).

After receiving approval from the UGA and KSU Institutional Review Boards, I contacted a KSU staff member working within the Transfer Advocacy Gateway (TAG)—a grant-funded initiative whose funding ended in late 2019—to solicit these participants. My contact within TAG sent an email to all fall 2019-start KSU transfer students with details of my study, which outlined the purpose and goals, and concluded with an invitation to participate. Students who responded to the recruitment email were asked to complete a short demographic survey, which allowed me to purposefully select a sample that both fit my eligibility requirements (fall-start new KSU transfer student, full-time, Kennesaw campus, 60 or more accumulated credits pre-transfer) and was fairly representative of the overall KSU undergraduate population's demographic composition. This email also included notification that some respondents may not be chosen. In order to incentivize participation, those selected were compensated for their time and efforts

with a twenty-dollar gift card to a campus eatery of their choice at the beginning of each interview session. Using purposeful sampling and the information provided in their survey responses, I was able to select fifteen incoming transfer students with a variety of demographic characteristics and transfer patterns (Patton, 2015).

After reviewing the students' survey responses, I selected and scheduled interviews with 15 students; however, one student did not show up for our scheduled interview and never responded to any of my outreach following the missed interview, which left a total of 14 students. In between the first and second rounds of interviews, two other students dropped out—one, Jon, responded to my scheduling email to let me know he had taken a job opportunity and was no longer enrolled, and a second student, Kelsey, did not respond to any communication sent after the completion of the first round of interviews. Table 1 presents a summary of the student participant demographics.

Table 1

Student Participants

Name	Age	Gender Identity	Race/Ethnicity	Prior Institutions
Adam	42	Male	White	1 in-state public
Britt	28	Female	Black/African American	2 in-state public
Edie	22	Female	White	1 in-state public
Jack	21	Male	White	1 in-state public
Jenna	22	Female	White	1 out-of-state private, 1 in-state public

Jon	23	Male	White	1 in-state public
Jordin	21	Female	Hispanic/Latinx	1 in-state private
Justin	22	Male	Black/African American	1 in-state public
Kelsey	23	Non-binary	White	1 in-state public
Mark	24	Male	White	1 out-of-state public, 1 in- state public
Maya	26	Female	Black/African American	3 in-state publics
Sienna	21	Female	Black/African American	1 in-state public
Tori	25	Female	White	1 in-state private, 1 in- state public
Wade	30	Male	White	1 in-state public

The 14 students' ages range from 21 to 42 years old, with an average age of 25; nine identified as White (64.3%), four as Black or African American (28.6%), and one as Hispanic or Latinx (7.1%); six self-identified as male (42.9%) and eight as female (50%), and one as non-binary (7.1%). In comparison, 80.5% of the total undergraduate student population at KSU is aged 18 to 24 (44.5% of whom are 18 to 20), with only 16% aged 25 to 49; is 53.6% White, 21.5% Black or African American, 10.9% Hispanic or Latinx, and 5.1% Asian; and is 50.8% male and 49.2% female (KSU did not report data on non-binary students). Five of the students interviewed (36%) had transferred more than once

prior to enrolling at KSU, and 13 (93%) transferred to KSU from another in-state institution. During the interview process, some students volunteered other personal details such as academic program, sexual orientation, first generation status, political affiliation, personal financial situation, etc. which are included in their respective profiles in the next chapter. In addition to the student participants selected, I also recruited three KSU administrators whose work centers around some aspect of the student experience. These administrators participated in interviews that provided supplementary context for the study.

Data Collection

Four data sources were utilized in this study: student interviews, student written responses, administrator interviews, and campus observations. Using the participants' point of view to guide the choice of sources, I conducted and analyzed two rounds of student interviews—one toward the end of their first semester and the second in the middle of their second semester. In addition, I analyzed their short responses to two emailed prompts. Using these data sources served to capture the genuine experiences of the participants over the course of their first year at the receiving institution. As Merriam (2009) explained, "interviewing is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people observe the world around them" (p. 88). Using multiple interviews provides a longitudinal snapshot of their experience within the new campus environment as it progresses over time, revealing any changes in attitude or interaction with the environment, whether they be positive, negative, or neutral (Merriam, 2009). Along with the interviews, I asked participants to respond to two short email prompts—scheduled

approximately a month after each interview—to document notable perceptions and experiences as they progressed through the semester (Stake, 1995). Requesting these short responses via email provided the participants time for self-reflection and composition of thought, giving them the opportunity to supplement their interview responses with fully formed, meaningful memories.

In addition to capturing and centering the students' own perspectives, I interviewed three campus administrators for additional context and conducted observations of the campus itself during my visits to gather further information of observable environmental characteristics through “a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 2009). Including administrator interviews and observations allowed further triangulation of the data and provide a fuller picture of the campus environment (Simons, 2009). These transcribed interviews, email prompt responses, and notes from campus observations comprise my data sources for this study.

Except for the two students noted above, I interviewed each student participant twice: once late in their first semester (late November/early December), and a second time about halfway through their second semester (late February/early March). These interviews were conducted in person and recorded for later transcription, apart from three that needed to be rescheduled and were conducted via a Zoom video meeting. I worked with a KSU staff member to reserve an empty office space in a central campus building to conduct the interviews during both visits. Prior to beginning each interview, I presented each student with a consent form that detailed the purpose of the study and their participation therein. Included in the consent form was their agreement for the interview to be audio recorded. Once they had reviewed and signed the form, they

received a twenty-dollar gift card to a campus restaurant or coffee shop. The process for my three administrator interviews was almost identical, except that each administrator was only interviewed once and did not receive any form of incentive.

The interviews were semi-structured, with predetermined but open-ended questions that connected to the study's research questions. Specifically, these questions asked participants to describe their experiences and perceptions of the four components of Strange and Banning's (2015) model of campus environments—physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed—without explicitly defining or acknowledging the underlying theoretical framework in a way that would influence participant responses (Merriam, 2009). For example, I asked students to describe, in detail, anything they could remember about a particular interaction with the environment, such as their Orientation session. If their response did not include reference to one or more of the aspects, I asked a follow-up question confirming this, such as “did anything stand out to you about the other students?” or “what did you think of the space where they held the event?”

I also asked questions that solicited participants' beliefs about whether they felt a sense of safety and inclusion, belonging, engagement, and/or members of a community, as defined in Strange and Banning's environmental hierarchy; I also asked the participants to consider what experiences they attribute to whether or not they identify with the above levels. The exact wording and order in which the questions are asked varied based on the flow of the interview, and additional follow-up questions were added as needed based on the content of previous responses. About a month after each round of student interviews, I sent a follow-up email to each student which contained the

aforementioned email prompt. I requested that the students email me back a short (three-to-five sentence) response within two weeks' time.

The questions I posed to the three administrators followed a similar structure and mirrored the content of the student questions but asked them to describe the campus environments and any supports/barriers contained therein from their experiences as a higher education administrator. As previously discussed, these interviews served to provide a more robust picture of the campus environment over time. Incorporating the perspective of campus leaders helped situate the students' experiences within a larger context and institutional history. The same is true for observations conducted while on campus for the interviews. During an hour before and an hour after the interviews each day on campus, I found a variety of spots within central campus to sit, observe, and take notes on my observations of the various aspects of the KSU campus environment that stood out to me at the time. Observation locations include the student center, which includes several fast-casual dining establishments, the bookstore, and several campus offices; the social sciences building, which houses the only on-campus coffee shop; the lobby of a building that contains the Registrar, Financial Aid, Life Sciences, and Education; and the main campus lawn, known as "the Green."

Data Analysis

As emphasized by Merriam (2009), Simons (2009), and others, qualitative data analysis should begin at the start of data collection and follow a constant comparative method throughout collection, rather than waiting to begin analysis until the end of the data collection period. This constant comparative method involves making frequent notes

and noting questions along the way, as well as breaking down each data source into categories and codes and comparing each new data to the existing codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using an inductive method when creating categories and codes, coding should be created based on what is revealed in the data rather than beginning with any expectations about what one hopes to find (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2008).

As each interview was completed, I used an online transcription service to have them transcribed, and then uploaded them to a qualitative analysis software program; since the email prompt responses were submitted electronically in writing, I did not need to have them transcribed and therefore was able to upload those immediately upon receipt. In the analysis of interview transcripts (both student and administrator) and written responses, I used a combination of coding methods: first, a priori coding, followed by open and then axial coding rather than solely a priori coding (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2007). Incorporating my theoretical framework of campus environments, I employed some a priori coding of Strange and Banning's aspects and levels; however, this was combined with inductive coding to allow existing themes to reveal themselves from the data. As described by Corbin and Strauss (2008), "[coding] means putting aside preconceived notions about what the research expects to find in the research, and letting the data and interpretation of it guide analysis" (p. 160). Once initial coding was complete, I began grouping similar codes into larger categories, which ultimately revealed common themes. Using this inductive approach was particularly important given my close connection to both the topic of transfer student success and the University System of Georgia.

Positionality and Trustworthiness

Although qualitative research acknowledges and embraces the researcher's role in the research process—unlike quantitative research—it is still important to demonstrate trustworthiness. To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I utilized strategies to increase credibility, dependability, and transferability (Merriam, 2009). While internal validity is the gold standard in quantitative research, the “reality” that exists in qualitative research is “not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be measured,” and therefore true internal validity cannot be established. What can be achieved in qualitative studies is credibility, which is when the researcher uses specific tools to improve the accuracy of the study findings—in this case, that the findings accurately represent the participants' perspectives and experiences (Wolcott, 2005; Merriam, 2009). Similarly, qualitative research seeks to achieve dependability—that the results are consistent given the data collected—rather than reliability, where a study could be perfectly replicated and achieve identical results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Lastly, qualitative studies are not generalizable, but can be considered transferrable if others could glean from the study whether it is similar enough to be applicable in another context (Merriam, 2009).

Equally important in a qualitative study is acknowledging the researcher's role as primary instrument. In my work as a higher education administrator, I am involved with many transfer-related discussions and initiatives, and have a vested interest in facilitating transfer student success. As a result, I recognized the possibility of my influencing the participants or outcomes of this study and practiced strategies to increase trustworthiness and minimize my potential biases. I acknowledge my own bias as someone who works

closely with transfer students and works to address issues of transfer student success as a practitioner, as well as my professional connection to the University System of Georgia via employment and enrollment at the state's flagship institution, the University of Georgia. However, this also allowed me a deeper familiarity with the subject matter and context of the case.

Within the data collection and analysis, and keeping in mind my connection to both the subject matter and state within which this study was conducted, I employed several methods to help ensure trustworthiness. First, I utilized purposeful selection techniques to identify a representative group of students. During data collection, I kept meticulous, detailed notes and records that demonstrate consistency and clarity of process throughout the study. Next, I used rich and thick description with many direct quotes from participant interviews and email prompt responses to support my findings. By using both interviews and written prompts that captured the student perspective multiple times over the course of a year, I was able to triangulate data to provide a more comprehensive view of their experiences and validate themes; I was also able to apply further triangulation through the addition of administrator interviews and observations. Once I had an initial list of codes, I asked my advisor to review and provide feedback. I also reviewed the data a final time after I had completed coding to search for disconfirming cases—any data that provides contradictory evidence to my analysis—in an effort to reduce any bias toward preconceived findings (Patton, 2015). Lastly, I engaged in member checking, or respondent validation, by asking participants to review their individual documents and comment on final emergent themes (Patton, 2015; Simons, 2009). Although qualitative studies are not generalizable in the same way as quantitative

studies with statistical backing, I hope that what is gleaned from this case study may serve as a basis for other campuses of similar institutional type, mission, etc. and/or with other similar environmental characteristics.

Limitations

There are several limitations of this study that should be acknowledged. First, a case study approach is inherently limited in transferability. While I have provided enough information to allow others to determine transferability, it is impossible to know whether the KSU campus or participants in this study are representative of other campuses or transfer students. Likewise, the experiences of this group of transfer students—a relatively small sample size—may or may not be similar to that of other transfer students, on this or other campuses. Although care was taken to select students with varying experiences and backgrounds, the final sample contains some students with similar experiences and/or backgrounds due to the limited information available at the time of participant selection. Another limitation of the study is that not all student participants chose to remain in the study until the end. One student completed the first interview and prompt, but pulled out of the study in the spring due to personal reasons; another student just stopped responding after the conclusion of the first interview.

Additionally, there are limitations that arise due to participants self-selecting into the study. If participants had any connection to the campus staff member who assisted with recruitment, their willingness to be part of the study and view of the school may have been influenced by this relationship. My status as a staff administrator at a major research institution may also have affected what the students chose to share or not share

with me about their experience. Lastly, it is possible that there are unique experiences and traits shared by students who were willing to volunteer, such as a predisposition to a positive experience, or a higher likelihood of campus engagement, that may affect the transferability of their experiences to the broader transfer student population.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the rationale for choosing a qualitative case study to explore transfer student perspectives within a campus ecology framework, along with details on the types of data selected and a description of the specific methods used for data collection and analysis. A single-site case study was appropriate both because it facilitated capturing the student voice and because it properly bounded the study to an individual campus with unique environmental characteristics. I followed an inductive analysis process to allow codes and themes to be revealed from the students' descriptions of their experiences of the environment, and supplemented this with data gathered from observations and administrator interviews to round out my understanding of the supports and barriers that exist on the KSU campus. This process revealed common themes found in these student experiences that shed light on how their environment supports or hinders a successful transition, which is detailed in chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In this study, I examined the transition experiences and perceptions of transfer students during their first year at KSU. A qualitative case study format was used, and through the theoretical lens of campus environments, the study was designed to capture incoming transfer students' true experiences and perspectives of their new campus environment. Semi-structured interviews and prompted written responses from 14 incoming transfer students were the primary data collected; interviews with several campus administrators and on-site observations were also conducted to provide additional context to the students' perspectives. This chapter begins with detailed descriptions of the study setting and participants, followed by the presentation of data, including themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis process.

Case Setting

KSU is a large, public, comprehensive four-year institution located in Kennesaw, Georgia, which is in the suburbs of northwest Atlanta. KSU has two campuses: the original Kennesaw campus, which is known as main campus, and the Marietta campus, which is newer and primarily houses their Schools of Engineering and Computer Science. The Marietta campus was added to KSU in 2015 following a merger with nearby Southern Polytechnic State University. For the purposes of this study, I focused on students who self-identified as being primarily enrolled at the main Kennesaw campus

due to it being the location of most centralized student spaces, services, and offices as well as the original campus pre-merger.

KSU enrolled 34,499 undergraduates and 3,308 graduate students in the fall of 2019 (Kennesaw State University Fact Book, 2019). Of these, 49.2 % were female and 50.8 % were male; 53.6 % were White, 21.5 % were Black or African-American, 10.9 % Hispanic/Latinx, 5.1% Asian and 0.1 % Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (those who reported “International,” “Two or More,” and “Not Reported” make up the remaining 8.2 %). Of their total undergraduate population, 74.6 % attend KSU full-time and 78.6 % are in-state. The most popular majors are Nursing, Biology, and Psychology, followed by Mechanical Engineering, Business (Management, Marketing, Accounting, and Finance), and Computer Science (Kennesaw State University Fact Book, 2019). For the fall 2011 cohort of first-time, full-time undergraduates—the most recent cohort with complete data—KSU reports a first-year retention rate of 76 %, a 4-year graduation rate of 12.5 %, and a 6-year graduation rate of 41.8 %. It is important to note that these numbers do not include transfer students and historically data on transfer student retention and completion has not been tracked widely or well.

From 2015–2018, the KSU undergraduate transfer student population hovered just above 4500 students—about 13 %. Of these 4500, the overwhelming majority transfer from four in-state institutions, three of which are USG System schools: Georgia State University, Georgia Highlands College, Chattahoochee Technical College, and the University of North Georgia (Kennesaw State University Fact Book, 2019). Their top majors mirror that of the total undergraduate population. I was unable to locate a breakdown of transfer student data on age, gender, or race/ethnicity.

At various points during the timeframe of this study, Kennesaw State offered a handful of transfer-specific initiatives and programs. The two that were referenced most often by participants were orientation sessions geared toward transfer students and the Transfer Advocacy Gateway (TAG), a U.S. Department of Education-funded program which provided individualized, holistic advising for transfer students from underrepresented populations. However, neither program touched all incoming transfer students. TAG, which was discontinued during the semester of this interview, only served a small population of KSU's transfer students even prior to its disbandment, per the terms of its grant. Transfer orientation sessions—while designed and intended for transfer students—often end up a mix of first-years and transfers if the transfer-specific sessions do not fill. Further, transfer orientation is not required, and is only a half-day of programming versus the full day of first-year student sessions.

Located directly off a major highway, KSU's main Kennesaw campus is large and sprawling, in an elongated diamond shape that begins with several common student-centered buildings. When entering campus, visitors are directed to a large flat pay lot that borders the campus; on the drive in from the main road, visitors will pass several athletic fields, an on-campus student apartment complex, two parking decks, and the student recreation center. Once parked, campus must be navigated on foot, as there are limited drivable routes that penetrate campus beyond the visitor lot. The main campus bus stop is also located in this area, in between the visitor lot and the recreation center; this bus system, known as Owl Express after the University's owl mascot, takes students to and from KSU's Marietta campus, and makes stops at some distant campus parking lots and off-campus housing complexes.

The closest building to the visitor lot is the Student Center, a large modern two-story building which houses the University bookstore, a convenience store, a game room, several chain quick-service eateries which border a large seating area, restrooms, and a handful of campus offices including Student Life and a one-stop service counter. A short walk from the back side of the Student Center leads to several other prominent academic buildings, also large and multi-story—one of which includes a chain coffee shop—and the library. Also located directly off visitor parking and adjacent to the front entrance to the Student Center is the Green, a large outdoor grassy space surrounded and intersected by walking paths. The Green is in the center of several other large, multi-story academic and student services buildings. One houses the School of Education on one side and the combined Registrar and Financial Aid office on the other, with the Career Center, Graduate School, and administrative offices on its upper levels; another is the Convocation Center, a large indoor event space. On the far side of the Green, the rest of the Kennesaw campus extends, starting with the main campus dining hall, the Commons, and including other prominent academic buildings such as the Schools of Business, Health Sciences, and Performing and Visual Arts. Beyond this lies the bulk of on-campus housing and some additional student parking.

During my observations in the late fall and early spring, campus was bustling with activity. Students filled the Student Center, coffee shop, and Commons' seating areas; many were in small groups, and others were alone eating or studying. In contrast, I rarely saw a student waiting for or interacting with a campus office; every time I walked past the Student Center's service desks or the Registrar/Financial Aid lobby, only staff were present. Almost every student that was not actively in conversation with another student

had headphones in, presumably connected to a phone or other device. Although the Green was primarily used by the students I observed as a route to get from one building to another, I suspect this was more due to the chilly and often rainy weather than truly representative of its use year-round; students described many events and activities as regularly occurring on the Green. Both lining the sidewalks around the Green and posted inside buildings were many KSU signs and posters, alerting students to upcoming scholarship and financial aid deadlines as well as advertising events and opportunities. Overall, my observations of the physical spaces on the main Kennesaw Campus consistently noted the size and scale of buildings and spaces, lots of signage both indoors and out, and the volume of students in common student spaces.

Student Participants

As this study is based largely on the perspectives and experiences of 14 student participants, I have included profiles of those students below. As is noted in chapter 3, all participants were provided with pseudonyms to protect their identities. Table 1 in chapter three summarizes these demographic profiles.

Adam

Adam—a 42-year-old White male—considered himself a member the “nontraditional” category of transfer students, or those who have taken a significant amount of time off and returned to complete a degree program much later in life, placing them far outside of the “traditional” 18 to 22-year-old age range. A veteran of the United States Army, Adam transferred credits from many years ago, completed at a large public university in the southern part of the state, to pursue a degree in surveying and mapping

as part of a mid-life career shift. At the time of the interviews, Adam was commuting from his home on the other side of Atlanta to the Kennesaw campus and drove an hour in both directions for his classes each day. Adam made it clear that his primary goal was to gain the knowledge and skills to further his career change and did not believe he would have time to try and experience much of KSU outside of his coursework. The only involvement opportunity he mentioned was the possibility of joining the KSU marching band, having played earlier in life. In fact, he went so far as to email the head of the program before he enrolled, who coincidentally is someone Adam knew from his time at his previous college; at the conclusion of the study, however, he had not taken any additional steps. Adam cited both the time and the cost associated with joining the marching band as barriers, as well as acknowledging some potential embarrassment about participating as a much older student. Adam was initially happy to get a seat in several online courses given his long commute, but ultimately expressed his frustrations with the online format and a strong preference for in-person instruction.

Britt

Britt, a Black female student who previously attended two other USG schools, was 28 at the time of the study. After taking a few years off and battling addiction issues, she enrolled at KSU to pursue a degree in exercise science. A self-described “outdoorsy person,” Britt noted her love of athletics and exercise. She lived in on-campus housing that was provided due to her membership in KSU’s Collegiate Recovery Program (CRP), a service housed in Student Affairs which provides holistic support to students in recovery from addiction. Britt described the CRP as “a major reason why [she] came to Kennesaw in the first place.” Britt loved KSU and felt very supported through her various

“mini-communities,” which included a Christian campus organization and the CRP; she also described many experiences throughout the year where she was able to bring lessons learned from her past—primarily connected to her mental health and recovery journey, which is ongoing—into her life at KSU.

Eddie

Eddie, a 22-year-old White female, transferred from a mid-sized in-state public university and to pursue a degree in Public Relations. When describing why she left her prior institution, Eddie said she “hated it so much ... I was miserable [there] ... I just didn’t have any friends at all.” She described transferring both for personal reasons—“I just felt like I could be a totally different person if I wanted to”—and for the broader array of academic options available to her at KSU. Very politically active, Eddie took a proactive approach to involvement at KSU based on her experience at the school from which she transferred, and during the timeframe of the study held a role on the leadership team of a very active KSU political student organization. She felt this placed her in the minority on a campus she perceived as not generally agreeing with these views and shared some related negative memories but described the student organization as her primary source of connection and community. Eddie lived in the Kennesaw area in off-campus housing and worked several part-time jobs in addition to attending KSU full-time.

Jack

Jack, a 21-year-old White male, decided to return to school for a business degree at KSU after dropping out of his previous school, a small public institution in suburban north Georgia, and working full-time in the film industry for a few years. He did not do well academically at his former institution and lost eligibility for the HOPE scholarship.

He noted this as a primary driver in his decision to drop out, although he also mentioned the “commuter culture” causing him to feel isolated and the resulting impact on his mental health. At the time of the study, he expressed the intention to return to the Atlanta film industry after he graduates, but the freelance nature of the field led him to the decision that a bachelor’s degree in accounting would provide stability: “I thought, well, I should probably go back to school and make sure that I get a degree and have that insurance and knowledge.” Jack lived off campus at KSU with friends during the 2019-2020 academic year. He cited already having friends who attend KSU and having spent some time on the KSU campus as contributing to a smoother transition. Despite this familiarity, he still described several specific memories from the year where he got lost or didn’t know what to do; he also mentioned difficulty navigating the adjustment to a much more populous student body where processes feel impersonal. Jack said he does have a group of friends, but they are friends he has known since high school who are “definitely not affiliated with KSU ... no real connection with any groups in KSU.”

Jenna

After transferring twice—first attending an out-of-state small private college, then transferring to a small, public in-state university much closer to home—Jenna, a 22-year-old White female, enrolled at KSU. A former high school and college athlete, Jenna was majoring in biology at the time of the interviews and planned to pursue a doctoral degree, hopefully with the aid of a military scholarship, eventually. Jenna emphasized how much she didn’t know during her first weeks on campus, from getting lost, to difficulty in navigating technology, to frustrations with being the very last to register for courses and apply for parking as a transfer student. Although she did receive help from friends she

already knew who attended KSU, she did not feel supported by the institutional processes in place. Jenna worked two days a week in a town about an hour from KSU. She lived off campus with a friend with whom she had played volleyball in high school, and did occasionally attend events thrown by her apartment complex, which is almost exclusively inhabited by other KSU students.

Jon

After finishing his associate's degree at a small, public feeder school with multiple campuses, Jon—a 23-year-old White male—decided to transfer to KSU for a bachelor's degree in business due to its proximity to his parents' house. Jon's memories of his first few weeks on campus mostly revolved around the size of the campus and his classes, as well as struggling to get a parking spot and seats in the courses he needed. Because of his job, Jon said he had not been able to join any clubs or intramural sports, which he had hoped to do. He did acknowledge that he just isn't as interested in being part of a community as other students and is really just here for academics. Once he arrived at KSU and met with an academic advisor, he was disappointed to find out that he would not be eligible to apply to the high-demand business school until he improved his grades in some key coursework, which would push back his graduation timeline. Jon dropped out of the study after the first interview because he was offered a full-time job opportunity and decided to stop attending school.

Jordin

Jordin, a 21-year-old Hispanic/Latinx female, transferred to KSU from a small private in-state liberal arts college for financial and family reasons. Both a first-generation United States citizen and first-generation college student, Jordin was

commuting to campus from her home where she worked part-time and also provided support for her immigrant parents who “don’t understand” the demands she is under juggling her busy schedule. At the time of the study, she regularly traveled almost two hours each way to visit her boyfriend, a student at the state flagship. She knew that KSU offered a much wider variety of involvement opportunities but had not felt able to participate in them due to commuting and other responsibilities. She “hasn’t really found any friends” and had “been pretty lonely.” Jordin was a member of a sorority at her previous school and joined the KSU chapter when she got there, but quickly had to drop out due to scheduling issues. She also reported that students are “all really mean,” and the times she has asked for help “I just found them to be really rude.” Although initially excited to transfer, Jordin described feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and burned out. “I was considering transferring somewhere else because the commute was also really affecting me. Honestly, I kind of got depressed and I’m not really that type of person. I’ve always been bubbly and I guess ... trying to replicate that into Kennesaw’s community ... it didn’t work out,” Jordin explained late in her first semester. By her second interview, Jordin informed me that she had made the decision to apply to transfer to the school her boyfriend attended in fall of 2020.

Justin

A 22-year-old Black male, Justin was majoring in music production. He previously attended a small public institution in suburban north Georgia but was so unhappy that he decided to investigate transferring. When recalling his experience at his old school, he said he “was getting depressed ... because there’s not really much to do ... and I wasn’t really making friends. I felt, I don’t know, alone.” As of the conclusion of

this study, he had been pleased with the contrast of his KSU experience. Right off the bat, Justin noted that exposure to campus traditions such as the school song and football games made him feel that there was a richer community at KSU. Justin described meeting friends through his major. As a Black male, Justin was also selected to participate in the now-defunct TAG, which he credited with giving him “pretty personal help” and felt “more like my academic advisor than my actual academic advisor.” Justin is the only study participant who mentioned receiving support from TAG, for which funding ran out at the end of 2019. The only aspect of his transition that he consistently noted as difficult was housing; he wanted to live in campus housing, but ended up at a semi-expensive off-campus apartment complex when he found there were no on-campus spots available.

Kelsey

Kelsey, a 23-year-old White non-binary student, transferred from a large urban in-state institution to pursue a technical communication degree. They said, “I think it’s a Kennesaw specific major because I’ve not heard of it anywhere else.” A member of the LGBT community, Kelsey got involved with related organizations and events and spent a lot of time in the LGBT Resource Center. They had also “gotten into some little cliques in classes ... [their major] is very small, so you get to know your classmates really well, which is nice.” They also described using the on-campus Counseling Center for individual therapy and had considered joining a counseling group for victims of sexual assault. In the fall, Kelsey lived off-campus in the Kennesaw area, but planned to move in with family in the spring which would increase their commute to 45 minutes each way.

After their first interview, I was unable to get a response from Kelsey, and so they were removed from further participation in the study.

Mark

Mark, a 24-year-old White male, began his college career at a large, prestigious public institution in the mid-Atlantic. While there, he got caught up in what he describes as “party culture” and eventually dropped out to pursue help for mental health and substance abuse issues. After taking almost four years off, he enrolled in a few general education courses at a campus of a large public urban institution near his home, and then decided to enroll at KSU to complete his bachelor’s degree. Mark is now pursuing a dual degree in theatre and math. In recalling memories from his first few weeks on campus, he credited the theatre department for creating a community right away: “[they] did a really good job of creating a cohort for transfers ... I’m in classes with a lot of the same people all day, and [as fellow theatre major transfer students] they’re dealing with some of the same stuff I’m going through and figuring it all out.” Mark was also a member of the Collegiate Recovery Program at KSU, which he mentioned frequently and credited with almost all of his transition success. Like Britt, he also lived in the CRP living learning community which is a subset of campus housing open only to those in recovery.

Maya

After earning her associate’s degree at a small in-state feeder school with multiple campuses, Maya—a 26-year old Black female—eventually decided to go for her bachelor’s degree. Maya had transferred multiple times and taken time off to work prior to enrolling at KSU, and had not initially planned to complete a four-year degree, but when researching career options she learned that her eventual salary would likely be

higher with a bachelor's degree. Although she was a new student, Maya entered KSU with some built-in friendships and a familiarity with campus because she had previously attended a local campus of her first school, which partners with KSU to provide their students access to KSU dorms, intramurals, student organizations, and sporting events. As a result, Maya started her time at KSU as the president of the KSU Marietta Activities Council, which "creates activities and social events on the Marietta campus." She still felt new, however, since her classes are primarily on the main Kennesaw campus, and wanted to fit in: "I'm not a freshman, but I'm new... I didn't want to seem like I was out of place ...I wanted to blend in with everybody else."

Sienna

Sienna transferred to KSU from a mid-sized public university in south Georgia that had recently gone through a merger. A 21-year-old Black female, Sienna was majoring in exercise science. When deciding where to attend college, she knew she wanted to become a physical therapist, but did not consider Kennesaw initially because "...being a first-generation college student ... I was looking for schools that had a PT program, not realizing that if they have exercise science, that's the same thing." Sienna was involved in several student organizations, which she found out about when she attended an event hosted by a historically and prominently Black sorority on campus. Initially interested in living on-campus, Sienna eventually signed a lease at a local apartment complex when she found out there were no more spots available in campus housing.

Tori

Tori, a White female, was 25 years old at the time of this study. She came to KSU after completing a year at a small, private religious college in North Georgia, where she spent “way too much money not knowing what I wanted to do.” After some time working as a store cashier, she decided to go back to school based on a conversation with a fellow employee. “She’s like, ‘oh, I’ve been here forty years and I’m just loving it.’ And I’m like, I don’t want to do that.” Tori first transferred her credits to a small, in-state school to earn her associate’s degree before enrolling at KSU to pursue a bachelor’s degree in psychology. Her interest in the field started when her family took in foster children, and she eventually hoped to earn her doctorate. Self-described as “not extroverted and really quiet,” Tori found KSU much less friendly and welcoming than her previous institutions and struggled to make friends.

Wade

A 30-year-old White male, Wade transferred to KSU to pursue a major in computer information systems. During the 2019–2020 academic year, Wade commuted half an hour each way to get to KSU because of the location of his part-time job: “I go to school two days a week, I work three or four, so it just makes more sense to be here.” He earned his associate’s degree at his prior institution, which he describes as a mostly online school with little student interaction. Although expressing a desire to get involved at KSU, he attributed his lack of connection to his own introversion and ability to “find my way into a group,” despite noting a much livelier atmosphere and friendlier people at KSU compared to the school from which he transferred. Wade was very soft-spoken and brief in his responses but did note a few students he has met in his classes that have

become friends. In particular, he noted another female student who seemed to be closer to his age, citing their shared experience as older students when describing the friendship that they developed.

Administrator Participants

In addition to the 14 transfer students described above, I also interviewed three KSU campus administrators with some connection to transfer students or student success. These interviews helped to situate the students' perceptions and experiences within the larger campus environment. As with the student participants, all administrator participants are identified by pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Charles

The first administrator I interviewed, Charles, held a role in institutional leadership with a focus on academic student success at the time of the study. Charles has served in various roles with the University for about five years; prior to KSU, they worked as a college-specific advising director at another large public institution in the Southeast for over a decade. In addition to their administrative role, Charles is also an alumnus of KSU, where they were themselves a transfer student. During his interview, Charles described the institution as "growing faster than [it] can keep up with," noting the fairly recent merger with another USG institution, Southern Polytechnic State University, which resulted in the addition of the Marietta campus. This is at the root of many issues facing KSU today, he believed, including a shortage of faculty, housing, and course availability. He also described watching KSU quickly morph from a primarily commuter campus for transfer students to what it is today: a residential campus with majority first-

time, full-time undergraduate students pursuing a diverse range of degree programs, and a small but growing graduate school. Charles believed that much of what transfer students are missing can be attributed to this rapid growth and shift away from a commuter-serving institution. Although he mentioned a couple of transfer-specific initiatives on campus, like the Transfer Advocacy Gateway (TAG) and transfer orientation, he noted limitations of both. Overall, he believed most issues arise from a combination of the aforementioned finite resources caused by rapid growth, and transfer students' initial belief that their previous college experience means they should not need any additional help with transitioning.

Karen

KSU's academic advising model is decentralized across the institution but centralized within each academic school or college, and the second administrator I interviewed, Karen, led one of these college-level teams of advisors. Prior to this role, Karen spent almost three decades in academic advising at another USG school. Although their current position did not directly create transfer-related policy or initiatives, as one of the larger colleges on campus, Karen's advising office worked with a large number of transfer students. When asked about issues she believed transfer students encounter, understanding the academic policies and requirements topped their list. Despite extensive, proactive outreach to students, Karen shared several anecdotes of new transfer students who did not seek out a meeting with their academic advisor until late in their first semester or even into their second. KSU students are only required to meet with an advisor when they have fewer than 30 earned credits, so although the policy was not designed to exclude transfer students, in practice it almost always does. This delayed

advising meeting, Karen believed, creates frustration and disappointment for transfer students, as they often find out that some KSU policy or transfer credit evaluation will extend their graduation timeline beyond their initial plan. Similarly, the factor they believe facilitates a successful transition the most is if a student makes contact with an advisor at KSU prior to transferring; if it were up to Karen, this would be a requirement. Karen acknowledged her limited perspective on the transfer experience, however, given the academic focus of her work. Other than transfer orientation, she was not aware of any transfer-specific supports or common experiences outside of academic advising.

Shannon

Shannon, the final administrator I interviewed, had recently transitioned to a student success advisor position within one of KSU's academic colleges. Prior to this role, she worked within the TAG program, which was disbanded when the program's funding ran out in December of 2019. The students within Shannon's new academic college are "probably 55 % transfers," she reported, which she attributed to the eligibility requirements and application process needed to join the college. When asked about their perception of the transfer student experience, Shannon immediately mentioned structural transition issues they believe these students experience, such as access to housing, knowledge about financial aid, and understanding of academic requirements and transfer equivalency. The primary factor that she believed positively impacts transfer transitions is establishing relationships with trusted faculty or staff, and the sooner, the better. These "points of intervention," as Shannon described them, were encouraged when they worked for TAG, and should be mandated for new transfer students as early as possible; however, she also emphasized that if transfer students perceive these interventions as impersonal or

deficit-focused in any way, they lose their power. These one-on-one interactions are so important for transfers, she said, for two reasons: first, transfer students often face barriers to participation in traditional transition supports such as working or family responsibilities; second, transfers tend to have more nuanced, “boutique” questions and situations that are better addressed individually. At a minimum, Shannon concluded, these relationships provide a mechanism for transfer students to feel heard and understood, even when circumstances prevent the specific question being resolved exactly to that student’s liking. Shannon’s experience working with transfer students in TAG informed their current work on a daily basis, she reported, as she was able to apply principles like this when working with transfer students who pass through their new units. Shannon was hopeful that the TAG advisors who have now been distributed across KSU’s student support units will imbed some of this personalized support into campus-wide practice.

Themes and Sub-Themes

Four main themes emerged during data analysis. These themes were found primarily from the coding of interviews and written prompts collected from the 14 students described above and were supplemented by data collected from three interviews with campus administrators and campus observations. These students’ written and verbal responses detailed their personal experiences and perceptions of the KSU campus environment as they progressed through their first year post-transfer. In doing so, they also highlighted barriers that slowed or halted their successful transition, as well as supports that they believed did or could facilitate a better transition experience. It is

important to acknowledge that while all of these students share several general characteristics—namely, that they enrolled at KSU as a new transfer student during the same term—each of these students is unique. They each followed different paths and describe varied motivations that led to their KSU enrollment, and each possess different and intersecting salient identities that contributed to unique experiences of KSU during the study time frame. While being cognizant of these differences, it was possible to pull some common thematic threads across this sample. To center these students' experiences in their own words, numerous individual quotes are woven throughout the theme and subtheme descriptions below. Quotes were selected based on their ability to best illustrate the theme and represent the perspectives expressed by other students.

Theme 1: Experience of Campus as Large and Complex

When asked to recall both general and specific memories of their first days, weeks, and months on campus, almost every single student commented on the size and complexity of the institution—most comparing it to one or more of their (much smaller) previous institutions. For many, the size and complexity of KSU was a driving factor in their choice to transfer, having felt stifled, bored, or held back by the limitations of a prior school, and having looked forward to expanded academic and/or social opportunities that they believed a larger institution like KSU could offer. However, regardless of their expectation or motivation to transfer, most described experiencing the size and complexity of KSU as in some way negatively impacting their transition once they were actually on campus in the fall.

“I’m just a number.” Most of the students described the large KSU student population by offering specific observations of how the human aggregate environment it impacted their day-to-day academic life: specifically, the large class sizes and high student-to-faculty ratio. Students reported this especially in contrast to previous institutions where they were able to make connections and build relationships with faculty and other students much more effortlessly. Jordin, who transferred from a very small school, brought this up many times: “I knew it was going to be a bigger school and I wasn't used to that. ... And like I just keep saying, I'm just a number, so...” When asked what he remembered about his first impressions of KSU students, Jack expressed a similar view:

I just remember more people than [smaller previous college] and so it kind of felt more like herding cattle. ... I think Kennesaw is a big school kind of, so I think that is the part that would make it hard for the students.

Tori, another student who transferred from a much smaller institution, also lamented this:

I go into a class and ... it has like 400 people in it. And so there's nowhere to give your input. And like [the instructor] tries to facilitate a really good conversational atmosphere, but you're just not able to do that with a class that size. So that was really like the biggest thing. My first couple of weeks I was like, "How do you even get to know anybody?" Like even the person sitting next to you probably isn't going to be sitting next to you the next class.

The challenges were even greater for students like Tori who acknowledged shyness. She

continued,

And I'm not an extroverted person, I'm super like quiet. So I expect whoever is sitting next to me to get my like super quiet comments and then we just relate through that, rather than like, "Oh, who are you?" So that was really the biggest shock.

Many students mentioned this specifically in the context of difficulty with faculty interactions: "It's like if you try to see a teacher after class now you're in a line with like five, 10 other people," said Jon. When reflecting on his academic transition from a smaller school, Wade shared a similar experience, saying "... [in] the bigger classes, you can lose a little bit of touch with the professor." When describing her memories of adjusting to larger classes, Jenna mentioned frustration with delayed faculty response times: "...I have to wait for [help] ... because teachers take 48 hours to reply [to an email or learning management system message], and sometimes you don't have 48 hours before homework is due." Jack also experienced this, and was able to contrast it to his only smaller class in terms of faculty engagement and availability in one of his written responses:

[In my smaller class, the] professor seems much more involved with the students. He'll get coffee with them. He is the kind of professor that's more involved with the class and what each individual is doing versus my other classes, which are a little bigger and it's clear that [the] professors' just going off the textbook. ... I guess the class size matters.

“It can be overwhelming.” The word “overwhelmed” and other similar adjectives such as “burnt out,” “stressed,” and “over my head” appeared quite frequently in student responses related to the size and complexity of their new school. Adam, who had not attended college in several decades, said “...so [adjusting to the size] was a little bit of a stress to the transition at the beginning of the semester.” Likewise, Sienna recalls her first week on campus, saying “I was overwhelmed, because my school was small, and then, just getting off of the bus, I was just like, “Oh my goodness, there's so many people here.” ... [If you] come from a smaller school, [and] transfer to a bigger school, it can be overwhelming.” As a first generation commuter student, Jordin expanded on how the size and complexity of the institution had impacted her throughout her first semester: “I get really anxious walking to class and stuff. ... Yeah. I just really felt burnt out.” Tori also mentioned this, saying “I was overwhelmed with the class sizes. ... Yeah, it's really the [class] sizes that were the crazy thing. Because if I know the content, it's great, but if I'm overwhelmed with everything in the room, I can't pay attention to anything.” For these students and others, feeling initially overwhelmed and efforts to manage that feeling significantly impacted how quickly they were able to engage with campus outside of the classroom. During her second interview mid-way through the spring semester, Maya summed up many students' views on this:

I would say academically, a lot of people definitely said that last semester, they had trouble [with the size] ... I didn't really know how to find the niche of how to study and I struggle with that now [at KSU]. So ... I'm just trying to find a balance and figure out where I fit in.

Navigating “the lay of the land.” When describing their experience of campus during their first days and weeks, many students mentioned having trouble navigating the new-to-them complex systems in place around this large campus. These systems included the structure and layout of the physical campus environment, with students noting times they got lost or relied on campus signage, maps, or other students for help; they also referenced trouble with utilizing complex organizational environmental systems such as student financial aid and the campus Learning Management System, D2L Brightspace.

Many students found the physical layout of campus confusing. Adam commented on the impact of learning to find his way around, saying “I think one of the things that was a little bit difficult for me was just the lay of the land ... physically figuring out where to go. I remember being late my first day because I went to the wrong building.” Other students recalled specific aspects of the physical campus that complicated their transition. When asked about anything that she remembered being an initial challenge, Sienna explained:

...[n]ot really knowing how everything works like buildings-wise. ... I know the Clendenin building and the Science building, they're connected, but the first floor of the Clendenin building is actually the second floor of the Science building. So it's very confusing and it took me a minute... Yeah, [things like] that can be confusing.

Jenna also struggled with learning her way around, saying “[f]inding out where the buildings were was almost impossible.” In addition to specific memories, most of these students were just blindsided by the process. Justin summarized this:

I remember realizing that it's been a long time since I didn't know where to go at a school because I'd [attended another college] for three years. So when I came here I was like, wow, I'm a junior and I don't know where the dining hall is, where my classes are. So, that's definitely something [that was a shock].

Along with learning to navigate the physical campus, students also explained their understanding—or lack thereof—of institutional organization, structure, and systems. Although almost every student could name the current university president due to her daily emails, few knew anything else about the structure of KSU institutional leadership roles and what those roles entail. When asked about his knowledge of institutional decision-making, Justin responded, “I know that the president, or the dean, or something ... [b]ecause I see those emails. And that's about it.” Adam gave a similar answer, and went on to add a vague description of faculty governance: “I know that there's groups of faculty figuring out, I don't know, the curriculum and there's other groups of administrators figuring out how much we have to pay them and things like that...”

Most seemed aware that KSU offers many services and resources to support students, but few knew about them in the first semester and even fewer had used them; many also found navigating structural systems and policies to be confusing or frustrating in some way. Jenna remembers struggling to access important course information as a result. She explained, “I wanted to get my textbooks before I went to class, [and] they'll normally post it on the syllabus online. But I didn't know how to get to that syllabus. So yeah.” Jon, who was pursuing a major that required an application, was also hindered by not fully understanding academic processes and policies:

I knew I had to apply [to the major]. I knew I had to get a B average in all my classes and everything. [But] since I got here, I've heard that the wait list [to get into the major] is really big anyway. So even if I did have a B average, I might have to wait a semester in the first place to even get there. So then I'll just sit there and twiddle my thumbs for a semester. Because they won't let you take the classes until you get in, which is understandable I guess, but kind of wack. ... I don't know, it feels like a waste of money and fees and stuff like that just to pay all that only to take two or three classes a semester. You know?

Jack associated issues caused by structural complexity with a lack of outreach from campus resources, saying:

You have to really kind of reach out to all the departments that you want to get in touch with ... [t]hey don't really do so much to help you I guess guide your way through. ... So maybe they could do more with getting individual time with people and explaining things a little more in depth.

Jack went on to comment on how siloed these offices were and how this increased frustration. He continued, “It's kind of like you have to find the right person to get the right information out of. If they don't know, they're not going to tell you because it's not their department to know.”

In general, the size and complexity of their new institution—and any resulting navigational challenges—came up frequently as students described their initial experiences of the campus environment.

Theme 2: Feeling that Transfer Students are Undervalued and Overlooked

The second main emergent theme involved feelings surrounding how the institution recognized or supported them based on their status as transfer students. This manifested in several ways, including a desire for more targeted outreach, frustration with being slotted last for access to limited campus resources, and to a desire to not be “treated like a freshman” given the college experience and wisdom they already possess. During my first round of coding I identified several positive student memories recalling some transfer-specific aspect KSU provided but, upon further review, it became clear that these referred to one-off or very targeted events and services that ultimately did not add much or meet the students’ needs adequately in their eyes.

When asked to describe any transfer-specific institutional outreach they remember, most students recalled receiving an email about at least one event designed for transfers very close to the beginning of the fall semester. Some even participated and enjoyed it: “There was actually a special transfer student appreciation day they had the other day. I got a T-shirt that says ‘KSU Loves Transfer Students,’ which made me feel pretty cool,” said Britt. Many others, however, faced barriers to participation or simply had no interest in being slapped with the often-stigmatizing “transfer student” label, like Edie: “I think if you're looking for help, they'll give you help if you know [where to look]. Though I think the opposite of that would be making all the transfer students wear special shirts, pointing them out, like oh, it's a transfer ... no student really wants that.” Administrator Charles echoed the students’ frustrations when describing the challenges he believes all transfer students face:

I always caution [prospective] transfer students, "You're going to come in and everyone else has got a year or two, or more, of cultural and campus knowledge.

They've made those connections. They've identified the folks with whom they might want to do research or get an internship. And you're coming in not having had all of that. You're coming in not having those introductory classes where the faculty assume that you know nothing about the institution yet. And even though you might know a lot about college, you might not know that much about this one." And how do you get that if you don't have that traditional start?

“They treat us like freshmen”: **Unacknowledged Transfer Capital.** Transfer students, on average, are older than their first-time, full-time counterparts. Several factors contribute to this, including lost time and/or credits during the transfer process, stopping out for a semester or more, and/or simply not pursuing a degree until slightly later than those who transition directly from high school (Lanaan, 2007; Shapiro et al., 2019). This sample is no different: the youngest students, Jack and Sienna, were 21 at the time of the study—the age when many “traditional” college students graduate—and had at least a year if not longer ahead of them; the average age of the sample is 25; and the oldest student interviewed, Adam, was 42. More than half of these students had transferred more than once, and many had taken time off from school to pursue challenging goals such as entering the workforce and conquering mental health and addiction issues. Throughout the interviews and prompts, students described frustration with not receiving acknowledgement that they felt was due to them given the wisdom and experiences. When describing why she did not find orientation helpful, Jordin mentioned this, saying, “...they go through things like the financial aid office and tell you what they do, which you already know what a financial aid office does and what the registrar does.” Jenna

expressed frustration on this topic when questioning why her previous college academic record did not seem to prove her ability to be successful at KSU:

I don't get, if I have a year in college, why do I have to get my high school transcript? ... That's one thing I don't get. If you're a transfer and you already have a year in college, or even a semester, can't they just look at that?

She went on to echo Jordin and other students' perspectives, saying: “[KSU] also say[s] [transfer students] don't know what to expect coming here. Kind of like, they kind of treat us like freshmen at the same time. Which, I mean, I get it, but I've also been to college at the same time. So”

Jon had a different take on the topic when discussing transfer-specific support, but still agreed that transfers enter their new institutions with capital:

You've already been to college for at least a year, you know? So it's like you should be used to most of the things in there. You should be able to figure it out. So [a lack of transfer support] doesn't bother me that much. But I guess for some people in might. I don't know what they can offer out there for transfer students that would help their journey along. I don't think you can expect them to pamper transfer students at all, or confirm to what they need compared to other students. I don't think that's fair and I don't think there's a reason to do that. I don't know. I don't think they have any extra... They don't go above and beyond for transfer students, but I don't think they should either.

“As a transfer student, you really get last dibs”: Feeling like an institutional afterthought during transition processes. Although a handful of students thought

transfer students were supported, most felt that KSU should do more to support the specific needs of new transfer students within the structural environment. Jack acknowledges this, saying “[y]ou get the intention to yourself like, “Oh, I’ve been through this, I know how to do it. I know how the process works.” But it’s still challenging just to transfer.” Several students could not recall any specific transition support with the exception of a few targeted emails and events at the beginning of the term. “Yeah, I don’t think I’ve, besides a couple transfer specific emails trying to cater to me ... about an event that they held, besides that I’ve not gotten much transfer specific help,” Kelsey said. Likewise, Jordin did not remember much: “I’m sure they did transfer events, but it wasn’t advertised to transfer students right in front of you. You would have to look for them and be willing to put yourself out there and get involved.” Mark also noted this in contrast to what the Collegiate Recovery Program offered.

I, as a transfer student, I did not feel that supported. So that’s where it’s weird. I really like the school and I like the stuff I’m doing, and the recovery community especially is really supportive. But I don’t feel like there’s a strong sense of integration with transfer students specifically, if that makes sense.

Tori mentioned the disparity between what is offered to first-year versus transfer students in relation to need-to-know campus resources:

So that’s one thing I didn’t know about, I guess. Probably in a freshman class they’re like, “Oh, and we have these services for you.” Because certainly if I ever was in an uncomfortable situation or something, I wouldn’t have known who to contact or where there was a safe outlet.

Summing up the collective opinions of most, Sienna asked: “I’m a transfer student. I feel like Kennesaw has a lot of transfer students, so why not help?”

What they all agreed on, however, was how they felt penalized or forgotten during campus-wide transition processes such as orientation, housing, parking, class registration, and post-enrollment programming.

Orientation. At the time of this study, transfer students at KSU were not required to attend an orientation session, and even if they chose to do so, there was a cost to attend and their sessions filled quickly—some were held just a few days before the beginning of term. (According to its website, KSU has since changed this policy and now requires all new students to attend orientation; they have also lowered the fee.) When asked why she did not attend, Maya mentioned the cost, saying “[p]aying \$60 for it. I just didn’t want to pay.” Adam also expressed how this negatively impacted him during his first weeks:

There was an orientation that I could have gone to that I would have had to pay for. So that was a little like frustrating. It was like \$60 or \$70. I don’t really want to do that. So that maybe could have answered some of my questions and alleviated some of those problems had I gone to it. But it also meant I didn’t register for classes early and I had to do this whole thing by going to my advisor, registering late and had to pick up some classes and drop adds. So that was stressful.

Those who did attend orientation recalled feeling shuffled around and leaving with not much other than a class schedule. Jordin recalls her orientation experience:

I think I was very overwhelmed, and it wasn’t really helpful for me because it was just a one-day type thing. I know they gave us a parking map, but ... I don’t know

the area, so I'm going to look at this map and not know where anything's at. The map wasn't helpful for me. I know they take your picture to get the [student ID] card, and then ... [t]hey took us on a tour, but since everything's so new I'm going to end up forgetting.

Kelsey, who did attend transfer orientation, signed up for a session that turned out to be overflow for first-year student latecomers in addition to transfer students, which is not unusual according to administrator Charles. Kelsey commented on the timing and feel:

I did go to orientation ... but it was July 31st and our classes were locked until orientation. So, I got basically the bottom of the barrel. It would have been nice if it was a little sooner. ... [Overall] it was a lot like herding sheep. They herded us into a line. ... And [the other students] weren't even transfers. I was the only transfer. It was a little bit of a mess.

When asked about transfer orientation, all three administrators interviewed affirmed this. "Orientation [for transfers] isn't required. The carrot is you get to register a little earlier. If we only offer [a few sessions], that can exclude some folks that potentially might want to come but can't because there are only a few, limited number of days," said Charles. It is important to note that transfers who attend orientation are only registering earlier than those who do not attend orientation—all continuing and new first-year students have registered already.

Administrator Shannon noted some significant barriers transfers may face to even attend orientation, and expressed her views on what is needed for it to actually be a valuable experience:

I think the problem with orientation is that, A, it's not required for transfer students. B, there's a charge, so you've got a socioeconomic barrier for a lot of students. It's offered at different times, but for some students it's a pretty big ask if they are working adults, let's say. Can you afford to take four hours off work and not get paid[?] ... It requires investment of time and funds that some of our students simply don't have that isn't covered by financial among other things. Also, the experience doesn't seem to be inclusive or have that kind of one-on-one attention that I think most transfer students feel like they need to have their more boutique kind of questions answered because they're all [individuals]. They're coming from someplace else with a history and a story. And, at orientation, no one's taking the time to hear their story and to learn how they need to move forward on the next step. We're just putting steps in front of them and hoping they can figure out which one they need to take next. While that works for most, it doesn't work for transfers. So, I'm hopeful we'll figure out a better way to serve them.

Registration. For most, getting the courses they needed became much easier when registering for the spring term, but almost all of them felt stress about finding seats in the courses they really needed to make progress toward their degree. “[T]hey just fill up so quick. As a transfer student, you really get last dibs,” Sienna said while recalling her initial registration experience. Maya echoed this, saying “[m]y registration was August 11th, and I was like, ‘All my classes going to be gone by then.’” Although this is a common “rite of passage” for new first-year students, transfer students typically are much closer to graduation and therefore have a far shorter list of courses they need to take—often in a strict sequence. A new first-year might not be able to snag the exact section of

introductory English they wanted, but can easily wait to take that later in their college career; if a transfer student misses out on a seat in a required course for their major, however, it may end up delaying their graduation by a full semester or more. “I would have [taken a required class] last semester if I had the choice, but I was so late in getting classes, I just took what I could get,” said Wade when describing his memory of initial course registration. When asked about what institutional policies have the biggest impact on transfer students, administrator Charles echoed students’ concern with registration and provided some institutional context that contributes to this challenge.

I think transfer students always get kind of screwed in their first semester. And it's very hard when you're in an environment, as we are right now, of very limited resources. We have a deficit of course availability to demand that is in the thousands already. I just got a report now. It's December, classes don't start for more than a month. We are thousands of seats in deficit and still have I think three orientations [left for spring start students]. So what do you do for the transfer student? Do you privilege that incoming student who desperately needs Physics in January to be on track? Do you privilege that student at the expense of someone who has been here for two years? And that's the tension that I think we always have.

Karen also mentioned this, saying:

I understand that we need to give our full-time current students the first opportunity to get seats, but I also understand there needs to be seats for students who are transferring in because they have less things that they can take and so it's harder. There needs to be some balance for the amount of transfer students we're taking in

to have those seats available when they need them because that gets frustrating too. That gives a negative vibe when you come to college and you can't even get the classes that you need to stay on track so that gets a little frustrating for students as well.

Parking. In addition to orientation and registration woes, many of these transfer students noted concerns about their parking location given their last pick slot, or even difficulty getting a parking pass at all. Jon was one of them. “I signed up too late, well I got accepted too late so I couldn't even get a parking pass,” he explained. Edie also experienced parking woes: “I live in Acworth. It's like 30 minutes away. I drive 25 minutes if I'm going fast every day. Yeah. They didn't have any parking passes left ... when I tried to apply. That was sucky. ... I park in the visitor lot every day and hope to not get a ticket,” Likewise, Jenna said “[t]hey need more parking for transfer students because when I went to apply I got East Economy, which is across [a major intersection] and it's sketchy walking across that street sometimes because people do not stop.” Jordin, who commutes an hour each way every day, mentioned her parking spot as an added stressor: “I have to park my car, cross the crosswalks. It's a long walk. Hopefully next year my parking's going to be a little bit closer.”

Housing. Like Jordin, many students commute to KSU, which may be due in part to the fact that transfer students are the last to be able to request on-campus housing. Even those who wanted to live on-campus describe being priced out, and students didn't remember receiving much in terms of off-campus housing support. “They don't have enough space for [housing] ...on campus. Yeah, they definitely need to build more

housing because, I mean all of the housing was completely full months before the year started,” Justin said. Maya elaborated on this need, particularly for those far from home:

And, also with housing, I mean I get it that they admitted a lot of people into the school this year, so that was really good on their part. But a lot of people need housing, so like be more aware that there's going to be a wait list ... some people are commuting from two hours away.

Jack, who lives off campus, was similarly frustrated:

I think the hardest thing is ... they don't have much space to live on campus for anyone who transfers here, so most of the time the students will live off campus. And if you're living off campus and you don't have a car, that can be very difficult. And that would make it hard to get to the school. ... I feel like there should just be more communication with those students and more involvement [with transfer housing].

Not only did students perceive issues with on-campus housing availability, Sienna also notes the financial burden of even applying:

I live off campus so, okay. I didn't know that housing fills up quick. You pay a nonrefundable deposit and housing was full, so I couldn't get that \$600 back. And I didn't know, and for transfers, we're the very last people to choose housing and it was filled up way, way, way before that. So, I was just like, "Oh." That's cool, I guess.

Tori agreed and noted the potential benefit of reserving spots for transfers. “Maybe [KSU could have] like a section of a dorm or something for transfer students ... where it's like,

"We do have this offered if you want this area, because you'll be around some other people like you."

Post-Enrollment Support. Lastly, many students expressed a desire for more substantial programming that would address specific transition needs of the transfer population. Mark mentioned this, saying:

I think having a space where transfer students can commune ... because college is so much more than just going to school. I think for people who it's just going to school, that's great. If you're living on campus or you want more than that and you have the opportunity to access more than that, it can be hard to integrate. Having a place where transfer students can get to know each other more than that would be cool. I don't know if that would be a seminar kind of thing? Something that facilitates [interaction].

Tori also mentioned the idea of a transfer seminar:

Because freshmen, I'm sure, get the lowdown on absolutely everything. I remember my freshmen year [at my old school] ... there was an intro class to the college. And we would take a field trip basically where we'd walk to the building and we'd be like, "Okay, this is where the computer lab is so that anyone can access. This is where the research stuff is. This is where the writing center is." So, it would be nice maybe if you could have one of those.

As another option to provide some structure in relationship building, several students wished for some sort of peer mentor program that would help new transfer students connect with others to help navigate their transition. In one of her written responses, Maya detailed her reasoning, saying:

[I think you should] have someone there to help you guide your way, someone open like I am to help you out. There are students who don't have that and they're kind of scared, nervous, or very shy to ask for help. I feel like there should be like an assigned person to a new student or a transfer student to help them out, like a prior transfer student helping a newcomer transfer student if that makes sense.

The only transfer-specific program on campus outside of orientation at the time of the study was the Transfer Advocacy Gateway (TAG), which ran out of funding in 2019 as previously mentioned. As it was designed to support only transfer students from underserved populations, even TAG was not available to all transfers at KSU.

Administrator Charles described the limitations of this program:

As it was explained to me, the restrictions on that grant were that there were very few students that TAG graduation coaches could serve. And so rather than being a resource for all transfer students, it was just for those who were part of this research cohort. ... [M]y understanding is there were a limited number of potential students that they could serve, and as such they sometimes kind of went underutilized, didn't have a lot of appointments.

However, Shannon—who worked in TAG until it was disbanded in December of 2019—explained her views on the value of the program:

What was so awesome about [TAG] is that it offered a way for transfer students to have one place to ask all of their questions. So more like a one-stop shop of, well, I'm getting this error. Why can't I register? What do you mean I have to have a time ticket? What are these processes in place for? How do I get in touch with somebody about my money? What exactly goes on within this? What do you mean [my major

is] gated? And especially because we were working with ... the students who are marginalized. So a lot of it was vernacular, almost like vocabulary lessons.

Conversations about words that we use that are not widely understood outside of this environment. It became very clear very early that we need to do a better job of understanding that. I find it interesting that right now if you have a question you can “contact the concierge at KSU.” Most of my students in TAG would not have known what concierge was nor how to spell it. When we start thinking about the mechanisms that we are creating, they're well intentioned, but they're not reaching students because we're not thinking like students. And we're certainly not considering where they're coming from when we're creating those things and it becomes evident.

This theme details the various ways in which the student participants felt a lack of recognition or support specifically due to their transfer status. Most students wanted the institution to acknowledge any wisdom and skills gained from previous college and life experiences, while providing appropriate support that both addressed transfer-specific challenges and made them feel as valued as native students in institutional transition processes.

Theme 3: Yearning for, and Obstacles to, Belonging

Although these students' motivations to transfer varied, almost all expressed a desire for a college experience that was a better fit for them than what they had experienced at one or more of their previous institutions. Many expressed initial hope and excitement about the sheer number of student organizations at KSU, like Sienna:

I felt like they had a lot of activities the first week. They had all of the organizations on the green, and just seeing all of that and from where I was in school, there was organizations, but they weren't doing anything. You could be in a club but you didn't see.... I wasn't really involved and I didn't like that. So, when I came here and saw all the clubs, I was just like, "Oh my goodness, this is amazing." So yeah, that was my biggest thing of coming here and just seeing that, I was like, "This is great." The involvement, and these clubs actually do things.

Others mentioned the fact that they can now pursue a degree program that wasn't previously available or known to them, like Kelsey, who transferred specifically for the technical communication major that KSU offers. Several commented on campus traditions they had heard about or were exposed to during the first few weeks of classes that made KSU feel like a community with lots of school spirit, from learning a school song at Orientation to attending a football game. Justin in particular commented on the impact of these traditions:

I guess it's just easier to have school spirit here. It doesn't seem forced. People want to represent this school and stuff. They wear all the KSU merch and stuff like that. On social media, people, they'll have KSU in their bio and stuff like that. I don't know. It just makes you feel like you're part of it.

Not all these students, however, felt connected to this community right away, and some continued to struggle with "fitting in" throughout the course of this study. In describing their desire to feel included, get involved, and find community, students frequently mentioned a few key factors in their success (or lack of).

“I’m just not an online learner”: Tech-savvy expectation for academic and social success. For many, the unspoken expectation of both understanding and utilizing technology was a challenge. Some students found the systems themselves difficult to navigate—including adjusting to large online courses and accessing campus offices—and had to proactively seek help, which often left them feeling embarrassed. Others found KSU’s heavy emphasis on technology as a communication tool frustrating and unhelpful. This was mentioned most often when describing how students are made aware of events and involvement opportunities. Almost every student mentioned receiving daily emails from KSU that summarized everything happening on campus that day. Britt explained:

Yeah, the student emails are every day and they come at the same time just about. They kind of have a summary of whatever is going on that day with all different kinds of departments or organizations. And they're not always just fun events, sometimes they're academic enhancing events or ways you can make a quick few dollars, do this... what do you call it? What's the word? I guess involvement, I'll just use that word. Just all different types of things, all different kinds of things, anything that's going on that day, basketball games, football games.

In her first interview, Sienna commented on how she appreciated these daily emails. She continued, “...[t]hey send us an email every day of all of these events and things happening and I'm just like, "Wow." So, if I don't have anything to do, nine times out of 10 I'll open that email. There's something for me to do.” This was also a topic she revisited in her spring semester interview: “I really like—I know I said this last time I think—but how we get emails every day about the activities and it's really cool. If you're not doing anything, you could go there and go to stuff.”

To all but the most outgoing students, unfortunately, these emails felt impersonal and/or overwhelming. Edie mentioned this potential barrier:

I think—and maybe because I feel like I'm a little bit more outgoing than most people—I feel like a lot of transfer students would have a hard time putting themselves out there. That's one problem that I could potentially see happening.

Referencing an event for transfers, Tori admitted “[i]t may have been in one of the daily emails or something. But, honestly, I open those to get the notification off my phone. I mean, I'll scroll through them sometimes, but most of it's not really applicable to me.”

Mark also described how students miss things that are included in the daily emails:

Yeah, they did [send emails]. But when I mentioned it to other people who were transfers, they were like, "What?" So it was buried in one of the weekly announcement or something. They may have sent out a couple individual emails. But that's the kind of stuff ... that if it's not really early on in the semester, it's really easy to get lost in the mix.

When explaining how she hears about things happening on campus, Jenna mentioned the emails not being that helpful for her, saying “[s]omeone I went to high school with tells me about all the events that happen at school cause somehow I never find about them and she's like, "Oh there an email," and I'm like, "Huh huh, must not have seen that one." Tori agrees: “[a]nd again, I might have some links in emails that I haven't ... But who opens the Daily Inform and reads every word of it?”

Beyond daily emails, students commented on the difficulty of adjusting to online courses. “I’m just not an online learner,” said Tori. Adam elaborates on this dependence on technology in the classroom—particularly as someone well outside the average

college student age range:

There's [online] discussion posts that you have to do generally on these things.

And I don't really dig Facebook or Twitter or anything like that ... but that's really the only interaction. And that's like a required interaction. It's not organic. ... If there's a [younger transfer student] who's just coming across town or coming from another school, maybe it's similar enough for that person and it's not a big deal, that all the doodads and the technology that confused me wouldn't be anything to them.

“It’s all about who you know”: **The power of personal interactions.** When describing positive memories about feeling connected or getting involved, overwhelmingly students recalled stories that involved a personal connection with another KSU community member. Students who struggled to find a sense of belonging, on the other hand, recalled negative interactions and difficulty making personal connections.

Faculty and staff. For some students, individual KSU faculty or staff relationships played a huge role in their positive transition. Britt referenced a KSU staff member as being important to her transition in her first semester written response:

[She is] a coordinator for the Collegiate Recovery Program here on campus. She's been pretty awesome at just helping me to be successful this first semester.

Whether it be advocating for me, just being someone to talk to and even to check me on different things and all this other stuff that kind of go along with academics. She's been really helpful, helping me adjust to being a new resident of

Kennesaw.

When asked about any specific people that stood out to her, Jordin brought up the student instructor (SI) from one of her classes: “I guess the SI definitely for sure. I’d be really lost if it wasn’t for her sessions,” she said. Many others also brought up a specific faculty member. “My visual comm teacher ... she’s just a really cool person, I guess. I don’t know. When I’m in that class I just feel a little bit relaxed,” Justin said. Tori also described how a professor made her feel welcome:

So, there was once I actually emailed a professor, just because I felt comfortable with the professor, and she had mentioned in class, she was like, “Email me anytime. Don’t say, ‘Good morning. Sorry for emailing.’ [Instead, say] ‘Good morning. I need help.’” ... [S]he is just wonderful. Like on our syllabus, she lists her cell phone number and she’s like, “If you text me, do [not say], ‘Hey, sorry to text, but...’” She’s like, “Just text me. I give you my number because I want you to have resources.” So she is really helpful with everything. I had emailed her, and I was like, “I just want to know like what to do if this doesn’t go well.” Because at that time, I didn’t know where my advisor was, who my advisor was. And so, she was like, “These are the steps you would take. Right now, I think your best bet is to do this and contact this person. But if it goes wrong, what we would do next is set this up and talk to the Dean and all this.” And so, she’s just so helpful and she really cares.

Students. For others, interactions or friendships with fellow students featured prominently in memories of feeling a sense of belonging on campus. Kelsey, for

example, credited her own initial involvement to students she met:

I vaguely knew about [LGBT-related events and programs] from other pride people that I've been with. They're like, "Oh yeah Kennesaw has this really cool resource center. You should check it out." Because I had told them that I was just starting Kennesaw that semester. I'm like, "Yeah, sure." And I made quite a few friends, which was nice.

Justin, whose KSU friend group was initially students he knew from high school, agreed, also commented on the power of individual relationships in the transition process, saying "that's definitely helped me just, going in and knowing that you at least know somebody." Jack also described the value of having a friend with whom to attend events: "maybe I've talked to someone and they said they're going to something and I thought, well, I'll go to that too." In explaining how she initially engaged with campus, Sienna echoes all of this, saying, "[s]o if one of my friends like, "Oh, we should go," then I'll go. If I'm not aware that is going on, then yeah. It's all about who you know, honestly, to know what's going on on campus."

In the same vein, those who reported negative interactions, or a lack of interactions, with other students on campus made it clear that it strongly impacted their perceptions of campus as a whole. Several students said they were reluctant to attend events because they did not have anyone to go with; others just lamented not knowing how to make friends. When asked about attending events and programs on campus, Jordin explained: "Since I didn't really know anybody I wasn't going to reach out to someone to come with me to these things, and plus it's so big, and I don't know. I don't

know how to explain it.” Tori, who also struggled to make friends, described memories of other students from her first weeks on campus while explaining the difficulties she experienced:

Honestly ... everyone's kind of rude. Like everyone kind of just looks at the ground and walks forward. If they run into you, too bad, you better not drop anything. And it's not always like that, but it's almost like you can tell what the atmosphere of the day is going to be just when you walk on campus. And, I mean, Highlands, I guess, because it was such a small school, with a few thousand students in several different campuses, you go through the day and you see the same person. Even if you don't have a class with them, you're passing them in the hall. And so you're smiling and saying, “Hey.”

Jordin’s experience coming from another small school was similar:

So last semester, talking to people, I felt like they were just kind of rude. They didn't want to be bothered and I understand they're trying to get to class and move on. That's kind of I feel like their mindset, some people will smile at you when you walk to class and stuff, but some people won't even acknowledge you.

Overall, every student cited a specific interaction at some point in reference to how it impacted their transition to campus. The administrators interviewed recognized the importance of these relationships as well. On the topic of the power of personal interactions over automated impersonal systems, administrator Shannon said, “[w]hen you are seen as an advocate for a student, as an ally, it is astonishing how very loyal they become.” They went on:

So, if I'm reaching out to a student ... and I say, "Hey, I'm worried about you. Circle back around me and just let me know you're safe," that's a lot different than, "I received an update that you have been alerted by Early Alarm. Blah, blah, blah, blah." It doesn't have to be all that. What it has to be is an interaction. It just has to be a touch, almost more like a approach of social worker ... it just seems to me like the more encounters that we have, the more conversations we begin, the more likely that our students will get the answers and the resources that we are offering. But we can't get that information to them without that foot in the door.

"It's a reach for me": Unseen and unaddressed barriers. Despite reporting that they were aware of a plethora of opportunities to get involved on campus, many students' ability to take advantage of these opportunities was hindered by one or more personal circumstances beyond a lack of personal connection. Students commuting to campus, for example, did not feel able to participate when they are so far away. As Jordin indicated:

I know about some events that are planned, but also some I guess the reason why I haven't really been going is I'm not super close to them. ... And Kennesaw students I've met, they say like, "Does anyone want to go grab something to eat?" And then I'm already at home. If it was during the week it would be helpful for me, but it has been something. It's a reach for me.

Administrator Shannon emphasized the lack of support for commuting students, saying "[m]ost of the transfer students that I've spoken with are nontraditional in nature. They are not living on campus, so they are commuting. At our institution, there are not easy ways for them to navigate that ... I'm sad that we aren't doing more to reach that population as an institution." Students balancing other responsibilities like full- or part-

time jobs felt they couldn't afford to spend the time or money necessary to get involved.

Tori describes these barriers, saying:

[T]ypically I don't go to things, because I do have a part-time job and I also have a full class load. So, I don't typically even check them out. Because basically even between classes I'll be focused on classes, because I have the online class that I do in the afternoons if I have classes in the morning, and then other days I'm at work. Just having something that's, okay, you have to show up on this day at this time. And you're like, "But I have a class at this time, and I have work at this time."

Another student balancing work and school, Jon, explained:

I haven't really done any clubs or anything else like that. I've been so busy with work at the same time, so I haven't been too connected as far as doing any clubs or intramural activities or anything like that. I wasn't sure if I wanted to or not. Definitely want to do intermural sports and stuff like that, but I just didn't have the time to do it. So that's part of it. I might do it next semester if I have more time, but I don't know. I didn't go to a single game this year, to be honest with you. I worked every single Saturday, unfortunately. But pretty much, yeah. Don't really have any time.

Several students just mentioned how their daily class schedule conflicted with activities in which they otherwise would have participated. "I didn't get to go for long because of class conflicts," Mark said when describing an academic honors event to which he was invited. Sienna experienced similar scheduling challenges, saying "I feel like how my class schedule was set up definitely was a part of it... last semester I would

be in class until 6:15 and most events start at six o'clock and it's awkward walking in late so I usually wouldn't go.”

Even those without these significant constraints noted how much easier it was for those who lived on campus to get involved and make friends simply due to proximity; given the high price tag and limited availability of on-campus housing, this was yet another sticking point for many. When asked about events, Jenna referenced those that are only open to those in the residence halls: “Normally they're like, ‘Oh you have to live on campus,’ but I don't live on campus.”

Mark, who did live on campus as part of the CRP Living Learning Community, acknowledged the benefit to on-campus students:

Because I live on campus and there are a lot of people who don't. I don't have to work and there are a lot of people that do. That kind of thing is where the question of what is college and what should it be and should there be an expectation that there's this great social place? What is the function of the school[?] ... I think that's something that the school decides, too.

Like Mark, others who lived on-campus recognized the integral nature of campus housing to their involvement and community-building, from which off-campus and commuter students are unable to benefit. Maya, who also lived in campus housing, acknowledged that she was able to participate in a lot of events and activities because of living in the residence halls. “Just basically seeing different flyers at our dorms, they post everything on the billboard. So, I'm always the person to stop and see the billboard because I just want to know what's going on,” she explained.

“It’s a home away from home”: **The power of identities.** Mentions of various individual identities were peppered throughout the interviews and responses to writing prompts in relation to students sense of safety and belonging on campus; almost always, these identities were tied to whether (or not) students felt safe and included as a part of the KSU community. For most, these identities were connected to memories of feeling unsafe in the wider campus community but were also tied to feelings of inclusion and community when related to identity-based organizations. Some of these identities include gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, academic major or focus, political views, mental health, and addiction/recovery.

Feelings of physical and emotional safety tied to identity. When asked about whether they felt both physically and emotionally safe on campus, students’ responses or the stories they used to illustrate them were often connected to a salient identity. Several Black students mentioned racist comments or acts of violence of which they were aware on or around campus. Justin, who is Black, recalled learning of racist events before he even started at KSU. “I actually heard before I came here, I heard that Kennesaw was racist. Because of an incident that happened over here. I don't know if you heard about it, but it was some group of guys that had a group chat, and they were making fun of black people.”

Maya, who is also Black, was deeply affected by this event when she was living on the KSU campus as a local community college student:

The spring semester at the Marietta campus, it was a thing going around. It was actually on the news, but it was a student who made a racist a group chat and saying ... he was going to shoot any black person he sees. And then I'm just kind

of like ... I never left class so early before. I went to my room and I locked my doors and turned the TV off, and I literally was under my bed. So, I have crates underneath my bed, and I kind of blocked the in the area so they won't see me. Had snacks underneath there too. Had my phone silent, even though I was in my dorm, it's not safe either because I live in apartment style dorm so we have a porch where people can just walk on there. And you never know.

Many female students noted feeling unsafe based on reports of women being assaulted or abducted. “A little bit just being a female, just in general... you always feel a little bit more vulnerable,” Edie said. Jordin felt the same way, and shared the following story when asked about safety on campus:

So, since I have that big break in between my classes and considering I have an 8:00 AM and I have to leave my house super early and wake up super early, I usually want to take a nap by lunch time. But I can't go home to take a nap. So, I usually just close my eyes in my car, take a nap in my car. But my boyfriend tells me that's not really safe. And I'm like, I should be fine, nothing's going to happen to me. And while I was taking a nap one time, apparently—and I think it happened two weeks ago, so it's really recent—there was a guy who was running around shirtless with a knife in the parking deck I think on the top floor. Yeah. So there were cops involved and they ended up arresting the guy. And this is while I was taking my nap. ... So now I don't plan on taking naps in my car anymore.

Jordin also mentioned hearing about sex trafficking on campus, as did Maya, who explained:

[T]his is a very open campus. Now I wish that there was more security. There's security but there's not security if that makes any sense. There's a lot of sex trafficking going around. For example, a couple of weeks ago I was coming down the hill ... and I went to my room, and my friend he was coming up the hill. But I didn't see this because I have my headphones and I wasn't really paying attention ... But he said there was a car circling around. ... My friend put his arm around me. I said, "What are you doing?" He was like, "the car behind you was circling around three times and he had his taillights on. Then when he saw you coming ... he turned his taillights off. And we saw a cop car right there, but when we walked up there was no cops in the car. So, I was like, "Yo, I could've been like literally gone."

Kelsey, who identifies as non-binary and primarily hangs out at the LGBT Resource Center, has felt both emotionally and physically unsafe when around right-leaning events and organizations:

Sometimes they let people on campus because they have to—they're a government organization—that make me feel unsafe. I don't know if you've seen them, but they're the pro-life people and they have some really gross images. And I contacted the, I guess complaint desk, and they've said that that's their freedom of speech basically. I'm like, yay, that's good to know. And then there are also, I think they are NRA adjacent people that I have other LGBT people tell me about

to watch out for because they have been rather aggressive to some people. ... At least verbally aggressive, which makes you feel physically unsafe.

Eddie, who is very outspoken about her political views, has felt a lingering fear that these views might put her in a vulnerable position. She describes worrying about this at her organization's events on campus:

I feel like even though I was trying my best to get people to like me and come to my organization's events and stuff, I know there's people that didn't like me or my views or anything like that. I'm pretty sure I was safe. ... I'll just say that. In the back of my mind there's always like a, "Oh, that person looks angry. What if they're going to come over to me and punch me in the face?" You know? Which that would suck but oh well. It's still kind of looming over you if you're outwardly speaking about things that you believe.

Finding community in identity-based campus organizations/services. In contrast to the negative identity-based experiences many students shared, students also connected these identities with feeling very much a part of a community at KSU. Although each of these students' experiences are different, there is something they all share: these students found community related to one or more aspects of their identity outside of their transfer status. Two students, Mark and Britt, were members of the KSU Campus Recovery Program, which provides wrap-around support for students in recovery for mental health and addiction issues. Britt explains the value of this organization:

I live in a Living-Learning Community. It's called The Outfit. It's I guess exclusive to the Collegiate Recovery Program. We kind of have our own floor, which makes me feel really safe and like family kind of... You know? Being in

the Collegiate Recovery, we have that thing in common, recovery, which is kind of the basis for my growth and what I seek to be involved in and they have really cool things that I like. [Without them] I think I would have to do more footwork on my end to find different organizations and different events that I want to do.

They've definitely helped giving me the scoop.

Mark also spoke incredibly highly of the program. “[I]t's its own community. And it's pretty tight knit. So that's been cool to kind of become a part of and experience. ... [T]he recovery community especially is really supportive,” he said. When asked what percentage of his success at KSU he would attribute to being a part of the CRP, he did not hesitate before saying “90 %.”

Several others identified their personal community based on membership in a campus organization related to religious, political, racial, or gender identity. Maya explained the value of her church community:

I feel like it's a home away from home ... and if you're able to find a religious organization here on campus that makes you feel at home, then that's what you need. So, I feel that's been very helpful for me because I'm away from home, and I need to start going back to church. And having different Christian organizations on campus have really been helping me a lot because I feel comfortable talking to them about my beliefs, my worries, my issues, and they're able to help me out. So I feel like that's been helpful for me.

Kelsey found community through the LGBT resource center, and Edie's friend circle is almost exclusively other members of the political organization that she co-leads. Others credited their academic program with creating their micro-community. Justin, who is

pursuing music production, mentioned how much he has enjoyed the community created within his major, which is housed in a building on campus exclusively for their use. Kelsey is in a very small major and says “[f]or my T-comm classes, the size is very small, so you get to know your classmates really well, which is nice.” Mark really valued the transfer community that the theatre department orchestrated for new transfer theatre majors. Jack has really found his niche with the students and programs in the business school; Britt and Sienna both sing the praises of the exercise science club. These niche groups are what make KSU feel like home, says Sienna:

I guess just you see where you fit in... for me, it's exercise science club. Whatever you like, there's something for you, and then, I feel like that's your little community. Even though it might be small, it's still a part of a bigger community at Kennesaw.

Overall, students' perceptions of whether or not they felt safe, included, engaged, and part of a community at KSU largely hinged on four factors: integration of technology, interactions with KSU faculty and students, access to campus, and identity-based experiences.

Theme 4: Internalized Responsibility for Transition

The final theme involves students' changing comfort at KSU, including how they felt personally responsible. Regardless of whether students self-described a successful transition experience or not, with few exceptions they ultimately credited negative experiences to their own personal shortcomings and expressed a belief that it was their responsibility to adapt to the existing KSU campus and culture in order to succeed.

Although many were quick to identify environmental factors that they found to be difficult or overwhelming during their first months on campus, as discussed in the first theme, inevitably they expressed believing that they probably could have exerted more effort or learned to adapt earlier rather than holding the institution responsible. Even if not explicitly articulated, it was clear that the majority of these students believed that if they had trouble adjusting, they were to blame. Not all of these comments were particularly harsh—some just jokingly referenced their own introversion or what they considered to be atypical college student traits—but all had an undertone of self-blaming.

“I guess it’s on me”: Responsibility for failure. “I guess it’s on [me] for not reaching out for help,” Jordin said after she finished describing her initial transition difficulties during our first interview. Adam, in describing difficulty transitioning to online course formats, conceded “maybe I was just a terrible student. I don’t know.” Edie also blamed herself for transition-related stress: “I guess it’s kind of my fault, I guess, for not going to Kennesaw to begin with. Realizing that you’re kind of stupid for not doing it sooner.”

Many students were similarly self-critical when exploring the reasons why they struggled to make friends during their first semester on campus. “I guess sometimes I’ll internalize stuff like that and be like, ‘What did I do?’ And I get into that circular thinking where I’m like, ‘I had to have said something wrong,’” said Tori. Wade also blamed himself for not feeling connected to the KSU community: “It’s just my personality. I’m slow to integrate myself into any group.” Jon, who dropped out of both the study and KSU after his first interview, similarly believed he was responsible for his transition struggles. He attributed his challenges with engagement to a lack of effort on

his part, saying “I think [KSU is] really good for those go-getters. There’s a lot of opportunities for people who really apply themselves.” At the conclusion of our interview, he said he thought I would have asked him if he regretted the decision to transfer to KSU. “I’ve yet to decide,” he shared. “I don’t know. It’s definitely harder... but I think I can deal with it, so I don’t think I’ll regret it.”

“You have to be willing to put in the work”: **Responsibility for success.** On the other hand, as time went on, most students described feeling more adjusted and connected. The students who remained in the study through the spring semester of their first year at KSU largely indicated that if they were able to adjust, it was due to mental and/or behavioral adaptations on their part. During the spring term, students frequently referenced how they had adapted to the campus norms as time went on. Mark attributed his improved experience in the spring to adjusting over time:

There's obviously the physical, not having to figure out where things are. Your body starts to do things on auto-pilot. You can think about other stuff, which is nice. On walks or going to get food, it's like, this is where we're going. This is what's going on. Not having to find study spaces. Also, knowing what's expected on a work level, what other students are like, what social activities make sense for me. All those things are having a level of familiarity is very helpful, which just comes with time.

Tori also shared this sentiment:

I just feel like I'm in the zone, I guess. I feel more comfortable, even registering for classes next semester. Even that. I have a better time slot, of course. But I feel

like I know what I'm doing. A little bit more. I do feel more adapted to it. I've kind of just learned how to do stuff.

This was also mentioned in Jack's second interview. "This semester has been really good. I'm more used to the process of everything. ... I feel like I've gotten the hang of it and I'm not as new to it as much as I was before," he commented.

Others described improvement as an intentional change in perspective more so than an inevitable adjustment over time. Jordin said as much when reflecting back on her first semester:

I don't know, I guess it was a mindset that I was in last semester because I just felt like I was kind of depressed and really wasn't looking at the positive of everything. I was focusing on the wrong things instead of focusing on what I'm really here for. ... Because of the change in my mindset, I've become grateful of what Kennesaw really is.

A shift in mindset came up in several responses, like this from Edie:

I mean, overall, I think it was mostly my own mindset. Kind of letting my guard down more and more and I guess yeah, it was mostly me I would say. Just my mindset and allowing more people to get to know me and stuff like that. I think that made all the difference. Yeah. I think so. Yeah. I've made a community for myself. ... I feel like all students really have to put themselves out there at some point and see what happens, see who they can meet and what they can be a part of.

Similarly, Britt made an intentional effort to adapt: "I did that purposefully because at my previous institutions I would isolate and not be involved, so I made it a point to be

involved in organizations and just step outside my comfort zone.” Maya described this as well:

I've been more social a lot this semester. Last semester I was okay, but I was spending a lot of time alone last semester. So, this semester I've been taking the initiative to actually make plans with my friends ... I've been more social this semester for sure. And I feel like last semester, since it was my first semester at Kennesaw fully, I had to learn a lot of things on my own. Yeah, I feel this semester is better than last semester.

Generally, students expressed a belief that in order to have a successful transition, the burden is on them to step up. “I think that you have to be willing to do the effort, to put in the work to do it, to find it,” said Mark. Edie echoed this, saying “I feel like all students really have to put themselves out there at some point and see what happens, see who they can meet and what they can be a part of.” Britt agreed, adding that it should fall to the student, rather than the institution:

So, it's kind of like the students themselves have to do some work and see what's out there and not isolate or not want to be involved. They put it out there for everyone to take it. It's just kind of their responsibility or it was their choice to see if they want to grab it.

Although they hoped this would change, administrator Charles shared a similar view of KSU's unspoken expectations of transfer students:

I don't know of other places on campus that are built around or targeted to or designed for the benefit of transfer students. I think the expectation is just, “Well, now you're a KSU student. It doesn't matter whether you came as a first-year or

with 90 hours from a combination of previous institutions. Now that you're here, you've got to conform to the model that we've established for the rest of campus.”

Overall, students were quick to put themselves down when they encountered challenges, and equally quick to assume that any progress they experienced was a result of something they changed in order to better adapt to the institution; rarely did they believe it was KSU's responsibility to help facilitate their transition.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the findings of this qualitative case study. Starting with the study parameters and followed by descriptions of all participants, I then described four main themes that emerged from data analysis. The first theme captured a general perception of the size and complexity of the institution, often in relation to smaller and less complex prior institutions. Students expressed how this experience caused them to feel like they were just a number, particularly in the context of the student to faculty ratio; this also contributed to them feeling overwhelmed by the sheer number of students on campus and struggling to navigate both the physical campus and student systems and processes. In the second theme, I discussed these students' perceptions of KSU undervaluing their transfer status. This manifested in two primary ways: first, in frustrations at being treated like a freshman, and second, in feeling like an institutional afterthought during transition processes—particularly orientation, registration, parking, housing, and post-enrollment transition support.

Next, students' desire to acclimate was explored, almost always accompanied by perceived challenges to doing so. Within this third theme, students discussed how integral

technology was to social and academic acclimation, and ways in which they found this expectation frustrating or challenging. They also described how receiving encouragement from someone they trusted on campus was most often the first step to seeking help or getting involved, as well as noting several significant barriers to acclimation which they perceived to be largely overlooked by the institution. This theme also captured the power of students' most salient identities and how their senses of safety, belonging, and community were impacted by those identities. For these students, closely held identities were perceived as both barriers to and supports for their transition: negative identity-based experiences often led to feeling unsafe on campus, whereas positive identity-based experiences seemed crucial to community membership. In the fourth and final theme, students acknowledged believing themselves to be personally responsible for their successful transition. When assessing their experiences of KSU, they both blamed themselves for any perceived failure to adapt and simultaneously credited any successful acclimation to their own mental or behavioral shifts.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Given the rising prevalence of transfer pathways as a route to bachelor's degree completion nationally, it is imperative that researchers and institutions understand how to best facilitate this student population's success. Yet, existing research on transfers focuses in large part on the impact of student characteristics and behaviors—rather than those of the institution—and rarely seeks to understand the experiences of the students themselves. This study sought to explore how transfer students experience and perceive the campus environment of their new institution, and the resulting impact of these environmental facets on their transition to the new institution. Using a qualitative case study approach, fourteen transfer students who matriculated at KSU in the fall of 2019 participated in this study, sharing their experiences during two semi-structured interviews and through responses to two emailed prompts. Additionally, I conducted interviews with three campus administrators and collected notes from observations of campus to provide context to the students' perceptions. Both the interview questions and email prompts were designed using the theoretical lens of Strange and Banning's (2015) campus environments.

Analysis of these data resulted in the emergence of five main themes, which are reintroduced below; situated within the existing literature and structured through the study's research questions, I then present findings drawn from these themes. By privileging student voices, the findings discussed in this chapter both reinforce and add to

existing knowledge on transfer students' experiences and perceptions. They also present environmental supports for and barriers to their successful transition. The chapter then closes with a discussion of implications for future research and practice.

Summary of Findings

This section first provides a review of the four themes outlined in the previous chapter, and then presents findings drawn from these themes. These findings offer a response to the study's research questions, which address how transfer students perceive their new campus environment and the resulting impact of the environment on their transition. The first theme, experience of the campus as large and complex, described how students navigated the size and complexity of the KSU campus, which left many students feeling overwhelmed. This theme also revealed related issues such as difficulty navigating the physical campus, difficulty forming relationships, and difficulty grasping the myriad structural systems in place. The second theme, transfer students' feelings that they are undervalued and overlooked, captured students' desire for the institution to make them feel valued. Students expressed whether or not they wanted to be singled out based on their transfer status, and if so, detailed ways in which the institution undervalued their transfer capital and consistently placed transfers last on the priority list for transition processes and opportunities.

In the third theme, students voiced their desire, and often their accompanying struggle, to find their place on campus. This theme outlined students' perceptions of the importance of technology for success, the value of individual interactions, and unaddressed barriers to campus engagement. An exploration of the power of salient

identities concluded this theme, and captured how identity plays a crucial role in students' feelings of safety and belonging within campus communities. The final theme, personal responsibility for failure/adapting to the institution, presented students' negative self-talk about perceived personal failings, their ability to adapt to institutional norms and culture, and their belief that they, not the institution, are responsible for their own success on campus.

The findings discussed below are pulled from these four themes and situated within relevant literature. They are organized by how they provide a response to the study's three research questions, which frame the students' experiences using a campus ecology framework:

1. How do transfer students experience the physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed components of their campus environment at the receiving institution during their first year after transfer?
2. Based on these experiences, what environmental supports do transfer students believe aid in their transition by facilitating safety and inclusion, involvement, and community membership?
3. Based on these experiences, what environmental barriers do transfer students believe hinder a successful transition by impeding safety and inclusion, involvement, and community membership?

Research Question 1: How do transfer students experience the physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed components of their campus environment at the receiving institution during their first year after -transfer?

Capturing how students describe their own experiences and perceptions of campus was a primary aim of this study. Specifically, I sought to understand their experiences within the context of Strange and Banning's (2015) framework of campus environments. This framework posits that students' interactions with campus occur within four areas: the physical environment, the human aggregate environment, the organizational environment, and the socially constructed environment.

Physical environment. In both interview and written responses, these students frequently referenced how they experienced aspects of the physical KSU campus environment during their first year. Many students commented on the sheer size of the physical campus, particularly when comparing it to much smaller schools they attended previously. This aligns with previous studies by Davis and Casey (1999) and Townsend and Wilson (2006), which both suggested that transfer students are often overwhelmed by the size and complexity of receiving institutions. Learning to navigate this new, much larger campus was a common experience during students' first few weeks and involved many features of the physical environment's micro-design and architecture (Strange & Banning, 2015). Many of them mentioned getting lost, which included memories about ending up in the wrong classroom or confusion about which building they were in. Students mentioned aspects of directionality such as campus signage and maps (both physical and electronic) that were largely helpful but did not prevent them getting lost initially. This was also referenced in the context of orientation; those who attended

described the campus tour as not being sufficient, or simply not being able to retain any knowledge of how to physically navigate the campus from their orientation session. Several students mentioned familiarity with one central campus landmark that they then used to orient themselves physically on campus, such as the campus gymnasium and the coffee shop located in the Social Sciences building. The size of campus also came up when discussing parking for those students who lived off-campus. Over and over, these students described how far away their parking lot was from campus, and the female students in particular noted feeling unsafe about both crossing very busy roads and/or simply walking such a distance alone.

The physical environment was also mentioned as students described their day-to-day experiences on campus throughout each semester. Students who lived on campus often mentioned spending time in various physical campus spaces before, during, or after class as a significant part of their routines; some described a habit of eating lunch in one of the on-campus dining halls or eateries, while others discussed a favorite and oft-visited study spot in the campus library. Beyond these spaces designed for all students, several participants mentioned a specific campus space as feeling like a “home base” for them, such as the LGBT Resource Center for Kelsey, the music business building for Justin, and the Campus Recovery Program student lounge for Britt and Mark.

Not all students relayed positive associations with campus spaces, however. Jack described the physical layout of the combined Registrar/Financial Aid office—which requires students to take a number and then wait to be called up to the next available staff member, who are seated behind plexiglass barriers—as off-putting and impersonal. Edie recalled a time when she watched a fellow student rip down a political poster she had just

affixed to a bulletin board in the Commons. Students with less access to campus, such as those with off-campus jobs or long commutes, reported spending little to no time in physical campus spaces outside of their academic classrooms, which echoes existing research on non-academic factors that often contribute to transfer students' transitions (Cedja, 1997; Cejda & Kaylor, 1997; Hills, 1965; Ishitani, 2008; Keely & House, 1993; Knoell & Medsker, 1965; Pascarella, 1999; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000).

Generally, these transfer students' experiences of the physical campus environment involved an initial shock at the sheer size of the campus and difficulty navigating it, which was discussed in the first emergent theme. As the year progressed, students spent significant time in physical campus spaces only if they lived on campus or associated a physical campus space with one or more salient identities. Students living and working off-campus, as well as students who did not associate any physical campus spaces with salient identities, spent little to no time in physical campus spaces beyond attending class and traveling to and from their assigned parking lots.

How students experienced the physical campus environment manifested in the third and fourth themes as well, which explored students' desire to "fit in" and relative success doing so, as well as the role of each student's various and intersecting identities in whether they felt safe and included on campus. Different campus spaces featured prominently in the memories of students who did feel they fit in; they were rarely mentioned by those who did not. Relatedly, many of the unseen or unaddressed barriers students perceived to belonging directly impacted these students' access to physical campus spaces. Similarly, campus spaces were central to those who felt they were part of a "mini-community" on campus and rarely mentioned by those without strong salient

identities, whether they were positively associated with identity-based campus affiliations or feeling unsafe in campus spaces based on those identities.

Human aggregate environment. The human aggregate environment at an institution is comprised of the majority characteristics of the people contained within, and how homogenous or varied those are; it also refers to how closely each student feels their personal characteristics align with those of the majority. Without exception the participants commented on their perceptions of the sheer number of people they encountered on campus, both within and outside the classroom. For some, this enlarged student population was a welcome change that represented a much-expanded pool of academic and/or social opportunities, but for most, it was described as overwhelming and an unanticipated barrier to developing both student and faculty relationships. These students often equated the massive student population with students being unfriendly and preoccupied, which for some led to insecurity about their ability to make friends.

Beyond the campus population en masse, students' perceptions of the human aggregate were largely illustrated and defined by recollections of individual interactions. These interactions with KSU faculty, staff, and other students gained significance based on whether they made participants feel included in, or excluded from, the human aggregate. Several students cited preexisting friendships from high school or elsewhere, noting these friends' role in basic transitional activities like navigating the physical campus, understanding student systems, and getting involved. Others shared memories of a particular friendly student or staff member who showed them kindness at a time of vulnerability. Many students referenced a particular professor whose enthusiasm for their subject and inclusive teaching approach elevated the student's experience. Although there

were a handful of students who mentioned a negative personal interaction, the vast majority conveyed positive associations with these relationships.

Students with strong connections to others on campus who shared their identities and interests reported the most fulfillment from their perception of the human aggregate environment. For some, these connections facilitated relationships based on shared experiences like mental health and addiction/recovery; for others, they were tied to meaningful racial or sexual identities. Others found these connections in groups related to curricular or extracurricular interests. This reflects Strange and Banning's (2015) claim that higher person-environment congruence—how closely students perceive their own characteristics aligning with those of the human aggregate—leads to higher satisfaction with the campus environment.

Organizational environment. The organizational environment, as defined by Strange and Banning (2015), is the combination of formal and informal structure within each institution, including who is responsible for decision making and what factors are considered when making decisions. Students' knowledge of the high-level structure and leadership of KSU varied widely. All of the students were aware of the role of university president, but beyond describing the daily email sent from the President's Office, they were largely unsure of what that role entailed. Very few students mentioned an awareness of other administrative leadership roles or how decisions get made; almost no student expressed a belief that they themselves, either individually or as transfer students, had any say in institutional decision-making. Along with flexibility and innovation, Strange and Banning (2015) connect this feeling of powerlessness over organizational decision-making to whether institutions are responsive to student needs.

By their second semester on campus, most students were aware of a wide array of KSU campus offices, services, and events. Few, however, knew about many beyond those they were required to utilize such as the Registrar and Financial Aid in the first semester, and even fewer had accessed them. Almost every student attended at least one KSU-affiliated event or program at some point during their first year, or could identify a specific involvement opportunity that they wanted to attend but could not. Most students reported attending more events and joining more clubs in the second semester.

Technology played a large role in students' interactions with the organizational environment. Although just a handful described actively reading them, most students mentioned receiving daily email digests from KSU which advertised both academic and social events occurring on campus that day; several others referenced following social media accounts that alerted them to events and programming. Navigating web-based student systems, another technological component of the organizational environment, caused frustration and confusion for many—some noted difficulty finding answers to questions on KSU websites, while others had trouble knowing how to operate within the student learning management system utilized for most courses. Students also conveyed frustration and disappointment about transfer-related policies surrounding these systems; incoming transfer students are the last on campus to gain access to course registration, parking passes, and on-campus housing. Although they did not reference the term specifically, these concerns connect to student's views on the institutional value placed on production—namely, that the institution values admitting more students over the resulting negative impact on those students (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Socially constructed environment. As defined by Strange and Banning (2015), this aspect of the campus environment is based solely on how students perceive the campus environment around them, regardless of whether their perceptions align with reality. Participants' perceptions about their environment were neither unified nor totally accurate when referenced against information gleaned from observations, administrator interviews, and the institutional research website. However, the simple fact that students could perceive the environment as different—both from others' views, and potentially from what actually exists—is notable. Some students commented on campus traditions and school spirit as being really meaningful, while others dismissed the same things as “trying too hard” or did not have a memory of them existing at all. Many students referenced informal student communication tools such as the mobile phone apps GroupMe and Wildfire as large contributors to the information they received and internalized about the constructed environment, while others never mentioned them, and still others held negative associations. Despite the variations in students' social construction of the campus environment around them, however, there were clear similarities across groups with shared views.

How these 14 transfer students constructed their beliefs about campus generally correlated with two factors: their level of access to the physical campus, and their perceived membership (or lack of) in one or more identity-based campus groups. In general, students found the socially constructed environment to be welcoming and inclusive if they lived on campus or had easy access to campus. Those with strong ties to a “mini-community” on campus, such as a student organization, academic program, or campus service, expressed the most positive perceptions of their environment. Students

living off-campus, in contrast, perceived the socially constructed environment as overwhelmingly complex, exclusive, impersonal, and/or unsafe. These negative perceptions were exacerbated if they had a significant commute, as well as if they held a job. This is consistent with previous research on common financial and social issues experienced by transfer students that impact their level of campus access (Thurmond, 2003, 2007; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Although most who fell into this bucket associated this negative perception with a decrease in their satisfaction, this was not true across the board: whether they were bothered by it differed based on their stated goals. A handful of students, who were both non-traditional in age and commuting to campus, experienced the socially constructed environment as large and impersonal, but also shared that this did not really matter to them due to their singular focus on academics and/or career attainment.

While retaining the essential uniqueness of each student's experience, it is possible to summarize common perceptions of their campus environment. Generally, students experienced the physical campus as overwhelmingly large. Similarly, their perceptions of the human aggregate environment centered around the size of the student population. Satisfaction with this environmental subset hinged on the quality of their one-on-one interactions and whether they saw themselves as highly similar to the majority of others around them. Organizationally, students felt confused about how to navigate systems and processes, particularly when those systems or processes seemed to discount their needs. All of these experiences contributed to participants' beliefs about the socially constructed environment, which they viewed as welcoming and inclusive only if they had

substantial access to campus and found community within an identity-based campus group.

Research Question 2: Based on these experiences, what environmental supports do transfer students believe aid in their transition by facilitating safety and inclusion, involvement, and community membership?

This study's first research question sought to learn how transfer students experienced and perceived the four components of Strange and Banning's (2015) campus environmental framework—the physical environment, the human aggregate environment, the organizational environment, and the socially constructed environment—during their first year post-transfer at KSU. To facilitate student success within a campus environment, moreover, Strange and Banning (2015) posit that institutions must use these environmental categories to scaffold support that ultimately leads to students becoming a part of the campus community. For this sense of community to flourish, students must first get involved and engaged on campus, Strange and Banning theorize, and that engagement is only possible when students first feel safe and included (2015). From the experiences of this study's student participants, it is possible to summarize what environmental supports they believe assist in the establishment of these three levels—safety and inclusion, involvement, and community—and therefore facilitate a successful transition.

Creating safety and inclusion. The foundational level of Strange and Banning's (2015) hierarchical model, safety and inclusion, refers to both the physical and psychological safety students feel on campus, along with their sense of belonging—

whether or not they feel their needs and interests are acknowledged in their new setting. In summarizing these 14 transfer students' experiences, there are several environmental factors they reported as positive contributors to their sense of safety and inclusion on campus.

First, students felt physically safer when they saw a campus police presence or when they were surrounded or directly supported by others. A sense of psychological security often stemmed from an individual interaction with a kind faculty member or friendly classmate where vulnerability was encouraged or extended, allowing a student to feel safe admitting that they needed help or were experiencing something difficult. This is consistent with findings from Drum and Denmark (2012), who noted that social connection with others helps students develop a sense of belonging and be open to support for mental health issues. Some students described KSU transfer-specific events and messaging as immediately making them feel welcome and included on campus; others connected a feeling of inclusion to the diversity of student organizations available, which fostered a belief that there was a place for them somewhere.

Facilitating involvement. Involvement, the next level on this hierarchy, is achieved when students are able to engage with, and gain responsibility within, their new campus. The perceived importance of involvement to transfer students' success has been studied widely (Astin, 1984, 1999; Lanaan & Jain, 2017; Lester et al., 2013; Wang & Wharton, 2006). Students discussed several environmental factors which they viewed as contributors to their ability to engage with campus organizations and activities, including the variety of involvement opportunities, event promotion, and individual relationships. For students whose sense of belonging at KSU was secure, the sheer number and

assortment of student organizations and school-sponsored events was invigorating and motivating. Similarly, the daily KSU email digests summarizing these options were very helpful for the same group of students, and often alerted them to an opportunity of which they had not been aware. Beyond the use of technology for involvement promotions, physical posters and signs posted in high-trafficked areas were also perceived as valuable for those living on campus or able to spend a significant amount of time on campus.

By far the most frequently mentioned involvement catalyst, however, was an individual interaction or relationship with another KSU community member. Some recalled being invited to join a friend at an event that they otherwise would have been unlikely to attend alone; others mentioned utilizing a campus resource or joining a student organization on the recommendation of a trusted faculty or staff member. This finding aligns with previous research on the power of faculty relationships to transfer student success (Lopez & Jones, 2017; Moser, 2013; Terenzini et al., 1994). These informal and often brief interactions were frequently the push of encouragement a student needed to step out of their comfort zone or overcome social anxiety. Once students joined an organization and deepened these relationships, they became more invested; most ultimately gained stake in the group through assuming responsibility, such as a leadership role, or accountability, such as committing to abide by group expectations. This echoes other studies on campus environments that champion the cruciality of social connections for transfer student success (Drum & Denmark, 2012; Townsend, 2008).

Building community. Achieving community, the pinnacle of the hierarchy, occurs when students feel “a complete sense of membership in a setting” (Strange & Banning, 2015). In particular, Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) argued that this

social integration is absolutely essential for transfer students at four-year institutions to succeed. Several student participants in this study described experiencing this sense of full membership within the KSU campus community; for those that did, without fail they attributed this perception of overarching membership to perceived membership in one or more interest- or identity-based “mini-communities” throughout campus. Although limited, there is existing research that explores identity-driven involvement and the resulting impact on transfer transitions—specifically, Wilson (2014) found that African-American transfer students believe that connecting with others who share that identity to be essential in retention and completion.

The mini-communities to which these students belonged ranged from completely student-led organizations to official campus groups and services to academic programs. Those whose responses indicated a higher level of perceived community were members of multiple campus organizations or groups, while those who described a more moderate level of community membership were involved in fewer groups tied to their interests or salient identities. Of these “mini-communities,” the campus groups that were most closely associated with community membership are those that promoted authenticity and vulnerability; often, these groups provided holistic support that made students feel someone would be there in times of need. Even students who felt unsafe or unwelcome in some other way on campus described believing themselves to be part of a community if they strongly identified with membership in, and felt supported by, one of the aforementioned campus organizations or groups. Interestingly, every student who expressed believing themselves to be strongly connected to the KSU community via these

campus groups had knowledge of and/or an insider connection to one of these groups prior to transferring to KSU and entered the institution with the intention to participate.

Factors these students believe contributed to their transition in a positive way largely center around human connections. Students who felt safe and included connected these feelings to campus police presence and specific encouragement from trusted sources; likewise, students were able to engage with campus more, and ultimately attain community membership if they felt personally supported by a friend or university employee. This was particularly true in students for whom involvement was identity driven.

Research Question 3: Based on these experiences, what environmental barriers do transfer students believe hinder a successful transition by impeding safety and inclusion, involvement, and community membership?

Just as aspects of the campus environment can facilitate a successful progression through Strange and Banning's (2015) environmental hierarchy of needs, so can this progression be stalled or inhibited by others. The final research question sought to discover what environmental factors these students perceived as barriers to their own transition. The transfer students in this study agreed on several environmental factors they believed negatively impacted their transition: some disrupted their ability to develop a sense of security and belonging; others were barriers to involvement and prevented the attainment of full community membership.

Creating safety and inclusion. Students perceptions of their own physical safety on campus were typically connected to whether they identified with one or more

marginalized populations, including women, people of color, and the LGBT community. The female students, for example, could almost all point to a time when they felt unsafe on campus associated with being physically vulnerable, such as when they were alone, the campus was not well-lit, or they had to travel a long distance across campus. Several Black students also mentioned feeling physically unsafe when they heard news or rumors of dangerous situations on campus, particularly when these went unaddressed by institutional leadership and impacted their socially constructed view of the campus environment. Two students who identified as White males, on the other hand, cited these identities when explaining why they did feel safe on campus, noting that if they were not members of these dominant groups, they likely would not always feel safe.

While the physical, human aggregate, and socially constructed environments all impacted students' perceptions of security, aspects of the organizational environment—specifically surrounding student transition systems and processes—were largely perceived as barriers to the development of a sense of belonging or inclusion. Many students mentioned feeling frustrated with transfer policies and processes surrounding New Student Orientation, including some students who were not able to secure a spot at all. Those who did recalled irritation about being charged to attend, feeling rushed through the experience, and being lumped in with first-year students; they also generally did not find the campus tour portion of orientation to be effective.

Similarly, the study participants expressed frustration about processes for which transfer students are the last to be considered, like parking, on-campus housing, and course registration. This frustration was heightened due to the fact that being last sometimes meant not having access to these resources at all, given that there are a finite

number of residence hall spots, parking passes, and seats in courses. This feeling of being overlooked or deprioritized left many students feeling unwelcome and wondering whether they belonged at a place that appeared not to consider their needs highly in the structure of the institution. Several studies reflect these findings, highlighting how essential it is to communicate a transfer-inclusive culture to new transfers before and as they transition in (Handel, 2011, 2013; Herrera & Jain, 2013).

Facilitating involvement. Through telling their own stories, students identified numerous environmental factors that they viewed as barriers to their ability to engage with campus organizations and activities. Primarily, these factors related to students' access to involvement opportunities rather than a perception that these opportunities did not exist or were not extensive enough. While every student agreed on the depth and breadth of student organizations and campus activities, and almost all of them expressed a desire to get involved on campus, only a few were able to do so. Townley et al. (2013)'s findings support this, noting that transfer students initial desire to become involved is often very different from their actual involvement post-transfer. For those that were not able to engage with campus, several common issues arose: scarcity of time, friendships, and/or money. This finding aligns with existing research on barriers transfer students may face that differ from those of first-year students, such as challenges in navigating the new campus environment and the technologies contained within, a decreased involvement on campus due to familial or work-related obligations, and feeling disconnected from traditional students as a result of age (Binkley, 2015; Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013; Lester et al., 2013; Mamiseishvili & Deggs, 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

For the majority of students, getting engaged on campus proved difficult because of these structural barriers; they simply did not have the time and/or access. Many were commuting to campus, working part-time jobs, or taking courses that created scheduling conflicts with common event and meeting times. Likewise, students who were not able to spend much time on campus due to other responsibilities were not able to develop many friendships, which added another layer: a disconnect with the human aggregate environment. These feelings of isolation were often mentioned when students lamented the lack of a partner with whom to try something new or scary, feeling too insecure to step out of their comfort zone alone. On top of these barriers, the financial cost of getting involved—from organization dues to ticket prices to the cost of a meal out with friends—served as an additional structural hurdle. Previous research confirms that financial issues are often a roadblock to involvement (Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990). For many, it was hard to justify spending money on these things even if they had it, given how many were partially or fully supporting themselves through school.

Building community. Unsurprisingly, the same factors that students cited as barriers to involvement also proved to be viewed as barriers to community. This is consistent with Townley et al.'s (2013) study, which found that transfer students are looking for community at their new institution but are largely unable to find it. In fact, most students who expressed not feeling like part of a community illustrated the reasons why by describing what was preventing them from getting involved—namely, lack of access, lack of friends, or lack of funds. Many students explained that living off-campus caused them to miss out on not just formal involvement activities but also the informal, organic social interactions that occur over long periods of exposure.

Others expanded on this, noting that the limited time they spent on campus was made even more difficult by their own introversion; this was especially true of students in majors with large classes, where the person who sat next to you could change with every class session. Some coupled this with acknowledging that they felt pressure to spend their limited time on campus focused on academics rather than social interactions. This is consistent with Bahr et al.'s (2013) study, which found that student agency impacts how they choose to allocate their time across academic, social, and other opportunities and responsibilities. Ultimately, students who faced barriers to getting engaged on campus were not even able to separate their understanding of community from the factors that inhibited their involvement.

For the student participants in this study, perceived barriers to a successful transition centered around a few experiences: feeling marginalized, believing that transfers are deprioritized by institutional policies and processes, and managing external issues which impacted their campus access.

Discussion of Findings

The practice of transferring from one institution to another is not new; since the mid-twentieth century, transfer students have been an ever-growing subpopulation, and they now represent a substantial percentage of most college and university enrollments that cannot be ignored. Providing adequate institutional support for these students, therefore, is crucial. Navigating a new institution presents challenges and opportunities for any incoming student, yet historically support for this transition has been designed and offered only for traditional first-year students. Transfer students are equally in need

of holistic transitional support that acknowledges and values the challenges and strengths they often share, although their diverse life experiences and identities result in much less homogenization as a group than their fresh-out-of-high-school counterparts.

Hearing about these challenges and strengths from the transfer students themselves as they recounted memories of their transition shines a spotlight on this neglected population. These students' perceptions of their transition—whether largely positive, negative, or somewhere in between—were impacted by all aspects of their campus environment. These perceptions clearly illustrated which environmental factors were key to their successful transition, and which were a detriment. Moreover, the holistic impact the campus environment exerted highlights the shortsightedness of attempting to fully meet this population's needs through isolated and limited programming alone. Transfer students' needs and goals go beyond the scope of one-size-fits-all initiatives that overlook these students' diverse backgrounds, identities, and situations; furthermore, one-off offerings do not address the myriad ways in which these students experience, and are impacted by, the entire campus environment around them.

Although all of these students share the common experience of attending more than one institution in their pursuit of a college degree, the findings of this study clearly demonstrate that it is not accurate nor useful to paint them all with the same brush. Every student who participated in this study held strong and often intersecting identities that superseded the label of "transfer." This supports Jain et al.'s (2016) call for a "transfer receptive culture" by recognizing and valuing the diverse identities and experiences contained within this growing group. This study's findings affirm that transfer students are not a homogenous group, but rather an incredibly diverse group of students with a

variety of circumstances and identities, each of which impacted their transition in different ways based on their experience of the KSU campus environment. There are, therefore, no cookie-cutter recommendations for practice that will match each student's experiences, needs, and goals. By keeping this in mind, the patterns found across student experiences provide a foundation for intentional campus environmental design in order to better support transfer students from matriculation to graduation and beyond.

While diverse, analysis of the participants' experiences and perceptions did reveal some commonalities. First, the transfer students in this study formed opinions on their new school, and their place within it, based on interactions with all four aspects of the campus environment. Second, the students who felt full membership within the campus community benefitted from environmental supports such as preexisting relationships, consistent and sustained access to campus, and/or perceived membership in identity-based mini-communities. Finally, students who struggled with their transition and ultimately did not find community were hindered by three environmental barriers: lack of campus access, lack of sufficient funds, and lack of personal connection.

At the conclusion of their interview, administrator Shannon effectively summarized the potential consequences of continuing to ignore the transfer student population, saying:

We're still at a point where we don't think that things need to be different or special for those students. And I think that if we don't do a better job of addressing those differences we're going to lose them. And when we start talking about half of our student population, that's a dangerous number.

In light of the social and institutional barriers transfer students face during their transition, focusing effort on alleviating these barriers and structuring environmental supports is crucial (Binkley, 2015; Chin-Newman & Shaw, 2013; Lester et al., 2013). These findings echo the existing body of literature on transfer transition, which emphasizes the importance of the receiving institution recognizing transfer capital and listening to the needs of their specific transfer student population to differentiate support (Jain et al., 2016; Townsend, 2008).

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Students who enroll and earn academic credit at more than one institution while pursuing an undergraduate degree program are a large and growing subset of today's college students. Unfortunately, these students are not receiving adequate support as they transition into and through their receiving institutions. While traditionally transfer students' success or failure was believed to hinge on their own characteristics and effort, Strange and Banning (2015) present an opposing perspective: institutions themselves are responsible for the success or failure of the student body they admit, and can facilitate or hinder this success through the campus environment they provide. Institutions can better tailor transitional support for this transfer population by recognizing the individual needs, goals, and strengths of each student across all aspects of the campus environment, and then creating environmental supports for and removing environmental barriers to their success.

Research

This case study and its findings are specific to the unique campus environment that exists at KSU and the perceptions of the transfer student participants contained therein. Yet, within these findings are overarching concepts that merit further investigation and may provide a better understanding of how this population can be better supported through initial transfer transition and beyond. First, following another group of new KSU transfer students in a longitudinal study from matriculation to graduation would both replicate this study and assess whether these findings hold true beyond students' first year on campus. Second, similar case studies that examine transfer students' experiences of other campuses would expand the transferability of this study and lend additional credibility to these findings. Including quantitative data on students' academic performance and progress toward degree completion, along with data on student involvement and utilization of campus resources, could reveal valuable insights.

Several specific findings of this study are also worthy of further exploration. The prominent role of salient identities outside of "transfer student" in facilitating involvement and building community warrants deeper investigation and could be studied using the various social identity theories contained within college student development literature. Outside of Wilson's (2014) study on factors impacting degree attainment for African-American transfer students, there is little existing research on this topic. Given the established connection to transfer student retention and mental health, it seems prudent to delve deeper into how closely-held identities could facilitate social interaction, involvement, and community building (Astin, 1984, 1999; Braxton, Hirschy, &

McClendon, 2004; Drum & Denmark, 2012; Kuh et al., 2005; Lanaan, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Townsend & Wilson, 2009).

In addition to examining this environmental support, opportunities for future research suggest themselves from the complex environmental barriers impeding many transfer students. The body of literature on transfer students would benefit from a deeper analysis of these barriers and their impact on transfer student transitions. Students who commute long distances, for example, may do so for reasons that go beyond a shortage of on-campus housing or financial concerns; likewise, there are often non-financial motivations behind students who work off-campus while attending school. Such research would add to the existing literature on transfer student barriers and could help institutions provide alternate environmental support to those students for whom having more access to campus is not reasonable or feasible.

The complex and nuanced role of technology in transfer students' transition experiences is another area worth additional exploration. Both official and unofficial websites, software programs, and mobile phone applications came up frequently in the participants' recollections, and their evaluation of its role in their experience of the campus environment varied widely. Gaining a better understanding of how to most effectively utilize ever-changing technology platforms to support transfer student transitions could offer further implications for practice.

Lastly, the final theme of this study's results—personal responsibility—certainly merits deeper exploration in the context of institutional environmental responsibility. While this study sought to identify environmental supports and barriers to transfer student transitions and success rather than ways in which transfer students impact their own

transition, the origin of students' negative self-talk and their confidence that their success or failure falls to them and them alone is deserving of further investigation. The power of self-reliance, self-authorship, and aspirational capital has been well established for both traditional and transfer students in numerous studies and theories (Ellis, 2013; Baxter-Magolda, 2001; Schlossberg, 2011; Yosso, 2005). The ways in which new transfer students develop and internalize these beliefs and practices in the context of the holistic campus environment, however, may offer insight on additional environmental supports or barriers for both sending and receiving institutions.

Practice

To the extent that they are transferrable beyond a single institution, the findings presented in this chapter suggest ways in which institutions could design or redesign aspects of the campus environment to more effectively scaffold new transfer students' transitions. In order to accomplish this, campuses must consciously decide to make the transfer student experience an institutional priority. First, policies and processes surrounding transfer student access to resources, such as applying for a room with the residence halls, requesting parking, and registering for courses, should be reevaluated. Updating these processes to better prioritize transfer needs will help to ensure new transfer students both feel welcomed and included. To do so, such redesigns may require additional creation or allocation of these finite resources; designating a certain percentage of on-campus housing for transfer students, for example, may mean that fewer returning students can continue living on campus, or that the institution may want to invest in additional on-campus housing options given the research on the value of live-on requirements for new students. Allowing new transfer students access to academic

advisors and course registration prior to new first-year students is another possibility to improve environmental support. Institutions may also want to add additional seats or sections of most-needed transfer courses, or minimally reserve seats in sections of these courses such that transfers who need them to progress in their degree are not shut out by continuing students or new first-years. Not only will increasing access to advisors and courses enhance transfer students' sense of belonging; it can also significantly improve transfer student retention and time-to-degree.

Moreover, institutions should rethink orientation for transfer students. The literature on this topic emphasizes the importance of orientation for transfer students (Finley & McNair, 2013; Foote, 2018; Marling & Jacobs, 2011). Transfer orientation can be a valuable tool in supporting transfer student transitions, but only if students perceive it as such. Requiring participation would set the tone that such an experience is essential to their success. Likewise, removing barriers to participation, such as lowering or eliminating costs and offering multiple scheduling options for those with other responsibilities, would demonstrate to students that the institution prioritizes their needs. Institutions may also want to consider multiple versions of transfer orientation, or a more a-la-carte approach, that would allow students to tailor the experience based on their own experiences, strengths, goals, and needs. Lastly, given how many students reported not retaining much from their orientation experience, expanding or extending the orientation process beyond a one- or two-day event—for example, offering or requiring extended orientation programs, or partnering with other student services to bridge orientation into these students' first semesters, may be valuable.

Beyond initial transition processes, institutions should also consider updating and expanding any transfer-specific initiatives or programs on their campus to capitalize on the power of facilitating individual relationships to transfer student success. As Berger & Maloney (2003) and Townsend (2008) reported, university personnel can be instrumental in alleviating some of the stress that transfer students experience as they interact with their new campus environment for the first time. If well-utilized, faculty, staff, and administrators can leverage their roles to determine transfer students' needs and concerns as they enter their new institution (Townsend, 2008). This is in line with Drum and Denmark's (2012) recommendations, which emphasized the importance of social connection to students' transitions and charge institutions to promote it through environmental factors.

Offering or mandating a transfer student seminar, for example, could aid in the development of these relationships by placing students in an environment that encourages vulnerability and exposes them to other transfers; a transfer seminar supports Townsend and Wilson's (2009) findings that transfer students have a yearn to connect with other transfer students. Facilitating meaningful relationships on campus could also be accomplished through required academic advising for transfer students, transfer mentoring programs with peers, faculty and staff, or all of the above. These advising and mentoring relationships should be structured enough such that advisors and mentors first build trust with their students, and then capitalize on this foundation to assess students' strengths, needs, and goals. As this study shows, lack of awareness of campus resources and activities was not a barrier to engagement; rather, students reported encouragement from trusting and valued relationships as the impetus to pursuing involvement

opportunities. These relationships could also help students address other barriers, such as cost or mental health issues, by connecting them with campus resources designed to alleviate them.

Finally, the most important implication for practice stems from the finding that students are most likely to feel a full sense of community membership if they are able to connect to smaller, identity-based groups that feel salient to them. The positive impact of student engagement on student success has been widely and thoroughly documented—therefore, facilitating the type of involvement that best meets transfer student needs is crucial (Astin, 1984, 1999; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005; Lanaan, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). Despite this knowledge, studies clearly show less campus engagement for transfer students than their native counterparts (Ishanti & McKittrick, 2010; Townley et al., 2013). Mechanisms such as extended orientation, required academic advising, transfer seminars, or mentoring programs could serve as a stepping-stone to helping students find and connect with these groups; efforts could also be made to discover students' salient identities during the admissions or orientation process in order to accelerate these links. Moreover, personal relationships with advisors or mentors could also be a mechanism for helping students understand the value of engagement with these groups, and to overcome any environmental barriers limiting their participation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the findings from this study were discussed and situated within the research questions, theoretical framework, and relevant literature. The research questions

sought to discover how incoming transfer students perceived the environment of their new institution, and how these environmental perceptions provided support for or barriers to their successful transition. Given the explosive growth of students choosing transfer pathways and the research revealing the previously unaddressed issues this process can often create, institutions cannot afford to continue overlooking the needs of this population. Furthermore, institutions need to distance themselves from deficit thinking about transfer students and take ownership of providing a campus environment which allows the students they admit—regardless of what they bring—to transition into and thrive within said environment. To do so, institutions should focus on intentionally designing environmental features that not just acknowledge but center the depth and breadth of diverse backgrounds, experiences, and goals contained within this population. Facilitating early and sustained connections to these meaningful personal identities is paramount, and institutions should capitalize on the inherent power of supportive personal interactions to this end. By building the development of these relationships, and through them, connection to meaningful “mini-communities,” into the fabric of the transfer transition experience, campuses can provide the essential building blocks of a successful transition.

This study adds to the body of literature on transfer students’ transitions. As evidenced through these students’ stories, how transfer students experience their new campus environment is complex and nuanced, and the environmental factors that either support or hinder their transition are not one-size-fits-all. As a result, approaches to supporting this student population must allow for differentiated support while also addressing the desires and needs that are common across the transfer experience. The

results of this study suggest implications for practice, as well as recommendations for future research. These suggestions are intended to better position transfer students for a successful transition, ultimately improving retention and time to degree.

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APPENDIX A
RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Recruitment Email

Dear new KSU transfer student,

My name is Julia Butler-Mayes, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. I am conducting research for my dissertation and seeking interview participants. The purpose of my study is to understand the impact that the campus environment has on transfer students' transition to their new institution.

Required Criteria:

- New Kennesaw State University transfer student (first semester of KSU enrollment: fall 2019 and previously attended one or more other institutions of higher education)
- Courses for fall 2019 are on campus (not online)
- 18 years of age or older

Preferred Criteria:

- 60+ credit hours previously earned and transferred to KSU (3rd year/junior class standing)
- Full-time enrollment for fall 2019 (12+ credit hours)

Volunteers will participate in 2 one-hour interviews and 2 short responses to email prompts over the 2019–2020 academic year. You will be interviewed about your experiences at KSU during your first year on campus. Eligible participants will receive 2 \$20 gift cards to an on-campus restaurant or coffee shop: one at the first interview, and another at the final interview.

All information will be confidential and pseudonyms will be used in the transcription from the interviews.

This study will help inform campus professionals on how to better support transfer students at Kennesaw State University and beyond. I hope you will seriously consider this opportunity to share your experiences and viewpoints as a contribution to this research.

If interested, please complete this short questionnaire to determine eligibility and gather basic demographic information.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at jmbm@uga.edu or Dr. Tim Cain, Primary Investigator, at tcain@uga.edu. The KSU IRB approval number for this study is 20-192 PR.

Thanks for your time.

Julia Butler-Mayes
Institute of Higher Education
University of Georgia

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Student Interview 1

Opening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me a little bit about yourself and why you were interested in participating in this study.
<p>1. How do transfer students experience the components of their campus environment (as defined by Strange and Banning, 2015) at the receiving institution during their first year post-transfer?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about how your first weeks at your new institution were. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: Did you attend Orientation? Tell me about that. What do you remember about that experience? ○ If needed: Did you spend any time on campus before classes started? Tell me about that. ○ If needed: Describe what you remember about your experience during the first week of classes. • Do you know anything about how the institution is structured (who is in charge/makes decisions)? If so, tell me what your understanding is and how you came to know. • Describe anything you've noticed about your fellow students. This could be specific interactions, observations about them as a group, etc. How do you feel about them? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: Do any specific people stand out to you that have impacted your experience so far (positively or negatively)? ○ If needed: Have you heard any rumors about KSU or learned about any traditions? If so, what are they and what do you think about them? • So far, what do you think of your new institution? Anything that stands out that we haven't talked about yet?
<p>2. Based on these experiences, what environmental supports do transfer students believe assist with transitioning (following the environmental hierarchy as outlined by Strange and Banning, 2015)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are transfer students supported at KSU? Tell me what experiences impact your belief about that. • Do you feel safe on campus? Tell me what experiences contribute to why or why not. • Based on your experiences of KSU so far, do you feel like you are part of a community? Outside of a community? What experiences have contributed to this? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: Have you gotten involved on campus at all (i.e. joined a club, or gotten connected with

	<p>KSU outside of classes in any way)? Tell me about that. What experiences have impacted why or why not?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What, if anything, is missing from your experience that would help you have an easier transition to your new school? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: What suggestions do you have to improve transfer students' experience during their first semester on campus?
3. Based on these experiences, what environmental barriers do transfer students believe hinder a successful transition and progression along the aforementioned hierarchy?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there things about KSU that have made it difficult for you to feel "at home" here? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: In your experience of campus so far, what challenges have you faced? ○ If needed: In general, what do you think are the challenges for new transfer students transitioning to their new institution?
Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What would you like to tell me that we haven't already discussed?

Student Interview 2

1. How do transfer students experience the components of their campus environment (as defined by Strange and Banning, 2015) at the receiving institution during their first year post-transfer?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about how the first few weeks of your second semester have been. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: Have you attended any on campus events or meetings? Tell me about that. What do you remember about that experience(s)? ○ If needed: Have you spent any time on campus outside of class? Tell me about that. ○ If needed: Describe what you remember about your experience of your classes since we last spoke. ○ If needed: Do any specific people stand out to you that have impacted your experience since we've last talked (positively or negatively)? • Have you learned anything new about how the institution is structured (who is in charge/makes decisions)? If so, tell me what your understanding is now and how you came to know. • Describe anything you've noticed about your fellow students since our last talk. This could be specific interactions, observations about them as a group, etc. How do you feel about them now? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: Have you heard any other rumors about KSU or learned about any other traditions since our
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	<p>last conversation? If so, what are they and what do you think about them?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now that you've finished your first semester what do you think of your new institution? Anything that stands out that we haven't talked about yet?
<p>2. Based on these experiences, what environmental supports do transfer students believe assist with transitioning (following the environmental hierarchy as outlined by Strange and Banning, 2015)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are transfer students supported at KSU? Tell me what experiences impact your belief about that. • Did you feel safe on campus last semester? Do you now? Tell me what experiences contribute to why or why not. • Based on your experiences of KSU so far, do you feel like you are part of a community? Outside of a community? What experiences have contributed to this? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: Have you gotten involved on campus at all (i.e. joined a club, or gotten connected with KSU outside of classes in any way)? Tell me about that. What experiences have impacted why or why not? • What, if anything, is missing from your first semester experience that would help you have an easier transition to your new school? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: What suggestions do you have to improve transfer students' experience during their first semester on campus?
<p>3. Based on these experiences, what environmental barriers do transfer students believe hinder a successful transition and progression along the aforementioned hierarchy?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there things about your experience at KSU that have made it difficult for you to feel "at home" now that you have one semester behind you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: In your experience of campus so far, what challenges have you faced? ○ If needed: In general, what do you think are the challenges for new transfer students transitioning to their new institution?
<p>Closing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything you'd like to tell me that we haven't already discussed?

Administrator Interview

<p>1. How do transfer students experience the components of their campus environment (as defined by Strange and Banning, 2015) at the receiving institution during their first semester post-transfer?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe your position/role within the University. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If needed: How long have you been employed at this institution? Where were you employed prior to this role? ○ If needed: How, if at all, does your position involve working with or supporting transfer students? • Based on your knowledge of KSU, what aspects of the physical campus spaces, places, characteristics, etc. do transfer students interact with most? Tell me about why you selected these. • Based on your knowledge of KSU, which role(s), unit(s), program(s), service(s), etc. are responsible for supporting transfer students as they transition to campus? • Based on your knowledge of KSU, what are the policies, rules, procedures, etc. that would most affect or impact transfer students? • Based on your knowledge of KSU, are there any campus traditions, rumors, beliefs, or other aspects of campus culture that affect or impact transfer students? • Based on your knowledge of KSU, are there any communities or groups that transfer students would be more or less likely to participate in? If so, what are they and why?
<p>2. Based on these experiences, what environmental supports do transfer students believe assist with transitioning (following the environmental hierarchy as outlined by Strange and Banning, 2015)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of the specific campus people, places, experiences, offices, culture, and groups mentioned above, or any others, which of these do you believe actually provide support for transfer students as they transition? • Describe a time you interacted with a transfer student that you felt was successful. Describe a time that was challenging. What do you think contributed to this feeling of success or challenge? • What suggestions do you have to improve the supports for transfer students at KSU?
<p>3. Based on these experiences, what environmental barriers do transfer students believe hinder a successful transition and progression along the aforementioned hierarchy?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of the specific campus people, places, experiences, offices, culture, and groups mentioned above, or any others not mentioned, which of these do you believe may be hindering or creating barriers for transfer students as they transition? • In your experience of working with transfer students, what ongoing challenges have you faced? • In general, what do you think are the barriers transfer students encounter during their transitions?

Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What would you like to tell me that we haven't already discussed?
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APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORMS

Student Consent Form

**UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
 CONSENT FORM
 TRANSFER TRANSITIONS:
 TRANSFER STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF THE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT**

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: *Timothy Cain, PhD*
Institute of Higher Education
tcain@uga.edu

Co-Investigator: *Julia Butler-Mayes*
Institute of Higher Education
jmbm@edu

We are doing this research study to understand the impact that the campus environment has on transfer students' transition to their new institution.

Research questions:

1. How do transfer students experience the components of their campus environment (as defined by Strange and Banning, 2015) at the receiving institution during their first year post-transfer?
2. Based on these experiences, what environmental supports do transfer students believe assist with transitioning (following the environmental hierarchy as outlined by Strange and Banning, 2015)?
3. Based on these experiences, what environmental barriers do transfer students believe hinder a successful transition and progression along the aforementioned hierarchy?

You are being invited to be in this research study because you are a new Kennesaw State University transfer student (first semester of enrollment: fall 2019 and previously enrolled at 1 or more other institutions of higher education). In order to be eligible to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older. Preferably, you have 60+ credits previously earned and transferred to KSU (i.e., 3rd year/junior class standing) and are enrolled full-time (12+ credit hour enrollment).

If you agree to participate in this study:

- We will collect information about your experiences and perceptions of campus.

- We will ask you to participate in two semi-structured interviews, one during the fall semester and another in the spring semester. Each will take about 60 minutes. These can be conducted in person or by phone.
- We will ask you to write a short response to three questions that will be emailed to you during the months in between interviews.
- Interviews will be audio recorded for transcription, and destroyed upon completion of the research.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your continued education at Kennesaw State University.

We do not foresee that any questions asked will make you uncomfortable, but if this occurs, you can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

You will receive a \$20 gift card to an on-campus restaurant or coffee shop at the first interview and another \$20 gift card to an on-campus restaurant or coffee shop at the final interview.

Your responses may help us understand how to better support future transfer students at KSU and beyond.

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. We may use direct quotes in publication but steps will be taken to assure anonymity. To reduce this risk we will use pseudonyms, and we will only keep information that could identify you until completion of the research.

Your information will not be used or distributed for future research.

If you decide to withdraw from the study or the investigator terminates your participation, the information that can be identified as yours will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed, unless you make a written request to remove, return, or destroy the information.

The KSU IRB approval number for this study is 20-192 PR. Please feel free to ask questions about this research at any time. You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Timothy Cain, at 706-542-4836, tcain@uga.edu. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the IRB at 706-542-3199 or by email at IRB@uga.edu.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.

Administrator Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM

TRANSFER TRANSITIONS: TRANSFER STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF THE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: *Timothy Cain, PhD*
Institute of Higher Education
tcain@uga.edu

Co-Investigator: *Julia Butler-Mayes*
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2. Based on these experiences, what environmental supports do transfer students believe assist with transitioning (following the environmental hierarchy as outlined by Strange and Banning, 2015)?
3. Based on these experiences, what environmental barriers do transfer students believe hinder a successful transition and progression along the aforementioned hierarchy?

You are being invited to be in this research study because you are a Kennesaw State University administrator whose work involves transfer students.

If you agree to participate in this study:

- We will collect information about your experiences and perceptions of campus.
- We will ask you to participate in one semi-structured interview. The interview will take about 60 minutes and can be conducted in person or by phone.
- The interview will be audio recorded for transcription, and destroyed upon completion of the research.

Participation is voluntary. You can refuse to take part or stop at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your continued employment at Kennesaw State University.

We do not foresee that any questions asked will make you uncomfortable, but if this occurs, you can skip these questions if you do not wish to answer them.

Your responses may help us understand how to better support future transfer students at KSU and beyond.

We will take steps to protect your privacy, but there is a small risk that your information could be accidentally disclosed to people not connected to the research. We may use direct quotes in publication but steps will be taken to assure anonymity. To reduce this risk we will use pseudonyms, and we will only keep information that could identify you until completion of the research.

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If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

_____	_____	
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please keep one copy and return the signed copy to the researcher.