



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION FROM TWO-YEAR TO FOUR-
YEAR INSTITUTIONS:

AN EXPLORATION OF STUDENT EXPERIENCES

By

Kaci Thane

August 2025

A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Master of Arts degree in the
Master of Arts Program in the Social Sciences

Preceptor & Primary Faculty Advisor: Brianne Painia, Ph.D.

Abstract

Community colleges are an important component of today's workforce ecosystem. As higher education becomes increasingly selective and expensive, community colleges have become especially valuable as a gateway to a bachelor's degree for those who might otherwise be left out. However, transfer rates from two-year institutions remain low, and graduation outcomes even lower. Through semi-structured interviews, the present study aimed to examine students' experiences navigating the transition between a community college and four-year university in order to better understand the larger quantitative trends.

The analysis found that interviewees were motivated by the belief that college was a necessary step on their path post-high school. While students shared concerns about their ability to keep up with the academic requirements of their university prior to transferring, most hesitation to embark on the transition centered around the uncertainty of integrating socially. This highlights the importance of ensuring students are equipped to build connections in order to better navigate their new environment. Though most students initially focused on building social connections through in-class opportunities, these often extended to external environments, which deepened the relationships and made students feel less alone in their journey. This affirms the overlap that exists between social and academic integration, especially among this population.

Overall, community colleges remain an important component of the American higher education system. While some students come equipped to successfully navigate the process largely independently, for others the pathway includes uncertainty and struggle. Ensuring access to effective information through proactive advising resources and accounting for the social needs of students is necessary for enabling individuals to maximize their time and experience at both institutions and remain engaged through the pursuit of their degree.

Introduction

Originally established to expand more equitable access to higher education, community colleges are an important component of today's workforce ecosystem. These low-barrier institutions provide opportunities for individuals, especially those at the margins, to obtain entry onto a path towards upskilling and economic security and mobility. As higher education becomes increasingly selective and expensive, community colleges have become especially valuable as a gateway to a bachelor's degree for those who might otherwise be left out. This transfer function is core to the mission of two-year institutions. In Fall 2024, roughly 500,000 students made the move from a community college to a four-year university, accounting for the highest percentage of all transfer students at roughly 40% (Velasco et al., 2024). However, given the diverse backgrounds of the students being served, efforts to increase transfer and graduation outcomes have continued to face challenges. While 80% of community college students enroll with the goal of earning a bachelor's degree, only about a third end up transferring to a four-year institution and less than a fifth complete their degree within six years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, Tracking Transfer [NSCRC], 2025). Challenges stem from the logistics of credit transfer and career planning to adjustments to a new social setting and differences in academic expectations (Wang, 2009; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; D'Amico 2014).

Bachelor's degree-seeking students begin their educational careers in two-year programs for a variety of reasons. These include the lower cost of courses, proximity to home, flexibility of class times, indecision around career interests, and overall accessibility (Morest, 2013). Community colleges also typically boast smaller class sizes and hands-on instructors that provide students with greater access to developmental resources. For many students, a two-year program provides an opportunity to build academic confidence as a step towards a more rigorous four-

year degree. However, success within a two-year program may not translate to the same success at a four-year institution (Hills, 1965; Chrystal, 2013). Despite an increase in articulation agreements and greater attention towards policies that reduce the barriers to transfer, many still remain (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Given the challenge of promoting success among a diverse background of students with differing needs, developing a more nuanced understanding of how transfer-aspiring students navigate higher education processes can aid in the selection of policies and practices that effectively support achievement among this group. As two-year transfer students continue to be an important population of interest for both two-year and four-year institutions, this study seeks to gain further insight into the individual experiences of students along the pathway from community college enrollment to bachelor's degree completion.

Research Questions

To better understand the low graduation rates and overall community college to four-year institution transfer experience, there is a need to solicit student voices and contextualize the individual trajectories the quantitative data represent. Specifically, more insight into how students develop goals and navigate the transition between two-year and four-year programs would allow schools, community-based organizations, and policy leaders to be better informed in their approaches to improve persistence and completion. The aim of this study is to contribute to the narrative around student persistence factors by offering a more nuanced discourse on the experiences transferring from between institutions. Given this context, I will seek to answer the following questions: 1. What are the goals of transfer-seeking students and how do they engage within the community college setting? 2. How do transfer-seeking students approach the decision to transfer and prepare for the transition? 3. How do students describe the experience of transferring from a two-year to a four-year educational environment? The overall structure of this

paper is to first present the literature on student persistence factors and the transfer process between two-year and four-year degree programs. This is followed by sections detailing the research methodology, data sources, and approach to analysis, as well as a discussion of the findings and study limitations.

Theoretical Framework

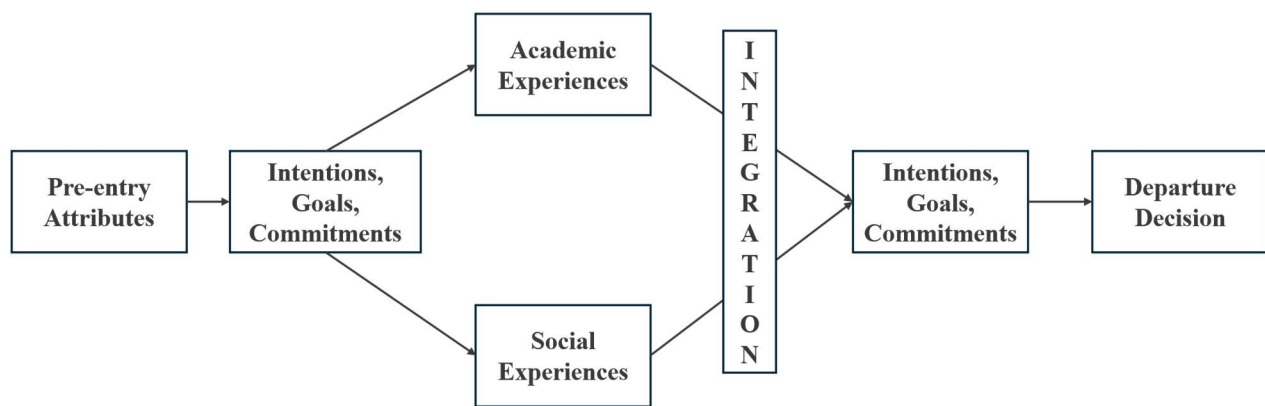
Within the literature on college persistence factors, two major conceptual perspectives have emerged that seek to predict the likelihood of a student remaining engaged. The first of these, Bean's Student Attrition Model, focuses on organizational factors and external forces that either promote or prevent a student's continued engagement (Bean, 1980). The second and more widely cited, Tinto's Student Integration Model, focuses on the influence of individual student characteristics and academic and social capacities (Tinto, 1975, 1993). Some overlap exists between the two, namely that both provide a framework to analyze institutional factors related to persistence. However, this study will largely be informed by Tinto's model given the widespread adoption and further scrutiny it has received since its introduction, especially as it relates to applications within the two-year setting (Deil-Amen, 2011; McQueen, 2009).

Tinto's Student Integration Model

Building from Spady's (1971) work on the role of social structures and Durkheim's work on suicide, Tinto posited that students are more likely to remain enrolled in an institution if they become connected to the social and academic life of that institution. Students who become integrated into a college, by developing connections to individuals, participating in clubs, or engaging in academic activities, are more likely to choose to persist than those who remain on the periphery (Tinto 1975). Originally developed based on the experiences of traditional age (18-

22) students at four-year institutions, Tinto has since refined the model (Figure 1) to address the lack of consideration for minority and low-income students. Further revisions also account for the influence of personal goals and motivations on a student’s desire to remain in school (Tinto, 1993, 2017). Since the model was introduced, subsequent studies have been conducted to test the validity of each factor on student persistence, as well as assess the applicability of these within alternative educational settings, including two-year institutions (Elkins et al., 2000; Braxton et al., 2000; Karp et al., 2010; Deil-Amen, 2011; Pascarella and Terenzino, 1980). The following sections of the literature review will seek to further define the individual components of the framework in an effort to outline how they will be used to understand individual student experiences.

Figure 1



Literature Review

Student Goals and Motivations

An important element of the revised framework involves the individual goals and commitments a student holds regarding their educational attainment. Various researchers investigating community college student behaviors have confirmed that enrolling with the intent to transfer is a leading predictor of upward movement from a two-year to a four-year institution.

The choice of program, either a transfer-oriented pathway or a technical/vocational track, as well as enrollment status (part-time vs. full-time) has a strong influence on a student's ability to persistence from a two-year to a four-year degree (LaSota and Zumeta, 2016; Tinto 2017). This is in part due to the logistics of credit transfer and the roadblocks students may encounter when two- and four-year programs are not aligned. The inability to prioritize school as a full-time endeavor also introduces limiting constraints through competing demands for time, resources, and attention. Bean's (1980) model of student attrition, which compared student departure to turnover within the professional setting, emphasizes the importance of an individual student's intent to stay on their overall persistence behavior. Further, initial level of commitment and student intent was validated as a predictive variable in multiple studies applying Tinto's model (Pascarella and Terenzin, 2014; Bers and Smith, 1991).

An important consideration for community college students as it relates to their goals is the extent to which they are decided about the focus of their degree, since some students enroll in a two-year program due to a lack of clarity around career interests. Remaining undecided may lead students to question the value of staying engaged within an educational program, especially given the financial and opportunity costs required to do so. The longer a student's goals remain unclear, the less likely it may be that they sustain their original level of commitment and thus may more strongly consider or follow through with departure (Tinto, 2022). While it is important not to frame all exits from higher education as negative, especially when students are able to transition to alternate opportunities, ensuring students have the resources available to explore and define their interests could ultimately serve to increase engagement.

Goals, once decided, are important, but by themselves do not provide the full picture of a student's interest and willingness to remain engaged. Personal motivations are an additional

crucial factor in understanding the likelihood of persistence for a given individual due to the time, energy, and financial resources required to complete a degree. These can have a moderating effect on goals in that they determine the amount of effort a student is willing and able to exert towards the pursuit of higher education (Wigfield, 1994). Within Tinto's framework, motivation not only shapes a student's initial engagement but is also shaped by a variety of forces, including their academic and social experiences within the educational environment (Tinto, 2015). While the following sections on academic and social integration are important components of the overall model, the degree to which a student experiences or even seeks out opportunities to integrate themselves may be influenced by their initial goals and level of commitment to an institution or degree (Tinto, 2015).

Academic Integration

Students can become academically integrated within an institution both formally and informally. Family educational backgrounds and prior academic achievement (formal integration mechanisms) and interactions with faculty (informal mechanisms) are important considerations for assessing the overall level of a student's academic integration (Tinto 1975, 2017; Meeuwisse et al., 2010). However, this definition can be expanded to include an understanding of the different pathways and courses available for study, as well as the expectations faculty and staff of academic institutions hold. A student's ability to integrate themselves academically within the community college setting specifically has the potential to set them up for success during the transition period, as selecting the appropriate institution to transfer to, declaring a major, and adjusting to classroom expectations, all require a degree of academic fluency.

For transfer students, academic integration may be especially important leading up to and during the transition to a four-year institution since the extent to which they can successfully

identify, and access, institutional resources can play a significant role in their ability to persist. Understanding the connections students build at both institutions to support decision-making, persistence, and completion is important in order to make sure information and resources are appropriately designed and distributed.

Social Integration

Students can also become socially integrated through both formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (connections to peers) pathways (Tinto 2015; Meeuwisse et al., 2010). The community college setting provides a distinct environment for social integration, as compared to a four-year institutional setting, given the range of student backgrounds and external responsibilities that limit relationship building on campus. Many students often remain more strongly connected to existing social networks external to the college and have fewer opportunities for involvement in formal social groups (Tinto 1975, 2017). However, social integration has still been validated as an important factor in persistence, especially due to the information channels students are able to build amongst their peers (Deil-Amen, 2011).

Among the body of evidence demonstrating the influence of social integration on the outcomes of post-secondary students, a prominent theory is that of an individual's sense of belonging. In the school context, this has been defined as "a psychological construct related to attachment to school and underpinned by feelings of being accepted and valued by others (including peers) within the school community" (Willms, 2000). Several subsequent studies have validated the "relationship between school belonging and academic achievement, mental health outcomes, and maladaptive behaviors" (Slaten et al, 2016). First-generation students or individuals who do not have the social capital to support their navigation through school may struggle to develop a sense of belonging and therefore be at greater risk of stopping out. A lack

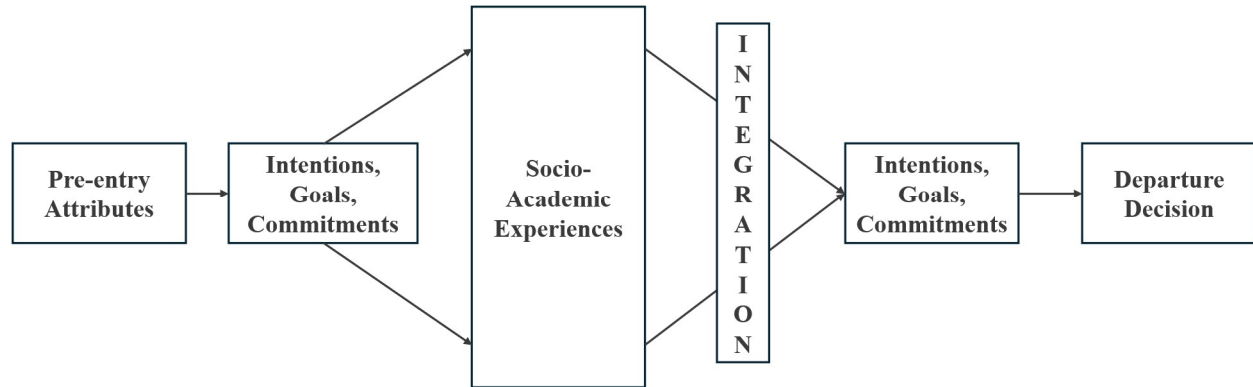
of familiarity with higher education norms may cause students to refrain from socially integrating due to a lack of confidence or fear around engaging. This can prohibit relationship building among both peers and faculty (Smith, 2013).

Per Tinto's model, the presence and stability of interpersonal relationships and connections to at least one social group can influence a student's goals and motivations to persist along their chosen track. Examining the social connections and sense of belonging held by students both during their time at a community college and at a four-year institution has the potential to further inform how social supports can aid in the navigation of an educational career.

Revisions to Tinto's Student Integration Model

Most applications of Tinto's model investigate the extent to which students are either academically *or* socially integrated, treating these as separate constructs within the educational setting (Deil-Amen, 2011). However, these two domains are very much interconnected, especially for community college students. Given the environment of two-year programs, most relationships begin in the academic setting of a classroom or are sought for both their academic *and* social utility. In fact, academic integration can be reinforced through the social networks students build. As Karp et. al (2014) found, community college student's social relationships often began as academic ones, rooted in academic processes such as study groups. The two forms of integration are therefore often indistinguishable from another within the two-year setting (Deil-Amen, 2011). Figure 2 provides a re-imagining of Figure 1 based on this context.

Figure 2



There has also been some inconsistency in how academic and social integration have been defined across studies. These inconsistencies have been further confused by the multiple revisions of Tinto's model. For example, interactions with faculty have been separately defined as evidence for both forms, providing further justification for adopting Deil-Amen's (2011) use of socio-academic integration to best describe student attachment within the two-year environment (Berger and Milem, 1999; Braxton et al., 2000). The overlap between these two concepts also highlights the inadequacy of quantitative data to fully describe the nuanced factors of integration. The collection of qualitative data relating to socio-academic integration can provide additional insight into the types of relationships students build and how those are used towards both social and academic aims.

Defining Transition

Tinto's theory frames student departure as an outcome of a longitudinal process wherein motivations and goals are informed, reinforced, and changed by academic and social experiences. Therefore, persisting through school is not a point-in-time decision, but rather a result of a series of interactions within the educational environment. Different interpretations of the transition between two-year and four-year institutions have an impact on the types of policies and resources that can be put in place to better support this population. Instead of

conceptualizing transition as a single point in a student's educational trajectory, it is better thought of as a 'stage' or 'phase' that a student experiences and therefore, requires a more complex set of navigational tools.

Students embarking on the transfer journey are in an extended period of change, requiring their ability to adapt to new social and academic expectations both pre- and post-transition. In a meta-analysis of the literature focused on higher education transfer, Gale and Parker defined three distinct approaches to framing and supporting this phenomenon. These include *induction* – the navigation of institutional norms and processes, *development* – the navigation of socio-cultural norms and expectations, and *becoming* – the navigation of multiple narratives, identities, and senses of self. Each of these domains contain different ramifications for what capacities and information are necessary for success and how these can be supported by institutions, individuals, and instructional pedagogy (Gale & Parker, 2014). As students move from one institution to another, they are simultaneously navigating new institutional and social norms, as well as defining and re-defining their personal identities and narratives. While academic-focused (induction) supports often take priority and are the most widely available across institutions, it is important that resources informed by development and becoming frames are also present and accessible.

Navigating Community College Transfer

The period of transition between academic programs can be a challenge for students due to both the logistics of moving from one institution to another and the requirement to adapt to new social and academic contexts. As a student acclimates to a new school environment, they may fail to achieve academically, putting their ability to persist at risk. This is a concern for administrators at four-year institutions specifically, since this not only impacts individual

students, but also the overall outcomes tracked and reported by schools. Termed “transfer shock”, the phenomenon is often the result of differences in class size, rigor, and structure between the two-year and the four-year setting (Hills, 1965, Laanan, 2007; Melguizo et al., 2011). While some students are able to navigate the period of transition and adapt to the new challenges of the four-year program, others may find the adjustment too overwhelming, leading them to disengage and jeopardize both their ability and desire to persist. Despite the numerous studies validating the phenomenon of transfer shock, more research is needed in order to better understand how students are experiencing transfer and what practices and information may aid in reducing the negative impacts that result.

Institutional agents and social networks can be helpful resources for students by promoting their success during the adjustment period. However, not all students have access to quality transfer resources, specifically in the form of a trusted advisor (Dowd et al., 2013; Fay et al., 2022). Negative experiences with transfer advising have been documented in multiple studies. This includes inaccurate course information, a lack of personalization, and misunderstanding of goals and career interests (Allen et al., 2014; Fay et al., 2022). Students with limited social capital or familiarity with academic processes may be at an even greater disadvantage, as they lack the resources to effectively navigate the system on their own (Nora, 2004). As a result, while students may have access to basic information regarding transfer processes, this may not be easily translatable into information that is appropriate and actionable for the specific needs of an individual student (Dowd et al., 2013).

Failure to efficiently and effectively navigate the transfer process often results in loss for students in terms of the credits accepted at the four-year institution (Monaghan and Attewell, 2015). In fact, many students face challenges both in understanding which credits will transfer

and how those that do will be applied to their bachelor's degree requirements. With appropriate resources, students who are able to successfully transfer to a four-year program often complete their degrees at rates similar to students who originated at a four-year institution (Ditchkoff et al., 2003; Monaghan and Attewell, 2015). Therefore, reducing the barriers and real costs that transfer students often encounter along their journey has the ability to increase the number of students who are able to achieve this milestone.

Evaluation of Research Design

Study Context and Methods

As evidenced in the introduction, there is a wealth of publicly available data that can help monitor larger trends in community college and two-to-four-year transfer outcomes. However, the distinct challenges that individual students face along their educational journey are largely absent from the quantitative data. To better understand the specific contexts impacting student choices and transfer experiences, this study utilizes a qualitative phenomenological approach to answer the research questions. *Phenomenology* is defined as the “study of lived experiences” and allows for the inquiry into both an individual's experience and their subjective interpretation of it (Chrystal et al., 2013; Creswell, 2023). Using semi-structured interviews as the main research tool allows for the opportunity to gain deeper insight into how students approach and evaluate opportunities and navigate the transition between institutions. The ultimate goal of this design is to extend the existing literature around student persistence factors by exploring how transfer students describe their experience integrating in both a two-year and four-year setting.

Qualitative Data and Analysis

To solicit the perspectives of community college students that have transferred or intend to transfer, an initial round of recruitment was conducted through existing social connections

with young adult development professionals. Additional interviewees were then recruited using the snowball method. Criteria for involvement was limited to first time students who were enrolled in a 2-year program with the intent to transfer, or who had started in a 2-year program and successfully transferred to a four-year institution. Since community colleges support a more diverse student body in comparison to traditional universities, the study aimed to include multiple perspectives and backgrounds. Race, gender, and employment status were not qualifiers for incorporation in the study. However, this information was collected for use in the resulting analysis. An initial screening survey was implemented to ensure prospective interviewees met selection criteria. Eligible respondents were then invited to participate in a full interview conducted virtually via Zoom.

In total, this paper uses qualitative interviews with eleven current and recently graduated students to explore how they leveraged different academic and social ties to acquire information, make decisions, and navigate transfer pathways towards their pursuit of a bachelor's degree. Interviewees represented multiple phases along the continuum of the transfer process. Two have completed their first year in community college and are in the beginning stages of preparing to transfer. Three have been accepted to a four-year institution and will be enrolling in the Fall. An additional three successfully transferred from a community college and have completed at least one semester at their university. Finally, three interviewees successfully transferred to a four-year program and completed their bachelor's degree. Seven of the individuals started their educational careers at Collin College in North Texas, two at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA), one at the Community College of Denver, and one at Central Oregon Community College. The youngest interviewee was 18 and the oldest 40. The median age was 21. Five of the total eleven were the first generation in their family to enroll in higher education. Four identified as white,

three as Black, two as Hispanic, one as white Hispanic, and one as Arab. Additionally, one interviewee was a first generation American and one immigrated to America during their senior year of high school. All identified as female.

Two interview protocols were developed, with questions informed by whether or not an individual had experienced the transfer process. Specific questions within the protocol for all interviewees focused on their reasons for enrolling in a two-year program, factors influencing their choice of transfer destination, resources accessed to navigate the process, and the types of academic and social relationships formed. For those still enrolled in a 2-year program with the intent to transfer, questions focused more on their perceptions of transfer options, interactions with advisors, and concerns around transitioning to a new institution. Interviewees who had successfully transferred were asked additional questions relating to their experience adjusting to a four-year program. To supplement the student data and better understand emerging themes, interviews were also conducted with four academic transfer advisors. These conversations provided the opportunity to both validate challenges shared by students and gain a more systems-level understanding of the transfer process. Advisors were found and approached via LinkedIn and worked at schools in Illinois, Alabama, and Maryland. Two of the advisors had backgrounds solely in the community college setting, the remaining two had experience advising students in both the community college and four-year university environment.

On average, interviews were approximately 1 hour in duration, with the shortest lasting 40 minutes and the longest 70 minutes. These were recorded with participant consent and then transcribed verbatim. In order to analyze the responses, a preliminary set of codes was established based on prior studies included within the literature review. These related to mentions of personal motivations and goals, peer relationships, access to and perceptions of advising

resources, and interactions with faculty. Using a grounded theory analytic approach, a second set of codes was then inductively derived by surfacing themes across responses. These included discussions of transition challenges, struggles with mental health, community college stigma, course selection and degree program requirements, transfer orientations, and career counseling resources provided prior to community college enrollment. All interviewees were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. These have been used to share direct quotes within the following *Findings* section.

Researcher Positionality

Recognizing the importance of acknowledging my own identity and the lens through which this study was conducted and interpreted, it is relevant to disclose that I have not personally experienced the two-to-four-year transfer process. My own bachelor's degree was earned at a four-year institution at which I was enrolled full-time as a traditional-aged, first-time student. However, my identity as a female student, and experience acclimating to a new campus environment to pursue my graduate degree, has afforded me some understanding of the challenges involved in navigating a new educational environment, both academically and socially. The decision to solicit insight from student advisors was an attempt to ensure I was analyzing interview data appropriately and accurately and provided an opportunity to check my interpretation of student narratives around the transfer process.

Findings

In the following sections, I will outline the common themes that emerged across interviews as it relates to the navigation of transfer between community college and university settings. Based on Tinto's revised framework, I will first summarize the various motivations and goals students in the sample began their career at a two-year institution with and how these

influenced their engagement. I will then discuss the extent to which students were able to integrate within their respective school environments and the resources and relationships they accessed to support their education. Finally, I will shed light on some of the challenges and concerns shared by multiple students as it relates to their transfer experience. To close, I will offer an additional revision of the integration framework based on the distinct experience of two- to four-year transfer students.

Motivations, Intent, and Commitment to Educational Goals

All students in the sample enrolled in a transfer track associate's degree with the intent to transition to a four-year institution as that was part of the criteria for involvement in this study. Students in the sample had various reasons for choosing this pathway. While financial concerns and the desire to save money were the primary factors influencing five of the interviewee's decision, a few also shared they enrolled at the direction of their parents and due to uncertainty around career interests. Other reasons included a desire to remain close to home, a lack of confidence in their academic abilities, and the low barrier to entry. This affirms what was found in prior literature, that the versatility of community college programming allows these institutions to serve students with differing backgrounds and needs and that intent to transfer is an important predictor of student engagement and retention (LaSota and Zumeta, 2016).

Aside from Dena, the 40-year-old student, all interviewees discussed resources provided by their high school to support decision-making. For most, enrolling in higher education was an expectation communicated as early as middle school, and reinforced through the push of dual-credit and AP/IB courses. Positively, this provided a source of social motivation towards pursuing a degree. However, a few students in the sample shared a sense of inferiority when it came to the comparison of their college plans against peers'. The promotion of a bachelor's

degree within the high school setting and connection to classmates enrolling at four-year institutions seemed to complicate the perception of the two-year to four-year track for these interviewees. Avery, a 19-year-old who transferred to a four-year institution after only one semester at a community college, put off the process of enrolling until the week before due to feeling upset and in denial that she had to start in a two-year program. This beginning disposition hindered her ability to engage within the community college setting and ultimately lead to her deciding to exit early. Conversely, Angela, an 18-year-old student who has completed her first year at a community college, reported feeling strongly engaged, both socially and academically, at school. She graduated high school a year early and was instructed by her parents to enroll in a two-year program to stay close to home. She enjoyed the environment of her classes and the social organizations she was a part of and felt inspired to make the most of her time at community college prior to transferring. Both of these examples reinforce the importance perception and motivation play in a student's ability to integrate and their desire to remain engaged.

Having a strong commitment to educational goals and the intent to earn a bachelor's degree also moderated interviewees' perceptions of the challenges they experienced while navigating the transfer process. However, two interviewees were actively considering stopping out at the time of our interview. One of the students weighing this option was Dena, the 40-year-old respondent, who shared concerns around the time it will take to earn a degree and the resulting financial impact. For now, she remains committed to her goal due to a strong interest in her chosen degree but acknowledged the opportunity costs are not insignificant.

“What keeps me going is I'm curious and ambitious and I know after a couple years I will be upset I'm not doing something to reach my potential.”

Cara, the other respondent considering stopping out, was less resolved in her desire to stay engaged. She is 21 and transferred to her four-year institution after only a year at a community college due to a desire to attend the same school as high school friends. While she was dissatisfied with the social opportunities at community college, she has since struggled academically in the university setting.

“I have considered it [stopping out] ever since I transferred. I feel like the university classes are much harder and take a lot more of my time and effort. I feel like I am not smart enough or prepared enough.”

A few students shared larger meanings behind achieving their goal that inspired a strong sense of motivation. For Taylor, one of the first-generation students, what a degree would mean to her family was a primary motivating factor.

“I feel like one of my main motivations is that, you know, my parents came all the way from Zimbabwe to the U.S. just for me and my sister to get a better education. And so, completing my degree would be my way of giving back to them.”

Avery, despite her initial dissatisfaction with community college, remained motivated to stay in school due to the perceived purpose and direction she felt further education could provide. All students felt that earning a degree would afford them greater career opportunities and financial stability. Two had aspirations for medical school and one to pursue a PhD and saw a four-year program as a necessary step on that pathway. These intentions were especially important when students faced challenges along their journey. Some shared that the time and money already invested influenced their motivation to stick it out, despite the reality that many would need to be in school longer than the expected 2 + 2. Jessica, who spent five years at a community college

due to the decision to change her degree program, remained intent on completing her bachelor's despite the additional three years required after transferring and unexpected health issues.

“I don't think there was ever a point where I wanted to drop out. I definitely struggled with my health issues and whether or not I was going to be able to pursue the career that I wanted, which I ended up going a different way, but I was so close to the end of my degree plan at that point that I was like, I'm going to finish this...I'm going to knock it out. It's going to happen.”

While goals and motivations alone are not enough to keep a student engaged, as evidenced in the literature, it is a significant factor in a student's ability to persist, especially in the face of setbacks (Tinto, 1993, 2017). Given that five of the respondents have yet to actually experience the transition to a four-year environment, the extent to which they can remain committed will likely affect their ability to achieve their overall educational goals.

Socio-Academic Integration Within the Community College Context

Levels of integration within the community college environment varied from not at all integrated to very integrated among the sample. This was determined by assessing the number of times a student mentioned interactions with peers, faculty, and or advisors and their impression, positive or negative, of that interaction. This included participation in study groups, involvement in a school-based club, office hours attendance, personal relationships with faculty, use of advising resources, and reports of having made at least one friend. As mentioned within the literature review, engagement opportunities within the community college setting can be limited and often require additional effort on the part of the student to seek out connections (Deil-Amen, 2011). Four of the students reported limited connection outside of class, as they primarily only

went to campus for lectures and then returned home. Those in this group were less satisfied with their experience and their limited social relationships more specifically. For Avery, the lack of connection was a primary reason she decided to transfer to a university after one semester.

“I saw a ton of people from my high school, and I tried to connect with them a little, but I felt like that was my biggest problem of why I honestly ended up leaving because I got like, really, really depressed because I didn’t feel connected at all. I literally felt like I had no friends, and I was super alone. I made like one friend...but like really there were no study groups being formed, nobody really tried to talk to each other, the professors didn’t really try to make anything interactive, it was just really, I don’t know how else to describe it other than like bland. I didn’t feel like there was anyone to be there for me or support me at all.”

Miranda, a 21-year-old who transferred after earning her associate’s, shared that her lack of connections in the two-year setting was a lesson learned and informed her approach to navigating the university experience.

“After my experience at Collin [College], I just wanted to branch out and make friends, have a community while I am here since I’m going to be here for a few years and I know what it’s like to not have that.”

For most respondents, it was less about how many actual connections they felt they had made and more so their overall perception of the environment. Several students were focused on completing the necessary requirements for transferring or were busy working while keeping up with the demands of school. They did not feel the need to be highly integrated, and therefore just appreciated that help was available *should* they be interested in accessing it. The sense that they

could ask for support from peers, faculty, or advising staff was enough to make them feel connected to and like they belonged at their school. This highlights a key difference within Tinto's framework between traditional university students and those enrolled in community college. While integration is still an important factor influencing success among both populations, for community college students, measuring the actual strength and number of social connections is less insightful. Rather, it is the perceived strength of the *opportunity* for social connection that determines how integrated a student feels.

Further distinguishing integration within the two-year context, and reinforcing the blurring of the social and academic spheres, interviewees who did seek out connections largely found these in academic settings, but received value through their more social nature. Jessica shared how having a supportive social network provided needed encouragement to become more engaged overall.

“I became a little more I think ingrained in campus activities when I had that more social aspect of people who knew about them and were inviting me in. I'm not the most outgoing, I'm not just going to join things when I don't know anybody there. So even if I saw, you know, flyers or something for something that I might be interested in, I probably wasn't going to go by myself, so having that invitation was big for me.”

Some students did regularly attend office hours and built relationships with professors, but having peers they could relate to and share experiences with held greater influence over their overall satisfaction with school. Mary, a 19-year-old who just completed her first year at community college, discussed the value of finding connections during her second semester.

“I would just go to class and then come home because I didn’t know anyone from campus that well. It changed in the spring semester because I made a friend. We met in English class because both of our names are [Mary]. Then, like if we saw each other on campus, we would walk to class together. It changed my experience, like wow, I don’t have to do this alone, I have other people to talk to now.”

Taking a class that had other students interested in forming bonds was not a universal experience. However, several students were lucky to find like-minded peers that were motivated to organize study groups and connect outside of class. Angela shared a feeling of gratitude that she had found a more social classroom.

“I feel like a lot of people isolate themselves from each other, like you’ll try to start a conversation with them, and they’ll give you like, a two-word answer. But I feel like this semester, I’ve been really blessed to have some good friends in my classes that actually do care about each other, and they do care about the content and its sort of like a little tight knit community in there. That only happens for some classes, and you really do, like community college is what you make of it and what clubs you join, but I feel like I have connected very, very well with my peers outside of academic classes.”

The diversity of the student base also helped interviewees feel more connected. Chloe, who immigrated before enrolling, felt like the different backgrounds of students at her community college made her less of an outlier among her peers.

“I would say that I was probably on the older end of the age group when I started college because we moved [to the U.S.] when I was 18, so I went to NOVA when I was around 19 and a lot of NOVA had people who came from high school and grew up in America,

but also like people who are coming back for degrees, coming back to study, getting certificates and stuff like that, so there were more people on the older end than I expected for like a first year college student or second year college student, so that also created a sense of belonging, it wasn't tough to find people.”

Dena, the 40-year-old respondent, shared a similar sense of surprise in her ability to fit in and be accepted amongst her peers. She was able to build connections that supported her both academically and socially.

“My cohort mate, who is 38, and his wife, were most helpful to my journey. It was great to have a friend who was in a similar place in life to talk about the unique struggles we face as midlife students that most people, including professors, don't fully understand because the professors went to school younger as well.”

The depth of the social connections some of the students were able to form in some ways caused concern for their experience at a four-year university. The acknowledgement that they would have to leave their friends behind and navigate a different social environment was discussed by multiple interviewees. Angela, who plans to transfer to a school outside of North Texas, had mixed emotions about the move. “I'm really excited to jump over to Texas Tech, the only I guess concern would be leaving this amazing community that I've built behind, which isn't something a lot of people who attend community college say, they're mostly like, 'I get to build a new community at the bigger university', but I'm very saddened to like, leave the really good people that I've gotten to know here, especially now that I'll be like 5 or 7 hours away.” The experiences of the sample validates the value of supporting students' sense of socio-academic integration within the community college setting. However, little is discussed as it relates to helping students adjust to the loss of close friendships, especially for those who move

farther away to transfer. To better support individuals navigating this pathway, structured opportunities to build connections with other transfers could provide students with a space to process emotions alongside like-minded peers and provide an avenue for seeking a similar level of integration within their new educational setting.

Perceptions of Faculty Accessibility at Two- and Four-Year Institutions

An important element of integration, both socially and academically, is a student's sense of faculty's approachability and the climate they create within a classroom. Four students mentioned establishing a close relationship with a professor in their two-year program that both influenced their career aspirations and created a greater sense of support and belonging on campus. Eight mentioned meeting with a professor outside of class at least once and felt that the smaller class sizes and ability to prioritize students created environments where they could more easily engage. Office hours were helpful, but more easily accessed by some students than others. For Mary, despite having taken advantage of the resource a few times, she still did not feel fully confident in approaching her faculty.

“It still feels kind of intimidating, because it's like, are they going to like, be upset at me for asking this question or like, how do I format this question to where it makes sense to them and makes sense to me.”

While there were a few examples of professors who were not as welcoming, most felt like they would be able and willing to help if the student asked. Interestingly, several students shared the perception that faculty would be less available at a four-year university. Among these interviewees, a common theme was the idea that since professors of a four-year program are largely focused on research, they would have less time and interest in building relationships with

students. For Angela, the connection she felt to her professors at Collin College provided appreciated opportunities to receive feedback. While she is excited about the backgrounds and interests of the professors at her target university, there is some concern that the dynamic will not be as open.

“I’ve heard some really good things about the professors there [Texas Tech], so I think that yes, I will be able to hopefully approach them, I mean, they are busy doing like a lot of research and things, but I really hope that once I get a feel for a professor, that I can actually go up to the professor and actually like start a good conversation and build those relationships and connections with them.”

Taylor also spoke very positively of her relationships with community college professors and felt that the same opportunities were possible at university, they just required more effort.

“I still have professors at Collin [College] that I visit and just say ‘Hi’ and go up to their office and they even gave me advice on transferring to UTD as well, so yeah, they’re always accessible but I feel like that’s the same thing for university, but you just need to make more effort to do that and like actually build that type of relationship as far as like always asking questions, going to their office hours and asking for help because they do want to help you but they’re not, you know, going to force you.”

Based on the sample, there appears to be value in helping students acquire academic capital within the two-year setting in order to support their ability to academically integrate post-transfer. Students shared different perceptions of faculty and the culture they supported in their classrooms, but many had at least one positive connection point with a professor. Encouraging

this type of experience, either formally or informally, could be an opportunity for community colleges to dispel this narrative and equip students preparing to transition.

Socio-Academic Integration Post-Transfer

The ability to form social relationships was a primary concern related to the transfer process. While some students shared worries relating to the rigor of university courses, the ability to access social networks was mentioned by most interviewees. Dena, the 40-year-old student, felt that her social relationships were vital to her experience in the two-year program and recognized the importance of replicating these at her university.

“My crew was the best part of going back to college. We basically became like family doing homework together all day. I’m going to miss them a lot and am worried about being able to find my people at a four-year because their groups have already been established.”

This sentiment, that students would have to build connections with peers who may already have their own friend groups, was a common theme. Zainab, who is 19 years old and preparing to transfer this Fall after completing one year at a community college, was motivated to move to a university partly for the social experience. However, she still shared concerns that it would be a difficult aspect of the transition.

“I have been worried that I’m not going to like find friends or whatever, and I’m worried about transfer shock a lot...like being caught up trying to find new friends and then your academics start slipping. I don’t want that to happen to me, so I am nervous about that.”

For those that had transferred, this concern had often materialized, though to different extents and in different ways. Taylor, a 21-year-old student who graduated with her associate’s

and then transferred to a nearby four-year school, shared her experience adjusting to the new dynamic.

“It was definitely a culture shock and also not to mention, like trying to talk to students and kind of making friends with peers, they felt a little more distant because there were just so many people and yeah, it was not easy.”

Chloe, the student who immigrated from Uganda, felt that it was difficult to overcome the two-year head start students who began at her university had. This led her to primarily rely on fellow transfer peers for social connections.

“I would say I didn’t feel as connected. Most probably similar to the high school thing, where I came in late. At this point, I was a third-year student, so everyone had already made friends their first and second year, so it was basically like starting over, which probably might have been the reason as to why a lot of the transfer students just resorted to having groups within the entire transfer community.”

Avery, who transferred after only one semester in community college, found the university environment to be the type of social atmosphere she was originally seeking.

“Right away, from like the first, I think on day three, I had a friend group...it was honestly like a shock to me because I really like never, I never had that many friends in high school, and I was super disconnected at Collin College, so yeah, it was literally like right away and already I felt like the professors were doing ice breakers and group activities, and they were talking about study groups, I didn’t have any of that at Collin [College], so yeah... it’s definitely helped me to branch out and get out of my shell in a way that I never got to before.”

However, despite her success in making friends, she also felt the disparity in having to make up for lost time.

“Even though I feel very connected, it’s still like, a lot of people have much stronger bonds because they’ve been here for longer. And then also... when I first got here, I remember some of my friends literally got mad at me one day because they were like, ‘you’re asking for advice too much and I feel like I’m going through college with you when I already went through this.’...I just wish I would have gone through it at the same time as everyone else because then it would have been like, okay, we’re going through this together instead like now, my friends are mad at me because they feel like they’re walking me through...so it’s kind of hard I guess.”

Students who transferred into programs with cultures that embraced new students had an easier time socially adjusting. For Jessica, the small size of the university she transferred into was a huge benefit in helping her build a friend group. The culture among students in her cohort was very welcoming and enabled her to make friends early on in her transition.

“My classmates were really, really good about brining any new people into the program, whether it was brand new students or transfers, so I made friends, even despite being a little more on the shy side, I made friends pretty quickly and was included in a lot and became very involved.”

This experience was similar to Miranda’s after she transferred.

“Since my classes are purely for interior design majors, we all have like similar minds, similar ways of thinking, ideals, interests. We spend a lot of time in the studios, even outside of class, since the projects can take so long, so we definitely spend a lot of time

together and I've made a lot of good friends just from my degree, so I've definitely connected with them more than I did at Collin [College].”

These two experiences illustrate how having more structured opportunities for academic integration can also support social integration within the university environment. There is likely also a reduction in the learning curve for transfer students when the four-year setting more closely resembles the dynamics of the two-year. While offering smaller degree programs is not always feasible, especially given the size of most universities, there is an opportunity to explore how transfer resources can be expanded to provide more formal avenues for socio-academic connections.

Role of Socio-Academic Relationships Within the Transfer Process

Social networks were helpful for students in their navigation of academic processes, as most preferred to leverage peer connections for school advice before resorting to advisors, faculty, or other formal academic resources. This was true for students both still in their two-year program and those navigating transfer. When it came to applying to her chosen universities, Chloe preferred learning from the experiences of her friends.

“I probably should have reached out to advisors, but I did it mostly by myself, mostly because I thought, at least in the moment, I thought transferring wouldn't be that difficult, I thought I met most of the requirements that would be necessary for the application, so I just made sure I checked in with friends to ask, ‘so this application requires this?’, ‘Is that the case?’, ‘What do I need to submit, what do I not need to submit?’, ‘Do I need to take time with this essay or can I just write something from the heart and just go with it?’”

Some interviewees also had relationships with students at their university of interest, mostly from high school, and used these connections to learn more about the environment and set expectations around the school. In reference to her research looking into one of her top options, Zainab discussed the value of her existing relationships in supporting her belief that the university was a strong fit. Angela also used her network to confirm her perceptions of the climate at Texas Tech when deciding to apply to the engineering program there. Hearing from those connections that they loved it reinforced her perception that it was the only school for her. Additionally, despite her friends challenging some of her questions, Avery still felt comfortable using her social relationships for help in navigating coursework and faculty expectations. She plans to only use office hours as a “last resort”, opting to rely on members of her sorority before approaching faculty and other resources.

Addressing Negative Community College Stigma

While not an anticipated phenomenon based on the literature review, a few students brought up concerns around being stigmatized in a university setting due to their community college background. For some, this was hypothetical or based on conversations they had held with peers. For others, this was something they experienced firsthand. When asked if she felt her close connections to other transfer students helped her academically, Chloe shared that her ability to navigate the experience with others similar to her helped her remain confident.

“It was mostly from the support, more of like, everyone’s going through, I think we were all in different majors, but it was more like, ‘Oh my god, this is... harder than community college’ and stuff like that, so that, more of like, going through the same experience and having that support of like, this is definitely not community college, but we all deserve to be here and we’re here to support each other.”

When asked what advice she might offer to prospective transfers, Angela encouraged students not to think less of themselves because they started at a community college. After asking her more about why she felt that was important, she shared she had also experienced negative comparisons to traditional four-year students.

“I feel like it’s definitely a stigma going to like a two-year college and then going to a four year college because it’s like, people think that you don’t get that full university experience, but again, like I said, community college is what you make of it and the amount of people that you do reach out to. I could say the same thing for university because you could keep yourself cooped up all day, too. But yeah, I feel like especially talking to a bunch of my classmates in community college, they’re like, ‘I’m just here to transfer’ and they want to be a four-year university student so bad because they feel like they don’t get anything at Collin [College].”

Zainab felt that the perception of being a community college student would harm her professionally, specifically the ability to secure an internship. In addition to accessing a more social environment, the status of a university was one of the primary reasons she started thinking about transferring from the moment she enrolled.

“I feel like it’d be really hard...to get an internship, just saying that I go to a community college when if I like, went somewhere like SMU, people would be more willing to give me an internship.”

When asked where that perception stemmed from, she shared that she has heard comments from both students and other adults.

“I’ve heard multiple times, like people tell me it’s a lot easier than other schools or like the opportunity isn’t as good and kind of things like that most of the time.”

Dena shared a concern that negative stigmas may harm her ability to form close social relationships.

“I’m worried about possibly some elitism of ‘ewww you came from a community college, you probably don’t even know what you’re doing’, honestly that is a fear I have internally as well.”

This perception, that students may be less accepted in a university environment due to their identity as a two-year transfer student, may also limit the extent to which students feel confident socially and academically integrating. This highlights the importance of building connections between transfer students to promote resilient mindsets in the face of these challenges while ensuring that students feel supported in their decision to begin their careers at two-year institutions.

Reasons for Pursuing a Bachelor’s Degree and Selecting a Transfer Institution

Similar to their choice behind enrolling in a community college, interviewees shared a variety of motivations that influenced their desire to transfer to a university and earn a bachelor's degree. For all but Dena, the 40-year-old student, family expectations and the perception that they would not be able to find a career without a degree were primary reasons they were pursuing a four-year degree. Dena was mainly motivated by the challenge and opportunity to study physics, a subject she had been interested in since high school but had put aside to work towards another career.

In selecting a university to transfer to, seven were solely motivated by financial aid offers, and six indicated a priority for a specific degree program. Five students discussed having friends already at their chosen university, which strongly influenced their decision. Other reasons included distance from home, with some preferring to stay close and others interested in achieving independence, transfer logistics and how many credits would be accepted, family ties or pressure to attend a certain institution, internships and career opportunities, and the culture, status, and reputation of a school.

Experience with Transfer Advising

Access to quality advisors within the community college setting specifically was not a universal experience. This is a documented phenomenon, largely due to the variety of needs advisors are being asked to support (Dowd et al., 2013; Fay et al., 2022). Several negative encounters students had with advising resources influenced perceptions of their overall usefulness and further reinforced the interest in seeking support from peer connections instead. Some interviewees even discussed receiving warnings from people in their network to be wary of advisor's advice, especially as it related to which credits would be needed for transfer. Angela received cautionary advice from her sister and therefore preferred to do a lot of her own research. The degree program at her university of choice, Texas Tech, required different classes than those needed to earn an associate's at her community college. She had already decided to focus on enrolling in certain courses instead of following a specific two-year program. However, she faced some challenges in feeling confident that she was understanding the system correctly.

“I got some weird answers back from the research I did for my degree because they [transfer advisor] put a degree plan...with the classes I needed to take...when I had already told him the classes that I was taking and needed for the degree and he was like,

‘you don’t need that class, you don’t need that class and you don’t need that class.’ And I’m like, yes I do, I’ve looked on your website and it literally says that I need all of those classes because there’s like a little transfer portal...and it tells you every single class you need for your degree, and that’s the most reliable thing. The advisors are not very reliable, like a lot of colleges unfortunately, and so I do plan on seeking someone to talk to in the engineering department, see if I can get a hold of someone to see what I actually do need for the degree because advising wasn’t very helpful.”

The stakes of poor advising can be high, not just for the stress this causes students trying to understand degree requirements, but also due to the financial implications a wrong selection can have. Angela was highly motivated to make sure she was choosing the appropriate choices but still felt like there was a chance she could make a mistake.

“It’s like that lingering fear, like if I get this one mistake wrong, I’m going to have to pay probably \$2,000 for that, it’s like a fear that kind of gets to you.”

Confusion around different course numbers, titles, and descriptions between institutions was discussed by multiple interviewees. For Rose, who had largely tried to also navigate the system on her own, she recalled almost not being able to graduate on time with her four-year degree.

“I remember my last semester, they were saying that I actually needed this certain type of class, and no one had told me that I needed that certain type of class, and so I had to scramble and to try to find one, and luckily I was able to, but that was again, I had to figure that out on my own.”

Chloe, who felt already in a deficit not having any family with experience in the American education system, did not feel confident in her understanding of what advisors could help with.

“The sense that I got was the resources were there, but information on what those resources help with was probably not information I could find, like there was information, ‘oh, this is your advisor’, but information about what your advisor can do for you was not made knowledgeable to everyone, at least to me.”

For Jessica, her experience with community college advisors often resulted in frustration, largely due to receiving mixed advice on which classes she should take and not being made aware of opportunities she wished would have been on her radar. She credits the mentorship of a professor in helping her determine a degree path and select a program to transfer to and acknowledged that her four-year institution was much more helpful in supporting her navigation.

“I know my experience with advising when I did switch to full university was entirely different. I had a very specific advisor who was in my degree plan who knew like all the things that I needed to take, in what order, and that was, it felt so much smoother and so much more organized than my experience at Collin [College]. It just kind of felt like, it is no shame specifically to the advising department, it was just, there were so many different degree paths and programs that they couldn’t know all of them but they were expected to be able to help any single student that walked in, so it was, I feel like not the best set up system.”

Advisors at the universities were generally thought of as being much more helpful and were preferred sources of information for students who knew which school they wanted to transfer to. This speaks more to challenges within the larger higher education system, as the pathway from community college to a four-year university is not standardized across institutions. Transferring credits is usually much more straightforward the closer the two- and four-year institutions are geographically due to local articulation agreements and faculty partnerships. This

also highlights the challenges community college advisors face in effectively supporting a wide variety of students who each have unique interests and needs. When speaking with the transfer advisors themselves, there was an acknowledgement that students often enroll with differing levels of capacity to navigate higher education systems, different goals for their education, and different career interests. In addition to the complexities of transfer logistics, which all advisors discussed as requiring significant time and resources, helping students plan longer-term, past one to two semesters, is often difficult to accomplish in one advising session. Staff time and expertise are capacity constraints that limit the availability and efficacy of advisors, pushing students to seek alternative sources of information that may not be as reliable or robust.

For students who had more clearly defined aspirations and planned to transfer to a school with an established pathway, their experience with advising was much smoother. Taylor, who decided to transfer to a university near her two-year school, found the advising support she received especially helpful in navigating the process. Cara, who felt especially disconnected both socially and academically in her two-year program, leaned heavily on her advisor to help her set expectations and prepare for transfer to her university.

All students mentioned using online resources either as a primary source of information or to supplement advising information they received. Among the transfer advisors, they acknowledged that for many students, digital access is often preferred over in-person consultations. However, this can create more opportunities for student-directed errors. Ensuring students feel confident in accessing advising resources *and* ensuring websites have accurate information are important to reducing stress and limiting the amount of excess time and money spent pursuing a degree.

Transfer Orientations and Resources

All interviewees participated in or expected to participate in an orientation specifically tailored to transfer students. Those who had already experienced transfer felt generally positive about having dedicated time and resources available to them. What stood out most were the connections to organizations and other social opportunities included in the programming. Jessica felt really positive about her transfer orientation experience and the chance it provided her to get a jump start on her time at university.

“Even further, they had tables that you could go to that like, hey, if you’re a transfer student, come see us for more information, or like, here’s different clubs and things that you can go to, here’s different information specific for transfers versus like brand new students. So that, I was very thankful for because that helped me kind of get plugged in a little bit more.”

Miranda, who did not feel very connected at her community college, also appreciated resources being made available at orientation.

“They had kind of a big ballroom full of different tables of different clubs and things to join and resources to use, that was definitely really helpful, just kind of being introduced to [Texas] Tech before the real orientation in the summer and knowing what all I can use while I’m there.”

Avery was appreciative of the opportunity her orientation provided to build connections, but felt a disparity between what was offered to transfers in comparison to freshmen.

“It’s kind of hard... I was able to meet people, but it was a lot shorter. I was only there for a couple of hours and the people that had, like the orientations...in the summer, were

like, they would stay overnight and it was a whole process and this was more, I felt like it was harder to find people that were new, like at the same time that I had come at...For the people that did it in the summer, I'm pretty sure there was follow up and stuff and then, you know, it's like they gave you an orientation group and it was more interactive, I would have loved that."

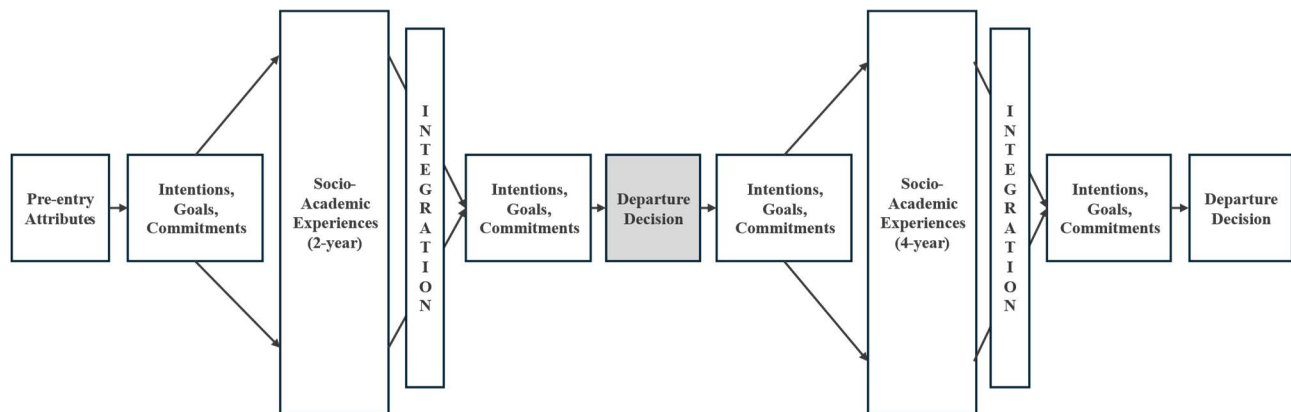
Of all the students who had experienced transfer orientations, Chloe spoke the most positively of the resources provided by her university.

"UVA had a transfer orientation for everyone who transferred from any college across the U.S. to UVA. They have a transfer peer advising program, so each of us were matched to ...a transfer student and they connected with us prior to starting at UVA and they were basically a peer point of contact. And once we were at UVA, I would say it was probably one of the things that made the transition easy to the point that I also ended up becoming a transfer peer advisor because I feel like having someone with inside knowledge about UVA when it comes to transferring to it from your college and not knowing anything was important."

Chloe's experience speaks to the process of transfer as a phase or series of changes that a student endures (Gale & Parker, 2014). Having *continued* access to resources, and connections to people who have experienced the process, made a difference in her overall academic confidence and desire to persist through her degree. Exploring the role and value of peer mentorship, specifically for transfer students, is an opportunity for institutions interested in expanding the resources offered for this population beyond just the point in time of their initial transition. Given the evolving needs of students in their first year at a new institution, extending the duration of

transfer support beyond orientation could allow for more formal relationship building that supports deeper social and academic integration.

Figure 3



The revised framework reflected in *Figure 3* is an attempt to acknowledge the distinct experiences of two-year to four-year transfer students. While it can be argued that all students, regardless of entry point, face multiple decision points to either remain engaged or depart, transfer students have a more explicit stage at which their goals, intents, and commitments are either reinforced or changed. The period of transition between institutions is a crucial stage on their journey towards a bachelor's degree and, as the data show, not all students choose to persist. This study is an attempt to better understand how students are experiencing this process in order to better support their ability to remain engaged and ultimately achieve the goals they have set.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, given the small size of the sample recruited for interviews, this study does not have the ability to advance broad narratives as to the nature of all student transition experiences. The intent is instead to provide qualitative data that can further inform the quantitatively established trends. Additionally, interviewees represented multiple

schools and state higher education systems. While this limits the ability to draw conclusions about a specific institution, it does allow for the exploration into common experiences and challenges encountered by students regardless of their school affiliation.

Second, despite the desire to recruit a full cross-section of students, all of those who actually followed through with participating in an interview identified as female. This may further limit interpretations of the findings as it relates to male student experiences. However, by unintentionally focusing on female student perspectives, there is an opportunity to explore how gender identity impacts socio-academic integration and transfer processes. Several studies have established that the magnitude of social integration is conditional on gender, with females being more likely to both seek out social connections and benefit academically from those relationships (Stage, 1989; Jones, 2010). While male narratives were not available in this study to fully test this finding, it does provide an opportunity for further research to better understand potential differences between gender identities and the experience of two-to-four-year transfer students.

Lastly, there are numerous studies documenting how the racial and ethnic identities of students may impact their access to and experience with educational opportunities. While this sample attempted to include a diverse set of voices, it was not sufficiently large enough to draw any real conclusions as to how race/ethnicity influenced student's ability to integrate within a school environment and persist through a four-year degree. This is an additional opportunity for further research.

Conclusions

The students in this study all navigated their educational careers differently based on their personal motivations and the resources and relationships they had access to. However, a similar

theme across all interviewees was the belief that college was a necessary step on their path post-high school. This motivated them to persist despite the obstacles they encountered and reaffirms the positive effect goals and intent have been documented to have on sustained engagement (Tinto, 1993, 2017).

While students shared concerns about their ability to keep up with the academic requirements of their university prior to transferring, most hesitation to embark on the transition centered around the uncertainty of integrating *socially*. Students' overall perceptions about their experience were largely influenced by the extent to which they felt their environment was supportive and they could build connections to faculty and peers. Though this may have been a prominent theme in this study due to the gender of the sample, a sense of belonging has been validated as a success factor for all students, regardless of identity (Slaten et al., 2016). This highlights the importance of ensuring students are equipped to navigate the development processes associated with transfer in addition to the purely academic ones (Gale & Parker, 2014).

Though most interviewees initially focused on building social connections through in-class opportunities, these often extended to external environments, which deepened the relationships and made students feel less alone in their journey. Several interviewees also shared positive connections to community college faculty that lasted beyond class terms and sometimes even post-transfer. This affirms the overlap that exists between social and academic integration mechanisms and supports Deil-Amen's (2011) revisions to Tinto's original model. Given the distinct context of the two-year program setting, students' main relationship-building opportunities begin in the classroom and can be formed to support both academic and social needs.

Quality advising relationships were not experienced by all students, which raises important questions about the structure of these positions and the types of support they are expected and able to provide. The presence of trusted advisors is influential for all higher education students, but especially so for transfers, who may encounter additional setbacks due to the difficulty in understanding which classes are needed for their desired degree. Several interviewees mentioned a preference for leveraging social connections and online resources after less than positive experiences with advisors. While these are both valid sources of information and can be beneficial in helping students, there remains an opportunity to better understand how advising relationships can be improved to ensure more equitable access.

The students in this sample were able to adjust, when needed, in order to accommodate a change in their degree program or even extension of their time in school. Many credited supportive families and financial aid for allowing them to persist with their education despite encountering setbacks. However, not all students have the ability, especially financially, to remain committed to their goal of earning a bachelor's degree. If overall graduation outcomes for transfers are to improve, engaging students in earlier and longer-term degree planning could reduce the risk that credits are lost and help more graduate on time.

Overall, community colleges remain an important component of the American higher education system. Their ability to provide students with a steppingstone to more advanced degrees has been and remains a primary reason for finding opportunities to better support these institutions. Students enroll in two-year programs for a variety of reasons, and while some come equipped to successfully navigate the process largely independently, for others the pathway includes uncertainty and struggle. Ensuring access to effective information through proactive advising resources and accounting for the social needs of students is necessary for enabling

individuals to maximize their time and experience at both institutions and remain engaged through the pursuit of their degree.

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