Influences of Social Relationships on the Transfer Student Experience

Capstone Project

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Acknowledgements
Dedication

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of transfer students currently enrolled in a small-sized, regional, public university located in the upper Midwestern region of the United States, who have transferred from another institution prior to enrolling. Five students were interviewed one-on-one for sixty to ninety minutes. Three themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews. These themes included were shared familiarities among the participants 'experiences: social support (both within the university and personal), connections with a community (both campus and geographical community), and the desire to pay it forward and give back (in ways other than financially). The present study found that Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement rings true in regards to students' accomplishing successful transition experiences from one institution to another, correlating with the amount of energy and effort put into the experience and relationship. However, this study found out that the student experience is more complex than that. This study reflected on Kahu's (2013) theories of multiple constructs, with all of the factors influencing the student experience.

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Introduction

What influences a student's collegiate experience? This question is important, and can be answered a million different ways. Some students can be easily influenced, while other students seem to be more resilient. Influences can be small, large, academic, social, or personal, but together can have an impact on the overall student experience. Recent attention in higher education has shifted to focusing on student retention and transfer students have been a group that tends to be forgotten by institutions of higher education. When focusing directly on transfer students, outside of academic support, substantial research is lacking on the topic of relationships and how these relationships influence transfer students' experience at the four-year college/university level. Social relationships are seldom thought of as a major factor in student success and retention, however social relationships can influence the student experience in both positive and negative ways. With transfer students becoming a group of interest to post-secondary institutions, examining the influences of social relationships on transfer students could assist a post-secondary institution in better preparing for transfer students for the transition, and assist these institutions in retaining transfer students, once enrolled, on their way to earning a baccalaureate degree.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this present qualitative study is to identify the social relationships that influence transfer student success and describe the nature of the social relationships in relation to the needs of the transfer students attending a small public university.

Background and Significance of the Study

The non-cognitive and social factors that influence the transfer student experience in terms of social engagements, relationships, and personal experiences, are being discussed more frequently by professionals in student services and counseling in the higher education as student movement between post-secondary institutions can no longer be deemed atypical (Marling, 2013; Martinez, 2016). Historically, the topic of student success revolved primarily around the thought of academics being the primary influencer on student success. The conversations on student experience now includes self-efficacy, college commitment, support of peers, and personal motivation, as key factors influencing student success (Dennis, Cavillo, & Gonzalez, 2008). Much of the literature available indicates the need for programming and resource assessment of institutions of higher education to seek areas of intervention for reevaluating transfer student needs within the institutions educational programming (Duggan & Pickering, 2008). Amongst the research, the way students self-identify and label themselves, along with self-doubt and fear, involvement and engagement, all seem to be prevalent themes in the literature, consistently being discussed and studied (France, Finney, and Swerdzewski, 2010; Clegg,2008; Winkle-Wagner 2009; Astin 1984; Tinto,2012).

With approximately one-third of all students transferring once in their collegiate career, and 25% of those students transferring more than once, there is a push for administration to focus on the transfer experience, to minimize the transferring of students out of institutions (Marling, 2013). Transfer students as an entirety are continuously changing as the demographics that were once known and studied, do not accurately represent that of the transfer student today. Roughly one in five transfer students will transfer to a four-year institution, however roughly half of those students that do transfer to a four-year college from a two-year college actually earn a bachelor's

degree within three years. This is 3% higher than the national rate previously recorded in 2013-2014 of 60 % students graduating from a four-year institution in four years after enrolling in a two-year institution, showing how the transfer student is continuously evolving (National Student Clearinghouse, 2012 & 2017; Fain, 2012). Some researchers suggest that administration within post-secondary institutions should focus on improving the transition process for transfer students from the community college level/two-year to the university/four-year level in order to make students feel less alienated from other students both academically and socially by making an inclusive institutional culture (Harrison, 1999; Marling, 2013). Transfer students are not easy to label singularly as a specific demographic, due to the diverse paths in which each student takes in their transfer journey, leaving many factors as influences on the transfer experience. The standard transfer students, a student who transfers from a two-year institution to a four-year institution, is not as common as it seems in higher education. Many students, when transferring from one institution of higher education to another, must work through and balance the multiple influencers such as effect of campus culture shock, student perceptions, and academic and social integration, in order to be a successful student (Davies, 1999). Marling (2013) mentions the need that students have for strong financial and social support systems institutionally. Many students arrive to college, no matter the institutional level, and encounter their first introductions to many new life experiences. Marling (2013), continues to explain that there are a myriad of factors that contribute to student transfer and the routes these transfer students take is forcing post-secondary institutions to look at how they recruit, retain, and assist students in degree completion.

Institutions are encouraged to research the types of factors that affect transfer students on both an academic and social integration level that are experienced and influence the success of the student (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Transfer students may need more help and assistance

earlier on in their transition than they are given. Townsend & Wilson (2006) discuss how access to appropriate resources and knowledge of existing resources is pertinent in transfer student success, as early in the transition process as possible. In addition to awareness of resources, it is just as important for transfer students to have self-responsibility to be aware of factors such as campus size and institution type, and how the mission affects the way institution operates. It is largely important for the post-secondary institutions to do their best to know their student body and appropriately communicate the information needed, to the transfer population (Marling 2013). The messages created specifically for transfer students directly reflect the institution and their level of understanding of transfer culture. Students are likely to take notice of the way an institution talks with the transfer students, which can ultimately affect the students' decision on whether or not to enroll (Marling, 2013; Townsend and Wilson, 2006; Hossler et al., 2012). Transfer students and their needs are changing, pushing post-secondary institutions to develop intentional and balanced plans to cater towards the niche market of transfer students within admissions recruitment, physical space on campus, and programming suited for the transfer students' needs (Marling, 2013, Fain, 2012; Handel & Williams, 2012).

Transfer students are a complex entity in regards to what they expect and perceive, along with how they exercise academic behaviors and attitudes. The complexity of the transfer student attributes grows even further when factoring in different race's and genders, therefore making it important for institutions to be aware of the academic behaviors, learning outcomes, and expectations of their transfer demographic (Marling 2013). Transfer students from two-year institutions are used to receiving social integration with academic dimension, allowing for study groups, small class discussions, and niche groups or clubs, which can add to the transfer shock

when enrolling in a four-year institution (Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Marling 2013).

Duggan and Pickering (2008) found that "an overall theme of balance, however, permeated the responses of at-risk transfer students who often struggled to find a balance in various aspects of their academic, social, work, and family obligations. Even though transfer students may be identified as being at risk for academic difficulty or attrition, each transfer student presents a unique blend of barriers to academic success and persistence. (pg. 454)" Because of the complex make-up of transfer students, institutions are needing to be constantly changing and adapting their policies and resources to the current needs of the transfer student. The needs vary due to the transfer students influences. Transfer students are balancing multiple obligations, identities, and social influence that all factors into creating the results of student performance and persistence (Tang and Li, 2015; Marling, 2013).

Due to the major impacts that social factors and relationships have on the student experience and transition from one institution to another, there is a need to further understand the relationships, social factors, and identity influencers for transfer students and how these relationships and social factors correlate to student success. This is of high importance to post-secondary institutions as student success, identity and engagement all factor into the retention rate within an institution (Clegg 2006; Chin-Newman, 2013). Because this study is focusing on identifying the influences social relationships have on the transfer student experience, the following research questions were the inspiration for the study. 1) Who are the people that transfer students develop social relationships that influence students' identity within a university? 2) How do the social relationships that transfer students develop at the university

shape the student's identity? 3) What is the nature of the social relationships formed in the transfer student experience that form a students' identity within the university?

Setting

The present study was conducted at a small public university that is part of a larger university system, in the Midwest region of the United States. The participants interviewed are current transfer students who have attended and attempted college credit at another institution (both two-year and four-year institutions) prior to enrolling. Two of the five participants interviewed transferred from a four-year institution to another four-year institution, where the remaining three participants transitioned from a two-year institution to a four-year institution.

Assumptions

The present study utilizes an open systems perspective, which focuses on a subject that is defined by the sum of many different parts. Because not all parts of the transfer experience originate within the institution that the student is enrolling in (Scott & Davis, 2007), this perspective allows for the multiple avenues of influence to intersect. In this case, the overall student experience can be viewed as a system, being made up of social relationships, academics, extracurricular activities, to name a few. The present study also takes Tinto's (1975) theory of student departure and Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement into consideration, due to the close ties to the transfer student experience, and how all systems are coming together to create the experience. Tinto's (1975) introduced his concept of retention by theorizing that students who socially integrate into a campus community are more likely to increase their commitment and identity within an institution and increase their likelihood of graduating. The model Tinto (1975) introduced concentrated on student involvement and engagement within institutions of higher education, and how both social and academic integration were responsibilities of the

student themselves and equally the sending and receiving institutions. Astin's (1984) theory however, discussed more of the students' campus and extracurricular involvement being directly related to students dedicating themselves academically. Being as the literature points to social and academic influences, the present study utilizes the theoretical framework of both Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975).

The researcher works as a Transfer Counselor in an Office of Admissions. The researcher, hereafter designated with first-person "I", have witnessed transfer students going through the transfer process, and watched how students of all different backgrounds have different student experiences at the collegiate level. Because I have personally talked with students going through their transfer experiences, I have heard both positive and negative experiences that transfer students have shared. In my position, I am responsible for communicating with transfer students from point of inquiry, though the admissions application process, to matriculation. Though registration and orientation traditionally fall outside of the scope of the Office of Admissions, being a small campus calls for all departments, especially those that work heavily with incoming students such as an admissions department, to work together to implement the events post-enrollment. Every day within my role as a Transfer Counselor, I meet with students, parents, family, community college advisors, high school counselors, and coaches to advise on credit transferability and course equivalencies, campus resources and amenities, scholarship information, and overall campus fit. It is not uncommon to be contacted by a transfer student with hopes of transferring out of the institution they are currently enrolled due to feeling disconnected or unhappy a different institution and wanting to transfer into a different institution. . Through my experiences I have developed a special passion for transfer students, their experiences, and the processes surrounding transitions from one post-

secondary institution to another. This present study focused on social relationships as influencers of the transfer experience. This study did not include academic information, other than social relationships that can be formed through academics.

Summary

The study seeks to describe the impact of social relationships on transfer students' academic success, along with identifying how institutions can assist the students in the transfer process. The framework of this study requires several different lenses to include organizational theory perspective that utilizes rational, natural, and open systems. (Scott and Davis, 2007) It is easy to say that social relationships do affect the student transfer experience, whether they be friendships, mentor-like relationships, community, or living situations. However, knowing that they all link together, intersecting at many different areas, those areas are where the student transfer experience created. This study examines the transfer students' perceptions and experiences in regards to the transfer experience. The next chapter will highlight the literature in the field of higher education, which is relevant to transfer students, academic success, and the relationships transfer students are involved in, and ultimately influenced.

Chapter Two
Literature Review

The literature reviewed for the present study is based on the social relationship factors of influence during the transfer student transition that can impact student experience and a student's identity within an institution. The present study was conducted with hopes of finding information on how the social relationships that transfer students partake in affect the overall transfer experience. There were three predominant themes in the literature on transfer student success being; the transfer student experience, social relationships, the overall constitution of a transfer student, and what social support needs are specific to transfer students. This review will first address the importance that definitions play in regards to understanding transfer students, layout the themes, and then will summarize the need for further research in the field.

Defining Transfer Students

The definition of a "transfer student" is not necessarily the same across all areas of higher education as well as from institution to institution, and may vary drastically. What is considered a traditional transfer student at one institution could potentially not be considered a transfer student at all, but rather a freshman level student with incoming credit, at another institution. With altering definitions, discrepancies can form and cause confusion and ambiguity for all involved in the field of higher education as well as the research. Since the transfer student population is increasing steadily within undergraduate education the examination of resources needed by the growing segment of students needs to be reevaluated (Martinez, 2016). No matter the reason a student decided to transfer from one post-secondary institution to another, it is important to understand who the transfer student is, what makes them a transfer student, and

what policies are in place for this defined group of students within each institution (Martinez, 2016). With the resources available at any given institution, the categorization of transfer students correctly can make an impact on the students, as there is a chance that the resources needed by the students could potentially not be appropriately serving the population that was originally intended to serve (Bartlett &Abell, 1995; National Student Clearinghouse, 2012 & 2017).

Two-year institutions have found that often enough, four-year institutions are lacking many of the support systems that the students utilize, during their enrollment at the two-year level (King 1994). Faculty and staff at the two-year level need to prepare the students for what they will encounter during their transition to the four-year level. Though King (1994) was referring mainly to academics, this can be applied to the non-cognitive and social side of transfer student resources as well, both academic and social resources are all part of the transfer student system. The relationships, programming, and support systems will vary, and often times be less personal at the four-year level, which can hinder the students' educational experience if they are not exposed or informed earlier, prior to the transition. It is found that the feeling of inclusion and university attachment can be large influencers of transfer student success and satisfaction (King, 1994 & France, Finney, & Swedzewski 2010).

In order for four-year colleges and universities to provide resources for transfer students, they first need to know what transfer students' needs truly are. According the research Radwin and Horn (2014), researching transfer students is can be a difficult task, due to the many different variations of definitions of transfer students held by colleges, states, and other researchers.

Outlining the definition of a transfer student can be difficult, though it serves of high importance in regards to consistency in research. With wavering definitions, there are potential

possibilities of research having skewed data in the eyes of the reader, if the personal definition differs from publisher. The understanding of a transfer student is more than just the standard definition, as there are layers to each student's educational story and background (Scott & Davis, 2007). Radwin and Horn (2014) describe that there is more to the phenomena of transfer students than just the physical aspect of transferring from school to school. When transfer students have low satisfaction socially within an institution, they may become withdrawn, causing them to stop out, and begin transitioning to another institution (Radwin and Horn 2014 & Winkle-Wagner 2009). "Transfer-Seeking" (Radwin and Horn 2014) is a label that is often applied to a transfer student who does not have a concrete education plan, and who transfers repeatedly. These students are important to study, along with the traditional "Degree-Seeking" student, a student purposefully seeking to obtain a degree, to better hone in on the students who have a plan to transfer in their academic career. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), the number of students enrolled at the undergraduate level that are transfer students/non-traditional students, has been increasing in recent years, and is projected to increase steadily until 2019. With projections of increased transfer students attending institutions, the understanding of this specific group is detrimental for anyone working within higher education.

A perspective to keep in mind is that of transfer students entering the system with multiple identities and entering from different pathways (Marling, 2013). It has been discussed that students that identify as multiple identities, such as gender, age, traditional student, nontraditional student, single parent, skilled or unskilled, socioeconomic label, those individual identities cannot be separated from inequality and social locations (Winkle-Wagner 2009). In trying to separate the identifiers, students can suffer negative consequences that create barriers

in their transfer such as self-doubt in their ability to perform at a four-year university level (Chin-Newman 2013). What students self-label is not necessarily a choice, but rather the identity is performed and enacted in their lives. These identities that transfer students assume range from personal implications to identities that include social relationships with others in their lives. Some of the identities that exist are family, socioeconomic status, self-efficacy, and social comfortability (Clegg, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Chin-Newman 2013; D'Amico et al. (2014).

Traditional Transfer Students

With varying perceptions from article to article on the definitions of a transfer student, a quote by Radwin and Horn (2014) generally described transfer students in a way that fits the overall theme which most of the literature conveyed.

> One definition of transfer students includes virtually any four-year college students who previously attended a community college, other definitions might exclude groups such as those whose attended a four-year institution before community college, those who enrolled in community college exclusively prior to the fall of their freshman year, those who had a long break in enrollment between community college and the four-year college, or those who transferred in the middle of an academic year. (p. 2)

Though originally a rarity, transfer students entering into a four-year university or institution with prior collegiate credit from additional institutions are now more common (Millard, 2014; Marling, 2013). Due to the increase in this type of student, students coming in though articulation agreements are considered more traditional than not (Millard, 2014). Much of recruitment for long-term transfer student success is through collaborations between community colleges and four-year institutions to benefit the student as well as both levels of higher

education institutions (Porchea et al., 2010). In the present study, the definition of transfer students will be based upon the policy that Office of Admissions at the institution in which this study took place. A transfer student is a student who has completed at least 24 semester (36 quarter) college-level credits at time of application. The credits that have been completed do not have to be transferrable, or passing grades, but they need to be college-level, meaning no remedial courses will count towards the 24 plus credits needed).

Non-Traditional and Unique Transfer Students

As stated previously, definitions are never going to be the same among researchers, readers and writers. Just as the definition varied for traditional transfer students, the same disparities are consistent with definitions of non-traditional students; though it seems to have more consistencies than traditional transfer students. Many post-secondary institutions have the same idea of what a non-traditional student looks like, only some have one group of students labeled "non-traditional", and others have sub-groups that help break down the group into more specific groups of people such as "adult learners". The National Center for Education Statistics (2016) states that non-traditional students have variables that differ largely from those of traditional students. Age is the variable that tends to capture the non-traditional student population; however, other variables are used to collect the factors that truly make a student non-traditional. Non-traditional students often have family and work responsibilities, they typically live off campus or are continuing their education remotely-in some cases online, their level of employment varies while attending school, they may waver from degree-seeking to non-degree seeking- meaning that they are taking a course here and there to accommodate external influences, not necessarily working towards a degree or academic plan. This all varies depending on their life situation (Martinez, 2016; Marling, 2013).

The National Center for Education Statistics (2016) describes a non-traditional student as an individual that has one or more of the following characteristics: being over the age of twenty-four; have previously graduated from a post-secondary institution; a person who graduated high school five or more years prior; someone that has earned a high school diploma or completed the GED at a satisfactory level; or a student that has previously attended a post-secondary institution in which they have completed less than the threshold that is typically considered a traditional transfer student. The credit amount ranges from any attempting of college level credit to twenty-four (National Center for the Educational Statistics, 2016) through thirty college credits (a rough credit equivalent to one full year of credits). The student type is affected by the credit variables that can all change depending on the institution's requirements. The institutions in the research also varied on whether or not non-transferrable credit applied towards the credits needed to be considered a traditional transfer student, yet most institutions stayed consistent on the credit needing to be earned rather than attempted.

The non-traditional student differs from a traditional transfer student in many ways. They are a separate type of student that at times can require resources different from those of a traditional transfer student. Age plays a large factor as well in this group of students. Though the age of a student has been considered as a predictor for learning strategies and cognitive maturity (Alexander, Murphy, Woods, Duhon & Parker, 1997), some students are entering the post-secondary world ten years or more since their last algebra or writing course. Due to the time that has lapsed and the knowledge that has deteriorated in the academic areas, there are resources needed for the student's success academically and socially. However, there is assistance needed for academic success, just as there is for entering freshman and traditional transfer students, non-traditional transfer students will also likely need more resources that assist them with social and

other non-cognitive skills. With the age gap alone, non-traditional students will be sharing the classrooms with 18 year-olds, if not younger, due to opportunities increasing for high school students such as concurrent enrollment. This can be challenging for students who are older in age, to relate to their classmates and peers that is an important part of learning at the collegiate level (Marling, 2013; Radwin & Horn, 2014). This also contributes to Mangan's (2013) thoughts on the paradigm shift not only that of transfer students becoming more prominent than before, but also the thoughts on the complex backgrounds from which these students come from. Some students hopping from institution to institution due to circumstances in which make it necessary for them to change in order to continue on their path to earning a degree.

The Transfer Student Experience: Transferring Academic Institutions

A challenge brought up regularly through the theme of transition is the importance of being aware of the potential road blocks that transfer students have to get over during their transition from one college or university to another. Many barriers that lie between transfer students and student success. The challenges are present at the two-year and the four-year level some of which include: poor academic preparation; lack of clear goals; and indifferent racist campus cultures. Students need academic and social integration in order to make campus connections (Davies 1999; Renn & Reason, 2013). Transfer students are looking for comfort on campus, individual attention, support, and opportunities to develop a social network of peers, a sense of community (Martinez, 2016), and pride or attachment to the institution (Clegg, 2008) of which they felt they had access to at the community college level. Because not all transfer students are the stereotypical traditional transfer student that attends a two-year community college and transitions into a four-year school, it is important to note that there are many other life aspects that play into a student's overall experience. Many students struggle balance of

student life, including social networks and support, financial concerns, and that of campus service support, to be very important and an issue when transitioning from institution to institution. Though a completely separate entity of its own, the overall experience also can affect online students and is important to be acknowledged. Student experience comes in many different forms (Davies 1999; Clegg 2008; Winkle-Wagner 2009). Attending an institution of higher education on campus or online comes with needs by the student for resources, no matter the modality. Miller and Lu (2003) mention "Online education has grown substantially and now must be adaptable to a variety of student cultures, concerns, and needs" (p. 163). Due to the growth of online learning due to technological advancements, new challenges and barriers have also come with it, making the online student another group of students with a unique identity along with non-traditional and traditional students.

Townsend (1998) provides insight on the acknowledgement that transfer students have usually had prior collegiate experiences, and they may not want to "feel like a freshman" again. The transfer students need to learn how to operate and be a student in a brand new environment (p. 77). Marling (2013) emphasizes the importance of the awareness of the multiple pathways that students take on their transfer transition journeys, and how this can influence the resource needs along with how they prefer to be treated. It can be easy to utilize current programming that was created for new freshman, and implement the same programming for the transfer students due to limited resources. The literature discusses how transfer students are not adequately served with those resources meant for a different target audience, and the influence of miss programming can affect a student's transition into the institution (Townsend, 1998; Clegg, 2008). Gawley (2006) discusses that the social aspects of the transfer transition suggest a need

for specified services aimed at transfer students due to the uniqueness of transfer student needs, as there are large differences between a college transfer and a new high school student.

Lacking clear goals on how to assist students in achieving success by an institution is a challenge within the overall student experience. Having unclear goals and expectations can cause issues with institution, as well as, and more importantly, the student. When a post-secondary institution creates goals for specific programming or resources for transfer students, it is of utmost importance that the institution as a whole remain as transparent as possible. Transparency reduces ambiguity within the different departments of the institution, as well as lays out clear expectations to the student depicting what it is the institution is trying to accomplish, and how the institutions are planning to assist the specific type of student. There is a large impact that the transfer transition experience has on the student and how it can essentially make or break the student's perceptions of inclusiveness and welcoming qualities, influencing the amount of connection the student feels within the institution (Marling, 2014; Davies 1999; France, Finney, & Swerdzewski, 2010). The discussion on transparency within an institutions goals and expectations serve to prove the point of how important it really is for institutions to learn from student experiences, adapt current strategies to better serve the student. To take it to the next step by implementing the programming, resources, or whatever entity it is the institution is trying to reach, with the transfer student in mind. If the institution fails to do so, there is a greater possibility that the student could then drop out, stop out, or transfer to another institution (Tobolowsky and Cox, 2012; Marlin, 2013).

Social Relationships

Much of the research and literature available about transfer students and providing non-cognitive resources brings up the importance of relationships. Some researchers speak about the relationships transfer students have with the other students, both transfer and not, in orientation-like settings (Gawley, 2006). Some researchers point to the importance of the relationships between the student and their advisors or other faculty and staff within the institution in which they are continuing their education. One study, along with several others, have found that higher levels of social support relate to better student persistence towards an academic degree (Nicpon et al., 2006). The social aspects of the transfer experience are important for institutions of higher education to be aware of, so that these social aspects can be assessed and implemented into programming such as orientation functions, which have proven to be vital in the retention of transfer students (Gawley, 2006; Davies, 1999).

Student and Faculty Relationships

Carol Steinhaus (1999) spoke specifically about the student to advisor/teacher relationship. Steinhaus implemented a program that initiated and strengthened the trust and comfort level between the professors and the students. It has been studied that faculty interactions show a large importance and positive impact in student success (Astin, 1999; Chang, 2008). Faculty engagement has seen the rise in social abilities, motivation, rewards, maturity, learning, evaluation, initiative, control, responsibility, relationships, and university attachment (France, Finney, & Swerdzewski, 2010). In relationship building, the student and the advisor/teacher have a two-way dialogue that allows both parties to give input and interact with each other, as well were the student has a say in the direction of the conversation as opposed to other forms of relationships in which the student plays a more passive role (Steinhaus, 1999;

Astin, 1999). Allowing the student to develop a close relationships, with dialogue addressing a wide variety of topics, personal and academic, creates a well-rounded relationship and establishing a new level of comfort with students (Starobin, 2004; Tinto, 2012). Effective support systems and mentee-mentor relationships have seemed to positively influence the self-efficacy of students (Starobin, 2004). Because of the social relationships that are created, students tend to feel more comfortable, are more likely to approach the faculty or staff member with questions, and the retention of the student is higher (Tinto, 2012; Pascarella, 1986). The impact in which establishing and keeping a positive relationship with advisors, staff, and faculty does impact the overall transfer and student experience. Feeling more comfortable allows the student to feel as though they can bring up issues and concerns with the advisor, faculty, and/or staff member that they normally would not do (Steinhaus, 1999).

Student satisfaction is another attribute that can play into relationships and their impact on student experience (McCormick, 2009). Studies have found that student-faculty interaction, quality of campus relationships and overall satisfaction with the college attended all play a factor in the positive student experience (McCormick, 2009).

Community Connections and Relationships

Transfer students often suffer from transfer shock, which was a key term coined by John Hills in 1965 which is still used to this day, generally describing the dip in GPA from a student within the first or second semester at a new institution. Transfer shock is one of the many different effects that can be seen when a transfer student does not have or have not used the resources needed to better transition themselves to the new institution. Transfer shock can also be influenced by the same concerns of balancing student life that was found in the Davies (1999) study explained above. When a student is enrolled at an institution, they are not only part of the

campus community, but they are also inherently part of the local community in which the institution is located. At times, a problem of transfer students can be experiencing a sense of community and belonging through different relationships with people that work within the institution (Forrest, et. al., 2015). Though the issue of student's not feeling a sense of committee is not necessarily always negative, the examples provided about the community impact shows the importance for the institution to be aware of the different constructs in which the student may feel either connected or disconnected within the campus community, to better help the student have a positive experience.

Social Support Services: What Transfer Students Need

A gap in the literature exists between what colleges offer, as well as awareness of the resources that are available for transfer students. Because so many colleges are filling the void of low enrollment with transfer students, the students need to have resources built in to the student experience, that are needed for academic and collegiate success (Grites & Farina, 2012). If colleges and universities fail to create or amp up current transfer resources, or fail to make the resources accessible to transfers students, the institution risks increased chances that the student will fail, drop, or stop out. This not only costs the institution tuition dollars, but also affects the overall graduation rate and retention rate of the college or university, which in return can hurt recruitment and overall enrollment. With many aspects of higher education being cyclical, it is important for institutions to put effort and resources towards studying, analyzing and implementing these types of improvements for their students, in this case, transfer students specifically. Some institutions have piloted outreach programs (Bartlett & Able, 1995) to help identify what resources students' need, no matter the resource type, early on in their academic career to help the student advance in their educational path.

In line with the institution's in which the present study has taken place, mission statement that mentions its dedication to the sharing of knowledge through education for a diverse community, transfer students can bring a lot to the table. Transfer students' diverse backgrounds, life experiences, educational paths, etc. bring another important value to the table in which they now can enrich others educational experiences with their own, thus benefiting the people of the state, the nation, and the world, just as the mission.

One aspect that many programmers do not consider when planning and implementing transfer specific programming, is acknowledging the non-traditional or special type of transfer student, and creating relationships with specific aspects in mind. Though non-traditional students may not be the largest group, it is important to not lose them in the shuffle (Grites & Farina, 2012). Depending on the size of the institution, and what resources the institution has in regards to people and funding for certain size of the student body that is affected, it can be hard to offer resources for non-cognitive skills, even though there is a need. A quote from Harper and Quaye (2008) helps depict some of the issues and importance surrounding understanding of the needs of transfer students, "colleges and universities have historically failed to recognize the frustrations, anxieties, and challenges of transferring from another institution" (p. 255). With the non-traditional transfer student, there can be more family-based needs than a traditional transfer as some of them are raising children, caring for elders, working full-time while going to school, and many other examples that could go on and on. It is important for the student to be aware of the resources within the community in regards to medical, pharmaceutical, pet, and childcare needs. Some institutions that have a larger population of non-traditional transfer students are able to provide resources such as reduced price daycare for students with young children, in a means to assist the student with staying on track with their education so that they may graduate

in a timely fashion. All assisting in the student saving themselves money in the long run and helping the student to not be forced to make a decision in which their education would be jeopardized (Radwin & Horn, 2014).

Mangan (2013) emphasizes the point of seriously analyzing the transfer student experience rather than solely on academics, which tends to be researched and discussed more in the field. She brings up the importance of which people and the federal government need to rely on more holistic metrics that deal specifically with the student experience. Much has changed in regards to the student experience throughout the last 50 years in higher education, and the lens in which the student experience is examined needs to be changed to adjust resources and funding to ensure the student is continuing on a path to educational success. Mangan (2013) also discusses the fact that statistically speaking, students are coming from more complex backgrounds than they were in years past. This indicates the need for social resources to assist these students from these diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and is necessary for institutions to focus time, funding, and resources towards.

Though many institutions have support services of varying kinds, ranging from social and non-cognitive (mentoring programs, daycare facilities, and learning communities) to academic (professional tutoring, test-taking strategies, remedial courses), it is important for the institution to understand what resource(s) being provided, what exactly do those resources include, and who is the audience in which they are providing the resource to.

Reflection and Future Study

A review of the literature revealed gaps do exist not only in the research but also in practice regarding transfer resources and implementation of social relationships. Working within

an institution of higher education, knowing the challenges of transfer students in general, as well as the struggles of being a smaller campus, there are areas in which further research and studies would be beneficial. Some future research could include learning more about what current resources can be either reevaluated to better fit this population or what resources can be implemented using current policies, budgets, materials, and assets. It would be advantageous to look into different studies that have been conducted in regards to smaller campuses and resources and social relationships that have either been implemented, such as living and learning communities, or that the campus has created, such as clubs and organizations. Even if the research tends to be freshman based, there is still much to learn from the similarities and challenges of being a smaller school. Though there are differences in student populations from one post-secondary institution to another, being able to identify common patterns and shared experiences in studies on different sizes of campus will allow the field of higher education more rich and diverse information that can improve and impact the programming aimed at recruitment, retention, and degree completion of a transfer student.

In reading the articles about the social and non-cognitive resources needed for transfer students, it would be pertinent to familiarize oneself with more studies, both qualitative and quantitative, conducted in means to usage of social resources by transfer students. These resources could vary, whether it be transfer resource centers, workshops, orientations, or other forms of programming specific to this group of students, to see how the resources are being put to use and if they are truly helping students or not. A large percentage of the literature read about transfer students and the resources that help them towards success, discussed student involvement and engagement within the university. This is interesting as when examining the thought of student engagement and involvement, it can be blanketed to the scenarios and

situations discussed above as all aspects need the student to be attentive and engaged in order for the resources to be fully utilized. Though student engagement as a whole is a very general and broad topic, it is necessary and it needs to be researched more than it currently is. There was not a large amount of research that looked at student engagement holistically, as the main topic being studied, but rather statistics on student involvement and attendance. There were a large number of times student engagement was mentioned and discussed as being an agent that caused change, but it was rather supplementary and not the focal point of the research. It appeared that if the literature used student engagement as the focal point, it was based on first year or freshman students, which typically did not mention that of transfer students. Within higher education and student services, student engagement is something that could really benefit individuals in providing services for students to better prepare and execute the services.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of the present study was to look into the transfer student experience, focusing on the impact that social relationships have on transfer student identity. This chapter first will discuss the research design of the study, and then go into the details on the transfer students interviewed, at a small, Midwest four-year college in the United States. Next, the chapter will describe the creation of interview questions, and will close with a description and analysis of the data collection.

Research Design

Qualitative research focuses on exploring a central phenomenon or concept, according to Creswell (2015). The design of this study was phenomenological. The reason I chose this research design was that I wanted to explore the transfer student experience in the eyes of current students, as I was once a transfer student myself. The definition of phenomenology according to the Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2013) includes studying a central structure of an overall experience intentionally, directed toward an object of process to gather meaning having my own experiences, along with working in the field, has made me develop a passion for transfer students, and their transition from one post-secondary institution to another.

Setting and Participants

This study took place at a four-year, small, comprehensive public university. The university was situated in the upper Midwestern part of the United States, in a rural region that was heavy in agriculture and natural resources. The institution has an enrollment of approximately 1,000 on campus students, and an equal number of online students. Some examples of agriculture that this area is known for include sugar beets, wheat, corn, soybeans,

sunflowers and edible beans. The participants in this study are reported anonymously, however since the interviews were conducted in person, the identities were known at the time of data collection. Each of the participants were identified as part of a larger sample obtained from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness at the university where the study took place. The sample included students who were current, enrolled transfer students, who had attended an institution of higher education prior to enrolling at this Midwestern, small public university. The large sample were individually emailed, asking transfer students to voluntarily participate in the study on social relationships influencing student experience. The students participating in the interviews were not limited to how they came to enroll within the institution. The transfer students could have transferred from a two-year institution, another four-year institution, or the transfer student could have attended an institution of higher education, and then taken some time off for a number of reason before continuing their education.

Data Gathering and Analysis

For this study, data were collected through in-person, one-on-one interviews with the researcher that were semi-structured, allowing for the conversation to flow freely, and for the participant to receive clarification to context. The participants were recruited via email, as email was the official means of communication at the institution where the study took place, asking for transfer student volunteers for interviews. The interviews lasted approximately one hour, with some lasting slightly longer, and some falling just short of the hour. In the interview process, the participants were asked about their transfer history, and personal transfer experience into the university, through the lens of social relationship influences. The interviews were audio recorded and stored via a cloud-based account as to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

The interviews conducted addressed many topics, including interactions with clubs and organizations on campus, relationships with faculty and staff members, associations with both campus and local community, faculty interactions, sports team affiliation, and acclimation from a two-year institution to a four-year institution. The topics chosen for the interview questions were to inspire the student participants to share their experiences as transfer students into the institution in which the study took place.

Constant comparative method of analysis was used (Creswell, 2015). Once the data were collected, the five interviews were listened to several times, the first review was to code the interviews topically. Each interview was cataloged minute by minute, to document which topics the students were discussing at that time. This allowed for time notations to be made, and further analysis easier. After the initial review, the recordings were listened to again, to note any topical emphasis, recurrences, and emotion that occurred to analyze how that could have shed some light on how that topic affected them personally during their college transition. Upon finishing the topic cataloging, the interviews were reviewed once again for a within interview analysis. During the within interview analysis, the data was observed to find patterns in topics, feelings, and phenomena within each interview specifically. Some of the participants had main topics that would resurface several times during their interview, where some mentioned topics once or twice, but added more emotion and emphasis to their stories they were sharing, indicating it was a topic or experience of importance.

Upon the analysis of the original topic cataloging, and within interview examination, all five interview results were compared to each other for the first time. Several patterns that were observed within each interview separately now started forming patterns across several of the participant's responses. Some patterns that were significant in one interview, were never shared

in the other interviews, where other experiences were shared amongst all five interviews. The analysis of the data show some shared experiences of influence by social relationships by the current students who were interviewed, ultimately displaying several prominent themes. Though some of the students' experiences were not shared by others in the study, they had similar feeling associated as other students, but different reasoning's to why they felt that way, allowing for different types of themes to display, that were not thought of originally.

Since the first and second rounds of coding topics focused on a person or group of people being the influence of the transfer experience, the 'within interview analysis' helped shape not only who these relationships were with, but focused on the nature of these relationships with the transfer students, and further how those relationships influenced the overall transfer experience.

Summary

The design and methods implemented in this study were phenomenological, emphasizing on non-qualitative aspects of the realities of collegiate transitions, the phenomena that can be observed accurately portray the transfer experience from a two-year institution to a four-year institution or a four-year institution to a four-year institution. The study conducted face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with current transfer students who were enrolled full-time (12 or more semester credits) at the time of interview. Once the interviews concluded, the data were collected, and commonalities of themes from each student became predominant. In the following chapter, I will describe the interviews and present the analysis of the time spent, gathering student testimonials.

Chapter Four

Results and Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the face-to-face interviews conducted with current transfer students in regards to their transfer transition experience, and how social relationships have influenced their overall transfer phenomena. The results look at who these social or non-cognitive relationships were with, the nature of these relationships, and how those relationships influenced the students' experiences from transferring from one institution to another. After analyzing all five interviews several times, there were several prominent themes that emerged. Many shared experienced across all students, and some shared feelings, but different experiences that brought them to the participants' shared experiences. I will lay out these themes in this chapter, and discuss how they came to be.

Results

In the beginning of the present study, I shaped the theoretical framework to that of Astin (1984) and Tinto's (1975) models of student involvement and engagement. Though that did play a large factor in the analysis of the results, the interviews also shed light on several different aspects of the transfer phenomena that fell outside of the original framework. Much of the literature points to students having an identity within or to an institution correlating with success, though this study found that it is more complex than that. There is more than one or two prominent ideas that have a cause and effect type of relationship, but rather a complex nexus with multiple factors that intersect at multiple places. It is like a ball of wires with many different and significant influences, all intersecting at different parts of the experience. Kahu (2013) discusses the psychological perspective and how there are three dimensions of engagement-affect, behavior, and cognition that play a role in creating influence. This rang true with the

analysis of the interviews. Kahu (2013) states, "In order to highlight that student engagement is more than just an internal static state, this individual experience is embedded within the socio-cultural context and shown as influenced by characteristics of both the student and the institution" (p. 766). With multiple factors all contributing into the lived reality that is the transfer student experience, it is important to note Kahu's (2013) thoughts on keeping the definitions around student engagement and experiences broad enough as to not limit what psycho-social influences such as relationships encompass and affect in regards to the overall experience. The data collected came from the students themselves sharing their transfer experiences in a face-to-face interview. Five students were interviewed and here are the following themes that remain prominent through the analysis of the data.

Differences in Definitions of 'Relationships'

In light of the transfer experience and specific to the student participants, the following emerged. It was obvious that social or non-cognitive relationships were influential. After the interviews were conducted, prior to any topic coding, it was clear that there were large impacts on the overall transfer experience. A large takeaway from the analysis here was analyzing the intersection between social and non-cognitive relationships on campus to identifying as a student at the institution. According to the literature, the sense of identity is shaped by the social and non-cognitive relationships formed, however this study revealed a more complex situation. It appeared in this study, that the sense of identity rather shapes and determines the formation of the relationships within and around the transfer experience. Some relationships that had influence are personal and professional and some are an overall relationship with a campus as an institution. For the students in this study, relationships meant several things. To the majority of the students interviewed, the term relationship was a social bond that was intimate, and shared.

Something that could be described as 'family-like' where one participant described, *"I found others like me that enjoyed the same things I do. I have been able to form a bond with these people that I will cherish for a lifetime, just like that of my family."* To one student however, relationships in the academic context seemed to be a sort of resource. Though the student did share some of the same experiences as the other participants, the idea of a relationship was strictly for networking and connections within the field of study.

Influence of Support Through Relationships

For all participants, the topic of support was recurrent and reoccurred in every interview. Though the thought of support is not in the way that could traditionally assumed, academic in nature. With so much of the literature discussing academic support, the support that the participants shared during this study was about social and non-cognitive relationships. Some of the support was personal and some were seen as a sort of commodity. Seeing a relationship as a resource was significant for one of the students in this study. The idea of forming relationships with faculty and staff on campus was important as they were going to be able to know someone who can be of use to them in the future, post-graduation.

> Several of the participants touched on the influence of faculty and staff during their transfer experience, and shared the thought of having connections that will benefit them personally and professionally. One student stating that *"I make it a point to have that connection [with faculty], because I couldn't have that at my prior institution even though I tried hard to establish that relationship…they are a resource whether or not there is that personal connection or not. And that is okay!"* when discussing faculty interaction as a substantial influence on her experience. Another student mentioned "I know that in 30 years when I look back, that I will have connections in the field and access to resources,

both people and data, that will help me gain knowledge progress in my field," when discussing his experiences with and how he values faculty relationships on campus. This finding answered the second question of whether these social relationships influence the transfer student experience. Some participants found personal fulfillment, where others found a more professional networking resource style of fulfillment. Specifically, faculty and staff influence seemed to be the largest relationship that the participants spoke of in regards to support. One of the participants discussed how it was a consistent theme throughout his entire transition, even starting at the point of inquiry:

I was accepted to the school I wanted to go to, but it truly was the faculty influence here, that changed my mind and swayed me to come here. I could not get ahold of anyone at the school I wanted to attend. It goes to show how influential faculty truly are. My situation seemed to be the most bizarre thing to the large institution I wanted to go to, and I could not get decent help or anyone to even try to help answer my questions. I was going to drive to the large campus to visit and see if I being there physically could help get answers, but I stopped here first, and decided I did not need to go to the large institution anymore, and decided to enroll here after engaging with the faculty and staff. They were so accommodating and assisted me with all of my questions, particularly those on the academic side. It is cool to see how one visit with a faculty member, then became my advisor, who will eventually be a contact for me in the field.

This study truly encompassed what Hinsdale (2015) discussed about the importance of mentorship and taking advising to the next level. The students felt extremely strong and close personal relationships with the faculty that ultimately influenced their student experience. Hinsdale (2015) mentions that what separates advisors from mentors is that the students have the

opportunity to have relationships with faculty that are both instrumental and physical. Mentoring can be defined as "the presence of a bonded personal relationship—a relationship that takes some time to develop, is often based on some level of mutual interest or attraction, and often endures through several phases or 'seasons" (Johnson, 2003). All of the students mentioned their faculty as mentors. Some for personal reasons, and others considered these relationships as tools or resources for when they enter the workforce. Nonetheless, these mentorships exist, and align with Johnson's thoughts on long-term relationships and that they tend to be based on trust. Several of the participants touched on trusting their faculty and how that was so important to them in the transfer process, specifically from those who did not have a positive transfer from a prior institution. One participant stated, "*When I looked into [this institution], I was nervous. The prior school I transferred into promised me everything upfront, but then couldn't actually deliver in the end, and consequently costed me a lot of money that I do not have."* The student later went on to say how important it was getting to know and trust the faculty and staff as that made for better relationships but also fostered the confidence within the student, to fully dive-in to the college experience, taking part in as many opportunities as possible during their time on campus.

Though relationships with faculty was a persistent topic brought up in this study, another prominent focus on support was in regards to family. All of the participants brought up family support, with majority of them emphasizing the impact on their transfer experience. One participant indicated that her family had to approve of her decision to transfer before she would consider the institution as an option to finisher her degree. Another student stated, *"This was a big decision for me and my family, and my family played a huge part as they really just want what is best for me."* Another participant discussed her culture and how important family is in

Hispanic culture. This participant started her collegiate experience at a community college in California so she could live at home and spend more time with her family before moving across the nation to finish her 4-year degree. Her family influenced her experience beyond the decision to enroll, as they continued to check in with her and wanted to be a part of her "UMC Family", which were community members and teammates as she was a member of the softball team. Her biological family and 'new' family came into play significantly with the struggle of being so far from home. Being homesick and the stresses of college called for her to need a sort of family system to rely on. Without a deep system of support both near and far, she indicated she would have probably dropped out and moved back home. As for one of the participants who was non-traditional in age and background, indicated that family is important to them from the standpoint of seeking to make their family proud, but not so much of playing an influential role in their experience like they did when the participant started college for the first time, which was well over 8 years prior to this interview taking place.

Though the topics of faith and spirituality were not heavily discussed, they were brought up in the majority of the participant's interviews. Much of the conversation around faith and spirituality revolved around the topics of family and culture. One student spoke about her family being so important, alongside of her faith. She relied on both for support through the stresses of working a full-time job, and going to school full-time. She mentioned that because of the influence her faith has on her life, it played a crucial role on her experience in transferring from one college to another. She was very active in campus ministry at her previous college, and knowing she wanted to continue to have that support, she looked into that prior to transferring to a four-year university. The participant also emphasized the important role getting involved in campus ministry/organizations at her current institution allowed her to form support groups with

like-minded friends who were also people of faith. She went on to describe how having the support from the student faith organizations and friendships created throughout her experience transferring schools has made the experience much less stressful, and knows that these friendships she has formed will last a lifetime. The participant discussed how that support would follow her, even after she graduates knowing that friends tend to part ways after completing their degrees due to career outcomes.

Desire to Pay It Forward

Another theme that remained prominent in this study was the students' experiences around feeling so passionate and loyal to the institution from the services, resources, and relationships that they have utilized and received, that they want to pay it forward. Through the analysis of the interviews, it was clear that the sense of identity within and institution plays a large role in the overall experience, aligning with Clegg's (2008) thoughts on attachment to an institution. Campus pride, friendships, and club involvement all factored in to the transition experience among the majority of the interviews. Just as Tinto (1975, 2012) and Astin (1984) discussed, the responsibility of getting involved and engaged within an university both socially and academically is the responsibility of the students, and this study proved to show that the majority of students interviewed were able to see this personal responsibility and decided to take matters into their own hands to get involved. The process of getting socially involved within the university, showed to have great impacts on their transfer experience socially and academically. Though much of the literature discusses the academic side, there is a social side to academics that is not always discussed, and this idea of faculty involvement and interactions with the students came up in all interviews, and seemed to have a significant impact on the experience of all but one participant. One student mentioned *"I am so proud of this place, proud of coming*

here, and proud to represent." She went on to say that she feels like she is a part of the campus community and has a strong desire to help others reach the collegiate experience satisfaction that she has received through here transfer. One participant who had a relatively negative transfer experience overall at the institution, discussed how the faculty relationships formed made him want to mentor others in his field, just like his faculty had for him at this institution. He discussed that the faculty at this institution stay current in the field while remaining personal and could relate to the student body, which fostered the relationships between faculty and students both personally and professionally. At his prior institution, he felt that many of the faculty would have been better off in research roles, rather than teaching roles, as they could not relate to the students. However, though his transition experience was not what he was hoping for, the mentor-like relationships formed with faculty were noticeable and something he will remember for the rest of his life. He stated, *"They [faculty] have inspired me to give back. Not financially, of course, but in my field, to incoming students in the program, and to prospective students of the college. Through their mentorship, instilling ethics within my field, and desire to learn continuously even after I graduate, it makes me want to do that for someone else!"*

Another student discussed how the transfer experience has made her more outgoing, and the atmosphere is so "small-town community like" that she hopes she can assist in other students having the opportunity to have a similar college experience. Having transferred from and institution that she was not enjoying, transferring to this institution she encountered many different faculty members and friends she met on campus who have made her proud to be a part of this campus. She stated,

> *I thought I really was liking it here, but it was during homecoming where it was school spirit central, and I had an almost out of body experience where I just could not believe*

how happy I was. Transferring from a school where was unhappy and simply going through the motions of school rather than really enjoying the college student experience, I knew I was at the right place. I knew I am part of the Eagle Nation (pseudonym used). I actually started a cheer club on campus after that! I was boasting with school pride so I figured why not do something that can help others on campus feel the way I do, while spreading happiness.

She connected with the campus and truly felt that her experience as a transfer student shaped her identity as an Eagle (pseudonym used). Her relationships with the faculty on campus, and the fraternity she was a part of shaped her and increased her confidence and self-efficacy. She mentioned how she would not have been this involved and engaged on campus if it was not for the relationships she has formed with those on campus that made her more comfortable. This student's experiences reflect much of what Astin (1984) discusses in his theory of involvement with the direct correlation between the amount of energy put in by the student towards involvement with the quality of happiness and then in return, academic success with higher amounts of student involvement. This student was able to see this theory in progress and noticed the benefits to getting involved rather early. This has since spread to the participant continuing to get involved in other aspects on campus, as well as into her academic career. It is also noteworthy to discuss how she talked about her identity within this institution, and how it continued to drive her to create relationships with others to give them a similar experience to what she has had. What students self-label is not necessarily a choice, but rather the identity is performed and enacted, such as family, socioeconomic status, self-efficacy, and social comfortability (Clegg, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Chin-Newman 2013; D'Amico et al. (2014). With this student's positive sense of identity within the institution, she reflected Clegg's

(2008) discussions that she was more involved and more passionate towards all aspects of the institution. Socially, academically, and personally, a student's identification within the university can impact the overall student experience.

Another student mentioned how she wanted to one day continue with schooling, so that after she had the credentials needed and a good amount of real-life experience in the field, that she wanted to come back and teach at this very institution. The participant discussed heavily the influence the faculty and programmatic affiliates has been since her time of enrollment. The connections the faculty have created with people in the field of her study, is what landed her what she called *"the internship experience of a lifetime*" and the opportunity to have been offered a full-time job by the company she did her internship with, almost a year prior to her graduating. The participant described how the faculty that she formed close relationships with pushed her to get involved in her major, where she ended up being the president of a club in her academic area. This helped her create connections that influenced not only her experience as a student within the institution but also set her up for success post-graduation. She discussed,

> *I cannot wait to get my student loans paid off, some experience in the workforce, and further schooling so that I can give back to this campus what it has done for me! I know it may be a while, but I feel so passionately about this place because of my experience, that I want others to form the bonds with faculty and students within their program like I have. The bonds I have created are professional no doubt, but even better than that, they are personal. I know that I will go on to invite these people to my wedding!*

She described how her experience with the faculty helping shape her and prepare her for the work force is where this desire to give back to future students truly started.

Sense of Community

A third theme that emerged was that of the sense of community and closeness that occurred during many of the students' transfer experience. Some students mentioned that they chose to attend school at this institution merely because of the geographical location. For one student, it was close to where she grew up, so she knew the people would be similar to the community in which she grew up and attended high school in. Another participant mentioned that he was not a fan of the small-town community that the institution resided in, but he was able to commute to a neighboring city where he lived, allowing him to have the best of two worlds. He was able to keep the community he has been living in for the past eight years, while being a part of a close-knit campus community that specialized in his academic area of study.

The majority of the students mentioned the physical size of the campus community as well as the physical size of the small town that the institution resided within. One student stated,

> *The on-campus community is much better than the city or surrounding community. The students on campus come together to create things that are going on on-campus like our entertainment board, athletic programs, and clubs. Being that the town is rural, coming from a large city in California, there is way less to do here, and I feel the community on campus is much more fun and younger crowd than in town.*

The student mentioned that she has enjoyed the community in the town the more she has been there, finding the charm of small-town communities where people tend to take care of and look out for one another. She described her experience of going home for a holiday break, and noticing the cultural differences in the way people treat others in the big city where she was from, that she was eager to return to campus to be around people to had her best interest at heart and wanted her to succeed. She mentioned,

This is a completely different experience than I ever imagined I would have. I don't want to leave now! There is something to be said that when I got a flat tire at home over break, nobody stopped to help me, but when I went into the ditch during a blizzard here, I had four or five cars stop to assist me. That means so much. That sense of protection was huge for me and my family, as they knew I had support and safety on campus and in the surrounding community.

One of the participants expressed the large influence her academic community had on her transfer experience. The overwhelming care that came from the faculty and staff on campus inspired her to get involved. She discussed how there were several faculty that took subjects she wasn't particularly good at or enjoyed and made her want to further her education and specialize in. The community connection that she made during her transfer experience gave her the self-confidence and drive to succeed. She discussed how she knew she was a part of a great community "*When you have all these people backing you up saying 'you can do it', and 'we will help', it is so much easier to be successful. And my grades have reflected that."*

Another student mentioned how he did not think the campus community was a positive experience when he considers his overall college experience. Most specifically during the transfer process, this student discussed how both the campus and surrounding community did not seem to benefit him socially, due to the population majority being white, and located in a rural area with agriculture as the main industry meant that many of the people grew up in the area and have never left. He discussed how the campus mirrored the surrounding local community in the fact that the people seemed closed-minded and the courses offered within the Liberal Arts reflected the same thought. The student mentioned,

There just is not a great environment for global and cultural learning, and it is probably because of the location and population in the area. The campus does a good job at trying to create liberal education courses; however, there is a lot of room for improvement. It helps having international and multicultural students on campus, however my previous institution, which was much larger, allowed for me to grow academically, but more importantly, it allowed me to grow personally and culturally which I feel this campus is lacking.

The literature discusses the importance of diversity socially, but also in the curriculum within higher education. Williams and Lee (2015) discuss how incorporating faculty within the mission allow for a diverse culture to take place, while educating topically but also socially, which resonates with what this participant was describing.

An overwhelming pattern in this study was that of the learning and academic sense of community that each student had been impacted with during their transfer experience. Though the sense of community within academia is not that of the traditional kind, but rather focuses on the connections, networking, and social relationships formed with faculty and other students within the same academic programs. As mentioned, some students have had such an influential experience that they have chosen to take more courses from a professor, based solely off the relationship the student has formed with this faculty member. Another participant mentioned that they could identify with the networking and professional opportunity to have such close relationships with faculty members during their transfer experience, and how it was a tool that this student will use going forward into the workforce. Not only the knowledge that the professor has taught the participant, but also the connections that the faculty member now brings forward post-graduation, is also a tool. The relationships that are formed amongst students and

faculty create a sense of community within academia that is more than knowledge, but takes this thought to the next level, but an entire network of individuals, all with common interests, helping each other out throughout the transfer process (Volkwein, King, & Terenzini, 1986).

Discussion

The present study found the following three themes to be prominent in regards to social relationships and the transfer student experience: sense of community, desire to pay it forward, and need for support. For most of the participants, several of the social relationships that largely influenced their experience, fell under multiple themes, proving their significance. Relationships with faculty, campus community, family, and campus involvement were patterns that continuously occurred. This shows that the data calls for a need to consider the social relationship impacts on student experience. Since much of the literature and data in the field focusses on qualitative data, specifically around the academic realm, this study has given the field a reason to consider other forms of influencers on student experience that can be applied to the conversations around recruitment, retention, involvement, engagement and academic success. Though this study was done at a small, rural Midwestern school, this can be applied to institutions of any size and geographical locations as the relationships of influence are relationships that occur at every institution of higher education. This study showed that the relationships formed influence the participant's identity within the institution, which filters down, influencing many different aspects of the transfer student experience. Positive or negative, the identity that a student feels to the institution depicts how involved the student will push himself or herself to be. This sense of identity is primarily new, but the results of this study around this idea ring true to Astin's (1984) theory of involvement. In this study alone, the data show that the more positive the relationship outcome is, the more likely the student will develop

the desire to engage in opportunities that arise, where the opposite was also observed. A student who may not feel connected to the campus can still identify the importance of the relationships formed, and may utilize the social relationships as a tool, rather than something that pushes them to have deeper engagement with the campus, and is less likely to get involved outside of the requirements for degree completion. Though this study had consistent undertones of social relationships influencing the desire to get involved or engaged within the institution, Clegg's (2008) concept of social identity within an institution was a consistent reoccurrence within the interviews, showing the influence that the social relationships had on the overall experience.

Summary

Knowing from the literature that the amount of effort and energy students put in to their collegiate experience directly correlates to overall happiness outcomes, this study proved this to be true yet again. However, the other major influences, and outcomes that arose from this study, such as faculty influence, support influences, and identity within an institution are not widely discussed in current and past works. What does that mean for higher education? For recruitment? For retention?

Chapter Five

Summary and Conclusions

This study, though conducted at a small, rural, public institution in the Midwest, produced a large amount of insight into the transfer transition experience of a transfer student. Though each student has their own experiences and understandings of their transfer process, patterns and commonalities start to emerge across students with varying types of transfer experiences. In the present study, there were prominent patterns of influence of social relationships on the transfer students' experience and identity within an institution that emerged into themes. Those themes being the desire to pay it forward influence of support systems, and connections to a community. Just as the literature highlighted, there are many influences and multiple factors that influence a student's experience in higher education, however this study focused on the influence of social relationships leaving us with emerged commonalities and experiences by majority of the students interviewed. With the themes that emerged from the analysis, what can be done with this information? What does it all mean?

This study produced insights to several pieces to the transfer student experience as phenomena that are housed in many different parts of higher education as a whole. All participants brought up topics that were unique to their specific experience. The participants did not compare their stories with other participants as the interviews were individually conducted, yet there were multiple patterns and shared experiences that arose across all interviews ranging from academics, to social involvement on campus, to athletics, to faculty and staff interactions. With much of the literature focusing on the academic side of higher education and the student experience, this study supports the idea that there is a need for research outside of academics. Though academia is immensely important, academics is merely one offshoot of the system that is

known as higher education. The students who participated in this study, proved that with the sharing of their stories.

Significant Findings

In a broad sense, this study uncovered many different significant findings. However, perhaps the most significant was the discovery of the mode in which the social relationships that influenced the participant's experiences were viewed. To the majority of the participants, the relationships with faculty and staff were personal with professional undertones. One participant touched on the fact that she created relationships with her faculty that she knew would last a lifetime, and they became a personal mentor to her. She jokingly stated that she knew the faculty had made an impact on her transfer experience, as she knows she will be inviting them to her wedding. This feeling was common in this study, but a significant finding occurred when one of the participants who was not having the best experience mentioned the faculty connection and impact on their experience, and how he knew he had a network of people that will be resources to him in the future, as he moves forward in the field. The significant finding here was that there was a shared experience amongst all the participants, yet the experience was viewed and perceived completely different from one another. One was a relationship in the personal sense. The personal relationship with the faculty was professional and personal and was enormously mentor-like. The other type was viewed as a resource. In this type of relationship, the faculty and student relationship was strictly of the professional modality, which was used as a sort of networking within the students' field of study. It is clear that the faculty influence is a great effect on the student experience, especially in this study of transfer students. However, taking a step back and focusing on the nature of the faculty and student relationship unveils a new

perspective on the importance of these relationships and how the students will use the connections formed in the future and moving forward.

Another significant finding was the fact that almost all of the participants were influenced socially in a way that made the students want to give back, or pay it forward. One participant mentioned they would one day like to give back to the institution financially, but when speaking of their desire to pay it forward, they were speaking of mirroring the relationships that others have created with them, but with other students coming in after them. The aspiration to be a positive relationship to an incoming student came from several viewpoints. One participant wanted to be a large alumni impact on a student as she had an alumni from this institution reach out to her during the recruitment phase, and that relationship turned into an internship, which later turned into a full-time job that she would assume upon graduating. Another student focused on more of a current scenario and how the participant wanted to be a positive mentor to a student within their academic major or department, as well as in extra-curricular activities to guide current students in hopes that those current students will be impacted as positively as the participant was during their transfer experience. One participant also mentioned how they wanted to get involved with the admissions process, to help recruit transfer students such as themselves to ensure that other prospective students can make the connections, network, and form relationships that will last a lifetime, both professionally and personally, just as the participant once did.

Implications for Practitioners

The findings of this study offer a variety of implications for multiple aspects of higher education. With enrollment and retention becoming the spotlight in most institutions, transfer students are becoming a sort of prized commodity sought after to fill seats as a short-term

strategy. This study provides useful information in regards to student retention and transitional experiences from one institution to another. Several items in which people within higher education should consider include student engagement in all levels of higher education and the types of variables being in multiples rather than single influencers at a time. However, this study's analysis is not mean to be generalized to all transfer and non-traditional students, it is meant to display the complex array of factors that influences a student's engagement. Kahu (2013) describes this stating "by embedding these phenomena and processes within the wider socio-cultural context, the unique nature of the individual experience becomes clearer… the framework does not claim to depict all the influences and relationships but rather to disaggregate and organize the central variable and relationships between them" (p.#).

Student engagement is a widely researched topic within higher education. This study however provided a more specific type of student engagement, one of those discussed was related to engagement with faculty and staff within an institution, having large impacts on the overall transfer experience. Axelson and Flick (2011) discuss the importance of relating to the students during their undergraduate and truly engage the students in all aspects of higher education. In this study, the participants shared how important relationships and student engagement was to them during their transfer transition from one institution to another. All of the participants emphasized the there were large impacts on the student experience, by the myriad of relationships the participants had. The participants noted that these relationships pushed them to see something in themselves that they could not see, or did not have the confidence to push themselves to get involved. One participant mentioned that their relationship with faculty pushed the student to get involved in their major, where she met more peers, contributing to the rising level of confidence, aiding the student in continuing to get involved in various aspects of

campus. Some participants mentioned faculty interaction as serving as an important influencer on the transfer student experience. It is important that institutions encourage student engagement and interaction with students from all faculty and staff. Johnson (2003) and Handel & Williams (2012) discuss how mentorship relationships happen at many different levels of interaction. Some of the interactions with faculty and students may be personal in nature and some relationships may be less intimate, but offer a more instrumental resource to the student, but play just as large of an importance in the student's experience. Most of the participants discussed the vital role in which relationships with faculty and staff having effects on not only their experience transitioning and while enrolled within an institution, but also as resources in the participants fields of study, that will carry on into the future, post-graduation.

Another aspect of student engagement in terms of their relationships that emerged from this study that rings importance in higher education is being connected to the campus and surrounding community. This relationship manifested through many different intersections of interactions. Alumni involvement during the recruitment process, while enrolled, and during the job search portion of the participants education, along with interactions within clubs and organizations both as part of an academic program as well as extra-curricular purposes were all noted as high influences on the transfer student experience. It is important for institutions within higher education help shape students' identity and affinity with the institution as soon as possible within the transition experience. Merriam & Kee (2014) discuss that it is important to create a sense of community in relation to lifelong learning and wellbeing. Institution-wide initiatives that promote this sort of community engagement is important to establish the students' affinity within an institution early on in the students educational career, reduces the likelihood of drop-outs, stop-outs, and students transferring out of an institution prior to degree completion.

Kahu (2013) emphasized the psyco-social variables that influence student experience phenomena by mentioning "good relationships foster engagement, which in turn promotes good relationships; and engagement leads to better grades, which in turn motivate students to be more engaged" (p.#). In this study, Kahu's (2013) thoughts emerged in the analysis of the data as all participants shared how their close-knit relationships influenced the student's self-efficacy and involvement in major/program specific and extra-curricular activities within the institution. All of these experiences were described by the participants as positive impacts on their student experience. It is important to note how students find the social relationships will all people within higher education, influential whether it is viewed as a resource or something smaller, that had large influence such as growing self-efficacy and confidence, which leads to more involvement and engagement, which as Kahu (2013) describes, leads to better grades and more successful outcomes within higher education.

Student success, retention, and degree completion are all goals of post-secondary institutions, however as Marling (2013) discusses, the institutions must know their students first. Once institutions develop a greater understanding of their transfer student population, they can more broadly program, and appropriately resource their campuses targeting their transfer population. With these goals in mind, it is important to strategically collect and interpret data. The present study provided great insight on the transfer population at this institution. Though the information was not collected as most data in higher education is via college applications and demographic information, it provides an important glance into the life of a transfer student at this institution. This will allow the institution to create programming, strategic student engagement plans, and establish a benchmark to compare to from year to year. According to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education and Guidelines for Transfer Student

Programs and Services provides statements that should be achievable by any program in all post-secondary institutions, allowing these institutions to appropriately assess their student population and create a system of accountability towards continuous improvement (2012). This provides important insight on the need for institutions to not only collect data of all types possible on their transfer population, but also to take it one step further and assess the current programming and resources implemented to make educated decisions on adding, updating, and changing to better suit the institutions transfer population.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study provided much insight into the social relationship influencers on the transfer student experience, though there are now new questions. The study proved certain relationships, such as those with faculty and staff, were of utmost importance, along with sense of identity within a community in the institution. If I were to conduct this study again, or dive deeper into the understanding of social relationship influences, I would probably have tailored some of the questions more directly in line with social relationships. Though all of the participants were able to provide a magnitude of data, some of the questions from the interview protocol were perceived differently by diverse participants. Though this is not always bad, consistency within understanding of the question is helpful in obtaining data about a specific topic, in this case social relationship influencers. In this study, the students were a part of a small, public, rural, Midwestern institution. This study would be interesting to compare to the same study conducted at a large institution in the Midwest, and then again in the greater United States to get a wider variety of student input and experience surrounding the transfer student phenomena

Limitations

Because this study was conducted within and institution located in a rural Midwestern town, there was not a large pool of participants to interview. A limitation of this study was not only the campus size of under 1000 undergraduates, but also the location and demographics of the student body within the institution this study took place. Being located in a rural area with long agricultural ties, a large percentage of the student body was considered local, or from within a fifty to one hundred mile radius surrounding the institution, with a large portion of those local students being involved in agricultural programs. This demographic tends to be students whose families homesteaded in the region, and has farmed or ranched for several generations, never leaving the area. With that comes very similar mindsets, and limited racial and multicultural diversity.

Summary

With much of the literature on higher education surrounding academia and influences on academic success, it is important to know the student experience in holistic form. Academia is large portion of higher education, with it being arguably the reason higher education exists. However, there are other aspects to the student experience outside of academics that are not always acknowledged. This study considered another other side of the student experience, social relationships as a whole, who the relationships were with, the nature of the relationships, and how the relationships influenced the students' identity within an institution. The data consists of students sharing experiences from students who have been through the transition from one institution of higher education, to another. The patterns that emerged, clustered into three main themes being, the desire to pay it forward, social support, and campus and/or community connections. These themes mentioned were the top three largest cluster of patterns and shared experiences; however, that just scratches the surface of the student experience phenomena.

There is much more to be discovered about the influence of social relationships and how those influences shape, impact, and affect a student's transition from one institution to another. Future research is what will change the way transfer students are recruited, retained, and the way programming and resources geared for transfer students are created and implemented. With transfer students becoming a pursued commodity by institutions used to fill enrollment targets quickly, it is important to understand who the transfer students are, what they seek to accomplish, and ultimately what resources are needed.

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Appendices

Appendix I

IRB Approval Letter or Email

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Twin Cities Campus

Human Research Protection Program
Office of the Vice President for Research

D528 Mayo Memorial Building
420 Delaware Street S.E.
MMC 820
Minneapolis, MN 55455

Phone: 612-626-5654
Fax: 612-626-6061
Email: irb@umn.edu
http://www.research.umn.edu/subjects/

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

February 13,

2018 Lynn

Brice

218-340-2618
lbrice@umn.edu

Dear Lynn Brice:

On 2/13/2018, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Influences of Social Relationships on the Transfer Student Experience
Investigator:	Lynn Brice
IRB ID:	STUDY00001383
Sponsored Funding:	None
Grant ID/Con Number:	None
Internal UMN Funding:	None
Fund Management Outside University:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None

Documents Reviewed with this Submission:	• IRB Recruitment Email-Brooke Novak, Category: Recruitment Materials; • IRB Interview Protocol- Brooke Novak, Category: Other; • IRB Participant Reply Response Email, Category: Recruitment Materials; • IRB Social Template Protocol Brooke Novak, Category: IRB Protocol; • IRB Reserve Participant Reply Email, Category: Recruitment Materials; • IRB Consent Form Brooke Novak, Category: Consent Form;

Driven to Discover℠

The IRB determined that this study meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To arrive at this determination, the IRB used "WORKSHEET: Exemption (HRP-312)." If you have any questions about this determination, please review that Worksheet in the HRPP Toolkit Library and contact the IRB office if needed.

This study met the following category for exemption:

• (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that Human Subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the Human Subjects responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects financial standing, employability, or reputation

Ongoing IRB review and approval for this study is not required; however, this determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a Modification to the IRB for a determination.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the HRPP Toolkit Library on the IRB website.

For grant certification purposes, you will need these dates and the Assurance of Compliance number which is FWA00000312 (Fairview Health Systems Research FWA00000325, Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare FWA00004003).

Sincerely,

Bri
Warner
IRB
Analyst

We value feedback from the research community and would like to hear about your experience. The link below will take you to a brief survey that will take a minute or two to complete. The questions are basic, but your responses will help us better understand what we are doing well and areas that may require improvement. Thank you in advance for completing the survey.

Even if you have provided feedback in the past, we want and welcome your evaluation.

https://umn.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_5BiYrqPNMJRQSBn

Appendix II

Interview Protocol and Interview Questions

Semi-Structured, Face-To-Face Interview Questions:

Hello XXXX, Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my research for my thesis, I greatly appreciate it! The purpose of this interview today, is to seek out common themes and constructs in the transfer student experience. I want to be transparent and say that I will be audio recording this interview, for data analysis purposes. I assure you that this will not be shared outside of this interview, and will only be used for this research project. Do you have any questions before I get started? (Inform interviewee of logistics: bathroom, water fountain, etc. locations)

1) Did you know someone currently attending this institution, before you transferred here?
    a. Who were they? Type of relationship?
    b. If no: What brought you to this institution?
2) Before you transferred to our campus, what were you studying?
    a. Was it a 2-year or a 4-year campus? Why did you choose XXXX campus to study XXXX?
    b. When you transferred, what did you bring with you in terms of degrees or transfer credits?
    c. What major(s)/minor(s) are you choosing to study here at this institution?
3) What made you choose to complete your degree at our campus?
    a. Was there a defining moment that played a role in your decision to enroll?
4) How long have you been on our campus?
    a. Being here for XXXX, what are some difference you have experienced between your previous college and this institution?
    b. Has any of those differences impacted your experience here at UMC?
5) I am interested to hear if you found that your relationships with friends, family, or anyone else has changed since you have attended this institution?
    a. Who is your relationship with, and what is the nature of this relationship?
6) Being a student here at UMC, are there any relationships that you have formed while enrolled that has impacted you?
    a. How have they impacted you? Was there an event or individual who assisted in the formation of the relationships? How did these relationships you mention come to be?
    b. Have these relationships impacted your decision to stay at UMC?
7) Tell me about your transition to UMC, Did you feel welcomed, coming from XXXX to here?
    a. How about now in the present time, has that feeling changed? How so?
8) I would like to know about your academic program, can you describe the connections you have within your major department?

a. Describe the nature of these relationships, have they impacted your connection to student life here at our college?
b. Tell me about your interactions outside of academics, can you describe relationships and connections you have made?

9) I wonder if you can describe to me what you think it takes to fully identify as and feel like a Golden Eagle.
    a. Can you tell me about your personal experience with identifying as a Golden Eagle?
10) Since you have transferred from one institution to another, tell me about your overall thoughts of the impact of relationships in choosing, attending, and staying at an institution?

Thank you so much for taking time out of your day, and more importantly for opening up and sharing your own experiences, thoughts, and stories with me today. I want to reassure you that this recording will not be reviewed by anyone, other than myself the researcher, for data analysis purposes. Do you have any questions at all for me? Thank you so much!

Project: Influences of Social Relationships on the Transfer Student Experience

Interviewer: Brooke Novak

Purpose of the study: To identify the influence that social relationships have on current students who have transferred experience that shape the students' identity at a four-year institution.

The individuals and sources of data being collected: Interviewing transfer students regarding their experiences post-transfer or after they have attending a former institution of higher education, and then become a student at the four-year institution.

What will be done with the data to protect the confidentiality of the interviewee: Data will be collected and recorded via audio recorder. Original data collected will only be viewed/heard by the researcher. Names will be changed to protect identities of participants.

How long the interview will take: 90 minutes or less

Questions: (see above)

Thank you for your cooperation and participation in the interview and in this study!

Appendix III

Any pertinent additional analysis if applicable