

Summer 8-2018

Pennsylvania Community College Students Interested in Earning Baccalaureate Degrees: A Qualitative Analysis of Their Decision-Making Experiences

Annete Fetterolf

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Fetterolf, Annete, "Pennsylvania Community College Students Interested in Earning Baccalaureate Degrees: A Qualitative Analysis of Their Decision-Making Experiences" (2018). *Theses and Dissertations (All)*. 1650.
<https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/etd/1650>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Knowledge Repository @ IUP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations (All) by an authorized administrator of Knowledge Repository @ IUP. For more information, please contact cclouser@iup.edu, sara.parme@iup.edu.

PENNSYLVANIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS
INTERESTED IN EARNING BACCALAUREATE DEGREES:
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THEIR DECISION-MAKING EXPERIENCES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Annette M. Fetterolf

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

August 2018

© 2018 Annette M. Fetterolf

All Rights Reserved

Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of Professional Studies in Education

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Annette M. Fetterolf

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Education

March 26, 2018

signature on file

David M. Piper, D.Ed.
Professor of Employment and
Labor Relations, Advisor

March 26, 2018

signature on file

Kelli Jo Kerry-Moran, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Professional
Studies in Education

March 26, 2018

signature on file

Kelli R. Paquette, Ed.D.
Professor of Professional Studies
in Education

ACCEPTED

Randy L. Martin, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: Pennsylvania Community College Students Interested in Earning Baccalaureate Degrees: A Qualitative Analysis of Their Decision-Making Experiences

Author: Annette M. Fetterolf

Dissertation Chair: Dr. David M. Piper

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Kelli Jo Kerry-Moran
Dr. Kelli R. Paquette

This qualitative narrative research study explores the reasons that undergraduate transfer students make college and career planning decisions. The insights of community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a university were compared with the perspectives of university students enrolled in a bachelor's degree program who had successfully transferred from a community college. The student input was analyzed to determine if there were differences in their decision-making experiences. Sixteen undergraduate students enrolled at higher education institutions in Pennsylvania responded to open-ended questions related to choosing a college and degree major, navigating the transfer admissions process, and participating in extracurricular activities. The participants provided viewpoints for ways in which they engaged with academic advising and transfer student support services and the influences that motivated their decisions. The qualitative data analysis resulted in nine emergent themes related to community college transfer student decision-making. The study concludes with a discussion and recommendations for further investigation. Understanding the student decision-making experiences of community college transfer students provides fellow-students, parents, education leaders, and policymakers with insights to support student success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Completion of the dissertation would not have been possible without the support of several colleagues, friends, and family members. First, I would like to thank Dr. Fred Welch, Professor Emeritus at The Pennsylvania State University, who planted the seed for me to obtain a higher career credential. Thirty years later that seed has finally germinated!

I would like to recognize the following colleagues who inspired me to reach for the stars including Mr. Jeff Adams, Ms. B.J. Arkans, Dr. Chelsea Cameron, Dr. Wes Donahue, Dr. Edgar Farmer, Dr. Pat Gerity, Ms. Daryle Gracey, Ms. Nicole Hurlbutt, Ms. Jean Marie Jacob, Dr. Dongsheng Jiang, Ms. Carri Joyce, Ms. Mary Kay Justice, Ms. Jen Krempa, Ms. Stefanie Lucas, Dr. Rose Piccioni, Dr. Karen Pollack, Dr. Daad Rizk, Ms. Angela Rodgers, Mr. Jeff Warner, Dr. Heidi Watson-Held, and Ms. Sarah Zifp.

Next, I would like to give a shout-out to my colleagues in the higher education administration and leadership studies doctoral cohort who provided collegiality, humor, and new insights during our weekend classes together, including Dr. Bobby Anderson, Dr. Adam Annaccone, Dr. Simeon Ananou, Dr. Sean Bridgen, Dr. Dennis Frketich, Dr. Sondra Dennison, Dr. Jackie Durst, Dr. Valerie Hayes, Dr. Theresa Horner, Dr. Jeff Raykes, Dr. Joe Rosenberg, and Dr. Susan Sitter. It was a pleasure to work with a diverse group of dedicated leaders who represent a broad spectrum of professions in higher education.

I especially appreciate my family members for their continuous love and support, including my husband, Mr. Todd Fetterolf, and our daughter, Ms. Linzy Fetterolf, for the many sacrifices that they made when I was traveling to campus,

completing assignments, and conducting research. Additionally, I would like to thank my parents, Mr. Wayne Arthur and Mrs. Virginia Arthur, for inspiring me to finish the dissertation despite the many challenges of balancing school, work, and family.

Another group I'd like to acknowledge includes the community college and university administrators who assisted me with recruiting students to participate in this study. Special thanks to Dr. Bill Curley, Dr. Kathleen Doherty, Mr. Robert Lagnese, Dr. Genita Mangum, Dr. Patty McCarthy, Dr. Ted Nichols, Ms. Mindy Nitch, Ms. Lori Roles, Ms. LaShana Stokes, Ms. Lindsay Swiss, and Mr. Ron Uroda. I appreciate their guidance as I navigated the complex approval process for gaining access to college students who met my research criteria.

Finally, I would like to recognize the faculty members at Indiana University of Pennsylvania who helped me to focus on my personal leadership strengths and pursue a research project that I was passionate about, including Dr. Cathy Kaufman, Dr. DeAnna Laverick, Dr. Robert Millward, and Dr. Jennifer Rotigel. I especially appreciate the guidance and enthusiasm of my committee members, Dr. Kelli Jo Kerry-Moran, Dr. Kelli Paquette, and Dr. David Piper. The professional knowledge and insights that I have gained from these individuals will continue to serve me throughout my career. I'm grateful to be surrounded by such a large village of supporters!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
1	INTRODUCTION	1
	Background	2
	Statement of the Problem	5
	Purpose of the Study	7
	Theoretical Framework	8
	Significance of the Study	10
	Research Design	11
	Research Questions and Anticipated Observations	12
	Limitations	14
	Definitions of Terms	15
	Expected Findings	18
	Organization of the Study	19
	Summary	20
2	REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE	22
	Theoretical Orientation	22
	College Admissions Process	23
	Types of College Transfer.....	25
	Dual Admission	25
	Lateral Transfer.....	26
	Reverse Transfer	26
	Swirling Pattern	27
	Vertical Transfer	28
	Community College Advantages.....	29
	College Transfer Trends.....	33
	Transfer and Articulation Agreements.....	34
	Transfer Student Challenges	37
	Institutional Challenges.....	40
	Transfer Student Support Services	42
	Synthesis of Research Findings.....	44
	Critique of Previous Research	47
	Summary	50
3	METHODOLOGY	52
	Purpose of the Study	52
	Research Questions and Anticipated Observations	53
	Research Design	55
	Target Population and Participant Selection	58

Chapter	Page
	Research Setting 60
	Research Materials..... 60
	Research Procedures 63
	Data Analysis 65
	Summary 67
4	DATA ANALYSIS AND OBSERVATIONS 68
	Sample of Interview Participants..... 68
	Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis..... 72
	Presentation of the Data 75
	Addressing Research Question #1:
	Decision-Making Experiences 76
	Research question #1 decision-making
	experiences: Interview question #1 77
	Research question #1 decision-making
	experiences: Interview question #2..... 80
	Research question #1 decision-making
	experiences: Interview question #3..... 84
	Research question #1 decision-making
	experiences: Interview question #11 88
	Research question #1 decision-making
	experiences: Summary of the observations 91
	Research question #1 decision-making
	experiences: Emergent theme #1 family
	support system..... 93
	Research question #1 decision-making
	experiences: Emergent theme #2 career
	opportunities 94
	Research question #1 decision-making
	experiences: Emergent theme #3 low
	cost of tuition 94
	Research question #1 decision-making
	experiences: Emergent theme #4 acceptance
	rate of transfer credits 95
	Addressing Research Question #2: Differences in
	Student Engagement and Participation Decisions..... 95
	Research question #2 decision-making
	experiences: Interview question #7 96
	Research question #2 differences in student
	engagement and participation decisions:
	Interview question #8 100

Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Interview question #9	103
Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Interview question #10	105
Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Interview questions #1, #2, #3, #7, and #11	108
Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Summary of the observations.....	109
Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Emergent theme #5 need for information.....	115
Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Emergent theme #6 convenience for students	115
Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Emergent theme #7 regrets and frustrations	116
Addressing Research Question #3: How Resources Influence Decisions.....	116
Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Interview question #4	117
Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Interview question #5	120
Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Interview question #6	123
Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Interview questions #8, #9, #10, and #11	127
Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Summary of the observations	129
Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Emergent theme #8 academic advisors	133
Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Emergent theme #9 interest in a career field	133
Summary	134

Chapter		Page
5	DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	137
	Discussion	138
	Research Question #1 Discussion: Decision-Making Experiences	139
	Research Question #2 Discussion: Differences in Student Engagement and Participation Decisions	142
	Research Question #3 Discussion: How Resources Influence Decisions.....	144
	Conclusions	147
	Research Question #1 Conclusions: Decision-Making Experiences	147
	Research Question #2 Conclusions: Differences in Student Engagement and Participation Decisions	152
	Research Question #3 Conclusions: How Resources Influence Decisions	156
	Recommendations	158
	Future Research.....	164
	Final Thoughts	166
	REFERENCES.....	168
	APPENDICES.....	188
	Appendix A - Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center: Baccalaureate Degree Programs with Statewide Articulation Agreements.....	188
	Appendix B - Informed Consent Letter	189
	Appendix C - Participant Recruitment Email.....	191
	Appendix D - Interview Participant Debrief	192
	Appendix E - Pre-Screening Participant Recruitment Survey: Community College Students Interested in a Bachelor’s Degree but not Planning to Transfer to a University	193

Chapter	Page
Appendix F - Pre-Screening Participant Recruitment Survey: Community College Students Who Transferred to a University and are Enrolled in a Bachelor's Degree Program	197
Appendix G - Interview Codes and Their Frequencies.....	201

LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
1	Pre-Screening Survey Responses.....	69
2	Community College Student Subsets.....	70
3	University Transfer Student Subsets.....	72
4	Data Categories and Their Frequencies.....	74
5	Research Questions and the Corresponding Emergent Themes.....	75
6	Research Questions and the Related Interview Questions.....	76
7	Interview Question #1 and Participant Responses.....	78
8	Interview Question #2 and Participant Responses.....	82
9	Interview Question #3 and Participant Responses.....	85
10	Interview Question #11 and Participant Responses.....	89
11	Interview Question #7 and Participant Responses.....	98
12	Interview Question #8 and Participant Responses.....	101
13	Interview Question #9 and Participant Responses.....	104
14	Interview Question #10 and Participant Responses.....	106
15	Interview Question #4 and Participant Responses.....	118
16	Interview Question #5 and Participant Responses.....	121
17	Interview Question #6 and Participant Responses.....	124
18	Interview Codes and Their Frequencies.....	201

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Carina was employed full-time and attending community college part-time when she decided to move to another city, transfer to a university before earning an associate degree, and become a full-time student (University of California, Berkeley, 2008).

Carina found the transfer admissions forms and financial aid application to be daunting and was disappointed to learn that she needed to wait a full semester before beginning classes at the university where she was accepted (University of California, Berkeley, 2008). When classes finally began at the baccalaureate institution, Carina was very nervous making new friends and surprised by the increased workload of weekly reading and daily homework assignments. She ultimately overcame these obstacles and completed a bachelor's degree (University of California, Berkeley, 2008).

Vincent began his postsecondary career at a community college and transferred to a four-year institution prior to earning an associate degree (Lorenzo, 2011b). Some math and computer science courses did not transfer from the community college to the university when he selected a baccalaureate degree major in information technology. Additionally, he had to repeat computer programming and opted to retake some foundational math courses (Lorenzo, 2011b). With a postsecondary academic journey spanning five years, mounting student loan debt, and still eighteen months away from completing the bachelor's degree program, Vincent dropped out of the university to work part-time at a grocery store while he looks for a better job. He plans to return to the community college and earn an associate degree, and possibly someday return to the university to complete a bachelor's degree (Lorenzo, 2011b).

These examples of transfer student challenges illustrate only a few of the common barriers faced by community college students who seek a bachelor's degree. It is common for community college transfer students to encounter enrollment delays, changing expectations, ineffective articulation agreements, lack of course transfer, escalating student loan debt, and leaving college without earning a credential (Mullin, 2012; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Townsend, 2008). Community college students often study at their own pace by enrolling part-time, or drop out to accommodate life situations and return when they are able (Smith, 2010). In addition to these obstacles, transfer students face numerous decisions including where to attend college, how to pay for their postsecondary education, where to live, and what major to choose (Handel & Williams, 2012; Townsend, 2008).

Background

According to Sterling (2001), Joliet Junior College was founded in 1901 and is “the oldest public community college in the United States” (p. 6). While social, political, and economic factors influenced the development of two-year colleges offering associate degrees, initial growth was slow, with only 14 public and 32 private junior colleges established by 1914 (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). During this time, most two-year colleges focused on preparation for upper-division coursework by offering liberal arts courses that could transfer to universities (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

In the 1930s, high unemployment and the addition of vocational education and guidance functions at junior colleges led to rapid enrollment growth from 56,000 to 150,000 nationwide (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Enrollments continued to expand in the 1940s when 2.2 million veterans attended college using educational benefits they

received from the federal government GI Bill of Rights following World War II (Vaughan, 2000). During this same period, junior colleges began to be referred to as community colleges. This distinction resulted from the low tuition rates, comprehensive curriculum, and local cultural centers that were provided by the community colleges (Vaughan, 2000).

In the 1960s, more community colleges were built nationwide, and enrollment surged as the post-World War II baby-boom generation went to college (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Enrollment continued to grow rapidly from 1.6 million students in the 1970s to more than 4.5 million in 1980 (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Despite the rapid growth, the focus on preparation for upper-division coursework at universities declined as community colleges placed more emphasis on vocational education and terminal associate degrees (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Today, nearly half of all undergraduate students choose to begin their higher education journey at a community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). Thirteen million (46%) of all undergraduates in the United States enroll in over 1,160 American community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016; Bundy, 2014; Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). Enrolling at a community college provides some advantages including open admissions policies, smaller class sizes, and lower tuition rates (Handel & Montoya, 2012). At the same time when community colleges have emerged as centers for educational opportunity in recent years, their original goal for increasing access to the bachelor's degree has been reestablished as the primary focus of these two-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Handel & Montoya, 2012). Community colleges strive to provide both a gateway

and a pathway to a baccalaureate degree by creating a seamless system of higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Handel, 2013; Kolesnikova, 2009a; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Phillippe & Patton, 1999; Taylor & Jain, 2017).

The baccalaureate degree serves as an entry-point to the workforce for a majority of professions and leadership positions (Carnevale, Cheah, & Hanson, 2015; Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016). Increasing community college transfer to four-year institutions is essential for preparing a competitive workforce, sustaining local and national economies, and maintaining active communities with engaged citizens (Carnevale, Cheah, & Hanson, 2015; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Handel & Williams, 2012; Vaughan, 2006; Wellman, 2002).

In Pennsylvania, legislators, higher education leaders, and college faculty members have been collaborating to improve the 2-year to 4-year college transfer process during the past decade. Improvements include mandated articulation agreements between community colleges and state system of higher education universities, the establishment of a common 30-credit transfer framework, and the introduction of an informational website that promotes transfer from 2- to 4-year institutions (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2017; Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center, 2010). Although Pennsylvania undergraduate students now have these resources, the state is still lacking college transfer best practices that are offered in many other states. For instance, most states offer a statewide associate degree that is guaranteed to transfer to a bachelor's degree, half of all states have established common course numbering systems for general education courses, and many states offer credit by assessment for transfer students (Education Commission of the States, 2014).

Despite many efforts to simplify the process of college transfer from two-year to four-year institutions during the past forty years, limited progress has been made to address issues related to academic portability as a comprehensive transfer system (Handel & Williams, 2012; Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, & Mazzeo, 2016; Roach, 2009; Smith, 2010; Vaughan, 2006). Both students and higher education institutions still face a myriad of challenges related to the transfer process (Handel & Williams, 2012; Hodara et al., 2016; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Townsend, 2008). For example, students may experience limited ability to transfer credits earned at the community college into the desired baccalaureate degree major, waiting periods to enroll in bachelor's degree majors, and limited financial aid options (Handel, 2013; Townsend, 2008). Not surprisingly, colleges and universities also face barriers related to transfer. For instance, obstacles facing higher education institutions may include failure of students to engage in transfer support services, lack of administrative support for transfer initiatives, and the labor-intensive process of evaluating transfer student applications (Sternberg, 2010; Swann & Henderson, 1998).

When students are facing numerous obstacles and fail to engage in transfer support services, they often make decisions that lead to negative consequences (Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Mullin, 2012; Owens, 2007; Townsend, 2008). Making poor choices may cause students to have incomplete course prerequisites, increased student loan debt, and higher college drop out rates (Mullin, 2012).

Statement of the Problem

Between 50-80% of students enrolled in two-year higher education institutions express interest in completing a bachelor's degree (American Association of

Community Colleges, 2015; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Only about 23% of community college students transfer to four-year institutions (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Much of the prior research has focused on college student enrollment patterns, transfer student support services, student persistence, and policies that encourage transfer (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Townsend, 2008). Limited previous research exists that explains the reasons that students who express interest in seeking a bachelor's degree make the decisions they do during their college journeys (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Townsend, 2008).

Prior research has illustrated obstacles students face when transitioning from a community college to a four-year institution, and the outcomes of the decisions that students make throughout the transition from 2-year to 4-year institutions. However, the reasons that community college transfer students make the decisions they do on their pathway toward earning a baccalaureate degree are not known (Taylor & Jain, 2017). Furthermore, it is unclear why the majority of students expressing interest in completing a bachelor's degree ultimately choose not to enroll at a university. A review of the literature revealed the educational pathways that students are following based on prior research related to transfer enrollment patterns, obstacles transfer students face, and transfer student graduation rates, but the reasons that transfer students make the decisions they do remains mostly unknown (Taylor & Jain, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the decision-making experiences of community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree. The perspectives of two subgroups of undergraduate students were gathered and analyzed. One subgroup included community college students who were enrolled in an associate degree program and expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a baccalaureate institution. The second subgroup included university students who were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program and had successfully transitioned from a community college. Previous studies illustrated *what* pathways students followed on their journeys to earning a college degree, but few describe *why* students make the decisions they do (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Townsend, 2008).

Analyzing the student decision-making process provides a means for higher education leaders and policymakers to understand the dynamic transfer landscape from the community college student perspective. The study includes the viewpoints of both students who have successfully transferred to a bachelor's degree program and those who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a baccalaureate institution. Increased knowledge of the student accounts helps higher education leaders and policymakers to understand obstacles and develop solutions to support transfer student success. Additionally, the findings of this study provide parents and students with decision-making best practices from students who have successfully managed the transition from community college toward earning a bachelor's degree.

Increased comprehension of the community college transfer student decision-making process also helps students, parents, higher education leaders, and policymakers to reduce the obstacles facing transfer students on their pathway toward earning a baccalaureate degree.

Theoretical Framework

Prior research illustrates that community college transfer students may face multiple challenges during their transition to a four-year institution (Dougherty & Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Hodara et al., 2016; Townsend, 2007). Schlossberg's Transition Theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the critical aspects that adults experience during anticipated and unanticipated life transitions (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Lazarowicz, 2015; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). The theory and its application to the transfer student change process served as the theoretical framework for this study. The transition theory includes three steps that people complete as they experience a change (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 2012). The three steps are described below and include approaching transitions, taking stock of coping resources, and taking charge of change (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 2012).

The first step in the theoretical framework, *approaching transitions*, involves identifying the evolution and how much it will change a person's life, as well as where the individual is in the transition process (Lazarowicz, 2015; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 2012). For community college students who are planning to transfer to a

four-year institution, this step might involve exploration of universities, bachelor degree options, financial aid sources, housing options, and the transfer application process.

The second step in Schlossberg's theory, *taking stock of coping resources*, examines features common to all transitions. Coping with a transition may be especially difficult if a person is experiencing stress during a time of change. According to Brown (2014), "If a situation is balanced, and the person is free from additional anxiety, the individual is likely to better adapt to the transition" (p. 45). When advising transfer students, it is less important to know a person's age than it is to understand how they handle stress and whether they are caring for dependents, were recently divorced, or are facing other life stresses (Fiske & Chiriboga, 1990).

The third step in the theoretical framework, *taking charge of change*, involves strengthening resources. The ratio of means to liabilities, depending on how they are viewed by the person, explains "why individuals react differently to the same type of transition and why the same person reacts differently at different times" (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995, p. 57). When resources outweigh deficits, adaptation to change may be relatively easy. When deficiencies exceed resources, the adjustment may be particularly difficult (Lazarowicz, 2015; Schlossberg, 1981). According to Archambault (2010), for a successful transition "transfer students need to come to grips with leaving the comfort of the community college, and ensure that they are well-informed about what lies ahead" (p. 41). For transfer students, this step might include accepting a new set of guidelines, forming a new routine, and adjusting to new systems such as registration, bill payment, parking, and schedules (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012).

Significance of the Study

The social equity and access to higher education that community colleges provide position them as a critical factor for increasing bachelor's degree completion in the nation (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2005). Prior research has focused on what community college transfer students do when provided with support services and policies that encourage transfer (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Townsend, 2008). However, limited input has been provided from the perspective of community college transfer students to examine the reasons that they make the decisions they do on their pathway toward earning a bachelor's degree. A better understanding of the decision-making process of community college students who expressed an interest in seeking a bachelor's degree provides personal accounts into the factors and influences that lead to student choices about their postsecondary education and career goals.

The findings of this study provide personal perspectives of actual students for fellow community college students and their parents to make informed decisions on the pathway toward earning a bachelor's degree from the perspective of students who are actively completing this journey. Furthermore, the results can help academic leaders, faculty members, and policymakers to improve services for students who plan to transition from community colleges to four-year institutions. Finally, personal accounts related to the community college transfer student experience add to the existing body of literature. The research results provide individual perspectives into the experiences of community college students who are planning to complete a bachelor's degree, including the students who decide to enter the workforce with only an associate degree

despite expressing interest in completing a baccalaureate degree. It is essential to understand the unique needs of this growing population of undergraduate students.

Research Design

A narrative inquiry qualitative research design was selected as the best possible approach to gain personal perspectives of the student decision-making experience from the students themselves. The qualitative narrative research design uses open-ended interview questions to gather participant perspectives through individual stories (Creswell, 2012; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were conducted with two undergraduate student subgroups to collect the narrative data. One subgroup included community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a baccalaureate institution. The other subgroup consisted of university students enrolled in a bachelor's degree program who transferred from a community college.

Data gathered from the participants in the two subgroups provided the student perspective regarding decisions they made related to choosing a degree major, making career plans, using resources to inform their decisions, and engaging in extracurricular activities at the higher education institution where they were enrolled. The data were analyzed to identify any differences that might exist between the two subgroups. The analysis provides personal accounts of current undergraduate students related to their decision-making experiences. The emergent themes and observations from the data analysis explain the motives that influence community college transfer student decisions.

Research Questions and Anticipated Observations

Community college transfer students often face multiple challenges during their transition to a four-year institution (Handel, 2013; Handel & Williams, 2012; Juskiewicz, 2014; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Vaughan, 2006). Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1984) and its application to the transfer student change process served as the theoretical framework for this study. The study focused on differences in the decision-making process of community college students who were enrolled in an associate degree program and expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a baccalaureate institution when compared with university students who successfully transitioned to enrollment in a bachelor's degree program from a community college. The research questions included:

1. Why do undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree decide to transfer or not transfer to a bachelor's degree program at a university?
2. What are the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who transferred to a bachelor's degree program at a university when compared to those who did not transfer to a bachelor's degree program?
3. How do resources and student support services influence college transfer and career planning decisions for undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree or who have transferred to a bachelor's degree from a community college?

For this study, it was anticipated that the decision-making experience of community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree might vary widely. Variations in decision-making may result from individual student motivations, external influences, resources used to support college transfer decisions, and engagement in college extracurricular activities. The investment in support services for community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree resulted in better student grade point averages and improved graduation rates (Kezar, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). It was anticipated that a wide variety of reasons might be provided from the participants regarding why they make the choices they do when planning for college and their careers.

When examining the differences between students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who transfer to a bachelor's degree major at a university when compared to those who choose to complete only an associate degree, it was expected that some variation might exist between the two groups. It was anticipated that the students in the subgroup who successfully transitioned from the community college to a bachelor's degree were more likely to participate in student information sessions, career planning events, and extracurricular activities.

For this study, it was anticipated that students who successfully transferred from a community college to a baccalaureate institution might be more engaged with faculty, academic advisors, and the transfer information programs when compared with those who expressed interest in transfer but chose to complete only an associate degree. It was predicted that students who had transferred to a bachelor's degree program would be more engaged with higher education resources and student support services.

Furthermore, it was anticipated that students deciding to earn only an associate degree might be more informed by friends and family members and less involved in college clubs and activities.

The expected observations described above were based on findings in the review of the literature completed for this study that illustrate the importance of student support services. Prior research demonstrates that transfer student information sessions, articulation agreements, academic advising, and engagement in extracurricular activities lead to transfer student success (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Juskiewicz, 2014; Lewis, 2013).

Limitations

This qualitative research study is subject to some limitations. First, the study was confined to the input of community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree. The limited target audience size helped to understand the research questions but may not represent the larger population of 50-80% of community college students who expressed interest in enrolling at a baccalaureate institution (Creswell, 2012; Jenkins & Fink, 2016).

Next, since the participants chose to join the study, the data collected may not capture all perceptions of the community college students who did not volunteer for the study. The students who participated may have been more invested in higher education or more interested in the research findings. For this reason, the observations cannot be generalized to a larger population.

Finally, the participants reported on occurrences and decision-making processes of a personal nature that were limited to their background and experiences. The

participant responses to open-ended questions are subject to individual opinions and bias. Therefore, the qualitative data and analysis provided observations of the participants and their decision-making experiences, rather than results (Creswell, 2012).

Definitions of Terms

Articulation agreement: A legal document, institutional policy, or other structure that is implemented when higher education institutions form a partnership to provide a formalized pathway to encourage, facilitate, and monitor college student transfer.

Articulation agreements, also known as transfer agreements, allow for the transfer of academic credits from one higher education institution to another (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Ignash & Townsend, 2000).

Associate degree: A postsecondary award in the United States that typically takes two years and requires 60 academic credits to complete for students who are enrolled full-time. The associate degree is also known as a 2-year degree program. In some states, an associate degree fulfills the general education requirements toward a bachelor's degree program (U. S. Department of Education, International Affairs Office, 2008a).

Baccalaureate institution: Higher education institution in which baccalaureate or higher degrees represent at least 50% of all degrees, but where fewer than 50 master's degrees or 20 doctoral degrees are awarded annually. Baccalaureate institutions are also known as 4-year colleges or universities (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2016).

Bachelor's degree: A postsecondary award in the United States that typically takes four years, and sometimes five years, and 120 academic credits to complete for students who are enrolled full-time. Also known as a 4-year or baccalaureate degree program,

bachelor's degrees may be awarded in academic or professional fields of study (U. S. Department of Education, International Affairs Office, 2008b).

College admission: The process of applying for entrance to undergraduate study at institutions of higher education offering associate and bachelor's degrees (Mamlet & VanDeVelde, 2011).

College transfer: The transition process that occurs when a student leaves one higher education institution and goes to a different higher education institution. College transfer is experienced by about one-third of students who begin their college career at either a two- or four-year institution (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2010).

Community college: An American two-year postsecondary public or private school that is regionally accredited to award the associate of arts or associate in science as its highest degree, and provides a pathway toward earning a bachelor's degree. Community colleges are also known as junior colleges and 2-year institutions (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013; U. S. Department of Education, 2015).

Community college student: For this study, an undergraduate student enrolled in an associate degree program at one of the fourteen community colleges in Pennsylvania.

Financial aid: The funding support available to students to assist with the cost of college tuition, materials, and living expenses. Forms of assistance may include grants, scholarships, loans, and personal gifts. Need-based aid is awarded to students based their financial need while merit-based aid is awarded to top academic performers and students with unique talents (Kantrowitz, 2009).

First-generation student: Undergraduate students who are the first member of their family to attend college and often have limited knowledge or family support to make informed decisions about college (Handel, 2017). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2016), thirty-six percent of the students enrolling in community college are first-generation students.

Higher education institution: For this study, a school that is authorized by the state and accredited by a nationally recognized agency to offer postsecondary degree programs in the United States (U. S. Department of Education, 1998).

Native student: For this study, native students have not previously attended college in a degree program at a postsecondary school (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Ishitani, 2008).

Qualitative research: A form of inquiry in which researchers interact directly with people being studied by examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants. Qualitative research often involves inductive analysis to identify patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up (Creswell, 2012).

Student support services: The system of support for college and university students that provides tutoring, mentoring, advising, career placement, and other services that are designed to improve retention and graduation rates (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Transfer shock: A phenomenon that results in a lower grade point average for transfer students who experience academic and social integration difficulties during the first or second semester at a new higher education institution (Hills, 1965; Laanan, 2001; Nolan & Hall, 1978; Townsend, 2008).

Transfer student: For this study, transfer students include undergraduate postsecondary students earning credit at one higher education institution and applying it to another institution (Townsend, 2008). In this study, the transfer student population will be limited to students who have earned at least 30 academic credits.

Undergraduate student: A person who has completed high school and is enrolled in an associate or bachelor's degree program at a college or university in the United States (U. S. Department of State, Education USA, 2017). In this study, the population will be limited to undergraduate students who are earning their first college degree.

Underprepared Student: A student entering college who is functioning below the expected entry-level performance range in math, reading, or writing. Underprepared students are typically required to complete pre-college coursework in their areas of deficiency before taking college-level courses (Kallison & Stader, 2012).

Expected Findings

The sample population for this study included undergraduate students in two distinct subgroups. One subgroup consisted of community college students enrolled in an associate degree program who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a baccalaureate institution. The second subgroup included university students enrolled in a bachelor's degree program who transferred from a community college.

It was anticipated that the decision-making experiences of the individual students would vary widely based on how undergraduates choose to receive information, whether they engage in student support services, and whether they participate in extracurricular activities. For this study, it was predicted that student

decision-making would be influenced by a variety of sources including friends, family members, parents, faculty members, academic advisors, career planning information sessions, and websites to name a few.

It was expected that university students enrolled in a bachelor's degree program who transferred from a community college would take a more formal approach to planning their education and careers by meeting with advisors, attending information sessions, and engaging in clubs and activities. On the other hand, it was anticipated that undergraduates who chose to complete only an associate degree would take a more casual approach to planning their education and careers by taking the advice of friends and parents and being less engaged in student support services and college activities.

Organization of the Study

The study included qualitative, narrative research that focused on the reasons that community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree make their decisions on the pathway toward earning a college degree. Purposeful sampling was used to identify sixteen participants who were interviewed for the study. The purposeful sampling technique provides a means for selecting participants that can help to understand the research questions but is not intended to represent the broader population (Creswell, 2012; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006).

Data were gathered using open-ended interview questions with undergraduate students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree. Upon receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, volunteer participants who met the criteria to be included in the study sample were solicited from participating community colleges and universities in Pennsylvania. A consistent interview procedure was followed with

each volunteer participant to reduce bias and increase the credibility of the study. The interview conversations were recorded to ensure for accurate transcription of the student data, and participants were invited review and comment on the interview transcripts to validate their responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The study was organized into five chapters. This chapter provides an overview of the challenges facing community college transfer students, the focus of prior literature, the theoretical framework, the research questions for the study, and the anticipated findings. Chapter 2 presents the literature related to community college advantages, college transfer trends, articulation agreements, and transfer student support services. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology that was used for the study including the research design, participant selection, data collection instruments, and study procedures.

Chapter 4 discusses the interview participant responses for the three research questions, data analysis, and emergent themes. Finally, Chapter 5 presents the observations and conclusions for the three research questions along with recommendations based on the data analysis.

Summary

Between 50-80% of students enrolled at two-year institutions express interest in completing a bachelor's degree, but only about 23% of community college students transfer to four-year institutions (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Limited prior research focuses on how students make decisions related to bachelor's degree attainment, college transfer preparation, and career planning from the student perspective (Adelman, 2006; Piland, 1995; Smith, 2010;

Townsend, 2001). “People who begin in community college, often with the intent of saving time and money, frequently find that the transfer track takes longer and costs more than if they had just begun at a four-year institution” (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, June 2010, p. v).

This study focused on the decision-making experiences of community college students who expressed interest in earning a bachelor’s degree. Analyzing the community college student decision-making process provides a means for students and their parents to make better-informed decisions based on personal accounts from the students themselves. Additionally, the results help higher education leaders and policymakers to understand the evolving transfer landscape and ultimately improve student support services. Support programs and policies aimed at boosting transfer student success are essential for meeting the increased workforce demand for bachelor’s degrees (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Gulish, 2016; Laanan, 2001; Roach, 2009).

Chapter 2 includes the highlights of existing literature that informed the qualitative study. The review of relevant literature consists of community college advantages, college transfer challenges, transfer and articulation agreements, and transfer student support services.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This review of the literature examines the college admissions process, types of college transfer, community college advantages, and college transfer challenges. Additionally, it describes prior research related to transfer and articulation agreements and transfer student support services. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of findings and critique of previous research.

Theoretical Orientation

Whether viewed as a period of crisis or merely a developmental adjustment, college student transfer presents an opportunity for growth and transformation (Bridges, 1980; Hudson, 1991; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Lazarowicz, 2015; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 2012) provides an integrative model for understanding the critical aspects that adults experience during anticipated and unanticipated life transitions. The application of this theory to the transfer student change process will serve as the theoretical framework for this study.

According to Schlossberg (1981, 1984), individuals facing significant life changes will experience three phases of adjustment. First, *approaching transitions* involves identifying an event or nonevent that will result in different expectations, roles, relationships, and routines (Schlossberg, Waters, Goodman, 2012). The second phase of the theoretical framework includes *taking stock of coping resources*. During this phase, individuals identify available resources that will help them to cope with changing circumstances. Finally, the third step in Schlossberg's Transition Theory includes *taking*

charge of change by strengthening available assets and reducing liabilities. When liabilities outweigh assets, the change process may be extremely complicated (Lazarowicz, 2015; Schlossberg, 1981).

According to the theoretical framework, life changes will be viewed as events or nonevents by each person experiencing the change, depending on his or her individual perspective (Schlossberg, Waters, Goodman, 2012). For example, if a community college student transfers to a bachelor's degree program at a local university and is able to transfer all courses from an associate degree into the bachelor's degree major, enrolls at the university immediately, continues living at the same residence, and maintains the same network of friends, the student may experience the transition as a nonevent. Each student will experience the college admissions and transfer enrollment process in a way that is unique to their perspective.

College Admissions Process

The admissions process can be intimidating for undergraduate students, especially for those who are planning to enroll at selective higher education institutions or students who are planning to transfer from a community college to a baccalaureate institution. In the United States, the admissions process is somewhat unique and depends on the vision of each institution (Stewart, 1998). The admissions process tends to be more complicated at baccalaureate institutions, while it is typically more straightforward at community colleges, due to their open enrollment policies. Since transfer students are planning to attend more than one institution, they also have the daunting task of completing the admissions process more than once.

Admission to a community college typically requires only a high school transcript, application, and an application fee. For a small number of selective degree programs, some community colleges may also request minimum entrance exam scores (Sternberg, 2010). The open enrollment policy at community colleges is especially attractive to students of lower socioeconomic status, first-generation college students, returning adult learners, or those who are underprepared for college-level coursework (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016; Melguizo & Dowd, 2009; Mery & Schiorring, 2011).

On the contrary, baccalaureate institutions often struggle to balance the quantity and quality of students as they strive to admit the right number of students who will be successful in college (Swann & Henderson, 1998). Admission to a baccalaureate institution typically requires a high school transcript, application, an application fee, minimum entrance exam scores, a personal essay, interviews or auditions, and letters of recommendation (Sternberg, 2010). Transfer students applying for admission to baccalaureate institutions will also be required to submit college transcripts from the prior colleges and universities they attended.

The admissions process is sometimes unfair to students, depending on the goals of the baccalaureate institution. For example, a higher education institution that is focused on attracting geographically diverse students may accept more out-of-state students when compared to local students (Sternberg, 2010). Transfer students often face inequitable admissions policies when compared to native students. For example, transfer students who are accepted to a bachelor's degree major sometimes wait for one to two years to enroll due to lack of available capacity in required courses for the major

or difficulty scheduling courses that are only offered in specific semesters (Handel, 2011; Townsend, 2007; Vaughan, 2006).

Types of College Transfer

Student transfer from a community college to a baccalaureate institution served as the focus of this study. The transition from a 2-year to a 4-year institution is known as vertical transfer (Ignash & Townsend, 2000; Piland, 1995; Townsend, 2000). While vertical transfer is the most common type of college transfer for community college students and most supported by state articulation agreements, a review of the literature illustrates that additional transfer enrollment patterns have emerged during the past 40 years (Kearney, Townsend, & Kearney, 1995; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Townsend & Dever, 1999; West & Spaulding, 2013). Other types of college student transfer include dual admission, lateral transfer, reverse transfer, and the swirling pattern (Taylor, 2016; Taylor & Jain, 2017). A brief overview of each of these college transfer enrollment patterns is provided below.

Dual Admission

Being immersed in the social and cultural aspects of two institutions simultaneously allows for a less complicated transition to four-year institutions (Kronish, 2009). Thirteen percent of students seeking a bachelor's degree enroll concurrently at two-year colleges and baccalaureate institutions (Townsend, 2000). This dual admission model shortens the time required to complete a bachelor's degree and allows baccalaureate students to complete general education requirements at a reduced cost (Slark, 1982; Townsend, 2000). For example, students enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at a university may choose to complete some of their general education

requirements at a community college. In many cases, the dual admission approach provides students with integrated academic advising services to maximize the transfer of credits to the four-year university. Furthermore, when a dual admission agreement is in place, associate degree graduates can seamlessly transfer all credits to a four-year institution (Kronish, 2009).

Lateral Transfer

Lateral transfer, also known as horizontal transfer, occurs when students transfer between a community college and another two-year school or when students transfer between a university and another four-year institution (Boughan, 2001; West & Spaulding, 2013). Data published by the National Center for Education Statistics suggests that lateral transfer among community colleges is a growing national phenomenon (Boughan, 2001). However, lateral transfer is often limited outside of urban areas. For example, most of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania are served by only one community college and do not offer local options for associate degree students to transfer to other two-year institutions (Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center, 2017).

Reverse Transfer

Another type of enrollment pattern includes reverse transfer (Clark, 1960; Heinze & Daniels, 1970; Taylor, 2016; Winter & Harris, 1999). Students using this approach begin at a four-year institution then transfer the credits earned to a two-year college to earn an associate degree (Bautsch, 2013; Kajstura & Keim, 1992; Nutting, 2005; Townsend & Dever, 1999). Reverse transfer agreements allow community colleges to award an associate degree, even when many of the credits toward the

credential were completed at the four-year institution (Bautsch, 2013; Taylor, 2016; West & Spaulding, 2013).

Reverse transfer enrollments vary by state due to variations in state higher education policies (Winter & Harris, 1999). Winter and Harris (1999) found the national average for reverse transfer to be twelve percent. However, researchers disagree how widespread reverse transfer may be, with reported enrollments at two-year institutions ranging from three to sixty-five percent (de los Santos & Wright, 1989; Heinze & Daniels, 1970; Hogan, 1986; Hudak, 1983; Mitchell & Grafton, 1985).

Swirling Pattern

When students transition back and forth between schools, a swirling enrollment pattern emerges (de los Santos & Wright, 1990; Townsend, 2002; West & Spaulding, 2013). The swirling enrollment model has become common, particularly between two-year and four-year institutions (Adelman, 2006). Unfortunately, swirling enrollment results in complex challenges for students, including increased cost and time required to complete their degrees (Adelman, 1999). For example, it is common for community college students who transfer to bachelor's degree programs to graduate with 140 credits when only 120 credits were required to earn the baccalaureate degree. Accumulating unnecessary credits increases students costs, may require additional financial aid, and delays the time until college graduates will enter the workforce (Juszkiewicz, 2014; Juszkiewicz, 2016; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010).

Vertical Transfer

Frequently, community college students and associate degree graduates switch to baccalaureate institutions (Piland, 1995; Townsend, 2000). This prevalent type of transition for community college students is known as a vertical transfer. Students following the vertical transfer approach typically complete general education requirements at a two-year institution before enrolling in core courses toward a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution (Ignash & Townsend, 2000).

Also known as "progressive transfer" or the "two-plus-two" model, vertical transfer allows students to apply some or all of their lower-division credits toward a four-year degree (Boughan, 2001). Two-plus-two articulation agreements, which exist in most states, guarantee admission with junior standing at state universities to designated community college graduates (Bautsch, 2013). For example, Florida's statewide articulation agreement ensures that students who earn an associate of arts degree from a Florida college can transfer all sixty credits to a state university and count those credits toward a bachelor's degree (Bautsch, 2013; Florida Department of Education, 2012).

The ability to complete a baccalaureate degree while remaining at the community college campus is a relatively new vertical transfer option for a limited number of students in select degree programs. In this type of vertical transfer, the community college students complete the general education requirements and an associate degree at the community college. Once the associate degree is complete, the students enroll in the junior and senior years of the bachelor's degree with the four-year institution but remain at the community college campus to complete the baccalaureate

degree program. For example, students enrolled at Montgomery County Community College in Pennsylvania can complete select bachelor's degrees at Albright College or Temple University while remaining at the community college campus (Montgomery County Community College, 2015). Additionally, North Seattle College partnered with three universities in Washington to offer select bachelor's degrees at the community college campus (North Seattle College, 2015).

Vertical transfer to a bachelor's degree program that is offered on a community college campus by a different higher education institution appears to be an emerging phenomenon. Although transfer is taking place from one institution to another, completing a bachelor's degree at the same place allows students to remain at the campus where they initially enrolled. Vertical transfer at the same campus seems intended to reduce or eliminate *transfer shock* that may occur during the transition to a four-year institution. According to Hills (1965), transfer shock occurs when transfer student grades drop during the first semester after transfer from a community college to a four-year institution (Ishitani, 2008).

Community College Advantages

For millions of students, especially women and ethnic minorities, the pathway to a baccalaureate degree can be achieved by starting at a community college and transferring to a four-year institution (Bragg, 2007; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Townsend, 1995). Community colleges provide a pathway of choice for earning a bachelor's degree because of their open admissions policy, student-centered environment, lower tuition and fees, and social mobility. Additionally, community college provides the ability to earn an associate degree as a stepping-stone

toward completing a baccalaureate degree (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Kolesnikova, 2009b; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges, 2014; Roman, 2007).

An open admissions policy makes it simple to enroll at a community college regardless of prior academic achievement (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Kahlenberg, 2011; Kolesnikova, 2009a; Striplin, 2000). Students who are not academically prepared to enroll at a four-year institution can attend community college to prepare for upper-level courses. (Bautsch, 2013; Vaughan, 2006). Community college admission typically requires only a high school diploma or General Education Development (GED) certificate (Forest & Kinser, 2002). The open admissions policy offers a gateway to increase baccalaureate degree attainment among the first-generation college, low income, and underrepresented minority students (Kim, 2001; Melguizo & Dowd, 2009; Mery & Schiorring, 2011; University of California, 2011).

Another advantage of community college includes the student-centered environment (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013; Kolesnikova, 2009b; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010). When compared to four-year institutions, community college faculty are typically more focused on teaching, advising, and student learning (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013; Kim, 2001; Townsend, 2007). Students often enjoy smaller class sizes that provide increased interaction with faculty members and peers (Kim, 2001; Townsend, 2007).

Additionally, community colleges have more flexible class schedules which allow students to enroll in college while meeting other obligations, such as working or caring

for dependents (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013; Kolesnikova, 2009a; Vaughan, 2006).

Tuition and fees for community college are significantly lower when compared to four-year institutions (Bautsch, 2013; Kim, 2001; Kolesnikova, 2009a). Lower tuition and fees provide an affordable alternative for proving college-level aptitude, completing the first two years of a baccalaureate degree, and reducing college loan debt (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006; Lorenzo, 2011b; Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges, 2014; Townsend, 2007).

It is especially beneficial for low socioeconomic status students to begin their journey toward a baccalaureate degree at the community college. Completion of a community college credential creates social and economic equity for diverse populations that leads to higher lifetime earnings (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Roman, 2007).

Another advantage of community college includes the opportunity to complete an associate degree on the pathway toward earning a baccalaureate degree. Attainment of an associate degree allows students to receive a credential that provides motivation, recognition, and early job placement options for working students (Juszkiewicz, 2014). Additionally, completion of an associate degree can lead to four-year college graduation rates that are nearly ten percentage points higher than comparable students who transfer before earning an associate degree (Juszkiewicz, 2014). However, not all researchers agree that earning an associate degree prior to transfer to a bachelor's degree provides advantages. A recent study by Wang, Chuang, & McCready (2017) found that community college transfer students enrolling at a university will experience similar

outcomes regardless of whether they complete and associate degree prior to transfer. Outcomes examined during the research included grade point average, retention, and bachelor's degree attainment (Wang, Chuang, & McCready, 2017).

Despite the many advantages of community college and the growing popularity of vertical transfer, not all researchers agree that students who are seeking a bachelor's degree benefit from beginning college at a two-year institution. Some studies show that community college students who plan to enroll at a four-year institution are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree when compared to students who begin their postsecondary education at a four-year institution (Dougherty, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Pincus & Archer, 1989). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of research evidence from 1970 to 2000, and concluded that "students seeking a bachelor's degree who begin their college careers in a two-year public institution continue to be at a disadvantage in reaching their education goals compared with similar students entering a four-year college or university" (p. 381). Additionally, some researchers believe that the vocational focus of community college decreases transfer rates, provides disadvantages for transfer students, and reduces bachelor's degree attainment for vertical transfer students (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Long & Kurlaender, 2009).

On the other hand, some researchers found that students who transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions are prepared for the transition and graduate at the same, if not better, rate as students who begin college at baccalaureate institutions (Bautsch, 2013; Roksa, 2007). Monaghan and Attewell (2015) found no significant differences in the bachelor's degree completion rates between community college

transfer students and native university students. The ongoing debate related to the advantages of starting the journey toward a bachelor's degree at a community college warrants further investigation that is beyond the scope of this study.

College Transfer Trends

Transfer enrollment growth in recent decades has resulted in 60% of undergraduate students attending two or more higher education institutions. During the same period, the community college has become a frequent gateway toward earning a baccalaureate degree (Adelman, 2006; Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Handel, 2013; Smith, 2010; Weir, 2008; Wellman, 2002). The growth of community college transfer is due to decreasing government appropriations, increasing tuition rates at four-year institutions, and rising demand for affordable higher education. Additionally, the popularity of transfer from two-year to four-year institutions is a direct result of more strict admissions requirements at four-year institutions and better articulation agreements between institutions (Anderson, Alfonso, & Sun, 2006; Vaughan, 2006; Wellman, 2002).

According to *U.S. News and World Report* (2017), the average higher education institution accepts 400 transfer students annually. Not surprisingly, the commitment to transfer varies widely among institutions. For example, Harvard University and Princeton University do not currently admit transfer enrollments, while Arizona State University, University of Central Florida, California State University, University of North Texas, and Portland State University admit thousands of transfer students each year (Hopkins, 2011). Temple University enrolls about 2,500 transfer students annually and is the only Pennsylvania higher education institution that appears on the *U.S. News*

and World Report list of top one-hundred baccalaureate institutions that admit transfer students (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2017).

Community college transfer students who excel have similar attributes to native students who are successful at four-year institutions. Traits that lead to degree completion include rigorous high school academic preparation and continuous, full-time college enrollment (Wellman, 2002). The typical transfer student is female, twenty-six years of age, and works part-time (Wynn, 2004). A high percentage of transfer students are first-generation college students, have lower socioeconomic status, are minorities, or in some cases represent all of these categories (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016; Vaughan, 2006).

Transfer and Articulation Agreements

In 1971, Florida became the first state to adopt a statewide articulation agreement for the transfer of courses between community colleges and baccalaureate institutions. Since then, most states have authorized the transfer of a general education core curriculum through a board of regents, state legislation, or a voluntary agreement among a group of higher education institutions (Bautsch, 2013; Ignash & Townsend, 2000; Lorenzo, 2011b; Senie, 2016; Stern, 2016). Articulation agreements are designed to prevent the loss of credits when students transfer within state higher education systems (Bautsch, 2013; Roksa & Keith, 2008; Senie, 2016; Stern, 2016; West & Spaulding, 2013).

Transfer and articulation agreements provide numerous benefits. First, they make college more affordable for students by creating a consistent, statewide procedure to efficiently transfer courses between participating higher education institutions

(Ignash & Townsend, 2000; Roach, 2009; Stern, 2016). Another benefit includes the cost savings for states. When students can efficiently transfer between colleges without the loss of credits, states spend fewer tuition subsidy dollars (Bautsch, 2013; Senie, 2016).

The third benefit of transfer policies includes the creation of statewide common course numbering systems. More than thirty states have enacted common course numbering systems for freshman- and sophomore-level courses that guarantee transfer between participating institutions (Bautsch, 2013; Education Commission of the States, 2014; Florida Department of Education, 2006). At the time of this study, Pennsylvania does not have a common course numbering system (Education Commission of the States, 2014; Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center, 2010).

Another benefit includes the development of websites, known as portals, to host information about transfer pathways and statewide transfer policies. These web portals help both students and advisors to explore degree options and identify which courses articulate between community colleges and baccalaureate degree programs (Bautsch, 2013; Lorenzo, 2011b). Pennsylvania offers a comprehensive web portal to provide information for transfer students and their parents (Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center, 2010).

Just over a decade ago, Pennsylvania established statewide transfer policies. Pennsylvania Act 114 of 2006 mandates a partnership between the state's fourteen community colleges and fourteen state universities. More recently, Pennsylvania Act 50 of 2011 resulted in transfer and articulation language being added to the Public School Code of 1949. Known as the Omnibus School Code bill, it expands participation in the

existing legislation to include state-related universities (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2011). The regulation mandates that participating institutions implement a seamless course transfer system (Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center, 2010).

Through complicated efforts coordinated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, academic leaders at the participating colleges and universities have identified dozens of general education courses that are guaranteed to transfer among them (Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center, 2010). Additionally, faculty members at the participating institutions agreed to several courses that students can apply toward nearly every two- and four-year degree major (Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center, 2010). Finally, statewide articulation agreements between the thirty-three member institutions have been implemented for several baccalaureate degree programs (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2017). The bachelor's degrees included in the Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center are shown in Appendix A on page 188.

Not all researchers agree with the benefits of articulation agreements. Despite efforts by state policymakers and higher education leaders to expand transfer and articulation agreements, little evidence exists that statewide transfer mandates improve student transfer rates (Gross & Goldhaber, 2009; Handel & Williams, 2012; Ishitani, 2008; Juskiewicz 2014). Even when articulation agreements exist, students are often required to repeat courses at four-year institutions due to missing prerequisites or wait one or more semesters for admission to a baccalaureate degree major (Bautsch, 2013). Furthermore, successful transfer policies require the continuous engagement of higher education leaders and state agencies along with a commitment of resources (West &

Spaulding, 2013). The need for statewide funding provides another obstacle for state government leaders and higher education administrators.

The American Association of Community Colleges recommends the establishment of policies that guarantee credit transfer for associate degree graduates who enroll at public four-year universities (Juszkiewicz, 2014). This type of articulation agreement consists of a core curriculum for freshman- and sophomore-level courses that transfer to designated four-year institutions within the same state (Bautsch, 2013; Vaughan, 2006). Example institutions that have implemented these recommendations include Seminole State College in Florida, El Paso Community College in Texas, and the Tennessee Transfer Pathways program (Juszkiewicz, 2014). The improvement of transfer and articulation agreements is critical due to the growth of students completing general education requirements at two-year colleges and transitioning to bachelor's degree programs (Bautsch, 2013; Senie, 2016; Stern, 2016).

Transfer Student Challenges

Despite community college transfer providing a pathway toward earning a baccalaureate degree for over a century, numerous challenges negatively impact both students and higher education institutions (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Handel & Williams, 2012; Vaughan, 2006). Example barriers for students include transfer shock, credits that do not transfer to a bachelor's degree, a delay in enrollment at the four-year institution, fewer financial aid opportunities, and limited degree options (Juszkiewicz, 2014; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010). Additionally, higher education institutions experience obstacles related to transfer. These may include a lack of student engagement in transfer support services, a low priority given to college transfer

initiatives, and the complexity of processing transfer enrollments (Handel & Williams, 2012).

Transfer students often experience difficulties during the transition to a four-year institution. A lack of academic preparation, unfamiliarity with academic expectations at the four-year institution, and poor transfer policies may cause barriers for transfer students (Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010). Most transfer students identify leaving home and going to a university as one of the hardest and most dramatic changes of their lives (Vaughan, 2006). The prior education experiences of transfer students can lead to *transfer shock*, which results from a shift in policies and procedures, terminology, advising models, and culture from the community college to the four-year institution (Cejda, 1997; Cejda & Kaylor, 1997; Cejda, Kaylor, & Rewey, 1998; Grites, 2004; Ishitani, 2008; Johnson, 2005; Whitfield, 2005). Transfer shock results in transfer students earning a lower grade point average (GPA) when compared to native students at four-year institutions (Hills, 1965; Ishitani, 2008). Diaz (1992) suggested that most undergraduate transfer students recover from transfer shock and begin making academic progress about twelve months after the transition.

Another challenge for students includes credits that do not transfer to a bachelor's degree. Even when a university accepts a transfer student's courses to meet the university's general education requirements, departments within the same university often refuse to acknowledge the courses for credit toward the academic major (Smith, 2010; Vaughan, 2006). The City University of New York found that students who were able to transfer ninety percent or more of their credits were two and a half times more

likely to complete a bachelor's degree compared to students who transferred less than half of their credits (Juszkiewicz, 2014).

Another common obstacle includes tightly structured curriculums at the four-year institutions that limit windows of opportunity for transfer students to enroll (Handel, 2011). For example, students who are accepted as juniors at four-year institutions may wait for one to two years to take courses in popular majors such as business, nursing, and teacher education (Vaughan, 2006). A delay in enrollment at the four-year institution extends the time it takes to earn a degree, increases student expenses, postpones entry to the workforce, consumes federal and state financial aid dollars, and causes some students to drop out of college before completing a degree (Smith, 2010).

Fewer opportunities for financial aid and accumulation of student loan debt provide additional challenges for transfer students (Lorenzo, 2011a; Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonso, 2011). Students often enroll in multiple colleges, have courses that don't transfer, fail to graduate, then return to work with student loan debt and no degree (Archambault, Forbes, & Schlossberg, 2012; Lorenzo, 2011a). Transfer students who receive financial aid persist to bachelor's degree completion at a significantly higher rate than those without assistance (Chen & John, 2011; Radovic, 2010).

Another barrier for transfer students includes limited degree options. The community college degree major and type of associate degree impacts the likelihood that transfer students will attain a bachelor's degree. Students who earn an associate of applied science (AAS) degree toward direct entry into the workforce, or who major in technology fields, have fewer opportunities for transferring to a bachelor's degree

(Juszkiewicz, 2014; Zinser & Hanssen, 2006). Working toward an associate of arts (AA) or associate of science (AS) degree significantly increases the likelihood that transfer students will earn a baccalaureate degree (Juszkiewicz, 2014). Limited degree options may confuse students, especially if they fail to seek academic advising or lack information needed to navigate confusing transfer systems that vary among colleges and universities (American Association of Community Colleges and American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2004; Vaughan, 2006).

Institutional Challenges

Higher education institutions serving transfer students also face some challenges. In recent decades policymakers, faculty, and advisors have designed transfer agreements and support services to assist transfer students. Despite these advancements, the National Survey for Student Engagement (2008) found that transfer students are less engaged on four out of five benchmarks when compared to native student peer groups. Other researchers found that college transfer students are typically less engaged in college life at the 4-year institution and more engaged with their families and community (Ghusson, 2016; Lester, Leonard, & Mathias, 2013).

Failure to engage in support services that are intended to improve college transfer success can lead to a lack of completing required course prerequisites, more student loan debt, loss of financial aid, increased time needed to complete a bachelor's degree, and higher college drop out rates (Mullin, 2012). Engagement in the campus culture, new processes, and campus resources are critical to transfer student success and persistence (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Lewis, 2013; Tinto, 1998).

Another challenge facing higher education institutions is the low priority given to college transfer. Despite growing popularity, transfer students are typically ignored by higher education leaders in their enrollment strategies and campus retention efforts (Handel, 2011; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Weir, 2008). In some cases, attention to transfer has only increased during periods of economic downturn, political upheaval, or demographic shifts in the population (Handel & Williams, 2012). The low priority of college transfer has resulted in a lack of admissions goals that target transfer students and the failure of higher education institutions to acknowledge the work they do on behalf of transfer students (Handel, 2011; Handel & Williams, 2012).

Next, successful transfer programs require a strong institutional commitment to the transfer mission as a means to strengthen the transfer process for students (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Chenoweth, 1998; Evelyn, Greenlee, Brown, & Weiger, 2000; Suarez, 2003). Faculty leaders and department heads can improve transfer support services by proactively developing policies and programs that support transfer and influencing others to advocate for transfer students (Kim, 2001). A high level of institutional commitment leads to structural supports that promote student persistence by establishing a robust transfer culture (Kim, 2001; Mery & Schiorring, 2011; Taylor & Jain, 2017).

Finally, the complexity of the recruitment and admissions procedures for transfer students provides another obstacle for higher education institutions. The admissions process includes evaluation of community college transfer student applications, assessment of student preparation for an intended major, and determination of the student's educational fit with the four-year institution (Handel,

2011; Handel & Williams, 2012). The complexity of the process has caused the focus of most higher education providers to remain on traditional first-year students. The extensive review of transcripts requires additional staff resources and transcript review software, both of which result in increased costs for the higher education institution.

Transfer Student Support Services

Community colleges and four-year institutions share the responsibility for making the transfer process more seamless (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Juskiewicz, 2014). Providing programs and services to support community college students who plan to complete a bachelor's degree increases student grade point averages and improves graduation rates (Kezar, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Successful transfer student support services are cost-effective for higher education institutions and are either free or affordable for low income and first-generation college students to participate (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Institutional commitment and the ability to customize services to meet individual student needs are both essential to offering support that leads to student success (Schlossberg, 2011; Taylor & Jain, 2017).

Each student deals with vertical transfer differently (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012). Community college transfer students, who may be underprepared academically, come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, or have jobs and families, have distinct needs that are different from those of the traditional students attending baccalaureate institutions (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012). Customizing transfer student support services to meet the diverse needs of individual transfer students is key to student success (Ackermann, 1991; Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Lewis, 2013; Mullin, 2010; Withem, 2007). Example

support services that may be customized include student orientation programs, assistance with class registration and financial aid applications, faculty availability outside the classroom, and career counseling (Mullin, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2011).

Beyond institutional commitment and customized options that meet individual needs, there are numerous support services that community colleges and four-year institutions can provide to assist students with a successful transfer experience. First, institutional partnerships between two- and four-year institutions support vertical transfer students (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Kim, 2001; Roach, 2009). Collaborations may include faculty working together to increase course rigor and establish course equivalencies. Articulation agreements also create sustainable partnerships that provide pathways toward bachelor's degree completion (Handel, 2011; Kahlenberg, 2011; Kim, 2001; Kisker, 2007; Noel-Levitz, 2008; Senie, 2016). The goal of institutional collaborations is to create structured support systems for transfer students that improve retention and completion rates (Bundy, 2014; Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Mery & Schiorring, 2011).

Another service that institutions can provide to support students includes communication of accurate information. When students can explore transfer options, get the facts about how the process works, know which courses will meet degree and major requirements, and develop a plan, they are more likely to be successful (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Vaughan, 2006). Continuous communication between students, advisors, and faculty members at two- and four-year institutions is essential for transfer student success (Noel-Levitz, 2008; Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2010). Communication of accurate information also enhances

academic advising, library literacy, financial literacy, cultural diversity, and overcoming negative perceptions of the transfer process (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Handel, 2011; Kisker, 2007; Mullin, 2010).

Next, both community colleges and four-year institutions can provide comprehensive orientation programs to support transfer student success (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Lewis, 2013). Orientation programs can offer knowledge of campus resources, support services, and degree requirements (Eggleston and Laanan, 2001; Smith, 2010). Additionally, orientation programs benefit transfer students by providing access to the same resources as all other students, such as assigning them an academic advisor and offering them campus housing (Townsend, 2008; Vaughan, 2006; Weir, 2008).

Finally, the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012) suggests learning communities as a proven strategy for serving transfer students. Learning communities provide student-centered, small group interaction that involves students in making plans, overcoming frustrations, and supporting one another on the journey to earning a bachelor's degree (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Bundy, 2014; Tovar & Simon, 2006). Additionally, learning communities can provide an essential social aspect that includes mentoring, community development, and building self-confidence (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011).

Synthesis of Research Findings

Previous research demonstrates a continuous progression of increased services being developed to support community college transfer students during the past forty years. Additionally, college transfer has increased in recent decades with 60% of

undergraduate students attending two or more higher education institutions (Adelman, 2006; Smith, 2010; Weir, 2008; Wellman, 2002). Despite these trends, 27-57% of community college students who express an interest in earning a bachelor's degree ultimately decide not to enroll at a baccalaureate institution (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015; Xu, Ran, Fink, Jenkins, & Dundar, 2017).

At the same time when student support services have continued to be enhanced, prior research shows that undergraduate transfer students continue to face numerous challenges. For example, Carina experienced daunting admissions and financial aid application processes and had to wait several months before beginning classes when she transferred from a community college to a baccalaureate institution (University of California, Berkeley, 2008). Vincent was unable to transfer some community college courses into his bachelor's degree major, accumulated student loan debt before earning a credential, and eventually dropped out of college (Lorenzo, 2011b). Programs that were designed to improve services to transfer students are often inefficient and ineffective (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).

Other barriers to transfer from community colleges to baccalaureate institutions include fewer financial aid options and a lack of academic preparation that may lead to transfer shock (Handel & Williams, 2012; Juskiewicz, 2014; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010). Additionally, transfer students may encounter limited degree opportunities and the lack of articulation agreements that enable a seamless transfer process (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Handel & Williams, 2012; Hodara et al., 2016; Juskiewicz, 2014; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010).

Higher education institutions also face some challenges in relation to vertical student transfer. For example, the failure of students to engage in support services and extracurricular activities that are designed to increase their success may lead to more student loan debt, increased time required to earn a bachelor's degree, and higher college drop out rates (Mullin, 2010; National Survey for Student Engagement, 2008). Additionally, the lack of institutional commitment may result in a more complex transfer admissions process and a lack of policies and programs that support transfer (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Handel & Williams, 2012; Kim, 2001; Mery & Schiorring, 2011; Taylor & Jain, 2017). Finally, some higher education institutions fail to acknowledge faculty and staff members who advocate for transfer students (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Handel & Williams, 2012; Kim, 2001; Mery & Schiorring, 2011).

Despite the many challenges to vertical transfer identified in the review of the literature, community college student transfer to baccalaureate institutions is recognized as a critical driver for preparing a competitive workforce, sustaining local and national economies, and maintaining active communities with engaged citizens (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Handel & Williams, 2012; Vaughan, 2006; Wellman, 2002). The gateway that community colleges provide toward earning a bachelor's degree is especially beneficial for low socioeconomic status students, first-generation college students, and returning adult learners, since it leads to higher lifetime earnings (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Roman, 2007).

The typical transfer student is female, twenty-six years of age, and works part-time, while the average higher education institution accepts 400 transfer students

annually (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2017; Wynn, 2004). Higher education institutions and state departments of education that encourage transfer offer articulation agreements, common course numbering systems, and web portals with transfer information. Pennsylvania has made incremental progress toward supporting vertical transfer in recent years, but the Commonwealth's student support services are lagging behind progressive states like Arizona, Florida, California, Texas, and Washington (Education Commission of the States, 2014; Hopkins, 2011; *U.S. News and World Report*, 2017).

Critique of Previous Research

Prior research illustrates the renewed focus on community college student transfer to bachelor's degrees that is aligned with the original mission of community colleges. In recent decades, various types of college transfer have emerged, making it difficult for colleges and universities to follow individual student progress. While the vertical approach is still the most common type of college transfer among community college students, other pathways toward completing a degree include the dual admission at two- and four-year institutions, the reverse transfer from a four-year to a two-year institution, and the swirling enrollment pattern in which students transition between institutions more than once (Taylor & Jain, 2017).

The emergence of multiple transfer enrollment patterns makes it problematic for colleges and universities to report retention and graduation rates. It is equally difficult to determine whether or not students earn a college credential. A national registry or centralized way of tracking individual students is needed to provide a complete picture of student outcomes. The National Student Clearinghouse does provide data related to

transfer enrollments, but it is limited to the institutional level (Boughan, 2001; Xu, Ran, Fink, Jenkins, & Dunder, 2017). Drilling down to the student level would allow for more accurate reporting as well as a way to continue communicating with students who have the potential to complete a degree. Additionally, reporting at the student level would provide more comprehensive data for future research studies.

Some studies focused on the advantages of beginning a college career at the community college on the pathway toward earning a bachelor's degree. Community colleges are especially beneficial for women, first-generation college students, ethnic minorities, and students with a low socioeconomic status due to their lower tuition and fees, open admissions policies, and the potential for higher lifetime earnings (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bragg, 2007; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Roman, 2007; Townsend, 1995). However, some research shows that community college students who plan to enroll at a baccalaureate institution are less likely to earn a bachelor's degree when compared to native students (Dougherty, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pincus & Archer, 1989). At the same time, other research illustrates that there is no impact on grade point average, retention, or bachelor's degree attainment when comparing community college transfer student and native university student outcomes (Wang, Chuang, & McCready, 2017).

Several studies also reported on the advantages of transfer and articulation agreements at the state level. These agreements allow for seamless transfer of course credits among participating higher education institutions which often results in lower costs for transfer students (Bautsch, 2013; Ignash & Townsend, 2000; Lorenzo, 2011b; Senie, 2016; Stern, 2016). Despite these reported advantages, another group of

researchers found that little evidence exists that transfer and articulation agreements improve student transfer rates (Gross & Goldhaber, 2009; Handel & Williams, 2012; Ishitani, 2008; Juskiewicz 2014). Since transfer agreements may have a limited impact on transfer student retention and are often limited to providing services inside of state boundaries, there is an opportunity for researchers to work with state departments of education to study the factors that lead to student success and to examine the potential for inter-state collaboration that reaches beyond state borders. New research on the student support services and types of transfer agreements that lead to student success could be applied nationwide in an effort to increase retention and graduation rates of college transfer students.

Numerous studies were conducted in relation to the challenges facing both transfer students and institutions that accept transfer enrollments. It is surprising that after forty years of progress and continued transfer enrollment growth, higher education decision-makers often ignore transfer students in their enrollment strategies and retention plans (Handel, 2011; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Weir, 2008). Additional research is needed to examine student support services and how they are being designed to meet individual student needs. Student decision-making may differ based on student motivation, external influences, resources used to support college transfer decisions, and engagement in college extracurricular activities (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Kezar, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Previous research findings illustrate several critical issues and developments along with disagreements among some scholars. The potential exists to develop a nationwide repository for analyzing college student enrollment data at the individual

student level that would allow for more accurate reporting and opportunities for further exploration. Further investigation is needed to determine the factors related to community college student engagement, influences on decision-making, and career aspirations. For example, research comparing the transfer student success rates among various states could provide an analysis of the impact of the student support services that are provided by higher education institutions and state departments of education. There are also opportunities to examine some of the factors related to college student transfer as this trend continues to grow and become more complicated.

Summary

According to the literature, community college students who are seeking a baccalaureate degree face numerous challenges. Obstacles include loss of credits during transfer, lack of understanding the transfer process steps, and loss of financial aid. Additionally, vertical transfer students have limited degree options, fewer financial aid opportunities, and may fail to engage in transfer student support services (Handel & Williams, 2012; Juskiewicz, 2014; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010). These hurdles often lengthen the time that it takes for students to complete a bachelor's degree and cause some students to drop out before earning a credential.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1984) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how vertical transfer students experience the transition from community college to four-year institutions. While numerous research studies have focused on transfer student challenges, support services, and transfer and articulation agreements, limited research has been related to the behaviors and decisions that successful vertical transfer students make during the transition (Taylor & Jain, 2017). Knowledge of the

actions of successful transfer students would provide personal student accounts associated with navigating the transition from community college to four-year institutions. The results add to the body of existing research and inform students, parents, faculty members, and advisors about the activities and influences that vertical transfer students perceive as critical to their success toward earning a bachelor's degree.

Chapter 3 focuses on the methodology that was used to complete this qualitative study. The methodology includes a protocol for interviewing a sample population of community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree and university transfer students who enrolled in a 4-year degree program.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the purpose of the study, research design, and target population. Additionally, it explains the research setting, interview questionnaire, and procedures that were selected for the study. The chapter concludes with how the data were analyzed to identify emergent themes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the decision-making experiences of community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree. The perspectives of two subgroups of undergraduate students were gathered and analyzed. The first subgroup included community college students who were enrolled in an associate degree program and expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a baccalaureate institution. The second subgroup included undergraduate students who were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at a university and had successfully transitioned from a community college. Previous studies related to college student transfer illustrated what pathways students followed on their journeys toward earning a college degree, but few described the motives that influence students to make the decisions they do (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Townsend, 2008).

Increased knowledge of the transfer student decision-making experiences helps fellow-students, parents, higher education leaders, and policymakers to better understand the decision-making process of transfer students on their pathway toward

earning a baccalaureate degree. Analyzing students' insights provides a means for higher education leaders and policymakers to appreciate the college transfer landscape from the student perspective. Additionally, the observations offer parents and fellow-students with decision-making best practices from students who have successfully navigated the transition from community college toward earning a bachelor's degree.

Research Questions and Anticipated Observations

The study focused on the decisions that community college students who expressed interest in earning a bachelor's degree made on their academic and career planning journeys. Additionally, the research determined if there were differences in the decision-making experiences of community college students who were enrolled in an associate degree program and expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a baccalaureate institution when compared with university students who were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at a university who had transferred from a community college. Schlossberg's Transition Theory provided a theoretical framework for this study (Anderson, Goodman, & Schlossberg, 2012; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). According to the theory, college transfer and career planning decisions provide opportunities for growth and transformation (Hudson, 1991; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995).

The research questions for this study included:

1. Why do undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree decide to transfer or not transfer to a bachelor's degree program at a university?

2. What are the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who transferred to a bachelor's degree program at a university when compared to those who did not transfer to a bachelor's degree program?
3. How do resources and student support services influence college transfer and career planning decisions for undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree or who have transferred to a bachelor's degree from a community college?

It was anticipated that the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students who participated in this study would vary widely based on individual student motivations, external influences, resources used to inform college transfer decisions, and whether students engaged in extracurricular activities (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Juskiewicz, 2014; Townsend, 2001). When examining the differences between the two student subgroups in the study, it was predicted that the community college students who had successfully transferred to a bachelor's degree program might use a more formal approach to making decisions. On the other hand, community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but decided not to enroll at a baccalaureate institution were expected to use informal methods for making decisions. For example, it was anticipated that university students who had successfully transitioned from the community college might be more engaged with faculty, academic advisors, transfer information programs, and extracurricular activities. Numerous researchers found that increased participation in transfer student

support services led to successful student transitions (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Juskiewicz, 2014; Lewis, 2013; Townsend, 2001).

Research Design

When developing a research design to understand student perspectives, several approaches were possible. A qualitative, narrative methodology was selected for this study as the most appropriate way to investigate the reasons that undergraduate students made decisions during their college journeys. Qualitative research uses open-ended questions to collect data and emphasizes the importance of the participant point of view (Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Narrative research focuses on gathering information through individual stories to construct a written account of participant experiences and the meanings that they attribute to their understandings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). The personal stories of community college students who expressed interest in seeking baccalaureate degrees provide an important voice that represents the student perspective of their decision-making experiences.

The research design included strategies suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to improve the credibility of the qualitative investigations. First, they suggested that researchers recognize personal bias that may influence the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Next, they suggested meticulous record keeping for ensuring that interpretations of the data are consistent (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Another suggestion was to seek similarities and differences across the participants to ensure that various perspectives were represented (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, they recommended that participants be

invited to review and comment on the interview transcript to validate their responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This procedure is known as member checking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For qualitative research, validity refers to the integrity of the data gathering methods used, and the precision in which the observations accurately reflect the data (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, credibility was reached through the consistency of the analytical procedures used for the study (Long & Johnson, 2000).

Qualitative research includes interactions among the research design components as the data is being gathered, rather than a linear set of sequential steps (Maxwell, 2013). This study consisted of one-to-one interviews between the researcher and the study participants during the fall 2017 semester. Audio recordings and written transcripts were used to capture the interview conversations. Participants were invited to review the transcripts to verify the accuracy of the data. After the verifications and feedback were received from the students, MAXQDA qualitative data analysis coding software was used to identify themes. The coded data and interview transcripts were analyzed to answer the research questions. The ongoing interaction between the components of the design allowed for themes to emerge throughout the interview process (Maxwell, 2013).

The interview questions were designed to gain the student perspective about decisions they made related to choosing a degree major, making career plans, using resources to inform their decisions, and engaging in extracurricular activities at the higher education institution where they were enrolled. Data were gathered during interviews with two subgroups of undergraduate students who participated in the study.

Throughout the interview process, differences between the two subgroups were noted to determine if there were variations in the decision-making experiences of community college students who expressed interest in seeking a bachelor's degree but decided not to enroll at a university, and undergraduate students who transitioned from a community college to a university and were enrolled in a bachelor's degree major.

Following each interview, detailed transcripts were developed for review by the study participants. The students were asked to review the data for accuracy and to make any additions that would add to their account of the college transfer experience. This procedure is known as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking allows for validation of the narrative data by having the participants confirm their responses to the interview questions. The participant review of the transcripts and additional input they submitted was combined with data that were gathered during the interviews to increase the credibility of the interview responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The risk to students of participating in the study was minimal, which Creswell (2012) defined as similar to the risks that people experience in daily life. Participants signed an informed consent form before participating in the study to acknowledge that they agreed to be interviewed and understood the protection of their rights (Creswell, 2012). The informed consent letter that was provided for participants is included in Appendix B on page 189. The study was approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (IRB) before soliciting for participants at the approved colleges and universities. Additionally, the participating colleges and

universities were invited to review the approved IRB application before any student volunteers were recruited.

Target Population and Participant Selection

This study required participants who could best help to understand the motives that influence community college students who expressed interest in seeking a bachelor's degree to make decisions during their college journeys. Homogeneous sampling was selected as the sampling technique due to its ability to provide the purposeful sampling of individuals based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 1990).

Two distinct subgroups of volunteer participants were invited to participate in the study. The first homogeneous subgroup included nine undergraduate students who were enrolled in an associate degree program at a Pennsylvania community college during the fall 2017 semester. The volunteers in this subgroup had earned at least 30 college credits, had not previously earned a college degree, and had expressed interest in earning a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a baccalaureate institution. Nationally, the majority of community college students (27-57%) who expressed interest in earning a bachelor's degree fit into this subgroup (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015; Xu, Ran, Fink, Jenkins, & Dundar, 2017).

The second homogeneous subgroup included seven undergraduate students who had transferred from a community college and were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at a Pennsylvania university during the fall 2017 semester. The participants in this subgroup had earned at least 30 college credits and had not previously earned a college degree. All of the students in this subgroup had transferred to a state system of

higher education university from one of Pennsylvania's fourteen community colleges. Nationally, only 23% of community college students who expressed interest in earning a bachelor's degree fit into this subgroup (American Association of Community Colleges, 2015).

Based on previous qualitative data collected by other researchers, data saturation may be reached after interviewing six participants in each subgroup (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Mason, 2010; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Data saturation is experienced when no new information is obtained from the study participants, and enough understanding has been provided to reproduce the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Mason, 2010; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). For this study, interviews were conducted with additional participants until data saturation was reached for each subgroup.

Staff members in the student registration office at the participating colleges and universities were asked to assist with identifying potential study participants. The participating registrars identified a subset of enrolled students whose profiles aligned with the targeted research criteria. The registrars sent a recruitment email to potential participants on behalf of the research study. Recipients of the email who were interested in volunteering for the study were provided with a link to the informed consent letter and pre-screening survey. The recruitment email that was sent to potential participants is included in Appendix C on page 191.

Prospective contributors completed an informed consent form and pre-screening survey to determine if they met the criteria to participate in the study. Undergraduate students who met the study criteria and provided their contact information were invited to schedule one-hour interviews in the order in which their pre-screening surveys were

received. Qualifying participants who exceeded the capacity of the targeted sample population were added to a waitlist until all of the interviews were complete.

Research Setting

One-to-one interviews were scheduled with the volunteer participants at their convenience. The interviews were conducted using web-conferencing technology that had audio recording capabilities. The interviews were held in closed office spaces to ensure confidentiality of the discussions with each of the participants. The closed office setting also provided a quiet location that was free from distractions and interruptions.

Recording the interview conversations allowed for accurate transcripts of each interview to be created. The audio recordings were transcribed using consistent protocols that helped to organize the responses to each question (Creswell, 2012). The recordings were maintained as confidential digital audio files on a computer server with restricted access. The digital audio files can only be accessed using a unique username, password, and authentication code. All digital recordings and written transcripts will be maintained according to Indiana University of Pennsylvania retention policies.

Research Materials

Individual interviews served as the data collection method for this study. The interviews were conducted with two subgroups of undergraduate students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree. One subgroup consisted of community college students enrolled in an associate degree program who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a baccalaureate institution. The second subgroup included university students enrolled in a bachelor's degree program who successfully transferred from a community college.

The interviews occurred at one point in time, which is known as a cross-sectional study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All participants responded to the same set of interview questions. The interviews were used to gain the perspectives of community college students who expressed interest in earning a bachelor's degree. The interview questions included:

1. Why did you decide to go to college? Follow-up: Who or what influenced your decision to go to college? Did any particular instructors, advisors, other students, friends, family members, websites, or other resources influence your decision?
2. Why did you decide to enroll at your current college or university? Follow-up: Who or what influenced your decision to choose the college or university that you are currently attending? Did any particular instructors, advisors, other students, friends, family members, websites, or other resources influence your decision?
3. Why did you choose your degree major? Follow-up: Who or what influenced your decision to choose your degree major? Did any particular instructors, advisors, other students, friends, family members, websites, or other resources influence your decision?
4. At your community college, did you ever attend a degree option or career planning information session? Follow-up: If you did attend an information session, describe your experience related to community college services that you received to inform you about degree options and career planning.

5. At your current college, describe how you used information about bachelor's degree transfer options or a degree transfer plan toward planning your degree program.
6. At your current college, who do you rely on to get information about credit transfer and course scheduling? Follow-up: Do you typically receive information about credit transfer from instructors, advisors, other students, friends, family members, websites, or other resources?
7. At what point did you consider completing an associate or bachelor's degree? Follow-up: Did any particular instructors, advisors, other students, friends, family members, websites, or other resources influence your decision?
8. In your first term at your current college, why did you choose to participate (or not participate) in the first-year experience or student orientation? Follow-up: If you participated in a first-year experience or student orientation, describe how it helped you in college.
9. At your current college, why did you choose to participate (or not participate) in tutoring sessions, study groups, or supplemental learning experiences? Follow-up: Describe how the tutoring sessions, study groups, or supplemental learning experiences helped you in college?
10. At your current college, why did you choose to participate (or not participate) in clubs, social organizations, sports teams, or other student activities? Follow-up: If you participated in clubs, teams, or activities, describe how they helped you in college?

11. Is there anything else that you would like me to know about your experiences related to choosing your degree and career options at the college or university?

The interview questions were designed to generate participant perspectives about their decision-making and career planning experiences as college students with an emphasis on the reasons that they made their decisions throughout their postsecondary academic journeys. Qualitative research relies on a few open-ended interview questions that do not restrict the views of the participants (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

During the interviews, questions were customized to reflect each participant's enrollment situation at either a community college or a university. Referencing the higher education institution and degree major was intended to make the interview more personalized for each participant but did not change the content or meaning of the interview questions.

Research Procedures

Several steps were required to gather and analyze the data related to the decision-making experiences of community college students who expressed interest in earning a bachelor's degree. The first step included study approvals by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania doctoral committee members, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB), and the School of Graduate Studies and Research. Upon approval to conduct the study, select community colleges and universities in Pennsylvania were invited to participate in the investigation. After approval was granted to conduct the research at targeted higher education institutions,

the registrars at the approved sites were asked to identify potential study participants who were likely to meet the study criteria.

A pilot study of both the pre-screening recruitment survey and interview questionnaire was conducted. The pilot study included input from 2 students who met the study criteria and submitted the informed consent form. One pilot interview was conducted with a community college student who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree while another pilot interview was completed with a university student who transitioned to a bachelor's degree from a community college. The purpose of the pilot study was to assess the ability to gather the expected data from the pre-screening survey instrument and interview questionnaire.

After the pilot study was completed and the appropriate improvements were made to the interview questions, the campus registrars invited undergraduate students to participate in the study. The participant recruitment email that was sent to students from the registrars is included in Appendix C on page 191. Students who demonstrated an interest in participating in the study were directed to an electronic informed consent letter, a web-based informed consent form, and a web-based pre-screening participant recruitment survey. The pre-screening participant recruitment survey was used to determine if students interested in participating in the study met the criteria to be included in the sample population.

For this study, two slightly different pre-screening surveys were used to identify eligible participants. One survey was designed to verify that students currently *enrolled at a community college* met the criteria to participate in the study. The pre-screening recruitment survey targeting community college students who expressed an interest in

earning a bachelor's degree is shown in Appendix E on page 193. The other survey was designed to verify that students currently *enrolled at a university who transferred from a community college* met the criteria to volunteer for the study. The pre-screening recruitment survey targeting university students who transferred from a community college is shown in Appendix F on page 197.

After the potential study participants signed the electronic informed consent form and completed the pre-screening recruitment questionnaire, their responses were reviewed to verify whether or not the students met the study criteria. Qualifying for the study was dependent on honest responses to the items on the pre-screening survey instrument. For those students who qualified to participate, the interview appointments were scheduled based upon the order in which the students responded to the pre-screening survey. The contact information for all qualifying participants was maintained on a waitlist until interviews were completed for at least six students in each of the two subgroups. Additional interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached in each student subgroup. Once data saturation was reached, four additional interviews were conducted based on the unique participant distinctions that emerged in both of the homogeneous student subgroups. A total of 16 undergraduate students participated in the research study, including 9 volunteer participants who were enrolled at a community college and 7 transfer students who were enrolled at a university.

Data Analysis

Following each interview meeting, transcripts were developed and shared with the participants to provide for member checking of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each participant was given an opportunity to correct or clarify any information in the

transcript before the data were coded. Member checking provides an essential technique for validation of the data by having the participants confirm the accuracy of the interview narrative (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following the interview meeting, each participant was also provided with an interview participant debrief document that contained career resources. The interview debrief document that was provided for student volunteers is included in Appendix D on page 192.

As anticipated based on previous research, coding and analyzing the open-ended responses to the interview questions was a complicated procedure (Creswell, 2012). Oral interview recordings were transcribed and saved as written electronic files. The resulting transcripts were reviewed using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis coding software. Coding of the data involved the identification of categories and common themes within the participant responses. Additionally, the MAXQDA coding software identified patterns that were used to assess the differences among the participant responses. Finally, the coded data and emergent themes were analyzed and summarized for each of the three research questions.

The goal of the analysis was to understand the variations in the student decision-making experiences and to recognize what influenced their decisions. Emergent themes in the data were analyzed for the two homogeneous subgroups to determine the answers to the research questions. The observations were interpreted based on a combination of the participant experiences, interview data collected, and the findings from the review of the literature.

Summary

The methodology for this study was designed to determine the reasons that community college students made college and career planning decisions after expressing interest in earning a bachelor's degree. Purposeful sampling of two homogeneous subgroups provided the approach for the investigation (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 1990). Interviews were conducted with community college students as well as university students who transferred from community colleges. Consistent practices were followed during the data gathering and analysis to improve credibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Long & Johnson, 2000). Procedures included following a standard interview script, avoiding influences of personal bias, keeping accurate records, and seeking a variety of perspectives among the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The results of the analysis provided personal accounts from the student perspectives related to their decision-making experiences.

Chapter 4 includes an analysis of the students' interview responses for each of the three research questions. Qualitative data analysis software was used to identify categories for describing the motives that influence the ways in which students make decisions. Additionally, the chapter includes nine themes that emerged as a result of the data analysis and observations.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND OBSERVATIONS

This chapter describes the sample of interview participants and the research methodology that was applied to the data analysis. The student interview data are presented along with observations about the participant responses for each of the three research questions. The chapter concludes with the emergent themes that were identified during the data analysis along with a summary of the results.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the decision-making experiences of community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree. While the study focused on the reasons that students made college and career planning decisions, it also identified if there were differences in the decision-making experiences of community college students who have not transferred to a baccalaureate institution when compared with university students who transferred to a bachelor's degree program from a community college.

An analysis of the findings provides increased knowledge and a better understanding of transfer student decision-making experiences to inform students, parents, higher education leaders, and policymakers. Additionally, the results provide parents and fellow-students with decision-making insights from students who have successfully navigated the transition from community college to earning a bachelor's degree.

Sample of Interview Participants

Homogeneous sampling was selected as the sampling technique for this study due to its ability to provide the purposeful sampling of individuals based on

membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Patton, 1990). Two distinct subgroups of volunteer participants who were enrolled at four higher education institutions in Pennsylvania were invited to complete a pre-screening survey to determine if they met the requirements to participate in the study. One subgroup included students enrolled in community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor’s degree while the other participant subgroup included students enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program at a university who had transferred from a community college. The student responses to the invitation to complete the pre-screening survey are shown in the table below.

Table 1

Pre-Screening Survey Responses

Higher Education Institution	Student Survey Incomplete	Student Did Not Meet Criteria	Student Opted Not to Interview	Student Interview Complete
Community College A	2	9	0	4
Community College B	12	9	6	5
University A	5	36	5	4
University B	2	6	2	3
TOTAL:	21	60	13	16

More than 100 students responded to the invitation to complete the pre-screening survey, and 29 of the respondents met the criteria to participate in the research study. Thirteen of the respondents who met the requirements to participate in the study opted not to be interviewed. Sixteen of the students who met the research criteria volunteered to participate in the study and subsequently completed interviews.

The first homogeneous subgroup of interview participants included nine undergraduate students who were enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college, were 18-34 years of age, had earned at least 30 college credits, and had expressed interest in earning a bachelor’s degree. The participants in the community college student subgroup are labeled A through I in the tables throughout this chapter and referred to as Student A, Student B, and so on. During the interview process, three distinct subsets of community college students emerged within this subgroup as illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Community College Student Subsets

Community College Student Distinctions	Subgroup Participants								
	Subset 1			Subset 2			Subset 3		
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
• Earned a high school diploma or GED; Did not earn a college degree	■	■	■	■	■	■			
• Earned an associate degree; continuing enrollment at a community college							■	■	■
• Completing an associate degree; not planning to enroll at a university	■	■	■						
• Thinking about enrollment in a bachelor’s degree in 1-2 years				■	■	■			
• Definitely plan to earn a bachelor’s degree in 1-2 years							■	■	■

The three subsets of participants enrolled at a community college included: (1) three students who had not previously earned a college degree, were completing only an associate degree, and were not intending to enroll at a baccalaureate institution in the

next 1-2 years despite expressing interest in earning a bachelor's degree; (2) three students who had not previously earned a college degree, were completing an associate degree, expressed interest in earning a bachelor's degree, and were still thinking about earning a bachelor's degree in the next 1-2 years; and (3) three students who completed an associate degree, were still enrolled in credit courses at the community college, had earned more than 60 college credits, and were definitely planning to transfer to a bachelor's degree program at a university in the next 1-2 years.

The second homogeneous subgroup of interview participants included seven undergraduate students who were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at a university, were 18-34 years of age, transferred from a community college to the baccalaureate institution, had earned a minimum of 30 college credits, and had not previously earned a bachelor's degree. The participants in the university transfer student subgroup are labeled J through P in the tables throughout this chapter and referred to as Student J, Student K, and so on. During the interview process, three distinct subsets of university transfer students emerged within this subgroup, as illustrated in Table 3 on the following page.

The three subsets of participants enrolled in a bachelor's degree program included: (4) three students who earned an associate degree before transferring to the university; (5) three students who did not earn an associate degree before transferring to the university; and (6) one student who did not earn an associate degree before transferring to the university, but received an associate degree through the reverse transfer process while enrolled at the university.

Table 3

University Transfer Student Subsets

University Transfer Student Distinctions	Subgroup Participants						
	Subset 4			Subset 5			Subset 6
	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• Earned an associate degree prior to transfer to a university	■	■	■				
• Did not earn an associate degree prior to transfer to a university				■	■	■	
• Earned an associate degree after transfer to a university							■

As anticipated based on previous qualitative data collected by other researchers, data saturation was reached for each student subgroup after interviewing six participants (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Mason, 2010; O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). For instance, multiple participants described their decision to enroll in college after struggling in low wage jobs as restaurant cooks, bank tellers, and fast food workers. Data saturation is experienced when no new information is obtained from the study participants, and enough information has been provided to reproduce the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Mason, 2010; O’Reilly & Parker, 2012). For this study, four additional interviews were conducted, once data saturation was reached, based on the unique student distinctions that emerged in both of the homogeneous subgroups.

Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis

This study included one-to-one interviews with volunteer participants, written transcripts to capture the interview conversations, and participant review of the

transcripts to verify the accuracy of the data. After the participants verified the data, MAXQDA qualitative data analysis coding software was used to categorize the student responses. The data and observations were analyzed to answer the research questions and to identify common themes that emerged from the interview responses.

Before gathering research data, a pilot study was conducted to test the pre-screening survey and interview questions (Creswell, 2012). A focus group of higher education professionals who had experience working with college transfer students reviewed the interview questions and provided feedback. Additionally, one community college student and one university transfer student agreed to the informed consent letter, completed the online pre-screening survey, and participated in one-to-one interviews. As a result of feedback received from the pilot study, two of the interview questions were combined, and the methods used for recording the interview conversations were improved.

Following the pilot study, individual telephone interviews were held with the 16 students who volunteered to participate in the study. The audio of each interview was recorded and used to develop a transcript of each discussion. The resulting narratives from these conversations provided the research data. Following each interview appointment, each participant was given a transcript of the conversation for their review and asked to make additions and provide clarifications. This procedure of asking the participants to verify their responses is known as member checking (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking ensures the accuracy of the data prior to it being analyzed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

MAXQDA is a computer software program that organizes written text using codes so that it can be grouped into common topics (Kuckartz, 2014). This qualitative data analysis software was used to categorize the data and assist with identifying similarities and differences among the student interview responses for this study. The coded statements were categorized and counted to determine their frequencies (Kuckartz, 2014). The data categories that were identified as a result of coding the interview transcripts using MAXQDA software are summarized in Table 4 below. The frequencies for each category shown in the table illustrate the number of times that the students mentioned topics related to the category during the interview conversations. Full details regarding the data coding and participant response rates for each category are illustrated in Appendix G on pages 201-203.

Table 4

Data Categories and Their Frequencies

Data Category	Frequency
• People Who Influenced Participant Decisions	112
• Conditions That Influenced Participant Decisions	40
• College Access and Affordability	53
• Career Opportunities and Income Potential	52
• Student Career Exploration	39
• Degree Attainment Decision	24
• Timing of Degree Attainment Decision	17
• College Transfer Support and Academic Advising	108
• Student Services and Support	55
• Clubs and Student Activities	44
• Positive Student Experience	19
• Negative Student Experience	48

After the above categories were identified and the interview responses were examined in relationship to each of the corresponding research questions, the data were analyzed to identify common themes that emerged among the interview responses. The correlation of the 3 research questions and the nine emergent themes that resulted from the data analysis are illustrated in Table 5 below.

Table 5

Research Questions and the Corresponding Emergent Themes

Research Question	Corresponding Emergent Themes
1. Decision-Making Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Support System • Career Opportunities • Low Cost of Tuition • Transfer Credit Acceptance Rate
2. Differences in Student Engagement and Participation Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Need for Information • Student Convenience • Regrets and Frustrations
3. How Resources Influence Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic Advisors • Student Career Interests

The emergent themes are described in further detail in relationship to each of the study research questions later in this chapter.

Presentation of the Data

The data presented in this section include example participant responses for the eleven interview questions along with tables that summarize the participant responses to each of the interview questions. The responses to the interview questions are organized into three groups based on their relationship with the three corresponding research

questions as shown in Table 6 below. Most of the interview questions were designed to address more than one of the research questions.

Table 6

Research Questions and the Related Interview Questions

Research Question	Related Interview Questions
1. Decision-Making Experiences	1, 2, 3, 7, 11
2. Differences in Student Engagement and Participation Decisions	1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11
3. How Resources Influence Decisions	4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11

The next section provides a synthesis of the responses to the interview questions that are associated with the first research question. The research question category combines the participant responses that are related to their decision-making experiences.

Addressing Research Question #1: Decision-Making Experiences

The first research question examined *why do undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree decide to transfer or not transfer to a bachelor's degree program at a university?* The related interview questions assessed the reasons that students chose to go to college, the motives for enrolling at the college or university they were currently attending, the reasons that students selected their degree major, and the factors that influenced their decisions.

Research question #1 decision-making experiences: Interview question #1.

When examining the reasons that students chose to go to college, some of the participants in both subgroups were high school or associate degree graduates who reported the inability to obtain employment beyond minimum wage jobs. Nearly half of the community college students who participated in the study were first-generation college students who had worked in low-income jobs, such as medical assistants, restaurant cooks, and bank tellers. Furthermore, five of the community college students and one of the university transfer students decided to enroll in college because they chose a career that requires a credential. For instance, Student P stated, “I don’t have any skills, so college was the only option for me to make money and be successful. My mom influenced me by quitting her phone sales job and becoming a nurse.”

Most of the participants in both subgroups wanted to establish careers that would provide better job prospects, increased income levels, and opportunities for advancement. For example, Student J explained:

When I was eighteen, I worked as a bank teller and associated a lot of money with college because the customers who were educated had big accounts that talked for them. The banking industry helped me want to go to college and make more money.

Additionally, a few of the students in both subgroups were self-motivated to make decisions about going to college and reported the lack of a family support system. For example, Student H mentioned:

My parents and grandparents didn't go to college and my parents never even talked about me going to college after high school. I thought if I went to college I will make more money and be more attractive to employers.

Interview question #1 and the student responses are summarized in the table below.

Table 7

Interview Question #1 and Participant Responses

Question #1: Why did you decide to go to college? Follow-up: Who or what influenced your decision to go to college? Did any particular instructors, advisors, other students, friends, family members, websites, or other resources influence your decision?

Participant Response	Community College Student										Transfer Student					
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• first-generation student	■			■	■				■		■					
• self-motivation/pride	■			■							■		■			
• career/income potential		■	■			■	■	■	■			■	■	■	■	■
• job requires credential				■	■	■		■		■			■			
• advisor/teacher inspired	■								■							
• college recruiter guided								■								
• friend/family influenced	■	■		■	■	■	■				■	■	■	■	■	■

All seven of the university transfer students and two-thirds of the community college students who participated in the study were influenced to enroll in college by their parents, grandparents, friends, spouses, and peers. For example Student M stated:

I decided to go to college because I wanted to make a little bit of extra money, have a comfortable lifestyle, and have a better quality of life. I was influenced by my peers in high school when they were all applying for college.

In another example, Student O explained, “I really didn’t know what I wanted to do when I graduated high school, but I didn’t want to go straight into the workforce. I was influenced by my peers who were going to college.” The study participants seemed to be influenced by their peers who enrolled in college and family members who had earned a college credential.

In addition to the influence of friends and family members, three of the community college students were also influenced to go to college by a high school teacher, college academic advisor, or college admissions counselor. For instance, Student G described his experience:

I dropped out of high school ten years ago and took my GED exam three years ago. I aced the exam and the lady (at the testing center) asked me why I wanted to be a trucker. I work in a restaurant and love cooking, and I used to do construction work and carpentry. But everywhere I went I was the grunt. I need a career that I can advance in.

When examining the reasons that students chose to go to college, some of the variations of the responses between the two subgroups may be due to the community college students joining the workforce shortly after high school and working full-time. Nearly half of the community college students were first-generation college students who mentioned the lack of family support and their own self-motivation to enroll in college. This was in contrast with the university transfer students who were often working part-time and had fewer job, marital, and family obligations. Additionally, the university transfer students seemed to have a more supportive network of family

members and friends who informed their college and career planning decisions. For example, Student F explained:

When I was 30 and working at a bank, I decided to go back to college and try making something of my life instead of making horrible money and not doing anything. My boyfriend encouraged me to go back to school.

Additional factors that influenced the decision-making experiences for the study participants related to the reasons they chose to go to college included the potential for better jobs, increased income levels, and the opportunity for career advancement. The majority of the participants in the study, regardless of student subgroup, were encouraged to go to college by their classmates, friends, spouses, and family members. A few of the students in both subgroups were self-motivated to enroll in college while many of the community college students and one university transfer student were motivated to pursue college because of their interest in a career that required a college credential.

Research question #1 decision-making experiences: Interview question #2.

When assessing the reasons that undergraduate students decided to enroll at the college or university they were currently attending, the majority of respondents in both subgroups reported the low cost of tuition, acceptance of transfer credits, or admission to a degree program despite prior poor academic performance as their primary reasons for choosing which higher education institution to attend. For example, Student A explained:

In high school, I didn't have a great GPA, I never took the SATs, and I'm not really good at school, so I wanted to try out the least expensive way to

college before I really commit. I don't really have a huge support system at home, so it was just kind of my own decision.

Another influence for both subgroups of students included the proximity between their home and the institution they were attending. In this case, two-thirds of the community college students and over half of the university transfer students mentioned the short commuting distance as a factor that influenced their decision to enroll at the higher education institution. For example, Student F stated, "I went to the community college because my boyfriend was graduating from there, they are cheap, and they are virtual. I'm primarily a virtual learner, and the campus is not too far away from where I live."

Additionally, four of the community college students and one university transfer student chose to enroll at their current college or university based on the opportunity to explore career options at a low cost. For example, Student J explained, "I originally enrolled and started classes at a different university, but my financial aid was shy of covering \$9,000. My family has terrible credit, and I didn't qualify for a private loan, so I had to pick a different school." Furthermore, the community college students mentioned the availability of the desired major as a reason for enrolling at their chosen college more frequently than the university transfer students.

Some of the decision-making experiences of the study participants seemed to be influenced by accessibility. For example, two of the community college students decided to attend their current institution based on the ability to complete classes online at their convenience. For instance, Student C stated, "The community college is local and its low cost. I'm married and have three children, so money is a factor. I'm doing

the degree online, but figured the local community college is as good as anybody.”

Interview question #2 and the student responses are summarized in the following table.

Table 8

Interview Question #2 and Participant Responses

Interview Question #2: Why did you decide to enroll at your current college or university? Follow-up: Who or what influenced your decision to choose the college or university that you are currently attending? Did any particular instructors, advisors, other students, friends, family members, websites, or other resources influence your decision?

Participant Response	Community College Student									Transfer Student							
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	
• access/affordability	■	■	■	■		■				■	■	■	■			■	■
• short commute	■	■	■		■	■	■					■	■	■	■		
• online courses			■			■											
• explore careers				■	■		■		■						■		
• small campus													■				
• college admissions																	■
• friend/family influence			■		■	■		■		■		■		■	■		

Another influence on the student decisions, regardless of student subgroup, included people who were close to them. Most students in both subgroups decided to enroll at their current college or university based on input from their friends, peers, spouses, and family members. For example, Student O explained:

At the community college I had lots of credits but not good grades. The university was the first to accept me and get back to me quickly. The price was affordable, and I had one friend already going there who recommended it to me.

In another example, Student F stated, “My boyfriend encouraged me to go back to school.”

Additional factors that influenced the decision-making experiences for a few of the university transfer students included a college admissions recruiter, the small university campus environment, and the ability to transfer the maximum number of community college credits to the university. For instance, Student P explained:

I transferred from a community college, and it was the only school that accepted all of my 60 credits. Other schools would accept only 33 credits. The admissions counselor was so helpful and persuaded me to come to the university.

Surprisingly, some of the university transfer students who lived within a short commuting distance of multiple higher education institutions chose to relocate up to five hours away from their hometown to enroll at a university with lower tuition rates, especially when all of their community college credits transferred to the bachelor’s degree program. For instance, Student L commented:

When I realized that the university was the cheapest one I had seen, I let my boyfriend know I would be going to school five hours away. He graduated from the same university in 2012, but did not expect me to move this far away for school.

This observation was unexpected since the universities in close proximity of some of the participants’ homes had established articulation agreements with numerous community colleges that were anticipated to be more supportive of student transfer. Despite these existing partnerships, the study participants identified stronger

articulation agreements at other locations within the state. They enrolled at the institution that would accept all of their transfer credits rather than remaining in their hometown and repeating courses to complete a bachelor's degree.

Study participants who were seeking a short commuting distance were typically caring for dependents and employed full-time. In contrast, the students who chose to enroll based on the cost of tuition seemed to research the institutions throughout the state that offered majors related to their career interests. The students in both subgroups seemed to be making decisions based on lower costs, convenience, and acceptance of transfer credits. When making decisions about which college to attend, the students in both subgroups who participated in this study seemed to make decisions based on the best value for earning a credential that would support their career goals.

Research question #1 decision-making experiences: Interview question #3.

When examining the motives that influenced students to choose their degree major, most of the participants in both subgroups chose their degree major based on a keen interest in their chosen career field. Some of the students selected their degree major based on career interests as early as middle school, while other students chose their major based on job knowledge they had acquired through work experience. For instance, Student P fell in love with video production in ninth grade and was majoring in communications and electronic media, while Student C enjoyed being a bookkeeper for a building materials company and was majoring in accounting.

Interview question #3 and the student responses are illustrated in Table 9 on the next page.

Table 9

Interview Question #3 and Participant Responses

Interview Question #3: Why did you choose your degree major? Follow-up: Who or what influenced your decision to choose your degree major? Did any particular instructors, advisors, other students, friends, family members, websites, or other resources influence your decision?

Participant Response	Community College Student									Transfer Student						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• interest in career field	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■	■	■		■
• job security potential				■			■	■		■						
• short commute	■							■								
• shortest path to degree															■	
• program reputation							■							■		
• friend/family influence				■										■		

A variety of other factors also seemed to influence the decisions of the students in both of the subgroups. For instance, a few of the students selected their degree major based on personal life situations, and the desire to help people. One student in each subgroup was influenced to choose her degree major based on the program’s reputation. Additionally, one student in each subgroup was inspired to select her degree major based on input from friends, family members, and coworkers. There were also some variations among the decision-making experiences of the participants in the study related to choosing their degree major. Three of the community college students were motivated to choose their degree major by the prospect of job security in their local community compared with only one university transfer student who mentioned job security. For example, Student H explained, “I switched majors from culinary arts to

network administration because I couldn't go too far from home because I had a 1-year-old son at the time, and I wasn't going to make decent money working in restaurants.”

Student D added, “I got to learn about the medical professions when my niece was born. Nursing has good job placement rates and job security compared to other jobs in the area.”

One of the university transfer students surprisingly selected his major based on the general education courses he had completed at the community college and the most direct path toward finishing a bachelor's degree. Student O explained:

I'm majoring in sociology because my financial aid was going to get cut off after five semesters at the community college, so this was the closest degree major I could choose based on the credits I had earned and keep my financial aid.

In fact, some students chose their degree major based on the desire to avoid math, science, and language requirements that they perceived as challenging. For instance, Student M explained, “I chose social work because my first major was physical therapy, but I'm not good with science classes, chemistry, and things like that.” In another example, Student K mentioned:

I changed majors from criminology to secondary education English. I'm terrible at Spanish and didn't want to take more language classes to complete a bachelor's degree. I have a child, so if I become a teacher, I could have the summers and holidays off.

Additionally, two of the community college students chose their degree major based on the short commuting distance between their home and the college campus. For

instance, Student A mentioned, “I originally majored in psychology, but I didn’t like research and I couldn’t get all of the classes (I needed) at the satellite campus near me.”

The student approaches of choosing a major based on prior completion of general education courses or on avoiding courses that were perceived as difficult were unexpected. It was anticipated that the undergraduate students would make decisions based on their career interests and employment opportunities. Instead, a few of the study participants illustrated that undergraduate students sometimes make decisions based on the path of least resistance. This observation of the student decision-making experience may have resulted from a lack of information or limited student planning. In some cases, the study participants may have enrolled in programs that seemed interesting, but changed majors when they realized the difficulty level of the course material. In other cases, it seemed as if the students didn’t plan their educational pathway, then selected degree options based on advisor recommendations when they faced a crisis such as running out of financial aid.

The life experiences and limited income potential of the community college students seemed to drive their decisions to choose degree majors and careers that would provide more job security and increased income potential in their local communities. In comparison, the students who had transferred to a university tended to select their degree major based on personal interests. Example majors of the community college students who participated in the study included nursing, social science, accounting, network administration, architecture, and engineering. By way of comparison, example majors of university transfer students who participated in the study included

communications and electronic media, secondary education, sociology, social work, recreation management, and Spanish professional. The breadth of degree majors was limited by the small sample population size for this study.

The majority of the students who participated in the study, regardless of student subgroup, chose their degree major based on their interest in a specific career field. Other factors that seemed to influence the student decisions included the potential for job security in the local region, the program's reputation, and input from friends and family members. A few of the students were influenced by the majors offered at the campus that was closest to their residence and the quickest route toward earning a degree based on the transfer credits they had earned.

Research question #1 decision-making experiences: Interview question #11.

When examining if there was anything else that students wanted to share about their decision-making experiences related to choosing their degree and career options, most of the participants in both student subgroups described the positive aspects that they liked about college, such as affordability, proximity to their home, and helpful professors. For example, Student E commented, "Overall, it's been fairly easy to proceed with my education. Everyone I approached at the community college provided some insightfulness that led me where I needed to be." In fact, two of the students reported that enrollment in college was one of the best decisions they had ever made. Interview question #11 and summaries of the student responses are shown in Table 10 on the next page.

Table 10

Interview Question #11 and Participant Responses

Interview Question #11: Is there anything else that you would like me to know about your experiences related to choosing your degree and career options at the college or university?

Participant Response	Community College Student									Transfer Student						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• positive experience	■	■	■	■	■					■		■		■	■	■
• access/affordability	■			■								■				
• career exploration			■	■		■										
• regret some decisions						■	■						■	■		
• some college frustration					■	■	■	■		■	■				■	
• no response to question									■							

Another of the similarities between the participants in the two student subgroups included regrets about some of the previous decisions they had made on their college journeys. Two of the community college students and two of the university transfer students expressed regrets related to missing out on social activities, transitioning to the university before earning an associate degree and struggling with online math classes. For example, Student M mentioned, “I think if I could do it over again, I would have stayed at the community college and graduated with an associate degree before transferring to the university.” In another example, Student F explained, “For virtual students, if you think you’re going to struggle with a class, try to get it in a classroom if you can. In retrospect, I should have taken all of my math classes in a classroom.”

Additionally, four of the community college students and three of the university transfer students who interviewed for this study described frustrations that they encountered in college. Some of the challenges included community college feeling similar to high school and the culture shock of transitioning from a small college to a large university. For example, Student K explained:

At the community college, everybody drove to school. Since I drive 40 minutes to the university, I don't have the luxury to run down to the library or meet for group work. The university professors don't entirely understand student commuters.

Another student was frustrated as a result of class disruptions caused by high school students who were integrated into classes at a community college campus.

When responding to this open-ended question, most of the students chose to share either a positive or a negative characteristic that had resulted from their college and career decision-making experiences. The participant responses about their decision-making experiences, regardless of student subgroup, were consistent with their previous responses related to the reasons that students chose to go to college, motives for selecting their degree major, and what factors influenced their decisions. For instance, about one-third of the students mentioned being motivated to explore career options at a low cost and the ability to attend college close to their residence. In another example, two-thirds of the participants in this study in both student subgroups reported having a positive experience in college. At the same time, nearly half of the participants in both subgroups described frustrations they had experienced while enrolled in college and some regrets they had related to their college and career planning decisions.

Research question #1 decision-making experiences: Summary of the observations. The first research question examined *why do undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree decide to transfer or not transfer to a bachelor's degree program at a university?* When considering the reasons that community college students decided to transfer or not transfer to a bachelor's degree program, the study found a variety of motives and influences that seemed to impact the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students. Most of the participant decisions, regardless of student subgroup, were motivated by the opportunity to establish a career that would lead to improved job prospects, increased income levels, and future career advancement options in their chosen career field. Also, most of the participants in both of the student subgroups made enrollment decisions based on the low cost of tuition at the Pennsylvania community colleges and the state system of higher education institutions. Additionally, the lower cost of tuition combined with the higher acceptance rate of transfer credits at the universities influenced a few of the university transfer students to relocate up to five hours from their hometown to enroll in college. Some of the university transfer students discovered they could complete their bachelor's degree in their desired major for a lower cost at a state university than they could have earned the same degree at their local higher education institutions.

The majority of the participant decisions, regardless of student subgroup, were also motivated by admission to a degree program despite prior poor academic performance. Students in both subgroups who had lower grade point averages, from either high school or community college, were grateful for the opportunity to have a

second chance to work toward their career aspirations. Additionally, more than half of the participant decisions, regardless of student subgroup, were influenced by the proximity between the student's home and the higher education institution he or she was attending. In fact, even the students who were completing courses online enrolled at the community college that was closest to their home. Furthermore, a few participants, regardless of student subgroup, were motivated to follow the most direct path toward completing a bachelor's degree. These students surprisingly made career decisions based on their desire to avoid enrolling in math, science, chemistry, or language courses that they perceived to be difficult. This observation was not anticipated to be a factor since it was not mentioned in the previous transfer student research findings.

When analyzing the reasons that community college students decided to transfer or not transfer to a bachelor's degree program, a variety of factors impacted the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students. In this study, most of the participants in both student subgroups made their decisions about college and career planning using a practical approach. The majority of student decisions for both subgroups were driven by the desire to establish a career at a low cost that would result in a good income along with career advancement potential. Many of the participants chose professions in fields that were personally interesting to them and enrolled in higher education institutions that were within commuting distance of their residence. Most of the participant decisions, regardless of student subgroup, used an informal approach to making decisions.

The participant decisions, regardless of student subgroup, were often influenced by academic advisors, family members, spouses, and friends. In fact, the students who participated in the study mentioned their academic advisor more than any other person they relied on for information throughout the interview process. Additionally, the student decisions seemed to be influenced by lower tuition rates that were offered at the higher education institutions where they enrolled. For many of the participants, their enrollment decisions were also influenced by the close proximity between their residence and the college campus. Finally, some students made their college and career planning decisions based on an offer of admission to a college or university despite prior poor academic performance or the largest acceptance rate of their transfer credits. These students seemed to choose the most direct path they could identify toward earning a career credential in their chosen field.

When examining the reasons that community college students decided to transfer or not transfer to a bachelor's degree program at a university, four themes emerged that were related to the influence of a family support system and the motivation of career opportunities. Additionally, the low cost of tuition and acceptance rate of transfer credits emerged as common themes in relationship to college affordability.

Research question #1 decision-making experiences: Emergent theme #1 family support system. The students with a *family support system* seemed to be motivated to make college and career planning decisions during or shortly after high school. These participants received encouragement from family members to pursue their career interests. In contrast, the students who had little to no family support system

in connection with enrolling in college delayed their college and career planning decisions until 2-10 years after leaving high school. The students who had a strong family support system often mentioned the influence of their parents, grandparents, spouses, and friends.

Research question #1 decision-making experiences: Emergent theme #2 career opportunities. The potential for improved *career opportunities* also inspired the students to enroll in college and earn a career credential. A majority of the students who participated in the study, regardless of student subgroup, made decisions to enroll in college and choose a degree major to enhance their career opportunities. The participants were motivated to establish careers that would lead to better job prospects, increased income levels, and future chances for advancement. Some students mentioned being motivated by friends through social media when they observed peers who were enrolled in college or had acquired good paying jobs after college when compared to their friends working in fast food restaurants and struggling with low wages.

Research question #1 decision-making experiences: Emergent theme #3 low cost of tuition. The *low cost of tuition* also emerged as a theme that influenced the student decisions. Most of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, were inspired to make college and career planning decisions by the low cost of tuition. For instance, five of the community college students mentioned the low cost of tuition in their local area that allowed them to commute to campus and to explore career options for a low cost. Additionally, some of the students who participated in the study enrolled in community college as a springboard toward earning a bachelor's degree, while others moved across the state to enroll in a higher education institution that offered lower

tuition rates than the universities near their hometown. Finally, two of the participants enrolled in community college after earning an associate degree to complete upper-division courses toward obtaining a bachelor's degree.

Research question #1 decision-making experiences: Emergent theme #4 acceptance rate of transfer credits. Another emergent theme that motivated the college student transfer decisions included the *acceptance rate of transfer credits*. The higher rate of acceptance of credits that transferred from a community college to a university resulted in lower expenses and less student loan debt among the participants. Several of the university transfer students who participated in the study described how they used website portals to research which community college courses would transfer to universities throughout the state. The students often decided to enroll at the university that accepted all of their transfer credits and offered a degree program that supported their career interests.

The following section includes a synthesis of the responses to the interview questions that are associated with the second research question. The research question compares the participant responses of the community college student subgroup with the responses of the university transfer student subgroup regarding their decisions related to engagement in activities and use of support resources.

Addressing Research Question #2: Differences in Student Engagement and Participation Decisions

The second research question investigated *what are the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who transferred to a bachelor's degree program at a university*

when compared to those who did not transfer to a bachelor's degree program? The related interview questions examined the period in time when the study participants decided to complete an associate or bachelor's degree, whether or not students chose to participate in a first-year experience or student orientation, whether or not students decided to participate in tutoring sessions or study groups, and whether or not students chose to participate in sports teams or student activities. Additionally, if students decided to engage in these activities, the interview questions assessed how participation may have helped the students in college.

Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Interview question #7. When assessing the period in time when students chose to complete an associate or bachelor's degree, the responses were very different among the students in the two subgroups. Only 2 of the nine community college students compared with 3 of the seven university transfer students decided to pursue a bachelor's degree while enrolled in high school. For example, university transfer Student P stated, "I knew when I was a senior in high school that I would complete a bachelor's degree, and that community college would be a springboard for me to get to a 4-year school." In another example, Student E added, "I have always wanted a bachelor's degree; it's just a personal preference. I don't want to look back and think about going to school again 10-20 years from now." In contrast, community college Student F stated, "I have fifteen years in business experience from the banking industry. I'm definitely going to finish my associate degree. After recently meeting with a career counselor, I'd like to pursue a bachelor's degree."

Five of the community college students compared with only one of the university transfer students decided to pursue an associate or bachelor's degree 2-10 years after high school. In fact, one of the community college students was a high school drop out with ten years of work experience, while another of the students had been employed at a bank for twelve years before enrolling in community college. For instance, Student J explained:

I always knew that I was going to get an associate degree. There have been lots of ups and downs throughout the years of starting at the community college. If my boyfriend was not going to the university, I may not have transferred.

Additionally, only 2 of the nine community college students compared with 3 of the seven university transfer students decided to pursue an associate or bachelor's degree while enrolled at the community college. For example, Student O stated, "I originally intended to get just an associate degree, but after five semesters at the community college, I was burned out. So I figured I'd just tough it out and get a bachelor's degree." Only two-thirds of the community college students were planning to pursue a bachelor's degree at some point in the future, compared with all of the university transfer students who were planning to complete a bachelor's degree. In fact, 3 of the community college students decided to complete an associate degree and enter the workforce. For example, Student B explained, "I saved money to complete an associate degree and thought I would transfer to a university. But I have new job opportunities in the construction industry that may not require a bachelor's degree." Finally, Student I decided to pursue a master's degree after being enrolled at the community college for three years. She explained, "I just recently decided that I wanted

a master’s degree because it would give me more job opportunities.” The student responses to interview question #7 are summarized in the table below.

Table 11

Interview Question #7 and Participant Responses

Interview Question #7: At what point did you consider completing an associate or bachelor's degree? Follow-up: Did any particular instructors, advisors, other students, friends, family members, websites, or other resources influence your decision?

Participant Response	Community College Student									Transfer Student						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• during high school	■				■								■	■		■
• years after high school		■	■	■		■	■					■				
• during community college		■				■				■	■					■
• associate degree now	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■							
• bachelor’s degree now										■	■	■	■	■	■	■
• bachelor’s degree later	■			■	■	■	■	■								
• master’s degree in future									■							
• shortest path to degree			■											■	■	
• friend/family influence				■	■					■		■	■			■

The influences on student decisions related to choosing the type of degree to pursue also varied somewhat among the two student subgroups. One of the community college students and 2 of the university transfer students were influenced by tuition cost savings that would result from following the shortest path toward earning a degree. These participants were motivated to decrease their student loan debt and enter the workforce more quickly by completing a credential that would provide better income potential. Additionally, friends and family members influenced the decision-making experiences of 4 of the university transfer students when compared with only 2 of the

community college students who experienced the same influence. For example, university transfer Student M stated, “People around me and my friends were going away to college, and I decided that I wanted to go away too.”

When examining the period in time when students chose to complete an associate or bachelor’s degree, some of the variations of the responses between the two student subgroups may be due to their socioeconomic status and first-generation college student standing. For example, the community college students, many of which were first-generation college students who were seeking a career credential, often joined the workforce after completing high school and delayed their decision to enroll in an associate or bachelor’s degree program. First-generation students often lack the information and family support needed to make informed career decisions (Handel, 2017). On the other hand, the university transfer students, many of which had family members who had gone to college, typically decided to enroll in a bachelor’s degree during high school or while enrolled in community college.

Finally, another factor that influenced the decision-making experiences for the university transfer students related to when they decided to pursue an associate or bachelor’s degree included peer pressure. Some of the students reported that shortly after high school they were influenced to pursue a bachelor’s degree when their friends who had enrolled in college seemed to be having more fun than their friends who were working in low wage jobs and not attending college. Some of the study participants reported that they were influenced to enroll in college after viewing the posts their friends made on social media. For example, Student J explained:

After I was out of high school for six months, I realized that I didn't want to work in dead-end jobs forever. My friends who were in college were having a better experience than my friends who were working in fast food places.

In another example, Student L mentioned:

My sister and my boyfriend were both in law school and my friends were finishing college. After working as an au pair for two years, I realized that I had no credentials and would have to work as a server in a restaurant.

The peers and siblings of recent high school graduates seemed to influence their decision to pursue a bachelor's degree.

Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Interview question #8. When identifying whether or not students chose to participate in a first-year experience or student orientation, the students in the two subgroups provided a variety of responses. Fourteen of the 16 students who interviewed for this study attended a student orientation before or during the first term at their current college. Both the community college and university transfer students who participated in this study seemed to value the benefits of participating in a new student orientation. For example, Student G recalled, "I attended both the orientation and the first-year experience when I came to the community college from another 2-year school. I liked to meet some of the people and teachers that I'd be in classes with."

Additionally, the majority of the participants in both student subgroups found the orientation beneficial for obtaining information and touring the campus. For example, Student K explained:

I recently did the orientation when I transferred to the university. My favorite part was that they had a separate meeting for commuters to tell us where to park.

There's probably 20 different parking lots, and it was the most helpful thing.

Interview question #8 and the student responses are summarized in the table below.

Table 12

Interview Question #8 and Participant Responses

Interview Question #8: In your first term at your current college, why did you choose to participate (or not participate) in the first-year experience or student orientation? Follow-up: If you participated in a first-year experience or student orientation, describe how it helped you in college.

Participant Response	Community College Student										Transfer Student					
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• get info; tour campus		■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■			■
• meet students/faculty							■		■				■			
• join clubs/activities				■												
• navigate online class			■													
• attended; not helpful	■															
• didn't attend; conflict														■	■	

A few of the participants in each of the student subgroups found the orientation helpful for other reasons. Two of the community college students and one university transfer student found the student orientation useful for meeting other students and faculty members. For instance, Student E stated, “I did the orientation just to get to know campus. It was nice because I got to see the campus and I had my questions answered there.” Additionally, one community college student found the orientation helpful for getting involved with campus activities and learning study skills while one

community college student found the orientation useful for navigating the online course layout. For example, Student C reflected, “I was so glad to do an on-campus orientation and then an online orientation too. Both were helpful to establish the basics.” In another example, Student P stated, “I attended orientation over the summer before I transferred. I wanted to see what the campus was like since I had visited in the winter and get information on financial aid.”

One of the community college students who attended the orientation did not find it helpful for obtaining information. The student who didn’t find the orientation beneficial commented that the information provided at the meeting was available on the college website. Finally, two of the university transfer students did not participate in a first-year experience or student orientation, compared to all of the community college students who chose to attend an orientation. For example, Student N stated, “I arrived after the new incoming students and did not get to participate in the orientation or new student activities.”

When identifying whether or not students chose to participate in a first-year experience or student orientation, all of the community college students and five of seven (71%) of the university transfer students chose to participate in orientation events. The students chose to participate in orientation events for a variety of reasons. First, the students, regardless of subgroup, were motivated to obtain general information, tour the campus, and meet faculty members and fellow-students. Next, a few of the community college students participated in the orientation to learn study skills and how to navigate the online course layout. Finally, one of the community college students used the orientation as a gateway for getting involved with campus activities.

While most students chose to participate in a first-year experience or student orientation, the students in the two subgroups attended for different reasons. The community college students seemed more interested in learning study skills, how to navigate online courses, and how to get involved with campus activities. In comparison, the university transfer students seemed more interested in learning about the campus, where to park, and general information. The slight variations in the responses among the two student subgroups may be due to individual student needs at the time of their participation. For example, most of the students benefited from receiving general information while some students seemed to be seeking more specialized knowledge that would assist them with navigating their education journey. The slight differences in the responses among the two student subgroups may have also been related to how much the students valued receiving the information that was provided.

Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Interview question #9. When determining whether or not students chose to participate in tutoring sessions or study groups, two-thirds of the community college students and nearly half of the university transfer students who participated in the study did not engage in tutoring sessions, study groups, or supplemental learning experiences. For example, Student J stated, “I did not participate in tutoring, and I don’t think I ever will. I’m pretty good in classes and don’t need a tutor.” In another example, Student G reported, “I’m a tutor at the community college, but did not participate in tutoring for myself. There’s a girl that I know who had almost the same classes with me for three years, and she helps me if I have questions.” Finally, Student P explained, “I didn’t go to tutoring. I think the tutoring sessions are more catered to our gen eds. I was done

with those before I came to the university, so I didn't need tutoring." Interview question #9 and the student responses are summarized in the following table.

Table 13

Interview Question #9 and Participant Responses

Interview Question #9: At your current college, why did you choose to participate (or not participate) in tutoring sessions, study groups, or supplemental learning experiences? Follow-up: Describe how the tutoring sessions, study groups, or supplemental learning experiences helped you in college.

Participant Response	Community College Student										Transfer Student					
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• math/economics tutor		■				■							■			■
• writing/language tutor											■		■			
• tutoring not helpful			■												■	
• didn't need tutoring	■			■	■		■	■	■	■		■				■
• served as a tutor		■					■					■				

Two of the community college students and three of the university transfer students who participated in tutoring sessions found them to be helpful. The students who participated in tutoring sessions reported that the academic support helped them with math, economics, writing, and language courses. For example, Student F explained, "I've done some tutoring because of my math skills, and it was beneficial. Also, my professor will call and spend an hour with me going over economics to make sure I get it." In another example Student B reported, "Math is a horrible subject to suffer through. The tutoring helped to make sure I understood the information. I was also a tutor for the architecture department because of my previous experience with drafting and computer-aided design." Finally, Student M stated, "I have participated in

a lot of study sessions; some were organized by the university and others were just with my peers. I actually signed up for tutoring even if I don't need it.”

Incidentally, two of the community college students and one of the university transfer students had served as tutors at their campus. For instance, Student L stated, “I'm a tutor and help students with Spanish. I think the tutoring services are great, and if I need help in a specific subject, I'll go ahead and ask for help.” All of the students who had served as tutors described tutoring as a valuable service for their peers.

Student decisions related to participating in tutoring sessions or study groups seemed to be related to whether or not they had a need for this resource to support their completion of specific college courses. There were only slight variations in the decision-making experiences for students in the two subgroups. The students who did participate typically needed assistance with a specific subject such as math or language courses. The variations in the responses among the individual participants in this study seemed to result from the individual student needs at the time when they were enrolled in courses that they perceived to be difficult. The majority of the participants in both of the student subgroups mentioned that they did not participate in tutoring sessions or study groups because they did not need these services. The students who did participate in tutoring found these services helpful for supporting their academic success.

Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Interview question #10. When identifying whether or not students chose to participate in clubs, social organizations, sports teams, or other student activities, fewer than half of the community college students participated in any clubs or student activities compared to all seven university transfer students who participated in

extracurricular activities. For example, Student A stated, “I’m the president of the LGBT club and have been in the club for three years. Also, I help my psychology professor with simulations and experiments on campus.” Interview question #10 and the student responses are summarized in the table below.

Table 14

Interview Question #10 and Participant Responses

Interview Question #10: At your current college, why did you choose to participate (or not participate) in clubs, social organizations, sports teams, or other student activities? Follow-up: If you participated in clubs, teams, or activities, describe how they helped you in college.

Participant Response	Community College Student									Transfer Student						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• personal interest/fitness										■	■		■	■	■	■
• friendships/networking											■	■		■	■	■
• student leadership role	■											■				■
• faculty research assistant	■															
• club was not helpful		■							■							
• didn’t join clubs; conflict				■	■	■	■	■	■							

The community college students who decided not to participate in clubs and student activities reported work schedule conflicts that limited their ability to participate in extra curricular activities as the primary reason to forego these optional events. For example, Student G explained, “I’m not really doing anything because I’m burned out. I also was working close to full-time to pay bills and whatever, so I didn’t have time to get involved.” A few of the community college students who participated in extracurricular activities didn’t find this engagement resource to be beneficial. For

example, Student B stated, “I was involved in the architecture club for one semester. It really was not helpful in any way.”

Students who engaged in clubs or student activities typically found the activities to be helpful. For example, Student N explained, “I’m in the outing club and the climbing club. We just did whitewater rafting, climbing, and hiking in West Virginia. It helps with networking with the older students.” In another example, Student K stated, “There is a person who offers a commuter breakfast and commuter lunch every month which is nice. The food is free, and you get to see who else is driving to campus.”

Additionally, the participants in both student subgroups who were engaged in clubs, social organizations, sports teams, or other activities reported their involvement to be helpful for meeting people, forming friendships, improving public speaking, staying physically fit, and gaining a better understanding of their personal and career interests. For instance, Student J mentioned, “I’m in the residence hall club for the dorm where I live and participated in cheerleading. The clubs help me to make friends and cheerleading helps me to stay physically fit.”

Student decisions related to participation in clubs, social organizations, sports teams, or other student activities varied among the two student subgroups. The university transfer students who participated in this study were more engaged in extracurricular activities when compared with the community college students. Some of the differences in the responses between the two student subgroups may be due to their first-generation college student standing and life roles they took on immediately following high school. For example, the community college students, many of which

were first-generation college students, often joined the workforce, got married, or had children following high school and had less time available for participating in extracurricular activities when they enrolled in college. First-generation college students often lack knowledge and family support systems for making college and career planning decisions (Handel, 2017). Additionally, the university transfer students were often living on campus, while the community college students were commuting to campus. The commuter students did not have as much time available to participate in extracurricular activities as the residential students.

Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Interview questions #1, #2, #3, #7, and #11.

The students who were already working or caring for dependents when they enrolled in college seemed to have limited time available to participate in first-year experiences, tutoring, and extracurricular activities. For instance, some of the students who participated in the study were working in retail or construction industry jobs, caring for multiple children, and commuting to campus. The students who had other commitments seemed to make decisions related to participation in activities based on the need for information. For example, if the students perceived that they needed to learn about the campus where they were enrolling, needed help writing a paper or completing an assignment, or needed to learn about career opportunities, they were more likely to participate in the student orientation, tutoring, or extracurricular activities. On the contrary, if they perceived that the activities or events would not provide them with information or resources that would support their success in college, they were less likely to participate.

A few of the study participants in both of the student subgroups expressed regrets related to missing out on social activities, transitioning to the university before earning an associate degree and struggling with online math classes. For instance, Student N stated, “If I had moved to the university on the correct arrival day, I would have a better friend base, but left that slip through the cracks.” In another example, Student J stated, “When I went to the community college, I was only able to go to classes at night and missed out on the clubs and social things they had when I was at work. When I transferred to the university, I didn’t work full-time and knew that I wanted to do social things.”

The decisions related to engagement in activities for most of the students who participated in the study seemed to be influenced by academic advisors, friends, family members, and co-workers. For example, Student N was majoring in recreation management and followed the advice of family members, fellow summer camp counselors, and upper-division class members in her major when making decisions related to participation and engagement in activities. In another example, Student D was majoring in nursing and mentioned that her brother was a nurse and that her sister was enrolled in college. The student relied on her siblings for advice related to choosing activities that would impact her success toward entering the health care field and becoming employed at the local hospital.

Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Summary of the observations. The second research question assessed *what are the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who transferred to a bachelor’s degree*

program at a university when compared to those who did not transfer to a bachelor's degree program? When examining the differences in the decision-making experiences, the study found a few similarities, but mostly some variations, when comparing the two different student subgroups.

A few similarities were observed when comparing the decision-making experiences of community college and university transfer students. For example, almost all of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, attended a student orientation before or during their first term at their current college. The students in both subgroups found the orientation helpful for obtaining information and touring the campus.

Surprisingly, two-thirds of the community college students and nearly half of the university transfer students who participated in the interviews did not engage in tutoring sessions, study groups, or supplemental learning experiences. The participants who took advantage of tutoring, regardless of student subgroup, reported that the tutoring sessions helped them with math, economics, writing, and language courses. The majority of the research participants did not seem to perceive that they needed additional classroom support, tutoring, or studying assistance.

Despite the similarities in the decision-making experiences of the community college and university transfer students, numerous differences were also observed in the approaches to decision-making among the participants in the two student subgroups. First, two of the university transfer students did not participate in a first-year experience or student orientation, in comparison to all 9 of the community college students who decided to attend. A few of the participating community college students found the new

student orientation helpful for meeting new people, compared to only one university transfer student who mentioned this benefit.

Additionally, the community college students found the orientation helpful for getting involved with campus activities, learning study skills, and navigating the online course layout. In contrast, none of the university transfer students mentioned these additional benefits. One of the community college students who did attend felt the orientation duplicated information that could have been retrieved from the college's website. Two of the community college students and one university transfer student served as tutors at their campus and described tutoring as a valuable service for their peers.

Next, five of the nine community college students (56%) did not participate in any clubs, social organizations, sports teams, or other student activities, compared to all seven of the university transfer students who participated in extracurricular activities. Students in both subgroups who participated in clubs or student activities typically found the events to be helpful for meeting people, forming friendships, improving public speaking, staying physically fit, and better understanding their personal and career interests. On the other hand, some of the community college students who participated in clubs and student activities did not find the events helpful. A few of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, expressed regret related to missing out on social activities while balancing college, work, and family obligations.

Additionally, the timing of the participant decisions varied somewhat among the two student subgroups. The university transfer students typically made their college and career planning decisions during high school, while the community college students

tended to join the workforce and begin caring for dependents immediately following high school. The other obligations and life roles of the community college student subgroup members following high school tended to delay their college and career planning decisions until 2-10 years after leaving high school.

When identifying whether or not students chose to participate in clubs, social organizations, sports teams, or other student activities, the responses also varied among the participants in the two student groups. As anticipated, the students enrolled at a university who transferred from a community college chose to be more engaged in clubs and student activities when compared to students enrolled at a community college. Community college students who successfully transferred to a bachelor's degree program and volunteered to participate in this study typically were more engaged in clubs and student activities when compared to community college students expressing interest in completing a bachelor's degree who chose not to enroll at a baccalaureate institution.

Analyzing the responses of the undergraduate students enrolled at higher education institutions in Pennsylvania who participated in this study illustrates the similarities and differences that can exist among a diverse group of students who began their education journey at a community college and expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree. Community college students who successfully transitioned to a bachelor's degree program at a university often made decisions related to their career aspirations while enrolled in high school. On the contrary, community college students who were enrolled in an associate degree program and expressed interest in a bachelor's

degree, but had not enrolled at a university, often struggled in low wage jobs and delayed their decision to enroll in college until 2-10 years after completing high school.

Not surprisingly, the community college students who participated in the study seemed to engage in activities only if they needed information or perceived the information as highly valuable. In contrast, the university transfer students who participated in the study seemed to engage in activities not only if they needed information, but also to network, serve as student leaders, and to learn skills that would help them in their careers. The community college students who were working full-time and caring for dependents had less time available to participate in extracurricular activities. Therefore, they typically opted out of these events. The university transfer students seemed to have more time available and placed a higher value on their participation in college extracurricular activities.

Several differences were also observed among the factors that influenced the decisions of the two student subgroups. First, four of the community college students were first-generation college students who had worked in low-income jobs, compared to only one university transfer student who mentioned being a first-generation college student. The first-generation college students who participated in the study tended to delay their decisions about college and career planning until 2-10 years after completing high school. This observation is in contrast with the university transfer students who typically enrolled at a community college within less than a year after high school graduation.

Next, four of the community college students were motivated by the opportunity to explore career options for a low cost, compared to only one university transfer

student who reported the ability to explore career interests in college. The more economical tuition rates at the community college allowed the participants to explore career options for a low cost while concurrently making progress toward earning a career credential. Additionally, five of the community college students were motivated to complete a credential that was required for their career, compared to only one university transfer student who mentioned the need to earn a credential that was crucial for job placement.

Furthermore, the participants in both student subgroups were motivated to make decisions about their degree major for a variety of different reasons. Three of the community college students chose their degree major for the prospect of job security in their local community, compared with only one university transfer student who mentioned the desire for job security in the local region. Some students made decisions based on career interests, while others chose their major based on job knowledge or the desire to help people.

When comparing the decision-making experiences of the participants in the two student subgroups, some slight differences included the timing of their career planning decisions and the community college student preference of exploring career options and degree majors that would lead to jobs in their local region. However, there were minimal differences in the decision-making experiences of university transfer students when compared to students enrolled at a community college who volunteered to participate in this study. The community college students who successfully transferred to a bachelor's degree program seemed to use a similar informal approach for making

decisions when compared with community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but chose not to enroll at a baccalaureate institution.

When assessing if there were differences in the decision-making experiences of community college students when compared to university transfer students, three more common themes emerged. The themes were related to the student need for information and the convenience of participation in activities. Additionally, the student regrets and frustrations with college transfer emerged as a theme in connection with engagement decisions.

Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Emergent theme #5 need for information. The student decisions related to participation in activities seemed to be inspired by the *need for information*. For example, most of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, were motivated to participate a new student orientation or tutoring sessions if they had a need for information that would support their academic success. If the students needed guidance or assistance, they were more likely to engage in an activity that would provide support. However, if the students did not perceive the need for information at the time when the event or activity was offered, they typically did not participate.

Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Emergent theme #6 convenience for students. Next, *convenience for students* emerged as a factor that influenced student decisions in connection with engagement and participation. For instance, the community college students who participated in the study typically enrolled in the college that was in the closest commuting distance of their residence. Some of the community college students made

enrollment decisions based on the availability of online classes, even when the college was in close proximity to their home. In another example, most of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, reported using online tools and website portals to obtain information. This self-service approach allowed the students to acquire knowledge to inform their decisions at a time that was convenient for them.

Research question #2 differences in student engagement and participation decisions: Emergent theme #7 regrets and frustrations. Another emergent theme that students in both subgroups mentioned included their *regrets and frustrations* with some of their college transfer decisions. For example, participants expressed regrets in connection with transferring to a university prior to earning a bachelor's degree, struggling through difficult online math classes, and not participating in college extracurricular activities. Some of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, vented frustrations related to community college seeming like high school, disruptive high school students enrolled in their college classes, and the inability to transfer all of their courses to a bachelor's degree.

The next section provides a synthesis of the responses to the interview questions that are associated with the third research question. The research question category combines the participant responses that are related to how resources are used to make college and career planning decisions.

Addressing Research Question #3: How Resources Influence Decisions

The third research question examined *how do resources and student support services influence college transfer and career planning decisions for undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who*

expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree or who have transferred to a bachelor's degree from a community college? The related interview questions examined information that students received before making college and career planning decisions, ways in which the students used the information they received, and the resources that students trusted to inform their decision-making. The interview questions also examined the types of factors that influenced the students when they made career planning decisions. When considering the ways in which higher education resources and student support services influence college and career planning decisions, the study identified several factors that influenced the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students.

Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Interview

question #4. When determining whether or not students had attended a degree option or career planning information session when enrolled at the community college, surprisingly only 2 of the sixteen students who interviewed for this study used these resources to help inform their career decision-making. For example, Student K explained, “I transferred from one community college to another community college, and changed majors. I did this on my own because I didn’t want to drive long distances after I got married.” Attending degree option or career planning information sessions seemed to be a low priority for a majority of the study participants.

Most students in both subgroups opted out of degree option or career planning information sessions because they had already decided on a career path or did not have an opportunity to attend because of work schedule conflicts. For instance, Student G explained, “I kind of avoided that stuff because I had already made my

decision about transfer to the engineering program at the university.” In another example, Student J stated, “I worked full-time and took classes at night. I was never available during the day when these career things were offered.” Interview question #4 and the sixteen student responses are summarized in the following table.

Table 15

Interview Question #4 and Participant Responses

Interview Question #4: At your community college, did you ever attend a degree option or career planning information session? Follow-up: If you did attend an information session, describe your experience related to community college services that you received to inform you about degree options and career planning.

Participant Response	Community College Student										Transfer Student					
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• explored career options					■							■				
• met with career counselor						■										
• conducted own research					■			■	■							
• didn't attend info session	■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■

The one community college student and one university transfer student who participated in the career planning information session did so to explore career options. For example, Student E mentioned, “I had to (seek career information) when I was changing majors. A lot of the research was on my own, but I did go to career services and job fairs on campus to get help.”

Four of the community college students mentioned alternative methods that they used for obtaining career planning information. One of the students met individually with a career counselor. For instance, Student F stated, “I talked to my advisor a few

times over the years about pathways, and this week I went to a career counselor, who was great.” Additionally, three of the community college students managed their own research to learn about degree options. For example, Student I conducted independent research and stated, “You can print the requirements for each major from the community college website. They have lists of everything you need and what will transfer.” The three community college students who managed their own research applied a self-service approach toward retrieving information that guided their decisions. None of the university transfer students indicated alternative ways that they had acquired career planning information.

Student decisions related to attending a career planning information session seemed to be influenced by a number of factors. First, the students who participated in this study, regardless of subgroup, were influenced by the limited time they had available. Because the students had other obligations and work schedule conflicts, most of them opted out of degree option or career planning information sessions. Next, since the students mentioned the need to balance school with other obligations, their decisions seemed to be influenced by the need for convenience. The students who conducted their own research about career options seemed to be influenced by using the web-based tools that provided the most convenient access at the time when they needed the information.

Finally, the student decisions related to attending a career planning information session seemed to be influenced by the individual student needs at a given point in time on their education journey. For instance, the community college students who conducted independent research and explored career options may have been considering

various job opportunities compared with the students who had already decided on a career plan. The majority of students, regardless of subgroup, seemed to have made some of the decisions about their career plans prior to enrolling in community college. In fact, only one of the students who participated in the study mentioned meeting with a career counselor. Juggling multiple priorities, having convenient access to resources, and making prior career plans all seemed to influence the student decision-making experiences related to choosing a degree major or career path.

Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Interview question #5. When assessing the ways in which students used information about bachelor's degree transfer options toward planning their degree program, participants provided a wide range of responses that were similar among both of the student subgroups. Most of the students used information about bachelor's degree transfer options to gain a better understanding of the degree requirements that would allow them to make informed decisions. Additionally, many of the students used the information to help them identify the shortest path toward earning a degree that would result in the reduction of their tuition, fees, and student loan debt.

Ten of the 16 students who participated in the interviews were assisted by an academic advisor, career counselor, or other university representative. For example, Student N explained:

Before I transferred, I had an advisor at the university who helped me to look at the university courses. I did my own research too, to see what exactly I needed to take, so I wasn't wasting my time or money.

In another example, Student F described her experience as, “A career counselor met with me and described how I could transfer my associate degree in business management to a bachelor’s degree in human resources.” Interview question #5 and a summary of the student responses are shown in the following table.

Table 16

Interview Question #5 and Participant Responses

Interview Question #5: At your current college, describe how you used information about bachelor's degree transfer options or a degree transfer plan toward planning your degree program.

Participant Response	Community College Student									Transfer Student						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• understand requirements	■	■		■	■	■			■			■	■		■	■
• make informed decisions		■			■	■		■		■				■	■	
• tuition cost savings		■							■					■		■
• didn't use transfer plan			■				■				■	■	■			

Many of the participants in both student subgroups investigated degree options using online college transfer tools to obtain information. For example, Student O stated, “I used a portal website at the university to map the credits I had, and I print one of these when I meet with an advisor.” In another example, Student I described his experience:

The community college has requirements for majors that you can print off of their website. They also have a certain part of their website where you can type in courses and see what transfers and what the course is called at the university.

Some of the students used a transfer guide to track courses to complete, attended a college transfer fair to learn about degree majors, or completed a community college course to learn about career options. For example, Student O explained, “What really helped me at the community college was a class called ‘Major Decision’ that helped me to figure out where I wanted to go and how to choose a major.” In another example, Student A stated, “The community college website has a whole tab dedicated to transfer degrees and the requirements to transfer. I use these online resources.”

Surprisingly, two of the community college students and three of the university transfer students did not use any degree transfer maps or online resources to plan for transfer to a bachelor’s degree program. For example, Student K commented:

I didn’t really think that far ahead and just assumed that everything you take in a 2-year degree would transfer (to a bachelor’s degree). I only learned that many of my credits wouldn’t transfer when I met with an advisor at the university.

Some of the study participants seemed to use resources if they perceived that they needed the information to inform their decisions. If the students in the study did not think the information would be helpful, they sometimes opted not to use the degree transfer maps and online resources that were designed to inform their decisions.

The majority of the students who participated in this study, regardless of student subgroup, used information about bachelor's degree transfer options to make informed decisions related to understanding which courses would transfer and which courses would allow them to complete their degree more quickly. Additionally, most of the students in both subgroups seemed to be motivated to complete only the required

courses that were needed to earn their degree. This strategy resulted in cost savings for most of the participants in this study since it allowed them to complete only the courses that were necessary to obtain a career credential.

Finally, many of the student decisions related to using transfer information toward planning their degree program may be due to the convenient access to both academic advisors and web portals. The students in both subgroups frequently mentioned their reliance on these sources for information and guidance throughout the interviews for this study. Making informed decisions, reducing the cost of earning a degree, and having convenient access to resources all seemed to influence the student decision-making experiences related to using information about bachelor's degree transfer options toward planning a degree program.

Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Interview question #6. When examining the people that students rely on to get information about credit transfer and course scheduling, most of the participants in both of the student subgroups trusted the professor who was assigned to be their academic advisor or a general advisor at the advising center on campus. In fact, throughout the interviews, students in both subgroups mentioned their academic advisor more than any other resource that informed their decision-making. For example, Student I stated, “I met with the advisor at the beginning of every semester, and she would help to rearrange my schedule, if needed, and tell me what courses would make the most sense to take in what order.” In another example, Student E explained, “The advisor at the community college will sit down with you, go over the transfer list for the school you want to transfer to, and review what you’ve already taken.”

One of the community college students and one of the university transfer students who relied on an academic advisor for information also trusted upper-division class members in their major, friends, and peers to learn more about credit transfer and course scheduling. For instance, Student H explained:

My wife used to work in admissions at the community college and about a year ago she started working in advising. I rely on her for most information, and she pointed me to somebody that advises network administration students.

In another example, Student N explained, “I have an academic advisor who is a professor in recreation management. I also talk to older students in the department about which classes to take.” Interview question #6 and the student responses are summarized in the following table.

Table 17

Interview Question #6 and Participant Responses

Interview Question #6: At your current college, who do you rely on to get information about credit transfer and course scheduling? Follow-up: Do you typically receive information about credit transfer from instructors, advisors, other students, friends, family members, websites, or other resources?

Participant Response	Community College Student										Transfer Student					
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
• academic advisor; faculty	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■	■
• college/university website		■	■			■					■					
• degree requirements list							■				■					■
• friend/family member								■						■		

Three of the community college students who relied on an academic advisor for information also obtained credit transfer and course scheduling information from the college website. This observation compares to only one university transfer student who did not rely on an academic advisor for information, but obtained credit transfer and course scheduling information from the university website and from a degree audit. For example, Student B explained, “I relied mostly on two advisors who are professors and the main community college web pages.” In another example, Student C stated, “I can piece some stuff together myself from the community college website. I found it very easy to navigate and get the information I needed on my own.”

Two of the university transfer students and one community college student referred to a degree requirements list that was provided to them to obtain credit transfer and course scheduling information. For instance, Student K explained, “The university had a degree audit, so my transfer credits are already there. All I had to do was change my major in the system.” In another example, Student P stated, “A professor in my department is my advisor, and I ask her questions if I need to. I’m pretty proactive and try to do things that I can on my own.”

It was anticipated that community college students would rely on more informal sources of information such as friends, family members, and co-workers to help inform their decisions. It was expected that university transfer students would use a more formal approach such as professors, advisors, and websites to help inform their decisions. Furthermore, it was anticipated that both subgroups of undergraduate students who participated in this study would rely on a wide range of resources to inform their decision-making. However, the students who participated in this study,

regardless of subgroup, relied primarily on the professor who was assigned to be their academic advisor or a general advisor at the advising center on campus.

Throughout the interview process, students mentioned advisors as their trusted source for information twice as much as they mentioned any other resource that influenced their decision-making. The professors who were providing advising support and the academic advisors in the campus advising center served as subject matter experts who quickly cultivated relationships with the undergraduate students assigned to them. The students who participated in this study seemed to trust these subject matter experts more than any other resource to help guide and direct their education and career decisions. The students seemed to trust the advisors to obtain the knowledge they would need to select relevant courses, complete their degree, improve their job opportunities, and increase their income potential.

When examining the people that students relied on to get credit transfer and course scheduling information, there were only slight variations in the decision-making experiences of community college students who transferred to a university when compared to students enrolled at a community college. The differences in the responses among the two student subgroups may be due to individual student preferences for receiving information. For example, although students in both subgroups relied on academic advisors to obtain information, they also turned to other resources that might have been more convenient to access at the time when the information was needed. Resources that provided convenience included college websites and upper-division class members who were enrolled in the same major. Trusting a knowledgeable subject matter expert and having convenient access to accurate printed or web-based college

resources seemed to influence who students relied on to obtain credit transfer and course scheduling information.

Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Interview questions #8, #9, #10, and #11. When assessing the ways in which resources influenced student decisions related to participation in a student orientation, tutoring sessions, and extracurricular activities, the participants in the study responded in a variety of ways. Most of the students in both subgroups chose to participate in a student orientation or first-year experience. Their decisions seemed to be motivated by the need for general information related to the campus, meeting faculty members, learning about the online course format, and meeting other students that would support their success in college. In fact, the few students who did not take advantage of the resources provided during the orientation expressed regret that they had not formed friendships with fellow-students during their first semester at the college or university. A few of the students who took advantage of the orientation for obtaining information seemed to become more involved in volunteering to become orientation leaders for incoming students, participating in extracurricular activities, and networking with upper-division class members in their major.

When examining how resources influenced student decisions related to participation in tutoring sessions, fewer than half of the students in both subgroups chose to participate in tutoring sessions or study groups. Their decisions seemed to be motivated by the need for specific information related to completing course assignments, writing papers, and preparing for exams. Although many students mentioned that they valued tutoring, and three of the students had served as tutors at

their campus, most students did not perceive that they needed this resource to support their academic success. Some of the students in both subgroups who participated in tutoring found it helpful, while a few of the community college students who participated in tutoring did not seem to recognize it as a resource that they used to inform their decision-making.

When assessing how resources influenced student decisions related to participation in extracurricular activities, most of the university transfer students chose to participate in student clubs and activities. Their decisions seemed to be motivated by how much they valued socializing, networking, volunteering, or doing something as part of their educational experience that could benefit their career, health, and life balance. As mentioned earlier, the students who were engaged in clubs, social organizations, sports teams, or other activities reported their involvement to be helpful for meeting people, forming friendships, improving public speaking, staying physically fit, and gaining a better understanding of their personal and career interests. Additionally, the university transfer students seemed to have more time available to take advantage of these resources when compared to the community college students.

On the other hand, the community college students who participated in the study seemed less likely to participate in extracurricular activities. Their decisions seemed to be motivated by how much they valued the need for information and participation. Additionally, the community college students seemed to have less time available to participate in these activities due to jobs and family obligations. While the university transfer students seemed to use the information and experience from their participation in extracurricular activities as a resource that they used to inform their decision-making,

the community college students did not seem to perceive that they needed this resource to support their success in college.

Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Summary of the observations. The third research question examined *how do resources and student support services influence college transfer and career planning decisions for undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree or who have transferred to a bachelor's degree from a community college?* When assessing how higher education resources and student support services influenced the decision-making experiences of the participants, several similarities were observed among the two student subgroups.

First, ten of the 16 students (63%) who participated in the interviews, regardless of student subgroup, were assisted by an academic advisor, career counselor, or another university representative. In addition to receiving assistance, many of the participants in both student subgroups researched degree options using online college transfer tools to obtain information. Surprisingly, only three of the 16 students (19%) who interviewed for this study attended college fairs or career information sessions to help inform their career decision-making. Most students in both subgroups didn't take advantage of these resources because they had already decided on a career path or had a work schedule conflict. The participants of the study seemed to make decisions related to participation based on if they perceived they needed information to inform their educational decisions and whether or not the activity was offered at a time that was convenient to them.

A majority of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, used information about bachelor's degree transfer options to understand degree requirements and to identify the shortest path toward earning a degree. Surprisingly, 2 of the community college students and 3 of the university transfer students didn't use degree transfer maps or online resources to plan for their college transfer. It was anticipated that the students would use a variety of resources and degree transfer maps to plan their transition. Instead, the participants of this study seemed to be more interested in the convenience of the resources and their perceived need for information when making decisions about using transfer resources that were provided to them by the colleges and universities.

Another factor that influenced the decision-making experiences of the students who participated in this study included people. In fact, most of the participant decisions, regardless of student subgroup, were influenced by academic advisors, family members, friends, peers, and coworkers. In addition to the influences of resources and other people, a few of the students in both subgroups were self-motivated to earn a college degree and to establish a career. Once the participants decided to pursue a bachelor's degree, their university and degree major choices were often influenced by acceptance of transfer credits from the community college to the university or the need for a career credential.

As another similarity, nearly half of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, described frustration that they experienced while enrolled in college. Example frustrations expressed by the participants included community college feeling like high school and the culture shock of transitioning from a small college to a large university. In some cases, frustration may have influenced the student decisions.

Finally, regardless of student subgroup, career planning information sessions and self-service career information websites were less influential than anticipated toward influencing career planning decisions. Very few of the students who participated in the study mentioned using these resources to inform their college and career planning decisions. It seemed as if most of the students who participated in the study had decided on a career path prior to entering college and were less likely to take advantage of career planning resources.

At the same time, the decision-making experiences of community college and university transfer students had some similarities, a few differences were observed in relation to the people, resources, and student support services that influenced their decisions. For instance, three of the community college students who interviewed for this study conducted independent research about career options. Additionally, one of the community college students met individually with a career counselor. This observation is in contrast with none of the university transfer students who conducted their own research or took advantage of meeting with a career counselor.

There were also some differences in the people who influenced the student decision-making experiences. Three of the community college student decisions were motivated by a high school teacher or college admissions counselor, compared to no university transfer students who mentioned these decision-making influences. Additionally, 2 of the community college student decisions were influenced by the ability to complete classes online at the student's convenience, compared to no university transfer students who mentioned these decision-making influences.

The participants in the study, regardless of student subgroup, were similarly engaged in student support services at the higher education institutions where they were enrolled. Most of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, were influenced by academic advisors, degree requirement information websites, degree transfer maps, and independent investigations to make informed decisions. However, when determining whether or not students chose to participate in tutoring sessions, study groups, or supplemental learning experiences, the university transfer students who participated in this study were more engaged with information sessions and student support services when compared to the community college student participants who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree but didn't enroll at a baccalaureate institution.

Most of the students who participated in the study seemed to take advantage of resources and support services if they perceived the need for information and could easily access the resources at the time when the information or support was needed. Many of the resources and student support services, regardless of student subgroup responses, often seemed to be underutilized or valued less by the busy students who chose to focus on their course completion requirements, work schedules, and family obligations.

University transfer students who often lived on campus and had fewer work and family commitments were frequently more engaged with resources, support services, and extracurricular activities. The community college students who were often commuting to campus, working full-time, and caring for dependents, seemed less likely to take advantage of the resources, support services, and extracurricular activities that were offered to them. The student participants seemed more likely to engage in

activities that they perceived as essential for their academic success. Finally, it seemed like students in both subgroups were more likely to use the resources and engage in support services that were convenient to them

When examining how resources and student support services influence college transfer and career planning decisions, two additional themes emerged. The themes were related to the influences of the academic advisors and the student interest in a chosen career field that impacted the student decisions.

Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Emergent theme #8 academic advisors. Most of the study participants in both student subgroups were influenced by their *academic advisors*. The academic advisors were typically professors in the student's degree major or occasionally staff members in the campus advising center. Throughout the interview process the participants of the study mentioned their academic advisors twice as much as any other resource. The academic advisors not only provided guidance and information, but also served as a support system for the students. For example, one student mentioned her community college advisor who stayed in touch with her after she had transferred to the university. The support system and encouragement provided by the academic advisors was especially critical for the self-motivated, first-generation college students who lacked a family support system.

Research question #3 how resources influence decisions: Emergent theme #9 interest in a career field. Another emergent theme that motivated the college student transfer decisions included the *student interest in their chosen career field*. While the interests in degree majors varied among the study participants, their career interests typically influenced their college and career planning decisions. For example,

the students who were interested in helping people enrolled in health care and social work fields while the students who were interested in business enrolled in accounting and human resources. Some of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, enrolled in degree majors that would allow them to avoid math, chemistry, and language courses that they perceived as difficult.

Summary

Whether finishing an associate or bachelor's degree, most students who participated in this study were influenced by the cost of earning a degree and the opportunity to explore career options. Additionally, most of the community college students were concerned about their career decisions and typically chose fields that would lead to good paying jobs in their local community. Both the community college students and university transfer students trusted their academic advisor, college websites, and degree transfer maps as the best resources for making informed decisions. Finally, some of the students expressed frustration with college, but most of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, described their enrollment in college as a positive experience.

This qualitative data analysis provided insights for better understanding community college transfer student decision-making experiences and their influences. In most cases, there were many similarities in the decision-making experiences of the university transfer students who were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program when compared to students enrolled at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree. The students who participated in this study were

motivated for better career opportunities and mostly influenced by their friends, family members, and college academic advisors.

Notable differences in the two student subgroups that emerged from the interview data included the timing of their decisions and participation in extracurricular activities. Students who had successfully transferred to a bachelor's degree program from a community college often planned to complete a bachelor's degree when they were in high school. Students who had not transferred to a bachelor's degree from a community college usually delayed their decision about going to college until 2-10 years after high school. Additionally, students enrolled at a university who transferred from a community college chose to be more engaged in clubs and student activities when compared to students enrolled at a community college.

The majority of the students who participated in the study described their college and career decision-making experiences as mostly positive. Despite the students having mostly positive experiences, the participants in both subgroups provided a wide array of responses to the interview questions. For example, two of the research participants described enrollment in college as the best decision they had ever made, while some of the students mentioned regrets or frustrating situations they had experienced while enrolled in college. Nine common themes emerged from the data categories, observations, and analysis.

Student decisions seemed to be influenced by the cost of enrolling in college, academic advisors, friends, and family members, the need for essential information, and convenient access to resources. The students who participated in the study seemed to be

informed consumers who were seeking the best higher education value that would result in a good-paying job upon earning a career credential.

Chapter 5 includes discussion along with the conclusions that were drawn from the interview responses, data analysis, and observations for the study. The discussion and conclusions are organized in relationship to each of the three research questions. Additionally, the chapter describes recommendations for further research that would support community college transfer student academic success.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter offers personal reflections related to the observations, data analysis, and emergent themes for each of the research questions for this study. Additionally, it provides conclusions that were derived from a combination of the study observations and findings from previous research. The discussion and conclusions provide insights from the student perspective about their college and career planning decision-making experiences. The chapter concludes with recommendations for additional initiatives and further research that are aimed at promoting seamless transfer between community colleges and universities to increase the access and affordability for bachelor's degree attainment.

This qualitative research study focused on the reasons that community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree made college and career planning decisions. The study also identified if there were differences in the decision-making experiences of community college students who expressed interest in earning a bachelor's degree but did not enroll at a baccalaureate institution when compared with university transfer students who successfully transferred to a bachelor's degree program from a community college.

Known strategies for improving the credibility of the study were used to assist with minimizing participant, researcher, and sampling bias. The methods included following a consistent data gathering protocol for all participants and recording the interview conversations to accurately document the student statements (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). Additionally, the participants were invited to review and comment on the interview transcripts to validate their responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The following section includes personal reflections related to the interview responses and observations for each of the three research questions. The discussion includes thoughts that resulted from the combination of the personal student insights, data analysis, emergent themes, and review of prior research studies related to community college transfer.

Discussion

The decision-making experiences of the community college transfer students who participated in this study included many parallels with prior research findings. For example, some students were frustrated with student loan debt and courses that did not transfer from the community college to the university (Lorenzo, 2011a; Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonso, 2011). In another example, many of the study participants were balancing work, school, and family obligations (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013; Kolesnikova, 2009a; Vaughan, 2006). Based on the review of the literature, it was anticipated that the interview responses of the community college students would vary widely from the interview responses of the university transfer students. Surprisingly, the community college students who expressed interest in a bachelor's degree, but had not enrolled at a university, had more similarities than differences when compared to the university transfer students who participated in this study. The similarities may be a result of the small sample population size that was used for the study or the narrow criteria that was used to identify study participants.

The following discussion is organized in association with each of the related research questions. The personal reflections incorporate Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Lazarowicz, 2015; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 2012) as a framework that provides context for the observations related to student decision-making during life transitions.

Research Question #1 Discussion: Decision-Making Experiences

The first research question examined *why do undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree decide to transfer or not transfer to a bachelor's degree program at a university?* The university transfer students who had successfully transferred from a community college typically enrolled in college immediately following completion of high school. On the contrary, the community college students often entered the workforce during or shortly after high school and only considered college when they became frustrated in low wage jobs. The university transfer students seemed to have a stronger family support system, career guidance, and encouragement of friends during high school that resulted in them making college and career planning decisions during high school or shortly after graduation.

On the other hand, the community college students seemed to lack a family support system and career guidance during high school. This lack of information and limited encouragement resulted in the community college students delaying their college and career decision-making until 2-10 years after leaving high school. The potential for increased job opportunities, improved income, and the prospect of career

advancement ultimately motivated the study participants in both student subgroups to enroll in college.

Most of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, enrolled in community college as a stepping-stone toward earning a bachelor's degree. For instance, many of the university transfer students enrolled in community college to complete their general education requirements toward the completion of a 4-year degree. These observations were consistent with prior research findings. For example, the students in both subgroups benefited from the open enrollment policies, exploration of career options, and lower tuition rates at the community college (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Bragg, 2007; Bautsch, 2013; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Kolesnikova, 2009a; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Roman, 2007).

In contrast, a few of the observations about the decision-making experiences of the participants in this study were inconsistent with previous research findings. For example, two of the community college students had already earned an associate degree and were planning to transition to a bachelor's degree program. But instead of enrolling at the university in their junior year, the two students continued to enroll in courses at the community college that would transfer to a bachelor's degree program at the university. The students used this strategy to take advantage of lower tuition rates at the community college. This enrollment pattern was not described in prior research studies related to community college transfer.

Despite the ongoing debate among researchers, the participants in this study illustrated that it was beneficial to attend community college on the pathway toward earning a bachelor's degree. The lower tuition rates at the community college not only

allowed students to complete their general education requirements, but were helpful for exploring career interests at a lower cost to the students. Completing general education requirements using a less expensive alternative also led to lower student loan debt among some of the participants of this study. Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Lazarowicz, 2015; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 1984; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 2012) supports these observations. In many cases, the participants received the services and resources that adults need for making decisions and taking charge of change while simultaneously dealing with less stress.

When considering what motives influenced community college student decisions to transfer or not transfer to a bachelor's degree, the students who successfully transferred to a university seemed to have higher career aspirations, a strong family support system, encouragement of friends and academic advisors, and career interests that motivated their decisions. The community college students who expressed interest in a bachelor's degree seemed to have limited to no family support network and lower career aspirations when compared to the university transfer students. Furthermore, the community college student decisions seemed to be influenced by self-motivation, encouragement of academic advisors, and the opportunity for better careers.

The presence of a family support system, increased career opportunities, low cost of tuition, and acceptance rate of transfer credits emerged as common themes that motivated undergraduate community college transfer student decisions. These observations were generally consistent with previous research findings that were discussed in the review of the literature. The insights from the student perspective provide for some implications that are presented later in this chapter.

The next section discusses the similarities and differences that were observed when comparing the community college students with the university transfer students who participated in the study. The two student subgroups had more similarities than anticipated, such as balancing school and work schedules. However, the university transfer students chose to be more engaged in extracurricular activities when compared to the community college students, as expected.

Research Question #2 Discussion: Differences in Student Engagement and Participation Decisions

The second research question assessed *what are the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who transferred to a bachelor's degree program at a university when compared to those who did not transfer to a bachelor's degree program?* Some of the participants in both student subgroups mentioned their challenges related to working, caring for dependents, minimizing their student loan debt, and overcoming previous poor academic performance. These observations were consistent with earlier findings of the Center for Community College Student Engagement (2012). Community college transfer students have unique needs that result from being underprepared academically, coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds, or having jobs and families (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012).

As anticipated, most of the university transfer students participated in extracurricular activities, compared with few of the community college students who participated in clubs and student activities. In some cases, the students who were less engaged in using transfer student support resources were the same ones who expressed

frustration with the transfer process. The variations in the two subgroups may be related to student differences in socioeconomic background, first-generation college student status, or personal preferences. Additionally, the variation in the two student subgroups may have resulted from the small sample population size of study participants.

When investigating the undergraduate student engagement and participation decisions, the community college students who participated in the study seemed to have less time available to participate in activities and to engage in transfer student support services due to work and family obligations. On the contrary, the university transfer students often lived on campus and had more time available to participate in extracurricular activities and to take advantage of student support services. Prior research illustrated that individualized student support services can be designed to address the needs of students who are juggling multiple priorities and help students to become successful (Blaylock & Bresciana, 2011; Lewis, 2013; Mullin, 2010; Schlossberg, 2011).

The student need for information, desire for convenient services, and frustrations with some situations emerged as common themes that motivated undergraduate community college transfer student decisions. While these observations were consistent with previous research findings, the insights varied among participants in the two student subgroups for this study. Fewer of the community college students chose to participate in extracurricular activities when compared to the university transfer students. This variation in student decision-making results in some implications that are discussed later in this chapter.

The following section discusses the influences of resources and student support services on college and career planning decisions for community college transfer students. The undergraduate students who participated in this study often overcame difficult challenges with the support of an academic advisor, family members, and transfer support services. This observation was consistent across both student subgroups and supports the findings of prior research presented in the review of related literature for this study.

Research Question #3 Discussion: How Resources Influence Decisions

The third research question examined *how do resources and student support services influence college transfer and career planning decisions for undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree or who have transferred to a bachelor's degree from a community college?* Some of the students who participated in the study faced complicated transfer admissions processes, balancing work and family obligations with school, and courses that would not transfer to their bachelor's degree major. The participants worked through these difficult challenges with assistance from academic advisors, admissions counselors, friends, and family members.

The community college students who postponed their college decision-making and career planning decisions until years after high school often had full-time jobs and were supporting dependents by the time they enrolled in college. Some of the community college students mentioned the lack of a family support system or were first-generation college students. This observation is consistent with prior research that describes community college as the gateway toward obtaining a bachelor's degree

among the first-generation college, low income, and underrepresented minority students (Kim, 2001; Melguizo & Dowd, 2009; Mery & Schiorring, 2011; University of California, 2011). The lack of a family support system may have caused some of the students to struggle with career planning decisions.

Once the study participants were enrolled in college, they received the support of academic advising and career counseling. This support network helped the community college students to learn about both career and bachelor's degree opportunities. The participants overcame what seemed to be limited exposure to possible job options during high school through self-motivation. The students were inspired to expand their opportunities for better careers, increased income potential, and the prospect for career advancement through their use of college resources, academic advising, career counseling, and student support services. Having more information assisted the study participants with making more-informed decisions about their careers and future job prospects.

Another observation of the participants in this study included the successful rate of transfer and academic progress among the participants. Most the community college students and university transfer students who volunteered for this study were making continual progress toward earning a bachelor's degree. For example, seven of the 16 total participants (44%) enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at a university, and 6 of the nine community college students (67%) were considering completion of a bachelor's degree in 1-2 years. This observation was inconsistent with some prior research that concluded community college decreases transfer rates and reduces bachelor's degree attainment for vertical transfer students (Brint & Karabel, 1989;

Dougherty, 1994; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The inconsistency with previous research may have been due to the small sample population size that participated in this qualitative study or the selection criteria used to recruit study participants.

When considering how resources influence student decisions, academic advisors, degree transfer maps, and transfer student support services contributed to the student academic success. Additionally, the community college and university partnerships throughout the state offered significant services and an affordable alternative toward earning a bachelor's degree for the students who participated in the study. The support of academic advisors emerged as a common theme that influenced undergraduate community college transfer student decisions regardless of student subgroup. This observation was consistent with previous research findings and resulted in implications that are discussed later in this chapter.

Additionally, the reflections of the study participants affirmed the significant role that partnerships between community colleges and participating universities provide for assisting community college transfer students with reaching their career and income goals. The students who were seeking affordable higher education and convenient services were benefiting from the established partnerships and articulation agreements between Pennsylvania community colleges and participating universities. For instance, some of the study participants enrolled at state universities that accepted all of their community college credits to avoid repeating general education courses. This approach helped the students to save on the cost of tuition on the pathway toward earning a bachelor's degree.

The next section provides conclusions that emerged when comparing the personal student insights with the findings of prior research. The implications offer new understandings about community college transfer student decision-making from their own perspectives. The conclusions are presented in relation to each of the three research questions.

Conclusions

The analysis of the participant responses to the interview questions and emergent themes related to the three research questions in comparison with prior research studies resulted in some new insights. The conclusions are especially important for higher education leaders and policymakers who continue to develop articulation agreements, programs, and support services that are designed to benefit community college students who express interest in earning bachelor's degrees. In most cases, the conclusions about the decision-making experiences of the participants in this study were consistent with the findings of previous research studies. However, in a few instances, the community college and university transfer student perspectives about their decision-making experiences were inconsistent with prior research findings. The conclusions are described below in association with each of the corresponding research questions.

Research Question #1 Conclusions: Decision-Making Experiences

The first research question examined *why do undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree decide to transfer or not transfer to a bachelor's degree program at a university?* When determining the reasons that community college students who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree decided to transfer or

not transfer to a university and what factors influenced their decisions, a number of conclusions were drawn from the data analysis and observations.

First, the demand for affordable higher education options was exemplified by the students who participated in this study. This observation is consistent with previous research findings. Tuition and fees for community college are significantly lower when compared to four-year institutions (Bautsch, 2013; Kim, 2001; Kolesnikova, 2009a). Lower tuition and fees provide an affordable alternative for proving college-level aptitude, completing the first two years of a baccalaureate degree, and reducing college loan debt (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006; Lorenzo, 2011b; Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges, 2014; Townsend, 2007).

To take advantage of lower tuition rates, two of the community college students who participated in this study surprisingly developed a unique vertical transfer approach for earning a bachelor's degree that was not mentioned in the literature. Typically, students following the vertical transfer approach complete general education requirements at a two-year institution before enrolling in core courses toward a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution during their junior year (Ignash & Townsend, 2000). Instead of following this common "two-plus-two" model, the two students who participated in this study completed an associate degree, then continued to enroll at the community college to complete the junior-level courses that were required for a bachelor's degree.

Continuing to enroll at the community college after completing an associate degree would only be possible for a limited number of degree majors. However, the innovative "three-plus-one" model helped the two study participants to reduce their

tuition expenses during the junior year of their 4-year degree program. This tuition reduction strategy led to less student loan debt for these students who chose to delay their transfer to the 4-year institution. Both of the students were working with an academic advisor at the university who approved the courses that could be completed at the community college before enrolling at the university.

Additionally, some of the university transfer students who participated in the study mentioned having credits that did not transfer to a bachelor's degree. Many of the participants overcame this challenge by evaluating the lowest cost options that were available to them. Some of the university transfer students relocated 2-5 hours from their hometown or commuted up to one hour from their home to enroll at a university that had lower tuition rates than the higher education institutions in their local community. The study participants in both student subgroups seemed to be particularly sensitive to the tuition rates and developed strategies to reduce their costs. Many students conducted research to assess their best value before enrolling in college.

Furthermore, some of the participants in the study determined which higher education institutions would accept most or all of their transfer credits toward completion of a bachelor's degree. For example, one student who participated in this study reported that the university she was attending accepted all 60 of her community college credits, while other institutions she considered would accept only 33 of her community college credits. Some of the students in the study explored the best acceptance rate for their transfer credits and relocated up to five hours from their hometown to enroll at a university that would accept all of their transfer credits. This

strategy helped the students to decrease their overall student loan debt and time required to complete a bachelor's degree program.

The students who participated in this study exemplified the advantages of community college in many ways. This observation was consistent with prior research findings (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2013; Kolesnikova, 2009b; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010). For instance, the students reported lower tuition rates, admission to their desired degree major despite prior poor academic performance, and access to faculty members for advising and career guidance. Some of the participants, regardless of student subgroup, mentioned their decision to enroll in community college to complete the general education course requirements toward earning a bachelor's degree. This pathway is consistent with the literature that described the ability to obtain an associate degree in community college as a stepping-stone toward completing a baccalaureate degree (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Kolesnikova, 2009b; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges, 2014; Roman, 2007; Townsend, 1995).

Another advantage of community college includes the opportunity to complete an associate degree on the pathway toward earning a baccalaureate degree (Juszkiewicz, 2014). Three of the university transfer students and two of the community college students who participated in this study obtained an associate degree on their journey toward completing a bachelor's degree. Attainment of an associate degree provides motivation, recognition, and early job placement options for working students (Juszkiewicz, 2014).

When considering vertical transfer student enrollment patterns from a community college to a baccalaureate degree program, the observations of the participants in this study were inconsistent with prior research. Most of the students who participated in this study seemed likely to pursue a bachelor's degree. This observation is inconsistent with some previous research that concluded enrollment in community college decreases transfer rates, provides disadvantages for transfer students and reduces bachelor's degree attainment for vertical transfer students (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The inconsistency with prior research may have resulted from the small study population size and the narrow criteria that was used to recruit study participants.

The student decision-making experiences were influenced by their family support system and low cost of tuition at the higher education institutions where they enrolled. The participants in the study were motivated by the prospect of better career opportunities and the acceptance rate of transfer credits at the university where they enrolled in a bachelor's degree program.

The next section provides conclusions about the variations in the decision-making experiences of study participant decisions related to their use of resources and engagement in extracurricular activities. The discussion explores how the observations of this study compare with previous research findings and a closer look at the emergent themes related to reasons that motivate students to use support resources and participate in activities.

Research Question #2 Conclusions: Differences in Student Engagement and Participation Decisions

The second research question assessed *what are the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who transferred to a bachelor's degree program at a university when compared to those who did not transfer to a bachelor's degree program?* When examining if there were differences in the decision-making experiences of community college students when compared to university transfer students, some conclusions were derived from the observations and data analysis in connection with the prior research.

First, many of the participants in this study were taking advantage of the articulation agreements and degree transfer maps between Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges and 14 state universities. The statewide articulation agreements have been implemented for several baccalaureate degree programs, while the participating institutions agreed to several general education courses that students can transfer toward nearly every four-year degree major (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2011; Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center, 2010). Transfer and articulation agreements have the potential to reduce tuition costs by creating an integrated, statewide procedure to efficiently transfer courses between participating higher education institutions (Ignash & Townsend, 2000; Roach, 2009; Senie, 2016; Stern, 2016).

Not only did the participants in the study benefit from lower tuition rates, but the degree maps and course requirements provided the students in both subgroups with the information they needed to make decisions that supported their academic success. This

conclusion is inconsistent with some prior research that found little evidence that statewide transfer mandates improve student transfer success (Gross & Goldhaber, 2009; Handel & Williams, 2012; Ishitani, 2008; Juskiewicz 2014). The inconsistent observations with previous research studies may have been due to the small sample population size for this qualitative study or the services provided by the four higher education institutions that volunteered to serve as research study locations.

Next, many of the university transfer students who participated in this study faced admissions challenges that were consistent with prior research findings. Example admissions obstacles from the previous research included credits that did not transfer to a bachelor's degree, fewer financial aid opportunities, and delayed enrollment at the four-year institution (Juskiewicz, 2014; Juskiewicz, 2016; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010). In this study, some of the participants found the transfer admissions process complex and worked through this challenge with assistance from an academic advisor, admissions counselor, or family member.

Additionally, some of the students who participated in the study described the frustration they encountered during the transfer admissions process. One of the university transfer students expressed his frustration with a delayed response from the 4-year institutions where he applied. He accepted the offer of admission from the first university that responded to him because he didn't think the others would offer him admission. In another example, one of the community college students who participated in this study mentioned the complexity of reviewing her transcripts with an advisor since she had attended more than one college. Higher education institutions often give

transfer admissions a lower priority due to the complexity of processing transfer enrollments (Handel & Williams, 2012).

Additional transfer student complications mentioned by participants in this study that were consistent with prior research included students balancing school with work and family obligations, and the transfer shock that resulted from transitioning from a small college to a large university campus. Other frustrating situations that were observed among the participants of this study that were also referenced in earlier research findings included credits that did not transfer to a bachelor's degree, and fewer financial aid opportunities.

Another conclusion for study participants, regardless of student subgroup, included the unique challenges related to paying for college, commuting to campus, being employed full-time, and caring for dependents. Additionally, a few of the transfer students were also challenged with poor prior academic performance. This observation is consistent with previous research which reported the unique needs of community college transfer students who may be underprepared academically, come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, or have jobs and families (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012).

Next, Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) reported that each student deals differently with the vertical transfer process. The various responses of the participants in this study, regardless of student subgroup, exemplified their individual needs. This conclusion is consistent with prior research that advocates for customized student support services (Taylor & Jain, 2017). Institutional commitment and the ability to customize transfer student support services to meet the diverse needs of individual

transfer students is key to their success (Ackermann, 1991; Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Mullin, 2010; Schlossberg, 2011; Withem, 2007).

Furthermore, Taylor and Jain (2017) recommended, “Transfer pathways and policies need to be flexible enough to accommodate students’ dynamic personal lives and should not penalize students for not following an administratively ideal path” (p. 277).

Additionally, most of the participants in this study researched degree options using online college transfer tools to obtain information. These websites helped the students to explore degree options and identify which courses would transfer from a community college to a baccalaureate degree program (Bautsch, 2013; Lorenzo, 2011b). The busy students used the information that was most convenient to access at the time when they needed to make college and career planning decisions.

The variations among the student engagement and participation decisions seemed to be influenced by the student need for information at the time when they needed the knowledge that would inform their decisions. Additionally, the differences in the engagement and participation decisions of the two student subgroups seemed to be related to the convenience of participation in extracurricular activities and access to resources. For example, if community college students had work or family commitments, they often underutilized many of the services and activities that were designed to support their academic success. Finally, the regrets and frustrations with college transfer that the participants experienced sometimes resulted from the student engagement and participation decisions.

The following section explores how resources and student support services influence undergraduate student college transfer and career planning decisions. The

conclusions are based on the observations of the study participant interview responses, emergent themes resulting from the data analysis, and review of the related prior research.

Research Question #3 Conclusions: How Resources Influence Decisions

The third research question examined *how do resources and student support services influence college transfer and career planning decisions for undergraduate students enrolled in an associate degree program at a community college who expressed interest in completing a bachelor's degree or who have transferred to a bachelor's degree from a community college?* When assessing how resources and student support services influenced college transfer and career planning decisions, a few conclusions were drawn from the observations and data analysis in association with the prior research.

First, some of the students who participated in this study mentioned their decision to enroll in community college due to poor prior academic performance. This conclusion was consistent with previous research findings. For instance, students who are not academically prepared to enroll at a four-year institution can attend community college to prepare for upper-level courses. (Bautsch, 2013; Vaughan, 2006). Once they were enrolled in college, the students who participated in this study received advice from academic advisors, career counselors, and upper-division class members to inform their decisions. For some students, the support of academic advisors and upper-division class members formed a supportive network that influenced them to enroll in a bachelor's degree program. This was especially true for self-motivated community college students who lacked a family support system.

Another conclusion that was consistent with prior research findings included university transfer students who reported earning credits that would not transfer from the community college to other institutions. This observation was consistent with the findings of prior research studies (Lorenzo, 2011b). To assist with overcoming this challenge, most of the students worked with academic advisors, career counselors, and other university representatives to maximize the number of credits that would transfer to their bachelor's degree. Increasing credit mobility results in more affordable degree options for students and less tuition subsidy dollars spent by states (Bautsch, 2013; Ignash & Townsend, 2000; Roach, 2009).

Finally, many of the students who participated in this study decided to pursue a bachelor's degree only after enrolling in an associate degree program at a community college. This conclusion is consistent with prior research findings. The open admissions policy of community colleges offers a gateway to increase baccalaureate degree attainment among first-generation college, low income, and underrepresented minority students (Kim, 2001; Melguizo & Dowd, 2009; Mery & Schiorring, 2011; University of California, 2011).

When considering how resources and student support services influenced college transfer and career planning decisions, academic advisors and web-based tools that informed decisions were the primary resources that influenced the decisions for the participants in this study. The academic advisors and campus advising centers provided a student support network that encouraged the study participants to be successful in reaching their career aspirations. The web-based tools and degree transfer maps provided students with accurate sources of information that were convenient to access.

The next section discusses recommendations for education leaders, policymakers, parents, and students that resulted from the data analysis and observations of the personal student insights. The suggestions include ideas for advancing services that support community college transfer along with topics for further research.

Recommendations

Both the community college and university transfer students who participated in this study made decisions related to college and career planning based on the cost of tuition and the opportunity for secure, good paying jobs aligned with their career interests. Regardless of student subgroup, the participants were often influenced by academic advisors, family members, and friends. The personal student insights, observations, and data analysis of this study resulted in some recommendations for fellow-students, parents, education leaders, and policymakers.

First, college and university leaders and state labor and industry officials should increase communications with parents, students, and middle and high school guidance counselors related to future workforce needs and degree completion opportunities. This suggestion is especially critical for the first-generation college students who often lack a family support system when it comes to choosing a college and planning a career (Bailey & Alfonso, 2005; Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Roman, 2007). Having more information would allow middle and high school students to make more-informed decisions about planning their careers and potentially enrolling in college. The participants in this study who had less information and lacked a family support system

seemed to struggle in low wage jobs for many years and delayed their college enrollment decisions for 2-10 years after leaving high school.

Additionally, increased communication about local career opportunities might assist with generating more interest in bachelor's degree attainment and workforce needs at an earlier age. For example, two of the students who participated in this study and successfully transferred to bachelor's degree programs chose careers based on interests they acquired during middle school. In contrast, participants who lacked career guidance and a family support system struggled in low wage jobs and delayed their college and career planning decisions for several years after high school.

Middle and high school students need more information about the professional careers and potential employers they could consider. Labor and industry officials and higher education leaders could develop promotional efforts and career guidance information about opportunities that help students to think about possible career opportunities, aspire to earn a college degree, and make informed decisions about their future. Further research is needed to determine the most effective ways for higher education institutions to collaborate with labor and industry professionals to develop and communicate meaningful information for middle and high school students.

Next, community college and university leaders and faculty members should work more closely with regional employers and labor and industry officials to better understand the changing needs of the local labor market. Increasing community college transfer to four-year institutions is essential for preparing a competitive workforce, sustaining local and national economies, and maintaining active communities with engaged citizens (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2012; Handel &

Williams, 2012; Vaughan, 2006; Wellman, 2002). Understanding the needs of the labor market will allow colleges and universities to offer more targeted degree programs that meet regional requirements. For example, local colleges are key educational providers for preparing future bank branch managers, data analysts, engineers, warehouse managers, nurses, police officers, government leaders, social workers, teachers, logistics experts, and project managers to meet the demands for these and many other types of professionals.

Increased collaboration with labor and industry leaders could better inform higher education leaders about job and workforce development needs throughout the state and in the local region. With increased awareness of emerging workforce development needs, college and university leaders could develop new programs that prepare students for jobs in the region. While community colleges are often focused on local workforce development needs, universities should target more programs toward the dynamic job needs of businesses, hospitals, governmental agencies, schools, and other regional employers that hire bachelor's degree graduates. College and university leaders determine the curriculum and requirements for earning a bachelor's degree and could align more programs toward preparing professionals to serve in the local workforce. Further investigation is needed to understand best practices that already exist related to higher education institutions collaborating with labor and industry leaders.

The third recommendation includes further research to identify customized student support services that are effective for engaging busy students. Failure to engage in support services that are intended to improve college transfer success can lead to a lack of completing required course prerequisites and increased time needed to complete

a bachelor's degree (Ghusson, 2016; Mullin, 2012). Prior studies found that engagement in the campus culture, new processes, and campus resources are critical to transfer student success and persistence (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Ghusson, 2016; Lewis, 2013; Tinto, 1998). Furthermore, transfer students who fail to engage in support services often face increased student loan debt, loss of financial aid, and higher college drop out rates (Mullin, 2012). Many of the participants of this study chose not to engage in student support services and campus activities due to their work and family obligations. Customized support services and student activities could be designed to engage busy students in different ways. For example, some support services could be made available during evening and weekend hours to allow students with other obligations the flexibility to participate during times that are convenient to them. In another example, some college student engagement activities could be developed that include family members. Ideas include designing educational activities that integrate family members, offering free family entertainment on campus, and offering free child care during certain campus events such as the transfer student orientation.

Customized student support services might allow students to achieve work, school, and family life balance while they are enrolled in college. Example support services that may be customized include student orientation programs, assistance with class registration, faculty availability outside the classroom, and career counseling (Mullin, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2011). Additional examples of customized student support services from the earlier research include orientation programs and learning communities for transfer students (Eggleston and Laanan, 2001; Lewis, 2013; Smith,

2010; Townsend, 2008). Learning communities would allow for increased student interaction with peers who have similar interests.

In another example, orientation programs targeting transfer students can provide knowledge of campus resources, support services, and degree requirements.

Participation in a student orientation or first-year experience can benefit transfer students by providing access to the same resources that assist all other students who enrolled at the university (Eggleston and Laanan, 2001; Smith, 2010; Townsend, 2008).

Transfer student learning communities provide student-centered, small group interaction that engages students in making plans, overcoming frustrations, and supporting one another on their journey toward earning a bachelor's degree (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Bundy, 2014; Tovar & Simon, 2006).

Future investigation related to customized student support services should include input from the undergraduate students. Understanding the student perspective would allow higher education leaders and faculty members to develop targeted support services that are more tailored to the needs of busy undergraduate students (Taylor & Jain, 2017). Additionally, gaining student input would build upon the existing best practices for providing services that support transfer student success.

Finally, effective transfer policies require the continuous engagement of higher education leaders and state agencies along with a commitment of resources (Handel, 2013; West & Spaulding, 2013). The incremental progress toward improving the services to community college transfer students in Pennsylvania during the past decade has provided a strong foundation for further development. With the building blocks firmly in place, higher education leaders and faculty members along with state

policymakers should continue to forge new partnerships for serving transfer students. These partnerships offer an affordable alternative toward earning a bachelor's degree, especially for first-generation college students and high school graduates who are receiving low wages. Furthermore, higher education institutional partnerships create structured support systems for transfer students that improve retention and completion rates (Bundy, 2014; Mery & Schiorring, 2011).

Higher education and state agency leaders working more closely could allow for increased portability of courses between partnering higher education institutions, more degree programs to be aligned for seamless vertical transfer, and more explicit pathways for community college students to work toward bachelor's degree completion. Collaborations may include faculty working together to increase course rigor and establishing course equivalencies that provide undergraduate students with pathways toward bachelor's degree completion (Handel, 2011; Kahlenberg, 2011; Kim, 2001; Kisker, 2007; Noel-Levitz, 2008). The American Association of Community Colleges recommends the establishment of policies that guarantee credit transfer for associate degree graduates who enroll at public four-year universities (Juszkiewicz, 2014). Further research is needed to identify community college and university partnership best practices that could be implemented to improve services and persistence toward graduation for transfer students.

The following section provides some recommendations for further research that are intended to improve the vertical transfer process for undergraduate students. Improvements to the college transfer function might allow students to be more informed

about career options, use limited financial aid funds more effectively, and increase the attainment of bachelor's degrees to meet changing workforce demands.

Future Research

The observations of this study led to several areas for further research that were beyond the scope of this qualitative data analysis. New enrollment patterns and higher education partnerships are emerging that warrant further examination. Increased knowledge is needed in relation to postsecondary and workforce development collaborations as well as customized support services that lead to transfer student success. Future research might provide opportunities for improving retention and graduation rates among community college transfer students.

First, more expansive research is needed that incorporates the voices of the transfer students to better understand their actual experiences. New enrollment patterns and opportunities for completing a bachelor's degree at a community college campus are emerging that require further investigation. For instance, two students described their decisions related to staying enrolled in community college to complete the junior year toward earning a bachelor's degree. This strategy was being used by the students to reduce their tuition expenses. In another example from the review of literature, a few universities are collaborating with community colleges to deliver bachelor's degree programs on the community college campus. This approach allows students to avoid the transfer shock of transitioning to a large university campus to attain their 4-year degree. Better understanding these emerging observations would allow higher education leaders and policymakers to adjust programs for student success based on best practices.

Next, research is needed to determine how higher education institutions can collaborate with labor and industry professionals to develop and communicate meaningful information about career options for middle and high school students, parents, and guidance counselors. Despite the limited population size for this study, it was common for participants from diverse geographical regions to delay their college and career making decisions. Further investigation is needed to understand best practices for exploring career opportunities for middle and high school students. The research of best practices should also explore alternative support systems for youth who may not have a support system that inspires them to consider education beyond high school and opportunities for careers with family sustaining wages.

Additionally, further research is needed to identify customized student support services that are effective for engaging busy students who are balancing school, work, and family obligations. Despite the limited population size of participants in this study, it was common for community college transfer students to make decisions based on activities that were competing for their limited time. It was often difficult for study participants to participate in the higher education support services that were designed for their success. Further investigation is needed to understand best practices for offering transfer student communities and support services that busy students embrace. The integration of students into support activities, including part-time students and those who commute to campus, will continue to be important as more community college transfer students seek bachelor's degree attainment.

Finally, research is required to determine community college and university partnership best practices that would increase retention and graduation rates among

community college transfer students. Legislation and mandates for community colleges and state higher education institutions to collaborate have benefited community colleges throughout Pennsylvania during the past decade. At the same time, more opportunities remain for community colleges and universities to collaborate more closely. Further investigation is needed to understand the best practices among higher education institutions in other states that could be adopted by states that are positioned to better serve community college transfer students. Understanding the partnership arrangements that lead to student success might improve retention and graduation rates among vertical transfer students nationwide.

The following section provides some thoughts related to approaches for improving the transition from community college to a university for students who are interested in completing a bachelor's degree. The reflections challenge higher education leaders, workforce development professionals, and policymakers to develop new strategies for serving the growing population of community college transfer students by building on the foundation that was established in recent decades.

Final Thoughts

Community colleges and four-year institutions have opportunities to increase course mobility and make the transfer process more seamless (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Hodara et al., 2016; Juskiewicz, 2014; Juskiewicz, 2016). The review of the literature, student interviews, data analysis, and observations from this study provide some new insights about community college decision-making experiences, along with recommendations for further research. Similar to the experiences of Carina that were described earlier in Chapter 1, many of the participants in this study were working

while enrolled in college and decided to transfer to a university before earning an associate degree (University of California, Berkeley, 2008). And similar to the experiences of Vincent that were described previously in Chapter 1, some of the participants in this study were frustrated by accumulating student loan debt and courses that did not transfer to their bachelor's degree major (Lorenzo, 2011b).

The new insights from the student perspectives, analysis of the research questions, and prior research findings highlighted some opportunities for improving the college transfer experience. Higher education institutions can provide more customized student support services, and assist middle and high school students with exploring career options. Transfer students can be more engaged with student support services that are provided by higher education institutions. Finally, community colleges and universities can forge new partnerships to offer affordable pathways toward earning a bachelor's degree. Building upon the firm foundation of providing affordable higher education for community college students interested in earning baccalaureate degrees will increase the career opportunities for individuals while meeting workforce development needs.

References

- Adelman, C. (1999). *Answers in the toolbox: Academic intensity, attendance patterns, and bachelor's degree attainment*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Adelman, C. (2006). *The toolbox revisited: Paths to degree completion from high school through college*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- American Association of Community Colleges. (2015). *Community college completion: Progress toward goal of 50% increase*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.
- American Association of Community Colleges. (2016). *Community college 2016 fact sheet*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.
Retrieved from http://www.napicaacc.com/docs/AACC_Fact_Sheet_2016.pdf
- American Association of Community Colleges & American Association of State Colleges and Universities. (2004). *Improving access to the baccalaureate*. Washington, DC: Community College Press.
- Anderson, G. M., Alfonso, M., & Sun, J. C. (2006). Effectiveness of statewide articulation agreements on the probability of transfer: A preliminary policy analysis. *Review of Higher Education*, 29(3): 261-291.
- Anderson, M. L., Goodman, J., & Schlossberg, N. K. (2012). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking Schlossberg's theory with practice in a diverse world*. (4th ed.) New York, NY: Springer.

- Archambault, K. L. (2010). *Improving transfer student preparation: Transition theory and organizational change in one community college* [Doctoral dissertation]. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (UMI No. 917650792)
- Archambault, K., Forbes, M., and Schlossberg, L. (2012). Challenges in the transfer transition. *Advising Transfer Students: Issues and Strategies* (2nd ed.). 105-118.
- Bailey, T., & Alfonso, M. (2005, January). *Paths to persistence: An analysis of research on program effectiveness at community colleges*. New Agenda Series. Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education.
- Bautsch, B. (2013, January). State policies to improve student transfers. *Hot Topics in Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org/documents/educ/student-transfer.pdf>
- Berger, J. B., & Malaney, G. D. (2003). Assessing the transition of transfer students from community colleges to a university. *NASPA Journal*, 40(4) 1-23.
- Boughan, K. (2001). Closing the transfer data gap: Using National Student Clearinghouse data in community college outcomes research. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 8, 107-116.
- Bragg, D. D. (2007). Teacher pipelines: Career pathways extending from high school to community college to university. *Community College Review*, 35(1), 10-29.

- Brint, S., & Karabel, J. (1989). *The diverted dream: Community colleges and the promise of educational opportunity in America, 1900-1985*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, (2014). *Understanding the pursuit of higher education among active-duty military personnel in the face of deployment, using the lens of Schlossberg's transition theory* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Nebraska-Lincoln Educational Administration: Theses, Dissertations, and Student Research database. Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cehsedaddiss/206/>
- Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2016). *The Carnegie classification of institutions of higher education*. Menlo Park, CA: Author.
- Carnevale, A. P., Cheah, B., Hanson, A. R. (2015). *The economic value of college majors* [Report]. Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/valueofcollegemajors/>
- Carnevale, A. P., Jayasundera, T., Gulish, A. (2016). *America's divided recovery: College haves and have nots* [Report]. Washington, DC: Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce. Retrieved from <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/americas-divided-recovery/>
- Cejda, B. (1997). An examination of transfer shock in academic disciplines. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice*, 21(3), 279-288.

- Cejda, B., & Kaylor, A. (1997, October). Academic performance of community college transfer students at private liberal arts colleges. *Community College Journal of Research & Practice*, 21(7), 651-659.
- Cejda, B., Kaylor, A., & Rewey, K. (1998). Transfer shock in an academic discipline: The relationship between students' majors and their academic performance. *Community College Review*, 26(3), 1-13.
- Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2012). *A matter of degrees: Promising practices for community college student success*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program. Retrieved from https://www.ccsse.org/docs/Matter_of_Degrees.pdf.
- Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2013). *A matter of degrees: Engaging practices, engaging students*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Community College Leadership Program. Retrieved from https://www.ccsse.org/docs/Matter_of_Degrees_2.pdf
- Clark, B. (1960). The "cooling out" function in higher education. *American Journal of Sociology*, 65, 569-576.
- Cohen, A. M., & Brawer, F. B. (2008). *The American community college* (5th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cohen, A. M., Brawer, F. B., & Kisker, C. B. (2013). *The American community college* (6th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. (5th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- de los Santos, A. G., & Wright, I. (1989). Community college and university student transfers. *Educational Record*, 79(3/4), 82-84.
- de los Santos, A. G., & Wright, I. (1990). Maricopa's swirling students: Earning one-third of Arizona State's bachelor's degrees. *AACJC Journal*, 60(6), 32-34.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*. (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Diaz, P. E. (1992). Effects of transfer on academic performance of community college students at the four-year institution. *Community College Quarterly*, 16, 279-291.
- Dougherty, K. J. (1994). *The contradictory college: The conflicting origins, impacts, and futures of the community college* (4th ed.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Dougherty, K. J., & Townsend, B. K. (2006). Community college missions: A theoretical and historical perspective. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 136, 5-13.
- Education Commission of the States (2014, May). *Transfer and articulation: All state profiles*. Retrieved from:
<http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbprofallRT?Rep=TA14A>
- Eggleston, L. E., & Laanan, F. S. (2001). Making the transition to the senior institution. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 114, 87-97.

- Evelyn, J., Greenlee, C., Brown, L. M., & Weiger, P. R. (2000). Natural allies. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 17(13), 30-39.
- Fink, J., & Jenkins, D. (2017). Takes two to tango: Essential practices of highly effective transfer partnerships. *Community College Review*, 45(4), 294–310.
- Fiske, M., & Chiriboga, D. A. (1990). *Change and continuity in adult life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ghusson, M. (2016). *Understanding the engagement of transfer students in four-year institutions: A national study* [Doctoral dissertation]. Retrieved from: <http://scholarship.shu.edu/dissertations/2162>
- Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. K., & Anderson, M. L. (2006). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory*. (3rd ed.). New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- Grites, T. (2004, September). Advising transfer students. *Academic Advising Today Quarterly Newsletter*, 27(3).
- Gross, B., & Goldhaber, D. (2009, May). *Can transfer and articulation policies propel community college students to a bachelor's degree – and is this the only goal?* Seattle, WA: Center on Reinventing Public Education. Retrieved from: https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/crpe_brief_lumina_cc_jun09_0.pdf
- Handel, S. J. (2017, June). Reigniting the promise of the transfer pathway. *College and University*, 92(2).
- Handel, S. J. (2011). *Improving student transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions: The perspective of leaders from baccalaureate-granting institutions*. New York, NY: The College Board.

- Handel, S. J. (2013). The transfer moment: The pivotal partnership between community colleges and four-year institutions in securing the nation's college completion agenda. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 2013: 5–15. doi:10.1002/he.20052
- Handel, S. J., & Montoya, J. (2012, September). *Increasing student participation in higher education: New collaborations for new populations* [presentation]. Washington, DC: The College Board. Retrieved from https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/rd/NewCollabs_NewPopulations%20_Handel-Montoya.pdf
- Handel, S. J., & Williams, R. A. (2012, October). *The promise of the transfer pathway: Opportunity and challenge for community college students seeking the baccalaureate degree*. Washington, DC: The College Board.
- Heinze, M. C., & Daniels, J. L. (1970). *The transfer of students into community colleges* [Unpublished manuscript].
- Hills, J. R. (1965). Transfer shock: The academic performance of the junior college transfer student. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 33(3), 201-216.
- Hodara, M., Martinez-Wenzl, M., Stevens, D., & Mazzeo, C. (2016). *Improving credit mobility for community college transfer students: Findings and recommendations from a 10-state study*. Portland, OR: Education Northwest.
- Hogan, R. R. (1986). An update on reverse transfers to two-year colleges. *Community/Junior College Quarterly*, 10, 295-306.

- Hopkins, K. (2011, April 12). *Ten colleges with most transfer students*. Washington, DC: U.S. News and World Report. Retrieved from <http://www.pdx.edu/sites/www.pdx.edu.transferstudent/files/10-colleges-with-most-transfer-students>
- Hudak, E. M. (1983). *The reverse transfer student: An emerging influence on the community/junior college campuses* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Washington, DC: George Washington University.
- Hudson, F. M. (1991). *The adult years: Mastering the art of self-renewal*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Ignash, J. M., & Townsend, B. K. (2000). Evaluating state-level articulation agreements according to good practice. *Community College Review*, 28(3),1-21.
- Ishitani, T. T. (2008). How do transfers survive after "transfer shock"? A longitudinal study of transfer student departure at a four-year institution. *Research in Higher Education*, 49(5), 403-419.
- Jenkins, D., & Fink, J. (2016). *Tracking transfer: New measures of state and institutional effectiveness in helping community college students attain bachelor's degrees*. New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Aspen Institute, and the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.
- Juszkiewicz, J. (2014, January). *Recent national community college enrollment and award completion data*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED557995>

- Juszkiewicz, J. (2016, March). *Trends in community college enrollment and completion data*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED557990>
- Kajstura, A., & Keim, M. C. (1992). Reverse transfer students in Illinois community colleges. *Community College Review*, 20(2), 39–44.
- Kallison, J. M., & Stader, D. L. (2012). Effectiveness of summer bridge programs in enhancing college readiness. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36, 340-357.
- Kantrowitz, M. (2009). Analysis of why some students do not apply for financial aid. *Student Aid Policy Analysis*. Retrieved from <http://www.finaid.org/educators/20090427CharacteristicsOfNonApplicants.pdf>
- Kearney, G., Townsend, B. K., & Kearney, T. (1995). Multiple-transfer students in a public urban university: Background characteristics and inter-institutional movements. *Research in Higher Education*, 36(3), 323-344.
- Kisker, C. B. (2007). Creating and sustaining community college-university transfer partnerships. *Community College Review*, 34(4), 282-301.
- Kolesnikova, N. (2009a, March). Community colleges: A route of upward economic mobility. *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Community Development Report*. Retrieved from http://www.stlouisfed.org/community_development/assets/pdf/CommunityColleges.pdf

- Kolesnikova, N. (2009b, July). From community college to a bachelor's degree and beyond: How smooth is the road? *The Regional Economist*. Retrieved from <http://www.stlouisfed.org/Publications/Regional-Economist/July-2009/From-Community-College-to-a-Bachelors-Degree-and-Beyond-How-Smooth-Is-the-Road>
- Kronish, E. (2009). Changing colleges: Handling the transfer process. *Fastweb!* Retrieved from <http://www.fastweb.com/college-search/articles/changing-colleges-handling-the-transfer-process>
- Kuckartz, U. (2014). *Qualitative text analysis: a guide to methods, practice and using software*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Laanan, F. S. (2001). Transfer student adjustment. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 114*, 5-14.
- Laanan, F. S., Starobin, S. S., & Eggleston, L. E. (2010). Adjustment of community college students at a four-year university: Role and relevance of transfer student capital for student retention. *Journal of College Student Retention, 12*(2), 175–209.
- Lazarowicz, T. A. (2015). *Understanding the transition experience of community college transfer students to a 4-year university: Incorporating Schlossberg's transition theory into higher education* [Doctoral dissertation]. Retrieved from: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cehsedaddiss/216/>
- Lester, J., Leonard, J. B., & Mathias, D. (2013, July). Transfer student engagement: Blurring of social and academic engagement. *Community College Review, 41*(3), 202-222.

- Lewis, P. (2013). *Transfer and transition: The challenges faced by transfer students and service best practices*. Retrieved from: https://transfersymposium.appstate.edu/sites/transfersymposium.appstate.edu/files/TST%20-%20Literature%20Review_0.pdf
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Long, B. T., & Kurlaender, M. (2009). Do community colleges provide a viable pathway to a baccalaureate degree? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 31*(1), 30-53.
- Lorenzo, G. (2011a, October). Transfer and articulation from community colleges to four-year institutions: Hope on the horizon. *The SOURCE on Community College Issues, Trends, and Strategies*. Clarence, NY: Lorenzo Associates, Inc.
- Lorenzo, G. (2011b, October). Eight transfer student success stories in progress. *The SOURCE on Community College Issues, Trends, and Strategies*. Clarence, NY: Lorenzo Associates, Inc.
- Mamlet, R., & VanDeVelde, C. (2011). *College admissions: From application to acceptance, step by step*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

- Melguizo, T., Kienzl, G., & Alfonso, M. (2011). Comparing the educational attainment of community college transfer students and four-year college rising juniors using propensity score matching methods, *The Journal of Higher Education*, 82(3), 265-291.
- Mitchell, G. N., & Grafton, C. L. (1985). Comparative study of reverse transfer, lateral transfer, and first-time community college students. *Community/Junior College Quarterly*, 9, 273-280.
- Monaghan, D., & Attewell, P. (2015). The community college route to the bachelor's degree. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 37(1), 70-91.
- Montgomery County Community College. (2015). *Bachelor's degrees* [Report]. Retrieved from <http://www3.mc3.edu/university-center/bachelors.html>.
- Mullin, C. M. (2010, June). Rebalancing the mission: The community college completion challenge. *Policy Brief 2010-02PBL*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.
- Mullin, C. M. (2012, February). Why access matters: The community college student body. *Policy Brief 2012-01PBL*. Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.
- Noel-Levitz. (2008). Education on the move: The e-expectations of transfer students. *2008 E-expectations Reports*. Retrieved from https://www.noellevitz.com/documents/shared/Papers_and_Research/2008/EExpEducationontheMove08.pdf

- Noel-Levitz. (2011). *New government projections forecast dramatic growth in college students 25 and older*. Retrieved from <http://blog.noellevitz.com/2011/10/11/government-projections-forecast-dramatic-growth-college-students-25-older/>
- Nolan, E. J., & Hall, D. L. (1978). Academic performance of the community college transfer student: A five year follow up study. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 19, 543-548.
- North Seattle College. (2015). *Bachelor degrees* [Report]. Retrieved from <https://northseattle.edu/bachelor-degrees>
- Nutting, A. W. (2005). Do community college students benefit when transferring with other transfers? A cross-section peer effects analysis. *Cornell Higher Education Research Institute*. Paper 23. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cheri/23>
- Owens, K. R. (2007). *Community college transfer students' experiences of the adjustment process to a four year institution: A qualitative analysis* [Doctoral dissertation]. Retrieved from: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/2312>
- Pascarella, E., & Terenzini, P. T. (1998). Studying college students in the 21st century: Meeting new challenges. *Review of Higher Education*, 21(2), 151–165.
- Pascarella, E.T., & Terenzini, P.T. (2005). *How college affects students*, 2. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Pennsylvania Department of Education (2011, August 8). *Transfer and articulation oversight committee updates and announcements* [Meeting notes]. Retrieved from http://www.pacollege-transfer.com/Portals/6/PAFiles/TAOC_Updates_August2011.pdf
- Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center (2010). *Statewide program-to-program articulation* [Report]. Retrieved from <https://patrac.org/Administrators/StatewideProgramtoProgramProcess/tabid/1967/Default.aspx>
- Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center (2017). *Participating PA TRAC colleges & universities*. Retrieved from <https://www.patrac.org/AboutPATRAC/ParticipatingCollegesandUniversities/tabid/301/Default.aspx>
- Phillippe, K. A., & Patton, M. (1999). *National profile of community colleges: Trends & statistics*. (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.
- Piland, W. (1995). Community college transfer students who earn bachelor's degrees. *Community College Review*, 23, 35–44.
- Roach, R. (2009, May). The community college transfer challenge. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, 26(7), 14-15.
- Roksa, J. (2007). Building bridges for student success: Are transfer policies effective? *Report for the Transitions to College Program*. Social Science Research Council.

- Roksa, J., & Keith, B. (2008). Credits, time, and attainment: Articulation policies and success after transfer. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 30*(3), 236-254.
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1981). A model for analyzing human adaptation. *The Counseling Psychologist, 9*(2), 2-18. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1984). *Counseling adults in transition*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.
- Schlossberg, N. K., Waters, E. B., & Goodman, J. (1995). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Spring.
- Senie, K. (2016). Implementing transfer and articulation: A case study of community colleges and state universities. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 40*(4), 269-284.
- Slark, J. (1982). *Reverse transfer student study*. Santa Ana, CA: Santa Ana College.
- Smith, P. (2010, May). *You can't get there from here: Five ways to clear roadblocks for college transfer students, 5*, 1-6. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Education.
- Sterling, R. E. (2001). *Joliet Junior College 1901 to 2001: A pictorial history of America's oldest public community college*. St. Louis, MO: G. Bradley Publishing.

- Stern, J.M.B. (2016). The effect of articulation agreements on community college transfers and bachelor's degree attainment. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 40(5), 355-369.
- Sternberg, R. J. (2010). *College admissions for the 21st century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stewart, D. (1998). Perspectives on educational reform. In C. Swann & S. Henderson (Eds.), *Handbook for the College Admissions Profession* (p. 4). Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Swann, C., & Henderson, S. (1998). *Handbook for the college admissions profession* (p. 4). Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Taylor, J. L. (2016). Reverse credit transfer policies and programs: Policy rationales, implementation, and implications. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 40(12), 1074-1090.
- Taylor, J. L., & Jain, D. (2017). The multiple dimensions of transfer: Examining the transfer function in American higher education. *Community College Review*, 45(4), 273-293.
- Townsend, B. K. (1995). Community college transfer students: A case study of survival. *The Review of Higher Education*, 18(2), 175-193.
- Townsend, B. K. (2000). Transfer students' institutional attendance patterns: A case study. *College and University*, 76(1), 21.

- Townsend, B. K. (2002). Transfer rates: A problematic criterion for measuring the community college. In T. Bers and H. Calhoun (Eds.), *Next Steps for the Community College: New Directions for Community Colleges*, 17(13), 13-23. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Townsend, B. K. (2007). Interpreting the influence of community college attendance upon baccalaureate attainment. *Community College Review*, 35(2), 128–136.
- Townsend, B. K. (2008). Feeling like a freshman again: The transfer student transition. In B.O. Barefoot (Ed.), *The First Year and Beyond: Rethinking the Challenge of Collegiate Transfer: New Directions for Higher Education*, 144, 69-77. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Townsend, B., & Dever, J. T. (1999). What do we know about reverse transfer students? In B. Townsend (Ed.). *Understanding the Impact of Reverse Transfers on the Community College: New Directions for Community Colleges*, 106, 5-14. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Townsend, B. K. & Wilson, K. B. (2006). A hand hold for a little bit: Factors facilitating the success of community college transfer students to a large research university. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(4), 439–456.
- University of California, Berkeley (2008). *True stories: An online journal featuring stories by students about the Berkeley undergraduate experience*. Retrieved from <http://calso.berkeley.edu/NSS/content/ps08transfer.html>

- U.S. Department of Education (1998). *1998 amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/highered/leg/hea98/sec101.html>
- U.S. Department of Education, International Affairs Office. (2008a). *Structure of the U.S. education system: Associate degrees*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/associate.doc>
- U.S. Department of Education, International Affairs Office. (2008b). *Structure of the U.S. education system: Bachelor's degrees*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/bachelor.doc>
- U.S. Department of State, Education USA. (2017). *What is a U.S. undergraduate student*. Retrieved from <https://educationusa.state.gov/your-5-steps-us-study/research-your-options/undergraduate/what-us-undergraduate-student>
- U.S. News and World Report (2017). *Colleges with most transfer students* [Report]. Washington, DC: U.S. News and World Report. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/rankings/most-transfer>
- Vaughan, G. B. (2000). *The community college story* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.
- Vaughan, G. B. (2006). Community college transfers come full circle - almost. *Community College Journal*, 76(6), 28-32.

- Wang, X., Chuang, Y., & McCready, B. (2017). The effect of earning an associate degree on community college transfer students' performance and success at four-year institutions. *Teachers College Record, 119*, 1-30.
- Weir, S. B. (2008). *Transitions: A guide for the transfer student*. Boston, MA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Wellman, J. V. (2002, August). *State policy and community college - baccalaureate transfer*. San Jose, CA: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and the Institute for Higher Education Policy.
- West, J. B., & Spaulding, R. (2013, January). 2013 transfer report: A review of improvements in transfer. *Washington Student Achievement Council Work Group Report to the Legislature*. Retrieved from http://www.wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Transfer_Report-2013.pdf
- Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. (2010, June). *Promising practices in statewide articulation and transfer systems*. Boulder, CO: Author.
- Winter, P. A., & Harris, M. R. (1999). Community college reverse transfer students: A field survey of a nontraditional student group. *Community College Review, 27*(1), 13–29.
- Wynn, A. R. (2004). Cracking the code: Determining what transfer students really need to be successful at four-year institutions. *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/021104aw.htm>

Xu, D., Ran, X., Fink, J., Jenkins, D., & Dunder, A. (2017). *Strengthening transfer paths to a bachelor's degree: Identifying effective two-year to four-year college partnerships* (CCRC Working Paper No. 93). New York, NY: Community College Research Center, Columbia University.

Appendix A

Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center:

Baccalaureate Degree Programs

with Statewide Articulation Agreements

The degree majors listed below provide direct pathways toward a bachelor's degree for Pennsylvania community college students who transfer to a participating Pennsylvania college or university.

1. Art
2. Biology
3. Business
4. Chemistry
5. Communications
6. Computer Science
7. Criminal Justice
8. Earth Science
9. Education: PreK-4
10. English
11. Environmental Geoscience
12. Environmental Science
13. Geography
14. Geology
15. History
16. Mathematics and Statistics
17. Meteorology
18. Modern Languages
19. Physical Oceanography
20. Physics
21. Political Science
22. Psychology
23. Social Work
24. Sociology
25. Theatre

Appendix B
Informed Consent Letter



Administration and Leadership Studies
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
Room 101 Stouffer Hall
1175 Maple Street
Indiana, PA 15705
Phone: (724) 357-4719

September 1, 2017

Dear Student,

I'm a doctoral candidate in the Administration and Leadership Studies program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) who is conducting a research study related to the decision-making experiences of college students. The following information is provided to help you decide whether or not to participate in the study.

The purpose of the study is to understand the decision-making experiences of students who express an interest in completing a bachelor's degree. It will take only 5 minutes to complete a survey to learn if you qualify to participate in the study. Students who complete the survey and provide their contact information will be entered in a random drawing for a \$100 Amazon gift card.

Following the survey, students who meet the study criteria will be invited to participate in individual 1-hour interviews with the Project Director. Interviews will be recorded, and participants will be provided with a transcript to review for accuracy. All interview recordings and transcripts will remain confidential. Students who meet the study criteria and volunteer to participate in the study will receive valuable interview experience. Additionally, each participant who completes an interview will receive a career resource guide and \$25 Starbucks eGift card.

Participation or non-participation in the study is not considered part of your college coursework and will not affect the evaluation of your performance in class. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw consent at any time without penalty. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your

relationship with the Project Director, IUP, or the college/university where you are enrolled. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you choose to participate in the study, you may withdraw at any time by exiting the survey and closing your internet browser or notifying the Project Director by e-mail. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed. If you choose to participate, all information will be held in strict confidence and have no bearing on your academic standing or services that you receive from IUP or the college/university where you are enrolled. Your responses to the pre-screening survey and interview questions will be considered only in combination with those from other participants. The information obtained in the study may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings, but your identity and the college/university you attend will remain confidential.

You may find the interview experience enjoyable, and it may be helpful as you continue planning your career. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Project Director at (814) 357-2400 or llzq@iup.edu. If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete the pre-screening survey below. If you choose not to participate, simply exit the survey and close your internet browser.

Project Director:

Ms. Annette M. Fetterolf
Doctoral Candidate
Administration and Leadership Studies
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
101 Stouffer Hall
1175 Maple Street
Indiana, PA 15705
Phone: (814) 357-2400
Email: llzq@iup.edu

Faculty Advisor:

Dr. David M. Piper
Chairperson and Professor
Department of Employment and Labor Relations
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
434 Davis Hall
570 South 11th Street
Indiana, PA 15705
Phone: (724) 357-2400
Email: David.Piper@iup.edu

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. The IRB office can be contacted at: (724) 357-7730.

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment Email

Subject: Survey Invitation - Win a \$100 Amazon Gift Card
To: Select Undergraduate Students
From: University Registrar
Date: October 4, 2017
Cc: 'llzq@iup.edu' <llzq@iup.edu>

Dear Student,

You are invited to participate in a research study about the decision-making experiences of college students. If you volunteer for this study you may withdraw at anytime without penalty. This study is not affiliated with (*name of higher education institution*).

If you complete the 5-minute survey and provide your contact information you will be entered in a random drawing to win a \$100 Amazon gift card. If you meet the study criteria, you will be invited to participate in a 1-hour interview to discuss your college and career decisions. *To complete the survey, click here.*

If you have questions, please contact the project director at (724) 357-2400 or llzq@iup.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.

Project Director:

Ms. Annette M. Fetterolf
Doctoral Candidate
Administration and Leadership Studies
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
101 Stouffer Hall
1175 Maple Street
Indiana, PA 15705
(724) 357-2400
Email: llzq@iup.edu

Appendix D

Interview Participant Debrief



INDIANA UNIVERSITY
OF PENNSYLVANIA

Thank you for participating in today's interview. Your input is greatly appreciated. The information you provided will be used to better understand the decision-making experiences of undergraduate students. A written transcript of the interview will be e-mailed to you in 1-2 weeks. This will provide you with the opportunity to make clarifying statements and any additions or corrections that you may have.

As you continue to work toward earning a degree, you may find the following resources helpful.



U.S. Department of Labor **CareerOneStop** provides resources for exploring careers, searching for jobs, and finding local resources. Website: <https://www.careeronestop.org/>



U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics **Occupational Outlook Handbook** can help you find career information on job duties, education and training, pay, and outlook for hundreds of occupations. Website: <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/>



Pennsylvania Transfer and Articulation Center (PA TRAC) enables students to easily identify courses and degrees that transfer to the participating colleges and universities. Website: <https://www.patrac.org/>



Careers.org provides resources for starting, changing, or energizing your career. Includes information related to occupations, salaries, colleges, and career advice. Website: <http://careers.org/>

Appendix E

Pre-Screening Participant Recruitment Survey:
Community College Students Interested in a Bachelor's Degree
but not Planning to Transfer to a University

Survey Instructions:

Read the questions below and provide an accurate response for each question. If you are volunteering to be interviewed for this research study, please provide your contact information. The survey will take about 5 minutes to complete.

Pre-Screening Survey Questions:

1. I have read the informed consent statements related to this research study and understand that I may discontinue my participation in the study at anytime.

yes

no

Logic: If yes, the survey continues; If no the survey ends.

2. Which statement reflects the year when you were born?

1982 or earlier

between 1983 and 1998

1999 or later

Logic: If born between 1983 and 1998, the survey continues; If born in 1982 or earlier or 1999 or later, the survey ends.

3. Did you plan to complete a bachelor's degree when you enrolled in community college?

yes

no

Logic: If yes, the survey continues; If no the survey ends.

4. At this time are you still planning to enroll in a bachelor's degree program?

yes

no

Logic: If no, the survey continues; if yes the survey ends.

5. As of the end of last semester, how many total college credits have you earned?

(choose one)

0-29 credits

30-59 credits

60-89 credits

90 or more credits

Logic: If 30 or more credits were earned, the survey continues; If 29 or fewer credits were earned, the survey ends.

6. What is your community college degree major?

Please specify: _____

Logic: The survey will continue regardless of the response. The information is being collected only to help verify community college enrollment and to personalize the interview experience.

7. What degree(s) do you plan to complete at the community college? (check all that apply)

none

Associate in Arts (AA)

Associate in Science (AS)

Associate in Applied Science (AAS)

Associate in General Studies (AGS)

Diploma or Non-Degree Certificate

Other (please specify): _____

Logic: The survey will continue regardless of the response. The information will be reviewed to verify that participants are enrolled in a degree program at a community college.

8. Are you willing to participate in a 1-hour interview to share information about your college experience and career decisions?

yes

no

Logic: If yes, the survey continues; If no the survey ends.

9. Please provide your contact information in the spaces provided below.

Name: _____

Email Address: _____

Mobile Phone Number: _____

Alternate Phone Number: _____

Logic: If left blank, the survey ends; If completed, the responses will be reviewed to verify if the student meets the criteria to participate in the study.

Study volunteers will be contacted on a first-come, first-served basis until at least 6 volunteers have been interviewed in each student subgroup.

10. Best way to reach you (check all that apply):

e-mail

phone call

text message

Appendix F

Pre-Screening Participant Recruitment Survey:
Community College Students Who Transferred to a University
and are Enrolled in a Bachelor's Degree Program

Survey Instructions:

Read the questions below and provide an accurate response for each question. If you are volunteering to be interviewed for this research study, please provide your contact information. The survey will take about 5 minutes to complete.

Pre-Screening Survey Questions:

1. I have read the informed consent statements related to this research study and understand that I may discontinue my participation in the study at anytime.

yes

no

Logic: If yes, the survey continues; If no the survey ends.

2. Which statement reflects the year when you were born?

1982 or earlier

between 1983 and 1998

1999 or later

Logic: If born between 1983 and 1998, the survey continues; If born in 1982 or earlier or 1999 or later, the survey ends.

3. Did you transfer to your current university from a community college? (choose one response)

yes

no

Logic: If yes, the survey continues; If no the survey ends.

4. What community college did you attend prior to transfer to your current university? Please specify: _____

Logic: The survey will continue regardless of the response. The information is being collected only to help verify transfer from a community college and to personalize the interview experience.

5. As of the end of last semester, how many total college credits have you earned?

(choose one response)

0-29 credits

30-59 credits

60-89 credits

90 or more credits

Logic: If 30 or more credits were earned, the survey continues; If 29 or fewer credits were earned, the survey ends.

6. What college degree(s) did you complete prior to transfer to the current university? (check all that apply)

none

Associate in Arts (AA)

Associate in Science (AS)

Associate in Applied Science (AAS)

Associate in General Studies (AGS)

Diploma or Non-Degree Certificate

Other (please specify): _____

Logic: The survey will continue regardless of the response. The information will be reviewed to verify that participants hold less than a bachelor's degree.

7. What is your bachelor's degree major?

Please specify: _____

Logic: The survey will continue regardless of the response. The information is being collected only to help verify university enrollment and to personalize the interview experience.

8. Are you willing to participate in a 1-hour interview to share information about your college experience and career decisions?

yes

no

Logic: If yes, the survey continues; If no the survey ends.

9. Please provide your contact information below.

Name: _____

Email Address: _____

Mobile Phone Number: _____

Alternate Phone Number: _____

Logic: If left blank, the survey ends; If completed, the responses will be reviewed to verify if the student meets the criteria to participate in the study.

Study volunteers will be contacted on a first-come, first-served basis until at least 6 volunteers have been interviewed in each student subgroup.

10. Best way to reach you (check all that apply):

e-mail

phone call

text message

Appendix G

Interview Codes and Their Frequencies

Participant responses to the interview questions were coded using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software, then organized by categories. The frequencies of each coded statement and corresponding categories are included in the table below.

Table 18

Interview Codes and Their Frequencies

Data Category	Interview Code	Frequency
People Who Influenced Participant Decisions	• spouse, partner, or family member	37
	• self-motivation; personal pride	34
	• friend, peer, coworker, or college graduate	28
	• college admissions counselor; recruiter	10
	• high school teacher/counselor	3
	Category sub-total:	112
Conditions That Influenced Participant Decisions	• career requires credential	12
	• first-generation college student	7
	• poor grades; difficult course subject	7
	• desired college major available	5
	• wanted independence	4
	• school/program reputation	3
	• loss of financial aid	2
	Category sub-total:	40
Access and Affordability	• tuition cost savings; affordable options	21
	• short commuting distance	15
	• shortest path to degree completion	8
	• complete general education courses	5
	• convenient online courses	4
	Category sub-total:	53

Data Category	Interview Code	Frequency
Career Opportunities	• more career opportunities	22
	• better income potential	17
	• second or alternate career	9
	• increased job security potential	4
	Category sub-total:	52
Career Exploration	• explore career options	20
	• decide career path	11
	• conducted own research	5
	• met with career counselor/coach	3
	Category sub-total:	39
Degree Attainment Decision	• complete associate degree	10
	• complete bachelor's degree	7
	• maybe earn bachelor's degree in the future	6
	• maybe earn master's degree in the future	1
	Category sub-total:	24
Timing of Degree Attainment Decision	• during high school	9
	• 2-10 years after high school	4
	• during community college	4
	Category sub-total:	17
College Transfer Support and Academic Advising	• college professor/academic advisor	53
	• degree requirements website; general website	16
	• degree transfer map; degree requirements list	14
	• understand requirements	10
	• make informed decisions	7
	• didn't use transfer plan	7
	• college registration office	1
	Category sub-total:	108

Data Category	Interview Code	Frequency
Student Services and Support	• attended student orientation	23
	• tutoring and study groups	12
	• didn't need tutoring	10
	• attended career info session or college fair	5
	• learn study and organizing skills	5
	Category sub-total:	55
Clubs and Student Activities	• participate in clubs & activities	17
	• friendships/networking	15
	• student leadership role	5
	• faculty research assistant	5
	• personal interest; physical fitness	2
	Category sub-total:	44
Positive Student Experience	• small, inviting campus environment	7
	• sense of community	4
	• vibrant social life	4
	• best decision I ever made	2
	• fast response time	2
	Category sub-total:	19
Negative Student Experience	• didn't attend activity; work conflict	16
	• some frustration; regret prior decisions	14
	• poor grades; difficult course subject	7
	• attended activity; was not helpful	5
	• community college similar to high school	4
	• college/program not a good fit	2
Category sub-total:	48	