

TRANSFER RECEPTIVITY: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL  
SUPPORT FOR THE TRANSFER AGENDA  
AT A FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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## DEDICATION

For Katherine, Emily, and Charlotte.

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To my husband, who never let me give up and offered unwavering faith in my ability to accomplish this goal.

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## ABSTRACT

Access to higher education in the U.S. is seen as an opportunity for social mobility. California's Master Plan for Education created a three tier system to provide educational opportunities for its citizens. By design, transfer pathways were implemented to allow students to begin their higher education journey at open access community colleges and transfer into four-year public institutions for bachelor's degree completion. Institutional support for transfer students, however, is almost non-existent at most four-year receiving institutions (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). This qualitative study sought to understand the experiences of transfer students who transferred to a four-year receiving institution from a community college and thereafter departed from the university without persisting to degree attainment. I interviewed transfer students about their experiences and the findings contribute to the broader understanding of the transfer student experience. Tinto's theory of student departure, which emphasizes the importance of institutional transfer receptivity in students' decisions about persistence and departure, provided a valuable theoretical framework from which to operate. Four major themes emerged at the conclusion of my interviews: recognizing the value of the community college experience; understanding the external opportunities of transfer students; accepting institutional commitment to the transfer agenda; and experiencing the transfer students' movement from expert to novice in the middle of the post-secondary educational journey. Recommendations urge both higher education administrators to evaluate their

institutional commitments to transfer student success and state policy makers to  
reinvest in the transfer agenda.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

At the national, state, and local levels, there are several benefits to having an educated society. First, a more educated workforce relies less on income support programs. Second, local, state, and federal governments benefit from the increased sales and income tax revenue. Third, higher levels of education are directly associated with higher levels of participation in the community. Finally, there is less reliance on the public healthcare system, greatly reducing long-term cost (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). To be sure, society as a whole benefits from a more educated workforce. Individuals, as well, benefit: education in the United States is perceived as a means to higher paying jobs and a better future for its citizens (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Many employers now require a college degree, and many jobs demand the skills that such a degree can provide. By 2022, occupations that require a bachelor's degree are expected to increase at a faster rate than those that only require a high school diploma (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Those students who do attain a bachelor's degree are much more likely to be employed and ultimately will earn a higher salary than employees without a bachelor's degree. In essence, the earnings gap between individuals with a high school diploma and individuals with a college degree continues to widen with time (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Education for all the nation's citizens is essential for the betterment of the collective and the individual.

Access to higher education certainly represents an opportunity for social mobility, especially for historically disadvantaged individuals such as those coming from the lowest socioeconomic status and/or historically underrepresented racial and/or ethnic groups. College-aged individuals from low socioeconomic status, underrepresented minority groups often have parents who have not attended college and are less likely to be prepared academically; these individuals are thus more likely to attend a community college (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). In California, the community college system was designed as an open access pathway to college for students who, for one reason or another, could not attend four-year institutions directly out of high school (Little Hoover Commission, 2013). In a way, community colleges have had a “calling to break down the barriers of access to higher education” (Dassance, 2011, p. 32). Indeed, the California community colleges have allowed students who are not immediately prepared for four-year institutions access to a college degree.

According to the Master Plan for Higher Education, one of the primary missions of California community colleges is to facilitate the transfer of students to four-year institutions for the attainment of a bachelor’s degree. With a nationwide increase in students attending community colleges (Kena, et. al., 2014), it is imperative that the transfer mission is achieved, especially in order to expand educational opportunities to students coming from disadvantaged groups. Students who transfer from community colleges and who persist to earn a degree from four-year institutions are just as likely to be employed and monetarily compensated as

those students who began their educational journey directly at four-year institutions (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Community colleges, then, are an important component of educating the nation's workforce. While the United States continues to have one of the highest college participation rates in the world, the nation ranks low for overall degree completion, and ties for last in completion of bachelor's degrees (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

There is an institutional responsibility to facilitate student success and, for transfer students, this success is shaped through institutional support for the transfer agenda. Tinto (1993) noted that institutions are often blind to the "manner in which they themselves are at least partially responsible for the leaving of their students" (p. 140). Although admissions criteria govern the caliber of a transfer students admitted into an institution, it is institutional policies and practices that form the students' experiences and essentially determine whether or not a transfer student will persist to degree (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Yet, some believe that the student determines his or her own success and that the student alone is responsible for degree attainment (St. Clair, 1993). While students, in the end, are indeed responsible for their own degree attainment, by admitting them, the institution makes a commitment to support their academic endeavors. Institutions of higher education must place high priority on supporting the transfer agenda.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Institutional support for the transfer agenda is a challenge that both community colleges and four-year institutions face. A critical mission of community

colleges is to help students successfully transfer to four-year receiving institutions, ultimately leading to a bachelor's degree. Yet, existing literature suggests a negative effect of ever attending community colleges on bachelor's degree attainment (Ishitani, 2008; Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Wang, 2009). Several studies concentrate primarily on two-year institutions and the resources and programs available to help students successfully transfer (Eagan, 2009; Hagedorn, 2007; Urso, 2007; Wood, 2012; Zamani, 2001), however, less attention has focused on the commitment of the transfer agenda at four-year institutions.

There are many studies that identify the characteristics of a successful transfer student, such as community college grade point average (GPA) or precollege test scores (Ceja, 1998; Eagan, 2009; Glass, 2010; Ishitani, 2008; Long, 2009; Mourad, 2011; Stewart, 2012; Wang, 2009; Wang, 2012; Wood, 2012), but the experiences of students scarcely have been described. Studies done at four-year receiving institutions often analyze the transition into the university (Eggleston, 2001; Glass, 2010; Laanan, 2001; Laanan, 2011; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Wang, 2009; Wang, 2012), and, although transition is an important phenomenon, transfer student success is not defined by transition alone. For transfer students to be categorized as successful, he or she must move beyond the point of transition and onto bachelor's degree attainment. Even fewer studies have focused on the experiences of transfer students who, after transition, left the institution without persisting to attain a bachelor's degree.

To be sure, transfer students have different struggles than students who attend a four-year institution directly from high school. These struggles can come in the

form of acclimating to the new campus culture, balancing external commitments, and/or assisting with family obligations (Tinto, 1993). These unique circumstances call for specialized institutional support. However, few four-year institutions offer support programs specifically designed to help transfer students navigate through such challenges and persist toward a bachelor's degree (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of students who first attended a community college and then transferred to a four-year receiving institution but left the institution without persisting to attain a bachelor's degree. The study engaged transfer students in conversations about their experiences after they departed without a degree from the four-year institution at which they had been admitted and matriculated.

### **Research Question**

What are the experiences of students who transferred from a California community college into a public four-year receiving institution but did not persist to attain a bachelor's degree?

### **Significance of the Study**

The findings of this study will fill a gap in current literature and contribute to the understanding of the transfer student experience. This knowledge will help develop institutional support strategies that promote the transfer agenda, ultimately leading to an increase in bachelor degree attainment by transfer students.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Transfer student.** A transfer student is defined as a student who has completed the curriculum, with a degree or not, at a community college and transferred to a four-year institution with 60 or more transferrable credits.

**Native student.** A native student attends a four-year institution directly from high school.

**Institutional support.** Institutional support describes the “institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully” (Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solorzano, 2011, p. 253). In the context of the current research, successful transfer occurs when a student persists at the four-year institution to earn a bachelor’s degree.

### **Conclusion**

The California community college system intends to allow everyone the opportunity to pursue higher education, but most who pursue education through this pathway are at a disadvantage. There is an institutional responsibility to ease the burden for disadvantaged students. Institutional support for the transfer agenda enables transfer students to pursue a bachelor’s degree. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of students who transferred from a California community college into a public four-year receiving institution but did not persist to attain a bachelor’s degree. Findings will contribute to the improvement of institutional support strategies for transfer students.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Students take many pathways to earn a bachelor's degree. Some enter four-year institutions directly after graduating from high school while others attend community colleges before transferring. Both the community college and four-year institution are intended to facilitate student completion of a bachelor's degree; however, transfer student success is not guaranteed upon transfer. The literature is often ambiguous about explaining the effects of transfer on bachelor degree attainment; research findings are often contradictory. However, what is clear is that transfer students have a harder time succeeding in four-year institutions than native students and they face different challenges.

Cohen (1990) likened the transfer process to flying: native students have a direct flight to bachelor degree attainment, whereas transfer students have non-direct flights, and many things can happen while they are trying to make their connection. Using this metaphor, it is easy to see that transfer students may experience challenges and unique transitions that call for specialized institutional support.

#### **History of the California Community College System**

Since their inception during the 1900's, community colleges, then called junior colleges, have had a transfer mission. According to Young (1996), in 1947, the *Higher Education for American Democracy* report concluded that community colleges could offer affordable education to lower- and middle-class populations (as

cited by O’Meara, Hall, & Carmichael, 2007, p. 9). Prior to the 1960 California Master Plan for Higher Education, the State Board of Education had oversight over the California community colleges as part of the K-12 system (Little Hoover Commission, 2013). At that time, state colleges were operating independently of each other, and often had overlapping functions. Thus, there was a threat of separate California college systems growing in competition with each other. According to Starr, “the situation reached a crisis in 1959, with too many requests for new campuses, a lack of clear administrative structure for existing state colleges, and the potential to waste resources...” (as cited in Little Hoover Commission, 2013, p. 18). In 1960, the California Master Plan for Higher Education was created to delineate roles and boundaries for the three systems and to accommodate the expected surge of students due to the Baby Boom and new G.I. Bill. Specifically, the plan separated the community college system from K-12 schools and established it as a part of a three-tiered higher education system. The plan also called for heavy reliance on the transfer function to provide access to four-year degrees in a cost-effective way (California State Department of Education, 1960).

Through the Master Plan, California’s community colleges were designed to allow access to post-secondary education for all Californians. The guiding principle of these “colleges” was as follows:

...offer instruction through but not beyond the fourteenth grade level, including but not limited to one or more of the following: (a) standard collegiate courses for transfer to higher institutions, (b) vocational-technical

fields leading to employment, and (c) general or liberal arts courses.

(California State Department of Education, 1960, p. 2)

The provision to award a bachelor's degree was given to the "state colleges" (i.e., the California State University System) and "the university" (i.e., the University of California).

Open access to higher education through the community college system was clearly outlined in the Master Plan. All students who graduate from an accredited high school were guaranteed access to the California community colleges system. The California State University, on the other hand, was positioned to accept 33% of high school graduates, and the University of California was set up to accept 12% of high school graduates (California State Department of Education, 1960). The California community colleges' mission was to accept everyone who did not qualify for admission to the California State University or University of California systems.

The California Master Plan for Higher Education "delineated a transfer path for community college students who wished to earn a baccalaureate degree" (Handel, 2007, p. 39). Transfer rates peaked in the 1960s with 66% of students enrolled at the community college taking courses with the intent to transfer (O'Meara et al., 2007). In 1984, the rate declined to 22% and thereafter remained at that rate (O'Meara et al., 2007). One of the reasons for this decline is the shift in focus at the community college from the transfer mission to the employment or vocational-technical mission (O'Meara et al., 2007).

In 1985, California's Master Plan was revised to coordinate with the efforts of the California Community Colleges (Zamani, 2001, p. 17). Then, in 1991, Senate Bill 121 was signed, establishing the California Community Colleges, California State University, and University of California systems as responsible for creating a solid transfer function. Also in 1991, the California Community Colleges received money to develop transfer centers; one year later those funds were shifted into general funds and are now managed uniquely at each campus (Hagedorn, Lester, Garcia, McLain, & May, 2004). According to Title 5, section 51027, of the California Code of Regulations, each community college campus must have a transfer center to provide transfer student support, monitor student progress, and coordinate the transition process with four-year receiving institutions. The California State University and University of California systems are not regulated to provide transfer support and therefore do not receive specialized funding to do so. Thus, while there is evidence of the interest in promoting student mobility to four-year institutions, the success of transfer students from community colleges is not guaranteed.

Nationwide, in the fall of 2012, more than 7 million students attended two-year institutions, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (Kena, et al., 2014). The students who attended two-year institutions directly after graduating from high school increased from 20% in 1990 to 29% in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). But those attending four-year institutions directly after high school decreased, however, from 42% in 2011 to 37% in 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). With such an increase in students attending community colleges, it

is imperative that the transfer mission be achieved, from arrival on the two-year campus through bachelor degree attainment at the four-year receiving institution. As noted, in California this transfer mission is outlined in The California Master Plan for Higher Education, which still guides the state's higher education system today. Some students nevertheless leave college without attaining a degree. With such a clearly delineated three-tier system, what is causing the lack of student persistence in attaining a bachelor's degree?

### **Challenges to Transfer Success**

An important component of the community college mission is to help students transfer to four-year institutions, with the ultimate goal of bachelor degree attainment. Based on an array of factors, some students are simply not prepared, or able, to pursue directly the four-year college degree, and they must therefore begin their higher educational experiences at a two-year institution. It is the community college that offers such students access to higher education. In spite of this goal, existing literature has largely pointed to the negative effects of ever attending a community college on the attainment of a bachelor's degree (Ishitani, 2008; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Wang, 2009).

Community college students frequently have no choice but to attend two-year institutions because of academic preparedness, cost, family responsibility, and/or proximity of the community college to home (Horn, Nevill, & Griffith, 2006; Provasnik & Planty, 2008). Thus, these institutions are an especially important entry point for many students but, unfortunately, access does not guarantee success. Long

and Kurlaender (2009), for example, using nine years of data from many different public institutions in Ohio, found that students who began their journeys at two-year institutions were less likely to attain bachelor degrees. This result was true even when controlling for disadvantages with which students may enter higher education with, such as those tied to ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. However, as one would expect, students who were considered disadvantaged experienced even lower degree completion rates when they began their education at community colleges.

Students who begin higher education at two-year institutions often face a number of unique challenges. Some, for example, are from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups; others are not college ready and need remediation; they may be first generation college goers; they may come from lower socioeconomic groups; and many have external pulls on their attention and time (Horn, Nevill, & Griffith, 2006). In all, community college students may not be prepared academically, socially, or personally for the four-year college experience. More likely, community college students experience a combination of all three of those challenges. In the remainder of this section, I discuss each of these challenges in turn.

### **Challenge: Being a Student of Color**

The population of students attending community college directly out of high school has increased concurrently with decreases in the proportion of students attending four-year institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Overall, the percentage of American college students who are Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander,

Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native has been increasing. From 1976 to 2011, the percentage of Hispanic students rose from 4% to 14%; the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students rose from 2% to 6%; the percentage of Black students rose from 10% to 15%; and the percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native students rose from 0.7% to 0.9%. During the same period, the percentage of White students decreased from 84% to 61% (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In essence, the overall percentage of underrepresented minority students attending any college or university has increased, whereas the percentage of white students has decreased.

Students from diverse ethnic backgrounds often begin their post-secondary education at community colleges. In California, however, those students of color who begin their education at a community college are less likely to transfer to a four-year receiving institution than their white counterparts. Regardless of ethnic background, of the 2005-06 cohort of students who attended a California community college, only 42% transferred to a four-year receiving institution within six years. But, students of color in the same cohort of students fared far worse with only 34% of Black students, 32% of American Indian students, and 32% of Hispanic students transferring to a four-year receiving institution within six years (California Community College Chancellor's Office, 2009). Therefore, historically underrepresented students transfer to a four-year receiving institution within six years at a lower rate.

One reason students of color may not transfer to a four-year receiving institution within six years is due to a lack of support at the community college.

Bensimon and Dowd (2009) interviewed five Latino/a students who were academically prepared to transfer from Long Beach Community College. Of the five interviewed, only one successfully transferred to a private four-year institution in southern California. The study postulated that institutional agents might not have presented all the educational opportunities available for these racial minority students and concluded that a lack of informed transfer agents at Long Beach Community College might have been a contributing factor to transfer student success. Thus, transfer students of color, while attending a community college, may not feel supported in their degree pursuit and thus decide not to persist in attaining their degree.

### **Challenge: Remediation**

Students who first attend community college often do so because they typically have not been adequately prepared by their respective high schools and thus need remediation in math and/or writing before attending a four-year institution. Nationally, of the students who attended two-year public institutions in 2011-2012, 41% were enrolled in remedial courses, as compared to 29% of those who attended four-year public institutions in the same year (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). A study conducted by Crisp and Delgado (2014) sought to determine if remedial education significantly impacted students' odds of success as measured by persistence and transfer to four-year receiving institutions. Their sample included 23,090 college students enrolled during the 2003-2004 academic year. Of those enrolled in remedial courses, minority students were pointedly over-represented. With regard to outcomes,

35% of remedial students transferred to a four-year institution whereas 44% of non-remedial students transferred (Crisp & Delgado, 2014). Statistics like these are discouraging given the high percentage of community college students deemed underprepared for college and who are required to complete some form of remediation prior to transferring. Since we know that 41% of community college students need remediation (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) and that those who need remediation are less likely to transfer, this is yet another challenge to transfer student success.

### **Challenge: First Generation Status**

First generation students are those whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree. They are often more likely to be students of color, come from a lower socioeconomic status, have dependent children, attend school part-time, and work full-time—all risk factors associated with lower rates of degree attainment (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First generation students also are more likely to attend community college. Engle and Tinto (2008) reported, when comparing the enrollment of first generation and non-first generation students, 70% of first generation students attended a two-year public institution in 2011–2012, whereas 52% of non-first generation students attended a four-year public institution in the same year. This is significant because Wood, Nevarez, and Hilton (2012) found that first generation students were 46.1% less likely to transfer from community colleges than non-first generation students.

Stebbleton and Soria (2012) compared first generation college students to their non-first generation peers at large public research institutions. Not surprisingly, they found that first generation students more frequently encountered obstacles that compromised their academic success as compared to students whose parents had attended college. These obstacles include family and work obligations, perceived weak English and math skills, inadequate study skills, and feelings of depression.

**Challenge: Cost**

The ever-rising cost of higher education is the reason that some students choose to attend a community college, and this is especially true for low socioeconomic status students. Tinto (1993) confirmed that financial responsibilities “may lead persons to initially enter relatively low-cost public two-year institutions as a means of lowering the overall cost of completing a four-year program” (p. 65). Therefore, students from the lowest socioeconomic status often chose to attend community college to realize cost savings.

However, this cost saving measure of first attending a community college could pose a challenge. Dowd, Cheslock, and Melguizo (2008) compared transfer enrollments at selective and non-selective institutions and found that selective institutions were far less likely to admit transfer students. Transfer students who came from the lowest socioeconomic groups were even less likely to be admitted into selective institutions. Even when looking at non-selective institutions, transfer students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to be admitted. This shows that “socioeconomic inequities in transfer access severely undermine a higher

education system where community colleges are intended to be low-cost engines of social and economic mobility” (Dowd et al., 2008, pp. 466-467). This poses a challenge, then, because if students from low socioeconomic backgrounds choose to attend community college as a cost saving measure, the likelihood that those students will actually obtain a bachelor’s degree is small—not because they cannot afford it (cost) but because their initial choice (cost-related/save money) negatively effects their chances of getting into a four-year receiving institution.

### **Challenge: External Activities**

Disadvantaged transfer students face other risk factors outside of the campus environment as well. Tinto defined these challenges as “external obligations” (Tinto, 1993). External obligations are those imposed by communities and environments a student is exposed to outside the college or university that pull him or her away from the institution. Tinto theorized that the “conflict between the expectations of external communities and those of the college may be greater for disadvantaged students” (p. 63).

Freeman, Conley, and Brooks (2006) compared characteristics of transfer students who attained a bachelor’s degree to characteristics of those who did not. Their analysis confirmed that students with one or more identified risk factors were less likely to attain bachelor degrees. Risk factors included in their study were having no high school diploma, delaying enrollment in higher education, being married, having dependents, being a single parent, working full time, and being financially independent. Historically marginalized groups face additional challenges due to

external obligations, such as the above factors, all of which increase the risk of not attaining a bachelor's degree.

In sum, there are many reasons students choose to attend a community college to begin their higher education experience. Some, because of external obligations, desire to attend part-time or stay closer to home before transferring. Others determine that community college is a more cost-effective approach to beginning their college experience. First-generation college students face a variety of challenges. Some community college students are underprepared academically for the rigor of the four-year institution. Others come from low socioeconomic backgrounds or underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds, and therefore experience associated barriers to pursuing a direct pathway to a bachelor's degree. Whatever the reason that students choose to attend community college, research confirms that attending community college sets up additional roadblocks to success. Although the California Master Plan for Education created clear transfer pathways, the success of transfer students from community colleges is not guaranteed. Thus, the question remains, are California's four-year institutions sufficiently meeting the needs of their transfer students?

### **Institutional Receptivity**

Once a student successfully transfers to a four-year receiving institution, the institution is expected to provide support to ensure persistence and degree attainment. This is referred to as institutional receptivity. Institutional receptivity at four-year receiving institutions includes the implementation of different support services, such

as summer bridge programs, orientation programs, unique housing options, specially assigned transfer advisors, and transfer-student run clubs. Tinto's model of student departure describes institutional receptivity as follows:

While external forces may influence one's decisions to go to college and greatly constrain choices as to which college to attend, once entry has been gained, their impact for most students tends to be dependent upon the character of one's integrative experiences within that college. In other words, the model posits that view that experiences on campus are, for most students, paramount to the process of persistence. (Tinto, 1993, p. 129)

While studies indicate that institutional receptivity is essential to transfer student success (Tinto, 1993), Swing (2000) concluded that transfer students receive only minimal institutional support. In a survey of 38 four-year receiving institutions, for example, Swing found that nearly one-third of campuses did not offer any special support programs for transfer students (as cited in Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Indeed, at most four-year receiving institutions, support programs for transfer students are non-existent (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001).

According to Tinto (1993), assistance programs should help students overcome social and academic difficulties as they integrate into their new campus culture. With a focus on transfer student transitions into four-year receiving institutions, Gard, Paton, and Gosselin (2012) conducted a single focus group with 35 participants who transferred from two different community colleges into one public research university. The students identified the lack of academic advising, financial

aid, and social/cultural issues as major barriers to their success. What's more, in a study specifically focused on transitions into four-year receiving institutions, Flaga (2006) interviewed 35 community college students who had transferred to Michigan State University and confirmed the need to increase institutional support at the receiving institution in order to continually foster the connections transfer students make on campus.

Most studies completed on transfer student success have been conducted solely at just one receiving institution and have focused on a specific transfer program within that institution (Cejda, Rewey, & Kaylor, 1998; Chrystal, Gansemer-Topf, & Laanan, 2013; Flaga, 2006; Ishitani, 2008; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). In a study at Colorado State University, Davies and Kratky (2000) conducted focus groups with students who participated in the Vital Connections Transfer Program, a program designed to assist students transferring from community colleges in Colorado and Wyoming. Davies and Kratky (2000) identified challenges the Vital Connections Transfer Program did not address, two of which centered on issues the students faced after they arrived on campus: 1) students needed unique assistance from staff, instead of the standard orientation all new students receive and 2) students expressed an interest in a peer mentoring system to connect them with other transfer students already on campus.

Although studies done at single, four-year receiving institutions are valuable with conclusions that are often applicable at other institutions, there have been far fewer studies conducted across multiple institutional types and locations. Dowd, Pak,

and Bensimon (2013) conducted a qualitative study of 10 individuals from across the United States who transferred from community colleges into a variety of four-year receiving institutions. Their results emphasize the need for “institutional agents” to “assist students in making successful postsecondary transitions and developing collegiate identities” at both the community college and the four-year receiving institution (p. 15). Furthermore, the students they interviewed placed importance on having a location on campus they could consider a “home base” (p. 17). Dowd, Pak, and Bensimon (2013) concluded that there is value in the special programs offered to transfer students at four-year receiving institutions especially when those programs offer an opportunity to build relationships with staff.

While a majority of studies of institutional receptivity focus specifically on the transfer student experience, another way to study the transfer student experience is from the vantage point of an institution. Tobolowsky and Cox (2012) interviewed 17 institutional agents who were determined to have an impact on the transfer agenda at one research institution. They discussed institutional structures and policies, personal perceptions, and internal and external environmental conditions affecting transfer students. The researchers concluded that most efforts at the institution were focused on native students as opposed to the unique needs of the transfer student population. This confirmed Tinto’s (1993) position that “transfer students are often channeled through those [orientation] programs together with freshman as if their needs and interests were identical” (p. 191).

Based on the results of these studies, it is clear that support for transfer neither can stop at the community college, nor can it stop after the transfer student's first semester at the four-year receiving institution. It is the responsibility of both the community college and the four-year receiving institution to ensure that transfer students persist and attain a bachelor's degree. Ultimately, "the bottom line is not transfer, support for transfer, institutional partnerships around transfer, etc., but the completion of the degree itself" (Bahr et al., 2013, p. 459). Institutional support of the transfer agenda becomes imperative, then, because it is one way an institution can support transfer student completion of the bachelor's degree.

### **Conclusion**

According to the Master Plan for Higher Education, the California community college system is designed to offer a pathway to bachelor degree attainment. Community colleges exist to provide open access to students who cannot or choose not to attend four-year institutions directly after high school. But open access does not equate to success. Most students who attend the California community college system are disadvantaged; they often need remediation in math and/or writing, are first generation college students, and/or come from low socioeconomic backgrounds or diverse ethnic backgrounds. Because a large number of community college students face challenges as they pursue their degrees, it is through institutional support for the transfer agenda that educational attainment can be facilitated.

Many have asked questions around the characteristics of transfer students. Fewer have focused on the *experiences* of transfer students. Even more rare are

studies concentrated on the experiences of transfer students who do not persist to degree attainment. With this in mind, I explored the experiences of students who transferred from a California community college into a public four-year receiving institution. I engaged transfer students in conversations about their experiences after they had been admitted and matriculated into a four-year receiving institution and left the institution before attaining a degree. In the next chapter, I present my research design detailing how I acquired this knowledge, including location, participants, data collection and analysis.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

Research has been defined as a careful and diligent search (Glesne, 2011) that is a “purposeful, systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging in the process” (Merriam, 1991, p. 43). This section, thus, seeks to describe in detail the process I used to collect data to answer my research question: What are the experiences of students who transferred from a California community college into a public four-year receiving institution but did not persist to attain a bachelor’s degree? First, I discuss the purpose of the study and related research questions. I then describe the study design and data analysis methods. Then I present information about the four-year receiving institution where my study was located. Finally, I discuss the steps I took to ensure trustworthiness and an ethical approach to the research.

#### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of transfer students who successfully transferred into a four-year receiving institution but then left the institution without attaining a degree. There has been relatively little research focused on the experiences of transfer students, particularly those who have transferred to four-year receiving institutions and have not persisted to a degree. This study engaged transfer students in conversations about their experiences in order to fill a gap in the current literature. The discovered themes contribute to our

understanding of the transfer student experience. This knowledge may help increase the bachelor degree attainment of transfer students by shaping institutional support surrounding the transfer agenda.

The following research questions guided my study:

**Overarching Question.** What are the experiences of students who transferred from a California community college into a public four-year receiving institution but did not persist to attain a bachelor's degree?

**Research Question 1.** What are the attributes of students who transfer from a California community college into a particular four-year receiving institution?

**Research Question 2.** What are the goals and commitments of transfer students upon entry to the four-year receiving institution, and how do those goals and commitments change over time?

**Research Question 3.** What are transfer students' institutional experiences?

**Research Question 4.** What are transfer students' perceptions of integration, both academic and social, into the four-year receiving institution?

### **Methodology**

I used a qualitative research design in this study. Qualitative research is best suited to a study that seeks to understand "an area where little is known or where previously offered understanding appears inadequate" (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 27). Since little is known about transfer students who leave four-year receiving institutions without attaining a degree, a qualitative research design was appropriate. This interpretivist study sought to explain the meaning of a phenomenon (Schwandt,

2001), where students successfully transfer to a four-year receiving institution but do not remain to earn a bachelor's degree.

In the interpretivist paradigm, the researcher believes that “reality is not an object that can be discovered and measured but rather a construction of the human mind” (Merriam, 1991, p. 48). This epistemology assumes there are multiple truths and the ontology accepts that reality is “socially constructed, complex, and ever changing” (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). Those practicing interpretivism value the lived experiences of the individual and “learn from the participants in a setting or process the way *they* experience it, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what they experience” (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 28). I used a qualitative research approach for this study because I sought to understand the complex experiences of a specific group of students as they have lived it.

In qualitative research, the researcher is not just an observer, but rather becomes a participant. Schwandt (2001) described participant observation as “a means whereby the researcher becomes at least partially socialized into the group under study to understand the nature, purpose, and meaning of some social action that takes place” (p. 186). For this study, I, as the researcher, was the primary means of data collection through conducting interviews, document gathering, reflection, analysis and interpretation. As I conducted this research, I found myself participating with the interviewees both through numerous phone contacts as I attempted to build trusting relationships and in person as they recounted their unique stories.

## **Methods**

As the primary instrument for data collection, I outline the specific methods used to understand the experiences of students who transferred from a California community college into a public four-year receiving institution but who did not persist in attaining a bachelor's degree.

### **Location**

The location of this study was one of the 23 public four-year receiving institutions within the California State University system. The California State University system was created under the Master Plan for Higher Education and is designed to prioritize admission to California community college transfer students. As the nation's largest four-year public university system, it educates approximately 447,000 students and is the state's greatest producer of bachelor's degrees (California State University, 2014). The institution where the study took place, Tule University, is located in the state's San Joaquin Valley, a rich agricultural region plagued with a low college going rate. In fact, the college attainment rate in the San Joaquin Valley is half the rate of the state of California as a whole (Carden, 2007).

The institution where the study took place educated about 9,000 students in 2013, of which about 8,000 were enrolled in undergraduate programs (CSU website, 2015). More than half of the transfer population enrolled at this host institution comes from local Central Valley community colleges, making it an ideal setting to explore the experiences of transfer students. The two-year graduation rate for the fall 2006 transfer student cohort was just over 40%, increasing to just under 80% for the six-

year graduate rate. The fall 2010 three-year retention rate for transfer students was over 45%. About half of the incoming class each year is transfer students. The Director of Retention Services at the institution agreed to be my point of entry liaison.

### **Participants**

I selected participants using two different methods: purposive sampling and snowball sampling. With purposive sampling, good participants are those who know the information that is required, are willing to reflect on the phenomenon, have the time to participate, and are willing to participate and be tape recorded (Morse & Richards, 2002). I chose purposive sampling as the primary method for acquiring participants as I was seeking to understand the experiences of this specific group of students. Snowball sampling, in which “participants already in the study recommend other persons to be invited to participate” (p. 173), was a useful complement to increase the sample size.

The participants invited to participate in this study met the following criteria:

1. Considered a transfer student by Tule University admission criteria:
  - a. Completion of a minimum of 60 transferable semester or 90 quarter units
  - b. At least a 2.0 GPA
  - c. Good academic standing with the last college of attendance
  - d. Completion of 30 units that meet Tule University general education requirements with a grade of C- or better, of which four courses are

specified as oral communication/speech, written English composition, critical thinking/logic, and math/quantitative reasoning;

2. Transferred from a California community college;
3. Attended Tule University either full-time or part-time during the fall 2013 semester;
4. Separated from Tule University, not having been dismissed for academic reasons; and
5. Were at least 18 years old.

Working with university administrators, I obtained a list of potential participants who met the selection criteria. Glensne (2011) confirmed that for depth of understanding, “you repeatedly spend extended periods with fewer respondents” (p. 46). Therefore, I sought to identify 10 willing participants.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Cause of Student Departure**

Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure can help higher education administrators understand why students leave institutions of higher education. Indeed, it serves as the theoretical framework for this study because it helps us understand why students who have different backgrounds depart institutions of higher education prior to degree completion. Unlike other theories of departure that view a departure from a four-year institution prior to degree attainment as a student’s personal failure to meet the demands of college (Tinto, 1993), Tinto’s theory regards a student not persisting to degree attainment as a result of the student’s interactions with the institution (Braxton, 2003). Tinto understood that students enter college with many

different attributes and backgrounds, including predetermined goals and intentions regarding college attendance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), but he placed emphasis on institutional interaction as the primary factor in student persistence and degree attainment. This theory specifically “speaks to the longitudinal process of departure as it occurs *within an institution* of higher education” (Tinto, 1993, p. 112, emphasis in original).

In 1986, Tinto identified four theoretical perspectives on college student departure. The first, *economic*, centers around the idea of return on investment. A student will depart from an institution if he or she feels the cost of attendance outweighs the benefits of continued attendance (Braxton, 2003; Tinto, 1993). However, Tinto posits that financial decisions are made in the form of deciding where to attend and how to attend (full-time or part-time) and that finances do not often affect a student once attendance begins. Tinto’s second perspective on student departure is the *organizational* perspective, which focuses specifically on the role the institution plays in influencing student departure (Braxton, 2003; Tinto, 1993). A strength of this perspective is that it recognizes the effect of institutional structure, behavior, culture, and design on the student. The third perspective, the *psychological* perspective, concentrates on two different levels: the individual and the environment (Braxton, 2003). The psychological perspective at the environmental level is closely tied to the organizational perspective, as it relates to the influence institutions have on student departure. Student perceptions of the institutional behaviors influence departure, specifically, friendliness, supportiveness, helpfulness, and intellectual

satisfaction (Pace, 1984, as cited by Braxton, 2003). The final student departure perspective is the *sociological* perspective, which acknowledges the influence of cultural capital and student culture on persisting to degree attainment (Braxton, 2003).

It was Tinto himself who realized the limitations of each of the four perspectives when considered alone. In other words, no one perspective solely influences a student's decision to depart from an institution before earning a degree. These four perspectives all interact with each other and influence the level of a student's academic and social integration into campus (Tinto, 1993). Integration is "the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 54). As integration increases, so does student commitment to the institution. When transfer students have positive and integrative experiences influenced by one or more of the four perspectives, persistence and commitment is reinforced. Negative experiences have the opposite effect and serve to sever the transfer student's ties to the institution (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto's work provides a valuable theoretical framework from which to operate. It underscores the ways in which the economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological perspectives of students can influence their experiences and perceptions. As noted earlier, the successful transfer is a student who persists to attain a degree from the receiving institution. Drawing from Tinto's

theoretical model of student departure, institutional transfer receptivity clearly is central to students' decisions about persistence and departure.

It is with this understanding that I employed Tinto's theory of student departure. His model is appropriate because it "provides us a way of understanding how colleges, comprised as they are of differing social and intellectual communities, come to influence the leaving of their students" (Tinto, 1993, p. 104). I therefore undertook data collection, coding, and analysis by focusing on four main concepts derived from Tinto's work: pre-entry attributes, goals/commitments, institutional experiences, and integration.

**Pre-entry attributes.** For the purpose of my study, these attributes included the characteristics of a student prior to entering the four-year receiving institution, such as demographic information, family background, prior academic schooling (both in high school and the community college), and previous skills and abilities.

**Goals/commitments.** These included the goals and commitments of both the student and the institution. They involve the student's original intentions, including degree attainment, and how those intentions have changed over time, as well as external obligations that could deter or encourage a student towards degree attainment. Imperative to this definition is the institutional commitment, demonstrated by institutional support.

**Institutional experiences.** Institutional experiences comprise two systems, academic and social, and within each of these systems there is both a formal and informal environment. The academic system "concerns itself almost entirely with the

formal education of students. Its activities center about the classrooms and laboratories of the institution and involve various faculty and staff whose primary responsibility is the education of students” (Tinto, 1993, p. 106). The social system “centers about the daily life and personal needs of the various members of the institution...that take place largely outside the formal academic domain of the college” (p. 106). These two systems are understood to be interwoven and have both direct and indirect influences over each other.

**Integration.** Defined by Tinto (1993), integration refers to the positive experiences that “reinforce persistence through their impact upon heightened intentions and commitments both to the goal of college completion and to the institution in which the person finds him/herself” (p. 115).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

I collected data for this study through semi-structured interviews and institutional documents.

**Interviews.** After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, an administrator at the host institution provided the institutional records of students who first transferred to Tule University in fall 2013, spring 2014, fall 2014, and spring 2015. For the purposes of gathering interview participants, invitations first were sent via email to 123 potential participants who satisfied the before mentioned characteristics and transferred to the receiving institution in fall 2013. After not receiving any responses for two weeks, a follow-up invitation that included a self-addressed, stamped envelope was mailed to the potential participants. After not

receiving any responses for three weeks after the mailing, I called the 123 potential participants at the phone number provided by the institution. Of those 123 potential participants, five agreed to be interviewed. Two additional participants were obtained through snowball sampling. During the first phone interaction, I went over the purpose of the study, the requirements for participation, and confidentiality. Those who agreed to participate received and signed the informed consent document (Appendix A). Interviewees had the opportunity to stop the interview and/or stop participation in the study at any time (Glesne, 2011).

Interviews with each participant were semi-structured and lasted between 45- and 90-minutes. According to Glesne (2011), “an hour of steady talk is generally an appropriate length before diminishing returns set in for both parties” (p. 114). I conducted all of the interviews, most of which took place in a neutral, mutually agreed upon location that was conducive to an interview setting. Due to the complexities of scheduling, three interviews were conducted over the phone. No interviews were conducted on the campus of Tule University because I wanted the respondents to feel comfortable and speak freely about their institutional experiences. Conducting interviews off campus also emphasized the fact that I was not acting as an agent of the institution.

The interview questions invited participants to offer the data I needed to answer my research questions. Using the four main concepts drawn from Tinto’s theory of student departure, Appendix B describes how the interview questions assisted in answering my research questions. Although these questions guided the

interview, time also allowed me to ask additional follow-up questions. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate when the researcher knows enough about the topic to guide the discussion (Morse & Richards, 2002).

All interviews were recorded, and I took notes about the conversations and my own observations during the interview. The digitally recorded interviews and transcribed text interviews were stored on a password protected, encrypted computer. I further protected the anonymity of the participants by assigning each a pseudonym. Notably, I did not interview or observe institutional agents at Tule University because I was seeking to understand the experiences of transfer students and wanted their unique student perspective.

**Documents.** I collected documents related to institutional resources from the institution's website that were available to assist students who transferred to the receiving institution.

### **Data Analysis**

The first step in data analysis is to prepare the data. For this step, the electronically recorded interviews were transcribed to text by a third party. The transcribed interviews were then supplemented by my field notes. During this stage it was important to bracket, or put aside, previous knowledge about the phenomenon so that it could be viewed exactly as it happened. To bracket, a researcher must make "these notions explicit" (Morse & Richards, 2002). This bracketing was done through my supplemented field notes and journal at the conclusion of each interview.

The second stage is coding—i.e., the process of analyzing qualitative data is done by “categorizing and coding its segments and then trying to establish a pattern for the whole by relating the codes or categories to one another” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 6). All transcribed interviews were uploaded into Dedoose, an online application used to store and analyze research. As I reviewed the transcribed interviews, I identified themes associated with each of the four main concepts. I also allowed for new and emerging concepts to be identified. Data collection happened until the point of saturation was reached, which happens when no new concepts or themes emerge during data collection (Morse & Richards, 2002).

### **Transfer Receptivity at Tule University**

Data collection began in summer 2015 and was concluded by the end of December 2015.

### **Demographics and Other Descriptors: Transfer Students at Tule University**

I obtained the names and demographics of all students who first transferred to Tule University in fall 2013—those who graduated and those who did not. For the purposes of this study, I was only interested in the experiences of those who no longer attended the host institution, but the demographics of the larger population were important.

First I will describe the demographics of all students who met the admissions criteria for transfer to Tule University, transferred from a California community college, and attended the host institution beginning in fall 2013. An understanding of the fall 2013 transfer student population at Tule University in its entirety is important

to compare those who attained a degree with those who did not. Thus, this section purposefully includes both students who persisted to degree attainment and those who did not. The population included 949 students, of whom 86.3% came from the California Central Valley. Females made up 61.1% of the population and males made up the remaining 38.9%. Students who identified as Hispanic/Latino\* made up the largest percent of the population at 41.8% followed by 29.7% White\* students. Of the total transfer population, 69.3% were low socioeconomic status, as defined by Pell Grant Eligibility, and 79.6% of students reported being the first in their family to attend college. The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) defines a non-traditional aged college student as being 24 or older. Based on that definition, 77.1% of the total transfer student population was of non-traditional college age. Of the population of students who transferred to Tule University in fall 2013 from a California community college, 25.7% had graduated by spring 2015. See Table 1.

Table 1  
*Descriptive Demographics of Fall 2013 Transfer Students (N = 949)*

	Percent
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	61.1
Male	38.9
<b>Race*</b>	
American Indian	0.4
Asian	12.6
Black	2.1
Hispanic/Latino	41.8
Non-Resident Alien	1.7
Pacific Islander	0.9
Two or more races	4.2
Unknown	6.6
White	29.7
<b>Low SES (Pell Eligible)</b>	
Yes	69.3
No	30.7
<b>First Generation</b>	
Yes	79.6
No	20.4
<b>Age</b>	
18-23	22.9
24-29	57.2
30-36	12.6
37-42	3.9
43 or above	3.4
<b>Graduated by Spring 2015</b>	
Yes	25.7
No	74.3

\*Note. The racial categories are those used by Tule University.

Looking more closely at the 74.3% of students who did not persist to graduation, those who were the focus of this study, Table 2 displays when the students stopped attending Tule University. By the start of the spring 2014 semester, 9.2% of the transfer students who first began attending in fall 2013 had stopped attending without attaining a bachelor's degree. One year later, by the start of spring

2015, 19.7% of the transfer students who first began attending in fall 2013 had stopped attending without degree attainment. I did not to invite any students who first began attending in fall 2013 and was still enrolled in spring 2015 to participate in this study because they could have easily enrolled in fall 2015 after receipt of the invitation to participate.

Table 2  
*Enrollment Patterns of Fall 2013 Transfer Students Not Persisting (N=705)*

	Percent
Enrolled in Fall 2013	100.0
Enrolled in Spring 2014	90.8
Enrolled in Fall 2014	82.8
Enrolled in Spring 2015	80.3
Enrolled in Fall 2015 (as of July 2015)	66.2

Only students who originally enrolled in fall 2013 and stopped attending after fall 2013, spring 2014, or fall 2014 were sent an invitation to participate in this study. Of the students who were invited to participate in this study, 65.9% were female. Those who identified as Hispanic/Latino made up 37.4% of the population, while those who identified as Asian made up 25.2%. Low socioeconomic status students made up 81.3% of those who met the criteria to participate in my study and 82.9% reported they were the first in their families to attend college. The age of the population was largely non-traditional, with 87% of students who reported they were 24 or older. See Table 3.

Table 3  
*Descriptive Demographics of Invited Participants (N = 123)*

	Percent
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	65.9
Male	34.1
<b>Race</b>	
American Indian	0.0
Asian	25.2
Black	1.6
Hispanic/Latino	37.4
Non-Resident Alien	0.8
Pacific Islander	0.8
Two or more races	4.9
Unknown	10.6
White	18.7
<b>Low SES (Pell Eligible)</b>	
Yes	81.3
No	18.7
<b>First Generation</b>	
Yes	82.9
No	17.1
<b>Age</b>	
18-23	13.0
24-29	61.8
30-36	13.8
37-42	6.5
43 or above	4.9

Note. The racial categories are those used by Tule University.

Comparing the demographics of the entire population and those who were invited to participate in the study, we can see that those who were invited to participate were similar to the population as a whole. Certainly, as demonstrated in the tables above, the students who transferred into Tule University from a California community college in fall 2013 were from diverse backgrounds, mostly low socioeconomic status, and of a non-traditional college age.

All participants contacted attended Tule University during the fall 2013 semester, but had stopped attending by spring 2015 semester. None of the participants had been dismissed from the institution, which demonstrates that they were able to perform academically. They were homogeneous with regards to ability, as they had already proven their success in higher education at their previous transfer institutions by meeting the minimum criteria and being accepted into Tule University.

### **Student Interviews: The Difficulty of Obtaining Participants**

After I obtained the student specific information in summer 2015 from the host institution, I attempted to contact 123 former students first through email and then through the postal mail. After not receiving any positive response from the mail campaign, I began reaching out to the former students by phone. Out of the 123 individual students I called, five students consented to an interview. The other two interviewees were obtained through snowballing. It turned out that one of the two participants obtained through snowballing had already attained a bachelor's degree from Tule University; consequently he became my negative case. A negative case is an instance that contradicts emerging assumptions (Schwandt, 2001), and can be used as another method to explore a topic (Glesne, 2011).

During the fall 2015 semester, I conducted semi-structured interviews where I inquired about the participants' transfer experiences within higher education. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, but due to the difficult nature of finding participants and aligning schedules with those who consented to participate in the study, several interviews were conducted over the phone. In addition, although I had

originally planned to conduct two separate interviews with each participant, participant hesitation to take part in my study compelled me to conduct one single interview with each participant. All interviews were tape-recorded and extensive notes were taken. The interviews were later transcribed and imported into Dedoose. In Dedoose, I coded and analyzed the interviews to further understand the participant perspective.

This population was difficult to connect with. All participants had stopped attending Tule University and were understandably concerned with how I had obtained their information. Most phone calls were met with questions like, “How did you get my information” or “Who gave you my phone number?” There also was significant confusion about my desire to include them in my study, which was evident from the comment, “You know I don’t go there anymore, right?” Some interviewees were extremely concerned about confidentiality; they were worried that their negative comments would be associated with them by name, and that they would be identifiable by the institution.

In addition to difficulties connecting with participants in general, it was difficult to find female participants with children with whom to work. When I called potential female participants, I often heard crying children in the background and was met with comments such as, “I just don’t have time, sorry.” Because of the difficulty connecting, I was not able to secure any female participants who had children.

Other potential participants told me that they didn’t meet the criteria of the study because they “still went there [Tule University],” even though the data I

received from the host institution indicated they had stopped attending several semesters earlier.

### **Document Collection: The Lack of Specialized Resources**

Each year, Tule University's incoming class consists of about half transfer students and half native students. Therefore, while I waited for the student specific information from the host institution, I began my document collection of resources available to Tule University's transfer student population. I began my inquiry by doing what any college student could do, I did a general search of the Internet for "Transfer [Tule University]." There was no one website uniquely dedicated to transfer students, although I did find websites devoted to specialized, at risk-populations: low-income, first generation, minority, and/or students needing remediation. These challenges to transfer student success were addressed in the review of the literature.

There is a webpage dedicated to "Transfer Admissions" that lists the requirements for admission to Tule University and provides a list of "Transfer Resources" all related to course articulation agreements. These articulation agreements were in addition to those available at assist.org. ASSIST is an online transfer information system that displays how a course or program at one California public institution will apply when it is transferred to another California public institution. This information is helpful for students intending to transfer into Tule University, but not for those who have already been admitted or are currently

attending. This was also the only website related to transfer students that appeared when I did a search for “Transfer” using Tule University’s own search engine.

In addition to the limited online resources, there is one program at Tule University that is specifically designed for those transfer students already admitted to the institution: the New Student Orientation [NSO] program. Tule University offers the NSO program for native and transfer students separately. This program offers transfer students preferred registration, meetings with faculty, campus tours, interaction with fellow transfer students, and information about campus policies, requirements, and services. The NSO program for transfer students occurs several times each summer and is designed for students admitted for the fall semester. While interviewees were not asked specifically about their experiences with the NSO program for transfer students, of the students interviewed, only two talked about attending the NSO program; more might have attended but were not prompted to discuss the experience.

Aside from the web resources and the NSO program for transfer students, there are no transfer specific support programs offered at Tule University. However, it should be noted that I intentionally didn’t use administrative personnel to determine other resources that may be available but not accessible via the Internet. I purposefully designed my research to understand the transfer student experience from their perspective; thus, I intentionally avoided asking administrative personnel about transfer student support programs.

## **Trustworthiness**

I recognize that I am the instrument of this research and that I must continuously improve my techniques in order to ensure the quality of my study. A study is only as good as the researcher who conducts it (Morse & Richards, 2002). As the main instrument of my study, it is imperative that I am trustworthy as a researcher. Schwandt (2001) defined trustworthiness as the quality of the investigation and what makes the investigation noteworthy to others. In order to increase the trustworthiness of this study, I established credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility relates to “the fit between respondents’ views of their life ways and the inquirer’s reconstruction and representation of the same” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 253). To demonstrate credibility, I used member checking and clarification of researcher bias. Member checking is when a researcher checks with interviewees to ensure that her interpretations of what is meaningful or important match with what the interviewees deem as meaningful and important (Seidman, 2013). During the interviews, the interviewees had the opportunity to verify findings, offer feedback, and confirm their perspectives were reflected accurately.

To further establish credibility, I sought to clarify my bias as the researcher. In my current role as a professional, I work with transfer students and have a deep institutional understanding of the transfer process. Although I have not worked professionally at Tule University, I journaled all prior knowledge I had of transfer procedures. I continually explored my pre-conceived ideas and reflected on the

influence they may have had on data collection and analysis. The credibility I established through member checking and bias awareness helped establish trustworthiness.

Transferability also helped establish the trustworthiness of my research. Transferability occurs when the researcher can demonstrate that what she has learned can be transferred to other similar situations (Schwandt, 2001). This can be accomplished through a rich description of the setting and context, derived from prolonged engagement with participants, field notes, and the use of an audit trail. To accomplish transferability, I conducted one meeting with participants, lasting between 45- and 90-minutes in length. During those interviews, I created observational field notes to enhance the interviews with information not digitally recorded. I also used an audit trail, which is an “organized collection of materials that includes the data generated in a study” (p. 9). The audit trail was especially constructive to transferability while I analyzed documents.

Along with credibility and transferability, through the use of multiple data collection methods, I ascertained dependability in order to assure that my research was trustworthy. For my study, I relied on interviews, document analysis, and observational field notes. As I analyzed the collected data, I continually attempted to understand the multiple perspectives being offered, or triangulated the data. Schwandt (2001) described triangulation as examining “a conclusion from more than one vantage point” (p. 257). Triangulation, or the use of multiple data collection methods, is how I ensured my study’s dependability.

Finally, I ensured confirmability, which is achieved by “establishing the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry were not merely figments of the inquirer’s imagination” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 259). I achieved confirmability through peer review and debriefing. Specifically, I relied on my peers and advisor and regularly sought their input on my work. The dependability and confirmability of my research helped me achieve the trustworthiness of my investigation.

### **Ethical Research Considerations**

I considered many ethical responsibilities during the design of this study. First, I attained Institutional Review Board approval and obtained a completed informed consent form from each participant. Additionally, I assured each participant that involvement in the study was voluntary: before agreeing to participate in the research, all potential participants were provided sufficient information to make an informed decision and those who agreed to participate also were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point. Finally, I respected the participants’ right to privacy and confidentiality. Participants’ names were changed and replaced with pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were also used to protect the location of the study, including the specific site location and any previous institutions the participants attended. All data were stored securely on a password protected, encrypted computer.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have outlined the process I used to answer my research questions. I provided a detailed research design—including information about the study location and participants—and described in detail my data analysis methods. I

also described and explained my use of Tinto's theory of student departure. I then offered a detailed description of transfer receptivity at Tule University. Finally, I discussed the steps I took to safeguard trustworthiness of the findings and outlined the ethical considerations in which I engaged while conducting this research. In all, I have established that my methodology is the appropriate paradigm to satisfy the needs of this study. Little is currently known about the transfer student experience and the knowledge gained from this study has the potential both to fill the gap in current literature and, in turn, to shape institutional support for transfer student success.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of students who successfully transfer from a community college into a four-year receiving institution and leave the institution without a bachelor's degree. I analyzed two types of data: interviews and documents. In this section, I will present the results and common themes I discovered when addressing each of my research questions. The themes contribute to an appreciation of the transfer student experience. Further, the resulting themes can help higher education administrators understand how shaping institutional support around the transfer agenda may increase bachelor degree attainment rates of transfer students.

As a way to organize and combine the themes I discovered during the analysis of the transcripts, I used Tinto's four main concepts: pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, institutional experiences, and integration. These four concepts provide a framework to understand why students departed the institution. Tinto's four main concepts do not exist independently, but, rather, they influence each other and altogether have an effect on student departure. In the following section I use student quotes to support and describe the themes that emerged.

#### **Pre-Entry Attributes: The Community College Experience**

In this section, I introduce the attributes of participants in order to answer the following research question:

What are the attributes of students who transfer from a California community college into a particular four-year receiving institution?

Participants' attributes are comprised of demographic information, family background, prior academic schooling, and previous skills and abilities. For the purpose of this study, these attributes include the characteristics of the student prior to entering the four-year receiving institution including the time the student spent at the community college.

Of the 123 invited participants, I was able to conduct seven interviews with volunteers. The seven participants' demographic characteristics were not reflective of the entire population invited to participate in this study. Of the seven interviews, two interviewees were female and five were male as indicated in Table 4. One self-identified as Hispanic, and the others identified as White or their race/ethnicity was undisclosed. All students interviewed were of non-traditional college age, defined as being 24 or older (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). The seven participants all transferred to Tule University after spending three to ten plus years at a community college. Five of the interviewees had attended Tule University for one academic year or longer, but only one persisted to degree attainment. Two of the five, Norris and John, had one semester remaining to earn their bachelor's degree from Tule University before they departed.

Table 4  
*Chart of Interviewees*

Interviewee	Per-Entry Attributes								Goals/Commitments			
	Age	First Generation	Gender	Pell Eligible	Ethnicity	How long attended CC	Transfer GPA	How long attended receiving institution	Units remaining to earn bachelors	Returned to School?	Long Term Goal	
Jane	28	Y	F	Y	Hispanic/Latino	6 years	3.04	3 semesters	U	Yes, different CSU	Professor	
Darcy	31	Y	M	Y	White	9 years	3.34	2 semesters	U	Yes, previous CC	Professor	
James	U	Y	M	U	U	4 years	U	4 semesters	Graduated	Graduated	Agricultural Business	
Norris	44	N	M	Y	White	10+ years	3.96	2 semesters	18 units	No	U	
John	25	N	M	Y	U	3 years	2.73	3 semesters	16 units	No, "still a student"	Police Officer	
Tilney	25	N	F	N	White	3 years	3.71	1 semester	4+ semesters	No, plans to return to previously attended CSU	Fashion Industry	
Martin	26	Y	M	Y	White	3 years	U	1 semester	4+ semesters	Yes, online	Gym Owner	

Note. U = Unknown.

In the following paragraphs I will introduce each participant by describing his or her time at the community college. Although the participants did not all attend the same community college, they shared common experiences.

While attending community college, Jane, one of the two female participants, had a transformative classroom experience that went on to influence her to pursue a four-year degree. Originally from the Sacramento metropolitan area, Jane was the only participant in this study who was not native to the San Joaquin Valley. The youngest of three children, her mother put a lot of pressure on her to attain a bachelor's degree, and she became the first in her family to receive any form of a college education. After attending her community college for three years with no declared major, Jane decided on the math major, however, she signed up for a geology general education class and fell in love with the subject. She thus changed her major to geology and is currently still pursuing that degree.

I took a random geology class and I loved it. It was earth science and I loved the professor. He was so awesome and I took him for the other two semesters for the geology major. And after that, I just in the summer finished working for him for nine semesters. TA and grading labs and now I'm just grading labs for him, because I'm in class. Can't make it in as a TA.

Jane's experience in her community college earth science class changed the trajectory of her post-secondary education. The faculty member became a mentor for her, and she maintained a relationship with him even after transferring to Tule University.

Jane was a good student at the community college: she transferred into Tule University with a 3.04 GPA.

While Jane had a transformative experience during community college, another participant, Darcy, was the most integrated into his community college culture. Darcy is originally from Iran and immigrated with his mother to the United States in 2000. Although subject content was easy for him during high school, he struggled because he “barely knew any English.” After earning his high school diploma in 2003, he began attending the local community college because of proximity—it was the closest college to his house. For nine years while attending community college, Darcy was the most integrated when compared to the other participants in my study. He served as the president of the geology club, was a student senator for two years, and did volunteer work. When I inquired if he worked while he attended his community college, he responded with a list of all his paid and unpaid activities.

Yeah. The student senator job, that's a paid job. I also was a geology tutor two years ago, student geology for our teacher. And I've been to—just volunteer throughout the campus, help students register, you know, their IDs and all that, and then I also worked as—bunch of other places. Mostly volunteer, but the student senator and tutoring, that was a paid job. And I've been active too, like, almost 10 clubs in one semester. I just—I like to be active and help students.

Darcy was an active and integrated participant at his community college and transferred into Tule University with a 3.34 GPA.

Like Darcy, the third participant James was also involved while attending his local community college, which demonstrated his full integration and his achievements as a student.

Yes. I was fairly involved, I mean, not as much as I was in high school. The first couple of years I helped out with a few conventions, and because the junior college would put on conventions for the high school FFA students. So since I've already done the competition as a high school student, I figured as a college student it would be kind of fun to see the other side, if you will. So I helped in directing the dairy products' team or the dairy products' competition as well as the livestock competition and—what else did I do—we had one class, it was called a leadership in Ag and that class was just dedicated to different activities within the junior college that we participated in. So I did, like I said, an array of different competitions and activities.

His involvement in these activities was related to his major in agricultural studies.

Born and raised in the San Joaquin Valley, James came from generations of ranch and dairy owners. However, by the time James graduated high school all the family ranches and dairies had been sold. This left James unsure of his future career, which is why he decided to pursue higher education. He shared his experiences with different faculty at the community college, who first introduced him to the agricultural studies major.

There was a—one teacher in particular, her name was Miss X and she's the one that kind of got me in the direction of Ag business in the first place. She's really nice. I still keep in contact with her. And Mr. Y is another one. He's now the dean of the Ag department at [CC]... Like I said, I mean, they just have a great faculty.

James was an active, engaged student while he attended his community college and this continued into his experience at Tule University. James is the one student in this study who persisted to graduate from Tule University. He was very proud of his academic accomplishments given he was the first in his family not only to attend college but also to earn a bachelor's degree.

Norris, the oldest participant who volunteered to be interviewed, was probably the least engaged at the community college, but he had the highest transfer GPA. In his late twenties, after a year of living out of a van, traveling and exploring the United States, he settled in Oregon and first began attending a community college. Norris then married and moved home to the San Joaquin Valley where he continued his education at the local community college. While attending his local community college and throughout his time at Tule University, Norris was married, had a son in junior high school, and operated his own business.

I think I started with like two classes [at the CC] and then I was like, okay, I did that. At the JC, obviously the JC is five minutes from our house, so I could be working and just take a class and then come out and keep working. It really didn't take any time from my schedule.

Due to family and work obligations, Norris did not have a lot of extra time to spend engaging in co-curricular activities. And, because he was older, he did not feel comfortable interacting with his fellow students.

When I was going there [the CC], I was 30. At different times, obviously when I finished I was almost 40, but I didn't really—I made friends. I look young. A lot of people thought I was young. I remember even some kids thinking I was actually their age and stuff. But I just—I couldn't keep up with the conversations. The things that a 20-year-old talks about is something completely different than something a 30-year-old would talk about.

So, although Norris was not as involved at his community college as the other participants, he demonstrated his dedication to bachelor degree attainment through his high GPA.

John was also dedicated to bachelor degree attainment. Growing up just a few blocks away from Tule University, it was no surprise that is where he decided to

attend. John's father and mother both attained bachelor's degrees and his younger brother began attending Tule University straight out of high school. He described his home life as "normal and boring." When I asked him to reflect on the type of student he was in high school he answered simply.

I wasn't the one that was a problem and I wasn't the one that was getting awards for my academic achievements.

John was a traditional high school student who played sports and had a few girlfriends. Although he always intended on a career in law enforcement, he graduated from high school during a recession, which influenced his decision to attain a bachelor's degree.

...right when I started getting into junior college and all that stuff, the economy took a crap, so I was like, it was more important than ever just trying to get a degree, because especially in law enforcement they were laying everyone off. They weren't hiring anyone.

John realized the impact a bachelor's degree could have on his future career advancement. He transferred into Tule University with a 2.73 GPA. And, although he had the lowest transfer GPA of the participants, he met the minimum entrance requirements and was accepted into Tule University.

Like John, both of Tilney's parents earned bachelor's degrees; they graduated from a polytechnic school within the California State University (CSU) system. Because of her parents' educational background, Tilney always knew she wanted to attain a bachelor's degree.

Like, it kind of wasn't even really a question growing up. It was, like, a weird, you know you already know you're going to college kind of deal.

Tilney considered herself a good student who never struggled academically, but she decided to attend community college straight out of high school so that she could live at home and maintain the very close relationship she had with her parents. She then transferred into a CSU in southern California, but after one semester moved back to the San Joaquin Valley again to live her with parents and attend Tule University. She transferred into Tule University with a 3.71 GPA.

Southern California was also Martin's destination after graduating high school; he moved there with friends with the intention of working and going to school. Although he worked, his plan to attend school was never brought to fruition. After realizing he did not want to bus tables at a restaurant for the rest of his life, he moved back home and began attending his local community college. Martin described his time at his community college as mundane.

For a long time it was just school. I just show up. I'd drive to class, go to class and leave. I wouldn't even study or do homework on campus. It wasn't until my last couple of semesters there that I actually got more involved on campus. It was with a club on campus called Cruise—Campus Crusade for Christ. But that wasn't until the last couple of semesters.

I followed up to ask if he thought that involvement helped him in any way.

Yeah. I think it did help a lot, because when you're on campus and you're—well, you're there so you're meeting other students or you're meeting teachers or kind of networking, and I think that the better your network is and the more people you have that you know, the more connections you have. It just helps you overall. And I think that really helped a lot as far as even just doing homework or knowing some teachers to go to their office hours to talk to them or whatever it is. I think it helped a lot, yeah.

Although Martin was not initially involved in his community college, he became more involved in his final semesters, and even though his involvement was not with

an academic organization it helped him feel engaged with campus and likely contributed to his academic success.

Community colleges are designed to be open to anyone in the community, and the participants varied background attest to the variety of students who attend community colleges. In addition to their varied home backgrounds, attendees at community colleges range in age, unlike four-year receiving institutions, which are comprised mostly of students of traditional college age (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). All the students interviewed for this study were non-traditional college aged students. Tinto (1993) argues that non-traditional age students often feel marginalized from mainstream activities at institutions of higher education. Of the seven participants in this study, feelings of marginalization were most evident with Norris, the oldest participant.

I just—but I know they were like, that whole being an older person. The junior college, no big deal. There's lots of old people, and by—forty is not that old, right? But it is when you're talking to a 20-year-old and I looked like their dad or their mom....

Although Norris implied that his age was not a cause of concern when attending his community college, that his age was “no big deal,” his age did seem to impede his social integration because as an older student, he indicated that he had both more adult responsibility and less in common with the students in his courses.

While the participants in my study might not have had much in common with their classmates, four of the seven interviewees mentioned they felt their time at community college helped prepare them for the academic rigor of the four-year

receiving institution. John, for example, talked about learning how to stay on task while attending his community college.

So I think the transition was easier for me because I was a transfer student than someone that just came straight out of high school, because I knew that I couldn't study like how I did in high school. So I knew I had to like—I couldn't slack off. If you slack off the first couple weeks, you're like a month behind, so I think that helped me a lot going to [CC] first.

John felt he acquired time management skills while attending the community college—skills that helped him perform academically at Tule University. Jane also learned how to study and perform in an academic setting while attending her community college.

Because in high school, most of the time you can just do your homework and pass. Just show up and pass. Over here, it's a university and coming from high school, it is way different. They [native students] didn't have that intermediate step like I did at the junior college.

Jane credits her time at her community college to helping her transition to the academic environment at her four-year receiving institution. Overall, the participants in my study felt their academic experiences at the community college helped them prepare for academic life at Tule University.

Home life and age varied among participants, as did time spent at their respective community colleges. Each of the seven individuals in this study spent three to ten years at their respective community colleges, but all decided at some point to transfer to Tule University. While attending their community colleges, they completed a minimum of 60 transferable units, earned GPAs worthy of transfer, and felt prepared for the academic rigor of the four-year receiving institution. Based on

literature, none of the students' background characteristics seemed to indicate that they would have been at risk for dropping out once they achieved entry into Tule University.

### **Goals and Commitments: Understanding External Opportunities**

As previously defined by Tinto, goals and commitments include the goals and commitments of both the student and the institution. Most importantly, and for the purposes of this study, I define goals as the student's intentions towards degree attainment and how those intentions changed over time. In addition to examining participants' goals, I also explored what Tinto (1993) defines as external commitments, which Tinto argues might deter or encourage a student towards degree attainment. This section addresses the following research question:

What are the goals and commitments of transfer students upon entry to the four-year receiving institution, and how do those goals and commitments change over time?

### **Goals**

To better understand how the goals and commitments of transfer students may have changed over time, I first wanted to understand their goals and commitments as they entered higher education at the community college. When I asked the participants why they first decided to attend a community college, two of the respondents indicated that they began attending community college because it was an expectation placed on them by either society or their parents. This was especially true for Jane, who felt pressure from her mom to go to school.

After high school, I took a few months off, then I just had a job. Then I got out of that job and then my mom just would not stop. She just said—she's older, obviously, so she grew up where if you don't go to college, you're not going to have a future. So she just did not stop harping on that, every day, multiple times a day, so I just signed up for college just to say, hey mom, I went—gave it a try and then I'm done. I guess I'm going to be mean and say shut her up about it. That's the only reason I actually started school.

In other words, Jane began attending community college to relieve parental pressure to attain a degree. And, although she continued attending community college, she didn't have a clear purpose other than to keep her student job at the campus testing center, which she indicated she did not enjoy.

Well, for three years I had no major. I had, like, no reason to be there, but I had a job there as a student, so it was just being a student just to keep the job.

In terms of goals, then, Jane attended the community college because of pressure from her mom, and her attendance for three years was directly related to her campus employment.

Martin had a similar experience, although instead of direct pressure from his father to attend school, his father provided an incentive. Martin's father told him that if he attended school, he could live rent free.

So I was like, "All right, I need to do something. I don't want to be a bus boy forever." So I moved home and decided to go to the junior college here. So my decision was because one, I knew people that went there; two, it was home, I could save money; and then my dad, it was just him living in his house, he said as long as I'm home and I'm going to school I could live there for free...

Martin began attending the community college because of an incentive from his father, friends who were also attending, and an understanding that higher education could lead to a more promising career. As Martin continued attending community

college, however, his intentions did not become any clearer, even when the opportunity to transfer arose. When I asked Martin when he first decided to transfer to Tule University, he was unclear that transfer was his goal.

I don't know. I don't know if I really want—decided I need to transfer and do this. I just knew that that's kind of what you did after the JC. You know like, all right you have your AA or whatever and then you transfer and go on. So that was when—kind of the same time a couple of my other friends were doing the same thing. Like, "Hey, we're at the end of our JC education and we needed to go on"...

Clearly, Martin pursued transfer to Tule University because it was “kind of what you did after JC” not because he had an articulated goal and/or specific career objective.

Unlike Jane and Martin, whose higher education goals were first defined by parental expectation, James and Tilney both set their own goal to attain a bachelor's degree. Still, they began attending community college for the opportunity to explore different courses and majors without paying the high cost of going directly to a four-year institution.

Well, I knew kind of that I wanted to go to college but being that I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do, I decided to start out at a junior college. One, it is closer to home, I didn't have to rent or anything, so it's cheaper and it was just cheaper to go to school there. You know I can do the same thing my—all my undergrad stuff and basic courses and try to get an idea of what I really wanted to do and I mean, that's kind of why I started at [CC]. (James)

...like, when I started at [CC] I had no idea what I even wanted to do. Like, I had no major. I had no—like, it was all up in the air of what direction I wanted to go. So a lot of it was also taking classes in different areas that, "Oh, I think I like this. Oh, I definitely don't like this," which even though it does take longer, I think it's important. So I don't mind that it did take a little longer at [CC]. And I guess at the same time, the cost of it is so much less than a state school that it's like, "Well, I can kind of experiment around to figure out what I like better because it's not that expensive." (Tilney)

Even though James and Tilney had similar reasons for first attending a community college, they had very different pre-entry attributes. James was the first in his family to attend college and was classified as having low socioeconomic status demonstrated by his Federal Pell Grant eligibility, whereas both of Tilney's parents held bachelor's degrees, and Tilney was not eligible for the Federal Pell Grant. The comments from James and Tilney make evident that different types of students from different backgrounds can have similar exploratory reasons for first attending a community college. Tinto (1993) posits that, for most students, finances affect a student's decision about where to attend and in what form to attend (full-time or part-time) but finances do not affect student persistence while attending. For James and Tilney, the low cost associated with enrolling in exploratory courses was the reason for first attending a community college. However, community college attendance can begin for reasons other than just finances.

Darcy, John, and Norris attended their local community college because they saw that as the next step; going straight to a four-year institution was not something any of the three considered. Darcy, because English was not his first language, struggled to adjust within the classroom, so when deciding where to go to school he selected the closest college available, which happened to be the local community college. He first majored in art and photography before finding his passion for geology. John is a native English speaker who did not struggle in the classroom like Darcy, but he, too, determined that community college was the next step after high school. In fact, John initially was interested in only earning a degree from a

community college and did not begin attendance at the community college with the intent to transfer.

Well, I always wanted to go into law enforcement so I always knew I had to kind of do that even though it wasn't a requirement to—you just need a high school degree, but I knew it was so many people applying for the job so I thought—I knew that at least do [CC], so I have a chance in getting a job in law enforcement.

Indeed, Darcy and John had different reasons for opting to attend community college. John began attending his community college because the economy was in recession, and he knew that earning an associate's degree would increase his chances of securing a career in law enforcement. He decided to attain a bachelor's degree only because the economy had not improved by the time he completed his AA degree and local law enforcement agencies were still not hiring when he was ready to enter the job market. Like Darcy and John, Norris had his own reason for attending community college. Norris began attending the community college first because he felt he had “catching up to do.” He knew he needed to complete basic remedial coursework before gaining entry into a four-year institution. So although Darcy, John, and Norris had different reasons for beginning at a community college, none of them considered first attending a four-year institution.

My data suggests that none of these three participants had a clear understanding of their academic goals when they first began attending the community college, and, for Norris, a career goal never fully crystalized likely because he was a returning college student who was already working. Although he knew he wanted to earn a degree, he did not have a specific career goal attached to earning the degree.

When I asked Norris about the time he first decided to attend college, he responded with a story about being a junior in high school and getting arrested for vandalism.

Norris said it was in juvenile hall that a counselor saw potential in him.

So I went in and he [the counselor] had me take some practice exams and after I took the practice exams, he's the first person that actually said, why aren't you in college? He just gave me the test the next day and he was like, you need to be in college. Of course I didn't go, but I always remembered that and I passed my GED while I was in there and so I had that. I don't know, it was always kind of in the back of my mind. I enjoyed learning. I just really—some days I was almost too smart and I figured out the system. I figured out all the bullshit bureaucracy that was going on and I just didn't want to play the game. I just kind of didn't and then at some point when I was 24, I guess, 24, 25, I took off for a year and just went traveling. When I came back, I have no idea why I just took that first class, but I was in Oregon at the time and maybe somebody mentioned something. I was looking for some new experience and so I started taking a class at the [CC].

Norris attended different community colleges for more than 10 years. When he started to “get more serious” about attending community college and transferring, he first decided on a degree in forestry. But, by the time he transferred to Tule University he had declared a major in English. Norris reflected on how his goals to obtain a bachelor's degree changed throughout his higher education experience.

...I was just all of a sudden, in the back of my mind, I was like, why am I even—most of these kids and even my friends, they had very direct goals. They were there for a purpose. They wanted to get this degree so they could do this. I didn't have that.

He attended Tule University for two semesters and departed with a higher GPA than when he began. Throughout his attendance at the different community colleges and even into his attendance at Tule University, he was never able to establish a clear purpose for obtaining a bachelor's degree, other than his enjoyment of learning.

Whether it was pressure from their parents, the low cost associated with the community college, or attending a school more suitable to exploring courses and majors, the students in this study had different goals for attending community college. Although some knew the end objective was to earn a bachelor's degree, this was not true for every student when they began their attendance at the community college. However, by the time the transfer students began attending the four-year receiving institution, the objective of earning a bachelor's degree was clear even if the reason for doing so was not. Tinto (1993) suggests that institutions should expect students to fluctuate between certainty and uncertainty when going through the process of goal clarification. He goes on to state that institutions should not "treat it as a deficiency in student development," but should instead consider it to be "an as an expected part of that complex process of personal growth" (p.41). Tinto also suggests that unresolved goal uncertainty over an extended period of time is more likely to lead to institutional departure, and the case of Norris demonstrated Tinto's claim.

### **External Commitments**

The seven participants in this study had varying reasons for attending community college—some had clearly defined goals and others developed goals as they gained experiences at their community colleges. While exploring goals is important when attempting to understand the transfer student experience, so, too, is an understanding of how students' external commitments influence their degree completion. Tinto (1993) posits that external obligations often lead students to be "pulled away" from an institution (p. 63). External obligations thus have negative

associations. While this may be true, participants with whom I spoke viewed their external commitments as *opportunities* they wanted to pursue.

Ultimately, the students' goals did not change over time based on their external obligations; instead, they simply had opportunities to achieve their goals before attaining their degrees. John's experience is a testament to how an external commitment can be viewed positively. John was interested in pursuing a career in law enforcement since he graduated high school, and he had the following experience when making the choice to continue his education or pursue his long-term goal:

So it was either—I'm going to [Tule University] to get into law enforcement and they're offering me a job in law enforcement, so it would be—it was kind of not a really tough decision to make.

When John was provided the opportunity to achieve his long-term goal, he stopped attending Tule University before degree attainment. Similarly, Martin, who wanted to own and operate his own gym, had the following experience while deciding to continue to pursue a bachelor's degree:

I wasn't like as motivated as I was to continue my education because, kind of timing-wise I knew that I always wanted—ever since I started CrossFit my timeline was, "Okay, go to school, get your degree, open a gym." So I wanted to do that even before I had met [my girlfriend], and then as timing went on or as time went on and I kind of saw the timing of gyms and in the big scheme of things, of how the town's going and stuff, I knew there was another gym going to be opening soon, so I kind of wanted just to focus on that because I didn't want that opportunity to slip by.

So as—I don't know. It was just hard to be motivated to go to school when I knew that it was going to take a whole other year or something out of my time to do that when, okay, I already have in the CrossFit world I have what I need to do this, so I should really be focusing on the business as opposed to focusing on my education.

Even though both John and Martin made the decision not to continue their education because of external opportunities, they still struggled with the decision to discontinue their attendance at Tule University.

So you could fail out of [police] academy and then you're like, "Oh, shit," so it was kind of like—it was a hard decision to make at the time, it was, but I knew I had to do it, but it was hard to make that decision, because I only had one semester left to get my bachelors. I was so close to finishing that and then just put that aside for—it's a big unknown. (John)

You know it was a bummer. I mean, I was a little bit bummed out. It's a lot of time and effort and energy you put into going to school and getting your degree, money. But it was a bummer, but I also knew I wasn't just dropping out to be a bum you know. I was dropping out for something productive. So it was, as much as a bummer as it was, it was also kind of encouraging, exciting too, because it's a new chapter, a new page, so it was cool that—to focus my time and energy on something else. (Martin)

Indeed, John and Martin had external commitments that ultimately resulted in their shift from attaining a bachelor's degree to a different goal. At the time of this study, John struggled with the decision to leave the university because although he had been accepted into the police academy, graduating from the police academy was not guaranteed. And, while Martin had achieved his goal of owning his own gym, he was disappointed that he had to stop attending Tule University because of the time and cost he had initially invested into his education.

Not all participants who left the university had other goals that pulled them from attaining their bachelor's degree. Norris, for example, had unclear goals and thus did not persist at his degree. Like John and Martin, though, Norris had similar feelings when making the decision to discontinue attendance at Tule University.

I started just telling my wife, okay, I've got to just let that—I've got to let it go. At that moment, once I realized that I wasn't going back, a little bummed. A little bummed. Of course I rationalized it in the sense that I wasn't sure if I—did I really want to be an English major?

It appears that despite other opportunities, the decision to stop attending Tule University was not an easy one for these three participants, and the impact of their decision was harder than expected because of the time and money they had invested in their education.

In contrast, Tilney, who was offered her “dream job” during her first semester at Tule University, didn't struggle as much as others about the decision to stop attending.

I don't really think I felt a certain way because in my head it was just like, “Well, whatever. I can go back to school whenever I want,” and at this point I kind of had this dream job that I was really thrilled to have, and I guess I valued that more than school. So I don't—I didn't really feel anyway about it. I felt like, “Oh. This is a temporary thing for me to be not doing school. I'll get back to it when I want to.”

For Tilney, the decision was easier because she only attended Tule University online, part-time for one semester. However, her statement about her departure from higher education being temporary suggests it was more difficult than she may be willing to admit. As demonstrated in Table 4, more than half of the interviewees, like Tilney, have returned to school or have plans to return. No participants saw their departure from Tule University as a complete withdrawal from higher education—they are merely putting their education on hold. This was evident when talking with Martin about his plans for the future.

I remember us [he and his wife] talking about how I was always going to go back to school. So it wasn't like I was dropping out, more like—putting on hold. We would talk about, "Oh if I stop." So what I actually did was, yeah, I stopped going to physical school, I...transferred everything to Liberty Online.

Martin stopped attending Tule University, but began attending an online institution because it was more accommodating to his many external activities. Indeed, as I placed phone calls to potential participants I was told that they did not think they met the criteria to participate in the study because they still considered themselves students of Tule University, even though data I received indicated they no longer attended.

While some participants had long-term career goals and left the university for what seemed to be an opportunity to achieve that goal, those long term career goals should not be confused with students' other external work obligations. The participants who left the institution for their "dream job" also worked while attending Tule University, as did those who left for other reasons.

I worked. Yeah. I worked a lot. Basically, if I wasn't at school, I was at work. (James)

Yeah. I—the whole time going to school I always had a job, whether it was—there was one time when I was working I had—I was working at Starbucks. I was instructing at [the gym] and then also coaching CrossFit...So I was pulling my hair out, but it was just kind of what I did. (Martin)

I still have my own business, I've just restructured it to a point where I don't—now I have a few clients that I just do work for them and of course at the time I had a guy working for me too, so when I was gone, he knew my schedule and so I told him just be available. I still have my phone with me on vibrate so if something happened I could take care of it. I did—I had to work, but also I had my own business so I kind of could make my own schedule. I think I had to skip class once during Shakespeare and nonfiction. Both professors were—I explained the situation, they were cool about it. (Norris)

These students worked to support themselves, and in the case of Norris, to support his family. Interestingly, Tinto (1993) suggests that work-related activities will have a negative impact on the student's institutional-related activities. In other words, employment has a negative impact on degree completion. Interestingly, it was not work related activities that took time away from studying and caused departure for the participants in my study. The seven students I interviewed were able to balance work and school as evidenced by their GPAs while attending Tule University. Their departure from the university was not because they were academically dismissed. In other words, it was not work commitments that took time away from studying and ultimately caused departure. Instead, based on the response from participants in my study, it was students' opportunities to fulfill long-term career goals that led them to discontinue their enrollment.

In the end, for three of the participants in this study, their reason to obtain a bachelor's degree was to achieve a particular career goal. When this career goal presented itself prior to degree attainment the students departed the institution. Interestingly, I found the students' career goals did not change over time; what changed was the desire or need to attain a bachelor's degree prior to achieving those career goals. Essentially, these three participants valued their final career objective more than they valued degree attainment. This finding does not completely align with Tinto's theory of student departure. Tinto (1993) posits that students whose career objectives are clear are more likely to complete their degree. The experiences of

Tilney, Martin, and John challenge this portion of Tinto's (1993) theory. They began attending Tule University with very clear career objectives, to obtain a career in fashion, business ownership, and law enforcement, respectively. Yet, these clear career objectives did not make them more likely to complete their degree, as Tinto suggests. In fact, it was the opportunity to pursue these career objectives prior to degree completion that led to their departure decision.

### **Institutional Experiences: Considering Institutional Commitment**

A student's institutional experience is comprised of both the academic and social environment. Tinto (1993) described the academic and social systems as two different systems that are interwoven and have both intentional and unintentional influence on each other. This section addresses research question three:

What are transfer students' institutional experiences?

The academic system refers to the formal education of students, or, what happens formally inside and outside the classroom. The social system "centers about the daily life and personal needs" of students (Tinto, 1993, p.106). This section is comprised of three sub-themes that describe the academic and social environment: faculty and staff interactions, administrative policy and programs, and social networking.

### **Faculty and Staff Interaction**

Tinto (1993) posits that the actions of faculty and staff reflect the institution's commitment to student well-being. These faculty and staff interactions influence a student's assumptions about institutional commitment and, ultimately, it is the student's perception of institutional commitment that leads to departure. That is,

when interactions with faculty and staff lead the students to believe that the institution does not care about their welfare, they are more likely to depart the institution.

Within this section I describe positive and negative interactions participants in my study had with faculty and staff at Tule University, both positive and negative. I then go on to discuss how, in the end, these interactions may have shaped the students' continued persistence.

**Interactions with faculty.** Among the participants in my study, because their time on campus was primarily spent in the classroom, the relationship between students and faculty had a high impact on a students' academic experiences. Tinto (1993) stresses the importance of the classroom experience, especially for commuting students because it “may be the primary if not the only place where students and faculty meet” (Tinto, 1993, p. 57). Six of the participants in my study were considered commuter students since they did not live on campus, thus their classroom experiences were highly related to their satisfaction with the university.

The participants in my study talked a lot about how the academic environment at the community college can be very different from the academic environment at the four-year receiving institution. One specific difference was the relationship the students formed with their professors at the community college. Six of the seven interviewees commented on the personal nature of the faculty from the community college.

They [CC] just have a great faculty. The teachers all knew the students, which ones were good, which ones were bad, if you will...They're personal enough to care about us as students, I guess. (James)

I mean, I had relationships with teachers where it was like, oh, I don't -- like I can ask them questions and, be like, they know who I am. (Tilney)

There's some professors [at the CC]...you can just walk into their office and start talking with them, like you don't really get that feeling at [Tule University] except for with a few professors, but at [CC] for the most part, most of the professors are not—I want to use the right adjective, but like not snotty or something. (John)

These quotes describe the faculty at the community college as being invested in relationships with their students. The community college faculty took the time to get to know their students and develop relationships with them. These relationships are something students valued and were stark contrasts to student experiences inside the classroom at the four-year receiving institution. Tinto (1993) confirmed this idea that student “persistence is increasingly shaped by educational concerns and by their educational experiences in the academic life of the institution” (p. 135). This suggests that as students persist through their coursework into their junior and senior years, the experience with faculty becomes increasingly important. Therefore, the students in this study, who had extremely positive experiences while attending community college, had increasing expectations as to the quality of interactions they would have had with faculty upon transfer to Tule University.

These expectations placed on faculty were not met for five of the participants when they arrived at Tule University. For example, Martin had higher expectations of the faculty at Tule University than he did of the faculty at his community college.

It was a little intimidating just because you're, new school, all these professors that are—you know, it's a real professor, it's not a community college

professor. So it was different. It was an adjustment to some of their teaching styles...

Martin thought that most of his faculty, during his one semester at Tule University, were “nice” and held office hours, but had one faculty member that stood out to him who “wasn’t the nicest.” Norris also had mostly positive experiences with faculty throughout his time at Tule University. However, he did specifically mention an Italian course he took that caused him stress during his first semester.

But here I am, 40 with these 18-year-olds when this lady comes bursting through the door, full-fledged, fast, powerful Italian for 35 minutes and then the last, like, five minutes of the class she stops, she speaks English and said this is the last time I'm going to use English and I think from that moment on I was pretty stressed. That whole semester was pretty stressful. That Italian class really had me stressed.

Although Martin and Norris had positive experiences inside the classroom with faculty, they also had memorable negative experiences during their first semester at Tule University, which likely influenced their lack of persistence.

Two of the students I interviewed, Darcy and Jane, shared a particular major and had similar interactions with faculty at Tule University. Their reason for leaving the university was largely associated with the classroom experience. Darcy talked at length about being discriminated against by a faculty member due to his physical disability. The second student, Jane, who was also declared in the same major, was a friend of Darcy’s and was sympathetic. Jane described her shared experience.

Yeah. But there's a disabled student [Darcy]—physically disabled student in the program and they were kind of not liking the disability thing...I hate people—this is going to sound terrible, but I hate people who hate disabled or anything that's like not perfect, I guess. I found out from the student that one of the two professors actually said he wouldn't hire him just because he is

disabled, which is actually illegal in this country. So that was like—I talked to both of them too, they're both really good and I liked talking to them, but after that I couldn't even look at them anymore. How do you just hate someone just because of a disability?

Jane was angry with her geology professors for the way they treated Darcy. Both Jane and Darcy left Tule University because of this one particular negative institutional academic experience that happened inside the classroom. However, neither of them had bad feelings towards the institution as a whole, just with the faculty within the geology program.

So I really can't say that [Tule University] is the wrong school, but I would say maybe I met the wrong teachers. (Darcy)

...this school [Tule University], all the [geology major] professors were bad, but they're not keeping me out of what I love. If I stayed here, they would have, but I didn't want to be like that. (Jane)

Even though these two students had negative experiences with faculty from their major, they also spoke about enjoying courses outside their program of study. Nevertheless, because geology was the chosen program of study for both these students, which tied to their long-term career goals to be professors of geology, their only option was to leave the university and pursue their studies elsewhere.

Like the other participants, John had negative classroom experiences, but his negative experiences were more about how faculty designed the courses rather than faculty interactions. Here is how John responded when I asked if he had any classes that were memorable.

Classes. Not really classes, I'd say professors more than classes...in law enforcement anybody that wants to go into law enforcement, I'm just going to be blunt about it, the classes don't prepare you for shit in law enforcement

except the few of the concentration classes maybe, but in college you spend time writing theory papers, learning all these case laws, and you're never you—it doesn't prepare you for being on the streets.

The courses he had to take required theory papers and learning case law. He did not think the courses he took helped prepare him for his career. Similarly to Darcy and Jane, John had a particular long-term career goal associated with the classes in which he was enrolled. The fact that he was dissatisfied with the instruction at Tule likely influenced his decision to depart from the university and pursue his career before earning a degree.

All of the students in my study excelled academically while attending community college, as demonstrated by their transfer GPA. They were also good students while attending Tule University, as demonstrated by their lack of academic dismissal. However, even with their proven academic performances, they did not have overwhelmingly positive experiences with faculty at Tule University. In other words, positive academic performance is not directly associated with positive faculty experiences. Tinto (1993) suggests it is positive classroom experiences that drive students into additional interactions outside the classroom. That is, without these positive classroom interactions, interaction outside the classroom and integration into the institution are not as likely. For the students in my study, this proved to be true. None of my research participants had overwhelmingly positive classroom experiences, which was one factor that contributed to their decisions to depart.

**Interactions with staff.** Faculty make up the heart of an institution's academic system, but staff members aid that work. The students who participated in

this study had few positive faculty interactions, and they had very few positive interactions with staff members at Tule University as well. Still, the participants did mention some positive interactions with staff. Darcy, for example, talked about two staff members, the disability services director and a school psychologist, who assisted him as much as they could when he related his experience of being discriminated against by the faculty in the geology department. Martin had one particular staff member who stood out for him as well.

...there was one individual that was very, extremely helpful, super -- he knew, "Oh, you need to go do this, fill out—take this form, do that,"...

This was a staff member that Martin interacted with often throughout his transition to Tule University. Other than these examples, Martin and Darcy did not offer more instances during which specific staff members stood out while they attended Tule University.

By contrast, instead of a select few staff members with which to have positive experiences, James indicated that he had positive interactions with all staff.

...all the staff there also, too, they were pretty awesome as far as telling you what classes you need and putting you on the right path and trying to set you up so basically you could get out of there in two years.

The comparison between Darcy and Martin, who had very specific examples of the few positive interactions they had with specific staff members, and James, who had positive interactions with all staff members, is noteworthy. Since James was the only student in my study who persisted to degree attainment, this finding offers an interesting distinction.

If students did not have positive interactions with all staff (James) or specific positive experiences with certain staff (Darcy and Martin), then they had negative experiences. When I asked Norris if he worked with any staff members at Tule University, for instance, he did not have any positive experiences to describe.

I guess when I went to [Tule University] I went in and talked to my counselor to see what I needed to do to fulfill all my requirements or whatever. I wasn't really impressed. I mean, she was nice. The lady was nice and as far as that, I liked her. She gave me some information that didn't add up.

Norris described his experience working with a counselor regarding courses he needed to fulfill degree requirements. The information he was provided during this meeting proved to be inaccurate. Consequently, although the staff member with whom he met with was "nice," the information was inaccurate, which led Norris to have a negative experience. Darcy also had a negative experience with staff at Tule University.

I have problems with financial aid so I changed my name, and I don't know, somehow they lend by my name instead of my social security, so they gave me some money and then they want me to pay in two days, and I'm, "I don't have that," and they're like, "We will drop you."

Although this negative experience was directly tied to financial aid, it was the way Darcy was treated by the staff, not the policy that was being applied, that caused the negative experience. Tilney also had negative experiences with staff members throughout the process of transferring to Tule University. She summarized her experiences like this:

I guess more than anything, it comes down to like you're going to come across people that are helpful and not and you're going to come across people that you're lucky to meet because they will be beneficial to you of helping you not

feel like everything is like, ugh, a dead-end to this answer or to this question...I wanted to make an appointment with someone who could kind of—just make an appointment with someone who could answer a few questions I had and I literally had to call to two different people, and then all they told me was, "Well, you just have to e-mail them. They don't do phone appointments," and I'm just like, "Well, this is very unhelpful. Like, no one can help me?" ... And it was like literally to the point where I just got so frustrated that I was like, "I can't. I'm tired. I've been talking to people for an hour-and-a-half now and I've gotten not one—like, not one step further in my answering of questions." So it's like it does—it's easy to get very discouraged because a lot of people that are helping aren't helpful and they don't want to be helpful.

Tilney described the frustration of not only having a hard time finding staff who could help her, but the staff with which she was able to connect with seemed not to want to help. Overwhelmingly, the few positive experiences the interviewees had with staff were outweighed by the negative staff experiences.

Overall, the students had negative institutional academic experiences at the four-year receiving institution as a result of negative faculty and staff interactions. Although students felt their time at the community college helped prepare them for the academic rigor of the four-year receiving institution, after arriving at Tule University the students experienced a stark contrast between the personal nature of the faculty at their community colleges and the unapproachable faculty at Tule University: although three students had limited positive interactions with staff, most students had negative interactions.

Tinto (1993) understood that students could not have all positive experiences at an institution at all times. Fortunately, he postulates that integration, which is at the root of persistence, can occur even if a student has negative experiences.

Congruence and contact need not imply a perfect or even extensive match between the individual and the institution as a whole... But it does argue that the person must find some compatible academic and or social group with whom to establish membership and make those contacts (Tinto, 1993, p. 59).

In other words, the lack of positive experiences is not enough to cause departure, but the lack of membership in the academic and/or social system could easily lead to a departure decision. It is not hard to draw the conclusion that the lack of positive academic experiences of the seven participants in my study contributed to their departure from the institution. Overall, the students in this study had mostly negative experiences with faculty and staff. Often, too, it is the faculty and staff at an institution who are creating the administrative policies and programs, which is the focus of the next section.

### **Administrative Policy and Programs**

In addition to faculty and staff, administrative policies and programs are another reflection of the institutional commitment to the transfer student experience. Indeed, policies and programs have the capacity to influence a students' beliefs about the institution's commitment to their success. Students' perceptions of institutional commitment can ultimately lead to a departure decision. There are three subcategories of policies and programs discussed in this section: maps, course registration, and orientation.

**Maps.** Any student entering the university struggles with finding classrooms and other spaces—the stereotypical image of the newbie on campus is one with her nose in a map. Having something as simple as maps available in multiple locations on campus would have benefited three out of the seven participants, enough so that they described the struggle to find locations on campus during the interview when asked about their first two weeks on campus.

I still felt kind of overwhelmed, like I didn't know where anything was. But, yeah, so the first week on campus or a couple of weeks on campus, it was kind of just a lot of like, "All right, I'm going to guess around where these things are and hopefully I figure it out." I would ask some people if I got totally lost, but for the most part I just kind of found my way around. (Martin)

It's a big campus, so I would have preferred having more—you know like when you're walking on campus more like, "Hey, you are here," kind of things, because especially for someone that's never been on a campus before, it's huge and you go over like two miles before you see one of those directional maps... (John)

It was sort of nerve-racking to find everything... (Darcy)

The stress of the first two weeks on campus was compacted by the feeling of uncertainty with locations of buildings or offices on campus. Not having knowledge of locations on campus at Tule University caused three interviewees to feel overwhelmed during the time of an already stressful transition.

**Course registration.** Another challenge that participants in my study had with Tule University was the struggle with course availability. When asked about a student's first two weeks on campus, each participants in my study mentioned the lack of course availability during his or her first semester. When I asked Tilney to

remember back to her first two weeks on campus, for example, she described it like this:

No. I mean, it—I think it all kind of went pretty smoothly. Like, I think the main problem with most schools is just the fact that so many classes are already full that it's really hard to get in classes that are really worth your time. So I know like my first semester there I took a couple that kind of fulfilled what I needed, but I wasn't even—I still came from my junior college and I'm still taking somewhat general courses [at Tule] just because the core classes I needed of my major were completely full. And it's not—I mean, I did everything on time so it's not as if I was coming into this late. Like it's just—it's hard to get classes, and that's the most frustrating part of it all that I would say.

Tilney was frustrated with the lack of courses that were available to her, specifically courses that fulfilled degree requirements. James confirmed the struggle to get into courses that counted towards degree requirements needed for graduation.

The hardest part, to be honest, was getting classes; that was the hardest part for me. A lot of classes were full and being that I got late acceptance, I went in, and I sat in on probably three or four different classes just trying to get in and get my—get the number of units that I needed. So that was the hardest thing for me as far as transferring there.

James also had a hard time gaining entry into courses that counted towards degree requirements for graduation. In both of these situations, the students felt that by being admitted into Tule University, the institution must have known which courses they needed to take in order to fulfill degree requirements. Student frustration occurred because those courses the institution knew the students needed to take either were not offered or were at maximum seat capacity for the room. The lack of course availability made the students feel unwelcome at an institution to which they had just been admitted.

It is not just course availability that students found frustrating, however. Scheduling one's courses while accommodating outside commitments was equally challenging. Because he lived 30 miles away from Tule University, Norris, for instance, hoped to schedule his courses around his other responsibilities, and he found it difficult to do so.

I couldn't just go there, take a class and come back and take a class later. I had to—if I was going to be there, I was going to have to be there all day when I was there. I knew I had to manipulate my schedule to get—to be there the least amount of days.

For Norris it was not just course availability, but the times the courses were offered that posed a problem. John also struggled with policies related to course scheduling: he could not fulfill the requirement to meet with his faculty advisor before registration each semester.

...every semester you have to do an advisement before you can pick your classes, you have to meet with your advisor, which I hated because not every major had it, and criminal justice was one of the ones that had it, so I just never understood why—it's with the professor you didn't even know if you chose, so I never understood. That was annoying, like you're stopping me from picking my classes. I already know what classes I want to take, what I'm going to do, I don't need an appointment for you to just—that was one of the annoying things.

John could not register for the courses he needed and resented the fact that he had to have a faculty member tell him that the courses he already knew he needed were the correct courses to take. By and large, course availability was the most frustrating thing for the interviewed students, but the time courses were offered and the approval needed to register for courses was also frustrating.

**Orientation.** The New Student Orientation [NSO] program at Tule University states the program is designed to provide students with information about requirements and resources and familiarize students with the campus layout. Tule University provides separate orientation programs for native and transfer students. Two students specifically talked about the NSO transfer program. Early in the interview when I asked Martin about his transition to Tule University, he talked about attending the NSO program and the activities he participated in that day. However, at the end of the interview when I asked Martin if there was anything Tule University could have done to retain him, he stated that they could have offered a program to help him transition.

So maybe some kind of—which I'm sure they offer, but maybe something to help smooth that transition, you know like, “Here and let's get you up to speed on how this stuff works.”

So, although Martin participated in the NSO for transfer students, it is evident that the NSO program did not help him transition into the four-year receiving institution.

Norris also talked specifically about the NSO program. I asked Norris if there was any advice he had for transfer students about to experience the process of transferring.

Any advice? Just have fun with it, I guess. If they're going through, like they're changing schools or they've got to go through the actual rigmarole of the bureaucracy of a transfer.

I asked him to tell me more about the bureaucracy of the transfer process.

Orientation. Just the orientation, you'll stand in line. And I get it, it's probably an important thing, but it's a whole day of—I don't know, stuff that I really

didn't pay any attention to. I mean, that was the worst part for me. I guess filling out the paper work, [inaudible] wasn't a big deal having to do that...

As he continued to think about orientation and, if he returned to Tule University in a future semester, how he would have to attend the NSO program again, Norris seemed annoyed.

Am I going to have to do that? If I have to reapply, do I have to go through that again? For whatever reason, sitting there a day was just like a long day and I'm busy. I have other things I could be doing and most of the shit did not pertain to me.

When Norris compared the time he spent attending the NSO program to other things he could have been doing, he valued his time more than the activities offered through the program. Although the NSO program was designed to familiarize transfer students with the campus layout and provide them with resources, the experiences described by the two students in my study who participated in NSO reveal that the program does not appear to be meeting its intended outcomes.

Ultimately, students were dissatisfied with the administrative policies and programs offered. Students struggled while finding the location of buildings and were frustrated by the availability of courses. They were unaware of services on campus and would have benefited from an orientation program that eased the transition into Tule University.

### **Social Networking**

In my study, the social system encompasses the friendships students established as they navigated their post-secondary educational journey. One theme emerged during the interviews that became very clear when comparing those who left

the institution without degree attainment and the one student who did persist to earn his degree (the student included in my study as the negative case). James had very rich social experiences while attending Tule University. He lived in an apartment with one native student and two other transfer students with whom he already had established friendships; they even all had the same declared major in agricultural studies. When asked what he did in his spare time, James described his social interactions as follows:

Well, being that I was 21, we did like to go out to [a bar] on Wednesday nights. Yeah. So I mean, that was kind of fun for us. One of my roommates was in a fraternity and so he had always had a lot of things going on and we went to—kind of got to join in some of them, not all of his activities, but we did a lot with him.

James had rich social experiences because of his pre-established friendships and living situation. James's social experiences were in direct contrast to the experiences of the other interviewees, and James went on to attain a bachelor's degree.

With the exception of James, the participants in this study did not establish social networks inside the institution. The students in this study were non-traditional college aged students, who remained in the same living situations while attending the community college and Tule University, and even sometimes kept the same jobs. They did not feel a need to integrate socially while attending Tule University since they had already established these rich social networks outside the institution.

Despite having social networks, because those social networks were outside the institution, the other participants expressed a feeling of isolation at Tule University. Jane, for example, described her first weeks on campus as follows:

Alone, very depressing and alone. Like my entire family at the time, they were all up in [home town] and ... my friend was up there as well, so I had like nothing down here. I was literally down here alone. So I spent a lot of the time just doing nothing...Just like after class, just ran out the door and just kept to myself.

Jane was away from home for the first time in her life and struggled to build relationships. Unlike James, Jane did not have pre-established relationships with fellow students, and she did not live with others in her program. The other five participants in the study lived in the same location while attending Tule University as they did when they attended their respective community colleges. With rich social networks outside the institution, their institutional experiences were tied solely to the classroom. When I asked Martin what he did in his free time, for instance, he stated school was his primary focus.

I just did school. For a long time it was just school. I just show up. I'd drive to class, go to class and leave. I wouldn't even study or do homework on campus.

Martin was not involved on campus and would only go to campus for school. Further, Norris stated that he avoided institutional, non-classroom experiences.

I even avoided the Wednesday—they do the Wednesday stuff in that little, whatever they call it, in the quad or something and I purposefully would kind of circumvent around it.

Norris went as far as to avoid purposely any possibility of building relationships outside of the classroom. Clearly, most participants in this study reflect how social networks, or the lack thereof, can influence students' persistence toward degree.

Again, James, the only student who persisted to graduation, was able to create and

maintain a social network at the four-year receiving institution, but the others in this study were not.

Along with having no social network within the institution, the students in this study also had negative academic experiences. They struggled to connect with faculty inside and staff outside the classroom. Indeed, participants were frustrated with the administrative policies and programs offered. If students' institutional experiences can be broken down into two categories, academic and social, and they have adverse experiences with both of these systems, then their overall institutional experiences likely can be described as having a negative impact on their ability to integrate successfully into Tule University. Tinto's theory of student departure argues that the "effect of formal organization upon departure is largely indirect, occurring through the role the organization has in shaping the social and intellectual communities of the institution" (Tinto, 1993, p. 113). That is, Tinto (1993) posits that most institutions are not completely aware of how they cause their students to depart. Institutions, like Tule University, do not understand the impact that the interactions students have with faculty, staff, the institutional organizational structure, policies, processes, and programs can have on student departure. In fact, these interactions have both a direct and indirect impact on creating students' overall institutional experience. The participants in my study, especially those who had negative experiences with faculty and staff and did not connect socially on campus, could not make swift progress towards degree attainment. Is it any wonder, then, that they did not integrate fully into the campus and thus chose to leave?

### **Integration: From Expert to Novice**

Integration occurs when “the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 54). Considering the findings of Tinto (1993), only one of the participants in this study, James, achieved integration into the institution because he indicated that he experienced a positive social network while at the institution. The fact that James when on to attain a degree further supports Tinto’s (1993) claim that integration is key to student success. In this section I will discuss how I answered my fourth research question:

What are transfer students’ perceptions of integration, both academic and social, into the four-year receiving institution?

In Tinto’s (1993) model of student departure, depicted in Figure 1, he suggests that over time, students’ goals are shaped by both their positive and negative institutional experiences. Those experiences lead either to alienation and a departure decision or integration and degree completion. It is important to note that transfer students, by design of California’s Master Plan for Higher Education, are expected to integrate at two different institutions with two distinct missions. The students I interviewed integrated at their respective community colleges and thus graduated from them. Based on Tinto and confirmed by my analysis, the participants in my study, then, had integrated successfully at one institution and were expected to do so when they transferred to the four-year receiving institution.

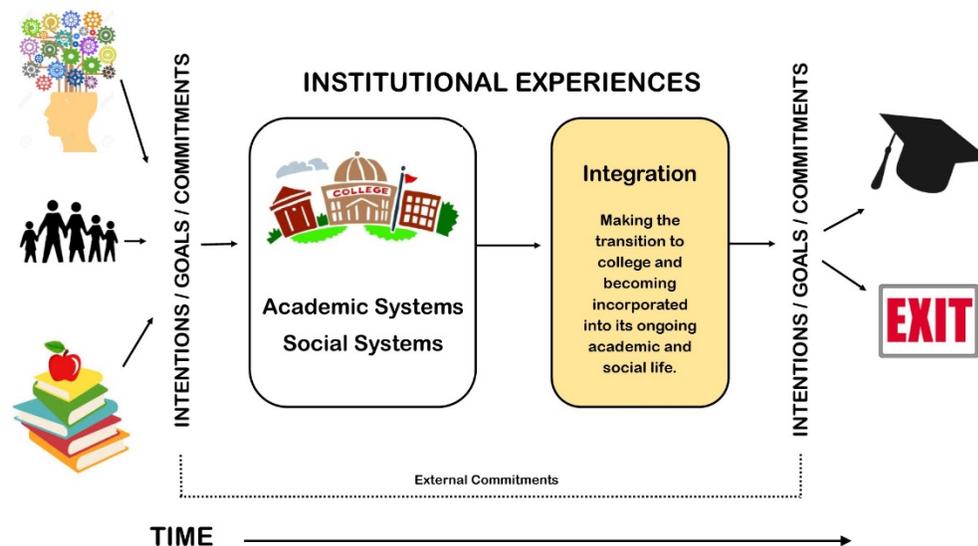


Figure 1. Longitudinal model of institutional departure (Tinto, 1990).

Tinto acknowledges that the experience at a community college could be a transformative one. He posits that “the intent to transfer may itself be a reflection of positive academic and social experiences in a two-year college” (Tinto, 1993, p.80) and my data attests to this. In the middle of their college experience, however, transfer students are forced to begin the integration process again when they move to a new institution. Transfer students’ positive institutional experiences at the community college can shift to dissonance after they arrive at the four-year receiving institution. Again, my data reveals this to be the case. The participants in my study were experts at their community colleges—they were familiar with the campus, had formed relationships with faculty, and had successfully navigated the administrative process of transfer. However, they went from being experts to feeling like novices

upon arriving at Tule University. Or, in Tinto's terms, the transfer students moved from integration at their community college to non-integration upon arrival at the four-year receiving institution. This section is organized into three sub-categories that demonstrate the theme of going from expert to novice: non-traditional age, faculty relationships, and value-added content.

### **Non-Traditional Age**

Due to the amount of time the participants in my study spent at the community college, they all attended the four-year receiving institution at non-traditional ages. This became a theme that affected their social integration into campus. This was most evident with Norris, the oldest participant in the study. When discussing his social integration into campus, Norris described looking and feeling much older than the other students who attended Tule University.

I look young. A lot of people thought I was young. I remember even some kids thinking I was actually their age and stuff. But I just—I couldn't keep up with the conversations. The things that a 20-year-old talks about is something completely different than something a 30-year-old would talk about. So yeah, I didn't really feel like I fit in...

This finding becomes significant when one considers a student's time at a community college. Community colleges are designed to be open to anyone in the community. Attendees at community colleges thus range in age, unlike a four-year receiving institution where attendees are often of traditional age (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015). At the community college, then, the participants of this study "fit in" socially more so than they did at Tule University. Age is but one reason

why participants in my study went from integration at the community college to non-integration at the four-year receiving institution.

### **Faculty Relationships**

Six of the seven participants in this study characterized the relationships they built with faculty at the community college as personal. Martin specifically described the faculty at his community college as being helpful.

...so the teachers that I had in that major were very helpful, because a lot of them did the same kind of things that I did, so we just had a lot of, I don't know, shared experiences...

Martin felt he could relate to his instructors based on the things they had in common. However, when he arrived at Tule University he mentioned feeling intimidated by both faculty and by the learning management system they required he use for their classes. Like Martin, Tilney also mentioned faculty members at her community college that stood out:

I took some history classes there. Professor Z, that's who he is, Professor Z, and was a history teacher. And I—any class that I could take that would fulfill any requirement that he taught, I took.

She had such a positive experience with an individual faculty member at the community college she attended that she intentionally sought out additional classes for which he was the instructor. As a reminder, Tilney only completed one course at Tule University; she therefore had the least interaction of any participants with the faculty there. However, she did not develop at Tule University the same kinds of relationships she did at the community college. It is worth wondering: had Tilney experienced a classroom environment at Tule University like the one that Professor Z

created at the community college, would she have been so quick to depart Tule University?

The community college clearly offered the participants in this study the needed relationships with faculty to foster success. Darcy, in fact, referred to his community college as his second home.

You know, you're like walking in my hometown. [CC]'s my hometown. It's my second home.

Indeed, Darcy was very involved at his community college. He was a tutor in the department of his major and led the student geology club, for example. During our interview, Darcy indicated that he had strong relationships with the geology faculty while at the community college. His interactions led to his integration at the community college. Considering his full academic integration at the community college in the area of his major, it is no surprise that a negative institutional experience in his major of study at his four-year receiving institution led to his departure.

Jane also was very involved in her community college and was a tutor in the geology department. Even while attending Tule University during the summers, she would return to her community college and work as a teaching assistant with the same faculty with whom she worked while she was a student there. She described the difference between the community college faculty and the faculty at the four-year receiving institution as disparate.

I went home and worked for the geology professor up there [CC]. So I did that and so that's like—I called him—the professors—the students were awesome.

They were great, great to talk to. Nothing at all like the professors here [Tule University], but the professors here, I called them too toxic for me to stay here any longer.

Although she did not directly experience the discrimination that Darcy experienced, Jane was affected by the discriminatory culture the faculty in the department seemed to have created. After having positive institutional experiences that led to integration at the community college—so much so that Darcy referred to his community college as home and Jane returned to work at her community college every summer—having negative institutional experiences at Tule University caused both students to exit the institution before earning a bachelor's degree.

Some might wonder why students like Darcy and Jane do not change to another program of study after having negative academic experiences at their four-year receiving institution. It is important to realize that by the time transfer students begin attending a four-year receiving institution, they have begun completing the coursework necessary for their declared majors. If a transfer student has a negative experience at the receiving institution, like Darcy and Jane had at Tule University, choosing a new major likely is not an option, or their time to degree will be extended. In all, Darcy and Jane were committed to their declared geology major, so instead of choosing a new major at Tule University, they chose to enroll in a different institution.

### **Value-Added Content**

When four of the transfer students in my study arrived at Tule University and attempted to register, they were met with closed courses. They thus were not able to

enroll in courses that directly applied to their long-term career goals. John, one of those participants, had very clear career goals even before attending the community college. He wanted to go into law enforcement. School seemed to be a placeholder until he was accepted into the police academy. When I asked John if Tule University could have done anything to keep him enrolled, he stated:

Well, they give you bachelor's so that's an incentive to keep you enrolled, but I think the thing that would make me feel like my time there is being productive and I'm learning something besides just getting—going there to get a piece of paper would offer classes—I'm not saying make it a trade school, but offer a class—if someone has a concentration in a certain subject, offer them classes that relate to that subject, then don't make them deviate from it by doing something that won't help them in that career at all.

Clearly, John believed that he would have benefited from course content that was more applicable to his intended career. While attending the community college, John indicated that he had fewer courses outside of his program of study. Community colleges are intended to be teaching institutions with a focus on trade. When he arrived at Tule University, however, John struggled to find the value in the course designs, particularly because the courses seemed irrelevant to his long-term career goals.

I get it, it's important, it teaches you other things, but I didn't see how it was benefiting me, preparing me—but my whole thing on college is like it's supposed to prepare you for your career that you're going to go into, and I didn't feel like sitting and writing about ten-page research paper on criminal justice studies is going to help me in any way in law enforcement.

Faculty failed to connect course content and assignments to the real world frustrated John. John had integrated academically at his community college, where he was taking courses that directly applied to his long-term goals, but when he arrived at his

four-year receiving institution, he could not readily connect his course content to his career.

Tilney had a similar experience. When I asked her about her decision to leave Tule University and move to New York for her dream job, she chose to describe the content of the courses in which she was enrolled.

I stayed in one class because I was like, "Well, this—I can take this one online," and that's when my opportunity came up to move to New York and at that point I wasn't attached to [Tule University]. I wasn't even in any classes that I cared about, so I was like, "Well, whatever. I'm moving and I'll figure it out when I figure it out."

Although she enrolled full time at Tule University her first semester, when the opportunity to achieve her long-term career goal presented itself, she moved to New York and only completed one course because it was offered online. Considering Tilney spent less than two weeks on campus at Tule University, her lack of integration is to be expected. However, if she had been in courses that directly related to the career she wished to pursue after degree attainment, would integration have occurred more readily?

Age, faculty relationships, and the evident value of course content are important to transfer student success, particularly in relation to how students experience moving from expert to novice as they transfer from the community college and integrate into the four-year receiving institution. This is how Martin described his experience going from integration to non-integration:

I feel I just had kind of got really good at that system, to now I'm into a whole completely different system...it's a huge adjustment.

After attending his community college for three years, Martin struggled with being a novice at his four-year receiving institution after being an expert at his community college. This struggle, in conjunction with having many external commitments that took precedence over degree attainment during the time of attendance, was the reason Martin did not integrate into Tule University.

To understand transfer students' perceptions of integration, both academic and social, into the four-year receiving institution, one must understand the unique experiences of transfer students prior to attending the four-year receiving institution. Transfer students in my study had achieved integration at their community colleges as evidenced by transferring into a four-year institution, but then they had the task of integrating at the four-year receiving institution. After arriving at the four-year receiving institution, the students did not integrate into Tule University as evidenced by their negative academic and social institutional experiences. Transfer students tend to go from their community college directly into a four-year receiving institution, taking no time away from coursework toward degree. Consequently, transfer students go from attending an institution as experts to a four-year receiving institution where they instantly become the novices. As Tinto (1993) suggests, some form of integration, either academic or social, is required for persistence to degree attainment, and integration requires that students shift from novice to expert at the four-year institution.

## Conclusion

In this study, document collection and student interviews took place to attempt to understand the experiences of students who transferred from a California community college and into a public, four-year receiving institution but who did not persist to attain a bachelor's degree. After analysis, several themes emerged. These themes were organized into four categories: pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, institutional experiences, and integration. The study's participants attended different community colleges, but had similar experiences while in attendance at their respective community colleges. They were all high achieving students who were able to meet the minimum requirements for admission into Tule University. All seven participants began attending Tule University with the goal of bachelor's degree attainment. However, some of the students I interviewed were faced with external opportunities that ultimately caused them to depart the institution prior to degree attainment. What caused this departure? After arriving at the four-year receiving institution, they did not struggle academically, but they struggled with finding locations on campus, registering for required courses, and making social connections. These challenges of integration led to negative institutional experiences. After feeling like experts and integrating at the community college, the students in this study began attending Tule University where they were not able to build meaningful faculty and staff relationships or find value from the coursework in which they were enrolled. The following chapter provides an interpretation of these research

findings, connects these findings to the literature, and outlines recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

One of the functions of California community colleges is to facilitate the transfer of students into four-year institutions to attain a bachelor's degree. A measurement of success for the community college, then, is a student's successful transfer to the four-year receiving institution. If the four-year institution is not committed to meeting the unique needs of the transfer student population, however, some students will not persist to attain a bachelor's degree because, ultimately, "access without support is not opportunity" (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008, p. 46). In this final chapter, I will provide my interpretations of the research findings to answer my research question:

What are the experiences of students who transferred from a California community college into a public four-year receiving institution but did not persist to attain a bachelor's degree?

I then relate these findings to the literature and provide recommendations for policy and practice. Finally, I offer recommendations for further research.

#### **Discussion of Research Findings**

In the previous section I organized my findings using Tinto's model for institutional departure. In this section, I diverge from that organization to discuss the themes presented in chapter four: engaging in the community college experience, understanding external opportunities, considering institutional commitment, and

moving from expert to novice. Within each section, I interpret the themes and present literature that supports my findings.

### **The Community College Experience**

My study sought to understand the experiences of students who transfer to a four-year receiving institution, and I initially thought that my findings would begin with these students' first days at the transfer institution. Indeed, this was not the case. I found their transfer experiences to be influenced significantly by their time at their community colleges. Thus, I conclude, the community college experience is an integral factor impacting many aspects of the transfer students' persistence.

Students begin their post-secondary educational journey at a community college for many reasons. The participants in my study, for example, began attending a community college because they either felt pressure from their parent(s) to go to college, wanted to be able to explore their interests without the high cost of a four-year institution, or attended the campus closest to home. Regardless of their reasons for beginning their post-secondary education at a community college, community college students face a number of distinct challenges. As I outlined in the literature review, students may be confronted with the following challenges: being a student of color, needing remediation, having low socioeconomic and/or first generation status, considering the cost of a bachelor's degree, and engaging in external activities. All of the participants in my study were able to overcome these challenges—they were active and engaged members of their community colleges, met the minimum admission criteria, and transferred into Tule University.

A recent study by Jenkins and Fink (2016) reported that only 14% of students in the U.S. who began their educational journey at a community college go on to earn a bachelor's degree within six years. Further, the report indicates that of those who were able to achieve transfer status, only 42% had earned a bachelor's degree within six years. While the national data is grim, California's public four-year institutions are above the national average for transfers who earn a bachelor's degree within six years, with 50% of transfer students going on to earn a bachelor's degree after transfer. The attainment of a bachelor's degree for 50% of California's transfer students seems positive, but that also means that half of the students who transfer into public four-year institutions within California depart the institution prior to degree attainment. The students in this study may be representative of the 50% of students who did not persist to earn a bachelor's degree within six years.

### **Understanding External Opportunities**

Despite the negative association with lack of persistence to degree, I found that transfer students' lack of persistence to bachelor's degree attainment does not equate always with failure. At the onset of the study, my own professional experiences tended to characterize students' lack of persistence with failure. For some of the participants in my study, however, I found that a departure decision prior to degree attainment correlated more so with students' successful attainment of life goals. Consequently, I found my initial assumption that either the institution somehow failed the students or that the students somehow failed the institution to be inaccurate. Nevertheless, I did find that some of the students had internalized a sense

of failure, and I suggest that the *failure* lens being attached to lack of degree attainment is not necessarily productive for the student or the institution. These findings have important implications that I will discuss later in this chapter.

Tinto (1993) offers a description of the transfer student that rang true of most of the transfer students in my study: “Unlike the typical, youthful high school graduate who goes to college *instead of doing something else*, the typical adult student goes to college *in addition to doing other things*” (p. 76, emphasis in original). The participants in this study were married, worked, and lived off campus. They were attending Tule University in addition to their day-to-day activities; they were not attending Tule University instead of completing their day-to-day activities. Any activity that can take time and attention away from the activities inside an institution are normally referred to in the literature as a deficit with a negative connotation. Often, the language used to describe these activities is “obligation,” “environmental pull,” or “external commitment” (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto 1993, 2012). However, my participants did not describe their reasons for departure as “obligations” or “commitments.” Instead, they viewed their departure as seizing an external opportunity that would lead to the achievement of long-term career goals.

What if institutions stopped seeing these external activities as obligations that pull a student away from higher education and started seeing them as students see them, as opportunities? Instead of seeing these activities as events that detract students from meeting their academic goals, how can institutions help students achieve academic and personal goals in tandem? Or, even better, how can institutions

embrace how students' external opportunities may help them persist to degree completion? Although answers to these questions should vary based on the specific student situation, there are things institutions can do to revise the ways in which they view environmental pulls.

### **Considering Institutional Commitment**

Every action of an institution reflects the commitments the institution has made to student degree attainment, and this study confirmed that students' perceptions of an institution's transfer receptivity impact their persistence. Institutional commitments are reflected in the student services provided but are reflected more in the student services institutions neglect to offer. This section has three focuses: faculty and staff interactions, administrative policy and programs, and social networking.

**Faculty and staff interactions.** Overall, the students in my study felt negatively about many of their experiences with faculty and staff. After arriving at the four-year receiving institution, the students found the faculty to be unapproachable and the staff unhelpful. These negative experiences demonstrated the commitments of the institution. It became evident in the student's daily interactions with these institutional agents that this was a four-year receiving institution that did not value the transfer agenda.

Transfer students felt that the faculty was unapproachable and struggled to make meaningful connections inside the classroom. And, because the students' time on campus was primarily spent in the classroom, these relationships, or lack thereof,

had a high impact on the students' overall academic experiences. This finding was supported by Townsend and Wilson (2006), who conducted a study on factors that facilitated the success of community college transfer students' transition into a large research university and found that transfer students had a difficult time creating faculty relationships. With so little time spent on campus outside the classroom, activities inside the classroom become the primary way students are exposed to the commitments and values of an institution. When students struggle to make connections with the only institutional agent with whom they interact on a daily basis, the faculty, the experience can easily lead students to a departure decision.

While interactions with faculty are significant for transfer student success, so, too, are interactions with staff. In this study, interactions with staff left the students in my study feeling unwelcome and conveyed to the students that they were not a valuable part of the institution. Staff disseminated inaccurate information, made the students feel inadequate, and seemed not to want to help them succeed. In a study conducted at Colorado State University, Davies and Kratky (2000) held focus groups with students who participated in a program specifically designed to assist in the transfer from community colleges in Colorado and Wyoming. Based on the results of the focus groups, Davies and Kratky identified a need for students to receive unique assistance from staff. The transfer students in my study did not receive assistance, much less unique assistance, and, in fact, felt like a nuisance to staff at times.

**Administrative policy and programs.** I found the transfer students in my study were acutely aware of the absence of institutional policies and programs that

would have contributed to their persistence and ultimately led them to success. The lack of policies and programs is not unique to my study. In fact, few four-year receiving institutions provide support programs for transfer students (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Swing 2000). Commitment to the transfer agenda is reflected in the student support programs an institution provides, but this commitment is also reflected in the programs it fails to offer, and institutions would do well to assess what they do and do not offer to support the transfer agenda.

Increasing the amount of maps located on campus or the accessibility of online campus maps, would have helped the transfer students in my study feel less like novices. Considering transfer students enter the receiving institution as juniors, they feel as if they should, like native juniors, know where things are located on campus. The shift from expert to novice is often a challenge for transfer students; programs and services that help facilitate a rapid return to expert for transfer students are important for institutions to implement.

Transfer students also expressed that not having courses required for degree completion available at the time of registration seemed counterintuitive to their expectations and reflected the institution's commitment to their success. In their first semester at the receiving institution, due to timing of admissions decisions, transfer students are often forced to register after native freshman. This delay often allows native freshman and sophomores to consume the remaining seats in upper-division courses. When a student transfers into an institution and cannot enroll in courses, s/he likely feels under-valued by the institution.

Like an increase in location services and course offerings, an orientation program designed specifically for transfer students would help convey to students that an institution cares about their success. The students in this study expressed a desire to have an orientation program specifically designed to meet their needs, not designed by institutional agents to meet the needs the institution anticipates transfer students will have. Upon admission, these students entered into an agreement with the institution and expected the institution to be committed to their persistence and success. Policies and programs must be in place to reflect that commitment.

**Social networking.** Absent orientation, most four-year institutions do not provide any unique programs for transfer students. In contrast, there are often many programs designed for native freshman that help them establish friendships and social networks during their first few weeks on campus. The lack of unique programs to facilitate social relationships specifically designed for transfer students (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Swing 2000), can create a void in their social engagement with campus. Based on interviews with the study's participants, I found that the lack of social engagement on campus contributed to transfer students' persistence.

Without an institutional commitment to the transfer agenda, transfer students may fail to integrate and can feel like marginalized members of the institutional community. Feelings of marginalization can lead to a departure decision. Upon admissions, there is an institutional responsibility to help the student succeed. If there is true institutional commitment to the transfer agenda, it will be reflected both in the

interactions between faculty, staff, and student and in the student support programs an institution chooses to provide.

### **From Expert to Novice**

Transfer students are required to integrate at two different institutions. They, by design of the Master Plan for Higher Education, go from being an expert at the community college to a novice at the four-year receiving institution in the middle of their educational journey. I found that transfer students' own successes at the community college led to frustration while attending the four-year receiving institution. Indeed, there was a direct contrast between experiences as expert at the community college and experiences as novice at the four-year receiving institution, which added to transfer students' feeling of marginalization at the four-year receiving institution. These feelings contributed to their departure decisions.

Townsend (2008) confirms the reality of the expert-to-novice transfer experience with the results of several studies conducted at a northwestern research institution over many years. According to Townsend, transfer students do not want to "feel like freshman again" (p. 73), but the transition from expert to novice can be lessened by institutional efforts. Flaga (2006) concurs and suggests that integration can only occur after familiarity. This "familiarity" is not just with locations on campus, although the findings of this study imply that is one factor that would contribute to familiarity, but Flaga proposes that familiarity includes knowing the information and being comfortable with that information.

There are many factors that lead transfer students to feelings of inadequacy at the four-year receiving institution, some of which I discussed in previous sections. Transfer students are experts at the community college and can easily locate different buildings and services on campus. When they arrive at the four-year receiving institution, they struggle to find locations and services. In their final terms at the community college, transfer students receive appointment times early in the registration period, ensuring they can obtain a seat in the course they need. Then, one of the first interactions they have with the four-year receiving institution is registration, where they experience frustration when enrollment in coursework for degree requirements is not available. The absence of the students' already established social network also adds to the feeling of being a novice. The findings of my study suggest a difference between the social systems of the one student who attained a degree and the other students who departed the institution before degree attainment. James, the student who attained a degree after transfer, lived with two transfer students from the same community college and one native student. He was able to bridge the social system from the community college into the four-year receiving institution, which likely decreased his feelings of being a social novice after transfer.

In addition to the expert-to-novice experience, experiences inside the classroom can also lead transfer students to feel marginalized. Transfer students become accustomed to the pedagogical choices of the faculty at the community college: their availability and the ability to build meaningful relationships with them. Then, in the middle of their college career, when they are beginning to take upper-

division coursework for their major, they are required to adapt to new faculty and pedagogy. They struggle with the difference between the personal nature of the faculty at the community college and feel like they cannot approach the faculty at the four-year receiving institution. Additionally, the course content at the community college has a focus on career development and advancement, whereas the content at the four-year receiving institution has a focus on theory and reasoning. Indeed, when students arrive at the four-year institution there is a mismatch between students' and faculty's ideas of teaching and learning.

I found that transfer students in my study valued their community college experiences, and these community college experiences when contrasted with experiences at the four-year receiving institution led students to feel like novices. The lack of institutional receptivity for the transfer student population also contributed to feelings of marginalization. These institutional experiences, combined with the opportunity to realize a long-term career goal, led students to depart the institution prior to degree attainment. This departure was not perceived by the students as a failure or permanent departure, but as the achievement of long-term career goals prior to degree completion.

### **Recommendations for Institutional Policy and Practice**

If transfer students do not perceive their lack of persistence as failure, institutions should find ways to capture their successes. In other words, if students do not see their departure as permanent, institutions should help them return to achieve their original degree objectives. Institutions therefore should employ a retention

coordinator to provide outreach to students who do not persist to degree attainment. A retention coordinator can help students complete degree requirements or document reasons for departure to account for students' success in meeting career objectives. Some institutions have a retention coordinator, but these agents are usually focused on keeping students enrolled. If students see their reasons for departure as opportunities, institutions should also begin to reverse their perspective.

Instead of viewing the activities in which students engage outside the institution as obligations or commitments that pull a student away from degree completion, how can institutions use those external activities as opportunities to pull students into student life on campus? Institutions need to find ways to support the external activities of transfer students. If a student has dependents, then s/he should be connected with a childcare center. If the student is married, then information should be sent to the spouse on ways the spouse can support the transfer student on his/her educational journey. If a student is interested in opening her/his own business or already owns a business, then the student should be connected with faculty at the institution in the business department or with staff within the career services center. If these connections were established from the onset of a transfer student's career at the four-year receiving institution, then when an external opportunity arose a student might look inside the institution for support in accomplishing the external goal while still persisting to degree attainment, instead of departing the institution feeling like both goals cannot be accomplished in tandem. Institutions should provide intrusive and intentional support to help students achieve their specific goals, goals of both an

academic and personal nature. When a student is admitted to the institution, there is an institutional responsibility to help the student succeed even when the student has needs and goals beyond life on campus.

Furthermore, institutions should take time to reflect on how they are prepared to support the transfer populations they admit. Tinto's theory of student departure (1993) posits that a student's leaving is not a reflection on the student's skills or abilities to remain enrolled, but a reflection of the commitment the institution makes to support that student. My findings supported Tinto's work in that transfer students' departure decisions were made easier when they perceived a lack of institutional commitment to their success. Indeed, according to Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and associates (2005), institutions who offer a supportive campus environment 1) have an emphasis on success through student support, 2) include positive relationships among different student social groups, 3) help students cope with their non-academic activities, and 4) facilitate high quality relationships among students, faculty, and staff. If institutional leadership prioritizes the transfer agenda, then it will be mirrored in interactions with faculty and staff, entrenched into institutional policies and practices, and solidified by the programs and services the institution chooses to offer.

Upon entry to the four-year receiving institution, there are several programs that would help transfer students feel like experts on campus immediately. Transfer students could begin taking courses at the four-year receiving institution prior to formal admissions. Institutions could be facilitate this action in two different ways: 1) by the community college arranging to offer courses on the campus of the four-year

receiving institution, or, 2) by the four-year receiving institution offering courses that could be taken by the community college student prior to transfer. The latter would not only allow the transfer student to gain familiarity with the four-year receiving institution campus locations, but also assimilate to the academic classroom environment. Such a program is offered by George Mason University and could be used as a model (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & associates, 2005). In addition to improving the academic experiences of transfer students, institutions must create programs that foster social relationships. To facilitate the social engagement of transfer students and lessen the need to create new friendships upon arrival at the four-year receiving institution, students who intend to transfer to the same four-year receiving institution should be brought together earlier while attending community college. This will lessen the feeling of being a social novice when first attending the four-year receiving institution.

To be sure, institutions should develop programs and activities that engage transfer students with life on campus. Four-year receiving institutions should consider employing a staff person to act as a liaison to campus resources for transfer students, from admission through degree completion. Institutions with a larger transfer population should consider adding a department on campus dedicated to the unique needs of transfer students. As well, while most institutions have Transfer Admissions websites, few have websites dedicated to transfer students' needs after matriculation, and institutions would do well to add such support. Registration practices also should be adapted to allow transfer students priority registration during their first semester at

the four-year receiving institution, allowing for enrollment in coursework needed for degree completion. If priority registration cannot be accommodated due to timing of admissions, then seats in necessary coursework could be reserved for transfer student enrollment.

Despite the many programs and services institutions might develop in support of their transfer students, when thinking about student engagement, most institutional administrators are quick to create programs at the margins of university life, often forgetting the student engagement that happens inside the classroom (Tinto, 2012). The findings of this study argue that for transfer students, relationships with faculty play an important role in student integration and success. When institutional leadership begins to commit themselves to the transfer agenda, particular attention should be paid to the classroom, as this is the place where transfer students spend a majority of their time.

Although creating programs will help campuses support the transfer agenda, programs alone are not enough. There must be a systemic commitment to supporting the success of transfer students within the institution, and this commitment starts with institutional leadership and administration. Each institution should take inventory of the support programs they currently offer and assess these programs for effectiveness based on the unique transfer population they serve. Institutional leadership should consider creation of a transfer success committee to ensure and assess adequate programs and pathways that are developed for this unique student population (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & associates, 2005).

There is no one program that will help institutions meet the needs of every transfer student, but making an institutional commitment to the transfer agenda is the first step towards increasing transfer receptivity. It is not the responsibility of a transfer student to find an institution that supports transfer, but the responsibility of the four-year receiving institution to support the transfer students it admits.

### **Recommendations for California State Policy Makers**

California has outlined its primary educational mission of being one of access, but access alone is not enough. Within California, half of the transfer students, who have already proven themselves successful academically by meeting the minimum admissions criteria to enter a four-year public institution, are not graduating within six years (Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Community colleges in California are funded to support transfer through specific Transfer Centers (Title 5, section 51027). But, this is where state support for transfer stops. The California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems are left with no specialized funding to support the transfer agenda. When considering recommendations for transfer student success, the state funding model cannot be overlooked. Additional state funding would allow the CSU and UC systems to offer programs and services mentioned in the previous section. State higher education agencies have a distinct advantage, authority, and responsibility to improve the educational environment for all students. Welsh (2002) posits that if states put a higher priority on transfer students, improvement would trickle down to individual institutions that have direct influence on transfer student success. If there is interest in promoting transfer student degree completion, then state

policy makers should consider funding the CSU and UC systems to promote the transfer agenda.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are a number of ways in which this study could be expanded. For one, this study could be expanded to include students who were dismissed academically from a four-year receiving institution. It could also be expanded to focus on the transfer populations at additional California State University or University of California campuses. A longitudinal approach as well would contribute to the literature—a study that seeks to understand the experiences of transfer students as they begin their educational journey at the community college and gathers the perceptions of transfer students as they continue to pursue their bachelor's degrees. Finally, my study was conducted with some transfer students several years after departure from the institution occurred. Although this passage of time allows for a unique perspective, it is also not the experience of the transfer student as the event is occurring. Future research thus could focus on student departure closer to the event occurrence in order to garner a more nuanced perspective of the transfer student experience.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study sought to understand the experiences of transfer students who transferred to a four-year receiving institution from a community college, after which they departed the university without persisting to degree attainment. I engaged transfer students in conversations about their experiences and

the findings have contributed to the broader understanding of the transfer student experience. Tinto's theory of student departure provided a valuable theoretical framework from which to operate. It underscored the centrality of institutional transfer receptivity in students' decisions about persistence and departure. Four major themes emerged at the conclusion of the interviews: the community college experience, understanding a transfer student's external opportunities, accepting institutional commitment to the transfer agenda, and the transfer student experience of moving from expert to novice in the middle of the educational journey. Recommendations urge institutional administrators to evaluate their institution's commitment to transfer student success and state policy makers to reinvest in the transfer agenda.

### **Conclusion**

If the California Master Plan for Higher Education is to be accomplished, there must be a change in the way four-year receiving institutions prioritize transfer. Priority for transfer cannot stop at admission to the four-year receiving institution, instead receptivity and support must be interwoven throughout the transfer students' institutional experience. Often, once students achieve transfer status, they are forgotten and are shuffled into programs designed to support native students. Institutions need to reinvest in their commitment to the transfer agenda. Ultimately, this reinvestment will lead to transfer student persistence and degree attainment.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant:

You are being asked to participate in a research project that is being done to fulfill requirements for a Doctorate degree in Educational Leadership at California State University, Stanislaus. In this study, I hope to learn about transfer student experiences. If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to take part in two interviews that should take no more than 60 minutes each.

There are no known risks to you for your participation in this study. However, if you feel you need to do so, you may contact Tule University, Psychological Counseling Services at (555) 555-5555. Although you may not benefit directly by participating in this study, results will help shape institutional support for transfer, ultimately leading to the bachelor degree attainment of students. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The information collected will be protected from all inappropriate disclosure under the law. All data will be kept in a secure location. Your identity and responses will be kept confidential.

If you agree to participate, please indicate this decision by signing below. By signing you also consent to allow me access to your permanent academic record, including your official transcript. If you have any questions about this research project please contact me, Erin Webb, at (209) 658-6941 or my faculty sponsor Anysia Mayer, at (209) 664-6564. If you have any questions regarding your rights and participation as a research subject, please contact the Campus Compliance Officer by phone (209) 667-3794 or email IRBAdmin@csustan.edu.

There is no cost to you beyond the time and effort required to complete the procedure(s) described above. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate in this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. You may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

## APPENDIX B

## SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Tell me about your family.

Tell me about your time in high school.

Tell me about why you wanted to go to college.

How did you decide to attend community college?

Tell me about your community college experience.

When did you decide that you wanted to get a bachelor's degree?

Why did you decide to attend Tule University?

Tell me about your transfer experience.

What were your first few weeks on campus like?

Why did you decide to you decide to leave Tule University?

How did you come to this decision?

Do you remember how you felt after you made the decision?

Will you chose to go back to school in the future?

Will you return to Tule University?