RIDING OUT THE WAVES: COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFERS GRADUATING WITH BACHELOR'S DEGREES

Tamara J. Rice

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Committee:

Maureen E. Wilson, Advisor

Peterann Siehl
Graduate Faculty Representative

Robert DeBard

Dafina L. Stewart

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ABSTRACT

Dr. Maureen E. Wilson, Advisor

The purpose of this study was to explore factors that influenced the completion of a bachelor's degree by community college transfer students. A qualitative methodology was used to capture the essence of the transfer student experience. One-on-one interviews were conducted with thirteen Bowling Green State University seniors who transferred to the university from a community college. Data included interview transcripts, academic transcripts, and observations noted in a research log. Themes were identified from data analysis. Measures of credibility and authenticity for qualitative research design were incorporated and attained in this study.

Data analysis provided results at two levels: a) thick description of the transfer student experience and b) explanation of why these students persisted. Reasons why participants chose to attend a community college included low cost, convenient location, feeling unprepared to attend a university, and having unclear goals. Several themes emerged from the data that pertained to their experiences of their journey to the baccalaureate including receiving quality teaching at both the community college and BGSU, having a fairly smooth transfer process, experiencing financial difficulties, feeling out of place at both the community college and BGSU, and balancing school and work responsibilities. What helped the students persist to graduation primarily included psychological factors, such as high educational aspirations and strong motivation, and social factors, such as supportive relationships.

From the results, implications for practice, policy, and research were discussed. Leading implications from this study included encouraging students to set high goals, strengthening inter-

institutional communication regarding transfer credits, stabilizing financial aid, and providing formal social networking opportunities for transfer students. More research should be conducted to examine the transfer experience of those who drop out, students of color, first-generation students, and faculty/staff who closely interact with transfer students. Further research should also consider longitudinal studies and investigate cultural and environmental factors that may influence degree attainment of transfer students. Overall, this study provided a better understanding of transfer student success and offered further support that the community college can serve as a gateway to the baccalaureate.

To my father, the late Jim Rice,

who instilled in me a generous heart and keen wit; and

to my mother, Valerie Rice,

who instilled in me the value of education and showed me how to be a woman in a man's world;

and

who both have loved and supported me all the days of my life,

I dedicate this dissertation to you.

I love you.

Thank you.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

The community college has become a major player in U.S. higher education. Community colleges make postsecondary education available to broad masses of people and increase educational attainment for those who normally would not seek it (Grubb et al., 1999). They play a vital role in enhancing the socioeconomic mobility of many people (Whitaker & Pascarella, 1994). Higher levels of education have long been associated with higher earnings (Marcotte, Bailey, Borkoski, & Kienzl, 2005). Democratizing access to postsecondary education to all persons heightens the role of the community college in U.S. higher education and national development.

Community colleges have been deemed the "people's colleges" because their student composition reflects that of their surrounding communities, much more so than four-year institutions. These institutions endeavor to serve a broad range of students' needs (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Walleri & Seybert, 1993). Community colleges enroll students who vary by race, age, and socioeconomic status to a far greater extent than four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). For instance, in Fall 2005, two-fifths or more of African American (40.7%), Native American (45.8%), and Asian (38.3%) students and more than half (52.2%) of Latino students attended a community college (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2007). These institutions play an important role in serving students from underrepresented groups because they often act not only as the "front door" to higher education, but also the only door for access. For many students it is often not a choice between a community college or a four-year institution, but rather between community college or no college at all. Because students from underrepresented groups tend to gravitate toward community colleges as their only chance at postsecondary

education, it is imperative that these institutions receive effective attention and support (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Community college standing in higher education has been enhanced because of recent enrollment trends. A considerable portion of all U.S. undergraduate students are enrolled in community colleges, with estimates ranging from 38% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005) to 46% (American Association of Community Colleges, 2007). Townsend and Wilson (2006) stated that anticipated overcrowding at four-year institutions, as well as escalating tuition costs, will increase the likelihood of high school graduates beginning their postsecondary education at community colleges. This anticipated increase in students with baccalaureate degree aspirations who first enroll in community colleges highlights the importance of the transfer function in U.S. higher education.

Statement of the Problem

Advocates for community colleges claim that these institutions serve as a gateway to a baccalaureate degree. Many community college students, however, do not persist to graduation at either two-year or four-year institutions. Students who matriculate at community colleges do not attain a bachelor's degree at the same rate as those students who originate at four-year institutions. These four-year students are often termed "native" students. In Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) meta-analysis of higher education research, they concluded that first attending a community college decreases the likelihood of attaining a bachelor's degree by 15-20%. Studies have indicated that only about one quarter of community college students who wish to enroll in a four-year institution actually transfer to their university of choice (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002; McCormick & Carroll, 1997).

Community colleges, with their open-door admissions policies, often enroll students who exhibit high-risk persistence factors, such as part-time enrollment, non-continuous enrollment, low socioeconomic status, and low academic ability. These institutions report low retention and graduation rates, compared to four-year institutions—56% versus 73% (Tinto, 1993). Controlling for background characteristics, studies indicate that students who first enroll in four-year institutions persist to a baccalaureate degree at higher rates than able peers with similar circumstances who initially enrolled in community colleges (Dougherty, 1992; Whitaker & Pascarella, 1994). There is a grave concern regarding attrition rates of community college transfer students (Kisker, 2007; Summers, 2003). The disparity in baccalaureate degree attainment between transfer and native students threatens the perception that community colleges are a viable means of attaining the bachelor's degree and warrants further study.

Purpose of Study

Students who first enroll in community colleges and wish to obtain a bachelor's degree face myriad obstacles. Many community college transfer students, however, have achieved success in attaining baccalaureate degrees. Townsend and Wilson (2006) stressed that little research has focused on the actual integration experiences of community college transfer students. Other researchers have discussed the gap in the literature related to the complexity of the transfer student experience (Eggleston & Lanaan, 2001; Kozeracki, 2001). A goal of this study was to better understand the experiences of baccalaureate degree candidates (i.e., college seniors) who were community college transfer students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore transfer students' experiences and determine what helped them successfully navigate the transfer process and persist to graduation.

Research Questions

The following central research question was posed to accomplish the purpose of this study: What experiences of selected community college transfer students led to their success in attaining a baccalaureate degree? In addition, this study was aimed to answer the following supporting questions:

1. Why did they attend a community college?
2. What were their experiences in college (both at the community college and university)?
3. Why did they persist?

Significance of Study

The literature in the area of transfer students is typically compartmentalized in that only one segment of the transfer experience is examined at a time. For instance, some researchers have focused on community college students and their success (Bulakowski & Townsend, 1995; Gabriner, 1998; Grimes & David, 1999; Nora, Attinasi, & Matonak, 1990; Tinto & Russo, 1994). Other researchers have studied transfer students who recently enrolled in four-year institutions (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Cejda & Kaylor, 2001; Davies & Casey, 1998; Laanan, 1996; Townsend, 1995; Townsend, McNerney, & Arnold, 1993; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). These studies are limited in that only one perspective of the transfer experience (i.e., pre-transfer or post-transfer), was explored. This study took a different approach by incorporating a holistic look at the transfer experience through examining the community college, transfer, and university experiences.

Although this study would have been strengthened by also studying transfer students who did not attain a bachelor's degree, this population is difficult to track. Time constraints limited this study to examining only those who were college seniors. Studying baccalaureate candidates

of a four-year institution who originally enrolled in a community college provided insight related to factors affecting persistence from the community college through the baccalaureate institution. Townsend (1995) concluded that future research should focus on interviewing transfer students who graduated with bachelor's degrees. Flaga (2006) conducted a qualitative study examining the transition experiences of community college transfer students and concluded that evaluating transfer students beyond their first year at a four-year institution is needed to evaluate their long-term retention and success. Degree attainment is the ultimate outcome in higher education (Adelman, 1999). It warrants examination from the perspective of those who are near completion of a baccalaureate degree. Therefore, exploring the "success stories" of transfer students who were near graduation provided a better understanding of the factors that facilitated persistence and degree attainment.

Summary

Transfer students are an important segment of not only the community college population, but also that of the four-year institution. Their success at four-year institutions compared to native students is a "measuring stick" of the acceptance of community colleges in higher education (Grubb, 1991). Although there is an extensive amount of research on transfer students, there is still much to be learned about this ever-growing population. With faltering transfer rates and rising enrollments of students who wish to transfer, it is becoming more important to understand how they successfully navigate through both types of institutions.

In the U.S., community college transfer students who can complete bachelor's degrees have important societal implications. Degree attainment correlates to higher earnings, which promotes economic and social advancement (Marcotte et al., 2005). Over a lifespan, a baccalaureate graduate will earn over $1,000,000 more than a person with a high school diploma

(U.S. Census, 2002). The successful baccalaureate degree attainment of community college transfer students can complement human capital theory that states an educated society leads to a modern society (Kubow & Fossum, 2003).

Research indicates that there is an apparent disadvantage to first enrolling in a community college for those who wish to earn at least a baccalaureate degree. Because transfer students experience barriers to attaining a bachelor's degree, it is important to study their experiences to help facilitate their success. If college administrators and faculty can learn from those who began their college careers in these institutions and were eventually successful in attaining bachelor's degrees, they might be able to mitigate those disadvantages and provide further support that community colleges provide access to postsecondary education to broad sections of society.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining transfer student success, it is important to first understand the institution, the person, and the phenomenon. In other words, what do we already know about community colleges, transfer students, the transfer challenge, and student retention in general? This literature review will include a synthesis of the research pertaining to the aforementioned items, including pre- and post-transfer issues and theoretical frameworks.

The Community College as an Institution

Community colleges are important in U.S. higher education. They enroll nearly half of all undergraduates, particularly students from underrepresented groups (American Association of Community Colleges, 2007). Community colleges are serious competitors for state budgets, which is one indicator of their prominence (Evelyn, 2004). Competition for 18-year-old high school graduates is becoming fierce in the four-year admissions marketplace, thus the community college transfer student population is a viable applicant pool for baccalaureate institutions (Hebel, 2000). Some states are proposing financial incentives for students to begin their baccalaureate study at community colleges (Keller, 2007). There is much discussion pertaining to the various roles of the community college and the priority of the transfer function within those roles.

Effects of Community Colleges

There is continued debate over whether community colleges democratize or divert higher education. The argument revolves around whether community colleges increase the overall educational attainment of those who would not normally go to college (democratization effect) or steer students away from four-year college aspirations (diversion effect). Proponents of community colleges argue that these institutions do provide a place in higher education for those

not traditionally served by the four-year college system (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Whitaker & Pascarella, 1994). Critics argue that the community college environment is not conducive for bachelor degree aspirants and perpetuates the social class divide in this country (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Carter, 2001; Dougherty, 1987). This debate sparks the interest in and importance of studying the academic success of community college students as well as their attainment of the baccalaureate degree.

Democratization Effect

Community colleges are often credited with the democratization of U.S. higher education. They contribute to the modernization of U.S. society by providing proximity and access in educating its citizens. Community colleges do what their name implies: serve their surrounding communities. Rouse (1995) argued that proximity is a significant factor in educational attainment. She noted that the closer the institution, the more likely students are to enroll. These institutions serve their communities by providing educational opportunities for a variety of purposes, including continuing education and vocational training in urban and rural areas.

Community colleges are important in U.S. society because they provide postsecondary education opportunities to those who may never have pursued education beyond high school, which can yield higher earnings. Community college attendance has the greatest positive impact on the futures of students of low socioeconomic status and low ability, and those who performed poorly in high school (Hilmer, 1997). In examining the National Longitudinal Study of the Class of 1972 (NLS-72), Grubb (2002) found that men with associate's degrees earned 18% more than men with high school diplomas and women with associate's degrees earned 23% more than women with high school diplomas. Whitaker and Pascarella (1994) examined the socioeconomic

attainment of community college students using national datasets and found that once transfer students enrolled in and graduated from four-year institutions, they appeared to be competitive with native students for the most desirable and best-paying jobs. The authors concluded:

> Hence, for those students who successfully transfer to four-year institutions and complete their bachelor's degree, the two-year college may provide a notably cost-effective way of obtaining the first year or two of postsecondary education without sacrificing occupational or economic competitiveness in the job market. (p. 206)

If students can successfully navigate their way through the community college and four-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree and reap higher earnings, then the two-year institution can arguably consider itself as a gateway to upward social mobility.

Diversion Effect

Critics argue that community colleges divert high-ability students away from four-year institutions and perpetuate social class divides in American society. Brint and Karabel (1989) declared that "the two-year institution has accentuated rather than reduced existing patterns of social inequality" (p. 226). They stressed that the presence of community colleges has allowed four-year institutions to raise their admissions standards and exclude students who might have otherwise felt entitled to enter the first-year class, particularly at public institutions.

Critics also maintain that the community college environment is not conducive to supporting baccalaureate aspirants and that the cultural norms associated with these institutions "cool out" students in their academic goal attainment (Clark, 1960). Clark asserted, "The conflict between open-door admission and performance of high quality often means a wide discrepancy between the hopes of entering students and the means of their realization" (p. 571). In other studies, researchers found that students who began in community colleges lowered their degree

aspirations within two years of enrollment (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1998). According to other scholars, this cooling effect is also evident in the higher attrition rates of community colleges compared to four-year institutions, particularly for students from underrepresented groups (Rendón & Valadez, 1993). Students who aspire to a bachelor's degree and start at community colleges are about 15% less likely to obtain that degree than students who initially enrolled in four-year institutions (Pierson, Wolniak, Pascarella, & Flowers, 2003).

Kane and Rouse (1999) argued that a reason for the cooling effect is that community colleges are not appropriate institutions for baccalaureate aspirants because of their varied roles. The authors stated that conversely, the four-year institution is much more appropriate because its environment keeps students focused on the bachelor's degree. Some claimed that the community college's role in providing technical, vocational, and community education has diluted their purpose of providing general education to those who wish to continue their education to the baccalaureate and beyond (Clark, 1960; Brint & Karabel, 1989). Critics assert that calling community colleges the gateway to the baccalaureate is misleading because there is an apparent disadvantage for bachelor's degree aspirants who first enroll in community colleges. This baccalaureate gap has called into question the emphasis placed on these institutions to serve the general education function in higher education.

Roles of the Community College

Community colleges are considered comprehensive institutions that serve a variety of functions, including vocational, community, general, and remedial education (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Vocational training, often termed "career track", involves a highly prescribed curriculum in a specific discipline from which students who earn an associate's degree can immediately

enter the workforce (e.g., dental hygienist, computer technician). Community education includes non-credit courses that serve the interests of the community (e.g., art classes, first aid, physical activity classes). General education courses are designed to satisfy lower-division course requirements for baccalaureate degree programs, often considered the collegial function of the community college. Remedial education serves to assist students who lack the academic skills necessary to succeed in the college-level curriculum. Some people would consider the varied roles of the community college to be an asset, as it provides a welcoming environment to those who are unsure about their academic pursuits (Dunn, 2004). Others, however, argue that the community college should focus on a particular mission, as its collegial function is being threatened by competing roles (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Greenfield, 1988).

Transfer Function

Historically, the primary role of community colleges was to provide general education and assist students in transferring to senior institutions (Wechsler, 1989). Over the years, as community needs changed, so did the role of the community college. This change was reflected in the declining rates of students transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions from the 1970s through the 1990s (Zamani, 2001). Townsend et al. (1993) explained that the drop in these transfer rates may be a result of competing roles for resources with occupational-technical, developmental, and community education. The declining transfer rates during those decades caused university officers and state legislators to question the transfer function of the community college.

The transfer function, however, remains a cornerstone of community colleges (Dougherty, 1992). Although community colleges are committed to serving their varied purposes, administrators cannot deny the vast number of students who enroll to obtain a

bachelor's degree. In 2001, 79% of students entering community colleges indicated that they aspired to earning at least a bachelor's degree (Doyle, 2006). Indeed, the community college serves a variety of educational needs; however, the transfer function is arguably the most significant element in its mission because of its democratizing effect in higher education. Bradburn, Hurst, and Peng (2001) stated, "[The transfer] preparation is key to the community college's role in higher education because it affirms the community college's claim to a collegiate, academic identity and to a role in broadening access for those historically excluded from a college education" (p. v). Grubb (1991) asserted that "the claims of community colleges to be egalitarian institutions rest in part on the success of the transfer function" (p. 195). The success of transfer students, not only in their persistence through the community college, but also in their achievement at four-year institutions, is a reflection of the strength of the transfer function.

Another indicator of the heightened importance of the transfer function in community colleges is the rising number of traditionally-aged students attending these institutions. Although the perception is that community colleges primarily serve older adult students, Adelman (2005) reported that in 2001, 42% of all credit-seeking community college students nationwide were under the age of 22. There is evidence that more traditional aged students will enroll in community colleges in the near future as the next generational wave of high school attendees prepare for the college market (Anderson, 2003). This trend of traditional students (i.e., students who are coming straight from high school with baccalaureate degree aspirations) enrolling in community colleges suggests that the transfer function will become of greater importance.

Transfer Rates

Often the success of the transfer function is measured through the transfer rate, that is the rate at which community college students who indicated intent to transfer actually do transfer to a baccalaureate institution in a specified period of time. Transfer rates are considered indicators of the success or effectiveness of community college enrollment (Wechsler, 1989). Studies have measured the transfer rates at a single institution (Deng, 2006) or state-wide system (Cohen, 1999). Using national datasets, McCormick and Carroll (1997) found that 39% of community college students from the 1990 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:90/94) who indicated a desire to earn a bachelor's degree actually transferred to a four-year institution by 1994. Berkner et al. (2002) found that about 25% of the students from the 1995-96 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01) enrolled in community colleges who stated they intend to complete a bachelor's degree transferred to a four-year institution by 2001.

There is much criticism over the validity of transfer rates because of the wide variety in the definition of "transfer" and rate calculations. Townsend (2002) argued that the core of the issue rests with defining the numerator (students who transferred) and denominator (students who could have transferred). Some studies use the entire community college headcount as a denominator, some use only full-time students, while others use some mixture of credit hour registration and program enrollment (Banks, 1990). Cohen and Brawer (2003) asserted that "potential" transfer students can formulate into an infinite number. The authors stated that, "since community college matriculants arguably are potential transfers until they either show up at a university or die, the transfer rate calculations can never be fully reflective of student performance" (p. 59). To demonstrate the wide disparity of transfer rate formulas, Spicer and

Armstrong (1996) developed eleven different definitions to be incorporated as the "denominator" and used student data sets from two community college districts in the state of California. Based on these different definitions, the authors calculated transfer rates that ranged from 3.6% to 61.3%. Additionally, in reviewing ERIC databases, Cohen (1990) found transfer rates that ranged from 5% to 84%, thus indicating the disparity in numerator and denominator definitions.

Despite the criticisms, a typical performance measure for community colleges is the percentage of the student body that transfers (Wechsler, 1989). All colleges and universities in the U.S. have been subject to rising calls for accountability (Bailey & Alfonzo, 2005). High tuition costs and decreased state support have forced college officials to acquire a variety of assessment measures to prove their worth. Community colleges are not exempt from such scrutiny. Discovering the factors that facilitate the success of community college transfer students is increasingly a topic of research because higher transfer rates can provide community college officials some ammunition in state budget negotiations.

Transfer Students

To better understand the transfer function of the community college, we need to understand the student. Transfer students are a valuable human resource for community colleges and baccalaureate institutions. The transfer student or transfer process has received attention in recent research (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Studies that examine transfer students are important in higher education because the transfer function of the community college serves as an important benchmark in postsecondary education. To better explain the transfer function of the community college, we need to understand the transfer students' characteristics and their motivations for attending a community college.

Student Characteristics

Students who are most likely to persist at a community college and transfer to a senior institution possess more of the traditional student characteristics, such as being enrolled full-time, being under 24 years of age, and having a higher socioeconomic status (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Lee and Frank (1990) tracked community college transfer students from a national sample in 1980 and followed them through 1984. In their summary, the authors described a transfer student as, “Higher social class, lower probabilities of being a minority or female, a higher probability of being from the academic track, higher test scores and grades in high school, and higher educational aspirations” (p. 190). Although Lee and Frank found race and gender to be significant predictors of transfer, more recent studies did not find such an effect (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Age at college entry also has been found to be a very powerful predictor of transfer (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; McCormick & Carroll, 1997). The authors in both studies found that the older the student, the less likely that student is to transfer and subsequently earn a bachelor’s degree.

In studying the BPS-96/01 cohort, Berkner et al. (2002) described traditional students at all institutional types as enrolling full-time immediately after high school, working part-time (at most), and being financially dependent on their parents. Berkner and colleagues asserted that the more risk factors students have, the less likely they will transfer. Risk factors identified in this study included part-time enrollment, delayed entry after high school, having children, being financially independent, and working full time while enrolled.

Reasons for Attending Community Colleges

Transfer students enroll in community colleges for a variety of reasons. Namely, they choose community colleges because of the relatively low tuition, close proximity to home or

work, and course schedules that typically cater to students with other obligations (Dunn, 2004). In addition, many students first attend a community college because it allows them to enroll at higher quality institutions upon transfer than if they were to apply to such institutions directly after high school (Hilmer, 1997). Community college environments are less threatening to students because of low selectivity or open admissions standards and an "easy-in-easy-out" enrollment concept. Because of this campus climate, community colleges are well suited for students who want to explore various fields and career paths.

Davies and Dickmann (1998) surveyed students about their reasons for choosing community colleges. Reasons cited included easier financial aid, flexible class schedules, and a friendlier learning environment. Students in the survey commented that they received more attention from faculty members, with an emphasis placed on teaching. Additionally, the authors commented that community colleges cater to students exploring a variety of vocations, as opposed to students feeling "pigeon-holed" into a major right way, like at four-year institutions.

One must be careful about making assumptions about transfer students. One assumption is that transfer students progress toward their academic goals in a linear fashion. Several researchers claimed that students "swirl" in and out of multiple institutions during their academic tenure (Adelman, 2005; Bach, Banks, Kinnick, Ricks, Stoering, & Walleri, 2000; Borden, 2004; McCormick, 2003; Piland, 1995). Many college students enroll in more than one institution at a time (called "double-dipping") and "reverse transfer," in that they start at a four-year institution and then transfer to a community college. Another emerging enrollment trend is called dual enrollment, in which high school students simultaneously take both high school and college courses. Because of the various enrollment patterns of transfer students, it is important that

institutional policies and practices monitor educational expectations of transfer students, but not in a simplistic fashion.

Transfer Challenge

Along with understanding the institution and the student, the phenomenon of the transfer challenge needs to be comprehended. Transfer students face many obstacles in their goal of earning a baccalaureate degree. The transfer challenge can be explained through three institutional stages: a) surviving at the community college (pre-transfer); b) successfully transferring to a four-year institution (point-of-transfer); and c) persisting at a four-year institution to a baccalaureate degree (post-transfer).

Pre-Transfer Issues

The most prominent obstacle that students face before transferring is community college attrition. In the history of community colleges, most of their students never transfer to a four-year institution (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Community colleges generally have the highest attrition rates among first-year students than any other institutional type (Tinto, 1993). Kane and Rouse (1999) observed that slightly over half of all students from the High School and Beyond Study (HS&B-80) who enrolled in a community college completed one year or less. Tinto (1993) examined the 1990 entering class reported by the American College Testing program (ACT) and noted that the attrition rate for all entering students at community colleges was 44.0%, compared to 26.8% at four-year colleges. Additionally, Tinto observed that the higher the selectivity of an institution, the lower the attrition rate. He found that the most selective institutions lose 8% of beginning full-time students by the start of the second school year, compared to 45% for open-enrollment institutions. More recently, Hoachlander et al. (2003) examined the BPS-96/01 cohort

and found that 44% of community college students left school without any credential within three years of entering.

Community colleges are frequently criticized for high attrition rates, however, one must be careful when reviewing drop-out rates of community college students. Tinto (1982) remarked that attrition rates in all of U.S. higher education have remained fairly stable at about 45% for the past 100 years. The nature of the community college, with its open-access policy, attracts a wide variety of students with varied backgrounds and interests. It is difficult to ascertain the academic goals of community college students, as not all of them are initially seeking a credential, unlike most bachelor degree-seeking students at four-year institutions. It is also possible that students may "declare" degree plans to receive financial aid with no intention of actually attaining such degrees. As a result, their degree declarations can skew results. Therefore, while attrition rates may be high at community colleges compared to four-year institutions, it does not necessarily mean that those students who dropped out failed to attain their academic goals.

Nevertheless, because of the noted high attrition rates at community colleges, several researchers have attempted to explain this phenomenon. Some studies focused on why community college students drop out (Anderson, 1981; Grimes & David, 1999; Mohammadi, 1994). Others have identified factors pertaining to who is most likely to transfer (Berkner et al., 2002; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Lee & Frank, 1990). In summarizing attrition research at community colleges in the 1990s, Summers (2003) identified common variables as they relate to student departure. The common variables included student characteristics (e.g., age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, marital status, parents' education), academic ability (high school and college GPA, high school class rank, test scores), noncognitive factors (motivation, social integration, intent to return), career aspirations, and use of student services. Summers found that

older students tend to drop out more than younger students; students of lower socioeconomic status and those who worked full-time were more likely to drop out; and students with lower grades (both high school and college) also tended to withdraw from the community college.

Another consistent finding regarding community college attrition is that students who acquire fewer community college credits tend to drop out more than students with additional credits (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). Historically, earning an associate's degree improved the likelihood of transfer. Grubb (1991) found that for the NLS-72 cohort, 65.4% of associate degree recipients transferred to a four-year institution after seven years, compared to 15.9% of entering community college students who transferred without any credential. For the HS&B-80 cohort, Grubb observed that 48.9% of associate degree recipients transferred to a four-year institution after four years, compared to 14.7% of community college entrants who transferred without a credential.

Times have changed, however, and with the rise of vocational and technical programs in the 1970s and 1980s, fewer students are attaining an associate's degree before transferring to a senior institution. McCormick and Carroll (1997) found that of the BPS-90/94 community college students who transferred to other institutions, 65% did so without a degree. In addition to the rise of vocational and technical programs, Cohen and Brawer (2003) commented that senior institutions are readily admitting students without associate degrees, contributing to the rise of students transferring without credentials. Although more students are transferring without associate's degrees, the degree recipients are graduating at four-year institutions at higher rates than those without such credentials (McCormick & Carroll).

Point-of-Transfer Issues

Once a student persists through the community college, another major obstacle to bachelor degree attainment occurs at the point of transfer. Point-of-transfer issues include admission to four-year institutions, articulation agreements and the acceptance of course credits, and financial aid. Four-year institutions typically give preference to enrolling native (i.e., first-year) students, then allow transfers if there is enough room. As a result, programs get closed before transfer students get a chance to enroll for a particular academic term. Some argued that four-year institutions are hesitant to admit transfer students because of perceptions that transfer students are not as prepared or successful at senior institutions as native students (Berger & Malaney, 2003). In addition, when an academic department changes its graduation requirements, it impacts admission for transfer students. Wechsler (1989) explained that four-year institutions have an asymmetrical relationship with community colleges that adversely affects transfer admission. Because of these and other issues, there has been a push for guaranteed admission for transfer students, particularly those who earn associate's degrees, through the use of articulation agreements (Grites, 2004; Rifkin, 1996).

Probably the most pressing issue for students at the point of transfer is discovering how many course credits will actually be accepted toward graduation requirements by the senior institution. Lee and Frank (1990) asserted that the most prominent factor in a transfer student's failure to attain a bachelor's degree was the lack of accepted course credits. Dougherty (1987) synthesized several studies that used different national datasets to track the educational attainment of students. He concluded that the frequent loss of credits, as much as one semester's worth, was a key determinant in the lower degree completion rates of transfer students. Four-year institutions deny credits from a community college because the rigor of community college

courses is questioned and the lack of established articulation agreements (Grites, 2004). In addition, senior institutions deny credits if they do not have a counterpart in the curriculum, such as many vocational course credits (Dougherty, 1992).

Most transfer students realize a loss of credits upon transferring to four-year institutions and that can have academic, economic, and psychological ramifications. Losing transfer credits can prolong enrollment, which decreases the likelihood a student will persist to a degree (Gabriner, 1998). Time-to-degree is a powerful influence on degree attainment and credit transfer is at the core of this dilemma. It is very frustrating for transfer students to learn that they have to take lower-division courses over again and it can damper their motivation (Dunn, 2004). The author explained, “They have worked hard and found a new appreciation for learning only to be penalized for their inability to predict the courses they would want to transfer” (p. 33). Dunn noted that other complaints by transfer students included changes in graduation requirements for which transfer students are not granted exemptions (unlike native students), and inconsistent requirements for the same major at different senior institutions. There is also an apparent inequity between native students and transfer students. For instance, four-year institutions typically reject course credits to transfer students who earn a grade of “D”, but accept such grades from current students. This disparity also contributes to the frustration transfer students experience when trying to assess their degree progress.

The issue of credit transfer is derived from the relationship between community colleges and four-year institutions. Communication often breaks down and community college students are either not given the correct information about course transfers or they are given the information too late to make any class changes. Because each baccalaureate-granting institution has its own faculty, hence its own curriculum standards, community colleges continue to struggle

with staying abreast of the dynamics of academic program requirements. Wechsler (1989) stated, "The art of facilitating transfer consists of balancing coordination with institutional autonomy" (p. 8). It is imperative that community colleges and four-year institutions streamline the transfer process (primarily through articulation agreements), to better support the bachelor degree aspirations of community college students. Doyle (2006) asserted, "The articulation agreements, common course numbering, and curriculum decisions that the policymakers develop all play a pivotal role in determining how many transfer credits will be accepted and hence the likelihood of students' attaining their educational goals" (p. 58). It is anticipated that as community college enrollments of traditional students continue to rise, so will the need to understand the various intricacies involved in the transfer process. This enhanced understanding will better inform practice specifically pertaining to the implementation of solid transfer mechanisms between community colleges and four-year institutions.

Along with these point-of-transfer concerns, even practical issues such as the amount of paperwork and the physical move from a community college to a four-year institution can hinder a student's progress toward a bachelor's degree (Astin, 1977). Dougherty (1992) discussed the differences between transfer and native students in moving from lower-division to upper-division courses. He observed that transfer students have to move to a new school, maybe even to a new community. Native students, on the other hand, do not have to experience such a marked difference between courses. Dougherty stated, "Moving from the lower to the upper division is simply a matter of registering for next semester's classes at what now is a familiar institution" (p. 196). Although native students encountered an adjustment period during the first year in college, transfer students endure two adjustment periods: once upon entering the community college and then again at the four-year institution.

Overall, the student's understanding of the transfer process is poor and community colleges are not intentional in providing adequate and accurate information to their students about transfer (Townsend, 1995). The lack of communication or cooperation between community colleges and four-year institutions contributes to the obstacles transfer students face in their attempt to attain a bachelor's degree. On a positive note, research has shown that once students have successfully navigated their way through the community college and point of transfer, they are just as likely as their four-year counterparts to persist to the baccalaureate degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Post-Transfer Issues

Much of the literature on community college transfer students examines how these students compare to their four-year counterparts in both academic achievement and graduation rates. Grubb (1991) stated that "the ability of students to transfer to four-year colleges and then compete as equals against students who begin in four-year colleges is one test of the acceptability of community colleges within higher education" (p. 195). Academic performance (i.e., grade point average), is strongly correlated with degree attainment; therefore, there is much research interest in how community college transfer students perform academically at four-year institutions. Similar to other GPA comparison studies, the results are mixed regarding whether transfer students perform better than native students once enrolled in senior institutions (Carlan & Byxbe, 2000; Diaz, 1992; Hughes & Graham, 1992; Lanaan, 2001).

Many transfer students experience "transfer shock" (Hills, 1965), or a brief drop in grade point average within the first one or two semesters of enrollment at the senior institution. Explanations for transfer shock include the more academically demanding curriculum at four-year institutions than at community colleges, the more academically competitive atmosphere at

four-year institutions, and less academic preparedness for transfer students compared to native students (Dougherty, 1992). Others have argued that because of the financial aid gap (i.e., transfer students not receiving as much aid as first-year students), transfer students need to work more hours per week to afford college, thus grades suffer (Astin, 1993b). Community colleges are often criticized for not preparing transfer students adequately enough for heightened course expectations at senior institutions. Some have stressed that because of the wide diversity of academic abilities shown in community college classrooms, faculty are pressed to cater to those of lower abilities, rather than challenge those with higher abilities and aspirations (Townsend, 1995). As a result, transfer students are not used to the demands placed on them once at the senior institution and do not perform as well upon initial enrollment.

Transfer shock not only applies to a dip in GPA, but also describes the transition issues these students face when they attempt to integrate themselves socially into the senior institution. Berger and Malaney (2003) argued, "Adjustment to college life involves more than performing inside of the classroom; there is a wide range of academic and social interactions and outcomes that must be considered in a comprehensive view of the college adjustment process" (p. 4). Grites (2004) described the transfer shock as a type of culture shock, similar to what is observed in anthropological studies.

Townsend and Wilson (2006) conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed 19 community college transfer students who were enrolled at a large, research university. Themes that emerged from this study indicated that transfer students need support in their academic as well as social integration, similar to the adjustment needs of first-year college students. The authors argued that "the drop in GPA transfer shock may be partly or almost totally a manifestation of the shock experienced in moving from one institutional culture to another" (p.

454). The authors stressed that because the two institutional types studied were so vastly different from one another, uneasiness and frustration likely occurred upon transfer.

Financial concerns are also part of the adjustment process for transfer students. Transfer students' lack of ability to pay for college typically results in having to work full-time once they enter senior institutions to afford the higher tuition. Working full-time usually requires a student to attend school part-time, which extends time-to-degree and adversely affects degree attainment. A student who has to work full-time does not get as socially integrated into the four-year institutional environment as non-working students, which also can negatively impact persistence. Astin (1993b) asserted, "The single largest negative effect on retention is associated with working full-time as a student" (p. 196).

Because of the various intricacies involved when a student transfers to a four-year institution, there have been several calls for these institutions to incorporate extensive orientation and college success programs specially designed for transfer students. "Transfer students need an orientation to the culture of the new campus, the academic and social impacts of the new environment, the academic advising structure, and the support services, activities, and organizations that are available to them" (Grites, 2004, p. 126). There is an immense amount of attention paid to first-year college students in the form of extensive orientation programs and first-year success initiatives, yet such features for transfer students are limited in four-year institutions.

Degree Attainment of Transfer Students

Due in part to these transfer challenges, degree attainment suffers. Degree attainment is one of the most critical outcomes in higher education research. Adelman (1999) stated, "Degree completion is the true bottom line for college administrators, state legislators, parents, and most

importantly, students—not retention to the second year, not persistence without a degree, but completion" (p. v). Studying degree attainment is usually linked to examining student persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) defined student persistence as "the progressive reenrollment in college, whether continuous from one term to the next or temporarily interrupted and then resumed" (p. 374). Issues regarding college access and student persistence have been ongoing concerns in the study of higher education. Student persistence and completion rates are common measures of educational outcomes for research.

Several studies examined baccalaureate degree attainment by community college transfer students. Researchers have incorporated single institution databases (Alba & Lavin, 1981; Hollahan, Green, & Kelley, 1983), statewide databases (Bach et al., 2000; Kinnick & Kempner, 1988), and national databases to examine the baccalaureate attainment of community college students. Anderson (1981), Nunley and Breneman (1988), and Velez (1985) all have investigated the academic progress of students from the NLS-72 cohort and tracked these students from 1972 to 1979. The authors of all three studies found that the students who entered community colleges received fewer bachelor degrees than those who entered four-year institutions. Specifically, Anderson found a 14% drop, Nunley and Breneman found a 11.5% drop, and Velez found a 18.7% drop in bachelor degree attainment for community college students, compared to their four-year counterparts.

Using another nationwide study, Kane and Rouse (1999) examined the HS&B-80 cohort and tracked them for 10 years. The authors found that 31% of high school seniors who started at community colleges and stated they wish to obtain at least a bachelor's degree in 1982 had done so by 1992, compared to 56.8% of high school seniors with similar degree aspirations who started at four-year institutions. In a more recent study, Berkner et al. (2002) examined the

BPS:96/01 cohort and tracked the degree completion rate of these students beginning at public two-year institutions through 2001. The authors found that about 25% of all beginning community college students in this cohort indicated an interest in obtaining a baccalaureate degree. Of that group, Berkner and colleagues found that 36% attained a bachelor's degree by 2001, compared to 51% among all beginners at four-year institutions who completed a bachelor's degree within six years of attendance. Additionally, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) noted that as few as 8% of bachelor degree seekers at community colleges completed such degrees.

As with most studies that incorporate the calculation of a rate, there is much debate over the validity of degree attainment studies. For example, there is wide variety in transfer student definitions (initial enrollment vs. number of credit hours attained), transfer rate calculations, degree aspiration definitions, use of transcripts versus self-reported data, and length of study determinations. Therefore, it is difficult make adequate comparisons between the persistence of transfer students and native students at four-year institutions. Critics who argue about the validity or appropriateness of degree attainment studies stress that community colleges serve a variety of purposes and should not be judged by persistence standards held for four-year institutions. Grubb (1991) asserted, "Indeed, given the multiple purposes of community colleges and the varied goals of their students, one might *expect* a decrease in transfer [rates]" (p. 194). Astin (1993a) acknowledged that retention rates are often misleading and believed that comparisons between different institutional types are unfair because simple rates are more about who colleges admit than how effective they are at retaining students.

Similar to characteristics of students who transfer, those who are most likely to persist to a bachelor's degree tend to be enrolled full-time, have continuous enrollment (i.e., no

interruptions in matriculation), come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, have stronger educational aspirations, and have higher high school and community college GPAs than those who do not persist. Although race and gender have been correlated to baccalaureate degree attainment (Lee & Frank, 1990; Velez & Javalgi, 1987), other studies have not found a relationship (Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Velez, 1985). Some argue that student characteristics are what influence degree attainment most (Astin, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Such studies suggest that community colleges, with their open admissions policy and large numbers of part-time, low achieving, and low socioeconomic students will have low persistence rates regardless of the effectiveness of any intentional interventions (Astin, 1993a; Mohammadi, 1994).

Despite the argument that pre-college characteristics have the most influence on degree attainment, other researchers have found that an institutional effect does exist when bachelor degree aspirants enroll in community colleges first (Dougherty & Kienzel, 2006; Velez, 1985). Using national datasets, Dougherty (1992) and Whitaker and Pascarella (1994) observed that initial enrollment in a community college negatively affected educational attainment, net of student pre-college traits, suggesting that the community college environment must be influential.

In addition to pre-college traits and institutional effects, researchers argued that community college enrollment negatively impacts the time it takes to complete a bachelor's degree. In synthesizing degree attainment studies of transfer students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that persistence to a bachelor's degree from initial entry in community colleges has more to do with time to degree than anything else. Gabriner (1998) explained, "The longer the student takes to finish up their transfer requirements, the greater the likelihood that

circumstances in their personal lives may arise that prevent them from finishing school" (p. 12). Overall, the path to the baccalaureate for a transfer student is often not linear. They are subject to many detours and delays, which can adversely affect degree attainment.

Conceptual Frameworks and Theoretical Perspectives

Not only do we need to know about community colleges and transfer students, but also about retention and attrition of college students in general. Many researchers have developed theories to study student persistence (staying in college) and attrition (dropping out of college). Theories are often used to help explain social phenomena. Having a theoretical perspective is important to guide research design. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) asserted, "Theory-free studies offer little in the way of systematic understanding, and single-paradigm research restricts the range of analytical vision and the depth and validity of understanding" (p. 631). It is important to provide serious conceptual underpinnings to guide research design, participant selection, and analytical procedures.

Conceptual Frameworks

Astin's I-E-O Model

Astin (2002) developed the input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model for institutional researchers to use as a guide for assessing desired outcomes. This model is a good way to study student outcomes and explain the relationships among the variables. To adequately and thoroughly assess an outcome, one must first gain an understanding of the inputs and environmental factors that could possibly affect results (Astin, 2002). Student inputs can include cognitive functioning (e.g., GPA, test scores), aspirations, attitudes, behaviors, and background characteristics. Astin stressed that inputs are related to environmental and output measures, so they must be controlled when conducting quantitative analyses.

The environment encompasses everything that happens to a student during the course of an educational program that might conceivably influence the outcomes under consideration. Astin (2002) argued that the environmental assessment is the most difficult, complex, and neglected of assessment types. Assessing the environment in a study involves the identification and quantification of external circumstances and events.

Outcomes pertain to the end product of what is being studied, also termed the dependent variable in quantitative studies. Astin (2002) defined outcomes as "aspects of the student's development that the institution either does influence or attempts to influence through its educational programs and practices" (p. 38). The decision to choose certain outcomes becomes a values judgment. For instance, one indicator of the value placed on degree attainment in U.S. higher education is the amount of literature dedicated to examining this particular educational outcome (Astin).

Astin (2002) cautioned about the incomplete use of the I-E-O model in assessment studies. Conducting outcome-only, environment-outcome, or input-outcome studies only tell part of the story. One can draw meaningful conclusions about a phenomenon only when outcomes are evaluated in relation to both inputs and environments. Although Astin's model was initially developed to use in quasi-experimental research, the I-E-O perspective provides a sound conceptual framework to guide this study.

To fully understand an outcome, such as degree attainment, one must first examine the related inputs and environmental factors. Student inputs such as background characteristics, aspirations, and motivation all play an important role in degree attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition to background characteristics, others have stressed that an institutional effect does occur and influences degree attainment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005;

Strange & Banning, 2001). There are many theories designed to explain the various environmental factors associated with student persistence. Strauss and Volkwein (2002) described two different perspectives pertaining to institutional effects (i.e., environment) on student outcomes: campus climate and organizational characteristics.

Campus Climate

One environmental variable in student retention includes the campus climate and its relationship to student learning and adjustment. A welcoming environment is conducive to students feeling included and will likely contribute to their engagement in learning and academic success, which leads to increased retention. A community college or four-year university, like any organization, strives for a sense of belonging among its campus community and perpetuates this desire through its campus culture. Strange and Banning (2001) asserted, “The conceptual link between safety and inclusion is that the lack of either can create a potentially hostile environment for the activities of personal development and learning” (p. 115).

Campus climate is particularly important for students of underrepresented groups, as they often experience prejudice and discrimination that contributes to feeling isolated in their academic environments. For instance, many researchers have attributed the lack of retention of students of color to an unwelcoming campus environment (Carter, 2001; Hurtado, 1992, 1994; McNairy, 1996; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Sedlacek, 1989). Incorporating an inclusive and safe environment is particularly important at community colleges, given the multicultural populations they serve. Strange and Banning (2001) stated, “The essential challenge in the achievement of campus safety and inclusion is the fact that those who share the dominant characteristics are more likely to feel safe and included, while those whose characteristics differ may be at risk” (p.

122). Therefore, the authors stressed that developing a safe campus climate will precede the development of community.

Saunders and Bauer (1998) discussed many elements of campus climate and stressed how crucial it is for administrators to understand the various student needs and expectations to maximize the chances for positive college experiences. The authors specifically addressed community college climates and observed that with the vast diversity of students and their reasons for attending, these students experience different aspects of campus. The community college campus climate becomes very complex. Holland (1973) also discussed the individualized nature of campus climates and argued that environments are transmitted through its members and are partially a function of the collective characteristics of the individuals who inhabit it. In the case of community college transfer students, to maximize their chances of persisting to a baccalaureate degree, they need to be able to function in an environment that is conducive to their success (Zamani, 2001). There is general agreement that creating an affirming campus climate for all students is a major factor in successful student outcomes (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

Organizational Characteristics

A second group of perspectives involve the influences of organizational characteristics in student success. Researchers studying different institutional types noticed that mission, size, wealth, and selectivity can exert significant influences on a variety of student outcomes (Berger & Milem, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strange & Banning, 2001; Strauss & Volkwein, 2002). Chickering (1969) asserted that institutional objectives and institutional size can either enhance or diminish student development. Chickering and Reisser (1993) argued that as the size of the institution increases, so does the redundancy (i.e., number of persons exceeds number of

opportunities to participate), which decreases individual participation and satisfaction, thus hindering student development. For community college students, it could be that the intent for community college administrators to be deliberate in providing support for transfer student success is blurred by the varied institutional objectives. In addition, the increased redundancy found at four-year institutions most likely contributes to the adjustment issues transfer students face and could adversely affect their persistence.

Berger and Milem (2000) concluded that an array of organizational features and behaviors influence student outcomes. The authors described many institutional dimensions, including bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic and argued that colleges are multidimensional. In synthesizing many studies that examined the relationship between organizational behavior and degree attainment, Berger and Milem concluded that highly bureaucratic institutions yielded higher attrition rates. In addition, humanistic administration was positively correlated to retention. The authors asserted that a hierarchical approach to administration (a variant of the bureaucratic dimension) leads to an abated concern for students, which increases attrition.

Astin's I-E-O model and subsequent examples of environmental factors influencing persistence are useful in providing a framework for this study. To examine why community college transfer students persisted to a bachelor's degree (i.e., an outcome), it is first important to explore their background and attitudes (i.e., inputs) in the context of the institutions (i.e., environments) they attended.

Theoretical Perspectives

In addition to conceptual frameworks, theories are also useful in designing research. One common theoretical perspective pertaining to student retention is student-institution fit. This

perspective asserts that student growth and persistence largely depends on the degree of student social and academic integration (Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993), and involvement and effort (Astin, 1984; Pace, 1984). These models attempt to explain the factors that affect college students' decisions to persist or withdraw.

Spady's Model

Spady's (1970, 1971) model is based on Durkheim's (1951, as cited in Spady, 1970) theory of suicide. According to Spady, Durkheim's model suggested that suicide is a result of a person breaking ties with the social system because of a lack of integration into society. Spady figured that these same types of integration directly affect student persistence or withdrawal. He argued that dropping out of college is a result of a student not becoming integrated into the institutional environment. In applying his model to 683 first-year students at the University of Chicago in 1965, Spady (1971) found that grade performance was the primary determinant of dropouts for men and general commitment to the institution was the primary determinant of dropouts for women. Overall, Spady argued that family experiences and normative orientations (i.e., the extent to which a student's disposition is in line with the institution's expectations), also play a direct role in the dropout process. Spady concluded, "It is clear from our findings that the intrinsically rewarding aspects of these activities, plus the establishment of personal contacts with faculty as well as peers, are fundamental components of student integration, satisfaction, and commitment" (p. 62).

Tinto's Model

Tinto (1975) expanded on Spady's retention model by applying the exchange theory to Durkheim's theory of suicide. The exchange theory is based loosely on the concept that people will avoid punishment and seek rewards through elevated statuses, relationships, interactions,

and emotional states. Tinto argued that if the perceived benefits of college are higher than the costs, the student remains in school; if other activities are perceived as having higher rewards and lower costs, the student will decide to leave. Tinto identified three areas that are instrumental in student retention: student entry characteristics (socioeconomic status, race, gender, high school GPA); academic integration (college GPA); and social integration (peer group association, co-curricular activities, interactions with faculty).

Tinto's model also assumes that environmental variables are more important than academic variables. For instance, if the academic variables are positive and the environmental variables are negative, the student will leave. But, if the academic variables are negative and the environmental variables are positive, the student will remain. He gave the example that even if students earn good grades (academic variable), if there is not a means to pay for college (environmental variable), they will leave. Overall, Tinto's model of student departure has been used as the grounding theoretical perspective in much of the leading research regarding student persistence and attrition (Andres & Carpenter, 1997).

Astin's Model

In Tinto's (1993) later work on student departure, he acknowledged the importance of student involvement and effort and credited the works of Astin (1984) and Pace (1984). Among other things, Astin's theory of student involvement was developed as a means to clarify much of the apparently confusing empirical data that existed about environmental effects on student development. Astin defined involvement as, "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). This theory of student involvement is rooted in Astin's longitudinal study of college dropouts. Astin noted that factors that contributed to students staying in college were related to involvement, whereas factors that

negatively affected retention were related to lack of involvement. Overall, Astin stressed that factors that positively affected persistence included: living on campus, participating in co-curricular activities, sports, ROTC, honors programs, research projects, and working a part-time job.

Pace's Model

Astin (1984) argued that the concept of involvement has much to do with the concept of effort, with the difference being that effort is narrower in scope. Pace (1984) based his theoretical foundations on effort. He developed the Quality of Student Effort scale that records the extent to which students engage in higher level activities normally associated with "serious" (i.e., highly motivated) students. From his work, Pace argued that quality of student effort is more closely related to academic outcomes than are student background characteristics. In explaining Pace's model, Tinto (1993) stated, "A basic assumption of Pace's work is that what a student gets out of college depends not only on what the college does but also on the degree and quality of effort the student puts into the college" (p. 70). In other words, Pace argues that it does not matter as much where students attend college, but rather on what they do once enrolled. Both Astin's and Pace's theories are important because they advocate that the more students invest in learning, the more they learn; the more students learn, the better their academic performance; and the better their academic performance, the better their chance to persist to a degree.

Criticisms of Models

With extensive research comes criticism. One criticism of the student-institution fit models presented is that they were constructed at a time when the majority of college students were White, male, affluent, and aged 18-24. Hence, they do not reflect the demographics of today's students (Andres & Carpenter, 1997). The majority of the literature pertaining to student

departure is based on attrition at four-year institutions. Tinto's (1975) interactionalist theory has served as the framework for much empirical research that it has reached "near-paradigmatic status" (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Tinto (1982) acknowledged weaknesses in his student departure model in four main areas: a) not accounting for the role of finances in student disengagement; b) not distinguishing between permanent withdrawal and transfer to another institution; c) not accounting for experiences for specific groups of students; and d) not being sensitive to the unique circumstances in the two-year college sector. Additionally, Mohammadi (1994) argued that Tinto's theory was limited in explaining external community forces on student departure and therefore was not suited to study student attrition at commuter (both four-year and two-year) institutions.

Non-Traditional Student Models

Tinto's (1975) theory has been incorporated in several studies examining non-traditional students. Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a non-traditional student attrition model; Stahl and Pavel (1992) developed a community college student attrition model based on Bean and Metzner's model; and, Wolfe (1993) incorporated Tinto's model on commuter students. All three models support the concept of social and academic integration. These models, however, suggest that for non-traditional students, internal social variables (e.g., peer group association, faculty interaction), have a minimal effect on retention. The non-traditional student attrition models indicate that external social variables, such as family and work obligations, have a much greater impact on retention than internal social variables.

Summary

Research pertaining to the experiences of community college students is limited compared to studies of students attending four-year institutions. Bailey and Alfonso (2005)

asserted, “It is an interesting point that researchers . . . continue to neglect a sector of higher education that enrolls nearly half of all undergraduates and even larger percentages of underserved students” (p. 26). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) stressed a need to study two-year institutions. They argued, “Given that community colleges and other institutions that do not grant the baccalaureate degree enroll more than 40 percent of the students in America’s colleges and universities, this line of research too should continue and expand” (p. 631). Although Pascarella and Terenzini observed that higher education research is dominated by four-year institutional studies, they indicated that the trend is changing in favor of community college research. Nevertheless, the historical lack of attention paid to community colleges and the growing number of undergraduates who enroll in more than one institution (Adelman, 2005) warrant more study into the effects these institutions have on student experiences.

Community colleges are criticized for their attrition rates compared to four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). As a result, community colleges are being urged more strongly by state legislators and their communities to increase student outcomes (Bailey & Alfonzo, 2005). Community college administrators are pressed to raise transfer rates and have a vested interest in students persisting to a bachelor’s degree. They seek to understand what is happening to the students and call for means to measure and track student success.

There is still much to learn about this sub-population and to better support transfer students, we need to better understand them. Research indicates that community college transfer students do not attain bachelor’s degrees at the same rate as native students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Community college students endure many challenges to earning the baccalaureate, including persisting through the community college, navigating through the transfer process, and acclimating to the four-year institution. Theories pertaining to student

retention and attrition indicate that a student's background characteristics are most influential in predicting student outcomes. Researchers also argue that an institutional effect occurs with community college transfer students that influences retention (Dougherty, 1992). There is much to be gained in the study of student retention in higher education and the research is far from complete on this topic. A gap in the literature exists pertaining to the experiences of transfer students from the time they entered community colleges through their baccalaureate institutions; this study is design to help fill that void

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The transfer process is a complex phenomenon with varying factors influencing transfer student success. There is a need to gain a holistic perspective on the experiences of community college students who are near completion of a bachelor's degree. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore factors that helped community college transfer students complete a bachelor's degree. This study was qualitative in nature and specifically incorporated a phenomenological approach in the research design. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research design that focuses on capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon (Patton, 2002). I was interested in studying college seniors who shared a common experience: they began their postsecondary education at a community college. Because these seniors were all community college transfer students, a phenomenological methodology was appropriate for the purpose of this study.

Data Collection

The participants recruited for this study were students at Bowling Green State University (BGSU). BGSU is a mid-size (21,000 students), largely residential, research-intensive, public four-year university located in northwest Ohio. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was utilized for this study. I specifically was interested in BGSU seniors (i.e., had at least 92 credit hours earned) and who also had been identified by the registrar's office as having accumulated at least 30 credit hours at a community college post-high school graduation. College seniors rather than graduates were chosen based on their availability and access, which are important considerations in qualitative research. Their stories were also very recent, aiding in recall of memories. It can also be argued that college seniors who are within a semester or two of graduating are "success stories."

The Office of Institutional Research (IR) at BGSU identified students who satisfied the above criteria in the Spring 2007 semester (N=700). IR provided a list of names (in batches of 25), proportionately stratified by matriculation date and full-time/part-time enrollment status. The list also included race, gender, age, transfer credit hours, high school graduation year, and contact information. Because background information such as enrollment status, age, race, and gender may influence persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), I wanted to vary the participant sample as much as possible, hence the reason for the stratified sampling.

Potential participants were contacted via a letter inviting them to be involved in this study (see Appendix A) and offered a $50 cash incentive for participation. This mailing included an information sheet (see Appendix B) asking the students to indicate if they were willing to participate in the study and, if so, to provide some background information, phone numbers, and an email address. I sent one follow-up email to the students who did not respond.

Of the first batch of 25 names I was provided by IR, nine responded, eight of whom agreed to participate. The remaining 16 students did not reply to either the initial or follow-up invitation. Of the eight who agreed to participate, seven were interviewed. One student who responded positively did not follow up for an interview after repeated communication attempts via phone and email. I requested a second batch of 25 names from IR and three responded and were interviewed. At this point, I had 10 participants, seven of whom were male and only one was a student of color. I requested a third batch of 25 names who were all female students of color and a fourth batch of 25 names who were all male students of color to diversify the sample by race and gender. Of this batch containing names of female students of color, four students responded, and two were interviewed. One student did not follow through in arranging an

interview and the other was in Mexico for study abroad, making it not feasible to conduct a face-to-face interview.

At this point, there were 12 participants, three of whom were Latino. In another attempt to diversify the group racially, I then tried to recruit African American students specifically (regardless of gender), so from the fourth batch of names, I sent letters to the African American students only (seven total in this batch). I did not get any response, even after repeated email attempts. I requested a fifth batch asking for African American students only and there were nine remaining in the original sample, so I sent a letter to all of them. From this final batch, two students responded. One was an international student who attended a community college for only one semester, so he did not meet the criteria for participation. The other student was interviewed. Overall, I contacted a total of 91 students, resulting in 13 participants. Of the 78 students who were contacted but either did not respond or declined to participate, 32 were male, 46 were female, 43 were students of color, 20 were enrolled part-time, and their age ranged from 20-53 (mean = 27). After about the ninth interview, the data generated reached a point of saturation (Patton, 2002), but because I wanted a more racially diverse sample, I continued to the thirteenth interview.

Individual interviews constituted the main source of data for this study. An interview-based approach allows for participants to describe how they have experienced a phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). I conducted semi-structured interviews and used an interview guide (see Appendix C) for direction. Core interview questions were complemented by probing questions to add depth and detail to the participants' responses. The interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and all interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for analysis. In addition to

interviews, I also reviewed academic transcripts from 12 participants who granted me permission.

Prior to the start of data collection, I conducted three pilot interviews with students who have obtained a bachelor's degree and were community college transfer students to determine if my questions yielded the information that would best inform my research questions. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. After conducting those interviews and consulting my advisor, parts of the interview guide were redesigned.

At the beginning of the first interview meeting, all participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix D). Because I wished to gain a holistic perspective on the transfer student experience, I asked questions pertaining to the participants' experiences at both the community college and BGSU. I asked questions about what they experienced during the pre-transfer, point-of-transfer, and post-transfer phases of their postsecondary tenure to gauge if they encountered problems identified in the research and also to gain a sense of how they overcame those challenges to persist in college. I met with each participant twice. The first meeting was to conduct the interview and the second meeting was to allow for any follow-up questions. I also had the participants review and respond to their interview transcripts, profile, and a summary of the findings (i.e., member checking) during this second meeting.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was informed by the works of Patton (2002) and Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). Data must first be described before they can be interpreted (Patton, 2002). Therefore, the first stage of data analysis included capturing the essence of what it means to be a transfer student. From the interviews, I created a narrative to retell each participant's story. Data analysis in qualitative research is about gaining the emic perspective, or the voice of the informant. In the

profiles I bridged my research concerns with the participants' subjective experiences (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Data analysis also includes interpretation. The process includes: raw text, relevant text, repeating ideas, and themes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). From the interview transcripts, I extracted the relevant text by reading the raw text with my research concerns in mind (i.e., What does it mean to be a successful transfer student?). I then examined the relevant text to find any repeating ideas and grouped them together with an identifying label or code (i.e., open coding). All of the relevant text was coded manually. From the repeating ideas, I then reduced related repeating ideas to general themes, which are presented in Chapter Four. From these theoretical constructs, significance can be determined and conclusions drawn; these are presented in Chapter Five.

Measures of Quality

For this study, I followed the advice of Lincoln and Guba (1985) related to trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is about whether the outside community would think that the findings generated from a naturalistic inquiry are valid. Authenticity focuses on the extent to which the participants' multiple constructions of reality are represented in the data analysis and interpretation (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Trustworthiness

Specifically, trustworthiness can be described as establishing whether the story generated is credible, the details are explicit enough so that the case study is *transferable* (i.e., people can relate to what is presented), the data are *dependable*, and the data can be *confirmed* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The transfer students' stories presented in this study are credible because I met with the participants twice to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. My goal was to

present each student's story in such detail (i.e., thick description) that a stranger could gain a sense of being a transfer student, hence making the data transferable. The data are dependable because I documented my own constructions through a log that provided an audit trail of my findings. Lastly, I confirmed the data by allowing participants the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interviews and their profile, and to edit as they deemed necessary (i.e., member checking).

Gaining credibility in qualitative research also involves peer debriefing and triangulation (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In peer debriefing, the researcher invites other professionals who are familiar with the nature of the study to review the constructions being presented and provide feedback (Erlandson et al., 1993). For this study, I conducted peer debriefing with colleagues who were familiar with qualitative research methods and the transfer student phenomena. I had them review all interview transcripts to verify that I was drawing conclusions from an emic perspective. Triangulation, on the other hand, is about collecting and analyzing data from various points of view (Erlandson et al., 1993). Patton (2002) described four types of triangulation: triangulation of methods, triangulation of sources, analyst triangulation, and theory triangulation. For this study, I incorporated an analyst triangulation through peer debriefing and theory triangulation in that I used a variety of theories pertaining to student success to interpret the data.

Authenticity

For this study, authenticity was attained through fairness, educative authenticity (participants not only learn their construction of a phenomenon, but others' as well), and ontological authenticity (participants develop improved construction). Fairness is about getting

all “sides” to a story (Patton, 2002). Authenticity is about raising awareness regarding one’s construction.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) defined fairness as “the extent to which different constructions and their underlying value structure are solicited and honored within the evaluation process” (p. 245). Maintaining fairness in this study involved remaining neutral throughout the data collection and analysis process. Before I began this study, I logged what I thought I would find so that I could recognize my own pre-judgments and account for them as I was collecting information from the participants (i.e., progressive subjectivity). I remained open and honest with the participants and allowed them every opportunity to react to their comments through member-checking. I provided an appeal mechanism in which they could contact my advisor or the Human Subjects Review Board of BGSU if they felt that the process was compromised (see Appendix D). None did so.

I obtained educative and ontological authenticity because I had all participants read my findings so that they not only gained a sense of understanding of their situation, but other transfer students’ as well. This was evident from their reactions to the summary of findings. Several commented that it felt good for them to not be alone in their thoughts and feelings about being a transfer student. From what they revealed during the second meeting, it was clear that the participants also gained a heightened understanding of their own experiences of being a transfer student.

Participant Safeguards

Although the risks of this study were minimal, thoughts and emotions played a significant role, which caused discomfort for some participants. Before I started each interview, I ensured

that the participants understood the risks involved and reassured them that they could exit the process at any time and could retract anything they told me without penalty or explanation.

I adhered to the guidelines provided by the Human Subjects Review Board of BGSU and completed the training required. I maintained confidentiality of the participants by keeping personally identifiable information in a locked cabinet. I used pseudonyms throughout the study and omitted any information in the results and discussion that might increase the chance identification of participants.

Researcher's Background

Because qualitative research intimately engages the human instrument, it is important to discuss the qualifications of the researcher. My experiences, both as a full-time professional at Purdue University and as a doctoral student in higher education administration at BGSU, adequately prepared me to conduct qualitative research.

At BGSU, I completed a course in qualitative inquiry and conducted two separate case studies that involved interviews, member checking, and analyzing transcripts for themes. There have been several other instances in which I have incorporated a qualitative approach to applied research. For instance, while at Purdue, I conducted program reviews on a couple of occasions. Program reviews involved interviewing key stakeholders, observing office interactions, and analyzing documents (e.g., annual reports) to determine strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the organization. Because of my experience in drafting case studies and conducting program reviews in vastly different office environments, I was capable of examining this research problem with a qualitative lens.

It is important for researchers to be aware of their subjectivity in qualitative study (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Patton, 2002). A goal in

quantitative research is to remove the subjectivity as much as possible; a goal in qualitative research is to identify the subjectivity so that it is no longer concealed. Guba and Lincoln (1989) asserted that inquirers need to "come clean" about their own predispositions and rely on acquired knowledge and peer reviews to expose any biases. A pre-judgment I had was related to community colleges in that I thought they were inferior to four-year institutions. I was never a transfer student, so I do not know what that experience was like. In some respects, I think not being a transfer student helped in this study because I rarely fell into the trap of assuming an understanding of the phenomenon.

Limitations

There are important limitations worth noting in this study. The participants' stories reflected here cannot be representative of the perceptions or experiences of all community college transfer students. Despite active efforts to secure their participation, only four of the 13 participants were students of color, which made it difficult to adequately compare experiences based on ethnicity. Furthermore, the transfer student phenomenon was examined through the perspectives of students only. Interviewing faculty and academic advisors, who could also inform about the transfer student phenomenon, was outside the scope of this study. Lastly, because all participants were students enrolled at a mid-sized, regional state university, findings and conclusions may have limited application in other institutional settings.

Summary

All of qualitative methodology is in the interest of raising consciousness. This methodology was chosen based on the belief that the students' experiences could be best understood by discussing, questioning, and analyzing their individual recollections and searching for common themes among their experiences. With this study, I was not trying to claim any

cause-effect relationships from the data. I was, however, trying to inform practice about the experiences of a group of college seniors who experienced a common phenomenon (i.e., being a transfer student). From the methodology incorporated in this study, the results contributed to the overall knowledge base about transfer student success and particularly about the importance of access to higher education via community colleges.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

In this chapter, data including interview transcripts, academic transcripts, and reflection are analyzed. To begin, a brief profile of each participant is presented. Following that, the chapter is organized in response to the central research question and subsequent support questions pertaining to experiences that lead to success in attaining a baccalaureate degree. From the data analysis, several themes emerged and are presented in the following sections as they relate to each supporting question.

Participant Profiles

Thirteen seniors or recent graduates who transferred from a community college to BGSU were interviewed for this study. As shown in Table 1, seven participants were male and six were female. Their ages ranged from 22 to 43 (mean = 27). The majority were Caucasian, while three were Latino and one was African American. Seven were first-generation college students, defined here as neither parent earning a college degree. Five reported coming from low-income backgrounds. They attended seven different community colleges located in Ohio. Four participants had attended two or more colleges before matriculating at BGSU. While at BGSU five participants were enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences, four in the College of Education and Human Development, two in the College of Technology, one in the College of Health and Human Services, and one in the College of Business. The average duration at the community college was 2.5 years with a range of 1-6 years. The average duration at BGSU was three years, with a range of 1.5-4.5 years. Five students graduated in December 2007. Five expected to graduate in May 2008, one in August 2008 and two in 2009. Among the 12 participants who granted me permission to review their transcripts, the average community

college GPA was 3.12 and the average BGSU GPA was 3.23. Only one of the students experienced a transfer shock in their GPA after the first semester at BGSU.

Table 1

Background Information on Study Participants

Name[a]	Age	Gender	Race[b]	1st-Gen?[c]	Enrollment[d]	Graduation Date	Reported Income Level
Angela	29	F	L	Yes	Mixed	12/07	Middle
Dwight	42	M	C	Yes	Mixed	05/08	Low
Jan	22	F	C	No	Full-time	12/07	Middle
Jim	23	M	C	Yes	Full-time	05/08	Low
Kelly	43	F	AA	Yes	Part-time	12/07	Low
Kevin	23	M	C	No	Full-time	05/08	Low
Meredith	21	F	L	Yes	Full-time	05/08	Low
Oscar	36	M	L	No	Part-time	2009	Middle
Pam	23	F	C	No	Full-time	08/08	Middle
Phyllis	22	F	C	No	Full-time	05/08	Middle
Roy	24	M	C	Yes	Full-time	12/07	Middle
Stanley	22	M	C	No	Full-time	05/09	Middle
Toby	24	M	C	Yes	Full-time	12/07	Middle

[a] All names are pseudonyms

[b] AA = African American; C = Caucasian; L = Latina/o

[c] Was participant a first generation student?

[d] Enrollment status at community college and university

Angela – "Like a Prayer"

Angela was an "overachiever' growing up, graduating from high school a year early. She tried the traditional route of going to a four-year institution right after high school, but that did not work out. She was not emotionally ready to go to college and her parents had split up, which caused tremendous turmoil and pain for her. Being the first person in her family to attend college meant that Angela was entering an alien world. She did not know about college processes, such as registration, withdrawing from classes, and financial aid. She also was hesitant to seek help and she really did not know where to turn. She dropped out.

Angela took a break from college and worked various "odd jobs". She worked in factories and hated the physical labor, often coming home crying. She would pray about gaining the strength to continue. After working three years, she knew she was "too smart to work this kind of work" and wanted to return to school. Her mother and grandmother were a big influence on Angela, pushing her to get an education. This time around, she decided to attend a medium-sized, public, rural-serving community college.

While at the community college, Angela found a major she really liked. She discovered that she enjoyed working with children. She was initially content with getting an associate's degree. However, discovering that she could only teach Pre-kindergarten with an associate's degree and her current job required that she have a bachelor's degree, she transferred to BGSU.

Angela always worked a mixture of full-time and part-time while going to school. She struggled to find courses offered at times that catered to her work schedule. Her scheduling woes delayed graduation, which frustrated Angela. Again, she prayed for the strength to make it through. She survived college and graduated in December 2007. She moved to Florida to work

for a non-profit organization designed to help children. Angela is now where she wants to be—living near family and working with children. It seems like her prayers have been answered.

Dwight – "Choosing Sides of the Law"

Born in a working class family, Dwight was not a strong student and nothing beyond high school was expected of him in terms of education. He got in trouble a lot as a youth and after high school, followed in his dad's footsteps to work in an automotive factory. After 17 years in the plant, Dwight decided he needed a change because he knew he could not endure the physical demands of his job for much longer. With neither parent earning a college degree, the thought of going back to school terrified him. With the encouragement of his sister who had a college degree, Dwight decided to "get his feet wet" and enrolled at a small, public, rural-serving community college.

From the beginning of his college pursuits, Dwight knew he wanted to go to law school. Although his family members certainly were influential in his vocational choice, it was the interactions he had with a judge during his deviant youth that helped him to pick a career in law. This judge had a frank discussion with him and told him to shape up or go to jail. Because Dwight had been on the "wrong side" of the law, he felt he could empathize with clients and help them.

Being back in the classroom after 17 years meant that Dwight was often one of the oldest students. He repeatedly was mistaken for the instructor when he walked into class and age became very salient to Dwight while going to college. Things got better as he got to know the students and they did not seem to care that he was older. The more classes Dwight took, the more he got comfortable with the academic routine.

Overall, Dwight was pleased with his educational path. It had been worth it. He had a lot of support from his family and was also motivated by the people who did not have faith in him during his early years. He will reach his goals and graduate in May 2008—just in time to face the judge on the "right side" of the bench for a change.

Jan – "Teacher in Waiting"

Jan was the youngest of four in her family and knew that education was important because she always had to make sure her homework was done. She also knew that she would go to college. Her dad went to a university and her mom took a few classes at a community college. Jan's older siblings also went to college. So, college was expected of her.

Family was very important to Jan. Her oldest brother was a strong influence and became a role model. Although Jan looked at a variety of colleges and universities, she chose to attend a small, public, suburban-serving community college to be close to home. She was not emotionally ready to separate herself from her family. She was also offered a scholarship because of her high marks while in high school, which made her decision to enroll that much easier.

She attended the community college for only one year because her academic advisor suggested she get started right away in taking classes at a four-year university. BGSU had a good reputation, so Jan transferred there. At first, Jan thought the experience of moving away from home would be scary, but she adjusted fairly quickly and started to enjoy the freedom.

Jan always wanted to become a teacher. Although she struggled throughout grade school, she really liked school. She particularly liked her 5th grade teacher, who later became a mentor to her. Jan was quite pleased with her educational path. Her love of learning helped her persevere through two different institutions. Going to college was probably the best decision Jan had made. She worked really hard to reach graduation in December 2007 and that made her proud.

Jim – "From Football Star to Bookworm"

A first-generation student, Jim was the only one in his family to go to college. He came from a working class background and grew up in a rural area. His parents divorced when he was three. His mother remarried and Jim lived with his mom and stepfather for most of his youth. Jim's parents believed it was important for their children to get an education. Additionally, Jim saw the importance of taking education seriously because he readily observed his parents' hardships trying to make ends meet. He was a good student through the sixth grade, but then because of stresses in the household related to being poor, his grades sank. Jim's grades rebounded in the eighth grade following encouragement from a teacher. He also played football in high school and that motivated him to get good grades.

After high school, Jim did consider some four-year schools. He had a chance to play football at a NCAA Division II school, but did not receive a full scholarship. After much thought, Jim decided to stay near home and commute to a small, public, suburban-serving community college because he did not want to burden his parents with tuition bills.

Now that Jim knew sports were over, he decided that he wanted to become a teacher. He had a government teacher during his senior year in high school who was very influential. He liked the idea that he could possibly change lives in his profession. Jim got a great sense of satisfaction knowing the kind of impact he could have on future generations, which motivated him to push forward and realize his dream.

After being at the community college for two years, Jim transferred to BGSU. Like Jan, he was anxious to become a teacher. Jim was unsure where his vocational path would lead him, but he could not wait to be done. The future may include a master's degree or even a Ph.D.

Wherever he ends up with his teaching degree in May 2008, Jim wants to make his parents proud because they were very supportive of him.

Kelly – "Satisfying a Hunger"

To say that Kelly came from humble beginnings, is a gross understatement. Growing up, her home environment was desolate, even dangerous. She passed by drug dealers and prostitutes on her way to school and even witnessed a murder in her own home. Her mother did the best that she could, raising five children alone. In her home, education was the furthest from anyone's mind. The biggest concern was eating and having a place to live. Yet, Kelly was a good student, so good that a teacher took a personal interest in her and encouraged her to apply to a college prep school. She took three buses everyday to get there. Kelly was the first in her family to graduate high school.

After graduation, Kelly needed to escape her home environment. She was always in search of something better. She knew there was more to life than what she had experienced. She felt a higher power wanted her to be somewhere else and she needed to follow that path. Kelly always had the goal of earning a master's degree. Not being able to afford college, she joined the military. After the military, she enrolled at a regional university in the Southwest, but she got into drugs and hung out with the wrong crowd, resulting in her dropping out. She was still running away from her past.

After several years in a lucrative career that included illegal activity, Kelly wanted to legitimize herself. She decided to get a nursing degree and enrolled at a medium-sized, public, rural-serving community college. She is one of only two students in this study who enrolled at both the community college and BGSU completely part-time while working full-time. After

getting her associate's degree, Kelly was "still hungry." She felt she needed to continue on the path God had created for her. She wanted a bachelor's degree and transferred to BGSU.

Kelly did not always make the right choices in life and had a rough start, to say the least. She is not running from her past anymore and has learned to accept it by rejecting excuses. After graduating from BGSU in December 2007, she often wondered how she overcame such insurmountable odds to get where she is today. Kelly no longer asks "why me" of God, but rather "why not me?" She makes her own path now.

Kevin – "Engineered for Success"

Kevin was the oldest of four children. Growing up in a low-income household, he felt like there was not much emphasis placed on going to college from his parents. His dad drove semi-trucks and his mom was a receptionist at a hospital. Kevin was not the first one in his family to go to college, as both his parents attended a two-year institution. His mom received an associate's degree from a technical school, but his dad dropped out of the local community college.

Kevin considered himself an average student while growing up. He was not crazy about the idea of going to college because it sounded like it would not pay off. College was expensive and he witnessed several people getting college degrees, only to return to working in factories. He knew, however, that he wanted to do better than his parents. Initially, Kevin thought he could go to a four-year university on a varsity track scholarship. Unfortunately, Kevin suffered an injury during his senior year in high school and the scholarship offers did not materialize. As a result, he decided to attend a small, public, rural-serving community college. He was not sure what to major in at first, but he liked technology and computers, so he thought he would try that out. He really liked it and has continued in the area of computer technology ever since.

Kevin always did just enough to "squeak by" regarding grades. However, the idea of doing the bare minimum in classes changed while at BGSU. From talking with fellow students and employers, he realized that a high GPA would open doors for more opportunities, so he started to care about getting good grades. If employers used GPA as criteria for interviews, then Kevin wanted to have a chance.

Although there had been times when he wanted to just give up and work full-time in a factory, Kevin persevered. He knew it would be worth it in the end. One of his younger sisters was following in Kevin's footsteps and enrolled at BGSU, which made him proud. Kevin did not regret going to a community college first and was not sure if he was ready to enter a four-year university right after high school. He felt that the community college helped him to prepare for the rigors of the university. Where he goes from this point, he does not know, but Kevin is confident that his degree that he will earn in May 2008 will get him to where he wants to be.

Meredith – "Late Bloomer"

Meredith came from humble beginnings. Her mother never graduated from college and her father never went to college. She saw first-hand the struggles they endured trying to make ends meet without college degrees. An only child, she received Catholic schooling during her primary education years. Meredith was a good student while growing up, until around the age of eight when her parents divorced. At that point, her grades suffered because she did not care about school anymore. Even though Meredith knew that she needed to do well in school, she just did not make any effort.

Meredith called herself a "late bloomer" because she finally started to care again about school around the 10th grade. College was always in the "plan", but she was just not sure what to

do. She wanted to go straight to BGSU from high school, and applied but was not admitted. So, Meredith felt like her only choice was a small, public, rural-serving community college.

Being a first-generation college student was a trying experience for Meredith because she had to learn to navigate an alien system on her own. However, she loved being in college, learning, and being around people who wanted to learn. She also enjoyed engaging in political conversations with students and faculty, something she never experienced in high school. Meredith transferred to BGSU as a business major, which she had reservations about because her heart was not in it. She was really torn about whether to change majors at this point in her college career. After much contemplating, Meredith eventually did change majors and pursued a degree in liberal studies.

Meredith was a woman with strong coping skills and a solid sense of independence. She developed the skill of getting out of "bad spots." Even to her own amazement, she overcame personal challenges and will reach graduation in May 2008. Meredith is not sure what the future holds for her. If her past behavior is any indication of her future behavior, with all she had overcome to succeed, her future looks bright.

Oscar – "Finish What You Start"

Born into a middle-income household, Oscar was the only one of his three siblings to go to college and get a degree. His parents and the father of a close friend had influenced him to get a degree. Oscar's mother did not finish high school and his dad had a bachelor's degree from BGSU. Hoping to make it big in the music industry, Oscar played in a band since ninth grade and continued beyond high school. Eighteen months after graduating high school, however, Oscar realized that he needed to give up the dream and do something else. He had a wife and a baby boy, so he knew he needed something more financially stable. He decided to enroll at a

small, public, rural-serving community college. He spoke with a dean at the college who helped him pick a major. He decided on electronics.

Oscar was excited to finally be a college student. He is the other student in this study who, throughout college, worked full-time while going to school part-time. Working, going to school, and raising a family proved to be very difficult for him. He had very little time to himself and it took him six years to complete his associate's degree. He almost did not make it. About three-quarters of the way through, he endured a personal setback when his father was killed in an auto accident. He dropped out of school and really struggled. However, with the help of a teacher at the community college and his own will to finish what he started, Oscar re-enrolled and eventually graduated with an associate's degree in general electronics.

Oscar transferred to BGSU to pursue a bachelor's degree because the plant he was working at offered an education reimbursement program. He did not want to pass up the opportunity to go to college for free. What was most salient to Oscar during his transition to BGSU was his age. He felt somewhat between a rock and a hard place because he wanted to be himself (a 36-year-old college student), but he did not want to be perceived by the other students as an old man.

Oscar was motivated to finish and complete his degree because he liked to finish what he started. He wanted to finish so that he could show his family (especially his dad in spirit), and his coworkers that he could do it. He is not sure what he wants to do once he graduates sometime in 2009. In his field, people who received bachelor's degrees typically entered management positions. He had been a part of "salary life" before and did not like it. Ideally, he wants to work in robotics and hopes to get that chance.

Pam – "Social Butterfly"

'Winners never quit, quitters never win.' This should have been Pam's motto. Quitting school was never an option for her, although she had her share of struggles. Born an only child to a mother who was a school teacher, Pam considered herself an average student. She had endured text anxiety issues all her life that persisted during her college years. She always thought she would go to college and earn a bachelor's degree. She chose to attend a large, public, urban-serving community college to be near her home and her boyfriend. Pam was not sure what she wanted to do at first, sampling a couple of majors before deciding on hospitality management. She found her niche there.

Pam was a self-starter. After she discovered her passion for the hospitality industry from a summer job at an amusement park, she initiated her newly developed educational path. She figured out where she could transfer so that she can earn a bachelor's degree in hospitality management and arranged for her financial aid. Her transition to BGSU was both exciting and scary. The social scene at BGSU was at first difficult for Pam. She felt alone because nobody knew her yet. Enrolling in January, it was hard for her to watch students embrace each other after returning from the winter break, knowing that no one would approach her. Pam decided to join a club, which helped her make connections at BGSU.

Pam's motivation to graduate was two-fold. She wanted to make her parents proud. Her father did not go to college and his work situation was a constant reminder to her that getting a bachelor's degree was a safety net. A degree in August 2008 provided her with a sense of security that her father did not have. Pam also could not wait to work in the hospitality industry. She felt fortunate to find a vocation she loved. She was excited and wanted to embark upon the next chapter of her life.

Phyllis – "Problem Solver"

Phyllis liked to solve problems. It was one of the reasons she found her niche in special education because she had the opportunity to try different things with people and she relished that flexibility. Phyllis was persistent; in that if something did not work out, she would try another tactic until she found a solution, which was another good asset to have in special education.

Born the middle child of three, Phyllis grew up in a middle-income household knowing she would go to college. Her parents placed a high importance on homework and education in general. Phyllis attended a private, Catholic prep school that would later turn out to be the best college preparation for her. Phyllis liked school and was a good student throughout her primary and secondary years. She was a quiet student, not readily participating in class, but that would all change during her college years.

Phyllis was not sure what she wanted to do first, so she started out at a large university because her sister was a student there. That did not work out and she ended up doing poorly in some of her classes. She did not like the university, so she decided she needed to transfer. She chose BGSU because of its strong reputation in education. However, she ran into a problem: her GPA. Those poor grades from her first institution had come back to haunt her and she was not eligible to transfer into BGSU right away. With the support and encouragement of her parents, particularly her father, Phyllis decided to enroll in a very large, public, urban-serving community college near her home.

It was at the community college that Phyllis began to participate in class. Teachers would continually call on her and she regained her confidence that was lost at her previous institution. She was only there for a year and then transferred. Transferring to BGSU was not particularly

difficult for Phyllis because she felt that both her high school and her first institution prepared her well for college. Phyllis liked her major and was also thinking about getting a master's degree after she graduated in May 2008. She was excited to finally have some direction in her life. She was continually reminded of her father telling her to find something she liked to do, so that life would be easier. One of life's biggest problems was working in a loathsome, dead-end job to make ends meet. Phyllis was trying to solve that problem by sticking it out in school so that she could end up doing something that she really wanted to do.

Roy – "Reformed Class Clown"

Raised by divorced parents, Roy would be the first person in his family to graduate with a bachelor's degree. He went to a Catholic high school, but did not take advantage of his education while growing up. He did not apply himself in junior high or high school and did not care about grades. Roy was the "class clown". He also was not sure what he wanted to do or study after high school. He received a golf scholarship from his high school to attend a very large, public, urban-serving community college. Roy started out as an environmental management major, but he lost his focus and flunked out during his second semester.

Roy then started working at a pizza parlor. After about a year of delivering pizzas, he began to think about his future. He realized he was in a dead-end job and needed to go back to school. He wanted to do something that he would enjoy, so he decided on aviation. Roy returned to the community college and got serious. He was no longer satisfied with mediocrity.

Roy went to BGSU because it was close to home and had a reputable aviation program. He found it much easier to get involved at BGSU than at the community college and it was more fun. He enjoyed BGSU for the most part. He was very social and liked meeting people. After being treasurer of a student organization, Roy was elected president. Finances were another issue

for Roy and nearly stopped him from continuing. He hated being in debt. The aviation major became too expensive to maintain, so he changed his major back to environmental management.

Overall, Roy had no regrets when it came to his educational path. He was not sure what the future held for him after he graduated. Maybe he would look for a job, maybe go to graduate school, maybe enlist in the Coast Guard. Roy had lived at home all through his college years. He felt like when he graduated from BGSU in December 2007, it would be graduating from high school because it would be the first time he moved away from home. Not ready for that level of independence when he graduated from high school, but he was ready to leave home.

Stanley – "Dream Chaser"

Stanley always planned on going to college. He was definitely on the "college track" during his primary and secondary school years. He was a good student, taking gifted and honors classes throughout grade school and high school. College was expected of him, primarily by his teachers, but he did not know where he wanted to go or what he wanted to do. He liked physics and math, so he decided to study mechanical engineering at a private, Baptist college. While at this college, Stanley discovered that he really did not like his major. During a college event, the speaker advocated that students should follow their deepest dreams, no matter the costs. That struck a cord with Stanley and provided him the motivation to get out of mechanical engineering.

Animation was what he liked, so he decided to major in digital arts. The college at which he began did not offer digital arts as a major, so Stanley knew he would have to leave to pursue his goal of entering the animation industry. He decided to transfer to a large, public, urban-serving community college because he remembered that this particular college offered scholarships for people from his high school with certain GPAs. He also decided that he could get an associate's degree while he was at the community college.

Stanley did not know immediately where he was going to transfer. A teacher at the community college recommended BGSU to him for digital arts. The transition to BGSU was not necessarily difficult because he was used to changing colleges by now. He enjoyed living on campus again, meeting new people, and joining clubs. Stanley felt that he did not have strong study habits. He did not have to study in high school and when he was at the community college, he would procrastinate and then rush to finish projects last minute, often at the expense of producing quality work. That habit of procrastinating remained with him at BGSU.

Overall, Stanley had been very pleased with the path he chose to get to where he is today. If he had not attended the Baptist university first, he would have never heard the speaker talk about chasing dreams. The fuzzy edges of his dream of doing animation were coming into focus and planned to graduate in May 2009. Stanley was going after what he wanted and advised others to do the same. He liked what he was doing at BGSU and understood that he needed his degree first to acquire his dream.

Toby – "Promising Author"

Education was not particularly valued in Toby's home. Raised by working class parents, his mom worked at an apartment complex and his dad was an electrician. His father definitely encouraged him to get an education so that Toby did not have to endure laborious, dangerous jobs like he did. So, going to college and getting a bachelor's degree was always in Toby's mind.

Toby had a rough grade school experience, because he was quickly thought to have a learning disability. In reality, he had a vocal disability, in that his speech was slow and slurred. His grades got better in high school, making the honor roll several times. After high school, he chose to attend a medium-sized, public, suburban-serving community college because it was close to home and his brother went there. He worked full-time while going to school during the

summers because he needed to find a way to pay for college. It was hectic, but the hard effort made it work. Toby chose classes to fulfill the associate's degree requirements, but believed that the degree limited him, as most companies required a bachelor's degree or higher.

Toby transferred to BGSU because of its cost, location, and "small college town". One of his biggest transitions to BGSU was not being home. Living in a residence hall did help him to adjust and find friends fairly quickly because he was constantly interacting with people. While the social part of college life was important, Toby made it clear that grades were more important.

Somewhere along the way, Toby changed his vocational plans. No longer did he want to become a high school teacher. He felt that the high school curriculum was very limited in its scope. Because of his dismal schooling experiences as a youth, he was very distrustful of the K-12 system. Toby would like to become a college professor so he could have more autonomy in both the curriculum and pedagogy. He thought it was important for people, especially students, to express their viewpoints freely. Therefore, he preferred the academic environment of higher education. After graduating in December 2007, he is currently working on two books, trying to get his viewpoints out into the world.

Summary

As the profiles indicated, these students came from varied backgrounds. Some had family members who went to college while others did not. They grew up in low-income and middle-income households. Education was perceived as important by parents for several participants. Most were just average students in their primary and secondary schooling, but nearly all knew they were going to college. Enrollment patterns were mixed with most enrolling full-time and several also working full-time. Oscar and Kelly finished both the community college and BGSU completely part-time. Meredith was the only participant who did not work in college. As

presented, each journey to the baccalaureate was different. Some worked full-time after high school before going back to school, others went to a four-year university first and then to a community college, and some went directly to the community college and then transferred to BGSU. At least six participants were either applying or considering applying to graduate school upon graduation. Although each path was different, the data revealed commonalities that will be discussed here.

Choosing A Community College

To answer the supporting research question of why the participants attended a community college, several themes emerged. Participants decided to enroll in a community college primarily for financial reasons, but academic issues also influenced their choices. Students chose a community college because of its low cost and close location, they felt unprepared for a university, it was a viable "plan B", and their goals were unclear at the time of initial college enrollment.

Cost and Location

The most frequent reasons cited as to why students enrolled in a community college were the low cost compared to four-year institutions and convenient location. Toby commented on his reason for choosing a community college:

> I guess I chose the one that was closest. . . . My parents recommended it to me because naturally [of the] financial constraints and it's much cheaper to start out at a community college than just going straight to the university.

The low tuition allowed many to pay for college themselves with money earned while working, or from savings and financial aid. Jim, for instance, applied to several colleges, including four-

year institutions, and was accepted at all of them. He talked about his decision to attend a community college:

> I guess the main reason why I wanted to go there is pretty much for the fact that I could pay for it myself . . . . And I decided that it was financially the best thing that I could do. So, rather than getting in the hole, I decided to go there.

Phyllis needed to attend a college that was inexpensive because her first institution, a four-year university, drained her savings. In talking about her decision to enroll at a community college, she said:

> [My parents] suggested that I do the [community college] thing. To save money. [Because] by the time I got out of [my first institution], I had nothing. Like, everything that I had saved up was gone. I had no money . . . . And I'm thinkin' what am I gonna do? . . . I'm pretty sure it was my dad that told me 'why don't you do the year at [the community college]?'

Low cost not only influenced students' decisions to attend a community college, but also to stay longer than anticipated. Many could have transferred to BGSU after one or two semesters at the community college, but continued so that they could take more courses at "community college prices." Both Meredith and Phyllis talked about needing to go to a community college to help become academically eligible to transfer to BGSU. In reflecting on her first year at the community college, Phyllis stated, "After the first semester, then my GPA was high enough that I could've transferred. But, I just stayed and went the cheap route for a year." In discussing his strategy to keep costs to a minimum, Dwight said, "I finished off everything I could as cheap as I could and then . . . [got] into the program here."

Another influential factor that pertained to cost was the availability of scholarships. Some chose a community college because they received a full scholarship. Stanley talked about his motivation to pick a particular community college:

> I knew that [the community college] gave out scholarships for people from my high school who had a certain GPA. Okay, so this is a 2-year scholarship and I'll go back there for a couple of years . . . and then transfer somewhere else.

Along with the low cost of tuition, scholarships also helped students to stay longer at the community college than anticipated. Students rationalized that free tuition was worth delaying transfer to BGSU.

Location was also a big factor in helping students choose a community college. Many lived at home while attending a community college, primarily to save money, so they wanted to attend a college close to home. Others felt the need to be near family, partners, and friends. In talking about her decision to attend a community college, Jan said, "There were a lot of colleges I considered. But I'm very close to my family and so I wanted to stick by them a little longer, I guess, be near them." Some did not feel ready to leave home and attend a four-year institution, so the thought of going to a community college nearby became an attractive option. For instance, Pam chose the community college closest to home. She said, "I wanna stay around, you know, I don't really want to go away." Older students such as Dwight (age 42) and Oscar (age 36) were settled with families of their own, so they needed to choose a college that was close to either home or work so they did not have to relocate. Although they did not have families to raise, both Angela (age 29) and Kelly (age 43) needed a college that was located close to their work because they both worked full-time while going to school part-time and did not want to give up their jobs.

Academically Unprepared

Many described themselves as "average" students, which influenced their decisions to attend a community college. Toby described himself as a "slacker" during elementary and middle school. Kevin felt his grades did not reflect his capabilities at the time. Many did not study much or care about school when they were young. Roy said, "I just kinda messed around. I was like the class clown. And didn't really care too much. So, I didn't really prepare myself for college at all."

Other students did well in school until something changed dramatically in their lives that adversely affected their grades. Jim's grades sank while he was in junior high and he attributed that to family struggles with money. Roy's grades dropped suddenly after getting involved in cliques and partying while in high school. In hindsight, he admitted, "If I would've applied myself and known what I know now, then I would've tried to get straight As." Meredith's grades suffered after a family crisis:

> Actually, I was doing really well until my parents got divorced when I was about eight. And then after that, my grades just totally went down. And then I also suffered, like a move. We moved and that whole thing. So, I really didn't do well, um, didn't really care that much about school.

For participants who experienced a significant drop in grades during their primary or secondary schooling, they found it very difficult to rebound. Meredith, for instance, discovered that her grades prevented her from enrolling in BGSU right after high school, as she was initially rejected due to her poor high school GPA.

Some struggled with particular subjects, such as English and math. Both Pam and Jan had considerable trouble grasping material when they were young. Pam, who was later diagnosed with a learning disability, talked about her struggles with school:

> I was an okay student. I don't know. I've always struggled with school. Always. It's never come easy to me. Exams are always a problem. I always do well on homework and fine on projects and things, and then it gets to the test and I just get real nervous.

It appeared that these struggles persisted throughout college. Students who struggled with certain subjects when they were young had to work harder in those same subjects at both the community college and BGSU.

Because the students either struggled in their secondary schooling or did not apply themselves, the community college became an attractive option. In addition, some felt their high school did not adequately prepare them for a college curriculum. Dwight, for instance, felt he was not academically ready to enter a four-year university when he contemplated going back to school. In reflecting on his high school preparation, he said:

> I took almost nothing as college prep in high school. It was all vocational crap. And I don't know if you've ever done any of that, but a 2-year-old could probably walk through that course and have no problems with it.

Although many participants were not as explicit as Dwight about how prepared they felt they were for college, from their discussions about their schooling growing up, there was a strong sense of apprehension about jumping right into the academic rigors of a four-year university.

"Plan B"

Reflecting upon their educational plans, it appeared that the community college was not the first choice for most. Something along the way did not work (i.e., "Plan A") that prompted a

change. For some, Plan A was going straight to a four-year university after high school. For instance, Kevin wanted to go to a university and be an athlete. He was being recruited by universities for track, but he suffered a hamstring injury his senior year and was not offered any scholarships. In his reaction to not attending a university, Kevin said, “I just was kinda disappointed and decided I’d go to a 2-year and then maybe transfer my credits.” Here, it appeared that the community college was a sub-par alternative to going to a four-year university and running varsity track. Jim also had an opportunity to become a student-athlete. He was being recruited to play football for Division II schools. Because he was not offered any scholarships, however, he decided to attend a community college. Jim stated, “The only reason why I did is just because of my financial situation and stuff like that.” As stated earlier, Meredith wanted to attend BGSU right after high school and when she was not admitted, she enrolled in a community college.

Kelly, Stanley, Phyllis, and Angela all started at four-year institutions, but then something changed. For Kelly, she was taking random classes at a regional university while working full-time and then her job had her traveling extensively, which caused her to quit. She was still dealing with her past and so she was not focused while at the college. She said, “I guess I mainly just took classes to keep my mind going. Keep my mind occupied.” For Stanley and Phyllis, they decided to change majors while at the four-year institution, prompting a transfer to a community college. While discussing his decision to change majors from engineering to digital art, Stanley said, “They don’t have this program here so I have to go somewhere else.” By stating that he “had” to go somewhere else, Stanley indicated that he would have stayed at the university had it offered a major in digital art. Phyllis changed majors from nursing to special education. Although she could have stayed at the four-year university because it offered her major, she was

advised to enroll in an accelerated program in which she would finish with a master's degree. Because she did not want to do that, she left. Angela endured a personal setback (i.e., her parents' divorce) while at her university, so she dropped out. Moreover, she felt she was emotionally immature to begin college. She said, "I wasn't ready for college. I wasn't familiar with financial aid, I wasn't familiar with either commuting or living on campus." In hindsight, Angela claimed that graduating from high school early was a mistake because she was not mentally prepared to be away from home.

For others, Plan A was working a steady job upon high school graduation. Dwight thought he would work at a factory until he retired, just like his father. But after recognizing that he was not going to make the kind of living that his father had, Dwight decided he needed to change careers. Oscar was playing in a band and working at a retail store after high school. Contemplating about his life plans and deciding to go to college, Oscar said:

> I just knew that after a couple of years [after high school], that I needed to do something with my life. I didn't want to be a stay-at-home parent. I really wanted an education. So, that's what I decided to do.

For both Dwight and Oscar, college was not immediately in their life plans. Dwight did not decide to go to college until much later in his life. Oscar always knew he wanted to go to college, but did not know how to go about doing it.

Ultimately, the participants did not regret their decisions to go to a community college, especially since they seemed to fiercely defend the community college by stating that these institutions are good schools but get a "bad rap". Rather, the community college was deemed as an alternative to what may be perceived as the "ideal" route to the bachelor's degree, which would be to start at a four-year institution.

Unclear Goals

The community college was an attractive option for some, especially those who were unsure about their future plans. As stated earlier, although most participants knew they wanted a four-year degree, several of them did not know where or what to study. To illustrate, Oscar said, "Towards the end of high school, I really didn't know what I wanted to do. At that point, I knew I wanted to go to school but I didn't know what I wanted to go to school for." Meredith knew she wanted to get a bachelor's degree, but could not visualize the end result. She stated, "I could say that it was in my mind as far as that was the plan. But, I never really knew what my plan was to do with it." Phyllis also was unsure of what she wanted to do and said, "I didn't really have a plan. Really. I knew I had to go somewhere. And I didn't really want to stay around the home." Her lack of direction led her to choose her first institution and major in nursing, something she changed after her first year. Angela knew she wanted to go to college while in high school, but was not sure what to study. She said, "I always thought about it and then when I got to my junior, senior year, I still wanted to attend college. I just didn't know what I wanted my major to be." Lastly, Roy also lacked a plan upon high school graduation. He said, "I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, so I'd just go [to the community college] . . . . But, honest, I don't think I was ready for college. Like Bowling Green or things like that." These participants depicted a common plight of high school seniors: being unsure of what they wanted to do upon graduation. The community college, with its open admissions policy and "low-risk" enrollment patterns, was a winning and viable option for these students.

Summary

As presented, several factors influenced the students' decisions to attend a community college. Although cost and location appeared to be the most significant factors, there were other

considerations, including feeling academically unprepared to attend a four-year institution and being unsure of what to do or what to study after high school. For many, the community college provided a “second chance” when their initial plans did not work out and they needed a change. Overall, deciding what they wanted to do with their lives, the participants recognized that they needed a bachelor’s degree and perceived the community college as a means to that goal, viewing their institution as a “stepping stone” to the university.

Experiences along the College Journey

In addressing the supporting questions pertaining to the participants’ experiences at the community college, the point-of-transfer, and BGSU, several themes emerged, including academics, financial issues, school-work balance, social considerations, support services, and the environment. Within these themes are key categories that are outlined below. Within the key categories, what some students found challenging, others found to be affirming.

Academics

Academic issues were the most pervasive experiences students discussed in the interviews. They shared stories about teaching, classes, and transfer of credits and compared their two-year college to BGSU. In their stories, a sense of prestige or reputation associated with either institutional type emerged as well. Students found many positive and negative attributes at both the community college and BGSU.

Teaching

The participants generally liked the teaching at the community college. Toby, for instance, shared that two of his best professors came from the community college. Phyllis was quite surprised to encounter quality teaching at her community college. Angela liked how the instructors took time to explain things. In her account, she said:

> They didn't assume that you knew how to get online and research. They pretty much had everything in guidelines and stuff for you if you didn't know, which was very helpful for me and for other learners there.

The students liked that the teachers at the community college were knowledgeable in their subject area and often had professional experiences in the field that complemented the course content.

What appeared to be most salient regarding teaching at the community colleges was the individual attention students felt they received from the instructors. Because of the small classes, teachers got to know them as individuals, which they found to be quite affirming. Instructors knew their names and what was going on in their lives. Pam said, "My instructors at [the community college] knew where I worked and they would come in and buy groceries from me." Pam felt a personal connection with them. Some felt that the instructors were flexible with assignments because they knew them as people with lives outside of class. Many appreciated being able to turn in assignments late when other obligations interfered.

Although the students appreciated the individual attention at the community college, it made coursework more difficult because they could not "hide" from teachers. Jim explained, "Everything was so one-on-one and teachers were asking so much out of you." Phyllis shared that instructors would continually call on her in class, which placed pressure on her. This individual attention resulted in students commenting that they had to remain focused (i.e., keeping up with course materials) and not skip class. Although the outcome of being prepared for class was not negative, the students complained that it became tiring to be constantly focused in class.

Others criticized the informality of the community college teaching environment. Two participants said they observed other students in class being disrespectful to the teacher by talking out of turn. Students stated that classes would get cancelled and some teachers were routinely late to class. A few felt that some of the teachers simply did not care.

At BGSU, many were impressed with the quality of teaching and the extent of knowledge possessed by the faculty. Even though Dwight was impressed by the teachers at the community college, he marveled at the quality of instruction at BGSU:

> I got into some of the later classes where the instructors were just . . . gods in their profession, so to speak. And it's like they knew it all. It's like, damn. They just took the bar up on how I thought a professor should be.

Kelly took all of her courses online at BGSU. She liked her professors and described them as: "Intelligent. They made themselves available. [They were] very constructive when they criticized. They didn't try to demean anybody." Most were quite pleased with the teaching and all of them were happy with at least one professor at BGSU. For example, Roy talked about a physics professor who was very passionate about his work and influenced him to work hard:

> He wants everybody in the class to learn. He wants you to understand. And that—I mean, you don't want to let him down because he thinks he's failing at his job. His—your grade is kind of his grade, in a way. So, yea, that makes me try.

Along with being excited about teaching, students appreciated faculty who provided good feedback, responded quickly to questions (via email), and extended their office hours to accommodate them.

What appeared to be the most noticeable complaint pertaining to the teaching at BGSU was the use of graduate teaching assistants (TAs). Nearly all of the stories the participants had

about their experiences with TAs were negative. The quality of teaching, or lack thereof, was particularly noticeable for the students who were majoring in teacher education. They were being trained to become teachers, so, in essence, they had become critical evaluators of teaching. For instance, Jim stated, “The hardest thing for me is to see a teacher actually caring and then seeing a grad student saying, ‘well, . . . I want to get my Ph.D. and I wanna be on my way’.” The use of TAs was a point of comparison for most. Because community colleges do not have graduate programs, they do not use students as instructors. There was a sense of bias against TAs because they were students and still learning, so the participants wondered what the TAs could teach. There was definitely an expectation (a higher one than at the community college) of what a professor should be and when the participants were taught by a student, they were disappointed.

Some commented on how BGSU professors tended to focus on their research, or appeared to be shielded from criticism because they were tenured, which was frustrating. In sharing his disappointment with the faculty, Toby said, “I just don’t get why you’re here to teach and yet you’re more concerned with your research. I think you should make time available to students, but some don’t see [it] that way.” Others felt some professors did not make time for them. Because of the large campus and greater number of students (compared to community colleges), some believed that the BGSU faculty appeared distant. Compared to the individual attention they received at the community college, one-on-one interaction was noticeably absent at BGSU, which the students found unfortunate.

Overall, the participants felt that they received quality teaching both at the community college and BGSU. The most notable comparison regarding the teaching at the community college and BGSU was that students felt the instructors at the community college were more personable, while the faculty at BGSU were more knowledgeable in their field of study. The

students liked the teaching at both institutions. Usually, each student preferred the teaching at one institution over the other and all for different reasons. What they found positive or affirming with the teaching far outweighed what they found negative or challenging.

Classes/Workload

Most felt that the coursework at the community college was not as challenging as that at BGSU. Students who came from rigorous high schools had an easier time with the schoolwork when starting college. Phyllis compared the coursework at the community college with the university she attended prior to transferring:

> I didn't have to study as much as I do or as I had to at [the university]. And the amount of workload—I wouldn't have homework to do everyday, or I wouldn't have something due all the time. You get the syllabus [at the community college] and there'd be maybe four papers that would be due over the semester.

Students did not find the work to be terribly hard at the community college. Others did group projects and completed most of the work during class.

Another positive attribute regarding classes at the community college was that the students really felt that they learned something and received a quality education. During the second interviews, several students commented that from reading their stories (and others), they appreciated the community college more than they realized. To illustrate, Jan reflected back on her community college experience:

> It made me think back and it really was a good learning experience and I never really thought of it. 'Cause like, being a part of where I am now and it was—it gave me a starting point. And I took a lot of classes that I needed to come here. I learned a lot.

Jim also revealed his appreciation for his community college experience:

> I went to a community college and I came here. But, I think I learned *so* much going to a junior college. Just the classroom settings, you know, homework, stuff like that. A lot of things that I don't think I would've learned here initially right away.

Although Pam struggled with her transfer of credits and was quite disillusioned about the extent to which her courses did not count toward her degree, she still found value in the classes she took. Students supported the community college against perceived criticism. They valued the education they received there and mostly felt that their time at these institutions was well spent.

Not all classes that the participants enrolled in at the community college, however, were positive experiences. Reviewing their academic transcripts, five received grades of D or F at the community college. Several talked about failing classes. Roy, for instance, flunked out of the community college his first year. Kevin and Oscar mentioned failing some classes as well. Meredith encountered challenges with certain math and business courses at the community college. She commented, "So, my biggest challenges, I guess, were just the business-oriented classes that I had thought was the right path and . . . just getting through those. . . . It's not what [I was] passionate about."

While at BGSU, participants marveled at the quality of education they received. A noticeable difference was that the curriculum in their classes seemed to be more focused on their major. Others said the classes were hard, but rewarding in that they were thought-provoking. Taking online courses, Kelly had low expectations, however, that quickly changed. She explained:

> I thought it would be easy, to be honest. Because it was online, you don't see anybody. But, the requirements are just as demanding as being in class. We had deadlines to meet on a weekly basis. So, I mean it was—it was tough.

Phyllis had to work hard for her grades, but it was not impossible to earn high marks at BGSU, which she appreciated. Jan also thought it was quite affirming to earn good grades because she viewed it as being rewarded for her efforts. Oscar actually felt that his classes at BGSU were easy because of his extensive work experience. He said, “It feels like a refresher.”

Many believed that they were receiving a better education at BGSU than that at the community college. The difference in quality was more noticeable for students in majors that required the use of specific equipment. Kevin explained:

> I think that they have better teachers because they can afford better teachers, better material, equipment. Like at [the community college], we didn’t really have a lot of—I’m an electronics major, and they didn’t have all the electrical equipment that we work with here, so. It’s kinda nice to get the hands-on experience.

Oscar, who also was an electronics major at the community college, said similar things about having better equipment to work with at BGSU.

Participants liked the number and variety of classes offered at BGSU, which they found affirming. They appreciated the freedom and flexibility with the course offerings. Jim found great value in taking courses about different cultures, as he was from a fairly homogeneous community growing up. He shared his experience with some BGSU classes:

> I think that learning in that class about African American culture, Hispanic culture, seeing those things that I can use in my teaching. It’s just, classes like that—you never get that if you come from a certain area like that. And Bowling Green I think does—they do an amazing job of offering classes to fit, I guess, the different types of students.

Jim felt that the class offerings were the best part of BGSU and college life, in general. His appreciation and wonder of the vast array of courses available helped him to enjoy BGSU.

Students also felt stressed and overwhelmed with their classes at BGSU. After reviewing transcripts, six participants received a grade of D or F at BGSU. Three of the students who had grades of D or F at BGSU also had such grades at the community college. Getting bad marks was memorable for most of the participants. Some talked about getting the first D or F (and in some cases, first C) and how that was such a deflating experience for them. Pam became academically ineligible to matriculate at her college, so she changed majors. Meredith shared a story about one of her academic performances:

> I failed a quiz, or not even a quiz, a test on Wednesday. Big time. And I haven't done this bad on something in a long time. And I cried. And it's really sad and embarrassing. But I went home and I was like a child. I cried for an hour because it was just so [sigh] embarrassing. My professor's gonna know. It's one of those weird things.

Another challenge students faced in their classes, most notably at BGSU, was the heavier workload. Dwight commented that at his age, he felt like he can't stay up all night, like "typical" college students. Participants also talked about the faster pace, challenging assignments, more reading, and longer papers at BGSU. Grasping new concepts was also a challenge for students. Oscar, for instance, tried to memorize a massive amount of unfamiliar terminology from his economics and legal issues classes. Feelings of confusion and frustration were associated with these challenges. Kevin sometimes thought about quitting college because of the challenging classes:

> I guess I'm not real good at [the "artsy" classes]. I struggled with them more. And the struggles sometimes made it almost seem like it wasn't worth it, you know? When you do really bad on a test, I'd get discouraged. Started thinking I could make more just working full-time at a factory.

Difficult subjects, tough classes, heavier workloads, and resulting poor grade performance were all challenges these students faced.

Overall, the participants were good students, with an average GPA of 3.12 at the community college and 3.23 at BGSU. As stated earlier, only one participant experienced transfer shock (i.e., a dip in GPA upon transfer to BGSU). The coursework at BGSU may not have been more difficult regarding content, but rather there was more work to be completed and the professors at BGSU seemed to expect more out of them than the faculty at the community college. The students appreciated that school was somewhat easier at the community college. They also liked that the BGSU coursework was challenging, but not to the degree that they could not perform well. Similar to what the participants experienced with the teaching, the positive attributes of classes greatly outnumbered the negative ones. They enjoyed the quality education at both institutions. Although they endured several challenges, these students persevered and generally liked their coursework.

Transfer of Credits

Most commented that their credit transfer experience was relatively smooth, which they found to be an affirming experience. Several just submitted their transcripts and left the rest to the transfer office at BGSU. Some mentioned a checklist or course applicability system, in reference to the State of Ohio articulation agreements, which helped with their transfer of credits. How students chose their classes varied, but it appeared that regardless of how they chose their classes at the community college, they still had a positive transfer of credit experience at BGSU.

A few had most of their credits transferred and counted toward their degree requirements, which they also liked. Jim, for instance, had most of his courses count toward his degree primarily because he never saw an academic advisor at his community college, but rather always

communicated with an advisor at BGSU. Oscar and Meredith also had the majority of their course credits count toward graduation. In fact, Oscar was somewhat surprised at the number of credits that BGSU accepted. For these students, their transfer experience worked out well.

For the majority of participants, however, the biggest discrepancy about transfer of credits had to do with semantics. Students commented that most of their courses transferred, but they transferred as electives and not as degree requirements. Their stories ranged from one or two classes not counting, to the majority of classes not going toward graduation requirements. The participants were frustrated and angry as a result. For instance, Dwight said, "[It] kinda ticked me off a bit . . . that's a lot of money to pay out to not—especially when you have to come [to BGSU] and take them at the prices here." Roy commented, "I was pretty mad, 'cause I spent all that money already and then come to find out I had to take stuff over again." While most participants commented on the cost of retaking classes, some also mentioned how it lengthened the time to degree. When Phyllis shared that her transfer of credit experience was "disheartening," she said, "Well, when I figured out that it would take me five years instead of four, I think when everyone finds that out, no one is too excited about that." Few talked about their time-to-degree being extended because graduation requirements at BGSU changed while taking classes at the community college and they were not being "grandfathered" in upon transfer. Although the participants were frustrated about their transfer of credits, it did not adversely affect their overall feelings about BGSU.

One student in particular described her transfer of credit experience as a "nightmare." According to Pam, she struggled with her credits. None of her classes counted toward graduation and a low grade she received in a four-credit accounting course at the community college seemed to have a ripple effect because it required Pam to retake many classes to help boost her GPA. In

addition, having to retake lower-division courses impeded her ability to take the higher-division courses, which delayed graduation. Pam was not pleased with the advising at BGSU because she felt she received conflicting information, which further complicated things for her. Her transfer experience also influenced whether she would suggest a community college to other prospective students.

Overall, the affirming and challenging experiences the students had that pertained to academic issues constituted a significant portion of their collegiate experience. They encountered similar attributes at both institutions, such as good teaching, challenging classes, and an overall quality education. What some found affirming, others found challenging, such as the individual attention given by instructors. Additionally, most felt that the transfer of credit process was relatively seamless but also experienced the reality of credits not being counted toward graduation. The participants celebrated triumphs over their setbacks in their academics and were appreciative of such experiences.

Financial

Another prominent theme that emerged from the data was financial issues. Several participants came from working-class backgrounds and money was a frequent topic during the interviews. Students talked about the cost of tuition and it was an influential factor in choosing a community college and often BGSU. Several received little or no financial help from parents and absorbed the entire cost of going to college. From their discussions, two key categories emerged: a) the low cost of attending a community college and the benefits associated with that and b) the financial transition to attend BGSU and its implications.

Cost

The low cost of attending a community college was a strong, affirming quality that the students greatly appreciated. It was cheaper than university tuition and they were not burdened with student loans. Many received grants and scholarships that covered their tuition and other related costs while attending a community college. All asserted that the community college was a good choice financially, as they were able to save a considerable amount of money.

Stanley believed that the low prices at a community college also allowed students to try out majors without a significant financial commitment. He explained:

> It gives you a chance to try out things for not as much money as it would be to just try something [at BGSU]. Like, if you want to take just some class on a whim just to see if you like it, it's like $80 a credit hour [at the community college], where it's—I don't even want to try and figure out how much it is here.

Both Stanley and Jim believed that the community college was an appropriate place to sample courses. Stanley referred to the community college as having a "low-risk atmosphere" to explore such activities. Jim advised that the community college was a good place for people who are not sure about what they want to do. He suggested:

> Don't spend, you know, $10,000 and get in debt if you only take a few weeks and things don't work out. I'd rather have somebody go to a community college, paying $2,000 in tuition and say something happens. I mean, you gotta have like a safeguard.

The low cost, resulting in not carrying college debt, was a positive outcome of attending a community college. Finances were also the main reason why participants suggested these institutions to others. They appreciated not having to acquire tuition debt and it was one of their most salient memories of being a community college student.

Financial Transition

The financial transition between the community college and BGSU was what struck the participants the most when transferring. Several were funding college themselves, so they were very aware of the price difference when they transferred. When he enrolled at BGSU and saw his account statement for the first time, Dwight recalled:

> It was sticker shock. It's like going into the Cadillac dealer the first time going [gasp!]. But, I knew it was going to cost more and then when I [had] seen that first semester's totals, it really was—made me go, oh my God, what am I getting into? Because what I paid here for one class I can take a whole semester of classes there.

There was a sense that although students knew the prices at BGSU would be different, they were still astounded at the markedly different costs of attendance. Jan said, "Well, very different. I mean, I had the scholarships, so we didn't really have to pay for anything except for books and things like that at [the community college]. I mean, it was a *big* difference." The price difference was very memorable for students, especially those who were solely responsible for paying for college. Meredith was quite frank in her discussion about the cost of attending BGSU:

> Sucks. It is horrible. I came out of [the community college] with two years of college and credits with no debt, paying my way, buying my books. BG, no, they're not—it's not happenin' over here. Basically the financial aid, the Pell grants and the [Ohio Instructional Grant] that I get is covering maybe half of my tuition. I have to take out the subsidized loan that covers the other half of my tuition. After that, I take out a private loan to help me with my bills.

As indicated in Meredith's story, one way in which the participants met the challenge of the higher tuition at BGSU was to acquire student loans.

How students coped with the financial transition included accepting grants, scholarships, and loans. As stated earlier, several were not in debt while going to the community college, but they were while at BGSU, which they found to be really bothersome. Roy said:

> I'm in debt. I wasn't at [the community college]. I had no debt. That's hard. It's hard for me to even—I hate that. I can't stand it. And it was hard for me to even continue going to school here. Just because of that. I mean, it's a lot of money. And, it's money I don't have. And I'm gonna have to pay it off someday. That was the biggest thing. It's money.

Other students talked about their debt, acquiring loans for the first time, and filling out paperwork. Stanley said:

> To transfer to another school, you gotta go through the application process and then you gotta go through the transcript. . . thing. And . . . financial aid. It's like there weren't that many applications, but applications are just—they kinda just a drag. I don't think anyone likes filling out applications or forms for anything. And that was probably the hardest thing.

The financial transition to BGSU also impacted family members for some. Toby shared:

> It put a dramatic effect on me, my parents. My dad's been working more overtime . . . . Taking these loans . . . . I guess for us also probably trying to cut back on expenses, like cut back on any leisure stuff. Or even eating less expensive food and going out less and just trying to find alternatives, I guess.

Toby said that he and his family just tried to find ways to cut corners and save money anyway they could.

As a transfer student, many had trouble finding scholarships. Dwight mentioned, "If you're a transfer student, you already pretty much eliminated 80% or better of anything

available." The majority of institution-sponsored scholarships were for first-time college enrollees, so transfer students were ineligible. Roy also shared his frustration with finding scholarships. He said, "I know there's scholarship money out there . . . . Why isn't there someone trying to help me?" Because students had trouble finding scholarships, they felt they had no other alternative than student loans and employment.

Although it bothered the participants to acquire debt, most of them rationalized their decision and figured it would be all worth it in the end. All were hoping that they would acquire good paying jobs with their degree and be able to pay back their student loans. Neither Meredith nor Phyllis wanted to deal with their debt until they were finished with school. Phyllis stated, "[I'll] just pay it off when I'm done and worry about it then." Talking about his experience with loans, Stanley said, "I'm just gonna fill out this loan application for however much they tell [me] I owe them and leave it at that. And worry about the rest after I graduate." Students recognized that they would be in debt for a long time and it was something that appeared to be in the distant future and not presently in focus for them.

Work-School Balance

Students also met the financial challenge of attending college by working while going to school, which was another major theme. Because all but one participant worked while attending college (either at the community college or BGSU), balancing the demands of work and school was a frequent topic. Some worked and went to school full-time while at the community college. Most described their schedules as hectic and found little time to engage in other activities. They enjoyed working, for the most part, and some acquired jobs that were related to their major. What was most noticeable in their discussions about working and going to school was time management and scheduling issues.

Time Management

Generally, the participants described working while going to school as tough. It was difficult to manage all the responsibilities associated with their employment and academics. Additionally, some also had family responsibilities. To illustrate, Oscar talked about the difficulties he encountered when he started going to the community college:

> That was tough. That was really tough. 'Cause, at the time I could only afford to take 2 classes a semester because working full-time. And, my wife, she was working part-time and you gotta worry about the babysitter and getting formula . . . . But, just kept at it. Kept pluggin' at it.

Because of all these responsibilities, time became a precious commodity. Unless these students effectively managed their time, they would not have been nearly as successful. Pam, for instance, described a typical day while she worked and enrolled at the community college full-time:

> I had class at eight in the morning, and I had class until four and work at 4:30. So, I would have to run to the car, eat in the car, change in the car when I got to work. And then I would go home and be so exhausted . . . . So, I would go home, do any homework or anything, and pass out, and get up and do it all over again.

According to some, being continuously tired adversely affected getting schoolwork completed. Stanley often procrastinated and the quality of his work suffered as a result. Roy shared his experience working while going to the community college:

> I guess when I was working at [the company], trying to juggle that and school, that was pretty tough. I mean I was only working part-time, but still, it was—I mean school and work I don't think mix too well. So that was difficult for me to try and find motivation to get my work done.

Students particularly noticed the time constraints associated with working and going to school, especially for those who worked and were enrolled full-time.

The range of difficulty of balancing work and school also was associated with where students were in their curriculum, particularly at BGSU. It seemed that students worked fewer hours at BGSU because they were taking more upper-division courses that demanded more of their time. Choice of major also influenced the ability to work many hours, especially for students who were required to complete co-ops or practica. Jan talked about her experience when she entered the latter stages of her education degree:

> Well, it was hard to work and like do that with classes. And getting assignments done. And, especially this last semester with methods. I was like, I cannot do this. 'Cause there'd be whenever five hours or so a night and I can be doing so much more with the time than working. But, I just moved into an apartment so I needed to work, to afford rent and that kind of things.

Juggling work with school was no easy task, even for students who worked part-time. It seemed that these students had strong time management skills that greatly enhanced their chances for success.

Not all students found working and going to school difficult. For example, although Oscar had trouble balancing work and school while at the community college, things got much better at BGSU with his new place of employment. He said:

> The workload here at school is not really much of an issue anymore because I have so much time at work I can get it done. It's a lot easier to balance everything and allow me to have my free time that I value so much.

Because Oscar was in a situation that he could get schoolwork completed while working his job, he was able to manage his time to his satisfaction. Another example came from Stanley who did not find working while going to the community college to be that difficult. He explained:

> One of my jobs was delivering newspapers. I picked up a paper route. And that was, that was nice. ‘Cause I’d get up early, I don’t have class until like ten or eleven, so I can stay at home and do that homework then. Then I’ve got all that time after my classes to do whatever I want.

As long as class schedules accommodated work schedules, students had less trouble balancing their work and school responsibilities.

Scheduling

What helped students to manage their time was course scheduling. It was a challenge at times for most as well. The time at which classes were offered often influenced what courses students took to accommodate their work schedules. To illustrate, Kevin explained how he chose his classes at the community college:

> I just picked whatever fit with my schedule. ‘Cause I worked in the afternoon on second shift. And I would just pick anything that fit in the morning. And then, as time went on, as I kept going, I had to meet with my advisor to work with my schedule so I could get classes that would work and fit. And I eventually went part-time at work just so I could finish up and get my associate’s.

Many had to schedule classes around their jobs and that did not always work well. Jim, for instance, could not take as many classes each semester as he would have liked while at the community college because of work obligations. This resulted in him being a few credits shy of earning an associate’s degree. Often, students chose to decrease their work hours, which had

financial implications. For those who were not able to reduce work hours, their time to degree was extended, which Angela experienced.

Participants also experienced scheduling woes at BGSU. Students who worked full-time and went to school part-time endured a greater challenge in finding courses that fit with their schedules. Angela shared her frustration with the course scheduling at BGSU:

> It's not really for the typical commuter, adult learner. So, that was very challenging—trying to work my schedule around the courses that are offered. There's not a lot of evening courses. I ended up taking a few at Firelands.

Oscar, for instance, talked about the course schedule trouble he was facing at BGSU:

> See, I work second shift, 2:30 to 11:00. So, all my classes have to be morning classes. . . . And getting towards the end of my school career, certain classes aren't available when I need to take them. And, I'm at that point now where I'm kinda trying to take what I can get and other classes, like physics, you gotta take it four days a week. You got classes in the morning, class in the afternoon, and I've been putting that off and off. I don't know how long I can do it.

Having strict work and class schedules resulted in students not being able to take advantage of some support mechanisms. Kevin found it difficult to meet with his advisor and Oscar never visited with a faculty member after class, both because of work schedules.

Work and class scheduling also affected to what extent students chose to participate in campus activities. Jan always felt that her schedule was too busy for her to get involved. Others, such as Oscar and Phyllis, treasured their free time and viewed getting involved in campus activities as taking that away. Phyllis explained:

> I never really invested a lot of time in [getting involved]. And I think it's basically because of the fact that I work so much that I'm kinda—between work and school and the amount that I study, I don't really, it just doesn't really interest me to say, oh, well my couple extra hours in the week, I'm gonna spend it at doing this. I just kinda rather relax.

Pam, on the other hand, became very involved in a co-ed fraternity and her scheduling woes pertained to balancing homework with her job and her fraternity. Scheduling was a considerable component of the work-school balance experience for the participants and greatly influenced whether their experience was positive or negative.

Balancing work and school responsibilities is not a new phenomenon for college students. These participants experienced similar woes as other working students. What seemed to help the participants with their work-school balance issues was effective time management and coordinating their course and work schedules. There were both positive and negative outcomes associated with being a working college student. Students enjoyed making money and appreciated the practical experience they were gaining. Working many hours, however, was stressful and hectic, resulting in fatigue and making some sacrifices, either in poor performance or reducing work hours. Overall, the students did not mind working while going to school, mainly because it was a matter of survival. Related to the financial theme mentioned earlier, students had to work to afford college, particularly at BGSU.

Social

Many participants felt that all they did was work and go to school, resulting in a perceived lack of a social life. Hence, the social aspects of college was another major theme in this study. Several students did not feel like they fit in at the community college or at BGSU. For some, age was a factor, but for others it felt more like a culture clash. There were times,

however, when the participants connected with their peers and made many friends, both at the community college and BGSU.

Not in Sync with Peers

Participants did not necessarily feel like they belonged when they reflected on the variety of students attending the community college. Not all students were there to transfer and it was difficult to connect with people who did not share similar academic goals. Roy in particular did not like to be in class with a heterogeneous group of learners:

> So, what my thought with that is you're kind of with people who are just average or below average and I didn't want that. I wanted to kinda be surrounded by people who could help me to learn. And, at [the community college], that's really hard and that's why I didn't like it.

Pam described a typical class as sitting next to a 35-year-old family man who worked construction and was getting an accounting degree for his business, while on the other side was a grandmother who wanted to take classes so she could get more involved in non-profit organizations. The variety in the classroom was considered by several participants as a negative component of the community college environment because it resulted in a lack of focus when students in the class had different academic goals or reasons for taking the course. Students encountered difficulties conducting group projects that required meeting outside of class because of varying schedules and obligations. Being a part of such a motley group of classmates resulted in the participants appreciating their upper-division courses at BGSU because they believed they were sitting in a classroom with others who wanted the same thing.

Age was a salient factor at both the community college and BGSU that also made students feel not in sync with peers, particularly for Kelly (age 43), Dwight (age 42), Oscar (age

36), and Angela (age 29). Dwight recalled being mistaken for the professor many times when he entered a classroom. In responding to the summary of results during the second meeting, both Oscar and Kelly also recalled similar experiences of being mistaken for the professor. In sharing his personal issue with age, Dwight said, “I don’t know if it’s just me or what, but it was like, you know, you kinda want to fit in somewhat and it’s really hard to do when you’re that blatantly different than everybody else.” Oscar also mentioned age in his stories about being a college student. He walked around campus and was amazed at how the students looked so young and the fact that most of them were here straight from high school. In discussing his struggle with his age, Oscar said, “I don’t want to look like an old guy that’s trying to look young. I kinda want to be myself. But, I don’t want to be an old man, either.”

Age issues were not reserved to the older students in this study. The more “traditionally” aged (i.e., 21-24) participants also made comments that alluded to age. Pam felt strange taking classes with 18- and 19-year-olds. Meredith referred to herself as a “late bloomer” and said that she felt old. Jan’s friends were all younger than she and she felt like she would graduate alone without her friends. Age permeated the stories told, regardless of how “young” or “old” the participants were who shared them.

Another way in which students did not feel in sync with their peers was that some experienced feeling like an “intruder” upon transferring to BGSU. Toby and Pam, for instance, who transferred in January, thought that being on the BGSU campus in the middle of the year made it difficult to find friends right away. Pam described her feelings of isolation:

> My first day on campus, I’m walking around and you see all the students, like ‘oh, how was your Christmas, did you have a good break?’ And I’m like, wow, no one knows me

> here . . . . And that was really, really sad for me. ‘Cause I’m like, no one is going to ask me how my break was . . . . I felt so alone.

By transferring to a new institution, students felt like they were jumping into an established community, which made them feel like outsiders. Dwight said, “It’s like everybody knows each other from other classes and stuff like that. And I’m coming in halfway through and not knowing any of these people and they’re like, ‘who the hell’s that guy?’ Stuff like that.”

Other examples of feeling like outsiders included participants revealing that they were not into the party scene at BGSU. Many distinguished themselves from other college students by describing them as “those kids” or “those stupid kids”. Roy described himself as not being like his peers when he said, “I’m different than most college students, though. I’m not here to party.” Some said that once they were at BGSU they got serious with their studies and other obligations, most notably work, so they did not have time to engage in “typical” college antics.

Fitting In/Making Friends

Despite differences, students made connections at the community college. Jim, for instance, gained most of his closest friends at the community college. Dwight and Oscar both appreciated seeing older people in their classes, primarily at the community college, as it made going back to school much easier. Dwight said, “The people you’d see there were more like people like me.”

The older participants worked through their issues with age, which helped them to fit in with the campus community at both institutions. The other students in class and faculty were very helpful in that they treated the older students the same as they would any other student. Angela, for instance felt that the students helped her with the age issue. She said:

> I made a connection. I mean, for the students being 18, 19 years old. I mean, being almost 10 years older than them. I mean, they were pretty friendly. They were willing to work with me not knowing everything that's on campus or what's going around. So, I think the students—I mean, they were very accepting of somebody not of their age.

Kelly also felt that the younger students looked up to her and she appreciated the respect they were granting her. She recalled:

> You know, at first I was kinda intimidated. Because I felt like—I felt old. But then, as the younger kids around me, they start looking up to me, asking me questions. They knew I was very matter-of-fact and they respected that. . . . After a while, I just kinda felt like, you know, it wasn't so bad after all being the oldest.

Similar to Dwight's, Kelly's and Angela's experiences, Oscar found that the students and faculty did not treat him any differently, which made his transition easier.

Students made many friends at BGSU as well. Jan stated she would not change her educational path if given the opportunity because of the friends she made. She said, "I wouldn't meet the people I've met. And my friends, like, they're really good friends." Toby thought living in a residence hall helped him to gain friends because he was constantly interacting with people. As far as students in the classroom at BGSU, the participants felt like they belonged once they were sitting among them. Kevin said, "I think I felt more in place with the people. They seemed more like the kind of person I was." The students seemed to really appreciate their upper-division courses and being among other students in their majors, unlike the general education courses described at the community college.

Participants found their niches within both the community college and BGSU communities. Social networks are a very important aspect of college life. Although the students

in this study felt out of sync with their peers and struggled to "blend" in at both the community college and BGSU, they found their place and flourished.

Support Services

Another major theme in this study was service (or lack thereof) that supported their academic endeavors. Students' descriptions of the advising they encountered along the way to the baccalaureate varied. They experienced both good and poor advising. There were stories of particular campus offices that were helpful (or not) and the types of resources available. Similar to what was discovered within the academic theme, there were more positive stories than negative ones pertaining to support services.

Advising

At the community college, students mostly described their advisors as helpful and knowledgeable. For instance, Dwight's advisor helped him to get focused on what was going to be required to graduate. Kevin found an advisor who was really helpful so he always went to her. She actually influenced him to transfer and pursue a bachelor's degree. Stanley also shared his advising experience at the community college:

> Right at the end, when I was thinking about getting an associate's before I got out, I did meet with an advisor there and they were pretty helpful. They kind of—they were good about telling me, 'well, you should take a look at this and get this transcript again. And these scores again, and if you do all this, you'll be able to get out. You'll be able to get your degree and graduate.' So they were really helpful.

Additionally, Jan became really close to her advisor and felt that her advisor knew her personally and supported her success. Oscar was really pleased with the advising he received at both institutions because he felt that the advisors were genuine and really cared about his success.

However, Students encountered poor, or inept advising at the community college. For example, Dwight was frustrated with the staff at the community college because they did not seem to know the transfer requirements and he said he was told to “look in a book” for answers. Meredith felt that her advisors did not show an interest in her, which resulted in her losing faith and not trusting academic advising. Other challenges with advising included not having office hours conducive to students who work outside of class and not feeling connected with their advisors.

Students perceived that they received good advising at BGSU. To illustrate, Dwight was very satisfied with his advisors at BGSU, much more so than at the community college. He said:

> My advisors have been awesome . . . . And they’ve all been great. And every one of them knows what needs to be done. So, they can point me in the right direction really easy . . . . Here, they can give you real advice, say, hey, this is only every other semester, so you might want to do it in this order, that way you get it done right and that way it saves you time. Which is really nice, to save time.

Others had advisors who “went to bat” for them regarding accepting course credits, or encouraging them to appeal certain courses. Angela’s advisor also helped her considerably when considering what courses to accept. She appreciated all the substitutions that her advisor allowed.

Things changed for Pam between the first and second interviews. She changed majors, which resulted in switching colleges within BGSU. She marveled at the difference in help she received at her new advising office:

> [I] met with an advisor in [the new college] and they have this student handbook that they gave me, with all these very important dates for classes, when registration starts, what I need to do. And they require that you meet with an advisor your junior year to make sure

you're on track. I was just amazed that like, a complete 360 and it's the same university, but a different college. I was just amazed with that.

Similar to the advisors at community colleges, participants described their advisors at BGSU as helpful, knowledgeable, genuine, and caring. Although some had negative experiences with advising, overall they seemed to appreciate the support they received from their advisors.

Staff/Office Help

Participants remarked about other campus offices they encountered at both the community college and BGSU. There were campus offices where students encountered frustrating or negative experiences, including financial aid and the bursar's office. For instance, Stanley had to appeal to acquire the two-year scholarship he was promised from the community college. Because he enrolled at a different college after high school before coming to the community college, he was told he was no longer eligible for the award. He appealed, and was awarded the scholarship for one year, but not two, which disappointed him.

Meredith had a negative encounter with financial aid at BGSU when she received an incomplete for a course and was unable to receive her awards. She felt that she was being penalized for something she had little control over, since she turned in her assignments but did not receive a grade from the professor in time for the award distribution. Meredith claimed that she and the bursar "just don't get along." Other challenges participants endured at BGSU included their perception that different offices did not communicate. Pam asserted that "nothing here is easy" and felt that she kept getting the runaround when she transferred to BGSU and was sent to various offices, often to the wrong office.

On a positive note, students were relatively pleased with the transfer credit evaluation office at BGSU. Transferring to another institution was a nebulous process for them. They did

not know what was going on and relied on their advisors and the transfer office for assistance, which for the most part, proved fruitful. Kevin stated, “They were really helpful when I needed to transfer. ‘Cause I had no idea what to do. They kinda walked me along.” The staff at the transfer office also helped students by explaining why some classes did not transfer. They were described as quick and efficient (especially during “transfer day”), and knew pertinent information. Jan said, “They were really nice. Very helpful. Willing to answer anything and everything. They would find the time for me to come in. That sort of thing . . . . And helped me find the classes that I could take.” Although most participants had some classes that did not transfer, they described their interactions with the transfer credit evaluation personnel as pleasant and helpful. Other than the transfer office, there was minimal discussion about positive interactions with other offices.

Resources

The discussion about lack of resources was primarily directed toward the community college. It was a point of comparison for most participants. Some believed that community colleges were smaller, and thus did not have the resources like bigger universities. Students also compared the activities available and opportunities to get involved. Again, they seemed to not notice such services at the community college. Although students did not find as many resources to help them at the community college, they did not appear to be bothered by it or feel it was a challenge for them.

Conversely, when talking about services available to them, the affirming experiences pertained to the number of resources at BGSU. The variety of classes students can take, academic resources available to them, and the number of organizations they can join astounded many. Jim shared his reaction when he enrolled at BGSU:

> I think the best thing about the college life seriously is the classes they offer. You know, and the services that they offer. The writing center and, I guess, the study skills lab, stats lab, things like that . . . . So, that's probably one of the best things about paying tuition is having those services and the fact is that you have to use them. And that makes your—I guess you get more for your buck.

Additionally, Kevin and others mentioned the help they got from tutors and study skills classes. Overall, it appeared that there were more avenues for help at BGSU compared to the community college.

In addition to academic resources, students liked the activities they could participate in and the organizations they could join at BGSU. Dwight said, "You actually literally have to scale it back because there's so many that you can't attend everything you want to attend." Students acknowledged the benefits they received by getting involved. Pam shared how she had benefited from participating in a co-ed fraternity:

> Meeting people, and getting involved with things on campus, like Dance Marathon. The fraternity's active with that. That pulled me into something at Bowling Green. And just getting involved with that just made me feel more of, wow, I did this. Or, wow I planned it. Or, I organized all these people to come do this. It just made me feel more of, wow, I guess . . . . Just that sense of accomplishment.

Both Roy and Kevin became officers in their student organizations. They commented about other benefits of joining a student organization, including getting to know faculty better and just making college more fun. The students certainly appreciated the opportunities available at BGSU.

Environment

The final theme discussed are the environmental factors. In comparing the community college and BGSU, the participants often referred to a campus "feel". The community college did not appear to have much school spirit or school pride and the participants sensed a lack of community because most students (including themselves) just came to class and then left. On the other hand, the students really enjoyed the BGSU campus and its atmosphere. They described it as "exciting." They liked the largeness of the campus, with more people to interact with and befriend. Some mentioned the athletics and school spirit, which they felt the community college was lacking. A large campus, however, was also a challenge. They did not like the large lecture halls because those made them feel disconnected from the faculty. The environmental factors resulted in some reactions by the students, ranging from fear to excitement.

Campus

The students in this study repeatedly talked about the size of the campuses they attended. For the community college, they all reflected about the small size of their institutions and how they found that to be quite affirming. Stanley, for instance, remarked that it was easier to see and recognize people he knew. As stated earlier pertaining to the teaching aspect of their experiences, the small size of the college allowed for them to know everybody in their classes and their teachers quite well.

However, in discussing what it meant to be a community college student, many said that the two-year institution they attended "felt like high school" in that most students went to class and then left campus. The students perceived the lack of a sense of community in that they did not interact with many people outside of class. To illustrate, Toby compared his community college with BGSU:

> Well, I guess when you're at a community college, it's more like you're in class and then you're gone. It's not much, social, like make a bunch of friends there. You made some here and there, but you won't make 'em at like a university level, especially when you live in a dorm. You're constantly interacting with people, where it's not like you're finish[ed with] class and then you just go home.

Jan talked about the community college and BGSU:

> [They are] just different in the sense where one's really small, one's big. At the university, you're required to stay two years on campus as a freshman . . . . But, I mean you get that campus feel. Lots of people. You meet lots of people whereas it was just kind of like high school at the community college. I mean, you go to school, go to class, you go home, kind of thing.

The perceived inability to meet people and make friends at the community college was also a social factor for these participants and contributed to them not feeling as connected with the community college as they did with BGSU, which made it an environmental factor as well.

Students did not see much school spirit at the community college. One participant did not expect to see much pride exhibited on the campus. Pam described the difference she observed in students displaying their allegiance to the community college:

> You don't see too many people like, 'oh, I go to community college.' You don't see too many t-shirts. Not like you do the people here. You don't walk around the community college and see people wearing [the community college] t-shirts or sweatshirts or have keychains, or lanyards. You don't see it. And, there's just no pride, no community. It's just you go to class, you go home.

It seems that they did not do anything but go to school, which contributed to the lack of a sense of community they felt at the community college.

All of the participants described BGSU as “big”, which they liked. They enjoyed having the opportunity to meet many people and simply relished being on a bigger campus. While the large campus appealed to the students, it was not considered to be too big, like other universities. They shared that they liked how BGSU was somewhat compact and “contained within itself,” meaning that it was somewhat like an oasis. Two participants also liked the town of Bowling Green and said they chose BGSU because of its “small college town” atmosphere.

Reactions to Environment

The reactions to campus environments primarily came from experiences transitioning to BGSU. What some found positive, others found negative. Participants were “fired up” to come to BGSU and found the campus to be exciting. For instance, Kevin talked about his initial thoughts when he came to BGSU:

> It was pretty cool. I liked it. Exciting atmosphere. I felt like the topics they talked about were a lot more interesting. ‘Cause my major was different here. I don’t know, just it was a lot more exciting. A lot more energy.

They felt good to be college students and liked how BGSU was new and different. Jan loved it at BGSU, including the campus, the people, and her major. Pam said, “I feel safe here.” For some, their excitement to be on the BGSU campus translated into their delight in their major and having a sense of direction.

For others, however, the new environment at BGSU conjured up feelings of fear and nervousness. Dwight, for instance, described it as a “whole new world”, which he found to be frightening. Oscar and Meredith had to get used to buildings that contain specific majors, as

opposed to going to all their classes in one building. Meredith described her first encounter at BGSU:

> The first thing that pops into my head has to be the difference in size of the campus. I just remember being so nervous that I didn't know where anything was. I didn't know, even just something as simple as the 100, room 102, is on the first level, room 202 on the second. 'Cause the [community college] campus was just one floor.

Jan and Jim also were scared at one point during their transition to BGSU. Jim attributed his fear to the size of the college, while Jan said it was a result of being away from home for the first time. Moreover, students described themselves as being a "freshman again" and not knowing what to expect when they started at BGSU.

Summary

The themes presented in this chapter, and the resulting sub-categories, provided a snapshot of the challenges and affirmations the students in this study experienced while on their journey to the baccalaureate. These themes do not operate in silos, but rather are intertwined. For instance, the small class size at the community college resulted in students getting to know their instructors better, which is both an environmental and academic factor. On several occasions, participants had mixed reactions to the same phenomenon, such as transferring to BGSU being exciting for some, but scary for others. Mostly, the participants' achievements outnumbered (or outweighed) their obstacles, which contributed to their success.

Why Did These Transfer Students Persist?

Another way to understand how transfer students persisted to a bachelor's degree is to examine how they met challenges they faced. Students credited the encouragement and support they received from family, friends, teachers, and employers. Additionally, the participants

seemed to share some common traits that not only helped them to overcome obstacles, but also provided motivation for them to strive for graduation.

Support

Participants in this study mentioned at least one person who supported their endeavors along their journey to the baccalaureate. Pam explained why she thought she was successful:

> Because I had a good support system . . . . a good group of friends, and professors, you know, they always challenge you to do a little bit better than what you're capable of. And I think that—them like having you strive to do better and grow, that definitely helps to get through.

People mentioned by the participants who provided encouragement included family members, friends, teachers, advisors, employers, and other community members.

Family

Family members, particularly parents, were the primary source of support for most of the participants. Many consulted with their parents on numerous occasions when they encountered a dilemma. Parents were there to celebrate their victories and console them during their struggles. Parents also provided a source of motivation for students as they wanted to make their parents proud of their accomplishments. Kevin said, "I got a lot of encouragement . . . . [with] family and friends. But family mainly. Parents most of all. I think they're proud. Seeing how I kinda surpassed what they did already." Angela stated that her mother and grandmother helped her to return to classes after being absent for three years. She recalled, "My mother always encouraged me to go back to school. My grandmother, my father's mother—she always encouraged me, 'go back to school. Be something.'" Oscar mentioned his father and how he was a source of strength, especially since his passing while Oscar was still at the community college. He said, "I knew he

would want me to [finish my degree]. And I guess, that guiding force pretty much propelled me to keep doing what I was doing. . . . I think a lot of—what would he want me to do, how would I make him proud of me." It meant a lot to Oscar to finish his degree as he knew his father would not have wanted him to quit.

Other family members who provided support included aunts, uncles, grandparents, siblings and spouses. Dwight attributed much of his success to his younger sister, who had already attended college by the time Dwight decided to pursue higher education. During a time when Dwight was apprehensive about going back to school, he talked about his sister's involvement. He recalled, "She was like, 'no, you can do it', you know, 'if I can do it, you can do it.' And she really pushed me into going ahead and going back to school and stuff like that." Dwight's sister helped him through rough patches, as she could direct him to resources on campus that could help him. Kelly had an aunt who earned a college degree and sent all her children to college. So, she was exposed to their lifestyle and wanted to know more. She said, "I wanted to know what they knew. I wanted to be in the circles that they were in." Roy talked about an uncle who was a doctor and always encouraged him to return to college. He said, "I would go visit him and he would always talk about college. 'You need to go . . . you really need to get an education so you can get a good job.' And things started sinking in then."

Friends

Participants frequently mentioned friends as people who stood by them during their educational journey. Many chose the community college or BGSU because of friends. In talking about what he liked about BGSU, Jim said, "Probably the best thing was that I have friends that go here. A lot of friends that decided to come here first. So, I guess it was more of like a reunion, pretty much." Having friends already at the institution helped participants get acclimated to the

new environment. To illustrate, Pam talked about her first night at BGSU. She said, “I’m living in this dorm and if it wasn’t for that one friend I had . . . she kind of helped me out. . . . I think I spent my first night with her, to be honest with you.” Roommates also helped participants with adjustment issues, particularly for those who lived on campus their first semester at BGSU.

Friends became sounding boards for participants, as they could talk to them about issues or problems they were having. For instance, Jan was very thankful for the friends she made in college. She said, “I mean, they help me through everything. Like, if I’m like stressed out with school, I mean I could always call them and they always help me.” Meredith, who was a first-generation college student, relied on her friends who were more familiar with college surroundings. In reflecting on how they assisted her, Meredith revealed:

> Well, I guess I made my friends take me around the campus a bunch. And just try to memorize where everything was the best I could . . . . Yea, I guess I would just rely on my friends who were here. So, if I didn’t know where something was, I’d ask them.

Friends also helped participants not feel so alone, especially if they were transfer students as well. The students really could connect with fellow transfers and appreciated having opportunities to meet them.

Kelly attributed her success at the community college to her classmates. In sharing about her support mechanism, she said:

> We had formulated a little group at the very beginning. . . . And that group of us vowed that we were going to make it through this two year program together. . . . And we made it through. I mean, we studied, you know, we stayed focused. We were just relentless. We knew this is what we wanted. So, together when there were times when we didn’t do so

well on tests, we embraced each other, ‘hey, you’ll do better.’ We motivated each other.

So, I guess I can honestly say it was that little group of people that I kinda hung out with.

Although participants clarified that they would have persisted even without the help of friends, the relationships they developed with their peers made college more enjoyable.

Teachers/Advisors

As stated earlier, several participants had positive interactions with teachers and advisors. Some mentioned teachers from their elementary or secondary school days who showed an interest in them and provided them with incentives to succeed. Jim reminisced about an inspirational teacher who strongly influenced him, ”[S]he made me a challenge in eighth grade to raise my grades. I ended up getting all As and Bs.” Teachers who challenged students to perform better were instrumental in boosting their confidence, especially for those who struggled academically in their youth. Jan specifically mentioned her 5th grade teacher with whom she kept in contact and sought her advice, more so now that Jan was studying to become a teacher herself. Kelly was encouraged by a teacher in junior high school to apply for a competitive college prep school and she surprised herself by being accepted.

Some credited their college professors who went above and beyond the call of duty to help them. When Oscar was sharing about the struggles he endured immediately after his father passed away, he talked about an instructor at the community college who provided great comfort and support. He said, “I pretty much had one teacher most of the time and he was a great guy. He was a really good teacher. And he really helped me out when I, you know, when I had some hardships.” Stanley talked about a community college teacher who liked to have former students visit her and share their accomplishments. He commented:

> She likes seeing people come back from after graduating from the college [they're] transferring out to somewhere else. [She'd] like to see what they're doing for themselves. And really like to see people move on and get a higher education after that. So that helped quite a bit.

Students treasured the memories of teachers who showed empathy and compassion toward them. Toby also talked about having professors being accessible for extra help:

> I guess they'll like stay after, you know, like past their office hours if you needed help, or sometimes they'll take in rough drafts and they'll even look at your presentation or whatever and make sure it's okay or appropriate or whatever.

Overall, instructors who were personable, accessible, and flexible supported their success.

Participants also developed relationships with advisors. Advisors played a key role in their experiences in college. Similar to the affirming qualities noted above for faculty, advisors who were personal and made an effort to get to know their advisees received particular notice. To illustrate, Jan spoke of her relationship with her advisor:

> I was pretty close to my academic advisor. . .she taught some of the classes that I took, too. So, I mean, I knew her from classes . . . . I really felt like she knew who I was and she wanted the best for me. And she was looking out for me.

They praised the advisors who seemed to "fight" for the students, especially when accepting course credits. Oscar shared that he was quite pleased with his advisor at BGSU:

> My advisor . . . . He helped me out quite a bit. He really went to bat for me a few times. You know, there were some classes that were iffy. He wasn't sure, but he went ahead and said, 'you know, I've had you in some of my classes, I know you've had this experience,

> you know the material, we'll go ahead and put it through and we'll give it to you.' I was pretty happy about that.

In this example, Oscar's advisor acknowledged that he wanted to complete his degree in the shortest amount of time possible, so he was accommodating. Advisors like the ones exemplified here made an effort to know their advisees' personal situations and provided a significant amount of support to these students.

Employers/Community Members

What seemed to permeate throughout several stories was how having a flexible supervisor at work really helped them to effectively balance work and school responsibilities. There were many recollections of being able to change schedules, being allowed to do homework while on the job, making up lost time, and working extra hours. Jan said that working on the BGSU campus made scheduling quite easy because her supervisor knew she was a student and classes had to come first. She said, "I liked working for [the on-campus office] 'cause then you knew they work around your schedule. You have a problem, you go to them and they'll help you. And that's what I really liked about that." Even for an off-campus job, students found places of employment where the managers were sympathetic. Kevin worked in another town and commuted to BGSU, which has been fairly smooth because of the relationship he had with his boss. He explained:

> Well at work they're pretty flexible 'cause I'm part-time. And my supervisor, I actually know her from before she started working there, so she's pretty cool with me and I can just come in whenever.

It also helped that Kevin had worked at that place of employment for several years and had built some credibility with the management.

Oscar, who worked full-time and attended BGSU part-time, credited his supervisor for helping him to make the work-school balance more manageable. He shared:

> They've been flexible for me. They'll let me leave work if I have to take a class and then come back and make up my time after work. And sometimes I've had to take a class that kind of overlapped my work starting time and they were okay with that. Just work over and make it up.

Oscar also said that he was able to get a lot of homework done while on the job, which helped him tremendously, especially since he had a family at home to help raise. Others, such as Jim, who worked at a library, were also able to do schoolwork while working, which supported their endeavors.

Other community members who provided support included their parents' friends and parents of significant others. Pam said that one of her mother's friends who worked at a community college helped her to line up her classes for BGSU. Oscar commented about his friend's dad who really encouraged him to get a degree. Dwight spoke about a judge who was quite influential during his youth:

> [He] sat down the framework of what I needed to do to straighten my life up . . . and I decided well I really don't want to go to jail. . . . Did some of the things he said and wow, low and behold, you know it really does work.

This judge turned his life around and inspired him to become a lawyer. Participants found people in many circles who remained a source of motivation and support as they proceeded along their college journeys.

Faith

Not only did the students rely on people for support, but also a "higher power." Both Angela and Kelly specifically mentioned their faith as helping them to overcome obstacles. Angela said, "And, I would just really, you know, ask God to help me in the sense of like, give me the strength to go on each day." Kelly always felt like there was a "master plan" for her to follow and that God would lead her toward the right path. She said, "I'm just following on that trail trying to get over as many obstacles as I can to meet my fulfillment to whatever I'm supposed to be doing." Because of her upbringing and the overwhelming odds against her to break the cycle of poverty, Kelly often asked why God chose her to succeed, wondering "why me?", which she found to be quite humbling.

Participants received support from a wide variety of sources, namely people and their faith. A word of encouragement was never overlooked, as many talked about receiving a "spark" from someone who showed interest in them. The power of spirit was alive and well in some, and provided comfort as well as an outlet to regain their sanity amidst the chaos of getting a college degree.

Qualities of Successful Transfer Students

From the stories told about their journeys, several common themes emerged. They shared common traits, including confidence, eagerness, instrumental independence, sense of direction, utilitarian view of degree, and love of learning.

Confidence

During the interviews, it because apparent that the participants felt confident in their abilities. Especially for the first-generation college students, as they were the "pioneers" in their family to attempt college. For instance, Meredith talked about her experience, "Well, it was

overwhelming in the fact of this is all new, but it was never overwhelming to the point of 'I can't do this'." Students like Meredith had struggles in getting acquainted with all the "red tape" in college, but not to a point of impossibility. They had become competent in navigating the procedural elements of college, which provided them the confidence to keep going.

Because most were not strong students during their primary or secondary schooling, they hesitated to believe they could be successful in college. Many revealed their confidence when they shared stories of getting a good grade on an assignment or in a course. Jim recalled his first semester at the community college and said, "So, I said, okay, well, I'll take 12 credit hours. And, I ended up getting like three As and a B. . . . So, I figured, well this is not too bad." Stanley, for instance, got a perfect score on the first paper and the first quiz in his English class at the community college, so the teacher encouraged him to take an honors course, which helped him to feel good about his abilities.

Other stories of confidence pertained to getting over the age factor and whether students felt they could work as much as they did and still go to school. Angela talked about how, at the age of 29, she was well behind her peers in attaining a college degree. She reflected:

> So [being older] was kinda hard but then I was like, 'no, this is something I need to do.' This is something I need to get done. It's only going to better myself. So, I just had a lot of more self esteem—that 'I could do it' talks to myself.

In talking about her ability to work and go to school, Phyllis said, "Another great thing about [the community college] was I worked 50 hours a week and went to school full-time there. And I could do it. And I still got good grades there." Pam also worked many hours while going to school and although it was tough, she managed it and that boosted her confidence as well.

Eagerness

As stated earlier, because most were within one or two semesters of graduating, the likelihood that they would drop out at this point was minimal. The end was in sight and their goals of graduating were within reach. Hence, another common trait exemplified by the participants was their strong desire to move on with their lives. Typical of many graduating seniors, they expressed that they were ready to be done with school. Thinking about his future, Jim said, "I just can't wait to be done. I can just say that. Can't wait to be done. I can't wait to go to grad school and get my master's degree. Maybe a Ph.D. someday, I don't know." For many, being done did not mean being finished with college entirely, as several were planning to enter graduate or professional schools. These participants acknowledged that although they had more schooling ahead of them, they were anxious to finish their undergraduate careers at BGSU.

For some, they were not sure exactly what they would do after they graduated. Nevertheless, they felt ready to depart BGSU. For instance, Roy said:

> I really don't know. Just graduating, I guess. I mean, I'd like to go to grad school, but like I said earlier, I don't know what I'm going to do yet, so. Um, yea, that's about it. I'm not sure. I just want to get out of here. Get my degree and try and do something.

Some felt apprehension when they contemplated on their futures. Jim said, "That's the scary thing about graduating. You know, most people know where they're going and this and that. And I don't." Although some experienced the "fear of the unknown" when they thought about graduation, that uncertainty did not deter them from still being excited or anxious to finish and move on.

The students that had a better idea of what they wanted to do when they finished really were excited to graduate so they could start their professions. Pam wanted to enter the hospitality

industry as soon as she earned her bachelor's degree. She said, "I found something that I completely love and enjoy and can't wait to graduate and just get out there." Jan was looking forward to teaching, especially since she had completed her teaching methods class and had gotten a "taste" of classroom life. She said, "I really want to be done so I can have my own classroom and get the real experience." Phyllis needed a continual "change of scenery" in her life, so she was also ready to move on. These students were anxious to start their professions and put their "stamp" on the world. Toby shared a similar sentiment:

> It's just—getting done for me, it's like you know, where I—I can actually get done and move on and do what—move to the goals that I would like to accomplish . . . . Trying—even becoming a college professor, thinking what you can do to actually help students and stuff like that. These are, you know, motivational drives for me to get done.

Like Toby, some wanted to make a difference and find their place in society. Participants talked about the kinds of influence they could have with future generations, especially those from the teaching professions, which also motivated them to finish so that they could start impacting lives.

Instrumental Independence

All demonstrated that they had the ability to solve issues themselves. Instrumental independence involves finding information or resources on one's own to satisfy needs (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The students demonstrated a heightened level of independence in their stories, especially when they met a particular challenge. For instance, many took the initiative to seek out professors' office hours, make appointments, or simply just reach out and talk with the faculty whenever they encountered a problem. Kelly made the effort to interact with students who helped get over her apprehension regarding her age. Phyllis had a challenge at BGSU in which she could not reach her academic advisor. She said:

> I had an advisor here that was really—I would like email him all the time and he just never got back to me. And I would call him and he would never call me back or anything. And so I just kind of learned to work around myself. I just found the answers to my questions and didn't go through him anymore.

Phyllis demonstrated her instrumental independence because her original route to getting her questions answered was not working, so she chose another route and found her answers. Another example was found in Meredith's story, especially when she reflected about being a first-generation college student who had to figure out many things about college on her own:

> You know, okay now I know that this is where the teachers' offices are. You know, or something like that. Now I know that this is where we eat lunch and this is how the financial aid works. . . . Every semester it got a little easier, as far as if I was confused about something, I could go and figure things out.

Meredith's instrumental independence was also tied to her confidence because things got easier for her each semester. Because she found success in figuring out things on her own, she gained more confidence to continue.

Other stories of instrumental independence involved being proactive and showing initiative. Many had the attitude of "heading things off at the pass" to avoid problems. For instance, Jim met with an academic advisor at BGSU before even enrolling at the community college so he could align his classes to BGSU requirements and made sure they would transfer. Pam also took initiative when she first moved to BGSU:

> I got here and like, you get the letter you can move in Sunday before classes start. And I'm like, wait a minute, I've never been to Bowling Green before, I don't know the campus, I gotta find my classes. So, I emailed Res Life and asked if I could move in, like

> Saturday morning, just to give me that day to kinda walk around and get a little bit familiar with my surroundings.

Because Pam recognized that moving in the day before classes may not work for her, she took the initiative to contact the Residential Life office and requested to move in early. They honored her request so she was able to start her first semester at BGSU feeling better about her transition because she had at least an additional day to get familiar with her new surroundings.

Strong Sense of Direction

Although about half of the participants did not know what they were going to do or study while in high school, they later gained a strong sense of direction. How each participant found their way to their particular major was different. Some knew what they wanted to do since they were little, some encountered a turning point in their lives, while others just stumbled upon something they liked doing. They also were widely influenced in their vocational choice, but most notable was the influence of their parents. Several watched their parents struggle through life and that gave them the incentive to choose an occupation that they would enjoy.

For many, gaining a sense of direction was about convincing themselves that going to college and getting a degree in a particular major was what they really wanted to do. Roy, for instance, flunked out of the community college when he first enrolled. He then worked at a pizza parlor for a year before returning. In thinking about what helped him to return to school, he said:

> I worked for a year doing that and then I finally realized, you know, I just started thinking about like some of the people that I used to hang out with in high school . . . . And I said, you know, they're so far ahead of me. I am—I need to do something. I need to go to school. I need to get a good job . . . . And you know, things started sinking in then. And I

was like, you know after I worked at [the pizza parlor] for a year, I was like, this is a dead end. I'm not going anywhere with this job. So, that's why I decided to go back to school.

It was not until Roy took a break for a year that he became more serious about school and focused on his studies.

Another aspect of keeping focus was related to whether the students liked their major. Several were excited to be at BGSU so that they could take classes that were more focused on their major. Stanley revealed, "The focus of it all is finally here." Phyllis also felt good to finally have a sense of direction with her major after a couple of years of not knowing what she wanted to do. Lastly, Pam shared her joy in finding a vocation she loved and felt like her goals were within reach.

Having a sense of direction was not enough, however, as maintaining the drive to finish was paramount to degree completion. Dwight said, "It's all about trying to keep focus and not losing that focus. 'Cause it can go away and then you have to beat yourself back into submission so you can continue on." One of the reasons why they had a strong sense of direction was because they were so close to finishing. With only one or two semesters that remained, the "prize" of a bachelor's degree was in focus and helped the students to persist. Most felt like they could not quit now, as they were so close to being done.

Utilitarian View of Degree

All viewed the bachelor's degree as a means to an end, namely a good paying job. Additionally, they recognized that they needed a bachelor's degree to do what they wanted to do in life. For instance, Dwight needed a bachelor's degree to get a law degree; Jim, Jan, Phyllis, and Toby all needed a bachelor's degree to become teachers; Pam, Kevin, Kelly, Angela, Roy, Stanley, and Meredith needed a bachelor's degree to enter the industry they were pursuing. Only

Oscar did not necessarily need a bachelor's degree for his current employment at a plant; however, it was the lure of advanced learning (and a free education) that brought him to BGSU. When the participants encountered challenges, they mostly rationalized their decisions to persist because they perceived the bachelor's degree as the only way to attain their ultimate goal.

Not only did the participants view a bachelor's degree as a means to good job, but also as a means to a better life. Half came from low-income backgrounds, so the bachelor's degree was perceived as the "ticket" to financial freedom. Jim, a first-generation college student, came from a low-income background and described his home life as very stressful because there was not any money. When asked about when he started thinking about college, Jim responded:

> I knew from that point [in eighth grade] that I didn't want to follow that working class . . . . But, I guess just, you know, my parent's hardships, seeing them . . . everything was pretty tight. And, I told myself well, if I'm going to live middle class, you're gonna have a degree.

Kelly grew up in an inner-city housing development project and overcame considerable odds to attend college. Despite her mother struggling to keep food on the table, Kelly was studious because she knew that a college degree would break the poverty cycle that permeated her surroundings. She shared:

> I knew I wanted to get away from the environment I was in. . . . Everyday going to school, I would see prostitutes walkin' up and down the street. I'd see drug dealers, so it was nothing, nothing positive about my environment. . . . I always knew there was more to life. And I always wondered, what's outside of the doors, other than me stepping over a wino. There's gotta be more. Always knew that. So, I was in search of that.

Her desire for a better life provided Kelly with the drive and sheer determination to start and finish college.

Related to seeking a better life, many either did not want to do what their parents did, or their parents told them not to follow their footsteps. Students shared stories about parents telling them to go to college so that they could find something they enjoyed and not be tortured in their work. For instance, Phyllis said, “Looking at my parents and how hard they have to work and my dad hates his job and so he always says ‘stay in school and study hard so you can do something that you want to do’.” Toby also talked about his father who was an electrician and worked a very dangerous job. In explaining his father’s experience, Toby stated, “[It] just kept reminding me, like the best thing you can do is get an education so you don’t have to do this work.” Parents played an important role in whether the students gained a sense of the importance of education. They were influential in what they told their children, but more so in their actions. There was a strong sense that what motivated the participants the most about their decision to get a bachelor’s degree was watching either their parents succeed in what they were doing or struggle to make ends meet while hating their jobs.

Love of Learning

The last common trait to be discussed was that the participants seemed to like the learning process. For instance, Meredith encountered obstacles such as not liking her original major and some significant financial stresses. When asked what kept her going, she responded, “I enjoyed it . . . . I guess everything. Just being in school. Learning new things.” She sought out learning experiences in all she encountered at both the community college and BGSU. She encountered many challenges, but she continually perceived these situations as opportunities to learn more about college.

For most, getting a degree was not just about acquiring a good job, but also about enhanced learning. Roy was frustrated when he encountered a TA who apparently just passed everyone to avoid teaching. His frustration demonstrated his desire to not just "skate" through college, but to gain something substantial along the way. Dwight discussed his love for learning:

> The more I went to classes and stuff like that and learned about the different things, it seems like the picture just got more and more filled out . . . . Just I want to learn more about it, once you get that little taste of hey, wow, and then you apply it to real world things, like hey this is cool. And then it just builds from there.

Dwight reflected about higher education in broad terms. He appreciated the knowledge he was receiving and provided an example of how he now read newspapers differently than his coworkers at the factory. College helped him to become more aware of bias, thus he read papers and other news materials more critically.

Oscar's story exemplified a love for learning because he did not necessarily need a bachelor's degree for his current occupation, but chose to attend BGSU to further his education. He had a lot of personal pride about being a college student and the need to finish what he started, which helped him to persist. In reflecting on his desire to get a bachelor's degree, Oscar continued:

> And then I got into electronics and I wanted to excel at that . . . . so I just wanted to . . . learn as much as I could . . . . And I end[ed] up going to school I guess. . . . It feels important to me to finish this so that I can continue to be like that. Just to be the best at what I can be.

The desire for Oscar and other participants to not only achieve tangible goals such as acquiring a good paying job, but also seek out intellectual goals helped to propel them to graduation. Kelly talked about the value of being educated:

> It only makes sense. You don't jump to conclusions anymore. You don't feel oppressed anymore. And I don't care what anybody say, oh you're still gonna be Black. You know what? No, I'm an educated woman and I can walk in anywhere and do want I want to do. I can apply for a job that you applied for and if I don't get it, it's not because of my color. It's maybe because I didn't have all of the qualifications. But the next one, I'll get.

They recognized the value of higher education as a whole and acknowledged they can reap the many benefits of a college degree, above and beyond a paycheck.

The participants mostly demonstrated strong coping skills and acquired a "suck it up" or a "don't complain, just do it" attitude to help them persist through obstacles. Kevin stated, "I guess I just take it as it comes, usually." When talking about working and going to school, Phyllis had to cut back on her working hours. In response to her situation, she said, "Just do what you have to do, you know?." When asked what challenges they faced at either the community college or BGSU, the participants could only come up with a few answers, which was another indicator of strong coping skills. Students could not "rattle off" a list of issues or problems, which may have indicated that the challenges they faced were dealt with and no longer salient to them. Stanley summed up the strong coping skills possessed by all when he said, "I'm like on this little wave just riding it out."

Summary

The participants endured the "typical" obstacles to degree completion, such as not being a strong student in high school, having large gaps in attendance, coming from poor backgrounds,

financial issues, and struggling with the social and academic demands of college. But, they persisted and graduated or were nearing graduation. From the varying avenues of support they received and strong qualities they developed, they overcame challenges. By successfully meeting their challenges, such outcomes propelled these students to persevere and graduate. It provided them motivation and gave them the confidence that they can do it, as evidenced in their stories.

Conclusion

In describing their journey to the baccalaureate, each participant's story was different. They came from varied backgrounds and chose to attend a community college for various reasons. For the most part, the participants liked the community college. They liked that their classes were small in size, which allowed for individual attention from the instructors. They believed they received a quality education and good teaching from the community college. The students mostly felt that the workload was manageable, so much so that they could work long hours and save some money. Students also liked that the community college was located relatively close as most of them continued to live at home while going to school.

One of the biggest challenges at the community college was that they felt disconnected with their fellow students in class. Most went to class and then left, along with the rest of the campus community. They did not really make any friends at the community college. They did not like how the students in class did not have similar academic goals, were not all studying the same thing, which they felt made it difficult for the instructor to teach to such a heterogeneous group. Students also shared that community colleges did not seem to have the financial resources like four-year institutions, hence their services were not nearly at the level as those universities.

The transition to BGSU conjured up many feelings, ranging from fear and nervousness to excitement and eagerness. Most were not in debt until coming to BGSU. The participants

experienced many adjustments, similar to what native first-year students endure, such as feeling like a freshman again. For a couple of the participants, living on campus was a different experience. Feeling invisible in large lecture halls and not worrying about being called upon were recalled by some of the participants. Others also commented on differences in teacher expectations. Several indicated that “office hours” for professors was an alien concept to them. Others had more coursework to do, such as longer papers and more readings. Not all participants thought the coursework was more difficult, but rather there was just more of it and more was expected from them by professors.

What helped students in their journey to the baccalaureate was the support they received from family, friends, and employers. Some also got involved in student organizations and other campus activities. They had strong coping skills, in that they persevered through all their trials and tribulations that occurred during the transition and throughout their educational journey.

Pam epitomized the plight of the transfer student when she said, “I’m just trying to take the right classes at the right time.” But as the themes presented in this chapter illustrate, being a successful transfer student was not just about taking the right classes. Many factors were involved that contributed to a transfer student’s successful completion of a bachelor’s degree, some of which has been illuminated in this study. Their stories and the themes emerged from the data exemplified what it took to overcome obstacles and persist. The ideas generated formed the basis pertaining to implications for future research, policy, and practice.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The focus of this study was to explore the experiences of BGSU seniors who were community college transfer students. I took a different approach from other studies about transfer students by attempting to gain a holistic (i.e., from the community college through the four-year institution) understanding of why certain community college transfer students succeeded. I sought to discover how the students navigated through different institutional types and persisted to graduation. This final chapter includes a discussion of findings and implications for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.

Discussion

This discussion begins with a focus on psychological, social, environmental, and cultural aspects influencing retention. This is followed by a discussion of the findings in light of theoretical perspectives on retention.

Aspects of Retention

Nora (2007) identified four major aspects of student retention: psychological, social, environmental, and cultural. From the data introduced in Chapter Four, the three aspects of retention most salient in helping students in this study persist were: psychological (educational aspirations, goal commitment, resilience, and satisfaction), social (relationships), environmental (preparation and financial aid), and cultural (navigation of rules/norms).

Psychological Aspects of Retention

The psychological aspects of student retention include the affective (feeling) and cognitive (thinking) manners that influence student behavior. The participants were highly motivated and determined to reach their goals. Student motivational factors have long been considered an essential element of persistence (Ramist, 1981). The psychological characteristics

of students (e.g., self esteem) can greatly impact their academic and social integration to an institution (Napoli & Wortman, 1998; Tinto, 1993). Therefore, it is not surprising that the psychological aspects of retention including aspirations, goal commitment, resilience, and satisfaction were most prominent in the students' stories.

Educational aspirations and goal commitment. Although the literature indicates that community colleges tend to "cool out" students' educational aspirations (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Pascarella et al., 1998), it was evident that this was not the case for the participants. Most knew early in their educational careers that they would get a bachelor's degree and nearly all had the intention to transfer to a four-year university. This mindset indicated they had high educational aspirations, which is a known positive influence on persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The students from low-income backgrounds also had at least bachelor's degree aspirations from the beginning, which did not fit the profile found in other studies indicating that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tended to have lower educational aspirations than their peers from higher income levels (Grimes & David, 1999).

Some students not only had aspirations to earn a bachelor's degree, but also to extend their pursuits to graduate and professional schools. For instance, Dwight knew he wanted to go to law school as soon as he started college. Kelly also knew she wanted a master's degree while in high school. It was quite surprising to discover how many participants planned to continue their studies beyond the baccalaureate. This is not a new concept, however, as McCormick and Carroll (1997) and Rivas, Pérez, Alvarez, and Solorzano (2007) also discovered that several former community college students were enrolling in graduate schools. It appeared that in this study, the community college was not only a means to a bachelor's degree, but also to a graduate degree. Having graduate school aspirations also likely contributed to persistence, as students

perceived the bachelor's degree as a step that needed to be completed before reaching higher educational goals.

The commitment of these students to attain a bachelor's degree stemmed from their perspective that such a degree would lead to a good life. All were going to college to get a good job and have access to higher paying employment. Therefore, they would jump over whatever hurdles they encountered because they needed the degree to attain life goals. Johnson (1987) concluded in her study that transfer students who associated the value of their education to future employment were more likely to graduate. Bean and Metzner (1985) used *utility*, meaning a student's perception of the usefulness of a college degree for employment opportunities, in their non-traditional student attrition model and found that this variable had a negative relationship with attrition. In other words, the more useful the student perceived the degree to be, the more likely the student would be to persist.

Having a utilitarian view of the bachelor's degree provided the participants a goal to which they could commit. Dedication has had a powerful effect on persistence for both community college students (Ashburn, 2007; Glenn, 2007; Mohammadi, 1994) and transfer students (Lee & Frank, 1990; Maclay, 2007). Having a strong desire to finish college and establishing long-range goals particularly help students of color to persist (Allen, 1999; Sedlacek, 1989). Additionally, Kinnick and Kempner (1988) and Piland (1995) found that transfer students who completed bachelor's degrees had clear goals when they entered the community college. The students in this study perceived the bachelor's degree as their ticket to financial freedom. Therefore, they were committed to finishing so that their dreams could be realized. Having this perspective, however, was not the only reason to get a bachelor's degree, as many wanted to improve society and enjoyed learning for learning's sake.

Having strong goal commitments not only helped these students persist, but also was a common piece of advice participants would share with others. Setting priorities and committing to them was suggested by many participants. Others recommended making small, reachable goals every semester because that helped them to succeed. Although it was important to set goals and develop a plan, some felt that being flexible with those plans was just as important. Pam stressed that her ability to adjust when plans changed helped her to continue on and not get discouraged. Overall, they learned the value of having focus, setting clear goals, and knowing what they wanted to do in life. Their lessons became recommendations to others who wished to follow in their footsteps.

Resilience. For the participants, the path to the baccalaureate was not linear, but rather convoluted with many detours and delays. One thing that helped them to overcome the transfer challenge was sheer resilience. They encountered stumbling blocks, most notably the acceptance of credits only as electives and the adjustment of graduation requirements upon transfer. The lack of community college credits transferring toward the bachelor's degree was a source of profound frustration for the students, and resulted in consequences, such as extending time-to-degree and increasing costs for tuition. This frustrating aspect of the transfer process was noted in other studies as well (Davies & Dickmann, 1998; Poch, 2005). Students were not allowed to continue with the BGSU course catalog they relied upon while enrolled in courses at the community college, but rather were subject to the catalog in effect upon transfer, which often meant revised graduation requirements. Dunn (2004) also discussed this challenge and termed it as a curricular barrier to transfer student success. Although they were frustrated, the students coped with these struggles by "shrugging it off" and moving forward, which exemplified their resilience.

Other studies have noted the impact of resilience on student outcomes. For instance, Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa (2005) wrote about "resilience to overcome the high hurdles" (p. 161) when they found that students from the lowest income bracket who were least academically prepared for college were 11% more likely to secure a bachelor's degree than students from the higher income brackets with similar paths. Lanaan (2007) applied an anthropological lens to the transfer student experience and compared their transition to that of sojourners. He asserted that "possessing the coping mechanisms to deal with the stress, and the extent to which they have the skills to fit in and become involved highly impacts their successful cross-cultural relocation" (p. 41). Suarez (2003) described Latino community college transfer student's resilience as having emotional competence that allowed them to "persist in the face of frustrations" (p. 110). The descriptions of strong coping skills depicted in the Cabrera et al, Lanaan, and Suarez studies resembled that of the students in this study, providing further support that developing strong coping skills and being resilient helps students to persist.

Satisfaction. The participants in this study perceived that they experienced more triumphs than challenges; their affirmations outweighed their struggles. It was interesting to hear countless stories of obstacles and difficulties, only to then hear how much they liked college. Because they liked what they were doing in college, they kept going. Some participants tried out their majors not knowing if their interest would last, but ended up liking them and continued. Many found a major that they enjoyed. Participants would use terms like "clicked" or "came together" to describe their relationship with their choice of major.

Along with liking their major, several loved their classes and their teachers, particularly at BGSU. Despite the challenges and negative aspects they encountered, students still liked the campuses and the people. Overall, the students found their collegiate experience to be positive.

Satisfaction, or the extent to which a student enjoys being a student, is a strong motivator, particularly for non-traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Astin (1984) and Tinto (1993) argued that if students enjoy learning, they are more likely to remain in college. This study helped to affirm that students who are satisfied with their college experience, despite obstacles encountered, may persist.

Social Aspects of Retention

While psychological aspects focus more on the individual, social aspects pertain to the interaction between the individual and others. Social support, in the form of individual relationships and social networks, also has been linked to persistence (Tinto, 1993). Students received emotional support from a variety of sources. From their relationships, the participants also received material aid and services that helped them to cope with problems more effectively. Students credited their support mechanisms as being instrumental in their success.

Relationships played a large role in the students' persistence to a bachelor's degree. Participants encountered both positive and negative role models. Positive role models included people who took an interest in them, such as teachers, employers, and family members who told them "you can do it." Parents also were of noteworthy importance. Students wanted to make them proud and not disappoint them, which was a significant motivator. Kevin specifically credited the support of his parents for his success. Negative role models included coworkers and parents who did not want the students to follow in their footsteps. By living a life the students did not want to emulate, their parents became role models for them of what not to do. This finding conflicted with other studies claiming parents of low-income students tended not to be supportive of their children's academic endeavors (Cabrera et al., 2005; King, 1996). The

students in this study had parents who supported them by not wanting them to have dead-end jobs and encouraged them to get an education so that they could do something they enjoyed.

Relationships students developed with faculty, friends, other transfer students, and advisors all helped them through the community college, point of transfer, and BGSU. Students learned to develop relationships with their instructors at the community college, a habit they carried over to BGSU. Student-faculty interaction is a known enabler of persistence (Astin, 1993b; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). What the students experienced resonated with the value or importance of supporting relationships (i.e., encouragement) that is reflected in the literature as positively impacting student outcomes, particularly for students of color (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Sedlacek, 1989; Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). It was apparent that relationships were important for the students of color in this study. For instance, Angela talked about the encouragement she received from her mother and grandmother. Kelly credited some of her success to her classmates. Oscar acknowledged his wife as a strong supporter. Meredith mentioned her father as a strong influence.

Because relationships were so important to their success, many participants recommended finding good people to help. Some suggested finding good professors and building strong rapport with them because they had reaped many rewards from making an effort to getting to know faculty. Others suggested that students should listen to their advisors and have faith in their knowledge. Talking to as many people as possible and avoiding people who had dropped out helped some to overcome their fears, particularly the older students. Overall, they found that seeking good relationships with faculty and advisors and finding good people to talk to about college better prepared them in making good choices about where to go and what to do.

Environmental Aspects of Retention

Social aspects pertain to relationships between students and other persons; environmental aspects focus on the relationship between students and their institutions. Environmental factors have also been shown to enhance integration and persistence (Napoli & Wortman, 1998). Astin (1984) argued that environmental factors such as living on campus, participating in college activities, and working on campus significantly affect a student's persistence in college. Most of the students in this study did not fit that profile, but identified other environmental factors that contributed to their success. The environmental factors discussed here include the small nature of the community college and the means in which the students financed their education.

Preparation. Choosing to attend a community college ably prepared the participants for the rigors of a four-year institution. Many did not think they would have succeeded if they had started at a four-year institution primarily because they were not ready academically or emotionally for a university. The nature of the community college was not as intimidating for these students as they felt a university would be. For instance, the small size of the community college classroom resulted in the individual attention from instructors. This environmental aspect of the community college helped the participants "catch up" academically with their peers and develop strong study skills. For instance, some felt they had to be prepared for class all the time because with such a small class, they knew the instructors would call on them. Piland (1995) also argued that small classes may help students acquire the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to be successful at a larger university. Students received the attention they needed to succeed in the classroom and developed good habits (e.g., being prepared for class, asking questions, getting to know faculty) that carried over to BGSU, which can be construed as academic integration and

is a known enabler of persistence (Astin, 1993b; Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Financial aid. The low tuition at the community college helped to make college affordable, and ability to pay is an influential variable in student retention (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1992; Cabrera, Stampen, & Hansen, 1990). The low cost influenced the students' choice to attend a community college and being debt-free was an affirming outcome of attending a community college. Tuition cost was one of the most notable differences between the community college and BGSU for these students. The comparatively high cost associated with attending BGSU was a considerable obstacle, but the students persisted with the help of financial aid (primarily loans) and working while going to school. To meet the financial challenge of a college education, students relied on an environmental factor, financial aid, which substantiates the claim that receiving aid has a positive effect on persistence (Cabrera et al., 2005; Nora, 1990; St. John, 1990; Voorhees, 1987).

Students in this study were not pleased to take out loans, but felt they had no viable alternatives. Researchers have indicated that students from low-income backgrounds, students of color, and community college students do not want to acquire school loans (Burdman, 2005; Dowd, 2006). Most participants seemed to share this sentiment. Although it is important for students to be prudent about student loan debt, bypassing loans all together can delay future earnings by prolonged enrollment because students may choose to attend school part-time to avoid taking out loans.

Several participants were financing college themselves, resulting in them having to work a considerable number of hours while going to school. Many researchers agree that working more than 20-25 hours per week negatively impacts persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985;

Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Working long hours while attending college produced consequences for these participants, such as not having (or allowing) free time to engage in "typical" college activities, like student organizations. Students chose classes that would fit their work schedule rather than ones that would satisfy degree requirements, which adversely affected their transfer course credits and extended their time to degree. However, the students were able to persist despite working 30-40 hours per week. Having strong time management skills and agreeable supervisors helped them to be successful. Because they were highly committed to their work and class schedules, students took advantage of the spare time they had between classes or lull times at work, for instance, to study. Research has shown that time spent studying positively impacts several educational outcomes, including degree attainment (Astin, 1993b). In addition to time management skills, students received much support from their supervisors that also helped them to succeed. Many negotiated schedules with their supervisors to accommodate class schedules or course assignment requirements. Having flexible supervisors was key to effectively managing school and work responsibilities.

Cultural Aspects of Retention

Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) argued that Tinto's interactionalist theory (i.e., both the student and institution interact in a variety of formal and informal situations that impact persistence) may be linked to an acculturation perspective. Therefore, the authors asserted that how a student adjusts to the cultural norms established on a college campus can influence retention. Others have termed this ability as having cultural capital. Oldfield (2007) defined cultural capital as "the knowledge, skills, education, and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed

easily" (p. 2). Navigating the rules and norms at both the community college and BGSU was evident in the students' stories, particularly for the first-generation college students.

Attending college can be a confusing experience, particularly for those who were the first in their family to pursue higher education. Terms such as bursar, registrar, and FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) were alien to many of these students. Not only were they unaware of where to go for help, but also did not know what questions to ask. Students had to get acquainted with new rules at both the community college and BGSU. They were used to the centralized nature of the high school, only to find a large, decentralized system in college. The transfer process was also puzzling and students needed help navigating through all the forms and prerequisites. Figuring out the financial aid process, for instance, was difficult for several students. Overall, many lacked cultural capital and were at the mercy of faculty and staff to provide accurate and timely information.

Luckily, help was available. Advising was key to a successful transfer experience. Several talked about advisors negotiating courses for graduation requirements, which saved time and money. Jim only spoke to BGSU advisors, even while at the community college, resulting in most of his courses counting toward his bachelor's degree. His perception that the community college advisors would be unreliable indicates a need for more inter-institution communication among faculty and academic advisors.

What also helped these students most to negotiate norms at both institutions, was taking initiative to solve problems. Several sought out professors or utilized resources such as the Internet to find information. This level of independence is reflected in the literature as a helpful trait for transfer students. Suarez (2003), for instance, found that Latino students who took a proactive approach to reaching goals were successful in achieving them. Other studies have

shown that taking initiative and relying on oneself for information was pivotal to transfer students' overall success (Davies & Casey, 1998; Flaga, 2006; Lanaan, 2007; Townsend, 1995).

Gaining more cultural capital meant that the students needed to take full advantage of the educational opportunity afforded them and have a vested interest in the higher education experience. Participants not only took the initiative to get involved academically, but also socially as well, and they suggested others to do the same. Many asserted that outside classroom experience was just as important as inside the classroom. Pam advised that students get involved with clubs and organizations because it helped her tremendously in finding a niche and gaining instant friends. Others mentioned getting involved academically and engaging in learning. They had made an effort to learn new things and were not afraid to ask questions, which helped them through the coursework. They avoided playing the passive by-stander in college, but instead became active participants, which helped them to acculturate and gain a sense of belonging.

Overall, the psychological factors could be considered to be student inputs and the social, environmental, and cultural aspects encompassed all that happened to the participants while attaining their bachelor's degrees. This conceptual framework provided a depth of understanding to the transfer student phenomenon. It is also important to reconnect the results with the theories identified in the literature pertaining to student retention and is discussed next.

Theoretical Perspectives on Retention

In the student retention literature, terms like "involvement", "engagement", and "integration" are used interchangeably, but deserve distinction. Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2007) argued against this interchangeable use. According to Astin (1984), involvement focuses on the individual. In contrast, engagement is both what the student does and what the institution does to produce positive student outcomes; it is reciprocal. Lastly, integration is more of a state

of being, as in how well the student feels connected or fits with the institution (Wolf-Wendel et al.). These results both supported and contradicted the findings of Tinto, Astin, Pace, and Bean and Metzner's models of student change.

Tinto

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) summarized Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) model of student departure, stating Tinto's hypothesis that students enter college with established characteristics that influence their initial commitment to the institution by shaping their interactions with faculty and peers, thereby impacting their social and academic integration (or lack thereof) that ultimately affects their decision to remain or leave college. Because most did not want to follow in their parents' working-class footsteps, the students in this study came to the community college with the intent to transfer and complete a bachelor's degree (i.e., pre-college characteristics). Thus, these findings support Tinto's theory in that their motivation to reach the baccalaureate influenced them to choose college level courses, perform well academically, and interact with faculty (i.e., academic integration).

Tinto (1993) also argued that a student's social integration, through involvement in campus activities and peer group interaction, is just as important as academic integration in committing to an institution. Only a few students in this study, however, integrated themselves socially at either the community college or BGSU. At the community college, most went to class and then left campus immediately, leaving little time to interact with peers. Many described themselves as not being into the "social scene" or participating in any clubs or other activities at BGSU. Students who worked full-time or were older did not have many friends on campus and felt particularly detached from the social aspects of college. Their experiences conflicted with

Tinto's theory in that they still persisted without the social integration component, as defined in his model.

Astin

Astin's (1984) theory of involvement focused on a student's psychological energy devoted to learning in college. He was interested in student behavior and claimed a lack of involvement adversely affected persistence. This study both affirms and contradicts Astin's theory. For instance, Astin defined an involved student as one who "devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students" (p. 297). Participants devoted much psychological energy to studying and other academic activities (e.g., group projects), but not so much in organizations or with peer groups. The students learned a lot both at the community college and BGSU, and enjoyed the learning process, which supports Astin's notion that the more students learn, the greater chance they will remain in college. Although a few participants lived on campus and became involved in campus activities, the majority did not, which conflicts with Astin's argument that an uninvolved student is less likely to engage in the learning process. Their experiences suggest that convenience and academic engagement likely contributed more to their persistence than more traditional forms of cocurricular involvement.

Pace

Briefly, Pace's (1984) Quality of Student Effort postulated that it does not matter nearly as much how students get to college, as what they do once they get there. In examining transfer student adjustment, Lanaan (2007) found that students' quality of effort in both the community college and four-year institution contributed to a successful transition. Because the participants were active in their college endeavors, such as seeking out help, their stories were reflective of

Pace's notion of quality of effort. The habits they developed while at the community college, such as interacting with faculty, carried over to BGSU, resulting in a positive educational experience. The findings suggested that important quality of effort variables contributed to students' positive college experience. Therefore, this study helped to affirm Pace's concept of quality of effort and echoed the conclusions in Lanaan's study.

Bean and Metzner

The theory that most closely resembled the students' experiences was found in Bean and Metzner's (1985) model pertaining to non-traditional student attrition. The authors defined non-traditional as older, part-time, and commuter students. This model is similar to the other models mentioned with a notable exception: the authors asserted that "nontraditional students are more affected by the external environment [e.g., work and family obligations] than by the social integration variables affecting traditional student attrition" (p. 485). The findings in this study supported Bean and Metzner's argument that students with a high utilitarian view of the degree, high satisfaction, and strong goal commitment reduced their intent to leave college. The authors postulated that students who effectively managed the stresses associated with balancing college with other life obligations also reduced their intent to leave. This notion resonated with the participants' strong time management and coping skills that helped them to persist. It is interesting to note that although this model was designed to explain non-traditional student attrition, the "traditional" (i.e., younger, full-time, residential) students in this study also shared several of the characteristics Bean and Metzner described.

Summary

The keys to being a successful transfer student are not isolated, but rather are interwoven. This study provided support that, like student departure, student retention is an "ill-structured

problem" (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004), meaning that it is complex and a simple solution does not exist. The transfer process can be difficult, so much so that several students advised others to go straight to a four-year institution and avoid the community college to better streamline their educational progress. In this study, all four components (psychological, social, environmental, and cultural) were evident and played a role in student persistence. It appeared that the psychological and social factors were most prominent in their stories. What was highlighted in the results resonated with several student departure theories. The problem of low retention rates among transfer students is far from being fixed, but what was gathered from this study has garnered more insight for practice and questions for research.

Implications

The data in this study reflected the experiences of community college transfer students who were earning baccalaureate degrees. Hence, the results may have implications for current community college students who seek to transfer and subsequently earn a bachelor's degree and college administrators who wish to help such students with their endeavors. The key findings presented in this chapter should bring forth dialogue among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The themes from this study yielded many implications for admissions officers, financial aid officers, academic advisors, institutional researchers, faculty, and other student affairs professionals at both community colleges and four-year institutions. Leading implications for this study relate to encouragement, communication, finances, information, networking, non-cognitive factors, and record-keeping. Some recommendations offered are not necessarily simple or easy to implement, but nevertheless need to be considered to defend against losing the historic

advantage that student success in higher education is the primary engine fueling American economic competitiveness (Ewell & Wellman, 2007).

An Encouraging Word

One can never underestimate the power of encouragement. In addition to family members, several participants encountered someone who took a personal interest in them and that made a significant difference. Teachers, advisors, faculty, and other community members challenged and motivated them to live better lives. To help students navigate through the transfer process, encouragement and support is needed and can be shown in a variety of ways. Because educational aspirations are an important consideration in student retention, people who work most closely with students need to continually encourage them to set high goals. Students should be encouraged early in their educational careers (e.g., middle school) because several participants said they thought about college during their primary and secondary schooling. Most participants in this study had strong intentions to attend a four-year institution and that likely helped them to persist. It is imperative for practitioners to work with students in establishing such intentions early, especially at the community college.

This study demonstrated that the transfer student's path to the bachelor's degree is not linear. Hence, faculty, advisors, and university administrators need to be made more aware of this and encouraged to provide transfer students additional support and encouragement. Transfer students themselves need to learn how to negotiate the stresses associated with college attendance and be shown support mechanisms. Transfer orientation programs can serve this need. Shulock and Moore (2007) advocated for substantive orientation programs, particularly going over the logistics of a new campus to students. Dwight, for instance, found orientation programs that provided information about resources available as particularly useful.

Furthermore, community colleges need to make a more concerted effort to advertise their support services, possibly through faculty communication and course syllabi, as students indicated they were not aware of such programs.

Inter-Institutional Communication

The students describing their transfer of credit process as relatively smooth gives credence to the articulation agreements and transfer checklist systems currently in place in the state of Ohio. It was affirming to hear stories of the State of Ohio articulation agreements working. Many talked about transfer checklists and community college course catalogs that had asterisks next to courses indicating what courses would transfer. This practice should continue. It is interesting to note that those participants who earned an associate's degree seemed to have more courses count toward graduation than other students in the study. There appears to be a benefit to earning an associate's degree when negotiating transfer course credits and this should be emphasized during academic advising at the community college. In addition, incentives should be in place encouraging students to earn associate's degrees because it helps in the transfer process. Massachusetts, for instance, has a joint admissions program in which community college students who identify a four-year university and complete an associate's degree with a 2.5 GPA or higher are automatically admitted (Dunn, 2004). I recommend taking this approach one step further, adding that students should also be allowed to apply the same course catalog used while at the community college and continue to satisfy the university requirements with this catalog upon transfer.

In the state of Ohio, articulation agreements were designed to increase course credit acceptance by four-year institutions. However, given that the majority of students in this study had several community college course credits count only as electives, further review of such

agreements is warranted. Accurate and timely communication between community colleges and four-year institutions is essential for transfer student success. Jim was very pleased with his transfer experience because he only visited with a BGSU advisor to ensure his credits would count toward his degree. Institutions should consider formalizing a process in which advisors from four-year institutions meet with community college students who intend to transfer. Zinser and Hanssen (2006) noted that articulation agreements throughout the nation have required student advising at both institutions, joint appointment of instructors, and institutional and faculty liaisons to review and update the agreement on a yearly basis. California and southern states, for instance, have implemented a standardized community college curriculum that is accepted at all public four-year institutions within their respective states (Rivas et al., 2007; Petrie, 2007).

Financial Assistance

Finances were a big part of the student experience. It is what they liked about the community college, what they noticed most in their transition to BGSU, and was the primary reason why they worked while going to school. To support these students, college leaders should consider providing additional financial incentives and assistance. With federal financial aid diminishing, many colleges are taking the initiative to provide their own awards that they can better regulate and control. For example, BGSU recently began offering transfer student scholarships (Bowling Green State University, 2007) to entice transfer students to the institution. More institutions should consider this practice. Institutions should also consider highlighting what scholarships transfer students are eligible for on their websites and other promotional materials, similar to first-year award initiatives, as many participants commented that they did not know what scholarships they could apply for when transferring.

It was interesting to discover how many students chose a community college because they were offered a scholarship. These institutions should continue and expand that practice. States like Virginia, Alabama, and Massachusetts have implemented creative solutions, such as providing financial incentives for students to begin at community colleges by allowing them to continue to pay community college tuition prices upon transfer to a four-year institution (Dunn, 2004; Keller, 2007; Petrie, 2007). During the Ohio State of the State address, Governor Strickland promoted a dual enrollment program in which high school seniors could attend their first year of college simultaneously free of charge (Office of the Governor, 2008). Ideas like these deserve serious consideration.

Another component of financial assistance is debt management education. A troubling finding was the rationale several participants used to acquire student loans. They tended to have an attitude of "I'll take care of it later" regarding loan payments without giving much thought about the accumulation of loans or outlook on debt-to-income ratios upon graduation. With rising concern over student loan default rates (Flint, 1997; Harrison, 1995), and bankruptcy rates for people under the age of 25 (Smillie, 2004), these students seemed to have a nonchalant approach to debt without a clear plan for repaying those loans upon graduation. The students generally rationalized their decision to acquire loans in that their degree will enable them to get higher paying jobs and figured they will be able to afford loan payments when the time comes. Although this may be true, a more concerted effort by financial aid and student affairs offices to provide more extensive educational programming regarding financial matters, including debt, is recommended.

Conversely, it is also important for students who attend school part-time to avoid acquiring student loan debt be made aware of the potential consequences of that choice. Namely,

there should be educational programs that highlight the cost-benefit analysis of securing loans to attend college, particularly for community college students. Attending school part-time prolongs enrollment and delays future earnings, which has significant financial implications. Additionally, part-time enrollment is a notable risk factor to persistence, so students who contemplate decreasing their credit hours should be counseled appropriately so they can make well informed decisions regarding enrollment.

Accurate and Timely Information

Students asserted that advisors who provided good details about what courses were being offered during which semester, were key to their success. Additionally, students who were able to find information on their own also greatly contributed to their persistence. Providing accurate and timely information is a necessary ingredient in student retention, requiring institutions to be open about what courses transfer. This accessibility minimizes the perception that the transfer process is secretive to students. This information exchange dilemma has received national attention as a Senate reauthorization bill was introduced requiring colleges to publicly disclose their policies on transfer credit acceptance (Field, 2007). Having a transfer student website dedicated to transfer issues, such as course listings and acceptance policies, would benefit both advisors and students by helping them to make more informed decisions about course selection. This website could also provide information about additional transfer student needs, such as housing, employment, and other support services.

Social/Peer Networking Opportunities

Although the social integration, as defined by Tinto (1975), was not as salient in the students' experiences, most talked about the importance of having friends in college. Many chose a college because they had friends there. Some enjoyed getting to know other transfer

students and just getting connected at BGSU. Kelly, for instance, credited a peer study group as key to her success at the community college. Therefore, college leaders should consider being more intentional in providing social networking opportunities for transfer students. For instance, some institutions offer on-campus living arrangements in which transfer students are housed together. In addition, when reviewing the summary of results during the second meeting, all of the participants responded that they appreciated knowing that they were not alone in their thoughts and feelings about being a transfer student. By providing formal avenues for peer group interactions, college professionals provide a means for transfer students to figure out the norms and rules at their new institution.

Power of Non-Cognitive Factors

Many students considered their academic abilities to be average. Often, they asserted that their grades did not reflect their aptitude. Despite mediocre academic performance in high school, they persevered to baccalaureate degree completion. This finding provided further support that university officers should seriously contemplate using non-cognitive variables, such as educational aspirations and goal commitment, as primary criteria for admission rather than traditional measures such as GPA and standardized test scores. Sedlacek (e.g., 1989; 2005) is one of the pioneers advocating for use of non-cognitive factors in college admissions because they have been shown to have validity in predicting success in higher education, particularly for students of color and non-traditional students (Noonan, Sedlacek, & Veerasamy, 2005). For instance, Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) identified several key non-cognitive variables, such as positive self concept (strength of character, determination, independence), realistic self appraisal (accepts deficiencies and works hard at self-development), and preferring long-term goals to short-term (able to respond to deferred gratification), all of which the students in this study

possessed. Noonan and colleagues also advocated for the use of non-cognitive variables at community colleges that have begun to implement selective admissions processes in crowded programs, such as health sciences. By utilizing non-cognitive variables at the onset of college admission, both institutions and students can benefit from a likely increase in retention.

More Complete Data Warehousing

This study provided further evidence of the need for a more thorough data tracking system. Adelman (2007a) and Bailey, Crosta, and Jenkins (2007) have advocated for a fuller and better accounting of matriculation through student unit records. For instance, students in this study did not fit the profile of "typical" transfer students described in national studies (Andres & Carpenter, 1997; Grubb, 1991; Lee & Frank, 1990) as being most likely White, male, coming from a higher socioeconomic status, and having higher test scores and high school GPA. In addition, through traditional tracking mechanisms, most national datasets examine first-time, full-time students enrolled during a particular time period and are measured to graduation. Thus, transfer students often are not included in institutional graduation rates because they did not originate at those institutions. For example, in this case, BGSU would not get credit for the 13 participants in this study who transferred to the university and graduated. Although 13 might seem like an insignificant number, those students came from a study population of more than 700 probable degree completers. Therefore, conceptually, BGSU could overlook a considerable cohort of students that should be considered in its graduation rates.

In addition, community colleges need to be judged by more than who they graduate. About half of the participants did not earn an associate's degree, so they would be deemed as drop-outs under usual measures, which would reflect poorly on the community colleges they attended. Instead, being able to track transfer students and follow them to degree completion

would reflect well on both the community college and four-year institution. Overall, this study indicated that too many success stories are not recognized using conventional parameters and do not get the credit they deserve.

Implications for Research

This exploration into the experiences of community college transfer students produced many implications for further inquiry. The focus of this study raised further questions about drop-outs, students of color, first-generation students, and faculty/staff. Longitudinal studies and research pertaining to cultural and environmental factors also need to be further explored.

Drop-Outs

Due to time constraints and convenience, this study did not examine community college transfer students who did not persist to the bachelor's degree. A part of investigating student retention involves understanding why students drop out of college. Although it is important to look into success stories, as this study offered, it is also necessary to consider transfer students who faltered in obtaining a bachelor's degree. To further investigate the likelihood that community college transfer students who succeed at a four-year institution have strong psychological and social factors, future research could involve students who failed to reach graduation. These students' perceptions as to what they found lacking could provide more insight into the necessary background characteristics and support mechanisms for success. This would be useful information to those committed to increasing retention rates among transfer students.

Students of Color

Of the 13 participants, four were students of color. Of the 700 students in the study population, 66 were identified as students of color. The relatively low number of these students in the study population was somewhat surprising, given that community colleges nationally

enroll a significant number of underrepresented students. It raises questions regarding challenges for students of color who begin at community colleges with the intent to transfer to a four-year institution and thus warrants further study. This likely also reflects the demographics of northwest Ohio, the region from which most participants were drawn. Additionally, the complexities of race and how they impact transfer student retention, particularly at predominately White institutions, need to be examined further. Transfer students grappling with the intersection of race with other factors, such as age, gender, and income level, may encounter additional challenges along the journey to the baccalaureate that should also be investigated.

First-Generation Students

More than half of the participants in this study were first-generation college students. They encountered a particular challenge in that their parents provided a level of support to them that was unequal to those who had parents who went to college. Parents were able to provide moral support, but the first-generation college students had to navigate their way through an alien world of obscure processes, unable to lean on their parents for practical guidance on policies and procedures. Because their circumstances are distinct from students who have parents with college degrees, transfers who are first-generation college students need to be examined more closely. Oldfield (2007) asserted, “Tales told by former poor and working-class first-generation college students can help today’s newcomers survive and prosper in the academy” (p. 3). Students in this study relied on outside sources to figure out college norms. Therefore, their perceptions of what they need from institutions to support them would provide useful insight for those promoting the success of this group.

Faculty/Staff Perspectives

Examining the transfer challenge from the perspective of those other than students was outside the scope of this study. However, it would also prove fruitful to gain insights from those who are intricately involved with transfer students, such as faculty, academic advisors, and transfer credit office staff. Because academics were an integral component of the experiences, hearing from faculty and staff would add considerably to the participants' stories. Few studies have examined what goes on inside a classroom (Nora, 2007), particularly at community colleges, so future research could include interviews with faculty and staff pertaining to their perceptions of successful transfer students.

Longitudinal Studies

What helped all of the participants persevere was their belief that the bachelor's degree would be worth it in the end. Therefore, it is important to conduct longitudinal studies that follow students beyond graduation to discover whether their beliefs about the worthiness of their degree are realized. The perspectives of transfer student alumni could provide further evidence that the utilitarian view of the degree is a powerful promoter of persistence. Students in this study sometimes had difficulty recalling their community college experiences. Hence, longitudinal studies in which a cohort of students is followed from the onset of community college enrollment through baccalaureate graduation, with annual interviews, could provide rich descriptions of their experiences and yield greater insight into what helped them to succeed.

Longitudinal studies can also highlight time-to-degree issues as they pertain to persistence and future earnings. Examining the costs associated with enrolling in college full-time versus part-time and how that is related to the benefits received upon the completion of a degree (e.g., securing a higher-paying job) may prove fruitful in helping students with their

enrollment decisions. Such studies may find that manageable student loans are a prudent investment, especially if they divert students away from the high risk persistence factor of part-time enrollment.

Cultural and Environmental Factors

In this study, psychological and social factors of student success were most prominent. This does not mean, however, that cultural and environmental factors were absent. There were hints of cultural and environmental influences, such as class identity and campus size, but were not probed extensively in this study. It could be that BGSU is "transfer-friendly" in that the smaller size and emphasis placed on teaching, compared to large, research universities, helped to make the adjustment easier on the students. In many societies, the cultural majority assumes that assimilation rests with the minority (McKinnon, 1996). Transfer students can be considered a minority group compared to native students on college campuses. College leaders cannot assume that transfer students will assimilate on their own, so more studies about the impact of cultural and environmental factors on the success of transfer students are needed. Lanaan (1996) urged researchers to move beyond GPA studies and examine the social and psychological perspectives of the transfer adjustment process. While this study helped to fill that gap by identifying several aspects of persistence, there is a reason to move beyond the social and psychological perspectives and examine the cultural and environmental impacts of the transfer student adjustment process (Nora, 2007).

Summary

The research community needs to encourage more studies on transfer students and more qualitative inquiries to uncover the complexities of the transfer conundrum. Nora (2007) argued that non-cognitive measures of success, psychosocial effects, and coping processes as they relate

to student retention are not extensively studied. This study revealed some of those factors and the findings largely corroborated in the existing theory and research. For instance, because the study sample was stratified by enrollment status, it is not surprising that the majority of students in the study sample (N = 91), as well as the participants, were enrolled full-time. However, this result still illustrates the importance of full-time enrollment as a strong enabler of retention. Overall, there is no "magic pill" to persistence. This study provides insights into the life of community college transfer students and raises new questions for inquiry. Rising college costs and higher enrollment of non-traditional students may result in a larger transfer student population and administrators must be well informed to facilitate their success.

Conclusion

Simply put, the students in this study were successful because they wanted a college degree and were willing to work hard to earn it. In discussing the success of low-income students, Adelman (2007b) concluded, "What it takes to help students become all that they can is hard work, very hard work" (p. 51). Being successful in college is hard work. The success of these participants was the convenience of the community college and the university, coupled with other supporting factors. The participants attained their goals because they were diligent in pursuing them. Even when they faced hurdles, both personal and institutional, they remained focused and were not derailed by frustration or cynicism. Professionals vested in the success of transfer students can seek to remove barriers and help students develop the skills to get through them.

For the students in this study, the community college served as a means to the baccalaureate and it did not lower their degree aspirations. Not only can the community college serve as a gateway to upward social mobility, but it can also sustain social class standing, as

evidenced by the majority of students in this study who self identified as coming from middle-income backgrounds as they entered the community college. Community colleges need to continually advocate that they can be a viable option for bachelor degree aspirants and foster the transfer function. Despite evidence in the literature to the contrary (Bingham-Newman & Hopkins, 2004; Dougherty, 1987, 1992; Doyle, 2006; Dunn, 2004; Jacobs, 2004), the transfer process was generally an affirming experience for these students. They were evidence of the positive outcomes of transferring. They did succeed, even with obstacles encountered. Their means to success (i.e., psychological, social, environmental, and cultural factors) were interconnected and so there is no simple explanation for persistence. Transfer students are a significant resource to both the community college and four-year institution (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). These students were a good risk, a worthy investment. Transfer student retention is an issue that requires sustained attention in policies and practices on the part of government, higher education institutions, and individual citizens.

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APPENDIX A (INVITATION LETTER)

[DATE]

Dear:

As a doctoral student in the higher education administration program at Bowling Green State University, I am conducting my dissertation study entitled, **"Success Stories: Community College Transfer Students Nearing Baccalaureate Completion"** to learn about the experiences of transfer students who are close to completing a bachelor's degree. Because you are a BGSU senior who transferred from a community college, I am inviting you to participate in my research project. If you choose to participate, a **$50.00 cash stipend** will be awarded to you at the completion of the research.

I plan to interview 10-12 BGSU seniors for this study. I am asking you to participate in two, separate one-on-one interviews that will be approximately 60 minutes in length. These interviews will take place at the researcher's office (Education Building, Room 330) unless you request another location. These interviews will be audiotaped. In addition, you will be provided with opportunities to read and revise your own statements, transcriptions of the interviews, and my interpretation of your responses.

All recordings, transcriptions, forms, and other documents will be coded to protect your identity and will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Your name will not be included in my results, as a pseudonym will be used in research findings. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you will be free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or explanation. Your participation (or non-participation) will not influence your relationship with BGSU.

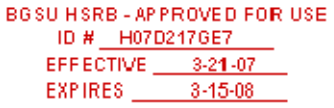
Learning what factors influence a community college student's pursuit of a bachelor's degree will benefit university administrators in gaining a better understanding of the transfer student experience and can influence future policy decisions. You may benefit from insights gained about your journey to your degree.

Please complete the enclosed Participant Profile form and return it in the postage-paid envelope provided by **[DATE].** Please submit just the cover sheet if you do not wish to participate and you will not be contacted again. I will contact you regarding the possibility of participation if I do not receive the Participant Profile form and/or cover sheet by **[DATE].**

For more information, please contact me at (419) 372-6016 or tjrice@bgsu.edu or my advisor, Dr. Maureen Wilson at (419) 372-7321 or mewilso@bgsu.edu. If you have any questions or comments about the conduct of the study or your rights as a research participant, you may also contact the Chair of the Human Subject Review Board at Bowling Green State University at (419) 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you and hope you will decide to participate and help me with my dissertation study.

Sincerely,



Tamara Rice
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX B

Participant Profile

NAME: _____

❒ **I am interested in participating in this study**. (please fill out both sides of this form)

Please complete the form(s) and email it to tjrice@bgsu.edu by [DATE]. If you have questions about the form(s) or this study, please contact Tamara Rice at tjrice@bgsu.edu, 419-494-1947 (cell), or 419-372-6016 (office).

Please be assured that your information is confidential and accessible only to me and the chair of my dissertation committee, Dr. Maureen Wilson, Associate Professor, Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs.

Contact Information:

Home Phone:_____ Email:_____

Cell Phone:_____ Work Phone:_____

❒ **I am NOT interested in participating in this study**. (please fill out this side only)

Please return this form by [DATE] to: (envelope provided)

Tamara Rice
Higher Education and Student Affairs
Bowling Green State University
330 Education Building
Bowling Green, OH 43403

Participant Information

(Compete this side only if you are willing to participate in the study)

1. Please list the name(s) of the college(s) you attended before coming to BGSU:

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. What year did you start going to college after high school graduation? _____

3. While at your community college(s), were you enrolled:
   - ❒ Part-time (less than 12 credit hours per term)
   - ❒ Full-time (12 credit hours or more per term)
   - ❒ Mixed part-time and full-time

4. While at your community college(s), were you employed:
   - ❒ Not at all
   - ❒ Part-time (less than 40 hours per week)
   - ❒ Full-time (40 hours or more per week)
   - ❒ Mixed part-time and full-time

5. Approximately how many credit hours did you complete at your community college(s)?

   _____

6. What was your GPA at your community college(s)?

   _____

7. Did you receive an Associate's degree?
   ❒ Yes ❒ No

8. Expected BGSU graduation date:
   - ❒ December 2007
   - ❒ May 2008
   - ❒ August 2008

9. At BGSU, are you currently enrolled:
   - ❒ Part-time (less than 12 credit hours per term)
   - ❒ Full-time (12 credit hours or more per term)

10. Are you employed:
    - ❒ Not at all
    - ❒ Part-time (less than 40 hours per week)
    - ❒ Full-time (40 hours or more per week)

11. Did your mother or guardian go to college?
    ❒ Yes ❒ No ❒ Don't Know

12. Did your father or guardian go to college?
    ❒ Yes ❒ No ❒ Don't Know

13. While in high school, did you think you were going to get a bachelor's degree?
    ❒ Yes ❒ No ❒ Maybe

14. Please indicate the type of household you consider yourself to come from:
    - ❒ low-income
    - ❒ middle-income
    - ❒ high-income

15. Please add anything else you think the researcher should know about you:

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

Thank you for your willingness to participate!

APPENDIX C

First Interview Guide

Research Question: What experiences of selected community college transfer students have led to their success in attaining a baccalaureate degree?

1. How was education perceived in your home while growing up?
2. What kind of student were you when you were young?
3. What led you to attend a community college?
4. What was it like to be a community college student?
5. What did you think of the teaching/coursework at the community college?
6. What motivated you to transfer?
7. How did you choose BGSU?
8. What was the transfer experience like?
9. What is it like to be a BGSU student?
10. What do you think of the teaching/coursework at BGSU?
11. What do you think of your overall educational path?
12. If you had a loved one who wanted to get a bachelor's degree and was starting at a community college, what advice would you have for him/her?

Second Interview Guide

1. What is your reaction to the profile/transcripts/summary of results? Was there anything you did not agree with? Was there anything that you felt was a significant part of your experience that I did not mention?
2. What do you think it takes to be a successful transfer student? How do you compare yourself with that description?
3. Why do you think you were successful?
4. Please describe your interactions with faculty/staff at the community college. At BGSU.
5. When you started at the community college, how long did you think it would take you to complete a bachelor's degree? How long has it taken? How do you feel about that?
6. Seeing where you are today, do you think now it matters where you started?
7. What, if anything, did you learn about yourself by being a participant in this study?

APPENDIX D

RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Consent for Participation in Social and Behavioral Research

I consent to participating in a research study entitled **Success Stories: Community College Transfer Students Nearing Baccalaureate Completion**. This research is intended to develop a better understanding of community college transfer students and their experiences in completing a baccalaureate degree.

I have been informed that:

- I must be at least 18 years old.
- My participation is completely voluntary.
- I will be interviewed by the researcher for approximately 60 minutes on two occasions.
- My interview will be audio taped and transcribed (typed). Tapes will be secured in the researcher's office and destroyed upon the conclusion of the study.
- My responses are confidential. My identity will be known only to the researcher and I will be identified by a pseudonym in research findings.
- I will be provided with opportunities to read and revise my own statements, transcriptions of the interviews, and the researcher's interpretation of my responses.
- I am free to discontinue participation in the study at any time.
- I may refuse to answer any question.
- There are no foreseen risks to participating in this study.
- My decision to participate in the study (or not) will not impact my relationship to BGSU in any way (e.g., grades or class standing).
- Interviews will take place in the researcher's office (330 Education) unless another location is requested by me.
- This study, and my participation in it, can result in a better understanding of the community college transfer experience and can influence future policy decisions.
- I will receive a $50.00 cash stipend at the completion of the research.
- I may have a copy of this signed form if I wish.

[OVER]

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ID # H07D217GE7
EFFECTIVE 3-21-07
EXPIRES 3-15-08

For more information, please contact the researcher, Tamara Rice at (419) 372-6016 or tjrice@bgsu.edu or the researcher's advisor, Dr. Maureen Wilson at (419) 372-7321 or mewilso@bgsu.edu. If you have any questions or comments about the conduct of the study or your rights as a research participant, you may also contact the Chair of the Human Subject Review Board at Bowling Green State University at (419) 372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

I agree to participate in this study and sign this consent form freely and voluntarily.

Signed:_____ Date:_____
(Research Participant)

I also have been informed that the researcher is requesting access to my transcripts that are in possession in the Registration and Records Office at Bowling Green State University. I understand that the use of my transcripts will better enrich the quality of this study. I also understand that my granting permission (or not granting permission) will not impact my ability to participate in this study.

I hereby:

- ☐ give Tamara Rice permission to gain access to my transcripts from Registration and Records.
- ☐ do <u>not</u> give Tamara Rice permission to gain access to my transcripts from Registration and Records.