

ABSTRACT

Does Gender Matter? Transfer Students' Perceptions on Their Transition Experiences

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This study focuses on the role of gender in the meaning-making processes of transfer students and their selection and use of institutional and non-institutional resources during their transitions to a new university. Contrary to previous research that shows transfer students want to participate in similar types of transition resources that are provided to first-year students, these participants discussed that they wanted their previous collegiate experiences to be recognized and validated by their transfer institution. Findings indicate that expectations and experiences of the individual play a more significant role in the selection of resources than gender. Implications for future research point to studying the inclusion of transfer students in Greek Life activities.

Does Gender Matter? Transfer Students' Perceptions of Their Transition Experiences

by

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Transfer Student Stress

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DEDICATION

To my Aunt Mary Lyn

For giving me a place to come home to when I was a transfer student

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Transfer students are unlike any other population of college students. They arrive at their transfer institution with some academic and campus life experience, but yet have no experience in navigating their new college or university. As a result, transfer students often have higher standards placed on them from administrators, but in some respects they need as much assistance as incoming freshmen (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Transfer students have experience in handling the workload of collegiate level academics but also need types of support usually reserved for new students (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Investigating how transfer students make meaning of their adjustment periods might have implications for understanding why they decide to persist or not persist toward attaining a baccalaureate degree. Earning a college degree is increasingly essential to gaining access to social and economic capital in today's society (Baum & Ma, 2010). Gaining insight into what transfer students think about their experiences at a four-year institution will help college administrators enhance the educational experiences of this population of students (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Finding out how transfer students cope with the stressors they experience during their transition show whether or not males and females need different resources to help in their transition process.

Transfer Students

In order to provide a positive educational experience for transfer students, college administrators need to understand the diversity of needs of this population. Transfer

students comprise a large percentage of today's college-going population: about 60% of college students attend more than one university (Adelman, 2006; Peter & Forest Cataldi, 2005). However, faculty and administrators often lack a comprehensive understanding of the needs of this group (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Li (2010) found that students who terminate their enrollment at one university and transfer from either community college or a four-year institution to another four-year institution are 70% less likely to finish a degree than those who stay enrolled. Furthermore, prior research shows that transferring between institutions can have lasting negative academic and psychosocial repercussions on students. At least some of the responsibility for a successful transition is borne by the colleges and universities to which students transfer (Townsend, 2008). However, the university where this study was conducted has published retention rates of transfer students of 88.5% for fall 2012-spring 2013 and 92.0% for fall 2013-spring 2014 ([Institution] University, Institutional Research and Testing, 2014). Examining the perceptions of transfer students at this university may help administrators understand what types of resources transfer students use in order to persist at the transfer institution. Increasing awareness of what transfer students need to successfully adjust to the four-year institution could improve their experience educationally and developmentally.

Transfer students must make a variety of adjustments when they arrive at the four-year college or university. According to Townsend (1995), many students who transfer to four-year institutions from community colleges not only have trouble adjusting to the academic rigor, but also face non-academic challenges in their adjustment processes as well. Some of these non-academic challenges include learning campus geography, becoming familiar with unique campus vocabulary and acronyms,

understanding academic policies and procedures, grasping how the academic advising system works, learning how to utilize the university-wide computer system, understanding how and when to register for courses, and learning the traditions and culture of the university (Grites, 2013). These studies show a need for colleges and universities to be intentional about creating ways to orient transfer students to multiple aspects of the institution to alleviate unnecessary stress on this group of students.

Coping and Stress

Understanding how transfer students cope with the stress of their transition process is a crucial part of implementing effective programs and support systems for this population at the institutional level. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined psychological stress as a “relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (p. 19). The effective use of coping resources allows individuals to succeed despite being in stressful situations. Holahan et al. (1996) defines coping as “cognitive behavior efforts to reduce or eliminate stressful conditions associated with emotional distress” (as cited in Rambo, 2008, p. 25). Colleges and universities provide various services to help students cope with academic and personal stressors, but few of these are geared towards transfer students. Further study is needed to examine what stressors transfer students face and how colleges and universities can provide resources to help transfer students cope with the transition. Many transfer students have to adjust to the academic rigor of their new university. Hills (1965) described this process as *transfer shock*. Because of this research, universities began providing resources such as orientation sessions and faculty partners to help transfer students improve their chance at a successful academic career.

Recently researchers have begun to study transfer students' psychosocial adjustment to the university. Townsend and Wilson's (2006) qualitative study on transfer student adjustment shows that transfer students think that they have a lot more to learn about the university than just how to navigate academics. The transfer students in their study reported that they did not think the university provided them with the resources that they needed to adjust to other areas of campus life, and that this caused them stress. Transfer students struggled to build social connections to the university because they did not know how to join campus organizations. The findings identified that the transfer students wanted to be provided with similar transition resources as first-year students. Therefore, further examination of what types of resources transfer students use outside of the institution to cope with stressful transitions is needed.

Gender Differences among Transfer Students

Gender differences are reflected in the experiences and demographics of transfer students. Surette (1999) found that women are less likely than men to transfer from two-year colleges to four-year universities. Furthermore, 62.4% of female transfer students completed their degrees from four-year institutions, whereas 60.6 percent of male students persisted at the four-year institution (Shapiro et al., 2013). Understanding gender differences in coping mechanisms among college students is an important starting point toward understanding what resources male and female transfer students rely on during their transition. For example, Misra et al. (2000) found that women perceived more academic stressors than men, but that men think that life events are less stressful in general. These findings suggest that the needs of transfer students may differ by gender. Male and female transfer students might need different types of institutional resources in

order to adjust to the four-year institution based on their appraisals of their environments and circumstances.

Gender Differences in Stress and Coping

Further research on gender and stress by Day and Livingstone (2000) investigated how males and females perceive and use social support. When perceived stressfulness was controlled for, gender differences disappeared. However, the results of the study showed that women are more likely to seek social support than are males. Campus involvement is one way that transfer students can have social support. Wawrzynski and Sedlacek (2003) found that female transfer students who were more involved in the campus community were more likely to have a higher amount of self-efficacy and developed more professional skills than female transfer students who were not involved on campus. Perceptions of the importance of institutional resources as a coping mechanism during the transition process is not fully understood.

Statement of the Problem

Even with all we currently know about how transfer students' use transition resources and the gender differences in stress and coping, serious questions persist: are there differences between the ways male and female transfer students perceive the sources of stress during their transition and the resources that the institution provides for them? This study also examines what resources transfer students rely on outside of the institution to cope with their transitions as well. Very few studies have used qualitative approaches to assess the spectrum of needs transfer students have when arriving at the transfer institution. This study relied on in-depth interviews to examine whether or not

male and female transfer students need different types of support to have successful transitions. Thus, this study addresses the following research question and the following sub-questions:

Do male and female transfer students perceive and use institutional and non-institutional resources differently in order to cope with the stress of the transition process?

1. What are the primary sources of stress during transition for males and females?
2. What institutional and non-institutional resources do transfer students use?
3. How do male and female transfer students perceive resources? How do they use resources?
4. What factors influence the selection and use of transition resources?
5. Do the experiences that transfer students have with institutional and non-institutional resources shape their attitudes and perceptions of their persistence at the university?

Significance

Learning how transfer students perceive the resources the university provides and what they did personally to get through the transition is a starting point to understanding this phenomenon. Furthermore, looking for possible gender differences in how male and female transfer students cope with their transitions to the four-year institution aids in administrators' and student affairs professionals' understanding what specific types of resources are needed to meet the needs of all transfer students.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Current Literature

Understanding the unique difficulties that transfer students face is important so that faculty and administrators know how to facilitate their success inside and outside of the classroom. Previous research on transfer students has mainly focused on their academic adjustment to their new institution. However, little research has been done on what types of institutional and non-institutional resources transfer students use to cope with their transition. Furthermore, the existing literature on the experiences of transfer students at four-year universities does not consider the role that gender differences in coping and adjustment styles has on transfer students' abilities to persist at four-year institutions. Although a few studies examine how transfer students perceive institutional resources and whether gender differences affect how transfer students perceive and use institutional resources to cope with the stress of their transition, much can still be learned. By researching the role that gender differences have, if any, on students' resource use and perceptions during the transition process, college administrators will gain greater insight into how to better meet the academic and social needs of transfer students. Furthermore, the phenomenological tradition of this study may help college administrators understand how male and female transfer students perceive, select, and use resources. Learning how transfer students experience the stressors of their transition and adjustment is necessary in order to provide effective resources to help them adjust both academically and psychosocially to the new institution.

Gender Differences in Perceived Stress and Coping Mechanisms

Despite all that is known about the challenges of the college experience generally and the specific challenges that transfer students face, the role of gender in coping with stress has not yet been studied with a population of transfer students, and in fact, is not widely studied with typical undergraduates either. Day and Livingstone (2000) state that there has been little research on gender differences in perceived stress and use of social support among college students. In their study, they surveyed 186 undergraduate students at a Maritime university. The participants were given five stressful scenarios and asked to rate how stressful they perceived each one to be. The findings show that men and perceive the stressfulness of situations differently. The researchers also state that future research is needed to show the relationship between stress, gender, and social support.

A study of gender differences and coping styles among graduate students demonstrates the promise of this approach. Matheny, Ashby, and Cupp (2005) examined the relationship between how male and female graduate students use coping resources to deal with stressful life events and physical illness. The study included 127 female and 60 male participants. The results show that females are more effective in their coping skills than are males, even though they reported more illness and stress. This could be because men did not want to report illness and stress in order to avoid being seen as inferior (Matheny, Ashby, & Cupp, 2005). Even though this study used a sample of graduate students rather than transfer students, the role of gender differences in coping may be applicable to all populations of students. Since female students report greater levels of stress than males, and cope more effectively with it, college administrators should seek to

understand the coping mechanisms that male and female transfer students use to handle stressful situations in college so that they can provide meaningful resources to help these students transition to the new institution.

Moreover, studies show a correlation between college student stress and life satisfaction. Weinstein and Laverghetta (2009) surveyed 104 females and 38 males at a regional college in Oklahoma. Two surveys were used to gather data. The first survey measured life satisfaction, and the other measured stress in college students. The results show that college student stress is negatively correlated with life satisfaction. Gender differences were found in the scores of the college stress survey, but there were no significant gender differences in regards to life satisfaction. As with Weinstein and Laverghetta (2009), females reported higher levels of stress than men did. The implications for these results are that college administrators need to address the issue of stress when trying to help students persist, as previous work by Weinstein (2008) shows that many students who leave his university leave because they are overstressed. When working with transfer students, college personnel need to consider how their institutional resources make the transition less stressful in order to help transfers persist at the university. Because females report more stress than men, institutional resources might need to be structured to accommodate the needs of both male and female transfer students.

Practitioners should also be aware that because women and men perceive stressful situations differently, they might also look for social support from different types of non-institutional resources. Males and females' perceptions of their levels of stress and social connectedness affect their abilities to relate to their environment (Lee, Keough, &

Sexton, 2002). Lee, Keough, and Sexton (2002)'s study looked at the effects of social appraisal of the campus culture, social connectedness, and stress levels of both college men and women. The researchers used a modified version of Lee and Robbins' (1995) Social Connectedness Scale and Sexton et al.'s (1999) Appraised Status of Social Groups Scale to assess the participants' perceptions of their social connectedness to campus. The results indicate that women who felt stressed because they were lonely perceived the campus environment to also be negative. Therefore, sense of social connectedness affects how individuals view their social environment. However, men had much more negative appraisals of campus than did women based on their sense of social connectedness, but men reported lower levels of stress based due to a lack of social connectedness. The aim of this study was to clarify what transfer students perceive they need in order to have a smooth transition and if the need for adjustment resources differs by gender.

Experiences of Transfer Students

Academic Adjustment

A majority of the research on transfer students has focused on their academic adjustment and success. Hills (1965) coined the term *transfer shock* to refer to the drop in academic performance that many transfer students experience throughout their first semester at the four-year institution. This terminology alerted faculty and administrators that transfer students enter the institution at different levels of academic preparedness. The negative effects of transfer shock impact academic and social aspects of adjustment.

However, academic effects and corresponding resources have received far more attention than social resources transfer students rely on.

The concept of transfer shock set the framework for further research on transfer students, which led to the exploration of research regarding other aspects of the transfer experience, and represented a new epoch in the study of transfer students. Graham and Hughes (1994) state that subsequent research on community college transfer students examines the characteristics of the institutions that relate to these students' success at four-year institutions while also inspecting how demographic characteristics of the students affect their persistence at the four-year institution. Laanan's (2001) research indicates that a transfer student's experiences at his or her previous institution may have an effect on affective and cognitive outcomes at the four-year institution. These findings suggest a need for a study focused on understanding the transfer experience and the complexities of individual's perceptions and use of coping resources. Examining how past experiences shape students' expectations will help to uncover the nature and source of their perceptions of institutional and non-institutional support structures.

Prior research on perceptions of transfer students has focused solely on academics, not psychosocial adjustment. Research by Laanan (2007) examined the academic adjustment of transfer students. The goal of this study was to expand on the previous research on transfer shock to gain a better understanding of the complexity of the transition process that community college students who transferred to a four-year research institution experienced. This study had two research questions: the first asked what demographic, community college, and university factors contribute to positive academic adjustment; the second asked what are the most influential factors in predicting

a successful adjustment (e.g. GPA, psychological, sociological, or extra-curricular). The results indicate that students who have negative perceptions about the environment of four-year institutions experience difficulty in adjusting to the academic standards at four-year institutions. The results also show that a lack of intellectual self-confidence and a low GPA were negative predictors of academic adjustment. However, the two main factors contributing to positive social adjustment were involvement and opportunities to socialize with friends. The findings also show that demographic backgrounds such as race, age, and honors participation do not play as big of a role in positive social adjustment to the four-year institution. This study only explored the academic adjustment process and coping mechanisms. It did not examine how transfer students cope with adjusting and integrating into the total campus environment. It also did not consider any gender differences in the adjustment strategies that are used by the transfer students.

Links between psychosocial variables and academic adjustment with transfer students have been studied as well. Robbins et al. (2004) conducted a meta-analysis on psychosocial variables, college achievement and retention. The results show that academic self-efficacy predicted GPA and retention after controlling for high school GPA and standardized test scores. Academic goal setting and time management skills were also predictors of retention. Dennis, Calvilo, and Gonzalez (2008) built on this previous research and studied the ways that academic self-efficacy, personal and career motivation, and college commitment contribute to post-transfer academic success. The results show that students with low peer support are less likely to persist than students who have social support. Further study of the role that the use of non-institutional

resources, like peer support, play in the adjustment of transfer students is needed to determine what coping mechanisms are most meaningful to male and female transfer students. The results also indicate that students who experienced transfer shock had difficulty bouncing back academically. Examining how transfer students think about and use other types of resources, like campus organization involvement, orientations, and transfer peer groups is important to understand what other types of resources the university can provide to help their psychosocial adjustment to the university as well.

Perceptions of Institutional Resources

Research indicates that transfer students need more than just academic support from the university. Current research on university resources only examines specific transition programs, rather than the broad picture of transfer students need in order to have a smooth transition. Including in the analysis non-institutional resources that transfer students use to cope with the transition will provide further insight into what else they might need in order make the adjustment smoothly. Townsend and Wilson (2006) conducted a qualitative study that found that transfer students might need more initial assistance when they arrive at the university. The researchers found that transfer students need to understand how community colleges and research universities differ. Most students that were interviewed for the study said that they did not receive any help from the four-year institution in figuring out which credits and courses would transfer to the receiving institution. Several of the participants stated that they used the internet instead.

Another finding was that the majority of participants were dissatisfied with transfer welcome week. They wanted to hear more about fees, applying to graduate programs, how to use university services. The transfer students also wanted an

orientation similar approach to that of the freshman experience. The transfer students in this study thought that the university saw them as more mature than freshmen, but in reality the participants felt like freshmen in the sense that they did not know anything about how to use institutional resources. The authors state that universities need to provide a “hand hold” for transfer students during the first few weeks of their first semester (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 454). By asking transfer students what resources they would like included to help them in their transition process would help the university provide for them and ensure a better educational experience at the four-year institution. Therefore, by examining resources as students perceive and identify them, this study will increase the field’s understanding of transfer student’s coping strategies and support needs. Knowing what sorts of resources they find helpful, which resources they chose not to take advantage of, and what resources they think would have helped them that were not provided will give clarity into what transfer students really need to adjust to the new university.

Providing social support such as peer mentoring programs can help minority groups overcome academic and non-academic barriers of transition. A phenomenological study by Shotton, Oosahwe, and Cintron (2007) found that American Indian students at a public university thought that being involved in a peer-mentoring program helped them overcome academic barriers. This research was conducted through in-depth interviews with seven participants who represented different tribes and both reservation and non-reservation communities. Five of the participants were female and two were male, reflecting the ratio of female/male American Indian students at that particular university. The researchers found four common ways to establish the peer-

mentoring relationship: commitment of the peer mentor, care and concern of the mentor, if the mentee perceives the mentor as admirable, and the mentor and mentee's ability to relate to each other. Using a phenomenology to study the students' perception of their mentoring experience captured the nuances and experiences of the participants more holistically. Gaining deeper understanding of perceptions of an institutional resource among a group of students that is not commonly studied lays a foundation for this study in terms of methods and common themes, although the two sample populations are different. Instead of looking at the experiences of a racial minority group, this study will examine the experiences of transfer students, a group that functions like an organizational minority within the larger institution. My study also considered the role of gender differences in perceptions of experiences and resources. However, the setting was at a private institution in the South instead of a public school in Oklahoma and only pursued the concept of race in the examination of transfer students' needs only as participants raised it as an issue.

Summary

Taken together, the current literature points to a gap in our understanding on how male and female transfer students perceive and use institutional and non-institutional resources to cope with the stress of their transition process. Gaining an understanding of the perceptions of transfer students on what they are currently doing to transition psychosocially to their new university gives insight on how to provide institutional resources that alleviate the stress of the transition process. This insight may help transfer students transition more easily because their needs will be better understood. Examining what resources transfer students use outside of the institution to help them transition is a

step that will help administrators know what resources they can provide to supplement the non-institutional resources transfer students use to cope, specifically looking at whether or not males and females need a different variety of resources to aid in their transition processes.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Researchers utilize qualitative methodology to understand how individuals make meaning of their experiences, circumstances, and other objects (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). In this study, I used an interpretive approach to better understand the meaning that transfer students assign to their experiences of transition stress, and the resources they turn to as a result of their experiences. I also explored the role of gender differences in the identification and use of coping strategies. As an exploratory phenomenological study, I used focus groups and interviews with current first-year transfer students at a private, religiously-affiliated university in order to gain in-depth understanding of their perceptions of how institutional and non-institutional resources help them deal with the stress of the adjustment. Using a phenomenological approach allows researchers to gain insight into how the meaning making processes of individuals shapes their understandings of social life and experiences (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Since phenomenology as a research tradition focuses on the experiences of individuals and how they understand those events, taking this approach to gaining insight on how transfer students make sense of their adjustment is most appropriate for the purposes of this study (Patton, 1980).

Data Collection Approach

The data for this study was collected through focus groups and in-depth individual interviews with an even number of male and female transfer students (n=7 total).

Participants were first interviewed individually and then were invited to participate in a focus group. Doing in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews provided insight into each individual's perception of his or her own transfer experience. Asking open-ended questions such as "What has the experience been like for you?" "What aspects of your transition experience were most difficult for you?" "What types of resources have you used to help you with the transition process?" "How do you cope with stress, and why do you choose those things as stress relievers?" provided data that the field and profession can use to better understand how transfer students, by gender, interpret their needs and viable resources during a stressful situation (see interview protocol in appendix B). This process shed light into how transfer students, as a group, interpret their transition experiences. Furthermore, by participating in the focus group, participants had an opportunity to discuss what they think of the institutional resources that the university provides. They were invited to discuss what types of non-institutional resources they use in order to cope with the transition. By asking participants to reflect on their perceptions in a group setting, I was able to see that participants share similar, although not identical, perceptions on their transfer experiences. This helped explain what resources are contributing to successful or unsuccessful transitions.

Setting, Selection, and Protection

The focus groups and interviews were held on the campus of the transfer institution. The participants were identified through a stratified convenience sample, identified in coordination with the Director of the Transfer Living-Learning Community and using snowball sampling from other peers at the site of this study. The participants were selected from among three participant groups: those that participate in a transfer

living learning community, those that participate in a student organization for transfer students, and those that do not participate in either organized group. Participants were selected in this manner so that multiple types of transfer experiences can be studied in order to gain a more extensive understanding of a wide range of perceptions, including why transfer students select to use the particular resources as they adjust to the university. The participants were invited to participate via their university email address. The participants were asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the beginning of the study. The document stated that they could choose not to participate in the study at any time without repercussions and can refuse to answer any question that they would not like to answer. The informed consent form clarified that all information the participants provide will be used by the researcher for research purposes only and that a pseudonym sheet is the only way that their names are tied to the raw data. I maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of all students through the use of pseudonyms and generalized descriptions of people, groups, institutions, and places. This was reiterated to participants at the beginning of the interviews and focus groups.

Data Analysis

I analyzed data in a two-cycle coding process. In the first cycle of the coding process, each interview is analyzed individually. The second cycle allows researchers to look for themes among all of the data. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through the use of Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word. In keeping with the aims of this study I used Holistic Coding during preliminary exploratory coding cycle, which attempts “to grasp themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole [the coder as a ‘lumper’] rather than by analyzing them line by line [the coder as

a ‘splitter’] (Dey, 1993, p. 104). Because I had a general idea of what broad categories of information I was looking to investigate within the data, lumping the pieces together in the first round of coding was beneficial to the exploratory, phenomenological nature of this study. The second cycle of coding will use a Pattern Coding technique. Pattern Codes are “explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. They pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unity of analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). Pattern Coding is appropriately used to develop major themes, identify causes, rules, and explanations in the data, and to examine social networks and patterns of human relationships that the participants mention (Saldana, 2013). Pattern Coding helped identify patterns of institutional and non-institutional use among male and female transfer students, and also aided in deciphering how transfer students cope with stress.

Trustworthiness of Process and Findings

In the qualitative research tradition, the concepts of reliability and validity are expressed through several sub-parts of trustworthiness. The trustworthiness of the process and findings in this study are upheld through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility, the congruence of the findings with the social reality of the participants, are pursued by using a triangulation of data sources such as focus groups and interviews, through iterative questioning to check for consistency in responses among the participants. Collecting data in multiple forms allows the researcher to see congruence among the participant’s answers. Member checks with participants, a way to confirm that interpretations reflect the intentions of participants, were done by asking participants to review preliminary findings for accuracy and by sharing the results

of the study with all of the participants. Debriefing with peers, including the thesis chair, the Director of Transfer Admissions at this university were used to discuss my perceptions on the research and also provided insight and new ways of thinking through the findings. I also pursued credibility through the use of negative case analyses if there were data points that did not fit within the emerging themes I identified. Analytic transferability, which refers to the ways the concepts developed through this study can be generalized to other contexts as individuals in other settings view them as applicable, and dependability, or providing sufficient explanation that researchers in other contexts could reproduce the study, was promoted through extensive use of participant narratives, and a full explanation of data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, confirmability means that the results are due to the meaning-making of the participants and not my own preferences. I pursued confirmability through my statement of positionality (Appendix A) that describes my previous experience as a transfer student and my relationship to the Transfer Living-Learning Community at this university that has influenced my interest and research approach towards this topic (Guba, 1981). However, I pursued neutrality (rather than objectivity) in my analysis of the results and to reflect the meaning making of the participants rather than my own preconceptions.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

In this chapter I present the findings that came from the participants' reflections during their individual interviews and the focus group. My role as the researcher is to reflect the meaning-making of my participants to the best of my ability. From my interpretation of the experiences of the participants, four categories arose from the data that will be discussed in depth: transfer expectations, the transfer experience, response and coping, and current meaning making and reflections. These categories help answer the research question: "how do male and female transfer students perceive and use institutional and non-institutional resources to cope with the stress of the transition?"

Expectations

The factors that led to the participants' expectations of what the transfer process would be like included their reasons for transferring, their reasons for choosing to this particular institutions, their expectations of what their experiences would be like at the institution, and the things they worried about.

Reasons for Transferring

Every participant provided insight into how past experiences influenced his or her decision to transfer to the University where this study was conducted. Commonalities that the participants discussed were the influence of past experiences on thought

processes, their own decision-making factors, anxieties, and the impact of transferring on their future goals. For example, Josh said:

I'm thinking about becoming a doctor after I graduate...I decided I had to get into a place where there's people that are gonna have the same goals as me, as well as a place with resources like advisors and programs to help with pre-med.

Other reasons for transferring among the seven participants included wanting to be closer to family, being part of a family who went to this institution, running out of classes to take at the local community college, and the financial aid packages they received from this particular school in comparison to other institutions.

Why This Institution?

When I asked participants what attracted them to this institution specifically, the majority of students mentioned one or more of the following factors: the religious affiliation of the institution, the size and location, or the quality of the academic department the student was entering into. For David, transferring was decided by a combination of several of these:

[The University] is really serious about its Christian commitment, but at the same time, it doesn't force it on anyone. The religion department is firmly grounded in the faith and the tradition, but it is not strangled by it, nor does it just write it off... [it] is a growing, nationally recognized university...and especially for our football team now, and academically, it is a university that is coming to more prominence

Similarly, Teresa said that she "came here for one reason and one reason only: to get my degree and get into graduate school." These statements show that both David and Teresa are very goal-driven students. The University's academic prominence and national recognition attracted these students to the institution.

Expectations of Experiences at the Institution

Each of the participants were also asked about the expectations they had about the institution before they arrived on campus. Four of the seven participants said that they expected classes to be more rigorous than at their previous institutions. However, some participants believed that making the transition would be harder than it actually was, some did not know what to expect from the process, and some thought the process would be easier. For example, David said,

I expected it to be more of a hassle than it was...I was expecting the negative, but that didn't happen. I was expecting to be swallowed up, to not be helped in the transition. I came and found a lot of personal connection. I was really helped in becoming part of [the school] ...I was really expecting it to be hard just to have the same kind of formative experiences that make you part of the community and just getting plugged in with other groups of people around my age.

David had a positive experience transitioning to this institution, even though he expected the transition to be negative. However, Teresa had a different experience. When recalling what her transition was like, she says:

I heard things...about what it was going to be. My expectations were higher...I thought meeting people would be the least difficult part, but I have been an introvert this semester and it's not that it's hard to meet people, I haven't really done anything. In my mind, I thought I would join all these organizations but I haven't because I wanted to see where I was academically.

Teresa had communicated with people from the school who had given her an expectation of her housing situation that what it actually was like when she arrived. Also, Teresa's narrative shows that the transition experience is a combination of resources and individual action. While there may be institutional structures in place to help students become members of the community, the students must make choices in how they prioritize their time between academics and involvement.

Worrysome Things

Another theme I found among the seven participants was that they mentioned factors that they were specifically worried about before they arrived on campus, such as second-guessing the decision to transfer, anticipating what the adjustment would be like, meeting people, and if their credits would transfer. For example, Jarren said:

I went to a quarter school, so coming to a semester school was tough. It was difficult to transfer the credits because a quarter is like $\frac{3}{4}$ of a semester or something like that. One class wouldn't count for a full class here, so you'd have to have two.

Both male and female participants mentioned the word “worry” in relation to their transfer experience. Monica was also concerned about credits transferring. She recalled her experience:

Well, I was really worried because I hadn't considered coming to [this school] at all, so I was going on the track to transfer all my credits to [my previous school], so I was taking all the classes for [my previous school]. I mean, I thought I was going to be really behind in my courses or that they wouldn't take a lot of them.

Both of these participants had not planned ahead for transferring to this institution while they were taking classes at their previous institutions, so they worried about which classes would transfer and if they would have to retake any classes. Another aspect that the participants worried about was anticipating the adjustment to this institution's campus life. For example, Josh said his biggest worries were “worrying what it was going to be like, and planning everything.”

Even before these participants arrived on campus, they experienced stress due to transferring credits, making the decision to leave their previous institution, and having to make new connections to people at their new institution. For some, communicating with advisors and housing staff helped to make connections to resources before arriving on

campus. However, there are no apparent gender differences in the way males and females perceived and used the resources available to them before they arrived on campus.

Transfer Experience

Pre-Semester Transfer Process

In this section I examine the various aspects of the transition process that the participants experienced before and after arriving on campus that contributed to students' stress and identification of resources, such as the process of getting their credits transferred, dealing with housing and financial aid, aspects of the transition that the participants perceived as difficult, and the coping mechanisms they used to handle the stressors they experienced.

Teresa had a disappointing experience when trying to get her housing and financial needs set up. She recalls:

I originally had been granted a scholarship by the [the housing department] because it said it was for new incoming students, so I thought I didn't need any need-based aid. They never specified it was for freshman only. That was a big deal because they took it away and gave it to someone else, so that was painful and my dad got involved. He called a bunch of people and talked to the administration about it. They gave me a scholarship that was about 1/3 of what I had originally been granted...I knew this is where I was supposed to be, but it was very aggravating to have something taken away from you for something that was never specified. It determined my attitude coming in. I was already frustrated.

Teresa's situation influenced how she felt about her new institution before even arriving on campus. It made her transfer experience start out negatively. Teresa had come from a small town community college where she had taken every class that she could take. She was excited to come to this particular institution for the academic rigor and Christian

environment before the misunderstanding with the housing scholarship. After this incident, she perceived her roommate situation as more stressful because she was already disappointed with her experience from the beginning.

David, on the other hand, made an effort to connect with other students before classes began by attending an orientation week. David recalls,

So I went to [orientation week] and I met other transfers there, I met freshman there, I met upperclassmen that were [orientation week] leaders. Everyone again was open to making these new experiences, establishing new relationships. So that made me feel comfortable going into the situation knowing people and I already have connections to them...Just knowing that [the school] was trying to get transfer students plugged in took a lot of stress and worry away. You feel like you are supported, the school is looking out for you. You are not just left to do your own thing, which I really liked.

Unlike Teresa, David perceived that the transfer institution is supportive of transfer students and wants to integrate them into the community. Going to orientation week was a good decision for David because it allowed him to connect with other students before classes began. This helped him feel connected to the institution before the start of his first semester. By taking advantage of this resource, the transition was less stressful for David. Both Teresa and David's narratives show the significance that institutional resources play in the role of transfer students' experiences. However, student choice is also an important factor. David took the initiative to go to orientation camp, and Teresa chose to live in the Leadership LLC. However, David's experience at orientation week impacted him differently than Teresa's experience with the scholarship because David felt as though he was supported by the institution, and that the institution was providing for him, whereas Teresa felt as though the institution was taking away something that she had earned. After the first semester, David recalled that he thought he transitioned to the

University within 3-4 weeks of being on campus, but Teresa said she was still adjusting at the beginning of her second semester.

Each participant mentioned various stressors throughout the interviews, but for some participants, making the transition was less stressful than they expected. Josh said that for him, the most stressful parts of transferring were, "...the applications, and waiting for it to come in, waiting for the first test, meeting the first friends. That was the most stressful thing for me, always wondering if I made the right choice or not." For Josh, the unknown was the most stressful for him. However, Tim and Brooke thought that adjusting to classes was the most stressful because they both mentioned having to drop a class during their first semester.

Difficult Parts of Transition

Adjusting. The participants also mentioned having to adjust from previous routines in order to be successful at the transfer institution. Some participants felt as though they had adjusted more quickly than others. David said he "Didn't like newness, it was hard being in a new situation, figuring out where do I fit, how do things run, what to expect. But within 3 or 4 weeks, I was done," whereas, participants like Teresa, Tim, and Josh said they are still adjusting. For Monica, being without her family was challenging because she said she is "really family-oriented." Time management was another factor that the participants had to adjust to, since for many of them, this was the first time they lived alone. Tim, for example, said the biggest adjustment he had to make was "finding a good schedule, the adjustment period to living on [my] own." Monica also had a similar experience to Tim. Monica says a challenging adjustment for her was

“figuring out my time, because I’m used to having food made for me at home or having easy access to food and then here I actually have to make the time to make a meal.” Both Tim and Monica live in the Transfer Community which is apartment-style living. Therefore, they did not have to purchase a meal plan and need to be responsible for cooking for themselves. Developing this competency was an added stressor and adjustment that these students had to make.

Academic Rigor. The academic load at the new institution was a challenge at first for most of the participants, especially those who had recalled never struggling in school. In regards to his course load, Josh said, “I got really frustrated and I dropped my physics class. I was like, ‘I don’t understand this stuff!’ It was a bit of a shock.” Having to change study habits and strategies in the middle of the semester proved challenging for most of the participants and caused stressed. For example, Teresa said “Everything else has been really easy besides academics and financial aid coming in. That’s been my greatest struggle, not knowing what to do. I’ve changed strategies multiple times. This hasn’t been my best semester.” For Teresa who calls herself a high-achieving student, needing to find different study strategies to adapt to the academic rigor and having to drop a class put added stress on the transition. Because Josh and Teresa both chose to transfer to this institution specifically for academics, struggling was a humbling experience for them. When they were stressed with their course load, they closed themselves off from getting involved in student organizations and focused more time on studying. They both said that it took them longer to feel a part of the school’s community as a result of not having time to form a sense of social connectedness.

Meeting People. Some of the participants mentioned they thought it would be difficult to meet people when they started at the transfer institution. The participants all mentioned wanting to transfer for academics as their primary reason, but each of them discussed in their interviews their experiences with wanting to feel like a part of the institution by connecting with other students and making new friends. For example, Monica said:

I thought I was going to be really afraid, 'cause I haven't lived away from home ever and it's just I didn't know anybody that came here, so I thought it was going to be really lonely and I wasn't going to meet anybody, but I met people and I enjoyed things.

A theme among the participants was that they first chose this particular institution for its academic quality, but they also wanted to make friendships that would last beyond college. Tim recalled that one of his goals was also to “make lasting friendships.” Teresa also mentioned that in “coming in, I didn't chose it for the sports or hoping to make lifelong friends. I hope that happens, but I chose it for one reason and one reason only – to get my degree to get into graduate school.” Teresa is very much academically focused, but yet still admits that she does want to make solid friendships.

Feeling Like a Freshman

Many of the participants mentioned that at some point during their transition, they felt like a freshman all over again, much to their dismay. David said, “I hated feeling kind of being lumped in with all freshman. I want to feel like I am a junior. I want to feel like I am making progress.” These participants have already had the freshman experience, and wanted there to be resources specifically geared towards them. They did not want to feel like freshmen again. They wanted more independence, but also want to

be informed about appropriate resources. Monica elaborated this point further when referring to how this school handles programming for the first few days before classes begin:

They kind of make transfer students feel like freshmen 'cause it's our first year, so it makes sense, but in everything, you're mixed in with the freshmen. So it's like you don't feel like you've been in college because they keep saying, "All the freshmen, the freshmen, the freshmen," but they did a good job of making you feel welcomed and 'cause they're showing all these freshmen these new ideas, the transfer students see it too. There just needs to be a clear difference between transfer students and freshmen.

Teresa was constantly surrounded by the freshman mentality. She recalls, "Being lumped in with the freshman was also frustrating. I'm 3-4 years older than some of them, so it's hard to live with the freshmen." Teresa felt as though she already had the college experience under her belt. Her roommate wanted to be babied and needed to be shown the ropes of college life which Teresa did not have time to deal with due to her academic load and trying to figure out the University on her own.

Stress, adjusting, academic rigor, meeting people, and feeling like a freshman were the four categories that the participants identified as the most difficult parts of transition, which Tim nicely summarizes by saying

Adjusting. The friendships. You come to a new city and you don't know where anything is, the courses are different, the instructors are different, you're away from home, you're living with strangers, all of those combined...trying to find [your] independence.

The next section will explore how the participants coped with the stress of making the transition to the institution.

Response and Coping

Although each participant discussed their own individual coping mechanisms, several themes encompassed the types of coping these individuals used. Three themes that will be discussed in this section are: the significance of people at the transfer institution, responding to difficult aspects, and coping mechanisms. These students also discussed the comparisons they made of the transfer institution to their previous institutions, the people they turned to for social support outside of the institution, and how they used resources to help them adapt to the University.

Influential People

The people from the transfer institution whom the participants mentioned ranged from faculty members, advisors, siblings, and student leaders. Having connections to siblings helped the participants meet peers within the school's community and influenced study habits. For example, Josh said "My brother, he had two friends that went here. He had gone to high school with them, so I had some people to make friends with pretty fast." Because of his brother's connections, Josh had social support when he arrived on campus and that was helpful for him to get acquainted. Having built in social support was positive for Josh. However, choosing to live with her brother during her first semester was not as positive for Brooke. She said "I lived with my brother. And my brother was the type of guy that didn't like campus events....He wasn't studious, and that got on to me." Brooke's brother discouraged her from going to campus events, and he was not a good academic role model either for Brooke either. This negatively affected Brooke's academic performance because she followed his example and as a result failed

a religion class. Although having a sibling who knows people at the transfer institution may help one feel more connected, a sibling can either be a support or a distraction.

Faculty and Staff Members. Every participant mentioned a faculty or staff member that was influential to them in their transfer process. For example, Jarren mentioned his “advisor in the college of arts and sciences. [Linda] already looked at my transcripts and I had it worked out before I got here.” Jarren also got in contact with the director of the Transfer Community. “I got in contact with her over the summer but I contacted her about looking for an apartment, and she gave me a tour.” This helped Jarren find a place to live before he arrived on campus. The roles of faculty and staff primarily helped students transfer their credits as well as assist them with finding on-campus housing arrangements.

Peers. Meeting peers that were also going through or had previously gone through a similar experience proved comforting to the participants. David puts it like this:

Other transfers and incoming freshman, they helped a lot because transfers, they were in the same boat as me, because they were going through what I was going through. And the freshman understood what I was going through in the sense that we were both in a new situation.

David expressed that it is helpful to be surrounded by people with whom one can empathize.

Orientation Week leaders were also critical to the integration of some of these participants into campus life. Monica spoke of the Orientation Week leaders for the transfer group. “I think they were sort of like a push to be involved and to not be afraid because they told us their transfer stories.” Again, having people who are empathetic

helps transfer students feel a sense of solidarity. Furthermore, Monica and Tim both mentioned that their Orientation Week small group was influential in their transition. Tim mentioned that he still goes to the gym with members of his Orientation Week group a few times a week. Peer connections allowed the participants to feel understood and supported during their transition experience.

Coping

At one point or another, each participant encountered an unexpected event or circumstance. The main commonalities in coping in response to difficulties was calling friends and family, trying to getting involved in student organizations and trying to meet people through living in the residence halls or the Transfer Community.

Calling Friends and Family. Every participant mentioned staying in touch with friends and family, and knowing that they could call those people when they felt stressed. Tim said “Yes, I am a firm believer that if something is hard you just got to do it. Be intentional about it, like just talking to people about it. That’s generally how I manage difficult situations.” Tim talks to people to be encouraged. Monica said the same of her support system “If I felt homesick or whatever, I would probably call my sister or my boyfriend and they’d be like, ‘Oh you’re fine. You’ll be okay and it’s going to be good,’ and they were right.” Josh’s parents helped him to change perspectives. He said, “My dad told me to look at things in a different way...that I should keep my memories as a touchstone and remember the good times and think about how I could apply that [here].” Even though friends and family provided encouragement to make it through difficult days

and helped reframe the situation, these participants wanted to handle the change independently as well.

Wanting to Handle it on Their Own. Most of the participants wanted to try to handle stress on their own. This may be because they are older and they wanted to be more independent, or it could be because of personality type. Brooke said, “I handled it by myself. I don’t like relying on other people’s help.” Even though Tim admitted he called his family when he felt stressed, he also said, “To a degree I didn’t want anyone’s help. I was very confident. I tried to handle it by myself internally.” Teresa was also similar. She said, “I’m very private, but depending on the situation, talking to people is sometimes helpful.” The combination of wanting support from friends and family and also wanting to get through the situation independently illustrates the essence of Chickering’s (1993) third vector of development: Moving through autonomy towards interdependence. In this stage of development, students become self-directed problem-solvers. Students in this vector want to maintain positive relationships with their loved one while also wanting to make their own decisions.

Getting Involved. David and Teresa were both part of the Leadership LLC, which is a residential program for first-year students. However, Teresa did not enjoy her Leadership experience, so she looked for other ways to get involved in the community. She said, “A couple that used to work with my parents lives in [town] so I go over there sometimes and babysit their kids. It’s a safe space for me to go after school. I also teach theater to kids. I really enjoy kids.” Having familiar faces in town made it seem a little more like home for Teresa. Josh, on the other hand, tried to get involved on campus. He

said, “I joined the Asian students organization, but I never showed up because meetings were on Monday and all my tests were on Tuesdays.” Josh felt as though it was hard for him to be involved on campus because the organization he wanted to be a part of was at a conflicting time with his academic schedule. He made the active choice to forgo participating in the organization in order to focus on his studies. This is another example of how individual choice affects the perceptions of institutional resources. Even though the participants knew that they needed to do well academically, they also wanted to find their niche somewhere on campus through a student organization. Being affiliated with a student organization enhances one’s sense of social connectedness, which is a basic human need. Astin (1984) defined involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 297). Involvement in student organizations are one way to enhance the academic experience and it allows students to feel connected to others with similar interests.

Perceptions of Resources

How the participants perceived the resources the institution offered to transfer students was an important factor in how they perceived their transition to go. Although not all of the participants utilized the same resources, they all had strong opinions about the ones they did take advantage of, and the ones they had seen others use. For example, the participants had mixed opinions about Welcome Week. David said he thought that “Orientation Week was actually a lot of fun. I really liked my Orientation Week leaders. I think that Orientation Week is something that every transfer student should do. I know it is optional, but I think it is good.” However, Brooke said that she feels as though

[this school] is behind the times with Orientation Week, like it's still this old school Baptist mentality of no dancing, no alcohol. I'm not saying we're supposed to have a big party, but it's childish, like let's play these games, then we're gonna sing these songs." Because Brooke perceives Orientation Week as outdated from what she heard about it from others, the influence of her peers was quite significant in how she formed her judgment on this event, which also shaped her perceptions about not wanting to live in the Transfer Community because she did not want to follow the on campus rules. This led to her isolation from other students, which made it more difficult for her to adapt to the school than those like David who chose to participate in events that would allow him to meet people, regardless of what he had heard from others. However, David wants a Orientation Camp that is not as geared toward freshmen. He said,

It was weird going to Orientation Week you're introduced to that freshman mentality, oh you're over 18, you're practically on social security! It's awkward. It's a high school mentality and it's weird to be around that again.

Because Orientation Week is students' first organized experiences at this institution, the experiences they have there can be formative and set the stage for the rest of their journey. David enjoyed Orientation Week because it forced him to meet other students. James and Teresa felt disconnected from their Orientation Week groups as well because they had time conflicts with their LLC events. James and Teresa were also surrounded by freshmen in their LLCs and it was detrimental to them meeting other transfer students through Orientation Week.

Student organizations figured as another important though sometimes challenging way for the participants to feel a sense of belonging to the campus. The student participants also explained why sometimes it can be difficult to fit in to a student

organization. The consensus was that the leaders of the student organizations are hard to identify with because their purpose for being in the group is for leadership instead of just for membership and participation. David puts it like this: “there is a unique personality type of people who run the clubs. It’s interesting to compare people involved in student organizations and school organizations like Orientation Week.” David stated that he feels as though the school sponsored organizations are less cliquey than the student organizations. Brooke offered this view on the personality types of the student leaders: “because they are all so similar to each other, it excludes a lot of people. It’s hard to connect with them. It’s hard for people to mesh well that have different goals for being in the group.” Finding student-led organizations where the participants felt as though they fit in with the culture of the group proved to be a challenging task for the majority of participants.

Transfer Council

Five of the seven participants had participated in Transfer Council events. However, only three of the participants identified themselves as active members of that organization. Many of the students said they did not know about Transfer Council until they heard about it from an older student. David said of his experience, “The transfer mixer was fun. There were some people there that I already knew. So that fun, but it was also awkward, here’s some drinks and a snack. I don’t think they did a really good job like getting you all to know each other.” Brooke did not even know TC existed until her roommate told her. She said, “I joined transfer council. I transferred, and I had no idea we had TC until my roommate last spring. I think the things they did in the first part of the semester like transfer mixer and transfer welcoming crew, I think those were good

things.” According to the participants, Transfer Council events are a good way for transfer students to connect with one another, but it is not necessarily something they want to be members of long-term.

Transfer Community

This particular institution is unique in the sense that it offers a living community just for transfer students. It is a university-owned apartment complex removed from the center of campus. Two of the participants lived there, and several more participants mentioned they had thought about living there. Brooke said, “I might have lived in [the Community], but it’s [university] owned, so it’s super strict. I’m in college now, I don’t want to have to deal with parents per se, telling you want you can and can’t do.” Brooke did not want to be committed to having to abide by university policy in her living arrangements. David, however, was more concerned about the proximity to campus. He said:

I actually did apply for the Transfer Community and got in and was set to go and then I tried to figure out exactly where it was in relationship to campus, and what turned me off was just how far it was like across the south or something. So I didn’t do it, and I hated that I didn’t do it, in the respect that it would have been really cool to connect with other transfer students, but I felt like in the grand scheme of things it would be better for me to be somewhere where I would be in the heart of campus than off of campus with other transfers.

Jarren chose to live in the Transfer Community and was disappointed with his experience. He reflected that:

We didn’t do much in that program. The main thing is living arrangements and living with other transfers. I’m not really involved in the community, but especially during the first month of school, there were some good events tied with that...It’s not as big, people are loosely in it. They aren’t tied to it. It was strong in the beginning and then fell apart...Yea it was good at the beginning to link us up. We’re all kinda going thru the same thing so that was nice.

Jarren appreciated being in community with people who understood what he was experiencing as a transfer student, especially at the beginning, but wanted it to sustain itself more than it actually did. The participants' perceptions of the Transfer Community illustrate that even though they say they do not want to be treated as freshmen, they do want to have a sense of connectedness to the University.

The Importance of Familiarity

A point of commonality among two of the participants was that they looked for ways to stay involved in similar types of activities as they were previously involved in.

Tim said:

I'm part of the Transfer Community. I got involved in the leadership council through that. At my previous institution, I was involved in student government late night. I love that they force you to go thru this process...the members send emails and they're really good at letting you know what's going on so that's how I joined the council.

Moreover, Josh said, "At [my previous institution], I was a part of the global community there, and I thought it would be a nice continuation. It was something I was familiar with." Here, the participants sought out types of resources that were familiar to them to make the transfer institution seem like less of a foreign environment.

Current Meaning-Making

Each of the participants reflected on making the transition and adapting to the transfer institution. They all made comparisons between this school and the institution they transferred from, discussed their perceptions of the transfer institution now after having been a student for some time, their confidence in completing their degrees, and

whether or not they thought there were differences in how males and females handled the transition.

Comparing Transfer Institution to Previous Institution

All of the participants could easily compare cultural aspects of their new school to the cultural aspects of their previous institutions. Brooke, Jarren, and Josh referred to their previous institutions as “party schools” and said that the student body at their new institution is much more studious. Tim noticed that, “A lot of the people here are forward thinking. They are here to do something after college.” Some participants discussed regional differences as well. Jarren said,

At my last school they didn't have Greek Life. It's a big party school, but they decided to do away with Greek Life. It's very northwestern, outdoorsy. Down here in [the south] people have a different mentality. It's more about the community here.

Furthermore, David noticed the differences in the cultural backgrounds of the students at both of his campuses. He said:

One thing I think that is really different is that I have never heard gay or retard used as a slur more than [I have here]. The general feel is that everyone kind of comes from a nice Christian home and has all the same Christian values and there is not this...like at [the institution I transferred from] we liked talking about things like this.

David was surprised that even though this is a Christian school and the students are stereotyped as coming from Christian backgrounds, he met people that speak of marginalized populations in derogatory terms. Josh pointed out how this University has more academic resources, by saying “example, [the Success Center] building. We didn't have that at [my previous school] where people would come and give talks for free.”

Reflecting upon the differences between their previous institutions and their new

university seemed to allow the participants to make sense of where they had been and where they are currently. Their perceptions of their previous institution shaped the way they perceived their current institution, and the way they perceived their current institution shaped their perspectives on their transfer experiences.

Because David lived with freshmen and he attended Orientation Week, the difference between him and the freshmen caught him off guard because he was used to having friends of all ages at his previous institution, and he thought he was beyond the point where age mattered. He said “It’s kind of like crazy, but that’s how I felt other people were looking at it. So you are weird because you are trying to relive your freshman year from a year and a half ago.” Feeling self-conscious about his age made David feel “a little paranoid” about what others thought of him and his reasons for transferring to this University. The types of comparisons the students made impacted their current perceptions of this University.

Perceptions of the University Now

During the focus group, participants reported that after completing their first semester, they felt more integrated into the community and like they were supposed to be here. Teresa said, “I don’t feel like I have the mentality of a transfer student. I went home between semesters and had a self-examination.” David related to this comment, saying, “I don’t feel that much like a transfer student anymore. I feel like I’m integrated in the community.” Even though Brooke had been at the institution a little bit longer, she said, “people forget all the time that I was a transfer student, so it’s nice to feel like a normal student, like I’ve always been [here].” These perceptions suggest that it might take time for transfer students to feel integrated in their new environment.

Degree Completion

After going through a transition period, every participant still said they were confident that they could complete their degree at the University. Monica shared:

I think the whole transfer experience has really--up to now it's been made like, "Yes! I can do this. I can stay here and I'll get used to whatever I'm not used to yet and it'll be fine, and I mean I love this school and I love how evolved it is with the students. Like they'll do anything to get people to come out and interact with other people, so it's really helped and I know I can graduate from here.

Brooke said "at first it was hard, but I realized I had to put the work and effort into the classes." Many of these participants are academically driven, which was their main reason for choosing to transfer to this particular University, and that they can use that drive to perpetuate them through difficult times to be successful.

Gender Differences

A major part of this study is examining if males and females perceive and use resources differently to cope with the transition. While none of the interview questions specifically focused on this, I asked directly in the focus group. David said, "among guys, it was not a big deal that we transferred. Life goes on. It's not something that comes up." Teresa followed up and said "I had the same experience as [David]. It hasn't been a difference between guys and girls." Brooke could not really see a difference either. She said "the only difference I could see would be in Greek Life. It was a lot harder for me as a transfer student. The Greek girls didn't reach out to the transfers who wanted to be Greek." Perhaps individual experience and the commonalities of the transition process account for more than gender does.

I categorized the findings from the study into four themes: factors that shaped preconceptions, the transfer experience, the response to and coping with stress, and the

current meaning-making and reflections of the participants. Each of these themes encompasses how the participants perceived the many facets of their transfer experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions and Implications

The participants' accounts presented in chapter four demonstrated the multidimensionality and yet commonalities of the transfer experience. This chapter will examine four central points of convergence around which the transfer experience took shape for study participants: pre-semester stress, transfer semester stress, non-institutional resources, and institutional resources. It will also discuss the role of gender in the study. I will then present a model that highlights and illustrates important relationships between various study elements. Elements in the model include the links between pre-semester and transfer semester stress, expected and unexpected forms of stress, episodic and continuous stressors; and how institutional and non-institutional resources that the participants used to cope with their stress.

Pre-semester Stress

Stressors that affected the participants differed depending on the point in the transition process. Transferring credits and feeling like freshmen were the two primary sources of stress that affected the participants before classes began. All of the participants were nervous about whether or not their credits would transfer over to the new institution. Students who chose to attend Orientation Week felt as though they were being treated as freshmen.

Transferring Credits

All of the participants discussed how they were nervous about transferring credits from their previous institutions. None of the participants had planned on transferring when planning out their academic course loads at their former schools. Therefore, upon deciding to transfer to this school they were uncertain about how many credits would transfer. The consensus among the participants was that the process of transferring credits was not as stressful as they thought it would be because they had the help of advisors who helped them throughout the process. Each of the participants spoke highly of the advisors they worked with, noting how it alleviated stress knowing that someone at the transfer institution was helping them take care of their credits and course registration.

Feeling Like Freshmen

Many of the participants discussed in great detail in the individual interviews and the focus group that they perceived transition resources such as Orientation Week to make them feel like freshmen and not transfer students. The study participants that took part in these events recalled how because they were surrounded by freshmen, they felt as though their previous college experience had been discounted, contributing to a sense that they were starting over. These transfer students wanted their previous educational experiences to be recognized by the transition programming they were participating in.

Transfer-semester Stress

Transfer-semester stress refers to the stressors that the participants faced after the beginning of classes of their first semester. These include adjusting to the academic rigor of the new institution, meeting people, and time management.

Academics

Many of the participants anticipated that academics at their new school would be more rigorous than academics at their previous institution. However, many of them were still shocked at just how much more time and effort they had to put in to classes once they transferred. The need to find new study strategies to adjust to the heightened academic rigor was an added layer of stress. For some of the participants, failing their first class in their first semester or having to drop a class was a humbling experience. Even through these circumstances, participants mentioned that this institution was still where they thought they were supposed to be in order to achieve their professional and academic goals. They used this stress positively in order to generate motivation to work harder and be successful.

Meeting People

Even though the majority of the participants chose to transfer to this school because of academic quality and the Christian environment, they all said they wanted to leave with lasting friendships, even if that was not their first reason for transferring. Making time to get involved in campus organizations was challenging for most of the participants because they underestimated the amount of effort they would have to put into their studies. The participants' primary ways of meeting people on campus included living in the Transfer Community, Global LLC, Leadership LLC, either joining Transfer Council or participating in its events, and relying on the connections of siblings. Becoming established in a solid group of friends took a substantial amount of time for most of the participants.

Time Management

For the majority of the participants, this was the first time that they lived either away from home or on their own in a non-dorm setting. With the added independence came added responsibility. Four of the participants recalled having to adjust to making time to prepare food, go grocery shopping, and balance classes and commuting to campus. Getting into a routine that was constructive to helping them achieve their goals was challenging at first for these transfer students. Assuming more adult responsibilities caused stress at the beginning, but these participants realized that the end result of finding balance and independence in their schedules was rewarding.

Therefore, the primary stressors during the transfer experience for these participants were adjusting to the high academic standards, having to make new friends, and time management. The institutional resources that the participants utilized in response, or in anticipation of these stressors included Orientation Week, residential housing, and student organizations. Non-institutional resources that the participants relied on for coping included calling friends and family back home, seeking to be involved in the local community, and living with siblings.

Non-Institutional Resources

Some participants in the study looked outside of the institution to find their sense of belonging within the local community and to derive social support from people with whom they felt close. Being involved outside of the University allowed these students to cope with the expected and unexpected stressors of transferring.

Community Involvement

A shared impulse among half of the participants was the desire to get involved in the community. In Teresa's case, because she had a negative experience with her housing assignment, she looked outside of the institution to seek social connectedness in town. Her parents had friends in town, and Teresa began babysitting their kids. She said that it was a place that she felt safe. It also gave her a sense of familiarity, and made her new environment seem less foreign. Because these transfer students are less tied to the institution internally, they seemed to be more open to looking for places outside of the University to feel connected to the greater community. Another example of this is how Jarren mentioned that he plays on an ice-hockey league out of town. Because Jarren is from a cold climate state where hockey was one of his childhood past times, he made the effort and commitment to drive to the nearest location he could find in order to play. Similarly, Monica got involved in a local non-profit organization and used that as a way to serve the greater community and meet people who had similar interests in giving back as she did. For many of these participants, finding involvement outside of the University made up for needs they perceived were not met by the institution.

Calling Friends and Family

Study participants found that calling family and friends was the most important non-institutional resource for coping with transfer stress. Family and friends provided words of encouragement, served as a listening ear, and helped the participants change their perspectives on the stress they felt while adjusting. Having people to go to for advice who were outside of the organization gave the participants independent perspectives on their original transfer decision. Individuals who the participants felt

close to helped them to stay centered and helped them remember why they decided to transfer on days that they felt discouraged. Access to this social support from afar relieved stressed and provided the participants with a safe space where their frustrations and worries could be heard.

Institutional Resources

All seven of the participants in this study mentioned the quality of academics as their primary reason for transferring to this institution. This source of motivation could mean that transfer students are more academically goal-oriented in their relationship to the transfer institution than are some freshmen. Freshmen might choose the institution based off of a combination of academic, social, and cultural factors. Even though the transfer students in this study listed academics as their primary reason for transferring, each one also said that they were nervous about having to meet new friends. And, although making lasting friendships was not a reason that they listed for choosing to transfer, the majority of participants said they hoped that it would happen. This emphasis on relationships likely suggests the human necessity of social affiliation in order to thrive in a new environment. This could also be why the participants utilized campus programs that would help them connect to other new students, such as Orientation Week and living in different Living-Learning Communities.

Academic Resources

One of the most repeated statements that the participants made was that they wanted more academic support specifically geared for transfer students. They felt as though the academic support was intended for freshmen. The participants all noted that

they had already taken college classes and they wanted their previous experience validated by faculty and staff. They felt as though they had already acquired general study skills and that they needed help learning how to study for classes at the transfer institution specifically, not just study skills in general. All of the participants noticed that their new courses were more rigorous and time consuming than courses they had taken at their previous institutions. Because they felt unprepared for the academic rigor of the transfer institution once classes begun, they wanted academic support catered towards their population specifically. Because this need often went unmet, a few of the participants either dropped or failed classes during their first semester.

Orientation Week

Some participants felt as though Orientation Week were geared towards freshmen. The consensus was that a separate Orientation Week for transfer students, or at least break-out sessions geared towards transfer students, would better meet their needs. Transfer students have already experienced the culture of another institution. When they embark on their journey at a new institution, they are in a stage that Van Gennep (1908) calls *liminality*, in which participants “stand at the threshold” between how their identities were previously constructed at their prior institutions and a new structuring of their identities in accordance with the practices and rituals of their new campus community. Transfer resources aimed at the initial transfer experience should help transfer students encounter to the culture of the transfer institution rather than giving them the perception that their previous educational experiences are not significant.

Transfer Council

Most of the participants discussed attending an event sponsored by Transfer Council (TC), even if they had not joined the organization. For the two participants who were members of the organization, they were not pleased with how the club was organized. Comments from all of the participants illustrated that while this organization was a good way to meet other transfer students, it was “cliquey” and hard place to make friends. They also felt as though TC is too exclusive and separates transfer students from the rest of the student body.

Looking for the Familiar

More than half of the participants looked to continue activities or interests at the transfer institution that they were involved with at their former institutions. For example, Josh was disappointed with his experience in the Global at this institution, and thus chose to pursue doing undergraduate research in his department, which he had first experienced at his previous institution. Josh, Monica, Tim, and Teresa also mentioned using hobbies, often that utilized campus resources, as a way to cope with stress. Hobbies such as listening to music, running, and wood crafting were activities that were familiar to these students and gave them a way to escape the stress of being a transfer student. Tim mentioned joining the Transfer Community Leadership Council because he was previously involved with Student Government and he was seeking involvement with the people he lived with. Here the participants talked about seeking out resources that they were familiar with, reflective of comfortable patterns of personal and student life already established.

Influences of Peers in the Selection of Resources

What other current students thought about resources significantly impacted the resources that the participants selected to use. For example, Brooke's brother told her not to go campus events because he thought they were lame, so she did not get involved on campus at all until she met her current roommate that is a member of Transfer Council. Monica got involved with a local non-profit group because some of the friends that she made were involved with that organization. Teresa chose to get involved in the community because her sister had gotten involved in the community that she lived in where she was enrolled in school. What the participants heard from their peers impacted their selection and use of resources in their transfer-semester.

Influence of Faculty and Staff

All seven of the participants mentioned how helpful their advisors at the transfer institution were in getting their credits transferred and welcoming them to the University. The participants felt cared about and known personally by at least one member of the University community before even arriving on campus. Because of this sense of social connectedness, these students had a point of contact to go to as a reference when they began classes, which made students feel at ease knowing they had someone who could point them in the right direction if they had questions about something else later on.

How Resources Shape Perceptions of the Institution

The participants' experiences with trying to get involved and find their niches at their new university shaped how they perceived the institution. Teresa said of her frustration of her housing situation "I was annoyed right off the bat." When she failed to

connect with the student leaders of TC, Brooke said “It doesn’t directly reflect on [the school], but it doesn’t make you feel at home.” For these students, negative experiences with resources added a level of stress. Not feeling “at home”, or feeling a sense of belonging to the environment caused these students to feel isolated.

The Role of Gender in Transfer Experiences

The findings on gender in this study are congruent with those of the previous research mentioned in chapters one and two. This study supports Misra et al.’s (2000) finding that male students tend to think life events are less stressful than do female students. For example, David mentioned that he perceived that transferring was “not a big deal” among guys. Basically, transferring was an event that happened, and it affected his current circumstances. However, Brooke’s transition took longer because she perceived events that happened as more stressful than David.

Furthermore, Day and Livingstone (2000) found that gender differences in the need for social support disappeared when stress was controlled for. All seven of the participants mentioned calling family and friends to talk about the stress they felt while making the transition to the new university. Although stress was not “controlled for” in this study due to the phenomenological research tradition, each participant talked about stressors that affected them and both male and females wanted social support at the transfer institution and also relied on those they were close to in order to cope. However, based off of the findings of this study, it is difficult to clearly differentiate between gender difference and individual experience because each of the participants’ experiences were unique.

Explanation of Major Findings Relative to Framework

The model below provides a visual depiction of the multiple dimensions of transition that impact stress levels for transfer students. Pre-semester stresses include the process of transferring credits and experiencing orienting activities to the new university. Transfer-semester stresses including adjusting to the academic rigor of the transfer institution, learning time management skills, and meeting people. Based off of the reaction to the stressor, students look for institutional and non-institutional resources to help them adjust to a new university's environment. For example, to cope with pre-semester stress, students looked to the help of academic advisors and other institutional resources. However, once classes started, they all relied on social support from friends and family. Their selection of resources was also were influenced by the comments of peers they met when arriving to the transfer institution.

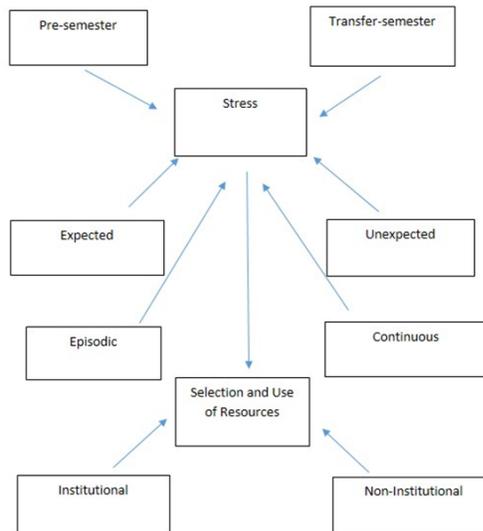


Figure 5.1

Transfer Stress Factors

Findings for Students

This model may be useful to students who are thinking about transferring. It shows what types of stressors to expect, how they might impact the students, and what types of resources might be appropriate to choose given a particular type of stress. This model may help students be proactive in how to prepare for making the transition to the transfer institution.

Implications for Administrators

From this study, I have found that the influence of peers is important to transfer students who are trying to figure out which institutional resources to try. Transfer students want to be independent and handle the transition on their own, but they also rely on the support of administrators, family, and friends to talk them through stressful days. Common stressors that affect the majority of transfer students are transferring credits, making new friends, and adjusting to academics at the new institution. The comparisons transfer students make between their previous institutions and new universities influence the meaning-making and their perceptions of their transfer experiences. The implications of this study for administrators are that they need to acknowledge transfer students' previous college experiences and unique needs. One way to do this is to consider providing transfer housing closer to the center of campus in non-apartment style housing. The participants in this study indicated that they want transition resources that speak directly to the transfer experience, rather than repeating the same types of activities that are for freshmen. Transfer students want sessions on how to succeed academically and an Orientation Week structured specifically for them, rather than being meshed in with the freshmen.

Limitations

The phenomenological methodology of this research study resulted in limitations that are a product of the choice of this particular method and study design. The self-selection of the participants excluded students who have had relatively smooth transitions to this particular institution because they do not have think they have an experience that would fit with the goals of the study. I chose not to include the variables of race or ethnicity, though I was open to race or ethnicity emerging as a meaningful characteristic for particular participants. Also, due to time constraints of this research project, the sample size of seven participants was relatively small and did not encapsulate all of the types of experiences that transfer students have. Furthermore, because this study was conducted at a religiously-affiliated institution, the findings may not be as applicable to public institutions based on the types of resources, and the contexts of the transition resources that are available at each type of institution. The participants were given an opportunity to check the interpretation of the data, but none of them responded, which means there is no certainty that I, as the researcher, have accurately interpreted the meaning-making of the participants. However, if the participants felt strongly that I misinterpreted an aspect of their transitions, perhaps they would have responded.

Implications for Future Research

I did not find enough evidence to draw conclusions on the role of gender in how transfer students perceive and use institutional and non-institutional resources to cope with the stress of the transition. From the accounts of these participants, it is too hard to differentiate between individual experience and gender. As Brooke mentioned, perhaps female transfer students might be more interested in participating in Greek Life than

males. Examining the reasons why this might be a difference between men and women is an area to be considered for future research. Finally, future research could be done at different types of institutions with a larger sample of participants to further assess the role of gender in the transfer experience.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Statement of Positionality

Personal History with the Topic

When I was a freshman in college, I transferred at the end of the first semester from a mid-size rural, public four-year Midwestern university to a large-size, four-year research institution also in the Midwest because it was my dream school. However, arriving at my dream school as a transfer student, I was disappointed with the lack of information I received. This institution provided an orientation for transfer students, but the majority of the content dealt with campus parking, which was not useful to me because I did not have a car on campus. I met with an academic advisor to discuss my degree plan, but the majority of that meeting focused on finding what classes were still open for the following quarter. I was not informed of how and when to register for classes for spring quarter. When I arrived on campus to start winter quarter at the transfer institution, I was frequently lost on campus because I did not know where any of the buildings were, nor did I have a group of friends or acquaintances to walk around with me and show me where anything was. Not only did I struggle to make friends, I also struggled academically because I was so overwhelmed learning how to get around at this large-sized institution.

Biases to Topic

I think that transfer students need more resources than what they currently get from the four-year institutions that they transfer to. Everyone deserves the right to be

provided for by the university, especially because they are customers paying a high price for cost of attendance. I also understand the psychosocial adjustment process that most transfer students' experience, which is why I am interested in studying how they seek support from resources outside of the institution as well.

I am involved in a practicum experience with a living community for transfer students. I have set up a mentoring program for incoming transfer students that choose to live in the community. They are paired with a former transfer student who is in a similar area of major study. The goal of this program is to provide a familiar face who can serve as an academic resource and social support system for incoming transfer students. For participants who may be currently a part of this program, because it is something that I have worked hard on, I expected it to be difficult to remain unbiased while conducting interviews. I only had direct contact with the mentors, so I have not met any of the first-year students they are mentoring.

How Biases will be handled in the Interpretation of this Study

Because I had a negative experience as a transfer student, I cannot help but interpret the study from that lens. In order to allow as minimal impact as possible on the interpretation of the results of this study, I will talk through meaning-making of coding and results with the chair of this thesis.

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Tell me about your education before you came to this school?

What made you choose to transfer to this university?

- What were some of the reasons that you did not start at a four-year institution?

What about this university seemed like a good fit for you?

How is this institution similar to or different than the expectations you had of it before you got here?

What did you expect your transfer process to be like? How was it the same or different?

What were the most difficult parts of your transition to this institution? How did you feel during that experience?

Would you say that your transfer experience was stressful?

When you thought about switching schools, what did you think would be the most difficult parts of the experience? Is that what actually happened?

Were there people who you met here that were important to you during your transition experience? What role did they serve in your transfer experience?

How do you think this school is different than the previous institution you attended?

1. Did you expect _____ to be different?
2. What surprised you the most about this?
3. How have you adjusted to this difference?

How else did you handle the transition?

Who were the individuals you turned to during your transition?

What did they support you? What kind of help did they give you?

How else did you deal with the difficulties?

In the past, have you dealt with difficult situations in a similar way?

Do you now think that this school is a good fit for you after you've been here? Why or why not?

How has your transfer experience influenced your confidence to complete a degree here?

If you are going to give advice to someone who is transferring, what would you tell them about what is the most difficult and how to get through it?

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