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First-Generation Community College Transfer Students' Perceptions of Building A Sense of Belonging and Its Subsequent Impact on University Retention

Tara E. Benson
Lindenwood University

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Tara E. Benson

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A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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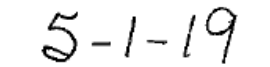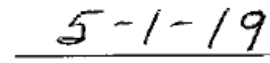_____   _____
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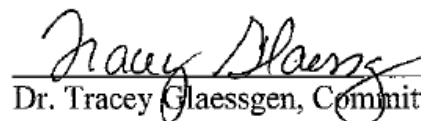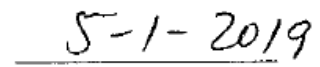
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Dr. Sherry DeVore, Committee Member   Date

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Dr. Tracey Glaessgen, Committee Member   Date

<div align="center">Declaration of Originality</div>

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

Full Legal Name: Tara E. Benson

Signature: _____ Date: 5/1/19

Abstract

Although attendance numbers are rising in both populations, transfer students and first-generation students have lower retention and completion rates (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Seider, Clark, & Soutter, 2015). All students, specifically first-generation and transfer students, have a better chance of succeeding if they feel they are academically and socially integrated into the university setting (Seider et al., 2015; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). The purpose of this study was to examine the success gap between first-generation transfer students and continuing generation community college transfer students who attend one Midwest university. The mixed methods study included an analysis of quantitative data of retention rates for both of these groups. A z-test was administered, and retention rates were not statistically significant between first-generation and continuing generation community college transfer students. For the qualitative analysis, a focus group was conducted with four students who were first-generation community college transfer students in their first semester at the participating institution. The focus group questions concentrated on building a sense of belonging at the institution. Additionally, five interviews were conducted with transfer student specific faculty and staff academic advisors. Questions during the interview focused on support techniques and training for academic advisors. Following the qualitative analysis, three themes emerged: students need support, advisors need training, and transfer student status matters more than first-generation student status. For students to be successful a sense of belonging must be obtained.

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Chapter One: Introduction

University committees, staff, and faculty spend hours studying special populations, including first-generation and transfer students at colleges and universities (Darling & Smith, 2007). Both first-generation and transfer students face more barriers to persistence and graduation than their peers who have attended the same university for their entire collegiate career (Darling & Smith, 2007; Seider et al., 2015; Shurts, 2016). Although attendance numbers are rising in both populations, transfer students and first-generation students have lower retention and completion rates (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Seider et al., 2015). Nearly 34% of low-income, first-generation students graduated with undergraduate degrees compared to 66% of their peers in 2008 (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 2). Research has been conducted on both populations in hopes of finding why retention rates are lower (Fauria & Fuller, 2015; Seider et al., 2015).

Barriers to graduation exist in both populations and many overlap (Darling & Smith, 2007; Davis, 2010; Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Some barriers include lack of academic preparedness and readiness, as well as financial stress and negative family influence, all of which can affect the success of first-generation and transfer students (Darling & Smith, 2007). Students who are not college-ready may try to navigate their experiences and may even succeed for some time, but eventually, without the necessary tools needed to succeed they will likely burn out (Davis, 2010).

All students, specifically first-generation and transfer students, have a better chance of succeeding if they feel they are academically and socially integrated into the university setting (Seider et al., 2015; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Students must feel valued and supported as individuals in order to succeed (Strayhorn, 2012). Additionally,

Strayhorn (2016) stated, "College students who feel as if they belong in college always perform better than those who 'stick out' and do not feel as if they belong" (p. 123). Sense of belonging is a theory based on social psychology not defined in a clear-cut set of steps, which may be applied to keep both first-generation and transfer students engaged at higher education institutions (Jenkins & Fink, 2015).

Additionally, sense of belonging is a basic human need all people desire (Strayhorn, 2012). Although sense of belonging is a human need, practitioners rely on anecdotal information that may or may not address issues regarding student sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). This study is important to the field because specific factors can be identified related to first-generation transfer students' sense of belonging, which in turn could impact their retention rate in higher education. Both first-generation and transfer student populations have been studied independently for many years, yet the most recent research article combining first-generation and transfer student experiences was published in 1995; therefore, this study is particularly timely to provide more current information as retention rates are becoming increasingly important (Rendon, 1995).

Academic advisors are often the first authority figures to formally interact with a student upon enrollment at an institution (Teasley & Buchanan, 2013). The role of the academic advisor is often course scheduling; however, academic advisors also assist students with developing a plan of study, orienting to the university, and helping with major selection (Huber & Miller, 2013). Academic advisors may also need to develop a different type of relationship dependent upon what each first-generation transfer student might need (Sickles, 2004). Some advisors quickly learn about students' educational and family background and determine a different type of advising style (Sickles, 2004).

Academic advisors can make a positive impact so great that it improves retention rates (Smith & Allen, 2006; Teasley & Buchanan, 2013). Additionally, a student may decide to stay or leave an institution based upon the relationships they built with peers, staff and faculty members (Vianden & Barlow, 2015).

Background of the Study

First-generation and transfer students are two critically examined populations in higher education (Darling & Smith, 2007). These student populations are of particular interest because they are growing in number yet are lacking in retention and completion rates compared to other students (Darling & Smith, 2007; Seider et al., 2015; Shurts, 2016). Both first-generation and transfer students face different challenges due to their unique needs in the college setting; however, they also face similar challenges together (Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016; Jenkins & Fink, 2015). For example, both populations need help navigating financial aid requirements, need additional specialized academic advising, and may require additional resources to acclimate to the new environment (Wyner, Deane, Jenkins, & Fink, 2016). Although both transfer and first-generation students share common barriers, there are specific differences between first-generation and transfer students (Williams & Ferrari, 2015; Utter & DeAngelo, 2015; Davis, 2010).

First-generation students continue to be an emerging population at colleges and universities (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Most commonly, the definition of a first-generation college student is one who neither parent graduated from a four-year institution (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Davis, 2010). Because attending college is a first-time experience for the student and the family, this group of

students cannot rely on their parents or caregivers to guide them through the bureaucracy of higher education (Darling & Smith, 2007). Additionally, two major factors common within the first-generation population are lack of persistence and lower graduation rates, many times due to family and financial commitments at home, as well as lack of financial resources (Williams & Ferrari, 2015).

By definition, transfer students are students who move their enrollment from one institution to another (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Transfer students are a unique population because no basic commonalities exist other than the fact they transfer from one institution to another (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). To better study the transfer student population and find commonalities, transfer students are split into two basic groups: vertical transfer students and lateral transfer students (Utter & DeAngelo, 2015). Vertical transfer students are those who graduated from a two-year institution and then transfer to a four-year institution (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Lateral transfer students transfer from similar institution to a similar institution for a variety of reasons (Utter & DeAngelo, 2015). Each transfer student subpopulation faces similar issues with social and academic integration including credit transfers, inadequate advising, and lack of institutional support (Utter & DeAngelo, 2015).

A disconnect with faculty members and peers may ultimately cause a persistence gap when students cannot integrate into a new environment (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Additionally, social integration theory implies a student needs a sense of community or a support network in which he or she feels accepted and valued as a member of the community (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Researchers have found student retention is greater when engaged early in and outside of the classroom (D'Amico, Dika, Elling,

Algozzine, & Ginn, 2014). Ultimately, both populations need to integrate socially and academically to succeed at the university level (Seider et al., 2015).

First-generation and transfer students both have factors working against their success before arriving at a college and need extra attention to persist and complete their degrees (D'Amico et al., 2014; Seider et al., 2015). The academic advisor many times fills that void (Grice et al., 2016). If a relationship does not form with an advisor, the student may never have a relationship with anyone who can fill that void (Grice et al., 2016). If an academic connection is not made, the chances of the student dropping out are elevated (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). Advising programs can be crucial to student success, and first-generation and transfer students each require different advising styles to best serve their needs (Donaldson, McKinney, Lee, & Pino, 2016).

Persistence is the rate of students who return for the second year of college at any institution, while retention is measured by students who return to the same institution (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). According to a report released with the National Student Clearinghouse (2017), nearly one-third of students drop out of school between their first and second years of college. Also, retention and persistence rates have dropped at two-year institutions leading to an overall retention and persistence issue for both two year and four year colleges and universities (Shapiro, Dunbar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015).

Theoretical Framework

For this study, multiple theories served as a guide. To understand some of the areas that impact student achievement, especially for transfer and first-generation students, thoughts about perceptions and the needs of every human being must be

discussed (Lambert, Stillman, Hicks, Kamble, Baurmeister, & Fincham, 2013). While difficult to measure, the impact of these areas can and do cause students to thrive or fail (Jerome, 2013).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs identifies a human's need for belonging as part of human motivation (Jerome, 2013). Maslow, a clinical psychologist, created this theory based on his belief that if people live in an environment where their needs are not met, they will likely not be successful, healthy individuals (Kaur, 2013). The hierarchy of needs includes biology, safety, belonging, self-esteem, and finally, self-actualization (Lester, 2013). The lowest levels of the hierarchy focus first on addressing the needs of self in the areas of basic needs and safety (Jerome, 2013). Even when biological needs are met, safety is often unmet and threatened (Jerome, 2013). According to Maslow, as cited in Lester (2013), if one is unable to have basic needs and safety needs met, then the needs for community and for developing interests and intellect may not be attainable (Lester, 2013).

Understanding one's abilities to make decisions and choose a course of action is a function of developing self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1997) described self-efficacy as one's ability to set a course of action to achieve a goal. Additionally, Bandura (1997) suggested practicing self-efficacy includes perseverance, resiliency, and coping with the decisions made in one's life. In general, self-efficacy is one's belief that one will or will not be successful (Rotter, 1966). If students, including those who are a transfer or first-generation student, cannot cope with change and manage the stress of demanding situations, then a threat to their ability to handle situations occurs (Rotter, 1966). People who are high in self-efficacy have the confidence of possessing adequate

resources to meet situational demands (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001). Increasing students' self-efficacy should be a concern for those involved in improving students' academic outcomes (Caskie, Sutton, & Eckhardt, 2014).

Self-efficacy is specifically important to show the relationship between academic performance and personal adjustment to college students' transition (Chemers et al., 2001). Typically, students who believe they can do well in their studies have higher grades (Chemers et al., 2001). The same is true for students who do not believe they will perform well academically (Chemers et al., 2001). According to Mateo, Makundu, Barnachea, and Paat (2014), individuals who do well in school are happier and more successful. However, students who struggle with the basic challenges of college life and transition feel threatened if resources are not accessible (Mateo, Makundu, Barnachea, & Paat, 2014). Therefore, students who are high in self-efficacy know they have the resources needed to resolve a situation (Mateo et al., 2014).

The same characteristics that guide the theories of Maslow and Bandura also apply to the theory of mattering and marginality (Shaw & Hammer, 2016). Marginality is defined as not feeling like one fits in or not being needed/accepted (Schlossberg, 1989). Mattering and marginality can be applied in any portion of life, but the theories resonate with college students; specifically, those who are a transfer or first-generation student (Allen, Smith, & Muehleck, 2014).

Sense of belonging is essential to the retention of first-generation and transfer student populations because it means the students feel welcomed, supported, and affirmed (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). The focus of institutions should be to help students achieve a sense of belonging because, without it, they are at risk of not surviving college

(Williams & Ferrari, 2015). A number of theorists have studied a student's sense of belonging and found a direct correlation among belongingness, student success, and persistence and its relation to academic motivation (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007).

Strayhorn (2012) spent years studying different student populations and how they develop a sense of belonging at an institution. A sense of belonging, according to Strayhorn (2012), is "a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior" (p. 17). Specifically, Strayhorn (2012) indicated a sense of belonging is especially important to marginalized student populations such as, "women, racial and ethnic minorities, low-income students, first-generation students, and gay students" (p. 17). Using this example by Strayhorn (2012), it could be argued that transfer students are an additional marginalized student population.

College students who report feelings of not mattering, not belonging, and feel loneliness and isolation do not perform as well academically (Strayhorn, 2012). If students do not feel they matter or are cared about in their academic environment, they may not move past the stage of safety in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Mateo et al., 2014). Their self-efficacy can be affected, and their sense of mattering and belongingness can deteriorate (Chemers et al., 2001). Feelings of not mattering and a lack of belongingness are underlying causes which could impact student success and retention (Rullman & Harrington, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Transfer and first-generation students are two distinct, growing populations in the university environment who also have lower graduation rates than native students

(Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Resources, such as academic tutoring, career counseling, and specific orientation and registration programs, are accessible to both transfer and first-generation students (D'Amico et al., 2014; Davis, 2010). Although all students can receive academic assistance through similar support areas such as tutoring, career counseling, and registration, there is still a gap in success between first-generation community college transfer students and continuing generation community college transfer students (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). With such a significant gap in graduation rates, there is a need to study how first-generation community college transfer students develop a sense of belonging (Davis, 2010; Townley et al., 2013)

Studies have been conducted to determine why both populations are graduating at lower rates than other higher education students (Fauria & Fuller, 2015; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Researchers found two common factors influence the retention and persistence rates of first-generation and transfer students (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). One factor is the lack of connection to the university the student attends (Fauria & Fuller, 2015). Students want to feel they belong at the institution, both socially and academically (D'Amico et al., 2014). Another factor is lack of university support in academic pursuits such as academic tutoring, advising, and articulation agreements (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). However, there is a lack of conclusive research on the significance of being a first-generation community college transfer student and the capacity to persist and graduate from universities (Jenkins & Fink, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine first-generation community college transfer students' sense of belonging at a Midwest four-year university and what roles

academic advisors play in the transition of first-generation community college transfer students. Also, retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students' retention were compared to continuing generation students. As noted above, there are reasons both of these growing populations are not graduating at the same rate as other students (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Seider et al., 2015). There is a gap in the literature regarding best practices which helps both populations gain a sense of belonging at a four-year university and contributes to their retention rate.

Research questions. The following questions guided this study:

1. What difference exists between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students at the end of first semester enrollment compared to continuing generation community college transfer students?

$H1_0$: There is no difference between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students at the end of first semester enrollment compared to continuing generation community college transfer students.

$H1_a$: There is a difference between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students at the end of first semester enrollment compared to continuing generation community college transfer students.

2. How do first-generation community college students who transfer to a public four-year university perceive their sense of belonging in this setting?

3. What role does sense of belonging contribute to first-generation community college transfer students' retention?

4. How do academic advisors at a public four-year university support the integration of first-generation transfer community college students on campus?

Key Terms

The following terms were defined for the purpose of this study:

First-generation student. The first person within an immediate family to attend post-high school education (Williams & Ferrari, 2015).

Lateral transfer student. Students who transfer from a similar institution to a similar institution for a variety of reasons (Utter & DeAngelo, 2015).

Persistence. The semester-to-semester enrollment at any college or university (Jenkins & Fink, 2015).

Retention rate. The ratio of students who enroll for one semester and re-enroll at the same college the following semester (Jenkins & Fink, 2015).

Sense of belonging. A "student's perceived social support on campus, a feeling of sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3).

Transfer student. Students who either by graduation or other needs, move their enrollment from one institution to another (Jenkins & Fink, 2015).

Vertical transfer student. Students who have graduated from a two-year institution and then transfer to a four-year institution (Jenkins & Fink, 2015).

Limitations and Assumptions

The following limitations were identified in this study:

Sample demographics. Only first-generation community college transfer students participated in the focus group at a large, public Midwestern university. Additionally, academic advisors were from various departments instead of just one department. Since the advisors were from varied departments, generalizations were made

regarding the approaches used in specific departments who may practice different types of advising (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2014)

Instrument. The instruments used in this study specifically addressed first-generation community college transfer students at one university. All questions were created by the researcher, which limited the value of the questions (Fraenkel et al., 2014). While the questions were field-tested to increase reliability and validity, the ability to generalize to all situations cannot be achieved.

The following assumptions were accepted.

1. The responses of participants were honest and without bias.

2. Student class registration were completed by the end of spring semester 2018.

3. Academic advisors utilized Advising Notes, computer software.

Summary

First-generation transfer students face a number of challenges and barriers in their journey from community college to a four-year institution (Darling & Smith, 2007; Seider et al., 2015; Shurts, 2016). According to Townley et al., many four-year institutions do not have a successful program to help support the academic and social integration of community college transfer students (2013). Missing key components such as academic and social integration effects of first-generation community college transfer student populations because it means the students feel welcomed, supported, and affirmed (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). The focus of institutions should be to help students achieve a sense of belonging because, without it, they are at risk of not remaining enrolled in college (Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Additionally, determining the role

academic advisors play in assisting students to find a sense of belongingness is a key issue addressed in this research study (Strayhorn, 2012).

Within Chapter One, an introduction to the research regarding first-generation community college transfer students was presented followed by the background of the study. Next, the theoretical framework and statement of the problem and purpose of the study were discussed. Research questions were designed using a mixed methods approach to provide a quantitative (retention rate) analysis to support a qualitative narrative provided through focus groups and interviews of first-generation community college transfer students and academic advisors at a large, public, Midwestern institution.

Chapter Two contains a review of literature written to provide insight into issues related to retention and sense of belonging development for first-generation and transfer students, as well as the role of the academic advisor. A richer description of the theoretical framework including the development theories of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging, and Schlossberg's (1989) mattering and marginality follows. Next, a description of students attending four-year institutions is provided. Concluding the chapter is a section of information regarding persistence and retention at four-year institutions and a discussion of the academic advisor role.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

The federal government is supporting long term career development by encouraging post-secondary education and training for all American citizens (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Many Americans taking advantage of this opportunity are underserved populations, including students who are first-generation, from lower socio-economic status, academically vulnerable, and adult learners (Havice & Von Kaenel, 2018). Additionally, after starting post-secondary training, many students who start at community colleges are interested in continuing their education by transferring to four-year institutions upon completion of general education courses or associate degrees (Bonet & Walters, 2016).

Student demographics found at universities in the past decade are different than those found in previous years (Davis, 2010). According to a study conducted by the Department of Education in 2010, nearly half of community college students are first-generation students (United States Department of Education, 2010, p. 4). Additionally, "37.2% of college students transfer at least once during their academic career" (Shapiro et al., 2015, p. 8). According to the statistics listed above, first-generation community college transfer students may be the biggest population of transfer students on a college campus (Miller & Servaty-Seib, 2016). Both populations are also at risk of not completing their higher education degree at increased rates than those students who are not (Bers & Schuetz, 2014). Due to the risk and retention factors of the largest populations of students currently enrolled in colleges, administrators are finding ways to address retention and persistence patterns (Miller & Servaty-Seib, 2016).

One particular risk factor related to college student persistence and retention is the college environment (Townley et al., 2013). When students lack academic and social integration, they are less likely to graduate (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). As a basic human function, it is natural for a person to want human interaction in a welcoming environment (Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2015).

In this review of the literature, a multitude of research is presented which relates to the current study. A continuation from Chapter One in regard to the theoretical framework is offered in the first section of the chapter. A detailed explanation of students who are attending college is also presented. Dialogue about retention and persistence of higher education students makes up the third section of this chapter. In the final section, literature is presented about the role academic advisors play in supporting students in higher education.

Theoretical Framework

One factor of human life and development is a sense of belonging which can predict the quality of life one will have (Cao et al., 2013). Belonging is also a key component in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Cao et al., 2013). According to Guest (2014), Maslow studied human motivation in the 1940s and wanted to determine what helps humans move through life. After the study, Maslow determined humans required five different levels of needs to be met (Guest, 2014). First, humans must have essential elements, such as air, water, food, clothing and shelter (Guest, 2014). Without the basic needs being satisfied, a person cannot move into the next level of human need (Cao et al., 2013). Following basic needs, Maslow found a person's desire to feel safe, health, and finances were the next level of necessary requirements (Guest, 2014). Only after all the

aforementioned needs are met can a person move to higher levels where personal interactions, love, and belonging are possible (Guest, 2014).

The next two needs identified are those of a person learning self-respect and then getting respect from others (Cao et al., 2013). Last, a person gains self-realization, which is the point where a person seeks personal growth and success for themselves (Guest, 2014). If one or more of an identified need is missing, the less likely a person will feel complete (Guest, 2014). Therefore, successful college students must have their basic needs met where they can gain a sense of belonging (Cao et al., 2013). Without a sense of belonging, a student will struggle to persist and lack a feeling of community in the college environment (Glass et al., 2015).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) defined belongingness as a human drive to maintain and form some type of relationship with others so a person feels valued and accepted. This type of relationship flourishes when interactions have meaning and happen on a consistent basis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Humans feel a need to make significant connections with others, which is why there are communities built by those who practice and share the same religion, common interests, or the same ethnic or diverse backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2016). When met, social bonding and building a community at the simplest level should be easily achieved (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

McMillan and Chavis, two social psychologists, formed a theory called a sense of community (Glass et al., 2015). The theory is based on four major attributes that help others feel they belong in a group. which include membership or fit, influence or a sense of mattering, getting something out of membership through the fulfillment of needs, and, sharing the same beliefs or experiences (Spinks, 2013). When applied in higher

education, college students need to connect and belong with others which becomes crucial to their success and degree completion (O'Keefe, 2013).

Belonging to, and creating a community, are vital to the success of college students, and they must find others who have similarities rather than differences in an already uncertain environment (Seider et al., 2015). Finding a supportive environment with others who are like-minded helps students persist, and these supports help them feel like they matter (Strayhorn, 2016). Students who perceive they are valued will build better relationships and connect more with peers in their collegiate environment (Strayhorn, 2016). Another strong relationship found to directly affect a student succeeding in college is the relationship built with professors and instructors (Glass et al., 2015).

Academic and social integration is equally important to building a sense of belonging with college students (Martin, 2015). A primary reason for students leaving college is they have a weak sense of belonging, especially for underrepresented populations (Strayhorn, 2012). O'Keefe (2013) supported this idea when asserting, "for students feeling rejected and not being able to develop a sense of belonging within higher education is a key cause of student attrition" (p. 612). Students want to feel they belong; not like an outsider who feels marginalized in a community (Strayhorn, 2016).

Mattering and marginality. Transition to college is a major life change that alters a student's existence and integration into a different environment (Huerta & Fishman, 2014). Theorist and researcher, Schlossberg (1989) researched how students perceive transition to the new college environment and identified four categories to help predict how a student will navigate the change, called the 4S system (Schlossberg,

1989). The 4S system includes four categories: situation, self, supports, and strategies (Schlossberg, 1989). Each "S" has a definition tied to the meaning (Schlossberg, 2011). *Situation* is the new environment which the person is placed in where change occurs and determines how much control the person has (Schlossberg, 2011). *Self* refers to the individual's characteristics in relation to the new environment, followed by *Support* which is the personal relationships and support networks (Schlossberg, 2011). Finally, *Strategies* are the personal mechanisms used to cope with the new environment (Huerta & Fishman, 2014). Although the four categories are crucial to integrating to a new environment, the other key factors of social and academic integration also exist for a student to be successful in a new college environment (Huerta & Fishman, 2014).

Social and academic integration is gained through feelings of mattering (Huerta & Fishman, 2014). When students feel they matter to the community, they are more likely to persist and succeed (Huerta & Fishman, 2014). Additionally, a community of supporters helps students know someone cares about their wellbeing and that they are appreciated in that environment (Mateo et al., 2014). When students feel they matter, it is in relation to the value placed on them as a person in the community (Mateo et al., 2014).

On the other hand, when individuals feel marginalized, the feelings can be indicative that they do not perceive being valued or accepted in a new environment (Rullman & Harrington, 2014). Feelings of isolation and social disconnection can affect students' participation in the community around them (Rullman & Harrington, 2014). When students join a new environment, they are perceived to have a certain set of

knowledge that makes them feel "normal" or accepted by their peers or faculty members, thus resulting in a successful transition (Huerta & Fishman, 2014).

Self-efficacy. A certain level of institutional support can be created to assist students; however, students must also have some level of self-efficacy in order to succeed (Huerta & Fishman, 2014). Competence and confidence in meeting the desired outcome are critical for navigating the new college environment (Bandura, 1997). A person's self-efficacy can often determine personal motivation to succeed (Mateo et al., 2014). If individuals are not motivated to make a successful transition or succeed to graduation, they may not be successful (Katz, Eilot, & Nevo, 2014).

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, students require their basic needs be met before moving forward to achieving success (Petty, 2014). After students have their physiological needs met, the needs of belonging are the next necessary components (Katz et al., 2014). Next, students need the motivation to be accepted into a new environment (Katz et al., 2014). Self-efficacy and institutional supports provide the greatest combination for student success when various barriers are present (Huerta & Fishman, 2014).

Finding ways in which students can be successful despite barriers is critical to the success of college students (Bonet & Walters, 2016). Many special populations, such as first-generation and transfer students, may require additional assistance and support services than those who are a continuing generation or native students at a four-year institution (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Students must be encouraged by their institutions to succeed (Huerta & Fishman, 2014). By providing support, students will build their

self-efficacy. which it could be argued, will lead to graduation (Huerta & Fishman, 2014).

Students Attending Higher Education Institutions

There are many directions students can utilize to enter higher education (Shurts, 2016). For some students, their educational path in the past, as well as their socio-economic status, has limited their opportunities to begin at a four-year university (Bonet & Walters, 2016). It is necessary to understand how the developmental years of students impact their future, how decisions are made in selecting a higher education institution, and barriers present that are challenging to success (Bonet & Walters, 2016).

The term "academically vulnerable" students include those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, underrepresented populations, and those whose parents did not graduate college (Karp, 2016). According to Stuart, Rios-Aguilar, and Deil-Amen, (2014), most students classified as academically vulnerable are those attending community colleges. Students identified as academically vulnerable typically make college decisions based on the interactions they have with high school counselors and teachers (Asa, Carignan, Marchesani, Moser, & Woods, 2018).

Before elementary school, there is a critical period that occurs when a child is not exposed to early childhood education during language development (Dixson, Keltner, Worrell, & Mello, 2017). Children from middle class or higher families develop nearly "30 more words than children from lower SES families in their first three years of life" (Dixson et al., 2017, p. 2). Students who do not have a strong academic foundation from as early as three years of age may struggle further into their lives and college careers (Dixson et al., 2017). Many times, students who are not exposed to early learning

opportunities are from lower privileged communities which lack valuable educational resources needed to succeed in their primary and secondary schools (Dixson et al., 2017).

There are higher levels of economic inequality now in America than in years past which has a drastic effect on the education of children (Leonhard & Quealy, 2014). According to the 2016 Federal Poverty Line Guidelines, the average household income for families considered lower social economic status or poverty stricken is $20,160 annually (Benefits, 2016, p. 1). Students living in poverty means that students from lower socio-economic status families have a bigger gap in academic preparedness, access, and resources than similar peers from middle class families (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Phillips, 2015). Social class disparities exist in factors, both individually and structurally (Stephens et al., 2015). Individual social class is based on an individuals' financial classification, most often labeled as working class, middle class, or upper class (Stephens et al., 2015). Structural social class is based on the environment and access to services (Stephens et al., 2015). Lacking both factors can affect the success rates of students trying to gain admission to college and succeeding once in college (Stephens et al., 2015).

Most Americans assume a high school graduate is prepared to attend and be successful in college (Dunston & Wilkins, 2015). However, students who live in a lower socioeconomic neighborhood and attend a public elementary school are nearly 1.5 to 2 times more underprepared than other students upon high school graduation (Dunston & Wilkins, 2015, p. 45). Typically, lower privileged community high schools lack valuable resources such as college counseling, college visit opportunities, and college preparation courses (Stephens et al., 2015). Overall, lower socio-economic status communities do

not support an environment that fosters access to successful role models and mentors to help guide the students to success causing students to be unprepared for higher education (Stephens et al., 2015).

When academically underprepared students register for classes, they are often placed in remedial courses to help better prepare them for the collegiate academic courses they will be taking in the future (Melzer & Grant, 2016). Additional remedial courses add extra time to a course of study making graduation a goal that takes additional time (Fauria & Fuller, 2015). Remedial coursework impacts the price of attending college for most entering college students due to the extra tuition that must be paid for the preparatory coursework (Melzer & Grant, 2016).

Arriving at college as an underprepared student leads to higher dropout rates and lower grade point averages than middle class students (Stephens et al., 2015). Underprepared students tend to have a lower grade point average at the end of their first semester in college, which then affects their feelings about being successful in higher education (Rodgers, Blunt, & Trible, 2014). Students may even wonder if they made the right choice in pursuing a college degree. Having such varying levels of preparedness for college, administrators must focus on the support to retain students coming from a multitude of backgrounds (Melzer & Grant, 2016). Aside from relationships built with faculty and staff, institutional leaders look to provide easier ways for academically under-prepared students to obtain a college education through a variety of academic assistance programs and non-academic assistance programs (Tovar, 2015).

Transfer students. Transfer students are students who by graduation or other needs move their enrollment from one institution to another (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). To

better study the transfer student population, researchers study vertical transfer students and lateral transfer students (Utter & DeAngelo, 2015). Vertical transfer students are those who have graduated from a two-year institution and then proceed to a four-year institution (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Lateral transfer students are students who transfer from similar institution to a similar institution for a variety of reasons other than graduation (Utter & DeAngelo, 2015).

The overall transfer student population is an ever-growing and changing population in higher education (Townley et al., 2013). Transfer students are the majority of the overall collegiate population, with nearly 60% of all undergraduate students attending college (Jenkins & Fink, 2015, p. 1). This phenomenon has affected students, particularly those who transfer from a two-year community college to four-year institutions (Fauria & Fuller, 2015; Wyner et al., 2016). It is estimated that 40% of transfer students attend community colleges (Jenkins & Fink, 2015, p. 1).

Transfer student populations especially students who make the decision after completing their two-year degree to continue their education at four-year institutions have also grown over the recent years due to initiatives set forth by government and lobbying groups (Fauria & Fuller, 2015). Former President Barack Obama introduced a college completion plan to the U.S. Department of Education in 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). At that address, President Obama announced a plan for every American to obtain at least one post-secondary year of college or technical training by 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Additionally, the College Board released a plan in 2012 called "55 by 25" which outlines ways of increasing the number of 25- to

34-year-old Americans who obtain an associate degree to 55% by 2025 (Hughes, 2012, p. 2).

In a 2008 study of this age demographic, the United States ranked ninth out of all countries for associate degree holding adults (Hughes, 2012, p. 4). A lack of post-secondary educated Americans is a clear concern to the people in the United States, because according to predictions made by Georgetown University, the number of jobs requiring only a high school diploma is on the decline (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010, p. 1). Experts also estimate that 62% of the job market requires post-secondary education and training (Carnevale et al., 2010, p. 1).

In the state of Missouri, colleges and universities are working together to help bridge the credit loss gap for transfer students (Fulton, 2017). Senate Bill 997 highlighted seven initiatives to assist Missourians in their higher education efforts (Fulton, 2017). One such effort is the Missouri Core Curriculum Transfer program (Missouri Department of Higher Education [MDHE], 2018). A committee comprised of administrators and faculty from both two-and four-year institutions worked collectively to design this program (MDHE, 2018). The committee also selected a common set of 42 hours of coursework that all state institutions teach that are transferrable to any other state funded college or university in Missouri (MDHE, 2018, p. 1). Nearly 30 other states in the United States have adopted similar programs (Jenkins & Fink, 2015).

Another initiative administered by the Missouri Department of Higher Education is the A+ Program to help residents reach personal education goals (MDHE, 2018). Educators designed the A+ Program to allow students access to complete two years of post-secondary education for a low cost at a community or two-year institution (MDHE,

2018). According to recent research, the Missouri A+ Program (Munoz, Harrington, Curs, & Ehlert, 2016):

> Increased the overall college-going rate by 1.5 percentage points for graduates
>
> from A+ designated high schools. Furthermore, the A+ Schools Program
>
> increased two-year college-going rates by 5.3 percentage points and decreased
>
> four-year college-going rates by 3.8 percentage points. (p. 801)

More students and schools continue to take advantage of the A+ program as the most affordable option for post-secondary education for Missourians (Munoz et al., 2016).

The Passport Program, sponsored by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, is another transfer student retention program created with assistance from the government (Patton, 2017). Creators of the Passport Program focused on agreements for seven different states in the western United States to promote seamless transfer processes for students (Patton, 2017). The difference of this program is the designation of guiding students through a set of nine learning outcomes agreed upon by the participating institutions rather than a course-by-course comparison used in traditional transfer credit assignments (Peat, Shea, & Sherman, 2017). This program also removes all faculty and staff from transfer credit evaluation while the federal commission grants all transfer credit to each institution in the program through articulation agreements (Peat et al., 2017).

While the overall population for transfer students is growing, the number graduating with a four-year degree is not (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Jenkins & Fink (2015), two researchers at the Community College Research Center, found 80% of community college incoming students plan to graduate with a bachelor's degree; however only 25%

transfer to a four-year institution to complete their degree (p. 1). Transfer students are less likely to complete an undergraduate degree in six years or less (Fauria & Fuller, 2015). Many enrollment services offices monitor retention and persistence rates for all student populations (Fauria & Fuller, 2015). Watching these rates is useful to university administrators to help determine the types of support needed to encourage students to reach through to graduation (Wyner et al., 2016).

According to Wyner et al. (2016), transfer students believe they will complete two years of course work at a community college, then transfer to a four-year institution to graduate in two additional years. It is more likely for a vertical transfer student to complete two years at community college and transfer to a four-year institution for a stay of 18 to 36 months (Bragg, 2015). The transfer student planning to graduate in four years can be discouraged by the thought of graduating in five years as opposed to four as originally anticipated (Wyner et al., 2016). Paying for additional and unnecessary courses continues to be a barrier to a seamless transfer experience (Strempel & Handel, 2018). The extra course work and additional time and energy causes stress on the student and affects their financial well-being (Bragg, 2015)

Transfer students are attracted to community colleges due to concerns of financial wellbeing and life stages (Martinez, 2018). Since the average age of transfer students is over 25, they are categorized as non-traditional adult student learners (Jenkins & Fink, 2015, p. 6). A report from the Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance indicated that overall, fewer high school students are enrolling immediately into college due to financial barriers and are waiting to enroll until they feel more stable (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Generally, non-traditional community college students tend to focus

more on getting their education at the lowest cost possible (Martinez, 2018). Since community college costs are typically lower cost than four-year institutions, more non-traditional students attend (Wyner et al., 2016).

Community college transfer students. A key component of the growth in post-secondary education is America's community college system (Stuart et al., 2014). Community college students are almost half of the current total undergraduate student population (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). The popularity of community college attendance has grown over the past few years due to the popularity of federal governmental programs and state support for post-secondary education (Turk, 2016). Affording access to postsecondary education and career development is appealing to many students who are receiving federal or state tuition assistance, adult learners who are changing careers by choice or by necessity, and students who may be academically underprepared to enroll in a four-year institution immediately upon graduation (Turk & Chen, 2017).

Community colleges were founded nearly 100 years ago to address the educational needs of students who did not have access to a college or university (Turk & Chen, 2017). With the turn of the century, community colleges met other needs of students contributing to upward mobility for underrepresented populations, including low income, first-generation or returning adult learners (Ma & Baum, 2016; Turk, 2016). Additionally, community colleges serve students in a transition to a four-year institution (Turk, 2016). These factors contributed to the success of community colleges along with personal support and success grew as students found comfort in classes closer to home at a reasonable cost in addition to career advancement and placement (Ma & Baum, 2016).

Community colleges continue to serve a group of students who need admittance to upward mobility, job development, and access (Turk, 2016). Adult learners are enrolling in community colleges to gain additional career development certifications or training (Turk, 2016). The flexibility of the community college curriculum and attendance is especially attractive to students who may want to attend part time or outside of traditional work hours (Havice & Von Kaenel, 2018). Community colleges attract students who are likely looking for a different experience than those offered at a traditional four-year institution (Havice & Von Kaenel, 2018).

Overall, there are fewer financial aid opportunities to students when they transfer to a four-year institution (Wyner et al., 2016). Many four-year institutional scholarships offered are aimed toward first-year students as a recruitment tactic (Wyner et al., 2016). Since more scholarship money is offered to first-year students, there will likely be less to offer for transfer scholarships although the need is just as great (Wyner et al, 2016). A lack of financial resources is only one piece of a complex issue regarding the transfer process (Strempel & Handel, 2018).

Articulation agreements are established between institutional partners who want a more seamless transfer process (Patton, 2017). Typically, faculty and administrators at both institutions review the curriculum of a particular program of study which predetermines a standard core set of curricula acceptable by both the community college and the four-year institution (Wyner et al., 2016). In fact, some community colleges create articulation agreements with other four-year institutions to agree to accept all general studies courses (Wyner et al., 2016). On the other hand, many four-year

institutions do not like to agree to articulation agreements due to the difference in course materials and learning outcomes (Patton, 2017).

According to Strempel and Handel (2018), students may take what they perceive as unnecessary courses to fulfill prerequisites which students often identify as a top barrier and challenge for transfer students. Developmental courses are one example of transfer credits often denied by an incoming institution (D'Amico et al., 2014). Many students are required to complete developmental courses at community colleges, which typically do not transfer to other institution (D'Amico et al., 2014). Loss of credits based on preparing for a particular program may lead a student to transfer to many different institutions to meet the academic major course requirements (Fauria & Fuller, 2015).

In addition, students are not following the same path to degree completion as they once did (Fauria & Fuller, 2015). Transfer swirling and "double dipping" is a term used by some researchers because students are more likely to transfer between institutions or be enrolled at multiple institutions within the same semester (Lester, Leonard, & Mathias, 2013). Additionally, some students are reverse transferring by starting at a four-year institution and transferring to a two-year institution (Fauria & Fuller, 2015).

First-generation students. The most common trait of first-generation students is the fact that their parents did not attend college (Pascarella, et al., 2004; Davis, 2010). This commonality also creates a population of students who have unique challenges and circumstances placed in front of them (Garriott, Hudyma, Keene, & Santiago, 2015; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Colleges and universities are working to find ways to better support first-generation students, especially since they tend to come from lower income families, are Pell grant eligible, and are also typically from underrepresented populations

(Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Due to challenges of being in a lower socioeconomic status along with the lack of cultural capital, and academic preparation, students arrive at the university with barriers that affect their academic outcomes. (Patton et al., 2016).

Although there are more first-generation students in college now than years prior, they are struggling to persist through college and tend to be less academically prepared, lack social capital, and tend to be financially burdened by attending the university (Darling & Smith, 2007; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Additionally, they "have greater work responsibilities, participate in fewer extracurricular activities and maintain lower levels of interactions with peers" (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015, p. 246). Without family financial support, first-generations students often fund college on their own through various loans and grants, all while supporting themselves through working when not in class (Petty, 2014).

According to Moschetti and Hudley (2015), many first-generation students are from low-income families; therefore, they also traditionally work more hours than other students. Nearly 66% of first-generation students are from underserved communities (Davis, 2010, p. 11). Working during college is not a new concept but a different one in terms of first-generation students (Davis, 2010). When students are working off campus, they are not integrating into their life on campus (Martin, 2015).

In addition, barriers exist for first-generation college students well before arrival on a college campus (Patton et al., 2016). First-generation college students may not have had access to attend an academically rigorous school which leaves them underprepared for college (Patton et al., 2016). First-generation college students may not have had access to additional tutoring or support networks provided to others (Davis, 2010). Other

continuing generation students may often have access to utilize academic coaches, tutors, and guides throughout their high school careers to prepare them for college (Davis, 2010). Because many first-generation students do not know how to seek out resources throughout their education, they may never gain exposure to this type of support, yet they are expected to know about support opportunities upon arrival to college (Jury, Smeding, & Darnon, 2015). The lack of access to vital tools needed to help support first-generation college students through their collegiate experience leads to an issue of academic integration into the university setting (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

DeGiorgio (2015) found that learning to engage with faculty and staff on a regular basis, join group activities outside the classroom, or use university support services also come as a struggle to first-generation students. First-generation students may not understand the value of integrating into the academic setting because they were not been taught to do so by their family members (Garriott et al., 2015). DeGiorgio (2015) also found students integrate academically when they develop a connection or relationship to someone, such as another student or a faculty member on campus.

Researchers have found the more comfortable students feel in the academic setting, the more successful they will be (Davis, 2010). Finding a comfortable academic setting may be harder for first-generation students because they prepare themselves to work harder and study more than continuing generation students (Davis, 2010). When asked by a researcher who first-generation students rely the most on for college advice, they will say "themselves" (Davis, 2010, p. 19).

When students choose to attend a college or university, they anticipate some questions regarding what type of support they will be offered (Moschetti & Hudley,

2015). DeGiorgio (2015) posited, that for some students, both parents attended college and are very familiar with the environment and types of support provided. This scenario is not the case for first-generation students who are "at a disadvantage when compared to their continuing generation peer's given deficits in social capital transmitted through generations" (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015, p. 246). In fact, many parents of first-generation students do not support college because they do not understand the value or support the financial obligation of a college education (Davis, 2010).

The concept of social capital is used to describe the amount of support and help given in a more social situation (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Additionally, DeGiorgio (2015) noted that social capital theory researchers found that personal connections with university staff and faculty help students navigate the new environment by providing special guidance and support they are not otherwise receiving. Misinterpreting, or not knowing about social capital, can be a barrier to students because they do not have the same amount of institutional knowledge provided by their family members that other continuing generation students may have (Everett, 2015). Moschetti and Hudley (2015) conducted research on social capital with first-generation students and reported, "18 of the 20 participants (90%), stated that the type of support their parents or caregivers provided was limited to financial support and encouragement" (p. 245). The researchers continued by saying that first-generation participants reported that their parents were unfamiliar with college, often did not understand students' needs, and could not assist with accessing institutional guidance (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

For a first-generation college student, institutional guidance can come in many forms such as advising, counseling, and tutoring (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). In these

relationships, students connect with faculty and staff members often outside of the classroom in more social activities (Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, & Barkmeyer, 2015). Social relationships with institutional agents can be the bridge builder to first-generation student success and retention (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

First-generation community college students. Open admission criteria at community colleges are especially attractive to first-generation students, especially when there is a lack of parental guidance (Everett, 2015). The disadvantage of not having a shared experience with one or more parents lowers a student's comfort when selecting a college because parents cannot offer advice (Davis, 2010). Students and families feel more comfortable with the access opportunities, geographic location, and affordability community colleges offer (Everett, 2015). Additionally, students who attend community college typically live within a 10 mile radius of their center which allows the student to commute from home easily (Everett, 2015). As all attractive options, a high number of first-generation students enroll at community colleges (Tucker, 2014).

First-generation students who attend community college often define relationships with faculty and staff as *functional* (Karp, 2016). A functional relationship, as defined by students was one where the student sought assistance from an advisor when they needed something specific and received the service directly (Karp, 2016). According to students, functional relationships with advisors did not allow for much time developing a career plan or further mentorship (Karp, 2016). Furthermore, first-generation community college students often have difficulty navigating the politics of the university and feel many policies are unwritten rules (Karp, 2016). First-generation students need a

relationship with a faculty or staff member to help them connect and navigate institutional policy and overall university environment (Davis, 2010).

Community colleges offer traditional general education courses to assist with a transfer and offer more vocational and career training programs than traditional four-year institutions (Everett, 2015). The options to finish a degree within a relatively short period of time is often attractive to first-generation students (Everett, 2015). Believing in a college education immediately yielding a job upon graduation is very important to first-generation students and their families (Karp, 2016). Often, community colleges provide a two-year occupational program which prepares the student to find stable employment through a local employment matching program (Everett, 2015).

Adult learners. One major difference between traditional students and adult learners is age (Sogurno, 2015). Adult learners are defined by the federal government as someone pursuing a degree in college, not as an 18-22-year-old, which is considered traditional aged college students (Rogers, 2018). To further define this field, other descriptors have been added including students working full time while attending college, returning veterans, commuters, students who earned a general education degree, and students with children (Roberts, 2017; Rogers, 2018). Adult learners are attending college to attain valuable credentials for future career development or to better support their dependents (Sogurno, 2015).

Due to an increase in workforce needs and longer life expectancies leading to longer career paths, college recruitment efforts are targeting more adult learners who are already employed (Roberts, 2017; Van Noy & Heldkamp, 2013). Additionally, the largest generation of "Baby Boomers" are retiring from long term employment and are

seeking new careers (Van Noy & Heldkamp, 2013). The classroom serves as a home to both traditional ages college students and adult learners (Van Noy & Heldkamp, 2013).

Traditional age students and adult learners experience college differently because they have different expectations of what college life should look like (Van Noy & Heldkamp, 2013). Socially, adult learners likely have established relationships outside of the collegiate environment through family and local communities (Van Noy & Heldkamp, 2013). Traditional age college students are very much focused on building social relationships at college while adult students are more likely to work full time and tend to care more about their work life and finances rather than campus life (Van Noy & Heldkamp, 2013). Often adult learners are not determined by age, rather, the level of personal responsibility outside of the classroom (Roberts, 2017). Academically, adult learners use less academic assistance resources such as academic advising, supplemental instruction, and peer tutors (Van Noy & Heldkamp, 2013). Often, adult learners need services offered at hours more convenient to their schedule due to personal obligations, which can often be a barrier to success (Roberts, 2017).

Retention and Persistence of College Students

There is a continued need for colleges and universities to research retention and persistence in relation to graduation rates in the United States (Bowman & Denson, 2014). The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2017) defined retention as enrollment from one year to another at the same institution and persistence as the enrollment between a student's first and second year at any institution. However, others in the higher education field defined retention and persistence interchangeably and find difficulty when trying to determine the differences (Kemp, 2016).

According to Ruffalo Noel-Levitz (2016), a company focused on college retention, 95% of entering freshmen report a strong desire to complete college, however, only 58% finish at four-year private institutions, 37% finish at four-year public institutions, and only 22% complete their degrees at two-year institutions (p. 2). In addition, as noted in a 2015 ACT report, there is a "32% overall attrition rate across the nation for 2,143 colleges and universities with a persistence to degree rate of 45.3 percent" (Kemp, 2016, p. 133).

Even amongst the challenges and barriers, most students enter college with the hopes of completing their degree (Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, 2016). College persistence and completion have moved to the forefront of conversations in higher education nationwide due to the changing demographics and mobility patterns of students (Miller, 2015). Today's students seek opportunities to connect with others and connect experiences both academically and socially, which is essential to showcase during student recruitment and retention activities (Miller, 2015).

A desire to finish and an optimistic outlook on the future are not the only things needed to persist through college (Kemp, 2016). Lacking basic study skills, a lack of overall college preparation, and the transition to new environments all affect retention and persistence rates (Bowman & Denson, 2014; Kemp, 2016). Many of those skills needed to be successful in college are provided as support systems in tutoring, advising, and first year introduction courses (Kemp, 2016).

What is harder to measure is how one finds an institutional fit (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Retention and persistence trends fall on track with a sense of belonging regarding how students feel and the "fit" at the institution for which they attend (Bowman

& Denson, 2014). Student retention and persistence are often determined by how a student feels about the campus climate (Bryant & Bodfish, 2014). For many students, college visits often include a time to discover if they feel like they belong at that institution (Bowman & Denson, 2014). Administrators know that students seek opportunities to connect with others to build social relationships, which will help with student retention and persistence (Stuart et al., 2014). Aside from students having an environmental fit, many students base their decisions to stay at a campus due to access of continued financial aid, academic advising support, access to classes needed to graduate, meaningful faculty interactions, and supportive campus culture and climate (Miller, 2015).

Programs designed by faculty and administrators to support transfer student recruitment and retention are necessary for community college transfer students to persist to graduation (Wyner et al., 2016). Vincent Tinto, who is a student development theorist, created the student persistence theory in 1987 (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013). Tinto wrote this theory with the intention of discovering why students leave colleges and universities (Guiffrida et al., 2013). Tinto specifically highlighted the need for students to feel both academically and socially integrated to succeed and persist at their institution of choice (Guiffrida et al., 2013). Students who have strong social networks feel integrated into the community and will more likely persist to graduation (Karp, 2016). If students do not receive results in both areas, they are more likely to depart earlier than graduation (Guiffrida et al., 2013).

Role of Academic Advisors

Academic advisors are often the first authority figures to interact formally with a student upon enrollment at an institution (Buchanan & Teasley, 2013). Some academic advisors provide guidance on class selection and registration, and other academic advisors provide service with career and personal development (Crocker, Kahla, & Allen, 2014). There are two types of advisors most commonly found at colleges and universities: professional and faculty advisors (Hernandez, 2017).

Professional academic advisors spend most of their time focusing on advising appointments and related duties (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). In some universities, faculty must bear advising responsibilities in addition to their teaching, research, and management/office (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). Other universities have designated entire offices of professional staff members for the sole purpose of advising students (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). Many times, professional advisors also help with orientation or pre-college programs to assist students with class schedule building (Buchanan & Teasley, 2013).

The most effective advising relationships are based loosely on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Grites, Miller, & Voller, 2016). When an advisor uses the hierarchy of needs advising model, the basic needs of the student are met first, which is usually registering for classes (Crocker et al., 2014). After a student is registered for classes, the advisor could work with the student regarding more career mapping, co-curricular involvement, and goal setting (Grites et al., 2016). Meeting the needs of students in the advising role can help a student achieve maximum success by graduating (Crocker et al., 2014).

Mixed opinions exist about the specific role and definition of the university academic advisor (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). Even the professional association for academic advisors, The Global Community for Academic Advising, struggles with an all-encompassing, universal definition and consistent job description for academic advisors (Grites, 2013). Some professionals believe academic advising is merely an advisor sharing information with a student regarding the order in which classes must be taken, and others believe academic advisors should have a mentoring type relationship (Crocker et al., 2014).

Many students think they know what they need to take to meet degree requirements, yet many students rely heavily on the support of their advisor to ensure graduation requirements are met (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). When there is a good relationship between an academic advisor and student, the relationship offers student-centered guidance (Darling 2015). Additionally, the relationship provides a support tool that helps students develop a successful academic plan which includes both inside and outside the classroom engagement (Darling, 2015). Because advising sessions should not only include basic class scheduling and degree completion guidance, it becomes a resource for a student to build a connection to the campus and institution (Buchanan & Teasley, 2013). If an academic advisor can make a positive impact on the student, the relationship can help students want to stay which ultimately increases retention rates (Allen et al., 2014; Buchanan & Teasley, 2013).

A student may decide to stay or leave an institution based upon the relationships they build with fellow peers, staff, and faculty members (Vianden & Barlow, 2015). An advisor may not fully understand what the student needs and should assess the

relationship early (Ellis, 2014). The relationship existing between a student and the academic advisor may include a strong personal component that will influence student self-efficacy, social, academic integration, and persistence (Vianden & Barlow, 2015). Many students can pinpoint whether the advisor relationship is good or bad after the first appointment (Ellis, 2014). It is important for an advisor to be proactive with practices and to understand different student populations such as transfer students and first-generation students have different advising needs than others (Donaldson et al., 2016).

Growing numbers of first-generation students, including those who may also be low income, will need special appreciation and attention (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). Academic advisors should understand how social class and socio-economic backgrounds affect a student's experiences in the classroom and on campus (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). If advisors do not prepare themselves to understand the unspoken needs and struggles of first-generation students, their students may not be as successful (Soria & Bultmann, 2014). It is vital to the success of the student for an advisor to not only assist with an academic plan but also a plan supported with essential campus resources and outside the classroom learning opportunities (Darling, 2015). The first advising session can set the tone for the entire relationship, particularly if the advisor is not prepared to provide certain levels of support (Ellis, 2014).

Academic advisors play a key role in transfer student success; students must have an advisor who understands their unique needs and understands how course transfers work (Wyner et al., 2016). The academic advisor's role is to provide program course planning along with securing transfer credit (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015). However, in some cases, the advisor does not offer the best academic counseling, so the student

takes additional courses resulting in additional, unplanned costs, which ultimately affects the success of that student (Strempel & Handel, 2018). Transfer students require an advisor who understands their unique circumstances and needs (Wyner et al., 2016). Many colleges utilize existing advisors and fill in as needed for transfer advising (Strempel & Handel, 2018). However, many advisees get added to the already busy schedule of a departmental advisor who does not offer the same type of support and guidance needed (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015). Due to the complexity of transfer students' degree audits, transfer advisors should monitor and review their advisees' progress throughout the year (Wyner et al., 2016).

Ideally, academic advisors for community college transfer students would focus on academic goal setting along with life goals and social integration opportunities (Allen et al., 2014). According to Allen et al., advisors must address the issues with students that extend beyond classroom scheduling (2014). Therefore, advisors should be prepared to foster an environment in which they provide both academic and social integration concepts and ideas to students through a variety of delivery methods which may change the relationship (Donaldson et al., 2016; Gaines, 2014). Most institutional advisors use one of three types of practices; prescriptive, developmental, or intrusive (Donaldson et al., 2016).

Prescriptive advising. The primary focus of this type of advising relationship is to move the student toward graduation as quickly as possible (Crocker et al., 2014). This particular advising practice generally requires faculty advisors to learn degree requirements outside of their expertise level with coursework (Crocker et al., 2014). The interaction between a developmental advisor and the student is transactional and focused

on class registration to ensure the student meets any prerequisites required to progress (Crocker et al., 2014).

Developmental advising. Developmental advising tends to be one of the most widely-used academic advising style and was more widely accepted beginning in 1989 (Grites, 2013). In developmental advising, the advisor offers additional guidance regarding the class structure and how certain classes may better fit the student's major while also providing connections to research or career opportunities (Crocker et al., 2014). The interaction between a developmental advisor and a student looks different than that of the prescriptive advising style, because it is eventually built more like a relationship (Crocker et al., 2014). Advisors may start providing advice, but also sharing wisdom in other areas of life which ultimately lead to a more rewarding college experience, and in turn, leads to graduation (Crocker et al., 2014; Grites, 2013).

Intrusive advising. Proactive, early, and mandatory contact are the key essentials in intrusive advising (Donaldson et al., 2016). In this type of advising relationship, the advisor takes a more genuine interest in the students' successes and many times starts on the first day with students and continues until graduation (Crocker et al., 2014). The intrusive advising theory was developed by Earl (1988) who based the theory on academic and social integration. In intrusive advising relationships, advisors do not wait for students to ask for help or show a need, but rather anticipate issues the students may face (Earl, 1988). Since the creation of this theory, several advisors use this proactive approach to help the student gain academic and social integration to the institution rather than focusing on course selection (Rodgers et al., 2014)

Often, the type of advising relationship is based upon the expectations of the department; however, the relationship may also rely on student needs (Ellis, 2014). for first-generation college students. An explanation regarding the difference between a counselor in high school and an academic advisor may be necessary (Glaessgen, Macgregor, Cornelius-White, Hornberger, & Baumann, 2018). Additionally, the advising relationship at a community college can look very different than at a four-year institution (Ellis, 2014). Many universities and colleges require a student to meet with an advisor for a brief period prior to registration and receive permission to register (Crocker et al., 2014). Some advisors may advise students on course selection but will not register the students, with hopes the student will follow the plan, however, it is ultimately up to the student's discretion on next steps (Crocker et al., 2014).

A student may become accustomed to a certain advisor and advising style only to be changed to another advisor who may practice a different advising type (Ellis, 2014). This change in approach and personnel may confuse the student or cause a barrier to registration if he or she feels uncomfortable with the new advisor or advising technique (Ellis, 2014). The advisor will need to re-introduce the student to a different advising style, and the student may not respond positively to the change (Ellis, 2014). A student who has a strong connection to the advisor is likely more successful than one who does not have a strong advising relationship (Kot, 2014).

As higher education moves toward the future, students' expectations will change regarding the role of the academic advisor and student (Ellis, 2014). As services become more accessible to students, the future of academic advising will not be an exception (Gaines, 2014). To provide a more consistent type of advising across disciplines and

across colleges and universities, a universal advisor training would be beneficial (Crocker et al., 2014).

Advisor training. Although some type of academic advising is required at most colleges and universities, there is no common training curriculum for academic advisors (Crocker et al., 2014; Grites, 2013). Many academicians believe academic advising is not a profession, and therefore, no common training curriculum is necessary (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015). College and university administrations have discussed the role of academic advisors for years; however, there are still major variations between what advising practices work at certain institutions and those that do not (Kot, 2014). Even with no training curriculum and minimal support for the professionals serving as advising, there are consistently more responsibilities placed upon academic advisors such as knowing various class course content and prerequisites (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015). It would be beneficial for faculty and staff departmental specific advisors to receive specific training regarding class content and for university and college requirements (Crocker et al., 2014). Additionally, the Global Community for Academic Advising also referred to as NACADA recognized that at the core of student success, is effective academic advising (About Us, 2019). The association also offers different professional development opportunities to support academic advising on all levels (About Us, 2019).

Academic advisors serve in unofficial capacities as adult educators, and therefore, should be supported by professional development opportunities (Alvarez & Towne, 2016). Since there are no current, similar continuing education options, academic advisors are limited on advancement in advising practices (Alvarez & Towne, 2016).

General topical training for academic advisors often include interviewing, relationship building, and understanding advising basics (Alvarez & Towne, 2016). Some researchers suggest advisors should receive training on technology use, institutional policy, personal assessment, personal growth, and student development (Alvarez & Towne, 2016; Ellis, 2014).

Summary

First-generation and community college transfer students are examples of two growing populations in America's colleges and universities (Museus, Varaxy, & Saeua, 2016). The first-generation and community college student population is trending up and set to continue indefinitely due to the support provided through a myriad of state funded support and assistance programs (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2014). Through support both inside and outside the classroom, first-generation community college students should have the skills needed to succeed, yet continue to struggle to college graduation (Davis, 2010; Museus et al., 2016; Strempel & Handel, 2018). The issue may be students not gaining a sense of belonging at the institution as a first-generation community college transfer student (Havice & Von Kaenel, 2018; Strayhorn, 2016).

Building a sense of belonging is especially crucial to the success of academically vulnerable students at college (Museus et al., 2016). First-generation community college students have barriers to success due to the fact they did not have parents attend college and also the barriers presented when transferring from a community college to a four-year institution (Davis, 2010; Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Additionally, open admissions community colleges also attract students who may be unfamiliar with the college environment, underprepared for college, or adult learners returning to school, all who

may struggle to integrate into academic environments (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2014). Without the student gaining a sense of belonging at the institution, there will be no motivation to self-efficacy and ultimately, the student will fail (Museus et al., 2016).

In Chapter Three, the methodology used for this study is presented. The problem and purpose overview including the research questions which guided the study are provided. A mixed methods research method was applied, and discussion of the rationale for selecting this type of approach is presented in the research design. Following the discussion of selecting mixed methods to guide this study, the population and sample are discussed. An in-depth explanation of how the data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative practices is detailed.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Enrollment is rapidly increasing for first-generation and transfer students at American colleges and universities; however, the two populations are not graduating at the same rate as their peers (Darling & Smith, 2007; Jenkins & Fink, 2015). In 2008, nearly 34% of low-income first-generation students graduated with undergraduate degrees compared to 66% of their peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 2). Although there are many barriers affecting first-generation transfer student success, one major issue identified is lack of belonging at an institution (Miller & Servaty-Seib, 2016).

Successful college graduates often attribute their college successes to building a connection with a group, faculty, staff, or community (Strayhorn, 2012). One basic need of all humans is gaining a sense of community and having the feeling of being valued and connected to the world (Strayhorn, 2012). According to Miller and Servaty-Seib (2016) and Strayhorn (2012), the same feeling of belongingness is necessary for college students, especially those from marginalized or underrepresented groups.

Determining the ways in which first-generation community college transfer students gain a sense of belonging is the focus of this study. A statement of the problem and the research questions are outlined in this chapter. A discussion of the mixed methods research methodology follows. Next, the description of the research design, the population and sample, instrumentation, data collection procedures, and the data analysis sections are presented.

Problem and Purpose Overview

Students who are both first-generation and community college transfer students are already at risk of dropping out of college before graduation (Darling & Smith, 2007;

Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Barriers exist for both populations including financial stressors, lack of college readiness, negative family influence, and lack of academic support (D'Amico et al., 2014; Darling & Smith, 2007). In addition to the previously identified barriers, a student's sense of belonging and the impact of belongingness on retention should be studied (Strayhorn, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to examine first-generation community transfer students' sense of belonging at a four-year, Midwestern public institution. Retention rates of first-generation and community college transfer students should be studied to determine if better support is necessary. Additionally, taking time to listen to this population of students and academic advisors through focus groups and interviews provided insight on ways to support first-generation and community college transfer students to college completion.

Research questions. The following questions served as a guide in this study:

1. What difference exists between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students at the end of first semester enrollment compared to continuing generation community college transfer students?

H1$_0$: There is no difference between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students at the end of first semester enrollment compared to continuing generation community college transfer students.

H1$_a$: There is a difference between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students at the end of first semester enrollment compared to continuing generation community college transfer students.

2. How do first-generation community college students who transfer to a public four-year university perceive their sense of belonging in this setting?

3. What role does sense of belonging contribute to first-generation community college transfer students' retention?

4. How do academic advisors at a public four-year university support the integration of first-generation transfer community college students on campus?

Research Design

A mixed methods approach was selected for this study because neither quantitative nor qualitative research alone can provide the necessary data to reach a meaningful conclusion (Creswell, 2015). Using mixed methods as a research design allows for both qualitative and quantitative data to be collected and analyzed (Creswell, 2015). The mixed methods approach as a methodology became popular when the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* was published (Mertens, 2015). Mixed methods were considered a new approach to research in the late 1980s and 1990s and became popular due to the robust amount of resulting detail (Creswell, 2015). Additionally, Creswell (2014) defined mixed methods as, "research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of inquiry" (p. 4).

There are three different types of mixed methods approaches, including convergent, explanatory, and exploratory (Creswell, 2014). In the convergent approach, qualitative and quantitative data are collected separately, and data are merged together (Creswell, 2015). In explanatory, quantitative data are initially collected and analyzed (Creswell, 2015). After an initial analysis, the researcher can determine what steps

should be taken next to collect the qualitative data (Creswell, 2015). The last example of mixed methods research, exploratory, occurs when qualitative data are first collected and analyzed (Creswell, 2014). Following the collection of qualitative data, quantitative data are then extracted and analyzed to provide support for the qualitative data (Creswell, 2015). In this study, the explanatory method was employed.

Quantitative data are used to review and analyze numerical data for large populations of people (Creswell, 2014). Typically, quantitative data are studied to answer a specific question or to accept or reject a specific hypothesis (Creswell, 2015). Hypotheses are created using theories or prior knowledge typically found in a literature review and used in research studies to determine the relationship between variables (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2015). Quantitative data can be gathered using a variety of different methods, but the manner in which the study is set up along with the type of data being collected is important (Creswell, 2014). For the purposes of this study, de-identified retention data from a public, four-year, large Midwestern university was utilized for this research study. These pre-existing data were provided by the university enrollment management office. When students apply for application, a choice is given to indicate if the applicant is a first-generation student [Institutional Data].

Causal comparative studies tend to involve pre-existing data which cannot be manipulated (Gay et al., 2015). Additionally, causal comparative research includes exploring reasons or similarities between two different groups (Fraenkel et al., 2014). In this study, first-generation and continuing generation community college transfer students were compared as opposed to using an experimental design which would allow a test group being compared to another group (Gay et al., 2015).

Qualitative research is used to collect information in a non-numerical fashion to provide context and information (Gay et al., 2015). Often, the researcher is hoping to gain an understanding based on opinions in which participants provide the "quality of the activity" rather than a numerical expression to "describe the activity in detail" (Fraenkel et al., 2014, p. 442). The methods with which the author assesses qualitative data are through "text, audio recordings or video recordings" (Creswell, 2015, p. 4).

In qualitative studies, data can also be collected through participant observations by the researcher, or by asking open-ended questions in a focus group or interview (Creswell, 2015). The researcher will often look for the meaning of responses during interviews and focus groups to describe a problem (Creswell, 2015). After data are collected, the researcher performs analyses to determine themes throughout dialogue of the participant (Creswell, 2015). This analysis is referred to as coding; data are tagged or labeled and referred to as chunks of data (Fraenkel et al., 2014). The person coding will try to find the ideas provided and categorize or find themes in answers of participants (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

Population and Sample

A population is a group of individuals with commonality and may exist at any time and in any geographical location (Gay et al., 2015). For the purposes of this study, there were two different populations. The first population consisted of first time at four-year, first-generation community college transfer students at a large, Midwestern, four year-public institution, and the second population consisted of faculty or staff transfer specific academic advisors employed at the same institution. There were 159 first-

generation community college transfer students and 59 faculty and staff transfer specific

advisors on campus during the spring of 2018 eligible to participate in this study.

A sample is pulled from a population to create a smaller group of people with

some certain criteria of commonalities (Creswell, 2014). Ultimately, sampling is used to

learn more about and draw inferences about a larger population (Gay et al., 2015). The

researcher chose convenience sampling, which is a sample of participants who could

speak about the similar experiences at the same institution (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

Typically, in convenience sampling, the researcher has access to participants' instead of

relying on a random sample (Creswell, 2014).

Primarily, in convenience sampling, data are accessible without any additional

restrictions or given information (Fraenkel et al., 2014). The report of the number of

first-generation transfer students in their first semester at a large, public, Midwestern

institution already existed. All students who met these criteria were invited to participate

in a focus group. Any student who responded and could meet for the focus group was

considered part of the sample.

Instrumentation

Mixed methods research combines quantitative data including statistical reports

and qualitative data including personal opinions and experiences (Creswell, 2015).

Combining quantitative and qualitative data helps researchers gain the best understanding

of a complex issue (Creswell, 2015). Due to the complexity of the research questions and

overall study design, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected utilizing

several instruments which are described in separate sections.

Quantitative. De-identified data, or data with names and/or other personal identifiers removed, were used to help answer the question of whether there was a difference in retention between first-generation community college transfer students and non-first- generation community college transfer students (Bluman, 2015). The researcher collected these data which already existed at the institution. The data were provided after a request was made to the enrollment management office.

Validity and reliability of quantitative data. Internal and external threats to establishing validity exist in quantitative studies (Creswell, 2014). Additional care should be taken to ensure scores from the quantitative data are free from error (Creswell, 2015). To assure no incorrect reporting occurred, data were as requested through the Office of Enrollment Services via email without personally identifying any student.

Qualitative focus groups. To collect data from first-generation community college transfer students, a focus group protocol with open-ended questions concerning how students develop a sense of belonging were created (see Appendix A). A focus group setting was the best method to gain an understanding of how students develop a sense of belonging, because the answers were based primarily on personal opinions (Gay et al., 2015). Open-ended questions allowed participants to direct the conversation in a manner they are most comfortable (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Focus groups are typically used in qualitative research because a group of individuals can provide consensus regarding a research topic (Coe, Waring, Hedges, & Arthur, 2017). Most importantly, focus groups are interactive and often a richer conversation occurs rather than individual interviews (Coe et al., 2017). When focus

group participants share thoughts, others may hear the same views and either agree or disagree with statements (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

In educational research, focus groups are a popular qualitative method because educators typically rely on experiences of students to guide future action (Coe et al., 2017). Focus groups are typically comprised of four to eight people and seated close to each other so they can actively participate with one another (Fraenkel et al., 2014). Participants may agree or disagree with one another, but the major focus is on hearing the views and opinions of participants (Fraenkel et al., 2014). The goal of this study was to find how and if students have built a sense of belonging based on their personal experiences at the four-year institution.

Qualitative interviews. To collect information about how faculty and advisors work with first-generation community college students, it was determined to be appropriate to use individual interviews. Interviewing is a way for a researcher to find how a person thinks or feels about something (Fraenkel et al., 2014). To obtain the most information about the advising process, an open-ended interview protocol was created (see Appendix B). Questions were designed to elicit answers from respondents used to compare with other answers (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

Interviews are often used in educational research to help explain or describe a culture (Coe et al., 2017). Interviewing can provide a deep and rich understanding of the individual's experiences with the topic being studied (Coe et al., 2017). Face-to-face interviews provided the researcher with a full spectrum of knowledge and allowed emotional reactions to be recorded and noted (Brinkmann, 2014). In this study, the researcher was able to gain a deep understanding of personal experiences advisors have

with first-generation community college transfer students. Individual interviews also enabled the researcher to have more one-to-one time with the advisors

Transfer specific faculty and staff academic advisors were interviewed face-to-face with open-ended questions regarding common practices used when students have a first-generation and community college transfer notice on record [Institutional Data, 2018]. Five interviews were conducted to gain enough information on themes efficiently, yet not oversaturate the sample (Coe et al., 2017). The ideal number of interviews to support a study varies dependent upon the information needed (Gay et al., 2015).

Validity and reliability of qualitative instruments. Validity must be established in a study to find meaningful and useful information (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative validity practices look very different from quantitative validity practices (Creswell, 2015). Different methods must be employed to ensure validity such as transcribing data accurately, following the definition of codes established, and comparing results (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is heavily based on interpreting and collecting information; therefore, field testing to ensure researcher bias is limited is essential to preserving the study (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

For the purposes of this study, focus group questions were field-tested prior to the study. The researcher utilized first-generation community college transfer students at the researcher's home institution. Volunteers were recruited who work with the institutional unit for transfer students, and a one-hour session was requested to help test the format. Field testing provided the researcher with a sample run-through to ensure comfort with the questions was established (Krueger & Casey, 2015)

Interviews were field-tested with academic advisors located in the advising services office at the researcher's home institution. The researcher requested volunteers who worked with transfer students to assist in field-testing. After field-testing was complete, a revision to the instrument was made based on results of the field testing.

Data Collection

The researcher notified the enrollment management area of the large, public Midwestern institution for the notice of study. After receiving an affirmative response to the notice of study, the approval was sought from the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (see Appendix C) as well as the review board at the large, public Midwestern university (see Appendix D). A request was made to the Office of Enrollment Services at the large, public Midwestern university for de-identified data to answer Research Question One (see Appendix E). This report included quantitative data collected from various enrollment reports highlighting retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students from the 2018 spring semester and the 2018 fall semester for both first-generation and continuing generation community college transfer students.

Next, to locate focus group participants, a request was submitted to Enrollment Management and Institutional Research to retrieve names and email addresses of first-generation community college transfer students (see Appendix F). After receiving the list from Institutional Research, an email invitation was sent to eligible students (see Appendix G). Students were asked to respond to the researcher to accept the invitation to participate. Participants had two weeks to accept the invitations. After the student responded in the affirmative, the researcher sent an email to sign up for a focus group

time (see Appendix H). All students who chose to participate were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix I).

After reviewing a comprehensive list of transfer specific faculty and staff academic advisors, an email invitation was sent soliciting participants (see Appendix J). The invitation included the purpose of the study, time commitment, and scheduling instructions. Participants had two weeks to accept the invitation. Upon accepting the invitation, a confirmation email was sent containing the time, date, and location of the interview (see Appendix K). All participants were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix L).

Data Analysis

Data analysis is a practice used to answer a question or to support or reject a hypothesis in a study (Gay et al., 2015). The strategy used in this mixed methods research to analyze data consisted of examining multiple levels (Creswell, 2014). For the purposes of this study, multiple-level analysis was utilized to extract qualitative data so the data could be supported by the quantitative numerical percentages (Gay et al., 2015).

Quantitative. Quantitative data for this study included enrollment reports with data that were used to determine differences between retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students and continuing generation community college transfer students. In statistics, z-tests are used to determine if two proportions are significantly different from each other (Gay et al., 2015). An advantage to using a z-test allows the researcher to compare raw scores to be compared (Fraenkel et al., 2014). Retention rates were calculated by using a simple mathematical equation of dividing students who were registered for the spring semester and those who were not registered.

After calculating retention rates, there was a difference, although not statistically significant, between first-generation and continuing generation students (Fraenkel et al., 2014). When a *z*-test is employed, raw numbers are tested to reveal if there is statistical significance using the mean and standard deviation (Fraenkel et al., 2014). Therefore, a *z*-test for independent samples was used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in retention rates from spring semester to fall semester for first-generation community college transfer students and continuing generation community college transfer students (Gay et al., 2015).

Qualitative. Face-to-face interviews and focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed with the assistance of a third-party transcription service. The goal of transcribing sessions was to find common themes among the responses provided by the individuals participating (Krueger & Casey, 2015). After data were collected, responses were grouped by the question (Creswell, 2014). After compiling questions, the transcriptions were read multiple times to ensure the accuracy (Fraenkel et al., 2014). After reviewing the transcriptions multiple times, categories or codes of responses provided by participants were identified (Creswell, 2014). Next, the codes were reviewed to determine if any overlap existed (Creswell, 2014). Then several of the codes and evidence were used to build a theme (Creswell, 2014).

Raw data or responses are funneled into themes through commonalities weaved throughout the dialogue for focus group and interview participants (Creswell, 2016; Fraenkel et al., 2014). Themes are then built into categories that are distinctly different than the others (Creswell, 2015). Most themes are presented in the findings section of

qualitative studies (Creswell, 2015). Themes from this study are presented in the next chapter.

Ethical Considerations

Researchers have a duty to protect participants and information provided in a study (Creswell, 2014). The first step to reviewing ethical considerations is ensuring compliance with the professional association in which the study falls (Creswell, 2014). This study followed the guidelines created by the American Psychological Association (2009) which included studies that fall under the educational realm of research (Fraenkel et al., 2014). This is an important step because maintaining confidentiality falls under rules or ethical codes regarding research (Creswell, 2014).

The next step in this study was sending a notice of study at the large, public Midwestern institution (Creswell, 2014). A notice helps gain access to the site and to potential participants (Creswell, 2014). The director of the enrollment management area provided support for the study. A notice of study at the institution was important to let someone know this study was taking place on the campus (Creswell, 2014).

Next, the researcher applied for approval from the home Institutional Review Board, who reviewed the confidentiality and care of the study. Confidentiality and care must be practiced to protect the validity of the study and the participants (Creswell, 2014). Ultimately, the researcher should do everything in his or her control to protect participants from harm and to maintain confidentiality (Fraenkel et al., 2014). The committee who reviews Institutional Review Board submissions assesses the study for potential risks or harm (Creswell, 2014). In this study, the researcher included the

population and sample and ensured participant privacy by identifying the focus group and interview participants by alphabet letters and numbers (Creswell, 2014).

After gaining approval from the Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited for the focus groups and interviews. After receiving acceptances to the study, focus group and interviews were scheduled. Before the focus group and interviews commenced, all participants signed a consent form (Creswell, 2014). The consent form included language regarding the purpose of the study, location, contact information for the researcher and advisor, and provided rights for the participants (Creswell, 2014).

After participants signed the consent forms, the researcher asked opened ended semi-structured questions regarding the participant's experiences (Fraenkel et al., 2014). The focus groups and interviews were held in closed, private offices or rooms. Using a quiet, private room helped ensure the privacy of the participants and did not disrupt the normal functions of the institution (Creswell, 2014). All responses were recorded using an electronic voice recorder. Following the focus group and interviews, a third-party transcription service was employed to transcribe the voice recording. The voice recordings are stored on an electronic file under password protection to ensure privacy and anonymity of participants (Creswell, 2014).

Designing a healthy study requires a researcher to consider ethical dilemmas that may arise and address them early in the study (Creswell, 2014). Ethical considerations for mixed methods research must include both quantitative and qualitative actions (Fraenkel et al., 2014). Most importantly, participants must be protected from physical and mental harm, identities must be protected and should be respected throughout the study (Fraenkel et al., 2014).

Summary

A mixed methods research design was used for this study because of the need to gather a robust blend of quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2015). Quantitative data were used to determine if there was a significant difference between first-generation community college transfer students and continuing generation community college transfer students at a large, Midwestern public institution. The quantitative study was supplemented by the qualitative study to determine how students gain a sense of belonging and to identify techniques used by academic advisors to help students gain a sense of belonging.

In Chapter Four, findings of both the quantitative and qualitative research are included. Statistical tests are analyzed and reported in conjunction with the themes determined by interviews and focus groups. Following the findings, emerging themes found in the study are identified.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to examine information about first-generation community college transfer students. Retention rates of first-generation community college students were compared to continuing generation community college transfer students to see if a significant difference existed. In addition, qualitative data were collected to see how first-generation community college students develop a sense of belonging at a large, public Midwestern four-year university. Last, transfer student specific academic advisors were interviewed to examine the advising services offered to help an incoming student develop a sense of belonging.

The study was conducted at a large, public, four-year Midwestern institution. Although the number of first-generation community college transfer students continues to rise, graduation rates continue to drop (Davis, 2010; Jenkins & Fink, 2015). There is no current data supporting why there is a lack of persistence to graduation for first-generation community college transfer students; therefore, this study combines both a quantitative and qualitative study to provide robust insight into this problem (Creswell, 2015).

Demographics

The population for this study included data from 396 domestic, community college transfer students enrolled in the 2018 spring semester at a large, four-year, public Midwestern institution. This information was extracted from the list of all transfer students enrolled by Office of Enrollment Management staff members who created enrollment reports through an internal reporting system. In addition, authorization was provided to the researcher to contact students extracted from the report to request focus

group participation. Academic advisors whose role is to specifically work with transfer students are listed on the public domain, and 15 advisors were contacted which yielded a sample of five transfer student specific advisors for participation in the study.

Data Analysis

In the following section, data collected from quantitative and qualitative research methods conducted in this study are discussed. The quantitative research question was analyzed using inferential statistics. The remaining three qualitative research questions were analyzed using focus group participation and individual interviews. All research questions are detailed in the next section.

Quantitative analysis of research question one. For the first research question, *What difference exists between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students at the end of first semester enrollment compared to continuing generation community college transfer students?* Enrollment reports were collected in partnership with the institution's Office of Enrollment Services. After first-generation community college transfer student numbers were extracted from the overall community college transfer student population, data analysis between the two populations occurred. In the data set determined by the Office of Enrollment Services, 396 community college transfer students were enrolled in the 2018 spring semester. There were 159 first-generation community college transfer students enrolled in the 2018 spring semester, and 125 enrolled for fall 2018. Additionally, there were 257 continuing generation community college transfer students enrolled in the 2018 spring semester, and 175 enrolled in fall 2018.

A *z*-test using proportions was conducted to determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students versus continuing generation community college transfer students (Creswell, 2014). A *z*-test was selected to analyze the two retention rates because two proportions were being compared to one another (Bluman, 2015). The retention rate for first-generation community college transfer students was calculated at 0.79. The retention rate for continuing generation community college transfer students was calculated at 0.68. Utilizing Microsoft Excel, a *z*-test was conducted and a *z*-value of 2.326 was obtained. This test was selected using a significance level of .05 (Creswell, 2014). When the means of the two groups were compared, the result was not statistically significant based on enrollment from spring 2018 to fall 2018. Therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

Qualitative analysis of research questions two and three. The second research question, *How do first-generation community college students who transfer to a public four-year university perceive their sense of belonging in this setting?* was addressed by summarizing responses based on answers provided in a focus group setting (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The focus group of four students was held in the spring semester 2018. A total of eight questions were asked during the session.

The third research question, *What role does sense of belonging contribute to first-generation community college transfer students' retention?* was also addressed using responses from the focus group participants. Responses were generated regarding their perspectives of a sense of belonging and staying enrolled. In the following sections,

demographics of study participants are presented along with data from each focus group question.

Focus group participant demographics. Four first-generation, community college transfer students participated in the focus group. One participant identified as male, and three identified as female. One student identified as African American, one identified as Hispanic, and two identified as Caucasian. Two students were a traditional college age of 18-24, and two were adult learners over 24 years of age. Participants represented various majors including agriculture, biology, graphic design, or were undecided/undeclared. The variety in range of age, ethnicity, and majors were considered diverse and provided representation of a variety of first-generation, community college students.

Focus group question #1. The first question asked of participants was, *Tell me how each of you navigated the transfer process to [institution name].* In each student's case, there was a combination of incoming student assistance received through the community college and the incoming institution. Students who had a connection with an advisor or staff member from the community college received support from that person, and if not, students utilized the transfer institution support systems for assistance through the transition. Student A1 commented, "I navigated the process on my own, [with] help from my community college and department head." In this case, the student utilized her skills and knowledge in concert with the resources gained at both the community college level and transfer institution. Student A2 explained, "I received a lot of help from [institution name], not from community college." Student A4 was a member of an academic support service which helped serve as an aid to her transition. "I was part of

the student support services (TRIO) program at my school and also an academic program called CAMP…we had workshops and the staff were super nice and answer any questions you might have."

Focus group question #2. The second question, *Has there been a faculty or staff member who stands out as being helpful in your transition?* was asked to participants. Students identified supporters located in academic programs at the community college level or the transfer student advisors in individual departments. Additionally, students believed those supporters were easy to access and communicated regularly with students. Student A1 commented, "She [transfer student advisor] was the biggest help of anyone- she's a teacher and academic advisor" adding, "I got to really know her and communicate with her." Student A2 named the department head and transfer advisor as the most supportive faculty members. In addition to an academic advisor, students A3 and A4 each named someone in outreach programming and veteran's student support at the community college and one from an academic assistance program. Overall, students were able to name at least one person who was helpful in their transition, primarily naming transfer advisors.

Focus group question #3. The third question, *Have there been areas each of you have found challenging at [institution name]? How did you solve these situations?* was asked to all participants. Students indicated they transferred in the spring and found difficulty navigating the financial aid system, connecting with instructors, and class schedules. Student A2 explained, "Financial aid was a pain, and just when I thought I was finished, I found out there was more work to be done." Student A4 discussed confusion with class scheduling regarding financial aid stating:

I'm transferring in with all my gen eds done. It was kinda difficult, because then

that meant that I was taking all classes in my major. How was I going to get

around certain problems with the schedule because I couldn't go in order because

I couldn't be eligible for financial aid? So in some areas, you need to be a full

time students, so that's the biggest problem, especially if it's in that structure,

because you only have two classes you can really take unless there are electives,

and then you have to be really able to communicate with your instructor and

advisors in order to be in them and for them to understand your situation…I have

friends who say, 'I have to take a semester off, so that I have enough credit hours

next semester to be eligible for Pell or whatever other scholarships; then they

don't come back.

Connections with instructors were important because transfer students often enroll

primarily in upper level courses with the same students and same instructors in a declared

major by the time they transferred to a new institution. Student A2 claimed, "Instructors

aren't open and available as I had hoped. I had a falling out with one instructor, and now

I have that person for most of my other classes." Student A4 also asserted, "Sometimes

it's really hard as a transfer student, because you know, you come from this really small

community and you come here where to get a hold of someone is sometimes difficult like

within your department."

Another negative connection point included a focus group participant's campus

roommate situation. According to the participant, the roommate added extra stressors

due to the constant miscommunication regarding responsibilities. The participant did not

feel at home in her room and tended to stay away from the room due to the tension.

Additionally, transfer students noted course scheduling was difficult for transfer students to navigate especially if they completed general education courses or participated in online course scheduling. Student A3 asserted, "Course catalog says courses and degrees can be met, but they aren't there and aren't available. That's an ongoing issue I have, online classes not available and not enough classes available when I need them." Student A4 commented, "It was kinda difficult because then that meant I was taking all classes in my major and they're so time consuming".

  Focus group question #4. The fourth question, *Tell me about your academic advisor. What role has he or she played in your transition to [institution name]?* was asked next to all participants. All students recalled having an academic advisor assist in their transition to [institution name]. Common statements emerged about the advisor regarding transactional relationships, limited communication, and time but also support systems needed to getting classes scheduled. Students explained that many times they were transferred from advisor to advisor. Student A4 posited, "It's been two people now, well, I guess technically three, because there has been a lot of change in my department". Student A1 said, "I had a hold when I transferred and needed to meet with the advisor. We did everything over e-mail. I don't think I've ever met him. He doesn't advise normally, just transfer students." Student A3 also agreed and said, "communication occurred over the phone."

  Continuing with the theme regarding limited communication and time. Student A4 explained:

> I kind of figured out my own schedule and just presented it to my advisor, and
> they were like 'yep, that works. I'll just contact this person and this person, and

we'll see where you can end up which is really great for them and made it easier

for them, because I know they handle at lot of students so sometimes, they have a

lot on their plate, apart from classes. So, if you put forth your own effort, your

own research into knowing what you need to have and stuff like that, you won't

go wrong. But I've also met a lot of people that didn't know they could look stuff

up online or didn't know where to go.

Student A3 agreed that the advisor provided advice on setting up the class schedule.

Student A1 had a personal relationship with his advisor and commented, "He's like a big

brother, very open and easy to communicate. He works with me. He's very patient with

me."

 Focus group question #5. The fifth question, *What are some reasons you chose*

to re-enroll at this institution? was asked to all participants. Overall, students agreed the

first and foremost driver to completing college is being too far along in their education to

not re-enroll. Participants also agreed there were some hesitations in returning for the

following semester. Student A2 commented, "I need to finish my degree." Student A4

followed the comment with, "I'm so far along that I don't think…I put so much work into

it, and at this point, I can see the finish line, and I want to do it regardless of how hard it

is."

 Considerations regarding the value of a college education continued in the focus

group when Student A3 explained, "If I get a job, I won't finish my degree. My military

training may set me apart enough to maybe get a job without an education." Student A1

agreed and commented, "I have had some hesitations on returning, I have met some

professors who help me outside the class and tell me this would be difficult, and did I know what I was getting myself into."

Focus group question #6. The sixth question, *What university-sponsored events such as athletic events, clubs, events fraternities or sororities do you participate in?* was asked next to participants. Students indicated it was hard to find groups to connect with regarding social groups, cultural groups, connecting with students at the same life stages, and proximity to campus. Student A2 divulged, "I was motivated at the beginning of the semester, then just started hanging out with the friends I know from home or in my residence hall far from main campus." Student A3 indicated, "I live far away from campus and only come when I absolutely have to."

Focus group participants also indicated an additional concern in a lack of connection with other students because of the difference in life stages at the university. Although the focus group students were new students to this specific institution, they were also older than the traditional first year student. Student A1 explained:

> I tried to find a group, and it was just like so different, because I'm older. The other kids in the group worried about things different than me. I went to a [student organization] meeting and didn't really fit it. I work full time, so I had to take off work to go. Wasn't worth it.

Student A4 agreed and commented, "The biggest thing is like having their meetings where I am. I live off campus, so it's a lot harder to be a part of organizations when you're living off campus."

Focus group question #7. The seventh question, *How did you find those activities you have each chosen to participate?* was asked to participants. An invitation

extended by others was a consistent message throughout the answers provided to this question. Student A2, who lived on campus, found flyers being posted in the residence halls helpful and was often was invited by others to events. Student A4 commented that she was invited by others in their major classes: "All of the meetings are in [university location], and most of them are upperclassmen, so it's really easy to connect with and also see where you're going to be, and they have a monthly meeting and have certain things."

Focus group question #8. The eighth question, *What are some examples of university resources each of you used to support your academic success? How did these resources impact your grades?* was asked to participants. Having access to library resources and specific computer software accessible both on and off campus was a common answer found in the responses to this question. Two students took advantage of the writing center or free supplemental instruction/tutoring located in the library while two students did not. Student A1 explained, "Library times help me out, the focus on schoolwork overall and having the library helps." Student A4 noted, "I just like going in there, because it's a nice place to be." Students agreed that having resources online helped, especially when not living or being near campus.

Focus group question #9. The ninth question, *What has helped you feel the most like you "belong" or "fit" here?* was asked next to all participants. A common reply for this question was friends and a faculty or staff member. Student A1 noted, "My academic advisor makes me feel like I belong. He makes me feel comfortable asking questions. I don't like to ask for help and he's allowed me to ask for help and helped me

connect." Student A4 noted, "Finding a profession that you really connect with...Just apart from like your professors and stuff has really made me feel comfortable here."

Different types of friendships were common responses with the participants. Student A2 discussed taking a class with a friend: "I took the same history class as my best friend, and I met more people in that class. Pretty cool people." Student A4 followed with the statement:

> Apart from having my best friends, having a good, solid group of friends is important. I think it's a little harder if you don't know anyone, I was very fortunate to know people here. But if you don't have that, I think getting involved is the biggest step. I think if it's really hard, especially if you're shy, but once you find that one person, and all it takes is one person to open up.

Focus group question #10. The tenth prompt was: *Finish this sentence: I do or do not feel valued at [institution name] because…*The answers revealed both feelings of value and devalue by participants. Student A1 divulged:

> I do, and I do not. I do not feel valued at [institution] because I don't feel allowed to think differently or critically about class content. I do feel valued because there's little moments when I can ask questions that they don't want me to ask and other students respond in a way they didn't think, and they find it interesting…I also do not feel valued when communicating to get assistance with due dates and certain things, that may be out of my control when I work full time. Seems like classes cater more to students who have less responsibilities outside the classroom.

Student A2 said, "I feel valued at [institution], I don't feel unvalued, so a presence is there, and I do not feel rejected. Acceptance is there." Student A3 explained:

I feel both ways, I feel valued, because I bring a different perspective. I don't feel valued because of the age difference. I'm very blunt and honest, and they are intimated, so they don't get to know me or my values.

Focus group question #11. The eleventh question: *What questions did I not ask you that you think I should have asked*? was the last question posed to the focus group participants. Students noted some disappointment about not being questioned regarding mental health as it relates to students. Offering personal experiences such as advice to other students was also mentioned during the discussion.

In Research Question Four, *How do academic advisors at a public four-year university support the integration of first-generation transfer community college students on campus?* was addressed by interviewing five transfer student advisors. The university website lists 59 transfer student advisors for each college and undecided/undeclared majors. Of the 59 transfer student advisors, six responded to the invitation for an interview, and five interviews were conducted. Three advisors were faculty members with teaching responsibilities in departments, and two were full time staff advisors with no teaching responsibilities. Next is a summary including answers provided by participants answering eight questions.

Interview question #1. *What training did you receive before becoming an academic advisor?* For the first interview question, all participants indicated there was no formal departmental training aside from a general master advisor workshop held at the university. The advisor workshop is held three times a year, and a variety of topics are

presented regarding advising techniques [Institutional Data]. Each interview participant attended the training at least once, and additional departmental training was completed while shadowing another advisor or faculty member.

Regarding training, Participant B2 said, "I didn't have any training to start advising…I've gotten a lot of informal advisor training from faculty members in the department." When asked the same question, participant B1 posited, "no training, mentoring mostly." Participant B3 noted she had "zero training…I shadowed [the advising coordinator] for a long time, but that was probably it." Participant B4 noted, "I learned from the person I took over from, but I also did the master advisor training". Participant B5 asserted, "We went to the master advisor session…I don't think anyone here helped me."

Another theme emerging from the responses to this question included being assigned transfer students as more of a task rather than a choice. Participant B2 posited, "I don't know why I immediately started taking on transfer students to advise as a new assistant professor, but I did." B4 agreed, "I guess I was assigned to work with transfer students."

Interview question #2. *What role does the academic advisor play with a student's academic integration into an institution?* When asked the second interview question, participants stated the relationship with students is very important because the advisor may be the first person who the student interacts with at the university. Participant B3 commented, "I think they are the most important person, because they are usually the first person that they [transfer student] meet after they're admitted to the institution." Participant B4 stated, "they [advisors] are often the first people that they

meet with the university where they have a more in-depth conversation about goals".

Participants found their roles were to help students get registered for classes, determine if

the student is in the correct major, and help them connect to learning outside the

classroom.

Participants believed his or her role is to provide basic information about

attending this specific institution. Participant B1 said, "It's nuts and bolts mostly."

Participant B2 indicated, "Most students want to know what classes they have to take."

Participant B4 explained the first one hour advising appointment is spent asking students

about, "how many credits hours you need to take to graduate."

Three of the participants divulged many transfer students chose a major not

accurately representing their true academic interests. For example, Participant B2

asserted, "…invariably, I have to move them into, 'what are you going to study in this

major?' …so, I do a lot of academic preparation to the extent I say, it's more…than just

liking to work with people." Participant B3's response was similar, "We talk about their

[class goals] to make sure which degree would be best for them and help them open their

mind a bit to what they want to do in the future."

Additionally, participants indicated they assist with a student's social integration

to the institution by encouraging students to seek activities outside the classroom.

Checklists including additional needs beyond course scheduling were utilized by two

advisors. The checklists helped the advisors provide additional guidance to students

while, two advisors did not use any type of guidance tool.

Participant B1 posited, "We facilitate information about clubs [major specific], and

[institution and major specific organization]. Participant B2 explained:

I use classes as a springboard to ask about internships and doing some

volunteering or maybe a service learning opportunity…I shifted a lot into

focusing on getting involved in student activities and involvement on campus…I

tell them not to be a parking lot-class-parking lot student and let them know the

importance of being involved on campus.

Interview question #3. *How familiar are you with the barriers facing first-generation community college transfer students?* In the third interview question,

participants agreed they are familiar with first-generation community college transfer

students. Participant B1 commented, "I'm reasonably familiar…most of our students are

traditional transfer." Participant B2 remarked:

I am familiar in my own way. On the advising notes page, we can see who a first-generation student is. That is something I usually look at right away, I also know

80% of community college transfer students are first-generation students, so I

generally assume they [community college transfer students] are first-generation.

Participant B4 explained, "I was a first-generation student, so I kind of walk through the

transfer student list with them." Participant B4 also noted, "I think I'm pretty familiar."

Interview question #4. *In your opinion, what similarities and differences exist*

between first-generation and continuing generation students? In the fourth interview

question, common responses surrounding similarities with first-generation and continuing

generation students included excitement about attending the university. Additionally, it

was noted by the interview participants that all students typically are nervous about

parking, where their classrooms are located, and how to register for courses.

Participant B2 observed, "They [continuing generation student and first-generation students] come to us with the same interest and excitement."   Participant B3 agreed, "First-generation students tend to be more excited about college."

Based on participants' responses regarding differences, answers focused on first-generation students having more perceived obstacle, such as a lack of knowledge based on parental educational experiences and concern of being compared and feeling different than their peers. Participant B1 explained, "Mom and Dad have no reference, Mom and Dad can't help them…kids rely on their parents for help, and first-generation students don't have them to fall back on." Participant B3's response was similar, "A lot of times, their parents just don't know what's available to them [students]. B4 also believed "[Continuing generation students] don't ask as many questions, because they feel like their parents have prepared them for it [college]."

Students who are first in their family to attend college may also have familial obligations which change their perceptions of what college should be. Participant B2 explained:

> Others may feel like they've abandoned their family…there is a tremendous difference in the sense of responsibility. They think, "I am carrying the torch if I screw up." They're [the family] going to say, "I told you so." I have to succeed for my family because that's the way my family is going to get ahead, or I can improve my life and I've got to be successful.

Interview question #5. *In your opinion, what similarities and differences exist between community college transfer students and non-transfer students?* In the fifth interview question, most of the participants did not identify similarities but rather focused

on differences. Similarities identified by participants were equal amounts of anxiety about the classes needed and finding new classes in new academic buildings. Because transfer student are exempt from orientation at the institution most have not taken a tour or participated in any welcome activities.

As participant B3 remarked, "When they come in for the first time, the whole experience is new. They are all nervous about getting a ticket or finding out where they are going to park or find the buildings."

The differences between community college transfer students and non-transfer students identified by participants include those who have completed an associate degree, acclimation to a new environment, and balancing self-efficacy/independence while seeking a need for a supported transition. Participant B2 said, "One structural difference is that transfer students will likely have an associate degree already…they know the college environment." Participant B5 explained further, "Those [transfer] students are fortunate enough to get an AA, get gen eds out [of the way]." Although transfer students have a knowledge of university life, there are still new university procedures to learn upon transfer.

Moreover, since community college students have attended a university for two years, they have a new transition to a four-year institution. Participants believe transfer students have a tougher time acclimating to the new environment due to personal habits and traditions developed in the two-year college. Participant B3 explained, "The community college person is set in their ways, they've been out of high school for a while, and now this is another scary thing in life." Participant B4 remarked, "They [community college transfer students] were not prepared for the difference and often

attribute their community college to being in high school or an extension of high school."

Due to the misunderstanding of how a university operates versus the community college

also caused confusion regarding the importance of early registration.

Interview question #6. *What type of advising approach do you take when there is a first-generation student alert on the advising notes?* When answering the sixth interview question, four of the five advisors indicated they did not notice if there is a first-generation student status alert on the advising notes and tended to take the same approach they do with other transfer students. Participant B3 commented, "I'll be honest, I probably don't always look" while Participant B1 said, "Not applicable for me" and Participant B4 said, "My approach is really the same for all transfer students, because they need that information whether they're a first-generation student or not." Participant B2 was the only one who looked at this specific advising alert, yet, did not change much of the advising techniques used: "So no matter whether they're first gen or not, I will always ask what type of advising experience they have had in the past." The participant continued, "I will maybe ask a few more questions about work, schedule, getting involved outside the class, where they will live. I may use fewer acronyms or leave time at the end maybe for questions". This type of interaction and advisement was not common with four of the five advisors interviewed.

Interview question #7. *Similarly, what type of advising approach do you take when there is a transfer student alert on the advising notes?* When asked the seventh interview question, participants established that transfer students are more likely to be more self-sufficient and guide the conversation more during the advising appointment since they have some experience at a college. Participant B explained, "I feel like I'm

talking to an adult…they are prepared…[they] have lots of questions, and I always let them guide the conversation." Participant B4 said, "Since they are coming from community college, I think it's important to just give them a checklist with resource and say, 'Here you go, here's a reminder about stuff.'"

Additionally, four of the five participants set advising appointments for one hour with transfer students. At this institution, a one-hour block of time allowed to advise a student is different from the experience of first year, first time students who participate in a mandatory two-day, extended orientation and advising session. Participant B5 stated, "When I make an appointment, I try to make it for an hour." Participant B4 explained, "My transfer student appointments last an hour versus 30 minutes for students who are already here. I stress to them [the advisee] to ask a lot of questions to make sure we are on the same page." The advisors interviewed ultimately wanted to be sure students had resources for what was needed for a successful transfer.

Most appointments and contact with transfer students are done via e-mail or over the phone because students may not be local. Participant B5 stated she keeps notes on each person because she may not meet the student face-to-face until he or she attends the first day of classes. Participant B2 replied, "I have my transfer advising appointments after dinner in the evenings over the phone, because that's when they [transfer students] are available."

Interview question #8. *Is there any additional information you would like to share about your experiences working with first-generation and/or transfer students?* In the last question of the interview, two participants showed great concern regarding registration and class availability. Participant B3 stated:

> Overall, I would say this counts for both first gen and for transfer students is that they don't realize how quickly classes fill up. They [the student] wait until after they're done [transferred or graduated] with their college wherever they're coming from and they're like 'oh I don't worry about me by transferring [and getting enrolled] at that point'. Sometimes it's too late "[I am] like hey all these classes you need are gone and we can't give you an override".

Participant B3 also voiced concern with the lack of students' knowledge about the registration deadlines and importance. Advisors noted they made contact with the students and state, "Please meet with me. If you are waiting to come down for the summer. That's going to be too late." Participants indicated they typically have had to reach out the advisees a number of times before receiving a response.

Emerging Themes

Data analysis occurred with both focus group and interview information. Once transcripts were read and coded for accuracy, data were analyzed to look for recurring patterns. The following themes were identified and are discussed in the following section.

Students need support. The four student focus group participants indicated their success is supported by at least one person inside the classroom. Due to this connection both in and outside the classroom, students felt more welcome at the institution. The person who helped provide support in the classroom varied from student to student and included an assigned academic advisor, an unintentional faculty connection, and a college preparation/bridge program staff member.

Focus group participants who indicated a strong desire to re-enroll also indicated a strong support system outside of the classroom. For two participants, connections with other students in their chosen majors and friends from home helped create a community. Two students who indicated more indecisiveness regarding returning indicated they did not have a community outside of the classroom.

The advisors interviewed indicated they spent more time advising individual transfer students than other students by helping students make a connection to the university. Typically, transfer advising appointments lasted an hour as opposed to group advising that occurs during orientation for the first year, first time students. Two advisors utilized a specific checklist of items to help students with the transactional actions; three did not utilize a checklist. Of the five advisors interviewed, two advisors offered guidance on getting involved outside of the classroom.

Advisors need training. All advisors interviewed indicated a lack of training in their departments for advisors. Although each voluntarily participated in the advisor training workshop provided at the university, it was not required and not required in a certain time period of hiring. Most advisors indicated their training came via on the job learning or shadowing another faculty or staff member.

Additionally, faculty members are assigned transfer advising duties in addition to full time teaching loads. This practice can be overwhelming to a new faculty member and also put a strain on their time to spend with a transfer student. The faculty transfer student advisors also indicated there was no reason as to why they were selected to serve transfer students. Students indicated the advisors were most helpful in gaining access to

courses needed to meet and follow curriculum guidelines and typically not the person who helped with additional questions.

Transfer student status matters more than first-generation status. Although all students interviewed were first-generation community college transfer students, participants primarily focused answers on being a transfer student first. Focus group participants all received an associate degree at their previous community college which indicates they were likely in college at least two years prior to transferring. There may be more transition as a first-generation college student in the first years of college attendance; however, once the student navigated the system and learned about college life, the focus moved toward integration into the new university environment at the institution he or she was transferring.

The primary concerns for students transferring from a community college were concerns regarding availability and timing of classes, adjustment to a new and bigger institution, and making connections both inside and outside the classroom with social groups and faculty members. The advisors provided more specific examples of how they advise and support transfer students than first-generation students. Being a first-generation student was not discussed in much detail, likely because focus group participants had navigated the college environment for up to two years prior to transferring.

Summary

In this chapter, retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students versus continuing generation community college transfer students were analyzed along with perceptions of first-generation community college transfer students regarding

the sense of belonging and the role of the academic advisor in assisting with the students' sense of belonging at a large, public Midwestern institution. The study included four research questions which guided a mixed method research approach. Using inferential statistics, results for Research Question One indicated there was no statistically significant difference between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students and continuing generation community college transfer students.

Three qualitative research questions were posed which initiated the study with focus group participation and interview research collection. To respond to Research Questions Two and Three, four focus group participants met and discussed personal experiences regarding building a sense of belonging at the transfer institution. Five transfer student specific academic advisors were interviewed for the fourth research question. Interview participants discussed what role the academic advisor played in helping a student gain a sense of belonging at the transfer institution. Through the focus groups and interviews, three themes were identified: student support, advisor training, and transfer student status mattering more than first-generation student status. The three themes are discussed in the final chapter.

In Chapter Five, the results of the study are summarized and are the foundation for the discussion. Implications for practice are presented along with recommendations for future research. Finally, a summary of the entire study is presented.

Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions

This study was designed to examine perceptions of first-generation community college transfer students' building a sense of belonging and its effects on student retention. Moreover, the role of the academic advisor plays in a student building a sense of belonging is examined. In this chapter, findings for the four research questions are presented. Implications for practice, recommendations for future research, and a summary close the final chapter.

Findings

One quantitative question and three qualitative questions guided this mixed-method study. The quantitative research question was written to determine if a statistically significant difference occurred with retention rates between first-generation community college transfer students and continuing generation community college transfer students. Two of the three remaining qualitative questions were posed to examine perceptions of first-generation-community college students' sense of belonging at the transfer institution. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1962), Strayhorn's (2016) sense of belonging and Schlossberg's mattering and marginality theory (1989) served as frameworks to examining how first-generation community college transfer students gain a sense of belonging at the four-year university. The final qualitative question was posed to examine how transfer student specific academic advisors assist students with a sense of belonging.

Research question one. *What difference exists between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students at the end of first semester enrollment compared to continuing generation community college transfer students?*

Utilizing retention rates as proportions, a *z*-test was conducted. It was determined there was not a significantly statistical difference between the retention rates of each group; therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected (Bluman, 2015).

Research question two. *How do first-generation community college students who transfer to a public four-year university perceive their sense of belonging in this setting?* This qualitative research question was posed to examine how the students felt about belonging at the institution. One focus group with four participants was held. Student participants were from a variety of different majors, ages, class standings, gender, and commuter and residential status as well as demographic backgrounds. The students were all first semester, first-generation community college transfer students.

Research question three. *What role does sense of belonging contribute to first-generation community college transfer students' retention?* One focus group with four participants was held. The student participants were from a variety of different majors, ages, class standings, gender, and commuter and residential status as well as demographic backgrounds. The students were all first semester, first-generation community college transfer students. Conclusions regarding answers provided to each of the focus group questions are presented.

Focus group question one. Each student talked about the role he or she took as an individual student. However, most students named at least one person or support area who helped during the transition to the four-year institution. One student named a department head at the four-year institution, one student named an advisor from the four-year institution, one student spoke to friends who helped make a connection to a

professor in the same program. The final participant received support from an academic

support staff member at the community college he or she had previously attended.

Focus group question two. The students could each name a specific person who

had helped most in the transition to the four-year institution. Two of the four students

named an academic advisor at the four-year institution while one named a department

head. One participant named two people who serve as outreach coordinators at the

community college where the student attended.

Focus group question three. There were several varied responses to this

question. One student identified roommate struggles while living on campus for the first

time in her college career. Two students identified financial aid challenges and

understanding the new financial aid process at the four-year institution. Two students

spoke about the transition to a different type of academic classroom and rigor which

included the instructor's lack of flexibility for deadlines and explaining a new scheduling

process.

Focus group question four. One student identified a very strong connection with

an academic advisor while the remaining four students did not feel they had a connection.

Two students had e-mail conversations with the academic advisors who lifted the hold

needed to register for classes at the four-year institution. The final student discussed a

pattern with having three different advisors in one semester due to internal departmental

restructuring.

Focus group question five. Students choose to re-enroll to ultimately finish a

degree. Two students identified hesitations about re-enrolling in the institution due to the

type of job both wanted to pursue. The remaining two students said they were far enough

along in their academic programs that the need to finish was stronger than any other desires at the institution.

Focus group question six. Students who joined a student organization with which to connect found activities and engagement opportunities easily. Students who did not connect with a group or a student organization, did not have as much engagement on campus. Students who did not connect to a group on campus tended to connect with friends from their hometown, co-workers, or family members off campus.

Focus group question seven. Students who connected socially during their transition found more activities more easily than those who did not. The student who lived on campus found flyers in the residence hallways helpful, along with the student who received notices from the organization. The remaining two students who did not connect were unaware of most campus events and opportunities.

Focus group question eight. Students had a difficult time naming university resources that assisted during the transition. Two students named the library as a good area to study. They also utilized the software located in the library computer labs. Two students did not use university resources such as the writing center or free supplemental instruction/tutoring resources and had not been in the library at the four-year institution.

Focus group question nine. Three students identified people who had helped them feel as if they "fit" or "belong" at the four-year institution. Two of the participants spoke specifically about the importance of connections he and she made with an instructor or with an academic advisor. One student stressed the importance of making friends both inside and outside the classroom. The final student indicated she did not feel

as if they "fit" or "belonged" because she had not made any connections either inside or outside the classroom.

      Focus group question ten. Three students identified feeling a sense of value and one student did not. The students believed having connections made them feel valued in the classroom and outside the classroom. Two students indicated that instructors played a pivotal role in making one feel valued inside the classroom.

      Focus group question eleven. When asked what question was missing from the interview, students noted a disappointment that mental health was not discussed. The participants also wanted to be asked about their experiences and what types of advice could be given to other first-generation community college transfer students.

      Research question four. *How do academic advisors at a public four-year university support the integration of first-generation transfer community college students on campus?* This qualitative research question was designed to review how faculty and staff advisors perceive their roles in assisting first-generation community college transfer students to make their transition to a four-year institution. The five individual interviews consisted of asking eight questions regarding knowledge, perception, and understanding from the academic advisor's perspective. Participants included staff members employed as two full time advisors and three faculty advisors from various departments and disciplines. A summary of the findings related to each interview question posed to participants is presented.

      Interview question one. No advisors received official training offered at the departmental level or required by the university. Most advisors received training from

the advising center located on campus. All advisors agreed most of the training received was on the job by shadowing someone who had advised students previously.

Interview question two. Most of the participants concluded that course scheduling and registration are the main role and goal for the position. Three advisors developed a checklist for transfer students to assist with any additional needs beyond scheduling courses. Two advisors did not use a checklist of any type and relied on personal knowledge to assist students.

Interview question three. All advisors were familiar with barriers facing first-generation community college transfer students. The way advisors learned about first-generation community college transfer students was vague. Most advisors interviewed learned about first-generation and community college transfer students through personal advising experience or self-directed professional readings. No advisors noted learning about first-generation or transfer students through a training or professional development course. Advisors allowed one hour for a transfer student appointment as opposed to a 30-minute appointment for native students. Additionally, advisors stated they left more time for questions if they noticed the student was tagged as a first-generation student.

Interview question four. All participants noted the biggest difference in first-generation students and continuing generation students is parental attendance at a college or university. When a parent did not attend any type of higher education institution, questions posed from students were usually more involved than those students whose parents had attended. Similarities of students usually involved general nervousness and excitement surrounding the college experience. Most interview participants indicated all

students have the same questions regarding parking, course registration, and locating academic buildings.

Interview question five. Participants indicated that transfer students typically have an associate degree by the time of transfer to a four-year institution. The students who have an associate degree are typically enrolled in less general education courses and more classes in the selected major. Participants also posited that transfer students have some knowledge regarding college and often need less support than those who have not attended college before.

Similarities identified by interview participants between community college transfers and non-community college transfer generally included anxiety about getting into the classes they want and finding academic buildings. Both community college and non-community college transfers are exempt from an orientation program, so the questions are very similar during transfer.

Interview question six. Interview participants indicated they often do not pay attention to the first-generation student tag in students' files. When interview participants realize the student is first-generation, some will use fewer acronyms for departments and buildings or leave more time for questions at the end of the advising session. The participants all indicated that noting transfer status was usually more helpful than first-generation due to requirements needed for a student to make a successful transition to the four-year institution.

Interview question seven. When participants noted the transfer student alert on the computer system, the approach became different than that of native students. The advisors wanted to be sure the credit hours transferred correctly and ensure the student is

in the correct major in the correct department. The next most important item was getting the student ready to register and ensure courses needed are available. Last, advisors wanted to ensure students knew the resources needed to have a successful transition to the four-year institution.

Interview question eight. When interview participants were asked if there was any additional information, they wanted the researcher to know about their experiences working with first-generation and/or community college students, they spoke about the importance of scheduling early. According to participants, many transfer students are not accustomed to registering for classes early at the community college level. Advisors continued by explaining since many of the community college transfer students have general education courses completed, the courses are typically major specific and offered in a certain sequence. If a student does not gain entrance into a course, the schedule could be affected, thus not completing coursework in a timely manner resulting in excess credits (Strempel & Handel, 2018)

Emerging themes. Responses from each focus group and interview were analyzed using Research Questions Two, Three and Four. Answers were coded by utilizing patterns found in the responses. Following the coding process, three emerging themes were identified. The three themes were: students need support, advisors need training, and transfer student status matters more than first-generation student status. In the next section, conclusions for each research question are discussed.

Conclusions

In this section, results of each research question are discussed. It is important to tie findings of this study to the current body of literature on first-generation transfer students. Conclusions, both quantitative and qualitative, are presented in the next section.

Research question one. *What difference exists between the retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students at the end of first semester enrollment compared to continuing generation community college transfer students?* The results of Research Question One indicated there was not a statistically significant difference in retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students and continuing generation community college transfer students. First-generation college students are more likely to drop out than continuing generation students (Pratt, Hunter, Cavazos, & Ditzfield, 2017). However, transfer students are also at risk of dropping out compared to native students (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Although both populations are at-risk, study results indicate that although not statistically significant, first-generation community college transfer students are retained at a higher rate than continuing generation community college students.

Research question two. *How do first-generation community college students who transfer to a public four-year university perceive their sense of belonging in this setting?* Based on the results of the questions posed to focus group participants, students gained a sense of belonging by making connections both inside and outside of the classroom. The manner they connected with those outside the classroom varied. All students were able to name at least one faculty or staff member who helped them feel as though they belonged at the four-year institution. Based on the theoretical frameworks of

this study including those of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1962), students gaining a

sense of belonging is essential to their personal success. Once students had basic needs

met of food, water, shelter, they would seek out chances to belong in a group (Guest,

2014). In the focus group, students spoke about their re-connection with friends from

their hometowns, attempted connections with new friends in their major, or trying to join

student organizations. Focus group participants tried making connections with others so

the new institution could feel more comfortable. As found in literature, it is not

uncommon for someone to try and connect with different communities to feel like they

belong (Shaw & Hammer, 2016).

Additionally, Strayhorn's (2016) sense of belonging theory helped determine the

needs students have about finding a fit at a higher education institution. Building a sense

of belonging quickly is most important for transfer students, because they may only be at

the four-year institution for one to three years (Braskamp, Braskamp, & Glass, 2015).

Based on the literature, students who perceive a sense of belonging tend to build better

relationships and connect more with peers (Seider et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2016).

Students who connected with a faculty, staff member, or a peer outside of the

classroom feel a better sense of belonging that those who do not (Martin, 2015). Four of

the five focus group participants agreed with the aforementioned statement, because they

had connected with a faculty, staff, or peer outside of the classroom. Having even one

connection point on campus helped the students feel a sense of belonging and felt valued

at the university. The student who admitted to feeling a lack in sense of belonging at the

campus did not have a current connection to any faculty, staff, or students on campus.

Mattering and marginality, a developmental theory by Schlossberg (1989) identifies the four stages students may go through when encountering a new environment. One of the stages, support, is the personal space where students make connections and networks in a new environment (Schlossberg, 2011). For first-generation community college transfer students, mattering on campus means navigating a new environment to find how they fit (Huerta & Fishman; Schlossberg, 2011). Finding a fit for a student means finding support systems and mastering strategies needed to accept the new environment and to be accepted by the new environment (Huerta & Fishman, 2014; Schlossberg, 2011). Without finding systems and strategies to navigating the new environment, retention and acclimation are more difficult (Williams & Ferrari, 2015).

Research question three. *What role does sense of belonging contribute to first-generation community college transfer students' retention?* The majority of students attending college currently have either been or will transfer at some point during their college career (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Knowing transfer students are the majority and less are graduating, the importance of university funded support systems is on the rise to address retention issues with transfer students (Jacobson, Delano, Krzykowski, Garafola, & Nyman, 2017). In this study, focus group participants who did not hesitate about re-enrolling could easily name faculty, staff, and other students by name who helped serve in their successful transition.

According to the advisors interviewed, transfer students who arrive from a community college typically have graduated with an associate degree which means the general education requirements are met. For most students, this could be a strategy for success, yet for some others, it is a bigger barrier (Bragg, 2015; Wyner et al., 2016).

Community colleges offer general education courses without a student declaring a major focus of study (Turk, 2016). Advisors interviewed posited that community college transfer students often arrive at the four-year institution with one major selected and find that major not fitting their individual needs. Interview participants also explained that community college transfer students are often accepted to four-year institution with 60+ hours, and transfer students are typically advised to enroll for at least 12 hours. The first semester for a community college transfer student is likely filled with classes related to a specific major, and if the student chooses to change majors, it can cause credit hour excess which costs the student both time and money (Wyner et al., 2016). As found in the literature, one of the greatest barriers to transfer student success is credit loss or excessive credits (Fauria & Fuller, 2015).

Students who encounter difficulty enrolling in classes required will not feel supported academically because the student feels appropriate guidance from a university authority (academic advisor) was not provided (Donaldson et al., 2016). A student focus group participant who had a disagreement with an instructor hesitated in enrolling the next semester because the student knew the instructor would be teaching again. The student who participated in the focus group said he had considered not re-enrolling due to the disagreement he had with the instructor. As supported in the literature, students often choose to stay or leave a college due to the relationships with faculty, staff, and peers (Vianden & Barlow, 2015). Student interactions with faculty, staff, and peers must demonstrate inclusion by offering relationships inclusive of acceptance, affirmation, and support; all factors which help create an individual's sense of belonging (Williams & Ferrari, 2015).

Research question four. *How do academic advisors at a public four-year university support the integration of first-generation transfer community college students on campus?* Academic advisors are often the first-person community college transfer students interact with at an institution (Buchanan & Teasley, 2013). Advisors have the knowledge base to help students overcome the barrier of registering for classroom or getting basic answers (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). Academic advisors are expected to know details about the major for which they are advising the student (Smith & Allen, 2014). Academic advisors knowing all the details regarding a specific major is crucial when the students need upper level courses (Smith & Allen, 2014). The advisor must know the prerequisites needed for the student to progress and provide realistic goals for what the student can expect about upper level academic rigor (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013).

At this institution, advisors have access to a program with which notes about advisees can be maintained [Institutional Data]. According to interview participants, a few alerts exist on the student profile page once an advisor receives a new advisee. There is basic information on the notes, and specific tags used to inform the advisor more about the student. Two of the tags classify students who self-identified as a first-generation student. All advisors who were interviewed established that the first-generation tag on a student profile is not something they pay much attention, but rather look more for the transfer student alert.

When the advisors were asked a question regarding how often they check the first-generation status of the student, all responded with a lack of importance. However, when participants were asked about the changes in advising approach, three advisors

noted they would change their advising approach minimally if they noticed the student identified as a first-generation student. Advisors also indicated that scheduling courses are the most essential need during the advising session, however, they would try to save time for questions at the end of the advising appointments or try to introduce the first-generation students to the university by using fewer abbreviations. This is an important practice for advisors because typically students do not know as much about college and cannot rely on parental expertise to help navigate the system (Patton et al., 2016; Williams & Ferrari, 2015). Additionally, first-generation college students often look to teachers, coaches, and counselors during high school to help with their academic endeavors, and similarly, may see academic advisors in the same manner (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015).

According to the advisors interviewed, when a transfer student alert is noted on the student profile, their advising approach changes, as does the conversation. As one interview participant remarked, "I feel like I'm talking more to an adult." The advisors indicated that transfer students were typically more prepared and had more questions about course scheduling, but rarely did advisors engage in conversations regarding relationship building and opportunities for engagement with faculty, staff, or students.

As found in literature, having a successful advising relationship can help community college transfer students have a smoother transition to a four-year institution by introducing the student to academic and social programming (Donaldson et al., 2016; Ellis; 2014; Vianden & Barlow, 2015). Without an introduction to academic and social integration, the student will lack a sense of belonging, which will affect their retention. As described by Christian and Sprinkle, a positive advisor relationship included support,

advice, mentorship, career mapping and life planning (2013). However, advisors who were interviewed did not have time to talk with students about much beyond scheduling. Since academic advisors are typically a key player in a transfer student's success at a four-year institution, having time to discuss topics beyond class schedule would be beneficial to the student's success (Ellis, 2014; Wyner et al., 2016).

Throughout the responses of both focus group participants and interview participants, there appeared to be a disconnect in what students need from advisors and what advisors expect of students. Similar to the information found in the literature review, first-generation students who attend community college call most of their interactions at the institution as "functional", and when they start at the four-year institution, they may expect much of the same (Karp, 2016). Researchers agree that mixed opinions exist about the role of the academic advisor at the institutional level (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013). Also, there is confusion regarding expectations the students have of their academic advisor (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013).

Students need to connect both inside and outside the classroom to help gain a sense of belonging at an institution (Strayhorn, 2016). Having a sense of belonging is especially crucial to student success or retention when the student is part of an underrepresented or academically vulnerable population, such as a first-generation community college transfer student. Both first-generation and community college student populations have grown in university populations, yet both are graduating less than other students (Darling & Smith, 2007; Davis, 2010; Jenkins & Fink, 2015). Finding quick ways for students to connect both inside and outside the classroom could assist with retention and persistence.

Implications for Practice

Examining the relationships of students outside the classroom and relationships with an academic advisor could assist colleges and universities with future support programs. Implications include finding support systems early and touching base often in a first-generation transfer student's transition. Additionally, academic advisors should be given time and compensation to better support a community college transfer student through the transition. For example, some responses in the Survey of Best Practices in Academic Advising indicate colleges offering workshop compensation packages to academic advisors when they host academic skills preparation workshops outside of advising hours (Moses, 2015). Additionally, as noted in the survey, academic advisors are provided a professional development budget to enhance advising practices on a regular basis (Moses, 2015).

Student support matters. Students who gain a sense of belonging by integrating both socially and academically into the college environment will be more successful than those who do not. (Strayhorn, 2016). Three of the four students who participated in the focus group were excited to re-enroll at the institution and felt valued in some capacity. All participants had support networks inside or outside the classroom. Additionally, advisors enjoyed advising and supporting transfer students due to their maturity and preparedness for scheduling courses. Having an academic advisor provides at least some type of support system to the student, even if basic in nature.

As students seek stability in a new environment, they go through four stages of being accepted. As Schlossberg (1989) found in the theory of mattering and marginality, students encounter the 4S system of including four categories of situation, self, supports,

and strategies. When a student gains an understanding of the situation they have been placed in and how they fit into the environment, it will be time to find support systems (Schlossberg, 1989). One student in the focus group specifically noted the importance of finding that one person both inside and outside the classroom to feel a sense of belonging on campus.

Evidence of support was found when students were able to name each person who helped with their transition to the four-year institution. Although not all were advisors, some were, and it is important to note the critical role faculty and staff play in the retention of students (Vianden & Barlow, 2015). Student focus group participants were all from various ages and backgrounds, yet they all required support and a need to belong to feel valued at the institution (Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2016).

Many faculty and staff members mentioned students reaching out for assistance; however, it would be more beneficial for faculty and staff to proactively connect with students. It only takes one person to build a relationship with a student. Efforts of connection could be perceived as reaching out rather than an established outreach. Many outreach and bridge programs connect students to other students, faculty, and staff prior to and during the semester. Many universities also host programs for first-generation, academically underprepared, and transfer students.

Programs focused on first-generation student success and transition to college have become increasingly more popular in the past few years at colleges and universities. Attention on first-generation student success is currently better supported by grant programs such as TRIO academic services and the Lumina Foundation (Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016). Universities investing in these types of programs help connect students to the

people who can support them early in the students' college career (LaSota & Zumeta, 2016).

Bridge programs for academically underprepared students typically take place the semester prior to the student enrolling at the institution (Ndiaye & Wolfe, 2016). These programs are based on acceptance of students who are provisionally admitted to the university or academic program (Sablan, 2013). In the bridge program, students are typically advised in a more intrusive manner by having consistent meetings and interactions with advisors (Sablan, 2013). Cohort members tend to take the same classes and have study halls to support one another and have faculty members who can support and assist differently than in an average semester course (Sablan, 2013).

Transfer student support programs can start as early as admission at the community college level up to the semester prior to transfer (Bers & Schuetz, 2014). A myriad of seated orientation, online orientation, and advising days exist for transfer students across various institution types (Jacobson et al., 2017). Incoming activities for transfer students should be similar to those of first year students (Faris, 2018). Transfer student support programs can begin at partner community colleges (Faris, 2018). In fact, some four-year institutions have recently started employing an admissions representative or academic advisor at nearby community colleges to help students make the transition easier (Bers & Schuetz, 2014).

Advisors need training. Advisors established they received no or very little training when starting the advisement duties, however, advisors play a key role in student retention and success (Wyner et al., 2016). Part of the confusion regarding the role of the advisor is due to the different advising structures and expectations that are different from

institution to institution (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015). Advisors want students prepared for meetings and to ask most of the questions. Students often do not know what questions to ask, or even the role of the advisor.

For some advisors, this role is distributed as an assignment from the department head. One advisor recounted:

> I don't know why I immediately started taking on transfer advising as a new assistant professor, but I did. I think the academic administrator or the administrative assist just did people by last name. The [name of the training program] was not required but recommended. I was fresh out of grad school, so I didn't know how to do anything related to advising. I had gone to a couple recruitment fairs. Before that, I had no idea what I was talking about. I'm just going to pretend like I do [know].

Another faculty member posited, "No training, just [name of program] workshop, mentoring mostly." A fundamental concern of academic advisors is the lack of consistent training followed by a concern for successful advising practices. There is not a skill set identified and not a consistent message of how an advising appointment should or should not include. As noted by the interview participants, each advisor has a different style, a different checklist, and a different set of priorities.

Without a lack of consistency to determine how overall university advising should occur, there will continue to be vagueness and inconsistency in the services provided to students. For those departments who assign faculty members as advisors, additional compensation and selection criteria should be considered. Advisors who participated in the study agreed transfer student advising duties were assigned to them and not

something they were seeking. It could be helpful if advisors were assigned to populations of students, they were most interested in advising, rather than distributing duties. Additionally, providing compensation and incentives would help encourage faculty members to take additional advising responsibilities. Overall, advisors want to do well, however, simply cannot give the time needed to train effectively and advise efficiently.

   Transfer student status matters more than first-generation status. Although, first-generation and transfer student populations are graduating at lesser rates than other students, meeting the basic needs of a transfer student identity is more valuable to the success of the student than looking at the student as a first-generation student. This conclusion leads one to acknowledge that support systems may be needed more for those students listed as continuing generation transfer students.

   The advisors who participated in the interviews indicated their acknowledgement of transfer student status alert more than the alert regarding a student's first-generation student status. Again, when advisors use a similar advising style to that of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the focus is on meeting the basic needs of the students. This outcome may be surprising and although both identities are important to support, by the time transfer students arrive at the four-year institution, their most basic college survival skills have been addressed. Transfer students arrive at four-year institution with ideas of what college is like because they have already attended, yet they need a re-introduction to the new college environment (Shaw, 2018). Since transfer student graduation rates are lower than those who are native to the institution, the support provided by the university is crucial to the success of students (Wyner et al., 2016).

As reviewed in the research, programs in various states and regions were created to ease a students' transition from a community college to a four-year institution (Jenkins & Fink, 2015; Taylor & Bragg, 2015). Articulation agreements allow state funded community colleges to work directly with the four-year institution to easily transfer general education courses (Shapiro et al., 2017). The importance of strong articulation agreements across institutions remains for the ease of transfer students' transition and success to graduation (Shapiro et al., 2017). The fewer barriers for students to succeed, the better (Jacobson et al., 2017).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was designed using mixed methods to examine retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students and their perceptions regarding a sense of belonging at a four-year institution (Creswell, 2015). The sample size of first-generation community college transfer students' focus group participants was sufficient; however, more participants from a variety in institutions would strengthen the information provided (Fraenkel et al., 2014). The study was focused on retention rates of first-generation community college transfer students for spring to fall semester change. It would be beneficial to take a longitudinal look at the same student demographic for five years to see if the same trends emerge.

Additionally, five advisors were interviewed, and with more advisor interviews, more insight would be provided. Also, advisors interviewed were a mix of faculty and staff advisors. Another research approach could examine academic advisors housed within academic departments or in a centralized advising unit. A comparison between

styles and training could provide the evidence needed to enhance and support the academic advising field.

More research regarding advising styles would be beneficial to advancing this study. Researching the type of advising style most appropriate for student demographics such as first-generation, community college transfer, and adult students would provide guidance to other advisors in how to effectively and efficiently anticipate students' needs and wants even if the student does not articulate needs. Using this type of study could help create a generalized advisor training program for institutions based on basic advising skills needed to guide students.

Summary

Although first-generation and community college transfer students account for up to half of an undergraduate population at any college or university, both populations are graduating less than those who are not first-generation or who do not transfer from a community college to a four-year institution (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Darling & Smith, 2007; Miller & Servaty-Seib, 2016). Students who have difficulty acclimating to a new environment tend to struggle more than those who acclimate easily (Schlossberg, 1989). This acclimation to a new environment is often referred to as gaining a sense of belonging in a new environment in which one feels accepted and valued (Maslow, 1962; Strayhorn, 2016). Academic and social integration is essential to a student building a sense of belonging and to the success of college students (Strayhorn, 2016). Gaining a sense of belonging is especially important for students who have characteristics from a special population such as first-generation and transfer students (Strayhorn, 2016).

In Chapter One, barriers and lack of graduation and retention rates were discussed regarding first-generation and transfer students (Darling & Smith, 2007; Seider et al., 2015; Shurts, 2016). College attendance numbers are rising for first-generation and transfer student populations yet transfer students and first-generation students have a lower semester to semester retention and college completion rates (Bonet & Walters, 2016; Seider et al., 2015). First-generation and community college transfer students both face barriers as individuals; however, no current research exists about the barriers faced when the student is both a first-generation student and a community college transfer student. Definitions and terms were introduced followed by the limitations and assumptions of the study.

In Chapter Two, an extensive review of the literature was provided along with the theoretical framework used to guide the study. Following Maslow, a sense of belonging ultimately culminated the theoretical frameworks by using the works of Strayhorn (2016) who posited the success of college students being based on their sense of belonging. Following the theoretical framework, the types of students attending four-year institutions including transfer and first-generation student populations were discussed. The last sections of Chapter Two included the retention and persistence of students in college and the role academic advisors play in student retention and success.

Chapter Three was a focused discussion and review of the methodology used to guide the research portion of the study. Four research questions were presented which required both quantitative and qualitative methods, to address the questions. Due to the robust topic and data needed to support the research questions, a mixed methods study was selected and discussed. Retention rates of first-generation community college

transfer students and continuing generation community college transfer students were tested for statistical significance followed by three qualitative research questions. A focus group of four participants and five academic advisor interviews were conducted.

In Chapter Four, findings of both the quantitative and qualitative research questions were presented. A *z*-test used to test proportions was conducted to determine if retention rates of first-generation community college students were different than those of continuing generation transfer students (Bluman, 2015). Responses from focus groups and interviews were transcribed and detailed by each question presented. Finally, themes found throughout the focus group and interview responses were revealed.

As found in the results of the *z*-test along with the emerging themes found in qualitative data, transfer students status matters more than the first-generation status for community college transfer students. Students at this level require more support in and outside the classroom as a transfer student than as a first-generation student. Therefore, a barrier to success for students is attributed to finding a sense of belonging at the four-year institution.

Appendix A

Student Focus Group Questions

1. Tell me how each of you navigated the transfer process to ███████████

2. Has there been a faculty or staff member who stands out as being helpful in your transition?

3. Have there been areas each of you have found challenging at ████████? How did you solve these situations?

4. Tell me about your academic advisor. What role has he or she played in your transition to ███████?

5. What are some reasons you chose to re-enroll at this institution?

6. What university-sponsored events such as athletic events, clubs, events, or fraternities or sororities do you participate in?

7. How did you find those activities you have each chosen to participate?

8. What are some examples of university resources each of you used to support your academic success?

9. What has helped you feel the most like you "belong" or "fit" here?

10. Finish this sentence: I do or do not feel valued at ██████ because _____.

11. What questions did I not ask you that you think I should have asked?

Appendix B

Advisor Interview Questions

1. What training did you receive before becoming an academic advisor?

2. What role does the academic advisor play with a student's academic integration into an institution?

3. How familiar are you with the barriers facing first-generation and community college transfer students?

4. In your opinion, what similarities and differences exist between first-generation and continuing generation students?

5. In your opinion, what similarities and differences exist between community college transfer students and non-transfer students?

6. What type of advising approach do you take when there is a first-generation student alert on the advising notes?

7. Similarly, what type of advising approach do you take when there is a transfer student alert on the advising notes?

8. Is there any additional information you would like to share about your experiences working with first-generation and/or transfer students?

Appendix C

Institutional Review Board Approval

LINDENWOOD

LINDENWOOD UNIVERSITY   ST. CHARLES, MISSOURI

DATE: March 8, 2018

TO: Tara Benson
FROM: Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: [1066399-1] Student's Sense of Belonging and Impact on Retention Rates
IRB REFERENCE #:
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: March 8, 2018
EXPIRATION DATE: March 7, 2019
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research project. Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review (Cat. 7) based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to the IRB.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the completion/amendment form for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of March 7, 2019.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.

If you have any questions, please contact Michael Leary at 636-949-4730 or mleary@lindenwood.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

If you have any questions, please send them to IRB@lindenwood.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board's records.

Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Approval

To:
Tara Benson
███████████████

RE: Notice of IRB Approval
Submission Type: Initial
Study #: IRB-FY2018-598
Study Title: Project CEO: Co-Curricular Outcomes Study
Decision: Approved

Approval Date: April 8, 2018
Expiration Date: April 7, 2019

This submission has been approved by the ███████████████ Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the period indicated.

_____
_____
___

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Should any adverse event or unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others occur it must be reported immediately to the IRB.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

Researchers Associated with this Project:
PI: Tara Benson
Co-PI:
Primary Contact: Tara Benson
Other Investigators:

Appendix E

Notice of Study

Tara:

Thank you for informing me of your research on enrollment of first-generation transfer students. Transfer students comprise about 40% of our new undergraduate students each year, and almost half of our transfers are first-generation. Thus, first-generation transfers are an important component of our total enrollment.

I look forward to learning about the results of your research.

Confidentiality Notice: This email message, including any attachments, is for the sole use of the intended recipient(s) and may contain confidential and privileged information. Any unauthorized review, use, disclosure, or distribution is prohibited. If you are not the intended recipient, please contact the sender by reply email and destroy all copies of the original message.

Appendix F

Request for Data

Date:

████████████████████████

████████████████████

██████████

██████████████

As part of my dissertation research, I will be analyzing the retention rates of first-

generation community college transfer students and continuing generation community

college transfer students. I am specifically interested in receiving enrollment data for

first-generation and continuing generation community college transfer students who were

enrolled during the spring 2018 semester and have subsequently registered for classes for

fall. I have received Institutional Review Board approval for this project from

Lindenwood University and ███████████████, and my approval notifications are

attached.

Thank you for your time.

Tara E. Benson

Lindenwood University Doctoral Student

Appendix G

Student Recruitment Letter

████████████████

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Tara E. Benson under the guidance of Dr Rhonda Bishop. This study will include involvement in a focus group. This discussion group will be led by the researcher who will ask questions concerning your social and academic integration experiences as a first-generation community college transfer student. This focus group should last no longer than one hour. This is an opportunity to share your personal experiences with other students who are first-generation community college transfer students. This study is designed to examine the tools you used to transition from a community college to a four-year institution and also the role your academic advisor played in your transition.

Your insight will be used in my doctoral dissertation through Lindenwood University. If you would like to participate in this focus group, please confirm participation by accepting this invitation and signing up for a focus group time (insert link here). Your comments will not be used for specific identifiers nor will they affect your standing as a student; therefore, there will be no risk to you. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy, and should you feel uncomfortable or change your mind about participating, please remove yourself from the focus group. More information will be sent after your confirmation of participation in this group.

Thank you for your consideration.

Tara E. Benson

Tara E. Benson, Lindenwood University Doctoral Student

Appendix H

Focus Group Email Confirmation

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group. This email serves as a

confirmation of your participation. Please arrive at [location] at [time.] You will be

asked to fill out the consent form below. If you have any questions, please let me know.

Appendix I

Focus Group Participation Consent Form

LINDENWOOD

Focus group Research Consent Form

**First-Generation Community College Transfer Students' Perceptions of
Building a Sense of Belonging**

You are being asked to participate in a focus group being conducted by Tara E.
Benson under the guidance of Dr. Rhonda Bishop at Lindenwood University.
This study is being conducted to learn how community college students find a
sense of belonging at a four-year institution and the impact on retention.

It will take about one hour to complete this focus group.

Participating in this focus group is voluntary. We will be asking about 10-15 other
people to participate as well.

What are the risks of this study?

We do not anticipate any risks related to your participation other than those
encountered in daily life. You do not need to answer any questions that make
you uncomfortable or you can leave the focus group at any time.

We are collecting data that could identify you, such as name and electronic mail
address and knowing you are a first-generation community college transfer
student. Every effort will be made to keep your information secure and
confidential. Only members of the research team will be able to see your data.
We do not intend to include any information that could identify you in any
publication or presentation.

Will anyone know my identity?

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. We do not intend to include
information that could identify you in any publication or presentation. Any
information we collect will be stored by the researcher in a secure location. The
only people who will be able to see your data are: members of the research
team, qualified staff of Lindenwood University, representatives of state or federal
agencies.

What are the benefits of this study?
You will receive no direct benefits for completing this focus group. We hope what we learn may benefit other people in the future.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study, you may contact the Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board Director, Michael Leary, at █████████ or █████████████████ You can contact the researcher, Tara E. Benson directly at █████████ or ████████████████████. You may also contact Dr. Rhonda Bishop at rbishop@lindenwood.edu**.**

I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be required to do, and the risks involved. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time by leaving the focus group. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age.
Please feel free to print a copy of this consent form.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   **Date**

_____
Participant's Printed Name

_____   _____
Signature of Principal Investigator or Designee   **Date**

_____
Investigator or Designee Printed Name

Appendix J

Advisor Recruitment

Date

Dear Advisor,

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Tara E. Benson under the guidance of Dr. Rhonda Bishop. The purpose of this research is to understand how a community college transfer student's sense of belonging affects the decision to re-enroll in an institution at the end of his or her first semester. One specific question is in regard to the role an academic advisor plays in the transition of a first-generation community college transfer student.

Should you decide to participate in this interview, I will set a time to meet with you to ask approximately 10 questions regarding your role in regard to supporting first-generation community college transfer students. This interview will take approximately one hour and will be scheduled based on mutual availability.

There are no risks associated with this research; however, participation is voluntary. Should you feel uncomfortable or need to refrain from participating, please do so. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Tara E. Benson

Appendix K

Advisor Email Confirmation

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview. This email serves as a

confirmation of your participation. I will arrive at [location] at [time.] You will be

asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview beginning. If you have any questions,

please let me know.

Appendix L

Advisor Consent Form

LINDENWOOD

Interview Research Consent Form

First-Generation Community College Transfer Students' Perceptions of Building a Sense of Belonging

You are being asked to participate in an interview being conducted by Tara E. Benson under the guidance of Dr. Rhonda Bishop at Lindenwood University. This study is being conducted to learn how community college students find a sense of belonging at a four-year institution and the role of the academic advisor in retention.

It will take about one hour to complete this interview.

Participating in this interview is voluntary. We will be asking about 5-10 other people to participate as well.

What are the risks of this study?

We do not anticipate any risks related to your participation other than those encountered in daily life. You do not need to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or you can stop the interview at any time.

We are collecting data that could identify you, such as name, job title and electronic mail address. Every effort will be made to keep your information secure and confidential. Only members of the research team will be able to see your data. We do not intend to include any information that could identify you in any publication or presentation.

Will anyone know my identity?

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. We do not intend to include information that could identify you in any publication or presentation. Any information we collect will be stored by the researcher in a secure location. The only people who will be able to see your data are: members of the research team, qualified staff of Lindenwood University, representatives of state or federal agencies.

What are the benefits of this study?
You will receive no direct benefits for completing this interview. We hope what we learn may benefit other people in the future.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study, you may contact the Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board Director, Michael Leary, at ██████████ ███████████████████. You can contact the researcher, Tara E. Benson directly at ████████ or ████████████████. You may also contact Dr. Rhonda Bishop at ███████████████.

I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be required to do, and the risks involved. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time by ending the interview. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age.
Please feel free to print a copy of this consent form.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   **Date**

_____
Participant's Printed Name

_____   _____
Signature of Principal Investigator or Designee   **Date**

_____
Investigator or Designee Printed Name

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Vita

Tara E. Benson is the Associate Director of the Plaster Student Union and Director of Student Engagement at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. Benson serves as the supervisor to seven professional staff members, six additional graduate assistants, and seven student workers who oversee areas of student engagement including leadership programs, spirit and tradition programming, campus activities, fraternity and sorority life, student organizations, the diversity fund and welcome weekend programming. Benson holds a Bachelor of Science in Mass Communication-Public Relations from Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and a master's degree in College Student Personnel Administration from the University of Central Missouri in Warrensburg, Missouri.

Benson has served in the field of student affairs for 14 years, working primarily in campus life and student engagement. Benson has served as a volunteer with the Association of College Unions International since 2007 including leadership roles such as the annual conference planning team, chair of the regional conference. and a member of the Educational Research Fund committee. Benson has also presented numerous times at the regional and national conferences.

In Springfield, Benson spends time volunteering in the community and serving on various boards. Benson has served as the Vice President of Membership for the Junior League of Springfield, President of the Springfield Little Theater Associate Board, and Secretary of the Discovery Center Board. The Springfield Business Journal also named Benson as one of the 20 Most Influential Women in 2018.