

Increasing Access and Enhancing Transition Experiences of Transfer Students in a 2+2 Program: A Descriptive Case Study

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Transfer agreements between institutions have existed for decades, but a newer 2+2 model provides pathways to bachelor's degree completion for students who initially applied to 4-year institutions but were not admitted. Most literature on these programs focuses on how articulation agreements and dual-admissions processes provide a gateway to baccalaureate degree attainment. Scant academic literature has focused on how institutional partnering programs facilitate the transfer process for students. This descriptive case study examined one dual-admission transfer program at a large Hispanic-Serving Institution and offers implications for practice, future research, and program design.

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Access to higher education has been improving in America, but recently, a greater focus has been on underserved and underprivileged Americans (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). President Obama (2011) affirmed the growing importance of community colleges in the overall picture of American higher education. While access has been expanded through the Higher Education Act of 1965—and reaffirmed as recently as 2015—providing equal opportunity and access to all has come under scrutiny (Palmadessa, 2017). Many students are gaining access to higher education via community colleges, and more than 80% of community college students desire to minimally obtain a baccalaureate degree (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). A recent report found that only 14.7% of students who started at a 2-year college had completed a degree at a 4-year institution within six years (Shapiro et al., 2017). Improving this lackluster graduation rate necessitates strong collaborative efforts between community colleges and 4-year institutions, especially regarding the

transition for students who desire a baccalaureate degree. Consequently, dual-admissions programs have gained importance, particularly for students who enter college underprepared.

The 2007–2009 recession impacted higher education funding significantly. Although state and federal appropriations per student have increased, they still lag prerecession rates (Whitford, 2021). At the same time, public 4-year institutions desire to maintain or increase selectivity to uphold prestige of their degree programs (Garcia Falconetti, 2009). College enrollments have increased by 3.7 million since 2000 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021), yet reduced funding and facilities limit the support available for these students. As community college student enrollments increase, so too have transfer programs between community colleges and 4-year institutions (e.g., 2+2 or 3+1 articulation agreements; Garcia Falconetti, 2009). In fact, 40 of the 50 U.S. states now have legislative mandates for transfer articulation (Lazarowicz, 2015).

One type of 2+2 model provides a pathway for students who applied and were denied admission to a 4-year institution. These programs facilitate student transition from a community college to a university and offer guaranteed admission into the university contingent upon the student completing their associate degree within a specific timeline (typically 3 years). Individualized advising at both institutions helps students maintain academic progress toward their degrees. Additionally, student services, athletic and social events, and additional campus resources such as financial aid and scholarships are sometimes offered. Finally, students permit the participating institutions to share their data to help with the seamless transition.

Most of the available literature on 2+2 programs focuses on how articulation agreements and dual-admissions processes provide a gateway to baccalaureate degree attainment, demonstrating

the value of “creating a transfer pipeline for students to continue their education beyond a 2-year college” (Grites & McDonald, 2012, p. 21). Although studies have focused on the effectiveness of 2+2 programs (Garcia Falconetti, 2009) and on outcomes of transfer students (Laanan, 2007), less emphasis has been placed on students’ transition experience and their integration into their new institution (McGill & Lazarowicz, 2012). Although there are an increasing number of 2+2 programs, scholars have not examined 2+2 programs designed for students who were first rejected from their 4-year institution of choice.

In this paper, we study one of these programs. The Degree Completion Program (DCP) at Southeastern Research University (SERU; both pseudonyms) was implemented in fall 2006 to capitalize on the collaborative relationships between the institution and its local and regional transfer feeder institutions. The program was designed to allow students, who were not admitted to SERU after high school, to complete their associate’s degree at one of four partnering institutions with guaranteed admission to SERU if certain conditions were met. It was funded by a grant from the Lumina Foundation, whose focus is on:

Increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina’s outcomes-based approach focuses on helping to design and build an equitable, accessible, responsive and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025. (Lumina Foundation, 2015, para. 1)

Qualifications for the program (e.g., minimum grade point average, SAT/ACT scores) vary from year to year. Students who accept the DCP invitation agree to matriculate at a partnering college, complete an associate’s degree within three years, and transition to SERU. The program even provides students the opportunity to live on campus at SERU while completing their initial coursework at their first institution.

The number of 2+2 programs are increasing, as is the importance placed on associate’s and bachelor’s degree completion. Yet, scant literature examines these programs—especially regarding access to education. Therefore, the purpose of this descriptive case study (Yin, 2012) is to

examine DCP at SERU through the lens of transition theory (Schlossberg, 1984) to offer insight into the factors that students in transition face and into how 2-year and 4-year institutions can respond to those needs to increase access to education.

Theoretical Framework: Transition Theory

A transition is “any event, or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Schlossberg et al., 1995, p. 27). Schlossberg’s (1984) theory highlights three parts of the transition. The first aspect reflects upon the experience leading up to the transition—the relativity, context, and impact of the move—and the transition as an event or nonevent (Goodman et al., 2006). The second facet consists of assets and liabilities within the 4 S system: situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg, 1984). Finally, those experiencing the change begin to use new strategies to manage their personal evolution.

Transitions are perceived positively or negatively depending on the individual and the holistic context. Consider two traditional-aged African American male students who transferred to a college in their hometown after one year at their state’s flagship university. One is transferring because the major he selected is only offered at the institution closer to home. The other was academically unsuccessful at the original institution. Even though they both move closer to home, their perceptions of the transfer may be vastly different.

There are three types of transitions: *anticipated* (expected transitions), *unanticipated* (those not expected), and *nonevents* (when a person expected a transition to occur that did not). For example, a student started his prerequisite nursing work at one institution knowing he would need to complete the curriculum elsewhere. Another student’s institution encountered financial hardships and closed suddenly, leaving her one month to find a new institution. A third student graduated with a bachelor’s degree, was not accepted into law school, and is taking classes in a postbaccalaureate program elsewhere. The timing of the transfer, the context for making the transition, and the relative complexity of these situations may require different sets of questions and approaches. Assessing differences between pre- and posttransition environments can help advisors gauge the impact of the transition on the

student (Goodman et al., 2006) and tailor their approaches and referrals to meet the needs of individual students.

One assumption of the theory is that change and growth can occur from transitions, but the result may not always be positive. A person's ability to cope with the transition depends on their resources in 4 S areas: *Situation*, *Self*, *Support*, and *Strategies*. Each S Area has different components that help the individual to self-assess their assets and liabilities.

- *Situation* (ability to assess what happened): trigger, timing control, role change, duration, previous experience with similar transition, concurrent stress, assessment
- *Self* (personal/demographic/psychological characteristics):
 - *Personal characteristics*: Sociocultural status, gender, age and stage of life, state of health, ethnicity/culture
 - *Psychological resources*: ego development, outlook, commitment/values, spirituality/resilience
- *Support* (who is there to help):
 - *Types*: Intimate, familial, friendship, community
 - *Functions*: Affect, affirmation, aid, feedback
- *Strategies* (how they handle it, ways of coping): Modifying the situation, control the meaning, manage resultant stress

Advisors should examine two areas for individuals in transition: the advisee's feelings about the transition in general and their attitudes about their resources for dealing with it (McGill & Lazarowicz, 2012). For instance, a military veteran just finishing active duty returns to begin her academic career. Although excited about her first semester back to civilian life, she has concerns about postcombat stress, academic underpreparedness, and connecting to peers native to the institution. In other words, the student generally feels positive about the transition but needs assistance identifying and building the resource network to transition successfully. Through this process, advisors working with transfer students need to understand the way a particular event influences the many roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions of the student (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Helping students understand their assets and liabilities

within these four areas can foster an understanding of what they are going through as they move in, through, and out of the transition.

Although transition theory has been prominent in many fields, it is only been applied to higher education within the past decade: Veterans' transition to a community college (Ryan et al., 2011; Wheeler, 2012); Division I female athletes transition into the workforce after graduation (Henderson, 2013); students on academic probation (Tovar & Simon, 2006); students transitioning back to school after the loss of a career (McAtee & Benshoff, 2006); and the experiences of nontraditional male college dropouts (Powers, 2010). Transition theory has been applied to study transfer students. Archambault (2010) developed an intervention that applied transition theory within a first-year seminar. She explored the theory's use within the context of a classroom experience with community college students preparing to transfer. Lazarowicz (2015) sought to understand the transition experience that community college transfer students faced in their first semester posttransfer. Neither study involved participants in dual-admissions programs. These studies reiterate the importance of positive support, accurate and timely dissemination of information, and institutional adaptation to student needs to help transfer students address the challenges of transferring institutions.

Method

Case study design is useful when the study's focus is on understanding how or why a phenomenon occurs in a specific context (Yin, 2012). Descriptive case studies "offer rich and revealing insights into the social world of a particular case" (Yin, 2012, p. 49), within its natural setting, informed by a descriptive theory of a phenomenon.

The Case

DCP was implemented at SERU in the fall of 2006 to offer students an alternative pathway to receive their bachelor's degree. DCP connects students, who may not have otherwise achieved a bachelor's degree, with the opportunity to earn one. Students who are ineligible for admission to SERU but meet the criteria for DCP are sent a letter inviting them into the program and asking them to choose which affiliated institution they will attend. As part of the program, students have access to targeted SERU resources (e.g., library,

academic advising) and opportunities for early affiliation (e.g., sporting and cultural events) while attending the partner college. Once they finish their associate's degree, they transition to SERU.

This program contributed to building a "college-going culture" (Tremblay, 2013, p. 20). Although initially an institutional structure for an academic pathway, an important added feature of the DCP is the availability of targeted academic advising services from SERU bridge advisors who are housed at Southeastern State Shore Community College (SESSCC; a pseudonym), the largest partnering college. These advisors pay special attention to helping students plan and carry out a successful transition to SERU (i.e., selecting an appropriate major and completing the prerequisites).

After the first cohort of DCP students had entered the program, a graduate student researcher used interviews to assess the program's effectiveness in aiding the transition of students from SESSCC to SERU. Program administrators were interested in student adjustment, obstacles students encountered through their transition, students' perceptions of the program, and their experiences with orientation and advising. The result was an unpublished report on the program, then called the DCP report (Nicholas, 2011).

Data Sources

The primary data source for this study was an unpublished, 14-page DCP report (Nicholas, 2011), which included a historical review of the program, workshops and advising processes, admissions and acceptance data, and information on graduates. It was prepared for university stakeholders and included summarizations of the research process undertaken (including tables and graphs of quantitative data points) and qualitative data from students regarding their DCP experience.

Additionally, several secondary sources informed our analysis. Before, during, and after analyzing the DCP report, the authors had personal communications with the research assistant who conducted the interviews with the initial cohort and compiled the research report. Conversations with the associate director of Transfer and Transition Services and the associate dean were instrumental in understanding the processes in the program's creation and how changes were implemented. These administrators provided valuable insights into the students'

experiences. Other DCP program documents and reports were also used to help us understand the context of the program and quantitative information about participants.

Next, a book on advising transfer students (Grites & Duncan, 2012) included a section highlighting exemplary transfer programs across the nation. One chapter (Valdés et al., 2012) described DCP, employed qualitative and quantitative assessment data, and commented on strengths and challenges of the program.

Finally, promotional materials, such as brochures and the DCP website, enriched our understanding of how the program was being marketed and attracting students. It was structured to include an overview of the program and information for students about the program specifically and broadly on transferring to SERU. Section examples include transfer guides, advising information, orientation information, degree audit information, and advising contact information. These sources provided rich quantitative and qualitative data collected over a 2-year period about the experiences of students who participated in the program.

Analytical Procedures

This study used directed content analysis, wherein a theory is used to guide the research question, the coding scheme, and relationships between codes or themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). With this approach, an "existing theory or prior research exists about a phenomenon that is incomplete or would benefit from further analysis" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). This process involves deductive category application (Mayring, 2000), in which researchers can "begin coding immediately with the predetermined codes" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1282). Thus, the goal of this type of analysis "is to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). Because we were interested in how this case could be investigated for the tenets of Schlossberg's transition theory, this approach helped give us a framework in which to examine the data sources. Deductive analysis "works from the 'top down,' from a theory to hypotheses to data to add to or contradict the theory" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 41). The theory should "guide the discussion of findings. Newly identified categories either offer a contradictory view of the phenomenon or might further refine, extend, and

enrich the theory” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1283).

Drawing upon a published conceptual article on advising transfer students using transition theory (McGill & Lazarowicz, 2012), the DCP report (Nicholas, 2011) was reviewed for evidence of Schlossberg’s (1984) four categories of situation, self, support, and strategies. The researchers then deductively coded for the representative student experiences with four predetermined codes based on Schlossberg’s (1984) four categories:

- Situation: timing of students’ transfer to the new institution, the duration of the transition, and concurrent stressors
- Self: personal characteristics that impacted students’ transition and their psychological resources in handling the transition (e.g., outlook and resiliency)
- Support: how students described types of supports from people (i.e., family members, friends, advisors, instructors) and the college/university as they were experiencing their transfer; the ways functions of support were described (i.e., affect, affirmation, aid, and feedback)
- Strategies: student actions or capabilities that affected their ability to cope with their transition

The findings from the DCP report were corroborated with content from analysis of other secondary data sources, such as other DCP program documents and individual communication with program administrative representatives.

Integrity Measures

The potential for validation or extension of a theory is a strength of directive qualitative content analysis. However, because “an overemphasis on the theory can blind researchers to contextual aspects of the phenomenon” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1283), the researchers engaged in investigator triangulation, collaboration, intercoder agreement, and peer debriefing (Patton, 2002).

First, in working together, we participated in investigator triangulation (Patton, 2002), which is “the use of several different researchers or evaluators” (p. 247). The authors engaged in *collaboration* throughout the analysis of the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Although we generally agreed the concepts of transition theory ran

through the data, as a validity measure, we analyzed the report and materials separately. Once we individually coded, we discussed and compared the categories and themes into which these data fell. When we disagreed, we challenged one another until we reached *intercoder agreement* (Creswell & Miller, 2000), which involves researchers discussing the issues until they reach a consensus. Disagreement was infrequent in our work. Finally, *peer debriefing*, a “review of the data and research process by someone who is familiar with the research or the phenomenon being explored” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 129), was employed when associates within the field critically reviewed our data analysis and our manuscript to ensure consistent and accurate program information and culturally accurate assumptions.

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we present the ways transition theory underscores factors students in transition face and how 2-year and 4-year institutions can respond to those needs to increase access to education. Our analysis found significant overlap in the findings that could be interpreted as either support or strategies. As such, support and strategies are discussed in tandem. Findings from this deductive analysis are presented with respect to situation, self, and strategies and support.

Situation

Schlossberg’s (1984) first area considers aspects of the situation, which might include triggers, the individual’s degree of control, any role that may have changed in the transition, the duration of the transition, any prior similar transition, concurrent stress, and their ability to assess the situation. DCP may provide an avenue for an easier transition for students, which relates to the transition elements of timing and duration. In the report, students used words such as “encouraging” and “motivating” to know they could transition to SERU as soon as they completed the associate degree. Although students indicated SESSCC was not their original first choice, some felt more positively when they received a conditional acceptance through DCP instead of a rejection. This positive mindset may have motivated some to complete the associate degree faster to transition sooner. Students thought that, in addition to cheaper tuition, SESSCC offered more flexibility in class

scheduling and in accommodating their work schedule. In this way, students may have felt control over both the timing and duration of their transition. Because students do not have to reapply and their SERU acceptance is guaranteed upon the completion of the associates degree (within 3 years), they may have experienced less anxiety when waiting to be admitted. Indeed, “If change is desired, then the certainty [of the expected outcome] ... may be reassuring” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 63).

Students’ situations varied (e.g., timing, degree of control, duration of their degree programs, and concurrent stress), which may have impacted their experience in the program transitioning from SESSCC to SERU. As some students outlined, these aspects are sometimes unavoidable obstacles. For example, because of limitations in course selection, students may feel they were forced into taking online classes instead of face-to-face, for which they might also incur significant course fees. In such cases, they may not feel they had as much control over their schedule or the modality in which they learned best (in the classroom). Other such obstacles might be that students learn that their major and classes are housed at a different campus than the one they planned to attend. Data from the report indicated that some students were unable to attend full time, which may have been because of course availability, missing prerequisites, or work expectations. With one of the program objectives being to encourage completion of a bachelor’s degree within five years, such obstacles to full-time enrollment may have serious consequences for long-term academic outcomes of these students.

Self

One goal of DCP is to help students develop a SERU affinity from their beginning at the community college. In working with transfer students, it is worthwhile to consider the following questions: “How has the transfer student’s role changed as a result of transfer? Did he or she need to construct a new identity as a result? How does this reconstruction shape the student’s new experiences?” (McGill & Lazarowicz, 2012, p. 132). Some students identified as SERU students from the beginning; others saw themselves as SESSCC students; and some did not really know how they identified. Some students did not understand DCP; one did not even realize she was in the program and was surprised she need not apply for the 4-year

institution after completing her associate’s degree. Many who identified as SERU students avoided identifying themselves as SESSCC students and instead referred to themselves as “Dual Degree students” or “SERU students taking classes at SESSCC.”

DCP students had the opportunity to use a SERU ID and participate in SERU activities while attending SESSCC. This appeared to be a strategic effort by SERU to assist students in developing a sense of identity/connection to SERU. However, these involvements, particularly the use of services, relate to commitment (Anderson et al., 2012), a type of psychological resource that helps a person overcome the stress of a transition. Commitment describes where energy is dedicated when dealing with the transition. A commitment is categorized as interpersonal, altruism, competence/mastery, or self-protection, and can change. For instance, participation in sporting events and performances aligns with a relational commitment; the use of library and tutoring services would align with competence and mastery commitments. The students who utilize these services and participate in campus events may feel an enhanced attachment to SERU.

Support and Strategies

Schlossberg’s (1984) third coping resource is support, which consists of *types* (intimate, familial, friendship, and community) and *functions* (affect, affirmation, aid, and feedback). The fourth category is strategies: the ways individuals respond to transitions. Types of strategies include modifying the situation, controlling the meaning of the transition, and managing the stress posttransition (Anderson et al., 2012). In reviewing program materials, conceptualizing the separation of these two coping resources was challenging. To guide this section, we considered the university’s interventions as providing support and the student’s use of these services as strategies.

First, an important initiative of institutional support was to address the need for a streamlined communication process for students who transferred from SESSCC to SERU in the program. Thus, the bridge advisor position was created in 2010. For instance, one student felt more prepared for the transition because she worked closely with the bridge advisor. Conceptually, this shows how students and the institution worked to modify the situation. Transitions are difficult, but

the students modified that stress by using university-provided resources. Additionally, some students participated in SERU events while attending SESSCC. In doing so, students modified their transition by connecting to resources before transition. However, some students noted they would have appreciated more opportunities for communication, connection, and advising. These students may have utilized more strategies in their transition if the institution had provided the perceived support the student desired.

As participants approached their transition to SERU, transition workshops and orientations were developed for DCP students. Students who participated in these opportunities could enroll in their first semester courses at SERU on that date. Many found the programs helpful and felt they had a better understanding of course requirements and planning (Nicholas, 2011). In particular, the bridge advisors, who worked with the students during the events, were perceived as one of the strongest resources because they were able to communicate information students did not fully understand.

Finally, people can control the meaning of the transition through selective ignoring (Anderson et al., 2012): finding the positive within the negative. Although some students were disappointed about having to start at SESSCC, others changed this time from a negative experience into a positive one. For some students, who were planning to attend graduate school programs, on-time degree completion was a concern. By having a goal and a positive outlook on the situation—and working hard to complete the degrees—students may have been attempting to control the meaning of the transition.

Implications for Practice

In thinking about the DCP program through the lens of transition theory, we consider several implications for practice and research: student engagement, timely degree completion, strategic institutional support, and theoretical underpinnings in program design.

First, DCP provided a means for transfer students to become engaged at their receiving institution early. Measures of institutional success are based on graduation and retention rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For public institutions, institutional funding relies on these factors. Decades of research has found campus engagement key to student retention (Astin, 1984;

Tinto, 1998). At most institutions, transfer students are less engaged than native students on four out of five benchmarks: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment (NSSE, 2008). Given this phenomenon, programs designed to assist in the transition of transfer students, particularly those that engage the students at the receiving campus early, play a key role in retaining transfer students (Garcia Falconetti, 2009).

Second, DCP participants indicated having an end goal—a pathway toward a bachelor's degree—helped them to complete their degree sooner. Compared to non-DCP counterparts, students who joined DCP finished their degree quicker, even when they had to complete developmental education courses (Valdés et al., 2012). Dr. Janie Valdés, director of the program, noted:

In the interviews, we learned that the promise of the “seat” at [SERU] was a motivator. The addition of the bridge advisors came later, so even though students were pleased with this service and transition support, there is something inherently motivating about keeping to the promise of the agreement—*timeline*. (Valdés, personal communication, May 15, 2015)

Thus, as a pathway for transitioning from one institution to another, DCP provided a structure for students to gain access to and subsequently complete their bachelor's degrees.

Transition theory provides an analytical framework for why this might be. As a coping strategy, Schlossberg (1984) discussed three ways for coping: modifying the situation, controlling the meaning of the problem, or managing the stress of the situation. Planning ahead is modifying the situation through action that can help create the best possible outcome, in this case staying on track toward degree completion in a timely manner. Although these issues all relate to a student's sense of not having control over the situation, individuals can control how they respond. One student indicated that although having to participate in DCP was not her first option for attending SERU, she was happy to have an alternative path in reaching her goal (Nicholas, 2011). Additionally, “An individual's view of who or what is responsible for the transition

affects how that individual appraises the transition” (Schlossberg, 1984, p. 64). By structuring their lives around an anticipated transition, DCP students planned carefully and used this action to modify their situation.

Third, there is value in utilizing this theoretical framework when working with community college transfer students. When institutions create policies and procedures geared toward increasing students’ assets in Schlossberg’s (1984) 4 S coping resources (and mindful of the full transition—moving in, moving through, and moving out), they ease the transition for community college transfer students by providing support structures. To design and implement robust programs connecting students with their new environments, universities and colleges ought to utilize literature. Therefore, a methodological consideration is thinking about how institutions might use theoretical frameworks in planning and program design. Although Schlossberg’s (1984) theory was not consulted as part of the initial design of DCP, aspects of the program can be better understood within this theoretical framework. Utilizing transition theory when developing similar programs may positively impact the experience of community college students and increase their likelihood of continuing their pursuit of a baccalaureate degree. Transition theory was initially conceived to better understand individual transition, but Anderson et al. (2012) discussed how the theory is applicable to building programs consisting of people working through a transition together. To be as effective as possible, “program planners [should] look broadly at the environment and consider the needs of the individuals to be served as well as those of the organization and the community” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 287). Thus, leaders of programs like DCP should listen actively to the students participating in the programs and make changes to meet the needs of the students as they transition. The theory may illuminate aspects of the student’s transition to a 4-year institution and provide a structured way to assess one’s assets in working through transitions (McGill & Lazarowicz, 2012).

Finally, in understanding the varying experiences students have with their transition—especially with understanding their assets and liabilities of the 4 S coping resources—advisors can better serve students and improve the transition experience. Advisors can tailor their questions to ensure they understand the students’ perceptions

of their assets and liabilities within each area. For instance, asking a student how the student has experienced the transition will guide the advisor’s line of questioning and provide opportunities to add assets to their student’s mindset. Knowing students’ outlooks can impact the amount of effort a student may be exerting in making the transition successful. Knowing the supports a student has or lacks can allow staff to better help coconstruct “concrete strategies that bolster existing support systems” (McGill & Lazarowicz, 2012, p. 133).

Limitations and Future Research

There are two limitations to our study and analysis. First, the primary mode of analysis for this descriptive case study was a directed qualitative content analysis which sought to learn if tenets of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory existed in the data. Thus, we utilized reports and analyzed data collected as part of a program evaluation. Although it provided a useful framework to guide the research question and the coding structure, directed qualitative content analysis does have limitations in the naturalistic paradigm. Using a theoretical framework to structure the study can impose limitations on the analytical process by pushing researchers “to find evidence that is supportive rather than nonsupportive of a theory” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1283). However, in “adding and enhancing rigor, validity and reliability of case study research” (Kohlbacher, 2006, para. 88), the mode of analysis worked for this study. Additionally, because we conducted our analysis mostly on secondary data rather than the raw data, the gap between the researchers and the actual student experiences widened. Neither author was involved in the primary data collection, which limited our ability to probe about the issues we found pressing in studying transfer students. Access to the secondary data only subjects the researchers to the analysis of the original analysis and limits the chance for fresh insights and conclusions.

Second, we utilized Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory, which was initially developed to look at individual transitions, and instead, offers a perspective of a shared lived experience among members of a cohort program. Although we believe the use of the theory provided insight into these shared lived experiences, it complicated the data coding vis-à-vis multiple

perspectives: the individual student's perspective as well as the institutional program experience. Conceiving of a shared transition experience creates an instance where the institution is both supporting, in the classical terms of Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory, and implementing strategies for the students to transition successfully. We experienced complications in coding for the categories of support and strategies. Because this program was focused on providing multiple mechanisms of support, the university interventions and initiatives frequently overlapped in the data. For instance, support structures, such as academic advising and access to campus resources implemented by the university, could be considered either a support structure or a strategy assisting students in a successful arrival to the new university. In our interpretation of the data, we deciphered that institutional units provide support, while the individual in transition uses strategies in navigating the transition. Bridge advising, for example, was an institution-implemented support, yet utilized as a strategy by the students. Therefore, we kept support and strategies together in our analysis. However, data coded as support was lacking in the materials. As researchers, we sought to explore this matter specifically, and our findings can be found elsewhere (Lazarowicz & McGill, 2022).

Bearing in mind these limitations, there are a few avenues for future research. To better understand the current state of the program, we first need to have a better historical context of how the program evolved. For example, in our analysis of the self component, participants reported varied perceptions and experiences throughout their transition. Therefore, it was difficult to understand how a program facilitated individual identity development. Future research could investigate how individuals transition in similar programs. Studies could seek to understand how participants experienced their assets and liabilities in each of the 4 S areas of the transition model (situation, self, support, and strategies) and the ways individuals felt their needs were met. Some guiding questions for future research might include: Are certain elements of programs more effective in facilitating the seamless transition of the students? How do students use resources of a transfer program differently?

Conclusion

Although transition theory has not yet been widely utilized in higher education literature, in considering transitions that students must work through when transferring institutions, it provides a strong theoretical underpinning for developing programs to assist with transfer students. Leaders should consider using the theory as a framework when developing, implementing, and improving future transfer programs. By applying the tenets of the model to individual life situations, advisors can improve the experiences of transfer students. The advising process provides a powerful opportunity for transfer students to be educated, supported, and understood during their transition. When students feel an advisor is concerned and knows where to find the resources they need, they are more likely to succeed in their new academic environment. We hope institutions will continue to incorporate strong advising practices into 2+2 programs.

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