

Advanced Qualitative Research: Pilot Study

Examining the Experiences of Rural Community College Transfer Students Who Attend Four
Year Institutions With No Pre-Established Transfer Receptive Culture

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Abstract

The following paper will examine the experiences of rural community college transfer students who later attend four year institutions with no established Transfer Receptive Culture (TRC). Using current literature and applicable theoretical frameworks as lenses to address the barriers transfer students encounter, the goal of this paper is to curate a list of recommendations for institutions who are considering establishing TRC. The findings within the collected literature can be used to justify appropriate funding and the need for the cultivation of TRC at institutions with high transfer rates. Furthermore, there will be an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the recommendations and approaches the current literature suggest implementing. Lastly, using the current literature to inform practice, a description of the pilot study I conducted, and the findings detailed. This study looked at the experiences of rural community college transfer students who attend four year institutions with no established TRC.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper and pilot study is to examine the experiences of rural community college transfer students who later attend four year institutions with no established Transfer Receptive Culture (TRC). Secondly, to examine the current literature around TRC, and the institutional benefits of supporting community college transfer students. From the literature examined in this paper, a comprehensive list of recommendations for institutions considering cultivating TRC will be developed.

The current national problems around transferring between institutions are addressed, while also exploring the significance and implications that these issues have for both students and institutions of higher education. Following the significance of these issues in higher education, a literature review examining the issues/barriers that rural community college transfer students face while transitioning to four year institutions is curated. While using the literature review to examine the current issues around transfer, the framework of Transfer Receptive Culture is used to develop recommendations for institutions looking to address the explored barriers. Additionally, the theoretical framework of intersectionality is applied to the literature as a lens to view the issues and approaches to addressing these barriers for students with complex identities. Lastly, a qualitative pilot study is outlined and detailed to address the phenomenon that rural community college transfer students experience when transferring to institutions that have not used the framework (Transfer Receptive Culture) to address issues around transferring.

Problem Being Addressed

Despite best efforts by policymakers and institutional leaders, the current higher education system has major barriers for students looking to transfer from a two year institution to a four year institution. The root of these issues come from the lack transfer equivalencies and

articulation agreements between institutions. Additionally, the sheer lack of supports that are in place for both the sending and receiving institutions. The core concept of Transfer Receptive Culture is the idea that both the sending and receiving institutions communicate effectively, honor academic coursework, and offer supports for students during their transition (Jain, Herrera, Bernal & Solorzano, 2011). The ideology behind this framework is that both institutions are responsible for the success of transfer students. The barriers that some students face when attempting transfer are broken down when institutions use the framework to establish and cultivate Transfer Receptive Culture.

Scholarly Significance

Undoubtedly, college tuition has been and is still on the rise. Newman (2014) asserts, “Published tuition and fees have increased by about 4% at public and private nonprofit four-year colleges, and by nearly 5% at public two-year colleges from 2011-12 to 2013-14” (p. 16). Due to this increase in tuition there are some educational professionals who believe that societal narrative around higher education will shift, and more students will choose to start at a community college due to cost. Baum, Little and Payea (2011) estimate a three times cost differential...“In 2010-2011, average tuition and fees for a full-time student enrolled in a public two-year college was \$2,713, compared to \$7,605 at public four-year institutions and significantly higher levels at private for-profit and nonprofit institutions” (p. 31). Community colleges serve as the primary point of access to higher education for many underrepresented students (Carter & Wilson, 1995; Levitz, 1992; Tinto, 1993). Since community colleges offer lower tuition rates, have less selective admission requirements, and provide greater geographical access to more students, the student population is more diverse in many ways (The College Board, 2011; Newman, 2014). Given the projected increase of tuition in higher education there

will be a greater need for increased workers with postsecondary education, but not necessarily a four-year degree (The College Board, 2011).

With college tuition on the rise and more students choosing to start their college journey at a community college, it will be more important than ever for two and four year institutions to consider and work towards the cultivation of TRC. Furthermore, using the tenets of TRC, we must consider that transfer students do need support. An interview of Mark Poisel at the University of Central Florida published in the article, *Improving Student Transfer from Community Colleges to Four-Year Institutions* highlighted the need for transfer student support. Poisel (2011) stated, “People say transfer students will take care of themselves. The reality is they won’t. If you really want to help them get the baccalaureate degree, you’ve got to have services for them when they get to the four-year institution.” (p. 6). The push for additional support for transfer students comes from the data showing that transfer students typically earn lower GPAs for their first semester at their new institution (Rhine, Miligan, & Nelson, 2000).

Institutional Benefits

There are institutional benefits to focusing on increasing enrollment and supports for community college transfer students. Transfer students from community colleges who are high-achieving not only bring a proven record of success, but also add to the fiscal bottom line by filling empty seats at four year institutions (The College Board, 2011). Based on a recent study completed by Lichtenberger and Dietrich (2017) it appears that community college transfer students are just as likely to graduate with a bachelor’s degree as a student who was directly enrolled in a four year institution.

Theoretical Frameworks

In order to examine the current literature around the barriers that rural community college transfer students face while transferring to four year institutions, the following framework and theoretical lens have been applied select and develop a list of recommendations.

Transfer Receptive Culture

As discussed above, Transfer Receptive Culture is the concept that institutions collaboratively work together to ensure that students who transfer from one institution to another will have a smooth transition to their new institution. In the 2011 article, *Building a Transfer Receptive Culture at Four Year Institutions*: the authors define a transfer receptive culture as “an institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully” (p. 253).

Jain, Herrera, Bernal and Solorzano (2011) explain that these efforts for inclusion begin prior to when the students arrive campus, framing TRC as having both pre-transfer and post-transfer initiatives. There are five elements that make up TRC, two are elements considered pre-transfer efforts, and three elements considered post transfer. The pre-transfer elements include: Establishing the transfer of students, especially nontraditional, first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students, as a high institutional priority that ensures stable accessibility, retention, and graduation. Secondly, providing outreach and resources that focus on the specific needs of transfer students while complimenting the community college mission of transfer (Jain, et al., 2011). The other three elements that focus on post-transfer include: Offer financial and academic support through distinct opportunities for nontraditional transfer students where they are challenged to achieve at high academic levels. Secondly, acknowledge the lived experiences that students bring and the intersectionality between community and family. Lastly, create an appropriate framework from which to assess, evaluate, and enhance transfer receptive programs

(Jain et al., 2011). Using Transfer Receptive Culture as a framework for establishing, supporting, and evaluating institutional efforts that support community college transfer students, the following literature review explores the barriers students face while transferring.

Literature Review

The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) suggest that approximately one third of first-time college students transfer institutions or co-enroll at least once within 5 to 6 years of initial enrollment (Hossler, Shapiro, Dundar, Ziskin, Chen, Zerquera & Torres, 2012; United States Department of Education, 2017). To truly understand some of the challenges that transfer students face, we have to look at the process of transferring. Townsend (2008) described the two parts of transfer as: one, being the process itself, and two, being the adjustment to the new institution once the student has transferred. Using Transfer Receptive Culture as a framework, scholars hope to examine the experiences of transfer students as a way to improve services and policies between sending and receiving institutions (Jain et al., 2011). Currently, institutions not addressing these problems are having notable issues around transfer student retention, barriers within pathways for transfer students, and students experiencing “transfer shock.” The purpose of establishing Transfer Receptive Culture is to address some of the barriers mentioned.

Who’s Considered a Transfer Student

First, we must address who is considered a transfer student. Radwin and Horn (2014) suggest, “while one definition of transfer students includes virtually any four-year college students who previously attended community college, other definitions might exclude groups such as those who attended a four year institution before community college, those who enrolled in community college exclusively prior to the fall of their freshman year, those who had a long break in enrollment between community college and the four year college, or those who

transferred in the middle of an academic year” (p. 13). It is clear that the definition of a transfer student is individually defined, but for the purpose of this paper a transfer student will be defined as a student who had attended at least one semester at a community college and is now enrolled at a four year institution.

Persistence and Attainment

There is no denying the research that shows community college transfer students have significant predictors of student attrition and lower graduation rates once at a four year institutions (Gao, Hughes, O’Rear & Fendley, 2002). Students transferring to another institution can face many barriers along the way. Students can face culture shock, and more specifically, transfer shock. Having to adjust to different a environment, classes, and academic rigor can cause problems academically (Laanan, 1996). Transfer shock is defined as a decline in GPA in the first semester (Hill, 1965). Students also face issues with transfer credits, and work-life balance. These researched issues and visible barriers show the need for institutions to consider establishing Transfer Receptive Culture to attempt address the inequity (Jain et al., 2011).

Pathways to Transfer

The current societal narrative holds the idea that transfer functions in our system only as vertical transfer pathways. Scholars define “vertical pathways” as the primary mission of community colleges (Cohen, Brawer & Kisker, 2014; Handel, 2013; Mullin, 2012). Challenging this narrative, Townsend (2001) posed the concept that there are actually six transfer pathways. More recently, Taylor (2016) added two more categories to account for reverse transfer credit. The eight pathways include: vertical transfer, lateral transfer, reverse transfer, reverse credit transfer, swirlers and alternating enrollees, concurrent enrollees, co-enrollment, and dual enrollment (Taylor, 2016; Townsend, 2001). Students experiences prior to transferring when

transferring vertically have been found to be predictive of future academic performance during post-transfer (Laanan, Starobin & Eggleston, 2011). As Jain et al., (2016) advocates, four year institutions with no established transfer receptive culture can have a negative impact on access and retention for transfer students.

Issues Within Pathways

The first notable issue with transferring, regardless of the pathway taken is credit loss. The second issue associated with transfer is inadequate articulation agreements. Literature from the Education Commission of the States (2006) and echoed by Monaghan and Attewell (2015) suggests that articulation agreements and policies often do nothing for credits outside of the general education courses, and do not include any technical credits. Roughly 69% of institutions have articulation agreements in place, however, the credits accepted are limited (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2005). Additionally, the U.S. Government Accountability Office suggested that if institutions do not make decisions on course equivalency approvals solely based on the accreditation of the sending institution as the ultimate measure of quality, then institutions could promote more consistent considerations of coursework approval. Outside of credit loss, transfer students often report experiencing different expectations from their previous institution to their new institution. This difference in expectations has been examined by many scholars as “transfer shock” (Cejda, 1997; Laanan, 2001). This shock is felt because the student was not prepared for the transition from their previous institution and was not supported by their new institution (Jain et al., 2011).

Transfer Shock

As mentioned above, when a student transfers from a community college to a four year institute they may face a period of time where they demonstrate lower academic performance.

Scholars call this initial period of time after transition “transfer shock” (Berger & Malaney, 2003). This could be contributed to the major differences between community colleges and four institutions. Typically, the smaller campuses and smaller class size can provide more opportunity for faculty-student interaction. A qualitative study done by Townsend and Wilson (2006) discovered that transfer students from community colleges felt like a “number” at their new institution. Furthermore, Townsend (1995) original work noted that transfer students perceived four year institutions as being more academically rigorous and having a higher expectation on writing ability. Lastly, Townsend and Wilson (2006) found that the social aspect of the transition can influence the impact that transfer shock has on a transfer student. Some transfer students reported having a hard time finding their place on a new campus with native students who have already established social bonds (Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Integration Barriers

Similar to transfer shock, community college transfer students can face obstacles while integrating socially to the new campus. Owens (2010) suggested that this can be due to common student demographics of community college transfer students. These students tend to be older, have established families, do not live on campus, and work while enrolled in college. These outside obligations really impact the involvement that community college transfer students have on their new campus. Unfortunately, the lack of involvement can severely limit the student's ability to connect to the new campus (Schlossberg, 1989). Research done by Townsend (2000) looked at the transition a community college transfer goes through on their new campus. The findings were that if the student had not established contacts/relationships with peers and faculty like the native students, the transfer students reported feeling isolated and disconnected during their experience (Townsend & Wilson, 2008; Townsend, 2001).

Vertical and Racial Transfer Gaps

From the beginning, community colleges were established as gatekeepers to four year institutions, but since that time, the focus has since shifted to self-sustaining measures of expanding occupational education and training (Briant & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006). Nationally, 80% of first time community college students report intention of earning a bachelor's degree, yet only 23% transfer within 5 years (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011). Students with various background demographics (e.g. parent, partner, full-time employee, first generation) have been reported to show that they are less likely to transfer. One of these demographics in particular shows greater disparity in the vertical transfer gap (Jain et al., 2011; Perez & Ceja, 2015). This disparity is notable because more than half of all Native American, Latinx, and Black undergraduate students across the nation enroll in community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). Given these statistics, it is important for institutions to view these students from an intersectional lens. When attempting to address barriers, institutions must view students as more than just transfer and community college students (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

The Impact of Work-Life Balance

Of the many barriers that need to be addressed for transfer students, the major barrier is work-life balance. Community colleges typically offer more flexibility in course scheduling allowing students to work while attending college, whereas, undergraduate courses at four year institutions tend to be during work hours (Rhine, Milligan & Nelson, 2000). Furthermore, student services like financial aid, counseling, registrar, and academic advising typically offer office hours between traditional business hours. This can cause less accessibility for working non-traditional transfer students. Community college transfer students are different than native

first year students at four year institutions because they tend to have different roles including: student, employee, partner, parent, or caregiver all while attending college (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2014). In regards to community college transfer student engagement, a survey completed by the Community College Survey of Student Engagement found that 40% of community college students attend school full-time and 60 percent part-time with 41% working 30 hours per week or more (CCCSE, 2014).

Academic Barriers

Despite facing barriers in the transition, community college transfer students can face barriers in the classroom too. Integrating into the academic coursework at the new institution is closely linked to persistence, and can be a major challenge for community college transfer students at four year institutions (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1975). Transfer students can experience difficulties adjusting to the new academic rigor and advanced course level curriculums at four year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2014). Adding another layer of difficulty with the adjustment to larger classroom sizes and a larger campus (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Townsend, 1995). There is a body of research that suggests faculty interactions and relationships greatly influence a student's persistence in college, and this can be challenging for community college transfer students given the larger class sizes (Astin, 1984). Furthermore, a student's perception of faculty at the new four year institution can make the transition difficult. Community college transfer students can perceive their faculty view them as less academically ready, which causes them to feel that the faculty are less supportive about their academic success (Laanan, 1996; Townsend, 1995).

Cost, Debt & Economic Barriers

As noted above, barriers to transferring can extend the time to earn a bachelor's degree, thus extending its direct cost for students. (Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solorzano, 2011; The College Board, 2016; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). There has been a reported 25% increase of the percentage of students receiving Pell grants in 2007-2008, and another increase in 2012-2013 to 36% (The College Board, 2014). Students who are supported by financial aid packages comprised of federal aid as the primary method to paying for tuition and fees can lose eligibility if they exceed the maximum amount of time allotted to complete a program. Furthermore, students who take remedial courses for academic support but receive no college credit become more likely to lose eligibility of aid (The College Board, 2014). Since transfer students face the likelihood of increased time for degree completion, it also increases the possibility of more student loan debt (Baum, Little & Payea, 2011). Transfer students included, student loan debt in general has increased significantly over ten years (The College Board, 2016).

What Defines Transfer Receptive Culture

Transfer Receptive Culture is defined as an “Institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfers successfully - that is, to navigate the community college, take the appropriate coursework, apply, enroll, and successfully earn a baccalaureate degree in a timely manner” (Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solorzano, 2011, p. 257). These two elements of honoring transfer students credits and supporting them through the transition are echoed by authors throughout the literature around TRC. Jain et al., (2011) and the College Board (2011) discuss the need for supports in advising. College Board (2011) states “Community College leaders must welcome transfer advisers on campus. They increase the community college’s overall advising capacity, and demonstrate

commitment of the four-year institution to community colleges and established credibility” (College Board, 2011, p. 13).

Findings & Recommendations

The literature around the explored topic area proposed some recommendations for institutions looking to cultivate TRC. Specifically, the article, *Critical race theory and the transfer function: Introducing a Transfer Receptive Culture* outlines elements that build this new culture. These elements include:

1. Provide outreach and resources that focus on the specific needs of transfer students (Improving Student Transfer from Community Colleges to Four, 2011).
2. Offer financial and academic support through distinct opportunities for non-traditional transfer students where they are challenged to achieve at high academic levels
3. Acknowledge the lived experiences that students bring and the intersectionality between identities, community and family
4. Create an appropriate framework from which to assess, evaluate, and enhance transfer receptive programs (Jain et al., 2011)

Further recommendations include dedicating an Admissions Counselors and Advisors who work specifically with transfer students, and build an electronic database for all articulated/approved courses of transfer (Taylor, 2016). The core of all Student Development Theories is institutional engagement – engagement is key. Wood and Moore (2011) suggests institutions have direct academic advising for transfer students to establish a clear academic plan. Secondly, the scholars suggest developing a mandatory transfer orientation that focuses on connecting transfer students to the institution (Wood & Moore, 2011). To provide greater accessibility, institutions should consider providing web-based orientations for students who

cannot not attend the orientation. Secondly, institutions should establish a one credit seminar specifically for transfer students. The course would be designed to introduce students to campus resources and establish a connection between them and the institution (Wood & Moore, 2011). Lastly, consider establishing a peer mentor program for incoming transfer students. Having a mentor will help transfer students continue to be engaged at the institution even after the seminar is completed (Jain et al., 2011).

Benefits of Adopting Transfer Receptive Culture

There is substantial amount of research that explores the issues that transfer students from community colleges face when transitioning to four year institutions. Institutions looking to adopt the framework of Transfer Receptive Culture as a model to address some of these barriers can find both fiscal benefits and institutional cultural benefits (Herrera & Jain, 2013; Jain, Herrera, Bernal & Solorzano, 2011).

Fiscal Benefits

According to data from NCES, in the fall 2015 roughly 6.3 million students were enrolled in public, two-year colleges (NCES, Enrollment and Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, 2015). Out of roughly 6 million students, 81% indicate they want to earn a bachelor's degree or higher. Although those students indicating a desire to transfer is high, only 30% of entering students actually transfer to a four-year institution within six years (Horn & Skomsvold, 2011; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). Between 2010 and 2014, the number of high school graduates has dropped, increasing competition for prospective undergraduate enrollment for all institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Due to this drop in enrollment institutions should consider focusing on recruiting community college transfer students to offset enrollment goals and fill empty seats.

Expanding a Diverse Student Population

Transfer students come from different socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Handel, 2011). Disproportionately, community colleges have large numbers of underrepresented college students. It is estimated that 50% of all minority students begin higher education at a community college (Carter & Wilson, 1995; Levitz, 1992). Hispanic students were overrepresented in the public two-year institutions while Black students were overrepresented in for-profit institutions (College Board, 2016; Tinto, 1993). For low-income community college students, only 11% report transferring to a four year institution compared to 48% of higher income students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Supporting data reports the disparities among underrepresented community college transfer students, the *Community College Research Center* reported that only 7% of minority transfer students from a community colleges end up completing a bachelor's degree within six years. Additionally, only 44% of community college transfer students complete a bachelor's degree within six years, versus 63% when compared to students who enrolled initially at a four year institution (Community College FAQ, 2017). Increasing the focus on recruiting, accepting, and supporting more community college transfer students can not only fill empty seats, and increase enrollment, but it can increase diversity among an institution's student population. Adopting the framework of Transfer Receptive Culture can provide guidance for institutions looking to further support current and future community college transfer students (Herrera & Jain, 2013). Additionally, to address the issues of inequity institutions should adopt a intersectional lens to view these inequities. The research shows the inequities between race, class, and gender (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

Summary

The review of the existing scholarly literature centering issues that rural community college transfer students face while attending four year institutions demonstrate the need for institutions to establish a culture that centers transfer students and addresses barriers. After examining the recommendations of the literature around Transfer Receptive Culture while looking at the institutional benefits of adopting this framework, to truly know the impact TRC has on a rural community college transfer student's experience, a study examining the experiences of these students at institutions with and without this culture established may prove beneficial.

Pilot Study: Methodological Approach

In the literature review I examined the barriers that rural community college transfer students face when transferring to four year institutions. I then expanded on the significance these barriers cause in degree attainment, completion, and student loan debt. Additionally, I examined the literature around Transfer Receptive Culture, and the outcomes of adopting this culture can have for transfer students, native students, and the institution. Based on the review of the literature around community college transfer students and Transfer Receptive Culture emerged a common themes as to how this culture can affect rural community college student experiences.

Rationale of the study

The purpose of the pilot study was to examine the experiences of rural community college transfer students who later attend four year institutions with no established Transfer Receptive Culture (TRC). The following pilot study is outlined to address the phenomenon that rural community college transfer students experience when transferring to institutions that have not used the framework (Transfer Receptive Culture) to address issues around transferring.

Despite best efforts by policymakers and institutional leaders, the current higher education system has major barriers for students looking to transfer from a two to a four year institution (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). The root of these issues come from the lack transfer equivalencies and articulation agreements between institutions (Jenkins & Fink, 2016).. Additionally, the sheer lack of supports that are in place for both the sending and receiving institutions. The core concept of Transfer Receptive Culture is the idea that both the sending and receiving institutions communicate effectively, honor academic coursework, and offer supports for students during their transition (Jain, Herrera, Bernal & Solorzano, 2011). The ideology behind this framework is that both institutions are responsible for the success of transfer students. The barriers that some students face when attempting transfer are broken down when institutions use the framework to establish and cultivate Transfer Receptive Culture (Townsend & Wilson, 2008).

Methodological Approaches

This section describes the research methods that I used to investigate the experiences of rural community college transfer students who attend institutions with no pre-established Transfer Receptive Culture. I discuss how case study and a phenomenological approach were used to examine and analyze student experiences, and illuminate the need to break down barriers in the transfer process. Following the discussion, I explain my data collection procedures, rationale, researcher positionality, design choice, methods, data collection, validity concerns, and findings.

Case Study & Phenomenology

Using case study as my primary method to guide the study, I also incorporated the use of phenomenology. This pilot study was governed by assumptions within the pragmatic paradigm,

where I was more concerned with application and finding answers to these barriers. With pragmatism researchers focus on the research problem rather than the method. Using this paradigm allowed for the use of different approaches to understand the problem around transfer (Rossman & Wilson, 1985). Pragmatism is not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality, and case study has versatility in approach. "It is not assigned to a fixed ontological, epistemological or methodological position" (Rosenberg & Yates, 2007, p.447). The flexibility in philosophical underpinnings allowed me the opportunity to decide the methodological mixture of tools I wanted to use to conduct the case study (Stewart, 2014; Yin, 2014). As I conducted this pilot study, it was important for me to be aware of my own identity as a rural community college transfer students, and the assumptions I held prior to the start of the interviews. I memoed after each of the interviews as a way to check my thoughts. By understanding my own positionality I understand the position I have chosen to adopt in relation to the topic and the research (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2012). In other words, positionality "...reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt within a given research study" (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2012, p, 71).

The rationale behind using case study as my primary method is that to answer my questions of the experiences of these students, I am really looking at a bounded time and activity (Yin, 2014). This allowed me to describe the lived experiences of individuals having gone through the same phenomenon. The incorporation of phenomenology was important because I wanted know more about the phenomenon of the particular participants within the case. Using principles of phenomenology to guide the semi-structured interviews allowed me to look at the cumulative essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon.

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of rural community college transfer students who attend a four year institution with no pre-established Transfer Receptive Culture?

Participant Selection Criteria

This pilot study was conducted as a case study at the University of Maine campus. Using the framework outlined by Jain, Herrera, Bernal and Solorzano (2011) of Transfer Receptive Culture, I determined the University of Maine at Orono has having no pre-established Transfer Receptive Culture between Kennebec Valley Community College (KVCC). KVCC was not the only community college I was looking at, but three of participants were from that college and made the transition to the University of Maine. Using these two identified institutions, I publicized the study to find participants.

Participant Recruitment

I self-selected participants that met the criteria and agreed to participate in the study. The criteria to be considered a participant was as followed: 1. Participant must have been a transfer student from a rural community college that is post-one year at an identified four year institution 2. The institution must not meet the outlined criteria to be classified as having Transfer Receptive Culture. 3. Participants must be at least 18 years old to participate in the pilot study.

At the start of the study I estimated finding 5-8 willing participants to interview for the proposed research study, but ultimately, I only found and conducted interviews with three participants. I selected my participants based on who can best inform the research questions and shed light on the phenomenon. Subject selection in qualitative research needs to be purposeful (Maxwell, 2013). In order to find my participants, I identified institutions in close proximity to the University of Maine with no established Transfer Receptive Culture (TRC). I then use the

tenets of TRC to decide whether an institution has established TRC or no established TRC.

Site Selection - Transfer Receptive Culture

As discussed above, Transfer Receptive Culture is the concept that institutions collaboratively work together to ensure that students who transfer from one institution to another will have a smooth transition to their new institution. In the 2011 article, *Building a Transfer Receptive Culture at Four Year Institutions*: the authors define a transfer receptive culture as “an institutional commitment by a four-year college or university to provide the support needed for students to transfer successfully” (p. 253).

Jain, Herrera, Bernal and Solorzano (2011) explain that these efforts for inclusion begin prior to when the students arrive campus, framing TRC as having both pretransfer and post transfer initiatives. There are five elements that make up TRC, two are elements considered pretransfer efforts, and three elements considered post transfer. The pretransfer elements include: Establishing the transfer of students, especially nontraditional, first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students, as a high institutional priority that ensures stable accessibility, retention, and graduation. Secondly, providing outreach and resources that focus on the specific needs of transfer students while complimenting the community college mission of transfer (Jain, et al., 2011). The other three elements that focus on post-transfer include: Offer financial and academic support through distinct opportunities for nontraditional transfer students where they are challenged to achieve at high academic levels. Secondly, acknowledge the lived experiences that students bring and the intersectionality between community and family. Lastly, create an appropriate framework from which to assess, evaluate, and enhance transfer receptive programs (Jain et al., 2011). Using the framework of TRC to identify institutions in close proximity to the University of Maine that did not meet the requirements to be classified as having Transfer

Receptive Culture I selected two institutions to look for participants. Once the institutions were selected, I contacted the Advising Centers who advise transfer students and/or support students on campus. I explained my study, and asked the staff to distribute information about the study via email to willing participants. I found three willing participants that fit the criteria outlined in the design of the study and setup times for semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection

The main source of data collection was a series of recorded interviews that were conducted in the participants' current institution, the University of Maine. All three of the participants selected were attending the University of Maine. Since this location was centralized for the participants and I, we held the interviews on campus. All three of the interviews were held in meeting room located in a centralized, neutral location on campus. Originally, I was going to hold the meeting in my office, but I did not want there to be a power dynamic that may have impacted the participant's answers (Sikes, 2004). The rationale behind conducting the interviews at the current institution is that it allows the participants to be fully emerged in the phenomenon. This setup allowed for participants to reflect and be engaged in the phenomenon being examined (Seidman, 2013). The interviews were set-up in a narrative format, and I used a secondary source of data collection to aid in my analysis of the transcripts (Seidman, 2013). The interviews lasted around 30 minutes, and during the initial start of the interview, I asked the participants to write down in a journal any thoughts or feelings that may come up after the initial interview. The secondary sources (journals) I collected the following week after the interview, and used it as a form of member checking, and to add to the overall data (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted and the secondary source had been collected, I used the recorded audio to transcribe the interviews and start coding the transcripts for themes. This process happened in a few steps. These steps include: 1. Reading through the interview transcripts in their entirety in order to get a sense of the whole interview 2. Reading the interview transcript a second time, slowly - in order to separate the data meaningful ways 3. Integrating those sections that I identified as having a similar focus, and then making sense of them.

After transcribing the three interviews once, I found errors in the documents and had to go through again and relisten to the recordings. Once I had all three of the transcripts transcribed, I skimmed through them assigning codes that represented larger themes among the data. I repeated the coding process three times until I had two defining codes. Once the codes were identified, I used the secondary sources (journals) to code and compare to the codes from the transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam, 2002). Lastly, I detailed my findings, while memoing my own thoughts throughout the process.

Trustworthiness

To address trustworthiness of the pilot study, I used a few methods to strengthen the study. I will followed up with each of the participants up to a month after the initial interview. This form of member checking build credibility and trustworthiness as it is a way to validate my respondents' ideas (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002). Furthermore, I used triangulation to test validity through combining information from different sources such as the journals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

After transcribing and coding the data collected from the three participants, I found three emergent themes. Two of the themes aligned with the literature around issues/barriers within the

transfer process, but the third theme was new. The participants discussed: lack of transfer equivalencies, an individual who made a difference in their transfer process, and a common narrative of devaluing coursework from community colleges by challenging course academic rigor. The first two themes listed have been discussed by current literature, but the third theme has not appeared in any current studies. Originally, I planned to have five participants, but I ended up with three. Furthermore, this pilot study has made me aware of some changes around participant recruitment that I will make in future studies. Lastly, this pilot study has opened new opportunities for research within this topic area. In the future, I will conduct further studies examining this narrative of devaluing academic coursework from community colleges. This theme is rich and complex, and needs further exploration.

Conclusion

To conclude, this section discussed an overview of the study, and methodological tools applied to the study. I began by going over the study, methods, participant selection, and frameworks, all while providing rationale as to why it was chosen. I outlined how I collected and analyzed data, and how my methods were utilized. I completed the section by addressing validity concerns, trustworthiness, and finally, the findings of the pilot study. Lastly, I detailed the major themes that emerged from the data, and the possible future research opportunities.

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Appendix A: IRB

Principal Investigator: Tobby Bragdon
Non-Degree Student tracking Ph.D in Higher Education Program
University of Maine

Title:

Start Date: February 20, 2018

1. Summary:

Rationale of the study

The purpose of the proposed study is to examine the experiences of rural community college transfer students who later attend four year institutions with no established Transfer Receptive Culture (TRC). The following proposed study is outlined to address the phenomenon that rural community college transfer students experience when transferring to institutions that have not used the framework (Transfer Receptive Culture) to address issues around transferring. Despite best efforts by policymakers and institutional leaders, the current higher education system has major barriers for students looking to transfer from a two to a four year institution. The root of these issues come from the lack transfer equivalencies and articulation agreements between institutions. Additionally, the sheer lack of supports that are in place for both the sending and receiving institutions. The core concept of Transfer Receptive Culture is the idea that both the sending and receiving institutions communicate effectively, honor academic coursework, and offer supports for students during their transition (Jain, Herrera, Bernal & Solorzano, 2011). The ideology behind this framework is that both institutions are responsible for the success of transfer students. The barriers that some students face when attempting transfer are broken down when institutions use the framework to establish and cultivate Transfer Receptive Culture.

Research Question

What are the lived experiences of rural community college transfer students who attend a four year institution with no pre-established Transfer Receptive Culture?

Methodology

Using a qualitative research methodology, specifically a phenomenological approach, I will set-up individual interviews with identified transfer students at least 1 year post transfer at a four year college. The interviews will be digitally recorded and will last between 30-45 minutes. A phenomenological study focuses on individual meaning making as the core element of their experience. Using the framework of Transfer Receptive Culture (TRC) to select participants at institutions with no framework in place, I will interview a range of available rural community college transfer students attending a four year institution with no TRC established. The participants would range from 5-8 willing individuals who would be interviewed and asked to keep a post-reflective journal. I will analyze and code the data collected from the students through the lens of intersectionality to find emergent themes.

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2. Personnel:

I, Toby Bragdon, a non-degree student tracking entrance into the Doctoral Program in Higher Education will be the primary investigator. This research is a pilot study for the advanced qualitative class I am taking during the Spring of 2018. Dr. Vanessa Klein, a faculty member in Cooperative Extension at

the University of Maine, and will serve as the faculty sponsor for this study. I, Toby Bragdon, have not worked with human subjects before, however, Dr. Vanessa Klein has worked with human subjects in her qualitative research.

3. Participant Recruitment:

I will self-select participants that meet the criteria and agree to the study. The criteria for the participants are as followed: 1. A transfer student from a rural community college that is post one year at an identified four year institution 2. The institution will not meet the outlined criteria to be classified as having Transfer Receptive Culture. Participants must be at least 18 years old to participate in the pilot study.

I am estimating finding 5-8 willing participants to interview for the proposed research study. I will select my participants based on who can best inform the research questions and shed light on the phenomenon. Subject selection in qualitative research needs to be purposeful (Maxwell, 2013). In order to find my participants, I will identify institutions in close proximity to my work that have no established Transfer Receptive Culture (TRC). I will use the tenets of TRC to decide whether an institution has established or no established TRC. Once the institutions are selected, I plan to contact Advising Centers who advise transfer students and/or a Commuter Lounge on campus. I will explain my study, and ask the staff to distribute information about the study via email to willing participants. See appendix A. The main source of data collection will be through a recorded interview that will be conducted in the participant's current institution. The rationale behind conducting the interviews at the current institution is that it allows the participants to be fully emerged in the phenomenon. This setup would allow for participants to reflect and be engaged in the phenomenon being examined (Seidman, 2013).

4. Informed Consent:

Participants will be e-mailed and given a printed copy of the written agreement that will indicate consent. Please reference appendix B.

5. Confidentiality:

I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality of a participant throughout the process of the study. Recordings will be transcribed by me, Toby Bragdon, the researcher. The recording will be in a digital format and electronic files will be kept on a password-protected computer and destroyed by December 1, 2020. The transcripts will be kept indefinitely on a password-protected computer. The investigator and the faculty sponsor will review the data. No identifying information will be associated with the transcription. Data will be aggregated for presentations and any publications. At no time will any individual be named or singled out in written or verbal presentations of the findings.

6. Risks to participants:

The level of risk in this study is minimal. Risks would include the use of the participants' time and potential inconvenience to participate in the interview. During the discussion, participants will be asked to discuss the experiences they have regarding their transfer experience. Participants can withdraw from participation at any time or skip any questions they do not wish to answer.

7. Benefits:

Participants will have an opportunity to share and learn valuable knowledge about how about how their experiences are meaningful when developing policies, or establishing supports for rural community college transfer students at four year institutions.

8. Compensation:

There will be no compensation offered for participation in the study, however, I, the researcher will will provide refreshments during the interview.

Appendix B: Letter to Participant

Hello,

The Advising Center is sending this letter on behalf of Toby Bragdon, a doctoral student at the University of Maine.

My name is Toby Bragdon, and I am pursuing a doctoral program at the University of Maine. This semester, I will be piloting a study that examines the experiences of rural community college transfer students who attend four year institutions with no established Transfer Receptive Culture. I am looking for participants to share their experiences post one year at a four year institution with no established Transfer Receptive Culture (i.e. limited academic supports, limited transfer equivalencies).

I am writing to ask if you would be willing to participate in a 30 to 45-minute interview with me regarding your experience with transferring institutions. Refreshments will be provided during the interview. The interview will be audio recorded. No personal identifiable information will be required or transcribed. Attached, you will find an informed consent document which contains additional information about this research.

I will be conducting in-person interviews on your campus in the Spring of 2018. If you are interested in participating this pilot study, please respond to this email at your earliest convenience.

Thank you in advance for your consideration!

Take care,
Toby

Toby Bragdon

Academic Advisor & Instructor
Explorations Program,
College of Liberal Arts & Sciences
Stevens Hall, room 220

The University of Maine
Orono, ME 04469
Phone: (207) 581-1806
Email: toby.bragdon@maine.edu

Appendix C: Consent Form

Experiences of Rural Community College Transfer Students at Four Year Institutions with No Established Transfer Receptive Culture**Consent Form****Consent Information**

You are invited to participate in a research project being led by Toby Bragdon, a non-degree graduate student in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine, under the sponsorship of faculty sponsor Dr. Vanessa Klein, a faculty member in Cooperative Extension. The goal of this research is to gain a better insight into the experiences that rural community college transfer students have at four year institutions with no established Transfer Receptive Culture. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in the interview.

What Will You Be Asked to Do?

You will be invited to participate in a 30-45 minute interview. The interview will be conducted in the Spring 2018 semester on your campus. Refreshments will be provided during the interview.

The interview questions will center on your experience as a rural community college transfer student at a four year institution. We will cover topics such as: your experience transitioning to the new campus, and the supports you utilized during the transition. Your identity will remain confidential.

Risks

The level of risk in this study is minimal. Risks include use of your time and potential inconvenience to participate in the interview. During the discussion you will be asked to discuss your experiences as a rural community college transfer student at a four year institution, and how the multiple aspects of your identity have shaped the meaning of those experiences.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefits to you. However, you will have an opportunity to share and learn valuable knowledge about your experiences. Additionally, the information you share will help guide the development of more informed practices for institutions without established Transfer Receptive Culture.

Confidentiality

I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality throughout your participation in the study. Recordings will be transcribed by me, Toby Bragdon, the researcher. The recording will be in a digital format and electronic files will be kept on a password-protected computer and destroyed by December 1, 2020. The transcripts will be kept indefinitely on a password-protected computer. The

investigator and the faculty sponsor will review the data. No identifying information will be associated with the transcription. Data will be aggregated for presentations and any publications. At no time will any individual be named or singled out in written or verbal presentations of the findings.

Voluntary

Participation in this research study is voluntary. If you choose to take part, you can stop at any time. You may withdraw from participation in the interview, or skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

Contact Information

If you have questions about the study, please contact Toby Bragdon at 207-581-1806 or tobby.bragdon@maine.edu or Dr. Vanessa Klein at 207-581-3209 or vanessa.klein@maine.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in the study, you can contact Gayle Jones, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board at 207-581-1498 or gayle.jones@maine.edu.

Appendix D: Example Questions

Example Questions

- 1.) How was your experience transferring to a four-year institution?
- 2.) How did that transition impact your academic performance?
- 3.) What resources, if any, did you utilize when transitioning institutions?
- 4.) Did any of your academic course credits not transfer? If so, how many?
- 5.) How supported did you feel at the new institution?
- 6.) How connected are you to your former college?
- 7.) How as your academic goals changed since transferring?

Appendix E: letter to Advising Center

Hello Advising Center Staff,

My name is Toby Bragdon, and I am reaching out for your assistances in identifying students who would like to participate in my study. Currently, I am pursuing a doctoral program at the University of Maine and for this semester, I will be piloting a study that examines the experiences of rural community college transfer students who attend four year institutions with no established Transfer Receptive Culture.

I am looking for participants to share their experiences post one year at a four-year institution with no established Transfer Receptive Culture. If you know of any students who fit these criteria, please send them the attached email on my behalf.

I appreciate your assistance and if you have any questions, please reach out!

Thank you,
Toby Bragdon

Hello,

The Advising Center is sending this letter on behalf of Toby Bragdon, a doctoral student at the University of Maine.

My name is Toby Bragdon, and I am pursuing a doctoral program at the University of Maine. This semester, I will be piloting a study that examines the experiences of rural community college transfer students who attend four year institutions with no established Transfer Receptive Culture. I am looking for participants to share their experiences post one year at a four year institution with no established Transfer Receptive Culture (i.e. limited academic supports, limited transfer equivalencies).

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I will be conducting in-person interviews on your campus in the Spring of 2018. If you are interested in participating this pilot study, please respond to this email at your earliest convenience.

Thank you in advance for your consideration!

Take care,
Toby