COMMUNITY COLLEGE STIGMATIZATION:

PERCEPTIONS OF VERTICAL TRANSFER STUDENTS

AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL

by

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Abstract

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This qualitative study fills a void in research by investigating the experiences of 10 vertical transfer students regarding perceptions of community college stigmatization. Prior studies have explored reasons for transfer student university attrition, and negative stereotyping has been found to have an adverse effect on various populations. However, no known research has been conducted on how transfer students perceive others view them in light of their community college attendance. Therefore, the purpose of this case study was to examine whether vertical transfer students believed there was a stigma connected to community college attendance, and, if so, how they described that stigma and the way it shaped their university experience.

Through using a revised version of the Internalized Stigma Model (Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, & Tucker, 2015) as a framework, several key findings emerged. Participants did perceive a stigma was connected to community college

attendance. They described encounters when others indicated transfers were unintelligent, and the academic rigor of community college was often viewed as inferior. Participants explained their transfer status was linked to them being stigmatized as old, poor, and as social outcasts. For some, secondary teachers and classmates sparked the initial stigmatization of community colleges. University faculty and classmates were additional sources of these perceptions.

Participants also discussed their agency in combatting these views. Overall, perceptions of stigmatization influenced participants' university experiences by compelling them to move quickly through their university time and advance to the next stage in life. Although the stigmatization made them feel like they were battling another test at the university, participants remained steadfast in their determination to beat the stigma. As a result of these findings, implications for future practice, research, theory, and policy arose. In particular, future studies should explore further development of the Community College Stigmatization Model, which was developed through this study.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Community colleges play a vitally important role in contributing to the total number of bachelor's degree holders (Handel, 2013; Marling, 2013) and preparing college-educated citizens to meet the nation's workforce needs (Carnevale & Rose, 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Between 2002 and 2012, the United States saw a 50% growth in the number of students enrolled full-time in a two-year institution (Marling, 2013). According to the National Student Clearinghouse (Shapiro et al., 2012), around 45% of students who earned four-year degrees at the end of the 2012 academic year started their higher education journey at a community college. However, although attendance at two-year institutions has become increasingly common, university attrition is higher for students who start at a community college than for those who begin their postsecondary education at a four-year institution (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). In fact, although 81% of students begin community college with the goal of earning a four-year degree, only 33% transfer to a university within six years (Jenkins & Fink, 2016), a disparity that Cuseo (2012) refers to as the "transfer gap." In Texas, where the present study took place, this gap is even more stark; only 14% of community college students who aspire to earn a bachelor's degree actually do so within six years (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

Prior research has found that a contributor to transfer student attrition is the lack of institutional support for transfer students at the university level

(Laanan, 1995; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012.). Examples of this include unclear transfer articulation agreements (Laanan, 1995) and confusing policy regulations, like course registration issues (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012). Kasworm (2010) and others (Marling, 2013; Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013) have found that increased out-of-school obligations and responsibilities often relating to work or family can also be a detriment to transfer student retention. The notion of transfer student stigma has been described as another possible reason for their attrition (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), although this factor remains relatively unexplored.

A stigma is a perceived mark of shame affiliated with a particular characteristic or condition (Goffman, 1963), and stigmatization is the act or occurrence of faulting a person or collective group due to whatever factors one deems to be different or "other." As noted by Goffman, a stigma can be a visible marking or delineation, or it can be an invisible part of one's identity, similar to how transfer status can be an unseen part of a student's identity. If someone feels stigmatized, it can shift him or her from feeling like "a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Whether accurate or not, such impressions can affect students' academic performance (Green, 2007). In some cases, the stigmatization occurs because of long-held negative stereotypes, which tend to "simplify and expedite perceptions and judgments, but they are often exaggerated, negative rather than positive, and resistant to revision even when perceivers encounter individuals with qualities that are not congruent with the stereotype" ("APA dictionary of psychology," 2018). Negative stereotyping is frequently discussed in conjunction with stigma research, and the two terms are

often used interchangeably (e.g., Derks, Inzlicht, & Kang, 2008; Mikolon, Kreiner, & Wieseke, 2016).

While published empirical research investigating transfer students' perceptions of stigmatization is exiguous, previous studies have explored its effects concerning other topics. For example, researchers (e.g., Boucher, Rydell, Van Loo, & Rydell, 2012; Johns, Schmader, & Martens, 2005) found that females' performance in mathematics is detrimentally affected by their consciousness of negative stereotypes commonly associated with their mathematical abilities. This research provides evidence that stigma is not merely an idea; it can create a real, noticeable response in people. Similarly, if *vertical transfer* students, or those who attend a two-year institution before transferring to a university (Hood, Hunt, & Haeffele, 2009), feel stigmatized by their university faculty, staff, or classmates for having attended a community college, then this may have an adverse effect on their overall experience at the four-year institution. As Green (2007) concluded, the perceptions of stigma, rather than the accuracy or actual presence of these views, is what matters because of the potential repercussions.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to find out whether vertical transfer students at one large research university perceived transfer student stigmatization, and, if so, how those perceptions influenced their university experience, if at all.

Statement of the Problem

Nearly half of the country's bachelor's degree holders begin their coursework at a community college (Shapiro et al., 2012). However, in 2010, only

14% of Texas community college students who intended to complete a bachelor's degree actually did so within six years (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board; U.S. Department of Education), which begs the question: What is impeding the other 86% of these students? Transfer student attrition at the university level is a problem because the nation needs a more educated workforce (Carnevale & Rose, 2015), and community colleges play a critical role in meeting those needs through providing college access to a more extensive variety of students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). While prior research has established that transfer student stigma exists as a possible reason for attrition (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), no research has been done specifically on how these students perceive university faculty, staff, and other students view them and how those perceptions contribute to their university experience.

Purpose of the Study

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand (a) how vertical transfer students at Southwestern University (a pseudonym) perceived they were viewed by university faculty, staff, and other students and (b) how they described that stigma and responded to it, and (c) how these perceptions influenced their overall university experience, if at all. If transfer students believe themselves to be viewed in a negative light, this could have serious ramifications for them, regardless of whether or not their impressions are accurate. In other words, the focus of this study was not on what others think of transfer students, but rather how transfer students feel others view them. This study explored the finer details of how such perceptions can contribute to the transfer student experience.

Research Questions

In order to fill the gap in the literature and better understand the perspectives of transfer students at the university level, I conducted a qualitative case study of 10 participants at one large research university in Texas. The following research questions guided this study:

1. Do vertical transfer students perceive there is a stigma connected to community college attendance?

2. If so, how do vertical transfer students describe that stigma, and how do they respond?

3. How is the university experience of vertical transfer students shaped by their perceptions of how others regard community college attendance?

Theoretical Framework

For this study, I used an adapted version of the Internalized Stigma Model (ISM) (Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, & Tucker, 2015). Originally, the ISM was developed to explore the relationships among mental illness stigmatization by others, one's perceptions of self-stigmatization, and one's intentions to seek counseling. The ISM creators "predicted that these links follow a process wherein people's perceptions of societal stigma are fully mediated by internalization of that stigma" that may lead to potentially deleterious effects (Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, & Tucker, 2015, p. 64), such as not seeking treatment in the context of mental illness. The original ISM from Lannin et al. (2015, p. 66) is included in Figure 1.
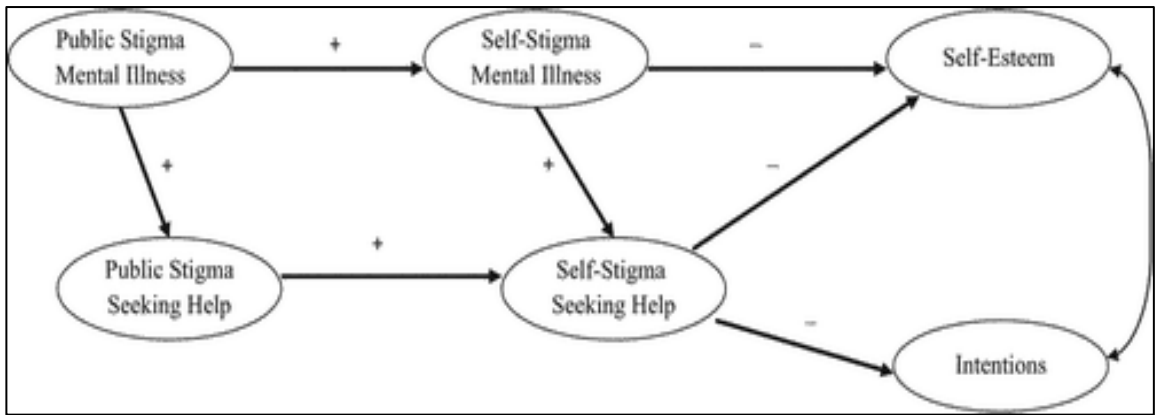
Figure 1. Theoretical internalized stigma model. Direction of hypothesized

relationships is denoted by + or – symbols.

Despite the fact that mental illness stigmatization is quite different from

the topic of vertical transfer student stigmatization, I chose this model as a

framework to help guide my exploration because it notes the possible relationship

between public and self-stigmatization and various outcomes. In this study, I

focused on the role of stigma within the context of transfer students' overall

university experience. Specifically, my goal was to better understand vertical

transfer students' *perceptions* of public opinions, rather than what public

impressions of community college attendance in fact *are*. The adapted version of

the ISM I used in the early stages of this study is depicted in Figure 2.
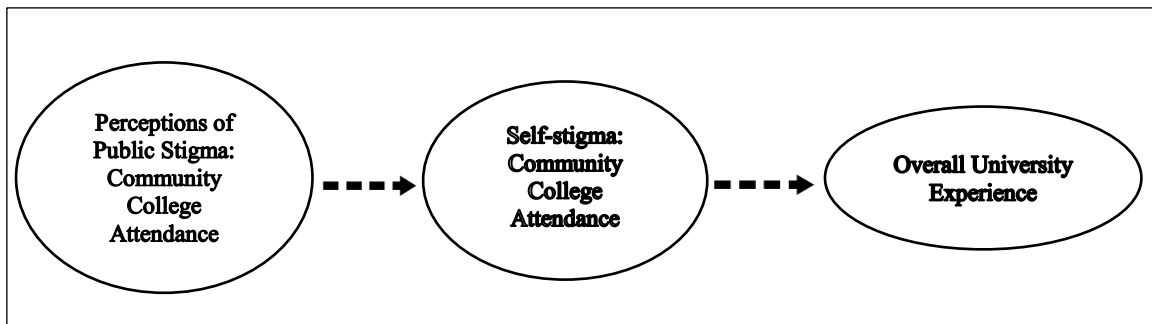
Figure 2. Proposed community college stigmatization model.

I approached this study knowing it was possible participants may not perceive a public stigma attached to community college attendance, and in that case, they would not feel any self-stigma or experience negative repercussions. However, this model served as a framework to better organize my approach to, and understanding of, the ways in which transfer students could possibly perceive stigmatization influenced their university experience. This model served as a starting point for understanding a previously unexplored topic (i.e., the role of stigma on transfer student success). However, through data collection and analysis, I developed a revised, informed Community College Stigmatization Model, which is presented and discussed in the findings section of this study.

Personal Biography

It is important for qualitative researchers to acknowledge any and all personal experiences that relate to the topic under investigation. Doing so helps ensure trustworthiness of data interpretation (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Therefore, in the following paragraphs, I will note the experiences I have had related to my topic.

My interest in this subject first surfaced during my time as an undergraduate student. I was a vertical transfer student, which contributed to shaping my identity and my time at the university I attended. When new acquaintances, faculty, or staff would learn that I attended a community college before transferring to the university, they would sometimes say things like, "But you seem really smart," which made me think they believed community colleges were for people who were not intelligent. Through brief interactions like this, it

became apparent to me that community college attendance was looked down upon by some. This was a notion that had previously never occurred to me, as I saw community college as being advantageous for manifold reasons. These encounters spurred me to establish the Transfer Leadership Organization (TLO), which became a registered student organization at my university during my time as President. This student group sponsored social, academic, and professional events, which all transfer students were invited and encouraged to attend.

Once I graduated with my bachelor's degree, I stayed at the same university to attend my master's program, during which I had the opportunity to continue overseeing the rapid growth and success of TLO as a co-advisor of the organization. I also established and directed a peer mentorship program for transfer students during my time as a graduate assistant and master's student, and I taught a first-year experience course for new transfer students each semester of my program. Through my numerous interactions with transfer students during this time period, I learned that many of them also felt stigmatized, at times, like I had. All of these personal experiences and encounters are what led me to the research I am conducting, which I hope will provide useful, practical implications to help improve the university experiences of future transfer students.

Significance of the Study

With community college becoming an increasingly viable and popular stepping stone towards earning a bachelor's degree (Marling, 2013), transfer student retention and degree completion is an important topic. As such, there is a considerable body of available research on transfer student retention and attrition;

however, apart from this study, there is no known information on how transfer students' perceptions of stigmatization may influence their persistence to degree. Therefore, the goal of this study was to better understand the university experiences of vertical transfer students, particularly regarding their perceptions of stigmatization. The study is a significant contribution to the literature because it helps shed light on a previously unknown topic (i.e., transfer students' perspectives on community college stigmatization). Additionally, through this research, I have provided several key implications for future practice and research, which I discuss in the final chapter of this dissertation. Overall, studies such as this are important because they may help improve educational practices across institutional levels, which could boost the persistence and ultimate success of vertical transfer students.

Summary

Although vertical transfer students account for nearly half of bachelor's degree holders in the United States (Shapiro et al., 2012), attrition of this population at the university level continues to be high (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). This study furthers previous research on transfer student attrition (e.g., Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012) by qualitatively exploring transfer students' perceptions of stigmatization. Initially, I used an adapted version of the Internalized Stigma Model (ISM) (Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, & Tucker, 2015) as my theoretical framework to help guide my understanding of this topic, and through this study, I developed a new, informed Community College Stigmatization Model. Through exploring this previously untapped topic, I aimed to provide useful findings and

implications for future practice and research to aid transfer student persistence

and degree completion.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Research related to transfer student issues is vast and varied because it explores the wide range of pathways students may take when pursuing their postsecondary education. In their 1989 article, De los Santos and Wright described several different transfer mobility patterns including (a) *reverse transferring* (from a university to a community college), (b) *co-enrolling* (taking classes at more than one institution simultaneously), and (c) *swirling* (going back and forth between the same institutions more than once). Hood, Hunt, and Haeffele (2009) added the more traditional path of *vertically transferring* (going from a two-year to a four-year institution), and *laterally transferring* (moving from one community college to another two-year institution, or transferring from one university to another). Each path offers unique benefits and challenges. The present study is focused on students who transferred vertically.

In the following chapter, I provide an overview of relevant literature related to the chosen research topic. First, I discuss research on vertical transfer students—their challenges, supports, and factors relating to persistence—and student engagement. Then, I cover research on characteristics of *nontraditional students* (Clark, 2012), followed by available information on community college stigmatization. I conclude this chapter with information on the Internalized Stigma Model (Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, & Tucker, 2015) and additional theories that helped inform the present study.

Vertical Transfer Student Characteristics

Community colleges are an increasingly popular path towards earning a bachelor's degree for many student populations (Marling, 2013). According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), two-year institutions host significantly large numbers of Latinos, African Americans, students of low socioeconomic status, and first-generation students (i.e., those who are the first in their family to attend college) (AACC, 2009). Moreover, Teranishi, Suarez-Orozco, and Suarez-Orozco (2011) noted that community colleges are the most popular higher education option for immigrants and racially underrepresented groups as a whole, as compared to universities. Reasons for this include: lower tuition costs (Cochrane, 2015), open or less rigorous admissions policies (Gabbard & Mupinga, 2013), smaller class sizes, class schedules that are more conducive to work and family responsibilities, faculty who are more accessible and teaching-focused, and being conveniently located near the students' homes and families (Teranishi et al., 2011). For these reasons, many students who aspire to earn a bachelor's degree begin their higher education journey at a community college.

Vertical Transfer Student Challenges

Vertical transfer students experience unique challenges because of their particular educational pathways from a community college to a four-year college or university. Some scholars have noted these students may experience *transfer shock* (e.g., Laanan, 2007; Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonso, 2011; Monroe, 2006; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend, 1995), a term that was first coined by Hills

(1965). Transfer shock refers to the temporary drop in grade point average (GPA) that is common during the first two semesters after students transfer to a university. Some researchers (e.g., Hills, 1965; Thurmond, 2007) have stated that transfer students' grades recover (go back up) after this initial dip. However, other scholars (Ishitani, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2009) have found that some transfer students had lower GPAs upon exiting the university (through graduating or otherwise) than do students who began at the institution. Schmidt and Wartick (2014) noted that there might be wide gaps in time between community college and university enrollment contributing to those lower grades. They also stated that the lack of congruity in sequential course content might be what causes some transfer students greater difficulty in recovering from the initial transfer shock period. In the following section, I provide an overview of some of the most common vertical transfer student challenges that have been discussed in prior research, including program misalignment, academic advising problems, information access issues, social challenges, and infrequent faculty interaction.

Program Misalignment

Mismatched or confusing policies often make transfer mobility challenging (Boswell, 2004). Degree program misalignment between two- and four-year institutions is a problem faced by many vertical transfer students (Borland, 2004; Jeffcoat et al., 2014; Miller, 2013). In a review of transfer policy documents across 10 states (Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, & Mazzeo, 2017), researchers found that many states have credit mobility limitations in that most transfer credits account for general education course requirements but often do

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not apply to a particular degree program. In other words, "…they only guarantee completion of general education requirements and junior standing in terms of the number of credits needed to enter as a junior, but not in terms of entering as a junior in a particular major" (p. 338). Disparity in degree requirements for programs across institutional levels is a problem that many transfer students may not recognize until they transfer to the university, which can cost them additional time and money towards their degree (Grites, 2004).

Academic Advising

Another issue for many transfer students is the convolution of transfer advising, a topic that has been discussed by many (e.g., Center for Community College Engagement, 2010; Cuseo, 2012; Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012; Hodara, Martinez-Wenzl, Stevens, & Mazzeo, 2017; Hunter & Kendall, 2008; Miller, 2013; Webb, Dantzler, & Hardy, 2015). In the Hodara et al. (2017) study, transfer advising practices were problematic, as university advisors were often ill-prepared or unable to adequately advise the over-abundance of students they were assigned, especially considering the students' varied pathways. In other words, the greater the volume of students and the more motley the educational backgrounds, the more labyrinthine advising is, especially when also trying to match advising to students' unique future plans. Hodara et al. (2017) also found that while in community college, students' uncertainty and delayed decision-making regarding their choice of major and destination institution contributed to loss of transferrable credits and subsequent advising issues at the university. Miller (2013) noted that providing advisors that specialize in transfer student advising at

both two- and four-year institutions could enable better clarity and smoother transfer mobility for vertical transfers. This suggestion was echoed by others (Webb, Dantzler, & Hardy, 2015).

Limited Access to Information

Compared to non-transfer students, access to information is another obstacle transfer students face. Ishitani and McKitrick (2010) noted that transfer students do not always have the same access to information at universities as non-transfers do. For example, they may not learn about experiential opportunities commonly offered at universities, such as internships, independent studies, or community service options of which non-transfer students are typically informed. Because these kinds of events are usually advertised more heavily to freshmen, new transfer students often do not receive this kind of information in their upper-level courses (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010). This is problematic because these activities can help bolster students' persistence and degree completion (Kuh et al., 2008). It is also worth noting that if transfer students are unaware such information exists, they are also incognizant of its unavailability to them and are thereby oblivious information accessibility is an issue they are facing.

Social Challenges

Transfer students also face social challenges due to their unique educational pathways (e.g., Lundberg, 2014; Woodard & Fatzinger, 2018). For example, they often enter the university as sophomores or juniors, which can make it difficult for them to make friends with students who have already established connections from their prior years at the university (Dennis, Calvillo,

& Gonzalez, 2008; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Many transfer students are also commuters who typically spend less time on campus than those who live in on-campus housing, which makes it more difficult for them to find time to get involved in university extracurricular clubs or activities (Fink, McShay, & Hernandez, 2016). Obstacles to forging friendships pose an issue because socialization is connected to student persistence and overall institutional satisfaction (Schreiner, 2010). For these reasons, the social challenges transfer students sometimes face is notable, as it can put their degree completion at risk (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010).

Infrequent Faculty Interaction

Another obstacle for transfer students is that they are less likely than non-transfer to connect with university faculty (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2009) found that transfer students reported less interaction with faculty than did students who entered the university as freshmen. This is significant because connection with faculty can improve transfer students' mental wellness (Fink, McShay, & Hernandez, 2016), as well as aid their overall adjustment to campus and ultimate persistence to degree (Laanan, 2001). These findings are relevant because if vertical transfer students believe university faculty view community college attendance in a negative light, this may be one reason why they are less likely to interact with their professors.

Transfer Student Supports and Factors Contributing to Persistence

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Although there are many challenges that vertical transfer students typically face, there are also known supports for this population and other factors that have been found to be helpful in aiding persistence and degree completion. For example, students who have a higher GPA, a declared major, and gain more credit hours at the community college level before vertically transferring are more likely to be retained at the university (Blekic, Carpenter, & Cao, 2017). Students who enter the university with more credit hours are also more likely to adjust well academically to the university environment (Jackson & Laanan, 2015). Jackson and Laanan (2015) noted that this is at least partly because earning more credit in community colleges allows for increased *transfer student capital* (Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2011), which is the knowledge of postsecondary practices that students learn through firsthand experience. In the following section, I discuss some of the transfer student supports and factors contributing to persistence that have been found in prior studies, including transfer receptivity, two- and four-year collaboration, institutional strategies, and student-faculty interaction.

Transfer Receptive Culture

It has been argued that it is the duty and responsibility of universities to help transfer students acclimate and succeed on their campuses (Grites, 2013). In the same spirit, transfer receptivity and the importance of creating a *transfer receptive culture* is a topic that has been well discussed in prior literature (e.g., Cuseo, 2012; Herrera & Jain, 2013; Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solorzano, 2011; Miller, 2013). A transfer receptive culture is one in which the institution provides

the support and resources necessary to facilitate a successful reception for vertical transfer students (Jain et al., 2011). Elements of such an environment include providing vertical transfer students with academic and financial support and acknowledging the sociocultural backgrounds of pupils and supporting them accordingly (Jain et al., 2011). Additional components of this type of environment include having a physical space for transfer student support services to be housed (Cuseo, 2012), training academic advisors who specialize in transfer student advising (Hunter & Kendall, 2008; Orozco, Alvarez, & Gutkin, 2010), and providing flexible scheduling options for students who have out-of-school responsibilities (Miller, 2013; Rhine, Milligan, & Nelson, 2000; Rosenberg, 2016).

Another way to build an environment that is transfer-friendly is to offer first-year experience (FYE) courses for first-semester transfer students (Cuseo, 2012). In an effort to alleviate transfer shock (Hills, 1965) and boost transfer student retention, FYE courses typically provide a more in-depth exploration of campus orientation topics for students, often providing a range of topics to help students acclimate to the university and become more aware of campus resources (Mayo, 2013; Windham et al., 2014). Including FYE course sections specifically for vertical transfer students can help them adapt to university life, which may enable them to feel more acknowledgement and inclusion from the receiving institution (Cuseo, 2012; Koker & Hendel, 2011).

Two- and Four-Year Institution Collaboration

Partnerships among community colleges and universities can also help streamline transfer mobility by establishing structured academic pathways (Cuseo, 2012; Hatton, Homer, & Park, 2009; Miller, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016). Successful transfer mobility pathways and programs that bridge across higher education institutions often include elements like transparent *articulation agreements* (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Wang & Wickersham, 2014*)*, developmental coursework initiatives, and *dual enrollment* programs (Miller, 2013). Articulation agreements typically refer to the formal agreements between colleges and universities delineating course transferability and alignment within a given academic discipline ("Articulation Agreements," 2019). Similarly, it can help streamline the transition process when developmental coursework initiatives are worked out between two- and four-year institutions (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013). Developmental courses refer to the remedial courses sometimes necessary for students who do not meet the entrance requirements for college classes and instead need more practice in a given subject to better prepare them for the later courses that count towards their degree plan (Bettinger et al., 2013; Miller, 2013; NCES, 2016; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2017). This is relevant because enrollment in remedial courses is more prevalent at community colleges than at universities (Ganga, Mazzariello, & Edgecombe, 2018; Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2015). As Miller (2013) noted, credit that is granted in dual enrollment programs is also something that should be discussed and aligned between colleges and universities. Dual enrollment is when high school students take classes for which they receive simultaneous credit on

both their high school and college transcripts (Karp, 2015). Dual credit classes are

often taught by community college faculty or qualified high school teachers

(Karp, 2015), and they take place at a variety of instructional settings, including

high school and community college campuses (Tobolowsky & Allen, 2016). As

Miller (2013) discussed, community colleges and universities should collaborate

and discuss each of these initiatives, which often affect the transitions of vertical

transfer students. Grites (2004) similarly urged that communication between two-

and four-year administrators and student affairs personnel is invaluable in

smoothing out the transition process for transfer students.

Additionally, in their multi-state review of transfer policies, Hodara et al.

(2017) found that 2+2 systems, such as those in Florida and Tennessee "specify

all lower division courses for nearly all majors so that course credits are applied to

programs of study consistently across the system" (p. 338). Because of this,

vertical transfers are able to meet all core or general requirements at the

community college; this also allows students to meet their pre-major requirements

simultaneously, as opposed to racking up credit in their first two years that does

not apply towards their respective bachelor's degree. Boswell (2004) also noted

the importance of alignment in course content and offerings from two- to four-

year institutions, as this has been found to bolster vertical transfer rates and

streamline the transition.

Institutional Strategies

In addition to articulation agreements and partnerships, individual

institutional-level strategies can aid vertical transfer student persistence. Mooring

and Mooring (2015) studied data from 730 vertical transfer students that completed the national Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) survey. Through their analysis, they noted that universities should consider implementing programs focused on tutoring, mentoring, study skills, and other academic-oriented educational opportunities tailored to transfer students from various racial groups to boost their retention numbers. Another institutional strategy to bolster transfer student persistence is to provide them with living and learning communities central to campus so students can have easy access to familiar faces and supports (Fink, McShay, & Hernandez, 2016). Such communities may also be effective at the community college level, pre-transfer (Miller, 2013). Additionally, because social networking sites, such as Facebook, have become so widely used as information sources, universities may want to consider having staff ready and equipped to appropriately monitor and update social media pages for various student affairs departments, especially during peak times, like the beginning of each semester (Nehls & Smith, 2014). Sharing links with relevant information has been found to be especially helpful for students, and information about transfer orientations, student organization fairs, and other events should also be updated and advertised on social media (Nehls & Smith, 2014).

Student-Faculty Interaction

Student-faculty interaction is also important for transfer students at both sending and receiving institutions. At the community college level, Lundberg (2014) found student-faculty interaction to be a strong predictor of self-reported learning among students. Because of this finding, she urged community colleges

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to consider ways to cultivate and reward faculty interaction with students. As examples of such incentives, she advised community college administrators to publicly recognize professors through campus publications or host celebratory events in honor of particularly student-oriented faculty. Interaction with faculty has also been tied to transfer student retention and success at the university level (e.g., Fauria & Fuller, 2015; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Zilvinskis & Dumford, 2018), marking it as an important factor pertaining to persistence. Research related to transfer student supports is relevant to this study in that it sheds light on some of the practices that may help alleviate transfer student attrition.

Transfer Student Engagement

Another topic pertinent to the proposed study is the concept of student engagement, which is often connected to student persistence (Kuh et al., 2008). Engagement is defined as "both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices" (Kuh et al., 2008, p. 542). In the following section, I will discuss literature on the engagement of vertical transfer students, as well as undergraduates as a whole.

Much research has explored the idea of student engagement in relation to transfer students. Ishitani and McKitrick (2010) used National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data to investigate the differences in educational experiences of 118 vertical transfer students and 417 non-transfers, all of whom were in their senior year at one university. The researchers found that students coming from a community college were less likely to engage in experiential learning and student-

faculty interaction, which are factors related to student success (Kuh et al., 2008).

Other researchers (Lester, Leonard, & Mathias, 2013) also explored the unique

experiences of transfer students (not exclusively vertical transfers) at one

university (n=37) and found participants were more interested in interaction with

family and the surrounding community (i.e., attending church) than on-campus

events and activities, unlike their non-transfer counterparts. In a related finding,

Townsend and Wilson (2006) reported that transfer students had challenges

making social connections with their younger classmates, which may help explain

their preference to maintain off-campus involvements. These findings are

troubling because Kuh et al. (2008) and others (e.g., Astin 1999; Handelsman,

Briggs, Sullivan, and Towler, 2005) have linked social and academic engagement

on campus to student persistence.

Similar to the concept of engagement is Astin's theory of involvement

(1999), through which he posited that an "involved" student is one who spends

physical and psychological time and energy connecting with campus entities and

activities. More simply put, involved students are those who spend time

interacting with faculty, participating in student organizations, studying class

materials, and being engaged on campus in various other ways. Laanan (2007)

noted, "Astin's theory holds that transfer students who had high levels of social

and academic involvement at the two-year college will most likely continue this

behavior at the four-year institution" (p. 40). In a quantitative study, Laanan

(2007) used Astin's theory to explore vertical transfer students' (n=442)

adjustment to one university. He found that transfer students were more likely to

seek out opportunities to socialize and become involved in clubs and organizations when they rated their own social confidence as being high. Further, transfers who spent more time fraternizing and engaging in student activities experienced a more positive social adjustment to their university. Again, such research findings relate to the present study because social and academic engagement have been linked to student persistence (Astin 1999; Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, and Towler, 2005; Kuh et al., 2008). In short, if transfer students are not engaging on campus, this may be one of the reasons attrition is high for this population (Marling, 2013).

Nontraditional Status

The term *nontraditional* encompasses many student characteristics, including being above the age of 25, being married, being a veteran, having dependents, working full-time, being of low socioeconomic status, and being a first-generation student (Clark, 2012). These characteristics are particularly relevant because students who fall under the nontraditional category are increasingly common at community colleges (College Board, 2011; Marling, 2013; Riesman, 1981) and have been found to persist at lower rates than their traditional peers (Shapiro et al., 2012). In the following paragraphs, I provide an overview of some of the research relating to nontraditional community college students, including research on age, first-generation students, socioeconomic status, minority status, and student veterans.

Age

Students above the age of 25 make up approximately 44% of students

enrolled in community colleges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012),

which, in 2016, equaled roughly 7.3 million students (American Association of

Community Colleges). Previous research has been dedicated to exploring the

unique experiences of this population. For example, many prior researchers (e.g.,

Cohen and Brawer, 2003; Davies & Casey, 1999; Leavitt, 1989; Schloss, Jayne,

& Lloyd, 1991) have found that community college students often embody

multiple roles simultaneously, such as being parents, full-time employees, and

students. Authors of another study (Zerquera, Ziskin, & Torres, 2016) explored

university (n=10) and community college (n=20) faculty perceptions of

nontraditional students, as compared with their traditional-aged pupils, in terms of

the various roles they assume. The authors discovered that faculty felt their

traditional-aged students were more "relaxed" (p. 34) and were able to manage

assignments more easily because they had fewer out-of-school responsibilities

than their nontraditional peers.

Other studies have explored the vertical transfer experience from the

perspective of older students to better understand their challenges. In a qualitative

study (2013), Zhang, Lui, and Hagedorn interviewed seven vertical transfers

between the ages of 25 and 36 to learn about their experiences at one large

research university. The researchers found that participants faced many obstacles

due to their age, including work obligations, family responsibilities, and the

additional stress and difficulty with time management that accompanied these

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challenges. Moreover, the students felt a sense of disparity from their traditional-aged counterparts because their life circumstances were so different (Zhang, Lui, & Hagedorn, 2013). The authors suggested that these feelings can result in attrition. Other researchers (e.g., Kasworm, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2006) reached similar conclusions. In order to better meet the needs of this population, Miller (2013) urged universities to consider including supports targeted to students balancing multiple responsibilities, such as offering extended or alternative hours in high-traffic student services offices or providing campus child care facilities for students.

First-Generation Students

Although there are some discrepancies in the definition of *first-generation* (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012), it most commonly refers to students who are the first in their immediate family to attend college (AACC, 2009; Aspelmeier, Love, McGill, Elliott, & Pierce, 2012). This population often lacks basic knowledge of college processes and functions that non-first-generation students have, making their college experience particularly precarious (Stephens et al., 2012; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Additionally, first-generation students are less likely to enroll in honors programs and perceive themselves as being less academically prepared than students who come from families with prior college experience (Warburton, Burgarin, & Nunez, 2001). These are relevant challenges to consider in terms of the proposed study, because approximately 61% of first-generation college

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students begin their postsecondary journeys at a community college (Redford &
Hoyer, 2018).

In a 2010 quantitative study, Hawthorne and Young surveyed 178
undergraduate students using Likert scale questions designed to measure
participants' satisfaction with university experiences. To compare student groups,
"participants were categorized based on generation of college students [i.e., first
generation (n = 95) or second-generation (n = 83)] and transfer status [i.e.,
transfer (n = 90) or non-transfer (n = 88)]" (p. 32). First-generation students who
were also vertical transfers were the least satisfied with their university
experiences, and the researchers (Hawthorne & Young, 2010) noted that such
lower levels of satisfaction may contribute to attrition.

Socioeconomic Status

Often linked to the topic of first-generation status is students'
socioeconomic status (SES) (Striplin, 1999). In 2003, the number of transfer
students that were both first-generation students and of low SES was around 4.5
million (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Additionally, first-generation students who are
also from low-income families are approximately four times more likely to drop
out of college after the first year of attendance than students who do not fit both of
these categories (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Although both of these statistics are from
Engle and Tinto's 2008 study that depicts not solely first-generation transfer
students of low SES, but low SES first-generation students as a whole, it is also
known that the majority of first-generation, low SES students are indeed also
vertical transfer students who use community college as a more affordable access

point to their four-year degree (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hawthorne & Young, 2010; Marling, 2013).

Regardless of first-generation status, community colleges tend to be a popular entry point to higher education for all students—but especially those from low SES backgrounds—because they are more affordable than universities (College Board, 2018; Jenkins & Fink, 2016). However, vertical transfer students with the highest financial need (e.g., no grant money, high loan amounts, no or low scholarship amounts received) are at a greater risk of attrition than those who are financially secure (Blekic, Carpenter, & Cao, 2017). For this reason, Miller (2013) noted that providing more transfer student scholarships is a way that universities can better aid this population and boost retention numbers. Universities can also offer financial literacy workshops to transfer students, another practice that can make them more aware of the financial options, responsibilities, and strategies they can employ to manage the financial strain of paying for college (Gard, Paton, & Gosselin, 2012; Miller, 2013). Additionally, to alleviate their financial burden, many vertical transfer students work in addition to attending school and therefore only enroll in university classes part-time (Fernandez & Fletcher, 2014). Unfortunately, part-time enrollment in college often automatically disqualifies students from being applicable to many academic scholarships (Fernandez & Fletcher, 2014).

Minority Status

Race and ethnicity are integral aspects of any students' identity, as this can influence the way they relate to others and the kinds of experiences they have

within an educational system (Monroe, 2006). Further, when discussing vertical transfer students, it is important to consider students who represent racial or ethnic minority groups, as they comprise a large portion of students who use community college as a stepping stone towards earning a four-year degree ("Fast Facts," 2018; Marling, 2013; Monroe, 2006). Vertical transfer students from underrepresented racial groups are also traditionally at a greater risk of attrition (Brooms, Goodman, & Clark, 2015; Mangan, 2014; Rendon & Garza, 1996).

Because traditionally underrepresented racial groups comprise a larger portion of the vertical transfer student population (Desrochers, Lenihan, & Wellman, 2010; Marling, 2013) and are at a greater risk of attrition (Mangan, 2014), prior research studies have been conducted to determine ways to improve retention among these groups. For example, Miller (2013) noted that it is important for community colleges to have culturally sensitive leadership, to engage in practices like community outreach, and to learn about the students the college is serving in order to match institutional practices to the needs of the respective students. It has also been suggested that universities implement a host of transfer student programs focused on tutoring, mentoring, study skills, and other academic-oriented educational opportunities tailored to students from various racial groups (Brooms et al., 2015; Mooring & Mooring, 2015).

Student Veterans

Since the enactment of the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008, now commonly called the "New GI Bill," millions of veterans are using their benefits to enroll in higher education (Radford, 2011). Student veterans,

another nontraditional student population, comprise 4% of the 12.1 million students enrolled in community college ("Fast Facts," 2018). Veteran status has been found to be a boon to retention efforts, with transfer student veterans being approximately 50% more likely to be retained than nonveterans (Blekic, Carpenter, & Cao, 2017). Some of the factors contributing to this may be the positive characteristics that are often ingrained in servicemen and women, including maturity, strong leadership skills, flexibility and adaptability, and determination and resiliency in the face of adversity (Davis & Minnis, 2017; Lim, Interiano, Tkacik, & Hewitt, 2016; Rumann & Hamrick, 2010).

Similar to other nontraditional student groups, veterans often face the struggle of juggling multiple competing responsibilities in addition to attending school, such as working, raising children, and being married (Cate, 2014; Clark, 2012). Additionally, as a result of their military service, transfer student veterans sometimes face other issues, such as transitioning to civilian life and medical or psychiatric issues (Alschuler & Yarab, 2018). It is also important to note that these challenges are in addition to the myriad of transitional obstacles that are characteristic of the vertical transfer student transition (Marling, 2013).

Community College Stigmatization

Although there are limited studies available on the concept of community college stigmatization, researchers (e.g., Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Holland, 2015) have explored negative perceptions about community colleges. For example, in a recent qualitative study, Holland (2015) explored the college choice perceptions of high school students. Her study included semi-structured

interviews with 89 juniors and seniors, 40 counselors and teachers, and observations over a two-year period that took place at two suburban high schools. Holland found that the high school juniors and seniors felt that community college was an undesirable avenue towards earning a four-year degree because of the stigmatization of community colleges. The high school students were quoted as saying that community college attendance was okay "if you had to" attend, but it would be viewed as a "failure" (Holland, 2015, p. 18). Counselors and administrators held similar views. One high school counselor felt the need to be cautious discussing community college "as a fall back plan" (Holland, 2015, p. 19) because students were so unreceptive to the idea of attending community college.

Furthermore, high school counselors themselves have also been found to stigmatize community colleges (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2018). According to a national survey distributed by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) (2018), the highest levels of stigmatization were found at private, nonparochial schools, with more than 50% of counselors reporting that community college attendance was "very stigmatized" among students and their families. The counselors at private schools were less likely to personally view community college curriculum as being academically rigorous than were public school counselors. Additionally, 24% of counselors from private, nonparochial schools responded that community college attendance was heavily stigmatized by the administrators at their schools (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2018). This is

important to note because counselors' beliefs and opinions about community colleges could influence the way they advise high school students in their higher education pursuits, and this could also affect the way students view community college attendance.

Even though empirical articles regarding the concept of community college stigmatization are scant, this topic has been covered in popular media. For example, the social media campaign #EndCCStigma was recently started by the president of Owen Community College, Steve Robinson (Jaschik, 2019). Through this current online media campaign, he intends to acknowledge that community college stigmatization exists and then provide facts and testimonials to the public via social media. Additionally, Hinds Community College has a webpage entitled, "Breaking Community College Stereotypes," on which it aims to dispel five common stereotypes, including the assumption that transfer students attend community college because they did not at first gain admittance to a university (McQuarters, 2015). Although these are not empirical sources, these examples serve to provide evidence that this concept exists and is being discussed by many—if not by many researchers. Further, these examples serve to underscore the need for research that is dedicated to fully investigating this topic.

Internalized Stigma Model and Other Theories

In this section, I will discuss several theories that influenced the development of this study. I begin by discussing the Internalized Stigma Model (Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, & Tucker, 2015), which served as the lens for the study. I provide information about the original model, as well as an explanation of the

revisions I made to the model to fit the context of this study. Then, I briefly

discuss stereotype threat theory (Steele & Aronson, 1995), social identity theory

(Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995;

Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012), as they inspired my thinking regarding

the present study.

Internalized Stigma Model

As stated previously, I employed a revised version of the Internalized

Stigma Model (ISM) (Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, & Tucker, 2015) to help me

explore the relationship between transfer students' perception of stigma and their

university experience. Although I adapted the model to fit the focus of my study,

its original design and implementation are still important to understand. The ISM

was based on several previous studies (Corrigan, 2004; Link & Phelan, 2001),

which established that there is a public stigma attached to mental illness. Corrigan

and Roa (2012) found that some people with mental illnesses avoid treatment due

to awareness of the stigma. Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, and Tucker (2015) created

the ISM to explore the relationships between the public and self-stigma of mental

illness and people's intentions to seek treatment.

The framework is based on prior quantitative research conducted by

Lannin et al. (2015) of 448 Midwestern university undergraduates, who were

diverse in age, gender, race, and classification (e.g., freshman, sophomore, etc.).

The findings showed that both the perceptions of public stigma associated with

having a mental illness and seeking counseling were related to self-esteem and

self-stigma. In other words, the students who showed greater awareness of public

stigma (both of having a mental illness and of seeking psychological help for it), were more likely to internalize the stigma, which resulted in decreased self-esteem and their probability of seeking professional help.

I chose to use an adapted version of the ISM as my framework because there may be parallels with Lannin et al.'s article (2015) where participants' perceptions of stigma led to negative outcomes. For my study, I focused on vertical transfer students' perceptions of public and self-stigmatization of community college attendance, and how, if at all, their views affected their overall university experience. I chose the ISM as a framework to help guide my exploration because it separates the distinct effects of public and self-stigmatization.

While the original researchers (Lannin et al., 2015) included participants' intentions to seek help as part of the model they explored, the revised model I used to explore my topic was simplified in that I only looked at stigma and how it influenced students' overall university experience. Specifically, my proposed model denoted that perceptions of a public stigma connected to community college attendance lead to self-stigma, and together, these components affect transfer students' overall university experience. As previously shown in Chapter 1, the adapted version of the model that I used to approach my topic is depicted in Figure 3.

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┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│   ⬭ Perceptions of      ⬭ Self-stigma:        ⬭ Overall University   │
│   Public Stigma:    --▶  Community      --▶      Experience           │
│   Community              College                                     │
│   College               Attendance                                   │
│   Attendance                                                         │
└──────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```
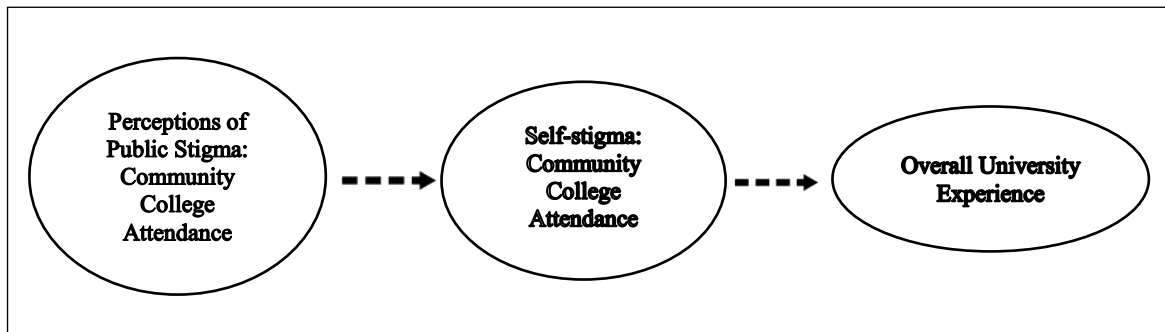
Figure 3. Proposed community college stigmatization model.

Additionally, although the subject of mental illness that is explored in the Lannin et al. (2015) study is quite different from my topic, some research (e.g., Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002; Holland 2015) notes that community colleges (and the students who attend them) may be viewed negatively by high school counselors, students, faculty, and other members of the college community. For this reason, I used the proposed model to help explore previously unexamined challenges (i.e., the role of stigma) to vertical transfer students' persistence. Specifically, I aimed to investigate whether the concept of community college stigmatization was indeed perceived by vertical transfer students. Additionally, if it was present, I wanted to discover how it influenced transfer students' overall university experiences.

Stereotype Threat Theory

Steele and Aronson's stereotype threat theory (1995) posits that when individuals face negative assumptions pertaining to an aspect of their identity, such encounters can have a detrimental effect on their abilities and performance. They found that African American students' test performance was negatively impacted when attention was drawn to parts of their identity by which they felt

stereotyped. Removing negative, stereotypical words and phrases from the testing environment dramatically improved the test scores of the participants.

Overall, stereotype threat theory has most commonly been used to better understand the academic performance of racial minority groups (Nguyen & Ryan, 2008; Owens & Massey, 2011; Steele & Aronson, 1995) and women in math (Boucher, et al., 2012; Johns et al., 2005). It has also been applied to other topics, such as the effects of stereotypes on older adults' driving behaviors (Brelet et al., 2016; Lambert et al., 2015) and the Graduate Record Examination performance of young adults with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (Foy, 2018). The notion of stereotype threat informed my thinking for this study because it revealed that word choice that is perceived as negative by some can have serious repercussions, which may also be the case for transfer students.

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory (SIT) postulates that there is a difference between one's personal and social identity. Essentially, an individual's social identity is derived collectively from the various groups with which the person identifies; these "groups" may include one's race, gender, religion, social class, occupation, etc. Additionally, in SIT, there exist *in-groups* (the one a given person identifies with) and *out-groups,* (the one with which the person does not relate) (Stets & Burke, 2000). As such, Stets and Burke (2000) found that people tend to behave in accordance with the population with which they identify (i.e., the in-group). For example, in the case of transfer students, the in-group might be other transfers and the out-group could be non-transfers. If the

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student perceives their in-group is viewed negatively, they would feel they were viewed negatively as well, even if no comment (or action) was made directly to them.

As for my own study, I wondered how participants would identify themselves as "fitting in" with the larger university population and how their perceptions of self might influence their connections to others on campus. Because transfer students do not have any physical characteristics that would make them immediately discernible (Marling, 2013), it may be difficult for them to find and connect with other transfer students, which could possibly lead to feelings of isolation or a disinclination to engage. In that regard, reading about SIT made me consider how vertical transfer students perceive themselves in relation to their university classmates.

Sense of Belonging

The well-explored theoretical concept of *sense of belonging* is generally defined as the extent to which a person feels like he or she is connected or matters to others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). Musues, Yi, and Saelua (2017) found that culturally engaging activities (e.g., cultural community service, culturally relevant knowledge, cross-cultural engagement) created greater feelings of togetherness and academic engagement for students of all races. Likewise, a lack of a sense of belonging can have negative effects. Nunez (2009) reported that a hostile or unwelcoming campus climate reduced Hispanic students' feelings of acceptance. Additional studies

(e.g., O'Keefe, 2013; Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015) have noted the importance of students' sense of belonging in relation to their persistence.

This concept influenced my study in two main ways. First, this theory caused me to consider whether or not vertical transfer students feel like they belong at the receiving institution, which is arguably an important part of their university experience as a whole. Secondly, community colleges are usually smaller in size and number of students than the university campuses students enter (Marling, 2013), which may be an adjustment for some vertical transfers. I wondered if these differences might make the transition even more challenging for some, negatively affecting their sense of connection to the campus.

Summary

This literature review included information on vertical transfer students, their challenges, and the supports that have been found to aid their persistence. I also provided an overview of research on transfer student engagement, characteristics of nontraditional students, and information available regarding the idea of community college stigmatization. Finally, I concluded this chapter with a discussion on the Internalized Stigma Model (Lannin et al., 2015) and additional theories that informed my thinking regarding the vertical transfer student experience.

Although there is relevant research available on transfer students, prior to this study, there was still a gap in the existing literature regarding the possible role stigmatization may have on this population's experience. This study sought to fill that void by exploring transfer students' impressions of a) whether or not public

and self-stigma relating to community college attendance was experienced by them, and b) how they described the stigma and the sources of these feelings, and c) how such perceptions shaped their university experience.

Chapter 3

Method

In this chapter, I present my research questions for reference. Then, I discuss my research design, site selection, participant selection, and process of data collection. I follow with an explanation of my data analysis and strategies used for ensuring trustworthiness of data interpretation. I conclude by providing an overview of the limitations of the study and a summary of the chapter as a whole.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Do vertical transfer students perceive there is a stigma connected to community college attendance?

2. If so, how do vertical transfer students describe that stigma, and how do they respond?

3. How is the university experience of vertical transfer students shaped by their perceptions of how others regard community college attendance?

Design

For this study, I used qualitative methods (Creswell, 2013) because they explore "the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44) and are used when "a complex, detailed understanding of the issue is needed" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 46). For my study, an in-depth exploration of vertical transfer students' experiences was needed to better

understand if and how the concept of community college stigmatization influenced their university experiences, which was a gap in previously available literature. Quantitative research methods would not have allowed for a deep investigation into the student perceptions that are key to the focus of my study. By contrast, qualitative methods were appropriate because they enabled me to learn about the experiences of vertical transfer students from their own perspectives and in their own words.

More specifically, I utilized a case study approach (Yin, 2014) to focus on transfer students at one university. The parameters of case study research include the specific community (or group), place, and timeframe of the case under investigation (Yin, 2014). In the present study, vertical transfer students attending Southwestern University represented the community I researched. Further, Yin (2014) refers to six forms of data collection common in case study research: interviews, documents, archival records, participant observation, direct observation, and physical artifacts. My case study included three of these recommended data sources in the form of a demographic questionnaire (document) (see Appendix A), participant illustrations (physical artifact), and semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B).

Site Selection

Southwestern University (SU) is a public research institution that hosts over 40,000 students, 67% of whom are either vertical or lateral transfers ("TransferSU," n.d.). As for the student body as a whole, SU is one of the most diverse public research universities in the United States, with 24.2% of students

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being Hispanic, 15.8% African American, 10.9% international, and 9.6% Asian ("Fast Facts," n.d.). Approximately half of new transfer students enrolled full-time at SU graduate within a 10-year period, and in 2012, 51.9% of new, full-time transfer students were retained from year one to two ("Graduation and Retention/Completion and Persistence Report," n.d.). During the 2015-16 academic year, 3,651 of the 11,526 degrees awarded were earned by students who vertically transferred to SU from a community college (Schnyder, 2017). In 2017, SU was one of 63 institutions in the country to be chosen as a Phi Theta Kappa Honor Roll recipient, an award that recognizes universities for achieving excellence in fostering transfer student pathways and success (Schnyder, 2017).

Additionally, SU houses an array of transfer-specific programs and events. Transfer orientations are offered as one-day events or half-day programs and include aspects like an overview of campus information and resources, academic advising, and opportunities to tour campus and ask questions prior to starting classes. *Transfer Appreciation Days* typically happen at the beginning of the fall and spring semesters and consist of free activities ranging from academic information sessions to social opportunities, like movie screenings, and are open to both transfer students and their families. Tau Sigma Transfer Honor Society[1] is a national honor society that celebrates outstanding full-time transfer students with a 3.5 grade point average at the university. *Transfer Talks* happen periodically and are essentially panel discussions on student issues led by current

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[1] There are other eligibility requirements students must meet including number of credits earned at the prior institution and the time spent at the current university.

transfer students who are there to give advice and dialogue with attendees. TransferSU[2] is an additional initiative created by the university to streamline transfer student pathways to degree attainment, with particular attention given to tailoring degree plans for vertical transfer students who enter the university with an associate degree ("TransferSU," n.d.).

Participant Selection

For this study, I used purposeful sampling, which involves intentionally selecting "a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination" (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 148). Therefore, I recruited vertical transfer students who attended a community college, enrolled at no other university prior to SU, and transferred to SU immediately after leaving their two-year institution. These parameters provided some consistency in the type of transition experienced by the population under study. Additionally, the study included only transfer students who had completed at least one semester or more at SU, which allowed them to have had time to gain some experiences at SU so they could articulate an opinion on their transition experiences at the university. I did not limit the study to certain community colleges or demographic groups; I instead chose to include participants who came from any previous community college and were any age, race, or academic major. I made this decision because if transfer students from a variety of backgrounds and across

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[2] The acronym was changed to protect anonymity of research site.

academic disciplines are having the same or similar experiences, then it may be important to note those commonalities.

Participant Recruitment Strategies

After I obtained approval from my dissertation committee and the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), I immediately implemented two recruitment strategies. First, as soon as I received IRB approval, I contacted The Office of University Analytics (See Appendix C) to formally request a list of email addresses for all vertical transfer students who fit the participant selection criteria. After I received this list, I then sent an email to all applicable students (see Appendix D) in which I explained who I am, the purpose of the study, and instructions on how to set up the first interview for those who were willing to participate. This strategy reaped the greatest number of participants.

While I waited on the list of email addresses to be sent to me, I targeted individual departments, people, and student organizations that I thought may have had connections to transfer students. I emailed each of these entities (see Appendix E) to ask for their help recruiting vertical transfer students for my study. The people and organizations I sent this recruitment email to were: the university's Director of Orientation (who oversees Transfer Orientation Leaders), the Tau Sigma Transfer Honor Society, and the Executive Director for Veteran Programs who I contacted because many student veterans are also vertical transfers (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2012; Radford, 2011). And finally, I also sent the recruitment email to colleagues I know on campus who I thought may have had student workers in their departments who fit the criteria for

my study. Although a minimum of one participant is needed for a case study, there is no clearly specified consensus in the available literature regarding the maximum number of recommended participants for a case study (Gerring, 2017). My goal was to recruit as many participants as I needed to reach *data saturation*, which is the point at which no new findings arise in collected data (Charmaz, 2014), and I reached this point with 10 participants.

Participants

This study included 10 vertical transfer students currently enrolled full-time in traditional, in-person classes at SU. Participants were representative of a variety of academic majors across campus, and it is worth noting that three of the students were social work majors. In total, six of the students were females and four were males, and they ranged in age from 21 to 37, with the mean age being approximately 27 years old. Seven students self-identified as being White, while three were Latina/o. Jake was the only military veteran of the group, and two (Beth and Jill) were married and had children. The study included four first-generation students: Amanda, Beth, Claudia, and Heather. Additionally, the majority (nine) of the participants maintained jobs, with a few working as many as 35 hours a week and the group as a whole working around 25 hours a week. Participant information is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Race	Marital Status	Children	First Generation Student	Weekly Hours Worked	Major
Amanda	30	F	White	Single	0	Yes	20	Biology
Andy	28	M	White	Single	0	No	30	General Studies
Beth	25	F	White	Married	1	Yes	13	Social Work
Claudia	23	F	Latina	Single	0	Yes	35	Social Work
Frankie	26	M	Latino	Single	0	No	10	Kinesiology
Heather	28	F	White	Single	0	Yes	35	History
Jake	29	M	White	Single	0	No	25	Communications
Jill	37	F	White	Married	2	No	20	Social Work
Mike	26	M	White	Single	0	No	35	Computer Science
Rebecca	21	F	Latina	Single	0	No	0	Marketing

Data Collection

When participants arrived for their interview, they each signed the university's Informed Consent Document (see Appendix F) in person prior to data collection. Essentially, the Informed Consent Document (ICD) covered the purpose and other details of the study. I talked through the ICD with each of the participants and made sure they were aware of what their voluntary, anonymous participation in the study would entail and answered any questions they had.

After signing the ICD, each student filled out a demographic questionnaire. This document helped me efficiently gather basic information that

was unique to each participant, such as their age, race, major, and marital status. Because transfer students are a characteristically diverse student population (Marling, 2013), this document served to aid in understanding the unique characteristics of each of the participants and helped me better contextualize their experiences.

Once the participants completed the demographic questionnaire, I began each interview by asking them to illustrate their experience as a transfer student at the university, which serves as a physical artifact. Additionally, the drawing constitutes an appropriate addition, as Creswell and Poth (2017) noted that qualitative data can include visual materials or artifacts that help interviewees express themselves. Finally, the interviews with each student served as my primary data source.

Each participant completed one round of these individual interviews. Charmaz (2014) noted that intensive interviewing is a "gently-guided, one-sided conversation that explores research participants' perspective on their personal experience with the research topic" (p. 56). As such, the interview protocol (see Appendix B) consisted of a range of questions relating to the vertical transfer student participants' experiences with university faculty and students, and how they perceived that their professors and peers at the university viewed transfer students. The interviews were semi-structured in nature. This means that I used my protocol to guide each interview, but I also asked additional questions, as needed, and explored relevant topics that emerged during the interviews. I audio recorded all interviews and then transcribed them verbatim. After I completed the

transcriptions, I assigned each participant a pseudonym to protect their identities, and I deleted the audio recordings.

I collected each of the three data sources (i.e., questionnaire, illustration, and interview) in the same location on the day and time chosen by each participant. All interviews took place in a quiet conference room located on campus between a Monday and Friday. The interviews lasted between 39 and 82 minutes, with the mean duration of interviews being approximately 49 minutes. I kept all documents, including the participant illustrations, demographic questionnaires, ICD's, interview transcripts, and notes I took manually during the interviews in a locked drawer in a secure office.

Data Analysis

I used a variety of strategies for data analysis, including memoing, transcribing, line-by-line coding, axial coding, and collapsing data into emergent themes. I used memoing (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Saldana, Leavy, & Beretvas, 2011) throughout both the data collection and analysis stages. The memos mainly included my thoughts on emerging themes, ways to improve interviews, and other notes to myself that I wanted to be sure to remember. I dated and titled each of these memos with the subject of the entry and stored them in a folder in my password-protected computer for easy access and future reference.

I completed each transcription within 72 hours after the respective interview so that the conversation was clear in my mind, and I was less likely to misunderstand a word or phrase on the recorder. Transcribing my own interviews allowed for repeated exposure to the material, which enabled me to more fully

immerse myself in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Further, if I had needed to clarify something or ask a participant a follow-up question, I would have been able to do so quickly, when the interview was still fresh for both of us.

I began data analysis and initial coding when I completed the first transcription so that I could make any necessary changes to my protocol as I continued collecting data. Because I was (and am) interested in exploring if and how stigmatization is experienced and described by participants, *stigma* and *marginalization* were two *a priori* codes for which I coded. I additionally looked for synonymous words and phrases, such as "looked down upon," "inferior," "frowned upon," "lesser than," "shameful," "embarrassment," "bad thing," "outsiders," "outcasts," "belittled," "discounted," etc. My initial coding method consisted of line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2014). I then employed axial coding (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to consider relationships among codes. Finally, I collapsed or grouped bigger segments of data into larger, more conceptual themes (Charmaz, 2014).

For the purposes of my study, I used my research questions and the Internalized Stigma Model (ISM) (Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, & Tucker, 2015), which I adapted, to help me explore the relationship between the idea of transfer student stigma and participants' university experience. In particular, I examined whether or not participants in the study felt there was a public or self-stigma attached to having attended a community college and how this influenced their overall university experience.

Trustworthiness

Creswell and Poth (2017) noted nine strategies for research validation to help improve trustworthiness of data interpretation. With this in mind, I incorporated four of these strategies to ensure credibility of findings. In the following section, I provide an overview of the following strategies: clarifying researcher bias; providing rich, thick description; member checking; and peer debriefing.

Clarifying Researcher Bias

It is important to acknowledge researcher bias in order to avoid it to the extent possible (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Machi & McEvoy, 2016). This was addressed in Chapter One, where I provided a personal biography explaining my interest in, and experiences relating to, my research topic. Acknowledging and maintaining awareness of my own personal connections to my research topic served as one strategy to help me avoid such biases in my interpretation of collected data.

Rich, Thick Description

In order to provide the in-depth, comprehensive understanding of my topic, as is characteristic of qualitative research, I aimed to provide rich, thick data (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017). To achieve this, I asked participants to explain themselves in-depth and provide evidence or examples when necessary. I did this so that I could completely understand their experiences to the best of my ability and to ensure I fully captured everything relevant to the study.

Member Checking

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that member checking is "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Therefore, after transcribing a participant's interview, I emailed the transcript to them so they could check, approve, and, if necessary, revise it to accurately reflect their experiences. This process helped me ensure that I correctly represented the participants' perceptions. I also made use of member checks later in the process when I sent a summary of my findings, without quotations, to the participants so they could verify that I accurately captured their views.

Peer Debriefing

After member checking was completed, I asked a doctoral student to act as a peer reviewer during the coding stage of my study. This student was familiar with qualitative research methods and understood how to code data. I asked her to read and code a few of the transcripts, which we then discussed to see if we had developed similar codes, with the purpose being to work through any disagreements or differences in interpretation until we reached agreement. Peer debriefing allowed me to become more aware of my own thoughts and avoid personal biases, and thus ensured the trustworthiness of data interpretation.

In summation, I included four strategies to address trustworthiness. My strategies were clarifying researcher bias; providing rich, thick description; conducting member checking; and implementing a peer review process. Combined, these strategies helped safeguard against researcher bias and assured the trustworthiness of the findings.

Limitations of the Study

There are a few known limitations for this study. The findings of this research are specific to the vertical transfer students who attended one four-year university after attending a community college. Other vertical transfer students at SU or other institutions could have different experiences than those included in the current research project. Additionally, although it was a requirement for students to have spent at least one semester at SU in order to participate, the students' views may have evolved over time. In other words, their perspectives may have been different prior to or after the time of the interview. There may have been some selection bias, as well, because students who responded to the invitation to be interviewed may have had extreme feelings one way or the other, compared to other vertical transfer students. Selection bias may have also been in effect because participants were those who had completed at least one prior semester at the university and were currently enrolled in classes at the time of data collection; in other words, these were students who were persevering. It is possible that students who were struggling more and having a harder time at the university might not have been willing to participate in this study in the first place. Further, although all universities have transfer students, the size of the transfer population on a given campus may affect their experiences. The fact that SU has a high percentage of transfer students and a diverse overall student body compared to other research universities may generate a very different transfer climate and experience than that of other institutions. In spite of these limitations, the findings still present meaningful new data that can be utilized by other

colleges and universities to directly inform and advance future practice and research.

Summary

This chapter presented methodological choices for the study, including research questions, research design, site selection, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and strategies for trustworthiness and validation. The study does possess limitations. However, the findings may still be used to help researchers, policymakers, and higher education professionals better understand the experiences and perceptions of vertical transfer students at Southwestern University.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to find out if vertical transfer students at one large research university perceived transfer student stigmatization, and, if so, how they described that stigma, and how those perceptions influenced their university experience, if at all. Through interviews with 10 vertical transfer students, several key themes emerged regarding their experiences at Southwestern University (SU). Participant quotations and illustrations are included to provide direct evidence and examples of the themes discussed throughout this chapter.

This chapter is organized into five sections, in which I answer the three guiding research questions of the study. In the first section, I provide an overview of the 10 participants included in this study. In the second section, I cover the descriptions of stigmatization participants described. Then, I discuss the sources of stigmatization, followed by an overview of the ways in which participants reacted and demonstrated their agency. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion on how perceptions of community college stigmatization influenced participants' overall experience at the university.

Participants

In this study, I included 10 participants from an array of academic majors at SU. All students had completed at least one semester prior to the study and were enrolled full-time in on-campus classes at the time of data collection. In this section, I provide background on each of the participants.

Amanda

For 30-year-old Amanda, science, zoology, and animal care have been "lifelong interests" that she is excited to learn more about in college. After graduating high school and working in "several odd jobs," none that she was "super excited about," Amanda and her sister became the first two people in their family to pursue a college degree. For Amanda, going to college was something that filled her with trepidations because she was a first-generation student, she was older than the traditional college-going age, and she was uncertain of how she would "be received." Community college was Amanda's first choice because "it was so close and inexpensive," and she was also able to take classes at nights and on weekends so that she could continue working full-time as a veterinary assistant during weekdays. After community college, SU was a clear choice for her continued education. She explained, "it was really close, it has a great science department, and… I was a member of a group that focuses on snakes and reptiles. We actually have our meetings [there], so I was already familiar with the campus..." Amanda plans to graduate in 2020 with a degree in biology. In the future, she hopes to continue her study of herpetology (i.e., the study of snakes and other reptiles) and lead informational seminars to educate others.

Andy

Andy is a 28-year-old architecture and design major from out-of-state. Similar to Amanda, Andy worked at a few minimum wage jobs after high school before he "figured out what [he] wanted to do in life" and enrolled in community college to pursue his goal of eventually becoming an interior designer. Because both his stepdad and older brother attended community colleges, that was "just

the natural thing to do" for Andy. Plus, "it was the smart, affordable option." After graduating from community college, his family moved to a new state, and Andy enrolled in school at SU to continue his goal of earning a bachelor's degree in architecture and design. This transition was especially tough for Andy because he was not only adjusting to his role as a university student; he was also transitioning to a new 30-hour-a-week job and life in a new state.

Beth

A 25-year-old social work major, Beth grew up being homeschooled before she attended community college as a first-generation student. She explained that she did not get to make many friends growing up or tour college campuses when it came time to graduate high school because her mom "hated driving me and my brother anywhere, like really, really hated going anywhere." So, Beth was used to being "sort of a loner," and she was always really interested in reading and learning about people and places through books. After marrying someone from her hometown at age 20 and experiencing family turmoil in both her own family and with her in-laws, she and her husband adopted his younger sibling (Beth's sister-in-law), who was in high school at the time. After her sister-in-law finished high school and went away to college, Beth experienced a bit of "empty nester syndrome," and decided she wanted to go to college, too, "to make use of the time I suddenly had and to better myself and like, my future, really." She described community college as being "really welcoming and not at all harsh like I thought it would be." Like many of the participants in this study, the real

challenge came when she transitioned to the university, where she had trouble finding friends and "fitting in."

Claudia

At 23, Claudia is a first-generation student double-majoring in social work and Spanish who works an average of 35 hours a week in retail. When she was in high school, Claudia suffered from an abusive situation for which she received crisis counseling. She described this as "a real turning point" in her life, and the help she received from her high school counselor is what inspired her to pursue a career in social work. She explained that she attended community college because "it helped me save up money for the university… and it's also close to my house." When she graduated from community college, affordability and relative proximity to home were also reasons she chose SU. Soon after transferring, Claudia decided to add Spanish as a double-major because she was already bilingual, "Spanish is an important part of [her] life," and she believes this will enable her to help and communicate with more people in her career as a social worker. At the university, Claudia felt "outcasted" and "singled out" as a transfer student by faculty and staff, which was something that bothered her.

Frankie

A kinesiology major, Frankie is 26 and aspires to become a physical therapist. Frankie explained that even though all of his grandparents dropped out of the education system in elementary school, both of his parents and all of his aunts and uncles graduated from college, and many went on to receive graduate degrees. Frankie said, "Now [graduating from college] just runs in my family, so I

can't break that chain." He attended community college in an effort to save money on tuition, and he went there for four years and "got as much as [he] could finished before transferring." Similarly, he chose SU after comparing tuition and fees across all of the universities that were driving distance from his home. Because Frankie is paying for college with student loans, spending as little money as possible right now is "the name of the game—well, that and doing well in school." Frankie shared that although he was very happy and excited to transfer to SU, he was completely overwhelmed and "didn't know what [he] was doing or where [he] fit in" once he arrived.

Heather

Heather is a 28-year-old first-generation student majoring in history and currently working an average of 35 hours a week. Although some of her extended family is college-educated, Heather explained that her parents "fell into a rut." Her dad graduated high school, but her mom did not. Heather disclosed that because her parents have had substance abuse issues all her life, she periodically lived with her grandma while she was growing up. She explained that she was determined to go to college "to prove to my parents that I could do it, and to show that other side of my family that all of us in my main family aren't giving up—but mostly to prove it to myself." She attended community college first because her SAT scores were "not up to snuff" due to her test anxiety, and she could not afford all four years at a university. When it came time to transfer, Heather based her university choice on affordability and driving distance from her grandma's house, where she lives currently. Since she transferred to SU, she has been

"lonesome" because at the time of data collection, she had not made any friends yet. She believed this was partly because she transferred into the university and was taking classes with students who already had "a big ol' group to hang out with."

Jake

After high school, Jake went straight to a community college, where he "made horrible grades, was waiting tables, living at home, just wasting time without any direction." After a few semesters there, he decided to join the Air Force, something he had always imagined pursuing but "never really thought [he] would actually do." After serving four years, he returned to civilian life with a renewed sense of purpose and work ethic and "basically just started over at a new community college." This time around, he made good grades, and completed his Associate of Arts before transferring to SU. Jake noted that because his tuition is covered by the G.I. Bill, his decision to attend SU was mainly influenced by proximity to his home and family. During his time at the university, he has felt "doubted" by professors and "avoided" by his classmates, which he feels is due to his transfer status and the fact that he is visibly older. Jake is currently 29, and he works approximately 25 hours per week. After graduating with his bachelor's degree in communications, he aspires to work in a human resources department at a major corporation.

Jill

As a 37-year-old mother of two working 20 hours a week, Jill described the many responsibilities she has to juggle at home, work, and school. She shared

that perhaps because of her age and her financial status, she noticed that transfer students as a whole are viewed as "being older, poorer, and having more difficulties academically and just struggling overall." Jill initially attended community college when she finished high school, but she "got sick, got married, then just quit going to school." Nearly 15 years later, Jill made the decision to go back to community college. Like most of the participants in the study, Jill made both her community college and university choices based on affordability and distance from home. Similar to Beth and Claudia, Jill is also pursuing a degree and career in social work. After receiving years of trauma therapy for child abuse she suffered, Jill was (and is) passionate about pursuing a career that will allow her to help others. She explained that she is driven by her desire to become an advocate for children and families; she wants to "be a voice for those who don't have a voice."

Mike

After living in Virginia for several years, Mike moved south with his family when he was in high school, a transition that he says was "a major adjustment" that he "wasn't too happy about at the time." Mike is currently a 23-year-old computer science major who works an average of 35 hours a week. He hopes to embark on a career as a software engineer upon graduating. Mike explained that he "loves anything to do with math, science, or technology," and he is really excited to pursue a career in a field "that always seems to be growing and changing." For him, community college "was just the obvious choice" after high school because "it's cheaper, you get more interaction with the professors, and it

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was closer to [his] house." Similar to many of the participants, after graduating from community college, Mike chose SU for its affordability and its closeness to his family. He shared that since he has been at the university, he has felt "stigmatized" at times by professors for having attended a community college, so he prefers to keep his transfer status private when possible.

Rebecca

Rebecca is a 21-year-old marketing major who plans to pursue a career in advertising upon obtaining her bachelor's degree. Rebecca explained that in spite of the way her high school teachers "bashed" and "negatively portrayed" community colleges that is where she first went when she got out of high school because her "test scores weren't super high." She "absolutely loved" her community college experience in regards to the professors, the curriculum, and the environment. After she graduated with her Associate of Arts, she transferred to SU due to its comparatively more affordable university tuition rate and closeness to home. Although Rebecca originally majored in education so she could become a teacher like her aunt, she had "kind of a downfall due to major depression and anxiety [she] was experiencing," and she had to withdraw from her classes during her first semester to take time for her mental health. Fortunately, she returned the following semester, although she felt she "had to switch majors" because withdrawing her first semester put her "off track" with her desired graduation timeline.

Overall, the participants conveyed unique experiences, backstories, hopes, and struggles, all of which make each one special. In spite of their diverse

backgrounds and individuality, several key themes came to light regarding their experiences as vertical transfer students. In the following sections, I provide an overview of the following themes: stigmatization, sources of public stigmatization, perceptions of self, and overall university experience.

Stigmatization

The first two research questions for this study investigated whether participants perceived a stigma was connected to community college attendance, and, if so, how they described it. With the exception of Andy, all of the participants expressed they felt stigmatized for having attended a community college. Although Andy had a rough social and academic adjustment to the university, he did not believe there was a stigma connected to community college attendance, *per se*. However, the majority of participants expressed similar accounts of being "negatively stereotyped" or "stigmatized." In the following section, I discuss the ways participants described and illustrated instances of stigmatization.

"Not as Smart"

The majority of students in this study felt like they were viewed as being less intelligent than non-transfer students. Participants described various encounters when other students, faculty, and staff made comments and negative generalizations about transfer students that made them feel slighted or discounted in regards to their intellectual capabilities. In particular, a common theme across interviews was the notion that others perceived community college curriculum as being easier than the course content taught at universities.

Although Rebecca attended community college in part because she had low standardized test scores, she found it "frustrating and demeaning" that her high school teachers and university professors automatically viewed her as being "not as smart" because she attended a community college. She felt strongly that her test scores were not an accurate reflection of her intelligence because she suffers from test anxiety. Heather has also heard university students say that community colleges are "for dumb people who can't get into a university," which surprised and offended her. Claudia and Frankie heard similar comments from others discounting community college students' intelligence. Claudia perceived that sometimes university faculty and staff viewed transfer students as "stupid or needy." She explained:

> When you come here, professors and especially, um, staff are just constantly like, "If you're a transfer student, you probably won't know this or that," and they may be trying to be helpful sometimes, but it really just makes me feel singled out, like they think I'm at a disadvantage or something, like I'm stupid or needy because I did community college. Like, I wish they'd just tell us the information and leave assumptions out of it. I'm not totally new to college, I'm just new to this one, you know? I can do it, I'm not pitiful.

In other words, Claudia wanted to be given the information she needed without being told she did not know something because she was a transfer student. Being doubted or constantly reminded she was a transfer student was annoying to her. Frankie similarly shared that professors at SU made ominous warnings, such as

"If you're a transfer, be prepared to struggle." This caused a lot of stress and anxiety for Frankie at first because it made him feel like he was starting classes at the university at an academic disadvantage. However, as his time progressed at the university, he noticed he was not struggling any more than anyone else, so he wished professors would not have made him "freak out like that in the beginning." Overall, being intellectually doubted because of their community college attendance was a common theme across the interviews.

Perceptions of Academic Rigor

Many participants encountered negative perceptions regarding the academic rigor of their community college courses. For example, Heather shard that she at times felt "automatically discredited" for her community college attendance. She explained that once when she was meeting with a university professor to ask questions about something covered in class, the professor "immediately asked if [she] took the prerequisite course in community college." This made her feel like he was insinuating that the reason she had questions was because she had been ill-prepared in community college. This interaction discouraged her from asking that professor future questions.

Mike and Amanda have also heard faculty and staff at the university "complain" about transfer students having a harder time adjusting to university expectations and curriculum because "people think community college is easier," Amanda explained. Jill similarly shared that community college course content is viewed as "less academically rigorous" than university coursework. Jake explained this is because "people think [community colleges] accept everybody,

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so then they think the curriculum is easier because of that." In other words, he

believed that community colleges are considered less difficult to get into than

universities, and because of this, people generally think the curriculum at

community colleges is also easier.

Perceptions of community college admissions policies was a topic

broached by other participants, as well. Both Heather and Beth discussed how

community colleges tend to have more open admissions policies than most

universities, as well as more remedial course options, but "that doesn't mean that

like, the content that transfers to the university is lesser than the equivalent

courses being taught [at SU]," Heather argued. In other words, participants felt

unfairly belittled for taking "the same exact courses somewhere else for cheaper,"

as Frankie explained. In this regard, participants felt looked down upon for the

very thing they thought was a strategy for success.

On the other hand, Jill and Mike wondered if the courses they took at

community college were in fact on par with the equivalent courses offered during

the first two years at the university. Jill described her community college course

content as being "much easier" than her university classes. Mike similarly

experienced a learning curve when he transferred to the university, as other

participants did, as well. But Mike pointed out, "I don't know if the classes were

easier because they were at community college or because it's the first two years,

and the basics would be the same if I had taken them here—I can't say."

Regardless of whether or not they believed their community college classes had in

fact been easier than university curriculum, as a whole, participants felt like others

tended to doubt their academic preparation because they were vertical transfer students, which they felt was unfair and demeaning.

"Social Outcasts"

In spite of the large transfer student population on the SU campus, several participants in this study shared that they were treated like "social outcasts" because they transferred in from a community college instead of "coming straight here with everyone else," as Rebecca put it. Because the majority of participants were taking sophomore- or junior-level classes when they transferred to SU, they found that the other students in their classes already had their friend groups, daily patterns, and social activities established. This made forging friendships rather intimidating for participants because there "wasn't like, a mutual need to make friends," as Frankie shared. Many of the students felt like they were alone in their quest to make connections since everyone around them already seemed to be engaged in their own activities.

For these reasons, establishing friendships was often something uncomfortable or intimidating that participants had to "force" themselves to do, as was the case with Amanda. For instance, Amanda shared that in order to make connections when transferring into upper-level classes, she had to force herself to "put [her]self out there, and try to make friends with people who probably already had a ton of friends." She shared that she sometimes felt spurned by others when they found out she attended community college. One time she felt like a girl she had formed a friendship with quit talking to her after she found out Amanda went to community college, and since then, Amanda has felt like she should "just keep

that to [her]self." For Heather, who is in her second semester at SU, loneliness

and isolation have been part of her experience as a transfer student, which is

something she hopes will change during her time at SU. Heather illustrated her

experience as a transfer student at the university, which is shown in Figure 4.
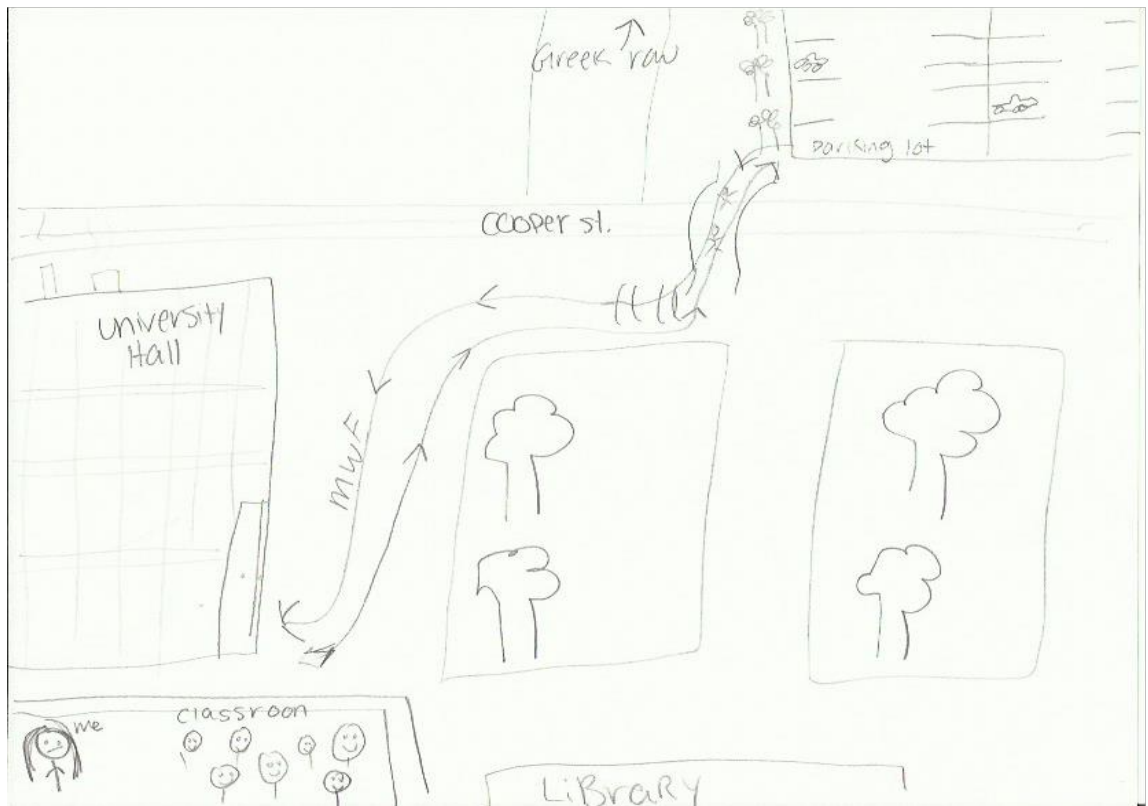
Figure 4. Heather's Illustration.

Heather explained:

> I have no friends yet, so I drew a classroom and then there's just me in the
>
> corner because I don't know anybody. People either come from high
>
> school with their friends who come here with them, or they join a sorority
>
> once they get here, so they've produced friends, but I'm just kind of by
>
> myself. A transfer student on my own. It's lonesome.

For Heather, overcoming her loneliness and forging friendships was difficult

because she felt like an "outsider" for attending community college. For this

reason, she was more cautious about "putting [her]self out there" for fear of being

rejected because of her vertical transfer status.

This social isolation was similar to how others, like Rebecca and Beth,

felt. Rebecca shared that she was "in a constant state of panic" about not "fitting

in" at the university, and she shared that she would try to start a conversation with

her classmates and they would "just look at [her] weird or give a one-word

response, and that was it." She was frustrated by the lack of follow-up in dialogue

with the people she was trying to connect with, and she explained that it made her

feel like an "outsider." Beth similarly had trouble making friends, even though

she became heavily involved in clubs and student activities. She described how

events that she would attend solo seemed to be attended by other students who

came in pairs or groups, and "they clearly didn't want [her] like, jumping in their

fun," and she felt snubbed and embarrassed for making the effort to connect.

However, being perceived or treated like an outsider was not something

that bothered all of the participants who experienced this. Although Jake felt like

his classmates did not "want much to do with [him]," he stated that this was a

"non-issue" for him, as forming friendships was never his objective in going to

college. Other participants discussed how their work and family responsibilities

leave little time for engaging in school activities or making new friends at SU.

The majority of participants travel between 30 minutes to an hour to get to school,

and making the drive to attend social or extracurricular events would not only be

costly in gas and mileage, it would "eat up time I just don't have to waste," as Jill explained. Similarly, Andy, who lives an hour away from campus and works 30 hours a week, shared, "I just don't have time, and my focus is more on school because that's what I'm paying for, that's what matters." Essentially, feeling like a social outcast was not particularly troubling for some who experienced it because they came to SU with the intention of taking the classes, getting the degree, "and getting on with things," as Jill put it. Building friendships with other college students was never part of the goal for some of the participants; it did not matter to them whether or not other students took an interest in spending time with them.

Old

Of the 10 participants included in this study, eight were 25 years or older. As such, many participants were in stages of life in which they were balancing work and family responsibilities in addition to school work. Their age also influenced the way they interacted with classmates and how their classmates and other university connections responded to them.

Jake, a 29-year-old veteran, felt that his age and his previous life experiences made relating to his younger, "more carefree and idealistic" classmates difficult. He also felt like his age in addition to his transfer status made him "sort of a pariah," and he noticed students avoiding him, unless they were also older students, who he usually assumed were also transfer students. Amanda and Mike made similar observations. They, too, felt like younger students eluded

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them, and they also presupposed older students had attended community college like them. Amanda shared:

> The majority of my classmates are so much younger. When I talk to them or ask them a question about themselves, it's like, a one-word response and that's it. It's pretty clear they don't want to like, get to know me. I think they assume I'm a transfer because I'm older, but I don't know if they're not interested because of that or the age difference or what.

Mike similarly explained that being 26 and having attended a community college made him "kind of an outlier" in his university classes. He described feeling out of place while listening to his younger classmates talk about past university professors who he did not know because he took the respective class at community college. Additionally, Mike felt like his fellow classmates were "always talking about what bars to go to" or other things he felt like he had "already outgrown."

Beth and Jill were both married and had children, which was something that they felt made them "more out of touch" with classmates, as Beth noted, because of the different life circumstances and concerns with which they were preoccupied. Jill shared that she often feels like she is "mothering or sheparding" her younger classmates, who are closer to her son's age than her own, and she feels them getting annoyed with her. "I can tell they're like, 'Oh, here's this old community college lady, here to get on to us or like, tell the professor on us,'" she said, exasperatedly. Jill went on to explain, "It definitely seems like they all hush up when I sit down or come around them. It's like they think of me as an authority

figure or something instead of a peer because I'm so much older." Jill believed the way her peers reacted to her had more to do with her age than her transfer status, but both were characteristics that made her an outsider among her younger, non-transfer classmates.

Similarly, Beth felt like she was viewed as an undesirable friend because of her age and nontraditional education pathway both from being homeschooled growing up and from having attended community college before transferring to SU. Beth is heavily involved in extracurricular activities because she feels pressure to "make the most of the time I have here." But in spite of trying to connect with others on campus, she shared that nobody has shown interest in connecting with her. "Students seem to think I'm just like, an old married transfer—not exactly one of the cool kids," she shared with a laugh and shrug. Beth illustrated her experience as a transfer student at SU, which is shown in Figure 5.
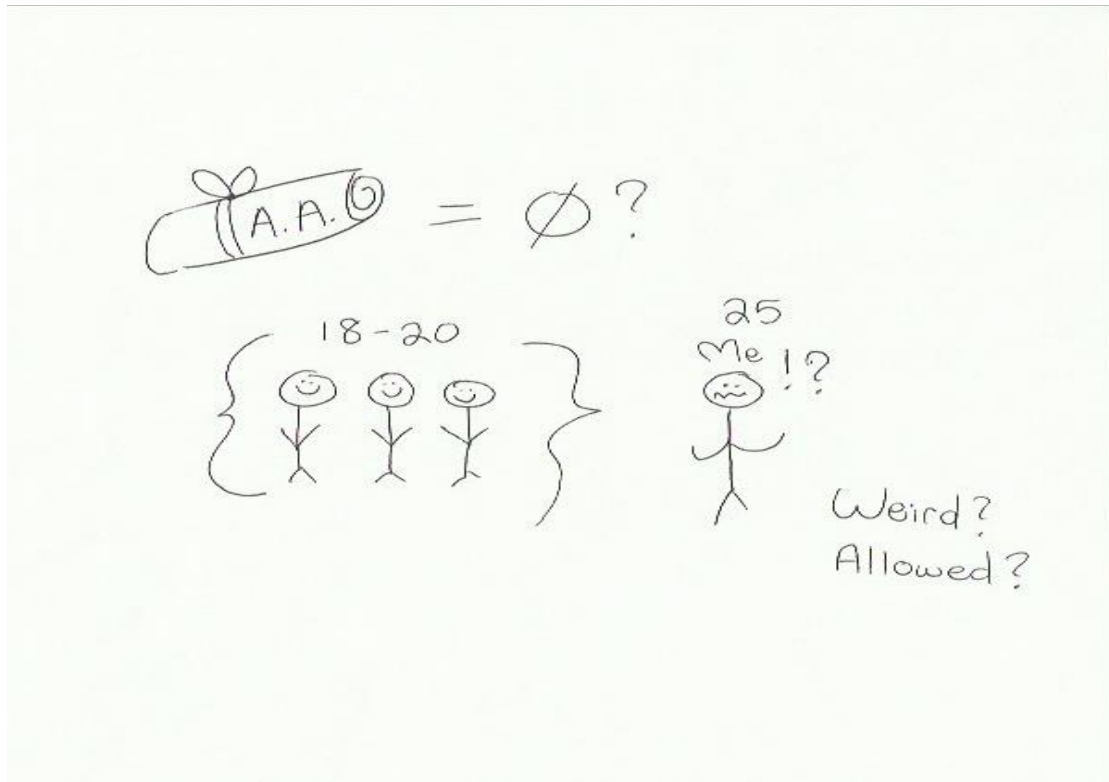
Figure 5. Beth's Illustration.

Beth explained that after realizing her Associate of Arts would not broaden her job prospects as much as she hoped it would, she decided to continue her education at SU, where she hoped to make a lot of connections. She stated that everyone in her classes was around 18-20-years old, and even though she is only 25, from the looks people give her, she gets the impression that her classmates think she is "weird." This made her feel like she is not "allowed" in various activities that she would participate in if she did not feel so ostracized.

Some participants, like Andy, Claudia, and Rebecca noted that they did not really "fit in" with either the non-transfer students or with the transfer student groups on campus. Andy explained that there are a lot of younger, traditional college-age students in his classes, with whom he does not relate. However, he

also does not connect well with the transfer student groups that he noticed are comprised of "visibly older people going back to school later in life." Although Claudia and Rebecca are both in their early twenties, they similarly felt like there were two distinct groups, (i.e., young, non-transfers versus older transfers) neither of which was "for them," as Claudia shared. Andy pointed out that even though it did not bother him, it was "weird to him" that he felt like an outsider, considering the broad diversity of the university's student body.

Perceptions of Socioeconomic Status

Participants tended to think of non-transfer students as being from a higher socioeconomic status than those who transfered, and they believed others held similar views of the two groups, as well. Participants viewed non-transfers as being "better off, financially," as Frankie put it. Jill explained, "I associate people who come straight here as being privileged or more affluent, and I think a lot of people think the opposite of transfer students." Collectively, participants expressed their own stereotyping of non-transfers as being "moneyed and care-free" as Andy stated, and participants assumed other people had similar perceptions about students who attend a university right after high school. Amanda, a first-generation student, acquired her view of university students largely from television and movies, and she grew up thinking of university students as being "rich and fabulous." Beth, another first-generation student, said she always thought of those who go straight to university as being "rich, tan, happy, popular people—or else really, really smart." Amanda and Beth explained that they felt like community colleges and the students who attend them were

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viewed in direct contrast to the affluent images people tie to university life and culture.

According to Jake, low socioeconomic status was a "black mark" with which community college students are "tagged." For almost all of the participants, the price of tuition was a deciding factor behind their community college attendance and their university choice, as well. With the exception of Rebecca, all of the students in this study work in addition to going to school in order to "make ends meet," as Heather put it. The participants described the struggles of balancing a job they had to keep in order to pay the bills with the demands of a college education they believed would help them build a better future. Mike explained his thoughts on this subject by the following:

> Some people view transfer students like poor people, but if it's true, what can you really say? Not everyone can afford to go straight to university, so that is a reason a lot of people go to community college, but there are a lot of other reasons to go, there, too. It's not like it's just for poor people.

In other words, for some transfer students, financial strain may in fact be a reason for their community college choice. But as Amanda pointed out, "Even if it's true in some cases, it doesn't feel good to be labeled and like, cast aside because my family doesn't have money," which is similar to how other students felt, as well. As Claudia put it, "It's nobody's fault they're not rich, and I mean, it's okay to be poor, it doesn't make you a bad person." But it was still the opinion of the group that financial difficulty is private and not something with which they wanted to be associated, whether it was true or not.

Overall, the participants in this study did perceive there was a stigma connected to community college attendance. They described instances of comments and looks they noticed from people around them that made them feel stigmatized for being vertical transfer students. The students in this study described being discounted intellectually and treated like social outcasts. Participants also felt like community college attendance was negatively associated with being older and being poor.

Sources of Stigmatization

Participants in this study perceived community college stigmatization from a variety of individuals, including their former high school faculty and classmates who were often the first ones who imparted a negative view of community colleges. Additional founts of community college stigmatization came from university faculty, staff, and classmates. In the following section, I discuss these sources of stigmatization and how they influenced participants' perceptions of the public views regarding community college attendance.

High School Teachers and Former Classmates

Although this study focused on how perceptions of stigmatization influenced the university experiences of vertical transfer students, for many of the participants, the origins of the perceived stigma dated back to high school. In particular, high school teachers and classmates were often the ones who initially made derogatory remarks about community college attendance that resonated with the participants of this study. This is worth noting because for some participants, their views on the public perceptions of community college

attendance initially surfaced not during their time attending the university, but as early as secondary school.

For Rebecca, Mike, and Amanda, perceptions of community college stigmatization first came from their high school teachers. Mike shared that his high school faculty "really put it in kids' heads that university was better, more respectable, and community college was subpar." He explained that although he attended a public high school and a lot of his classmates went on to attend a community college, this was still the message they received from "some of the famous, beloved teachers." Mike shared that receiving this advice "as a kid," especially from teachers he admired, really made an impression on him. He went on to explain that although he now realizes that those were merely opinions and not facts, it was "easy to be swayed at that age." Rebecca also shared:

> I went to a private school for my high school, and the teachers there…
> would always say [community college] was second-rate, or, "Don't go
> there if you don't have to because you're going to be like, limited or
> doubted by others as soon as they find out you went to one." They said
> that it was frowned upon, looked down upon, and we should all just go
> straight to university, and that was the mentality they always instilled in
> us. It's frustrating thinking back on it.

Rebecca went on to explain that she was irritated by the way she felt her high school faculty "pushed" students into "whatever is viewed by others as like, most posh or elite" without considering what was best for students on an individual

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basis. She believed this inclination toward elitism was a product of her private school environment.

However, Mike and Amanda observed community college stigmatization on their public high school campuses, as well. At age 30, Amanda can still remember her high school English teacher and her counselor both "discouraging" her from going to community college and telling her, "Universities are always better quality—and it just looks better, too." Amanda shared that being a first-generation student, the idea of going from high school to a "huge university" was "intimidating," but she did not want to disappoint anyone who wanted her to go straight to a university by going to a community college, either. Amanda had a gap of several years between high school and higher education, during which time she worked before choosing community college as a stepping stone towards earning her bachelor's degree. She partly attributes this gap to her high school faculty's dogma regarding community college attendance.

Former high school classmates also played a role in shaping participants' perceptions of community college stigmatization. For example, Rebecca and Claudia described times when their high school classmates negatively stereotyped community college. Rebecca explained that in her situation, these comments often came from students whose families attended universities or from students who intended to go directly to a university themselves. Claudia shared:

> When I was a high school student, people that were like planning to go
> straight to a university would always tell me like, "Don't do that, don't go
> to community college first. That's lame. Community college is really not

cool at all. Go to university, you'll get the college experience, and you can

party, and meet people, and be in sororities."

Rebecca made similar observations about her high school classmates, and she

shared that her high school classmates looked down upon community college

because it was "not as cool" as going straight to the university, and "popular kids

go to the university." It seemed that comments from both high school faculty and

classmates were perceived by participants as being superficial and focused on

how college choice would make the student appear. However, judging from the

comments participants shared, the teachers seemed to be more interested in

pushing Rebecca, Mike, and Amanda towards a university because their

attendance there would be viewed as "better quality" and more "elite," whereas

classmates in high school were more interested in perceptions of "coolness" and

popularity. Claudia went on to explain:

> I went to community college because it was the best financial option for
>
> me, and it was closer to my home, but when I transferred to the university,
>
> I had that in the back of my head, that people would think I was "lame"
>
> for going to community college, or I'm not rich, and I couldn't afford it.
>
> But in reality, going to community college was the best thing I could have
>
> done for myself.

Claudia, Rebecca, Mike, and Amanda made the choice to attend community

college in spite of the negative stereotypes their high school teachers and

classmates conjectured. However, memories of these comments from their

secondary school days still rankled. Although the participants in this study

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persisted in their community college attendance, the stigmatization they described may have had a more negative effect on their other high school classmates. In other words, such comments could have dissuaded the higher education pursuits of students who might have otherwise attended community college.

University Faculty and Staff

Sources of community college stigmatization also came in the form of faculty and staff at SU. For example, Heather shared an awkward comment one of her professors made early in her first semester that bothered her. She explained:

> This professor in one of my science classes at the beginning of last semester was like talking about how he taught some first year, like intro. or freshman-level classes, and he hated it, so he said now he's teaching upper-level classes, but he has so many transfer students he feels like, "Take me back to the freshman! I like them better!" And he laughed like he was joking, but it wasn't funny to me at all.

Heather was left feeling confused and offended by this comment. She was unclear if her professor meant that transfer students were harder to teach than freshmen, or if he thought transfer students are "dumb" or not the academic level they should be. Shaking her head, Heather said, "I really didn't get why he didn't like transfers, but it was definitely clear he didn't."

Jake also heard one of his professors make disparaging remarks about vertical transfers. Jake described a time when his professor was standing on a stage in a large class and began talking about the differences between transfers and non-transfers, and the professor said that transfer students have a harder time

because in the past there were lower standards and less academic rigor in community colleges. Jake elaborated,

> He was saying they have a harder time here, so if any of us were transfer students, we should just like be prepared to struggle, I guess. It was kind of weird because he gave us this like, ominous warning without any practical advice to go with it… I just felt like it was really negative and didn't really serve a purpose other than to make all of the transfer folks nervous.

Jake shared that this comment made him more self-aware because of his "visibly older age." At the time of the incident, he wondered if professors have a way of being able to tell who is a transfer student versus who is not on their class rosters or through some other means. Jake was "a little weary" that even if that professor did not know for certain that he was a transfer student, the faculty member would at least suspect it because of his older appearance.

Similar to Jake, Mike also speculated whether professors "could tell" he was a transfer student. He had a university professor who announced to the class that if they had taken the prerequisite course somewhere else, and the professor "didn't already cover such and such, then don't even bother asking me about it— you're on your own." Mike felt like the professor was referring to students who had taken the previous course at a community college. After this experience, Mike decided it was in his best interest to keep his transfer status to himself, lest he be discounted or disparaged for it. Mike explained that although a lot of professors and staff know that SU is a transfer heavy school, "it's still like a 'don't ask, don't

tell' kind of situation." Mike said that transfer students should not tell university faculty who they are because the professors would "look down on" them and "not take them as seriously."

Staff members at the university were also conduits of community college stigmatization, as was the case for Frankie and Claudia. Frankie, a kinesiology major, described a time when his academic advisor showed a "bad attitude" towards him because he came from a community college. Frankie needed to take a particular mathematics course, and the advisor asked if he was going to take it at the university or go back to the community college to take the course. He responded that he was taking at it the university because he had already graduated with his Associate of Arts. Frankie shared, "She was like, 'Oh, you *graduated* from community college?' in this really nasty, um, mocking tone, and I was just like, 'Um, yeah…'" Frankie went on to share that his advisor also said, "Well, good luck with that…" when he talked to her about other courses he planned to enroll in at SU, which he perceived to be in a "sarcastic tone." Frankie confided that he was really baffled by his advisor's reactions to him, and he was also annoyed that she never called him by his name, "barely looked [him] in the eye," and did not seem to take him or his academic goals very seriously. Frankie felt that her snarky comments about community college and her dismissiveness towards him was due to him being a vertical transfer student.

Additionally, Claudia's initial interactions with university offices and staff personnel varied greatly between her first impressions and the remainder of her time at SU. She explained:

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At first, the staff people and offices during orientation are all like, "Oh, come here, we have this program and that activity, et cetera, et cetera," but then after the semester gets going, it's quiet, and nobody really tells us about what's going on, the staff in the offices aren't as friendly to us anymore, like they were at first. It seems like the things they host for transfer students are all at the beginning, and then they just go away… It's kind of like they don't actually like transfers all that much after all once they get us here.

In other words, Claudia perceived that she mattered more to SU during the orientation process than she did as a student enrolled in classes. The fact that the programs, activities, and clubs available for transfer students were advertised at the beginning of the semester before tapering away was a problem for her because it made her feel like the university did not really care about her involvement once she was already enrolled on campus. It also made her feel like she was not genuinely cared for when staff who worked in various student services departments were not as friendly to her once she had already been successfully recruited to SU. Claudia went on to share that she did not like always being labeled a transfer student and only receiving emails and notices about functions for transfer students (if she received any information at all.) She posed the question, "What about other things? Can't I participate in the activities for other students, too, or they just want transfer students to be like, sectioned off?" Claudia wanted to be included more by staff in programs and activities available to all students instead of being "labeled and forgotten" as a vertical transfer student.

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University Classmates

Although sources of community college stigmatization at the university

level seemed to come from faculty and staff more so than other students, Beth,

Claudia, and Jill discussed some situations in which their classmates at the

university made them feel stigmatized. Although Beth tried to be involved in

many different extracurricular activities at the university, other students always

made her feel "out of place and like a weirdo, basically." She explained that it

was not so much what her classmates and other university students said to her, so

much as it was "the looks they'd give [her], and the way they'd respond to [her]."

Beth shared that her classmates and students involved in extracurricular clubs and

activities already seemed to have friend groups, which she understood. But she

was disappointed that other students did not show any interest in connecting with

her or reciprocating questions with which she would try to engage them. Beth was

not sure if this was because she was 25 and a little older than the majority of her

classmates, or if it was because she seemed like a "new kid—or adult—on the

block" because of her transfer status.

For Claudia, the community college stigmatization she has observed from

her university classmates came in the form of comments she overheard. She

shared:

> Every now and then I hear students say things like "Being a transfer
>
> student must suck," which I think is because you haven't established
>
> friends or you don't really know where everything is. And every now and
>
> then I'll hear someone say they went to community college and the person

they're talking to will be like, "Wow, that sucks, I'd never want to do that.

Why'd you do that when you just could have come straight here?"
Although Claudia explained that she only hears comments like this every now and then from her non-transfer university peers, it is something she has noticed, nonetheless. She believes that in general, her university classmates have a "bad view" and a lot of "misconceptions" about vertical transfer students.

As mentioned previously, Jill is 37-years-old and often feels like her classmates at SU are "annoyed" by her "mothering" them when she tries to help them with something or join a conversation with the younger students that comprise the majority of her peers. She has noticed they "hush up" whenever she sits or stands next to them, as if they view her as an authority figure because of her older age. Jill also shared that she feels "marginalized" by her classmates' disinterest in befriending and connecting with her. Even though she was in her third semester at the university at the time of data collection, her inability to successfully engage with her fellow classmates makes her think she is viewed "like an implant" at the university because she is "so much older and still labeled a transfer student, even though [she's] been [at SU] for over a year now." The fact that she is "not received well or embraced by [her] peers," is something she attributes to the different life experiences and educational journey she has had as a transfer student. "They definitely don't view me as one of them," she said of her university classmates with a shrug.

In summation, for some participants, the original sources of stigmatization came from their high school faculty and classmates. Participants also perceived

their university faculty, staff, and classmates to be additional sources of their perceptions of stigmatization or marginalization. In the next section, I will discuss how participants reacted to and were affected by these experiences.

Demonstrations of Agency

In the second research question for this study, I explored how transfer students responded to stigmatization. Participants described feelings of anxiety regarding their transfer status and discussed how they overcame those concerns while at the university. The students in this study also provided accounts of their sense of agency and reactions to stigmatization while at the university, with post-transfer tenacity being a common theme across interviews.

Overcoming Feelings of Anxiety

Andy, Amanda, and Rebecca discussed trepidation prior to transferring, as well as during the beginning of their first university semester, before they adjusted. Prior to transferring, Andy worried about fitting in and adjusting to university life at SU. He shared that having grown up in another state, he did not know much about the "culture" or "how they felt about transfers" at SU before he applied. Although he had a smoother adjustment to the university environment than some of the other participants in this study, he did state that he had concerns about whether or not he would be viewed "like a black sheep" at the university before his classes started. For Andy, overcoming these concerns was something he attributed to "[his] ability to just, like block out any worries and do what [he] needs to do." In other words, Andy's ability to consciously ignore his own

concerns about his university adjustment was what enabled him to focus more completely on his coursework.

Amanda explained that because her high school teachers had voiced such negative conjectures about the "quality" of community college curriculum, she worried that when she transferred to the university she would be "looked down on or basically doubted." Prior to transferring, Amanda feared university faculty would know she was a transfer student if they either had access to that information or presupposed her transfer status because of her older appearance. She was concerned about this because of the views her high school teachers expressed regarding community college attendance. More to the point, she worried if university faculty felt the same as her high school teachers had, then they might have been "primed to think [she] would perform poorly" since she is a vertical transfer student and would therefore grade her more stringently than her non-transfer peers. Amanda shared that she combatted her concerns by "overcompensating" and working "extra hard" to ensure that she performed well on every test and class assignment at the university. She explained that although she could not control what others thought of her or her community college attendance, she could at least do "everything in [her] power" make sure she did well at SU academically.

For Rebecca, the anxiety she felt prior to transferring reached a peak at the beginning of her first semester at SU once classes started. Rebecca confided she felt as if she "had failed before she even got started" at SU because she entered the university as a vertical transfer, which had been viewed so negatively by her

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high school teachers. Her initial experience as a transfer student is illustrated in

Figure 6.
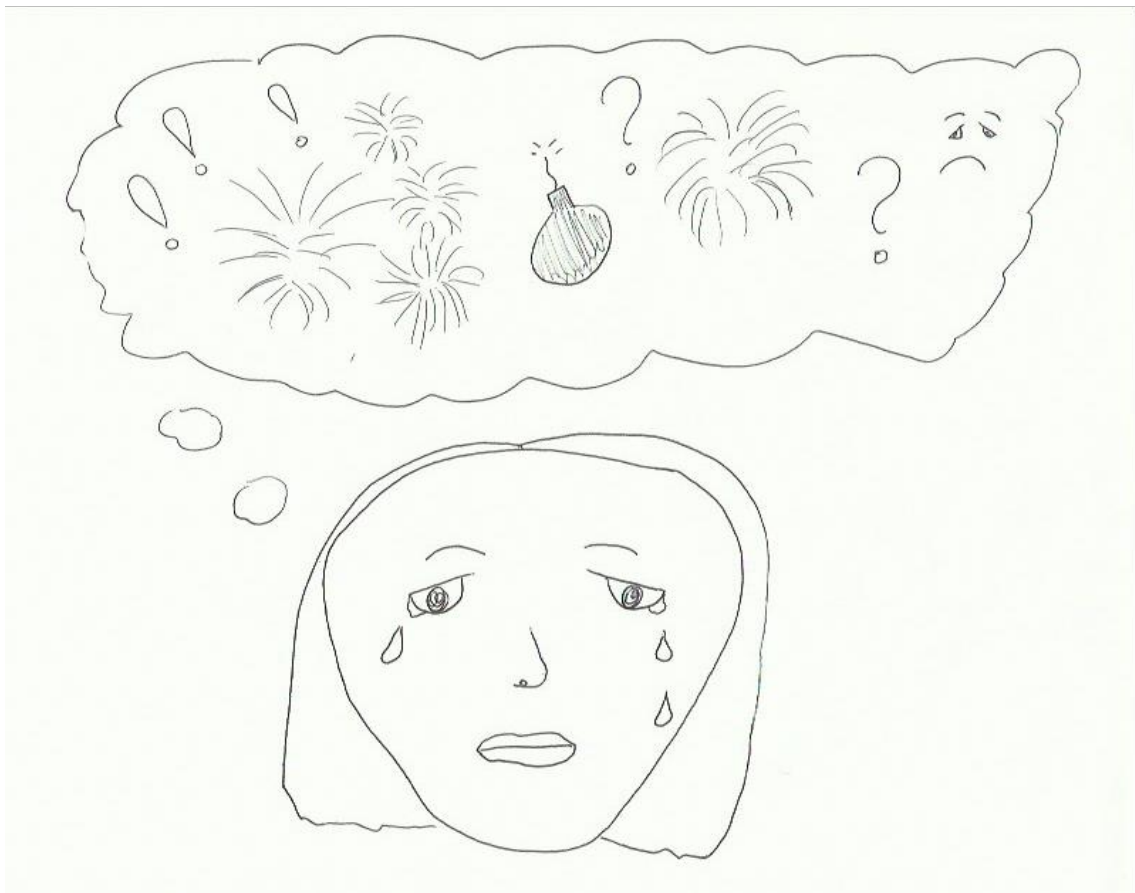
Figure 6. Rebecca's Illustration.

Rebecca explained her drawing by sharing the following:

> It was like a bomb went off in my head… I was so stressed and
>
> overwhelmed by everything, the size of things, the amount of people, and
>
> just feeling like I didn't know what I was doing or where I fit in. I was just
>
> constantly panicked wondering "What do I do? Where do I fit in?" I felt
>
> certain nobody would want anything to do with me because I was a
>
> transfer, and that's like, not held in a very good light.

She became so "consumed" by her anxiety about "fitting in" and her fear of failure, that she had to withdraw from her first semester at the university not long after classes started. Fortunately, Rebecca began seeing a therapist, and she came back to the university part-time the following semester, and full-time the semester after that. Although she still had concerns about the scale of things at the university and feelings of not "fitting in," through meeting with her therapist and "easing" her way back into her classes at SU, she was better able to manage her anxiety about these issues.

Transfer Student Tenacity

Although the majority of the participants experienced instances of stigmatization for having attended a community college, they overcame these experiences and "rose above it," as Beth phrased it. The transfer students in this study showed a lot of fortitude through their determination to prove anyone who doubted them wrong, and their desires to make their families proud is what drove them. They argued that their age and alternative educational pathways—some of the very things they felt stigmatized for—had advantages on which they could capitalize. And through believing in themselves and giving themselves time to adjust and grow at the university, they knew they could accomplish their goals, regardless of what anyone else thought.

Proving naysayers wrong was integral to the participants' persistence and success. For example, after a university professor made Heather think he doubted the academic abilities and preparation of community college students, she explained, "He can think that transfer kids are dumb or whatever he thinks, but

I'll just prove him wrong." In the same vein, Frankie stated vehemently, "I don't really care what other people think or who doubts me. I know I'm going to succeed because that's what I'm [at SU] to do." Mike was also motivated by the thought of "quietly proving wrong" anyone who discounted or discredited him for having attended a community college.

For Claudia, Heather, and Frankie, making their families proud was part of what inspired them to persist in spite of negativity they encountered regarding their transfer status. Claudia is the first member of her family to attend college, and she shared that her family cried when she told them she was accepted to the university. It was important to Claudia to be a trailblazer for her family and to show her younger brothers that they can overcome obstacles and pursue higher education, as well. "I tell them all the time, 'It's hard, but if I can do it, you can do it," Claudia said emphatically. Similarly, Heather, who is also a first-generation student, felt driven to "succeed in college and life no matter what" because she wants to prove to her parents, herself, and the rest of their family that she can do it. Unlike Claudia and Heather, both of Frankie's parents and many of his aunts, uncles, and cousins have college degrees. He explained that because of this, he felt motivated to continue that legacy in spite of stigmatization or any other obstacles he encounters.

Frankie and Jill noted that the older age and life experiences transfer students often possess could be an advantage in some regards, even though it is not often perceived that way by other people. For example, Frankie stated that for the preponderance of older transfer students, there are actually benefits on which

they may be able to capitalize. He pointed out that they have "more life experience, and they know what they want to do more so than students who come straight [to SU] and haven't had as many different experiences." Similarly, Jill explained that although her age and transfer status might marginalize her in others' eyes, it is something that she feels compelled to "steer to [her] advantage." Similar to Frankie's perspective, Jill expounded upon how more life experience may help transfer students choose a major more purposefully than young, non-transfer students who "rush in [to the university] and just pick a major willy-nilly." Her decision to major in social work was something that she arrived at over time through living experiences that made her passionate about her chosen area of study.

For Jill and Heather, giving themselves time to acclimatize and believing in their ability to adapt and overcome the negativity they encountered were key to their persistence at the university. Their determination to allow themselves time to adjust and believing in their own abilities to succeed were especially important for these two women, considering the perceptions of stigmatization they perceived from others. Jill shared:

> I feel like I had two very distinct, very different experiences as a transfer student. When I first transferred, the process was absolutely horrible… finding my place, everything. Not knowing what to do, or my spot, my routine… it affected the way I started the semester and my mindset. But then through the course of the semester… I feel like I adjusted. That's why you have the frazzled me on one side and a content me on the other side.

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Jill's illustration is portrayed in Figure 7.
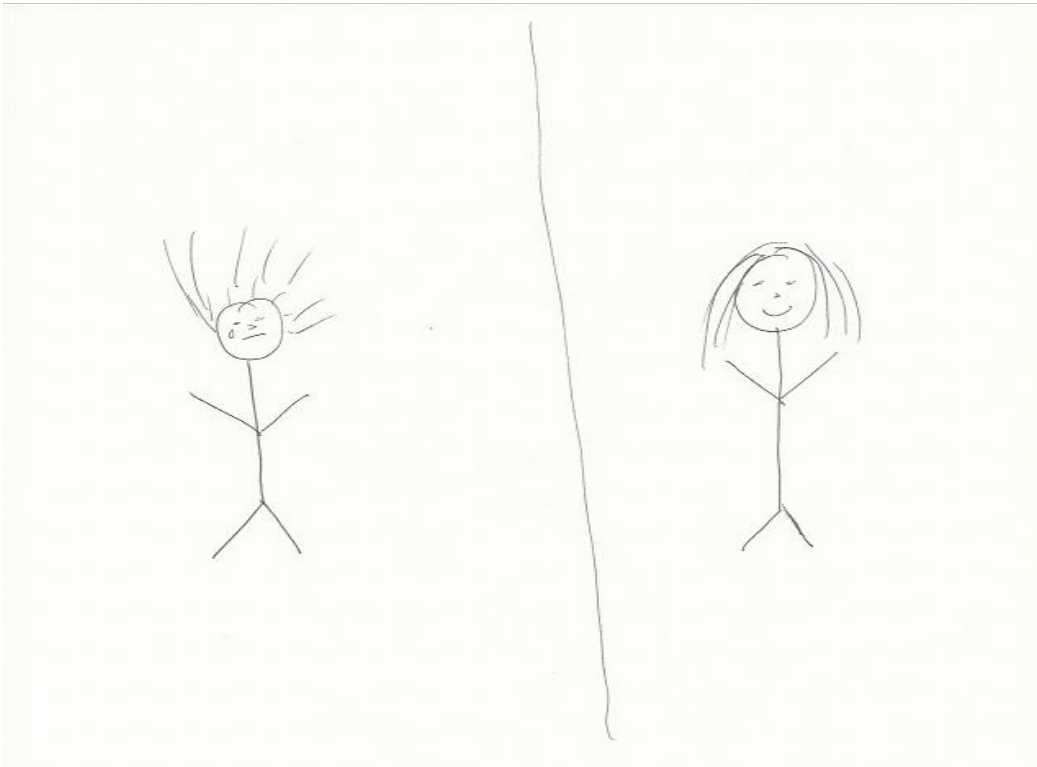
Figure 7. Jill's Illustration.

Jill felt that although she did not know where or how she "fit in" at first as a transfer student at the university, finding her niche and "gaining her footing" was something that came to her in time. Heather similarly stated that "it takes time" to adjust to the university, and future transfer students should "be prepared for a lot of change and don't give up." Earnestly, Heather stated:

> You can't take it to heart when other people doubt you. Speaking that negativity into your mind is what causes failure, I think. If you believe you won't make it, then chances are, you're not going to. The first step to achieving any goal is believing in your ability to do it and to give yourself time. You have to believe in yourself, especially when no one else does.

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In addition to perceiving that others doubted her intellectual abilities because of her status as a vertical transfer student, Heather was also a first-generation student who felt like she had to advocate for herself if she wanted to succeed. Heather's response to the dubiousness others had about her academic abilities was to steadfastly champion her own academic goals and believe in her ability to succeed in due time.

Overall, although participants perceived others held negative views of their community college attendance, which sparked feelings of anxiety initially, they remained tenacious in the face of these obstacles. The transfer students included in this study showed an inspiring amount of resiliency in spite of perceptions of stigmatization. As a whole, they were determined to succeed, and accounts of their fortitude were evident across interviews.

Overall University Experience

In response to the third research question for this study, I investigated how participants' overall university experiences were shaped by their perceptions of how others regarded their community college attendance. Feelings of stigmatization led participants to feel like they needed to move quickly through their time at the university and reach their end goal of earning a bachelor's degree in a swift timeframe. Additionally, participants viewed perceptions of community college stigmatization as an additional obstacle or test they needed to conquer during their time at the university. In the following section, I provide an overview of these two themes regarding how perceptions of stigmatization influenced participants' overall experience at the university.

"Rushing to Catch Back up"

Perceptions of stigmatization caused Jill, Jake, and Beth to feel like they did not belong at the university and instead needed to hurry through their time at SU in order to get to where they are "supposed to be right now," as Jill phrased it. Although Jill explained that it takes time to "adjust to things" at the university, she had to "constantly remind" herself to be patient and to take everything one semester at a time. "It's hard because I should have done college so long ago, and I'm so ready to get through it and get into my profession, like everyone else my age," Jill explained. Although she tried to make friendships and "fit in" at SU, she felt out of place and self-conscious as an older transfer student, which made her want to move through the university quickly and find her place in the workforce.

Likewise, Jake also felt like he was in a hurry to rejoin his own age group. Although Jake shared that he was not upset by his inability to form friendships and connections at the university, he was eager to "fast-forward" school and embark on his career, where he would be among people his own age with similar interests. "I just don't have the same interests as students here, and they don't want anything to do with me, either," Jake explained. He provided an illustration of these feelings, which is shown in Figure 8.
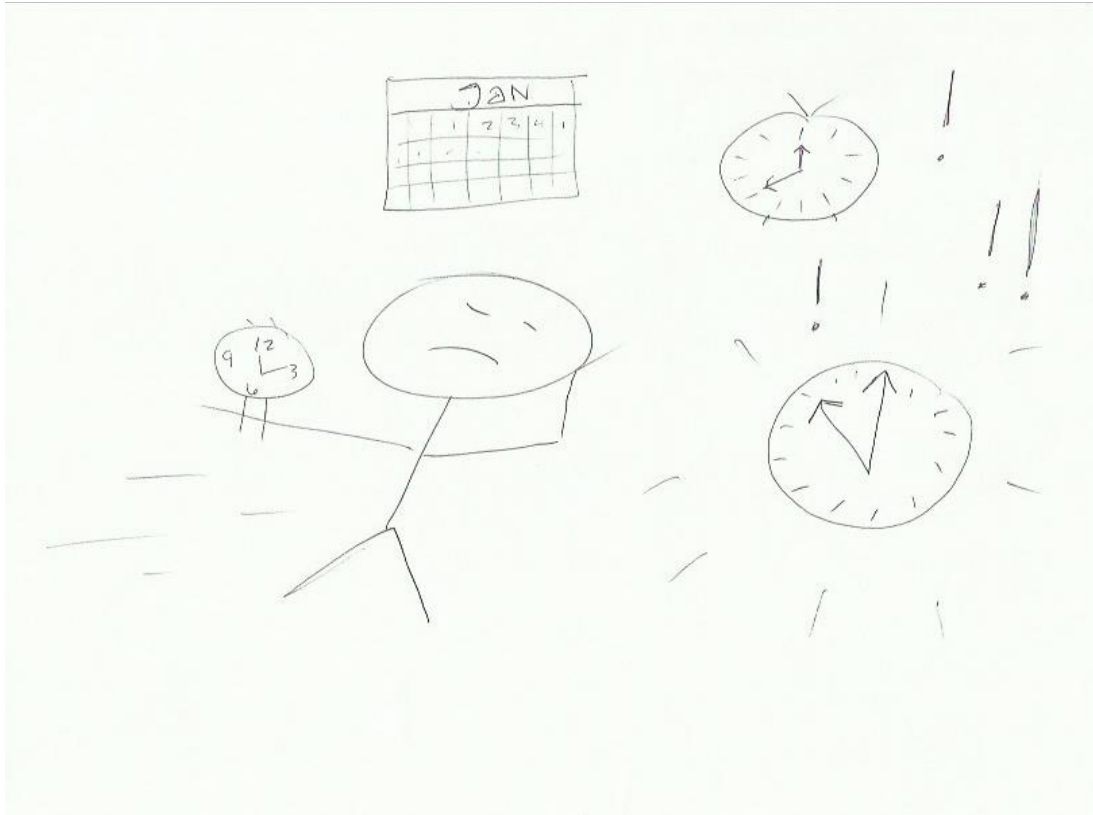
Figure 8. Jake's Illustration.

Jake explained:

> I always feel like time is running out, it's running away from me. You
>
> know, I'm older than your average Joe college student, I'm a veteran, I'm
>
> pretty out of place here, and now I feel like I'm rushing to catch back up
>
> to where other people my age are right now, where I'm supposed to be.

Like Jill, these perceptions made Jake want to move on more quickly to a place in

life where he would be around people more like himself.

Perceptions of stigmatization also made Beth long to "get past school."

Initially, Beth looked forward to joining lots of extracurricular clubs at SU and

connecting with other students and professors. Therefore, when university

students did not show much interest in reciprocating her expressed desire to

connect, Beth felt like they thought she was "weird," and she felt "outcasted" for being both older and a transfer student. She explained this was a big disappointment for her, and it made her want to "hurry up and finish" her time at SU and move on to the next thing, where she hoped she would be better received. After reflecting for a bit, Beth also pointed out, "It could be really different for some transfers, though—it could make them want to quit," as opposed to making her want to "hurry up and finish."

"It's Like Another Test"

For some of the participants in this study, perceptions of stigmatization made them feel like they were being tested at SU. Because they felt like other people generally doubted their academic abilities because of their community college attendance, they felt challenged to defend their capabilities throughout their time at the university. For example, Hannah shared, "The whole time I've been [at SU] I feel like… 'challenge accepted,' like I'm here to prove something, to prove that yeah, I'm a transfer, but I can do it." In other words, her perceptions of community college stigmatization influenced her overall university experience by making her feel like she was challenged with counteracting the stigma.

Frankie and Mike expressed similar views, as they both compared their overall university experience as transfer students to an exam. Frankie stated that being a transfer student at the university is, "like another test… People expect you to struggle more because you're a transfer, and maybe you do, maybe you don't, but yeah, it's definitely like you're being tested." Mike similarly shared that he feels like he is "always being tested" as a transfer student at the university, and he

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measures his overall performance at the university in relation to both his academic performance and his social life. Mike compared his time at the university to a series of challenges within a given class. He stated:

> I'd say overall my experience has been full of hills and valleys. It's like, I'll figure out how something works or where something is, and that's like a little victory, I guess, a hill. Then I'll have a bad experience where someone says something like, negative, I guess, about community college people, or I don't really feel like I mesh here, and those are the valleys. So, there's good and bad times. It's kind of like a class. You have a series of tests, some you do good on, others, not so much, but then at the end you have your average.

Mike further explained that being a transfer student caused him to be challenged at the university more so than non-transfers who did not have to transition or adjust to a new environment amidst their higher education journey. Although he experienced "hills and valleys," Mike was eager to get to the end of his time at the university; he was determined to reach his goal of graduating.

Amanda also felt like she was continuously being challenged during her transition through higher education. She compared her progression from community college student to university pupil to the metamorphosis of a butterfly. Her illustration of her experience is portrayed in Figure 9.
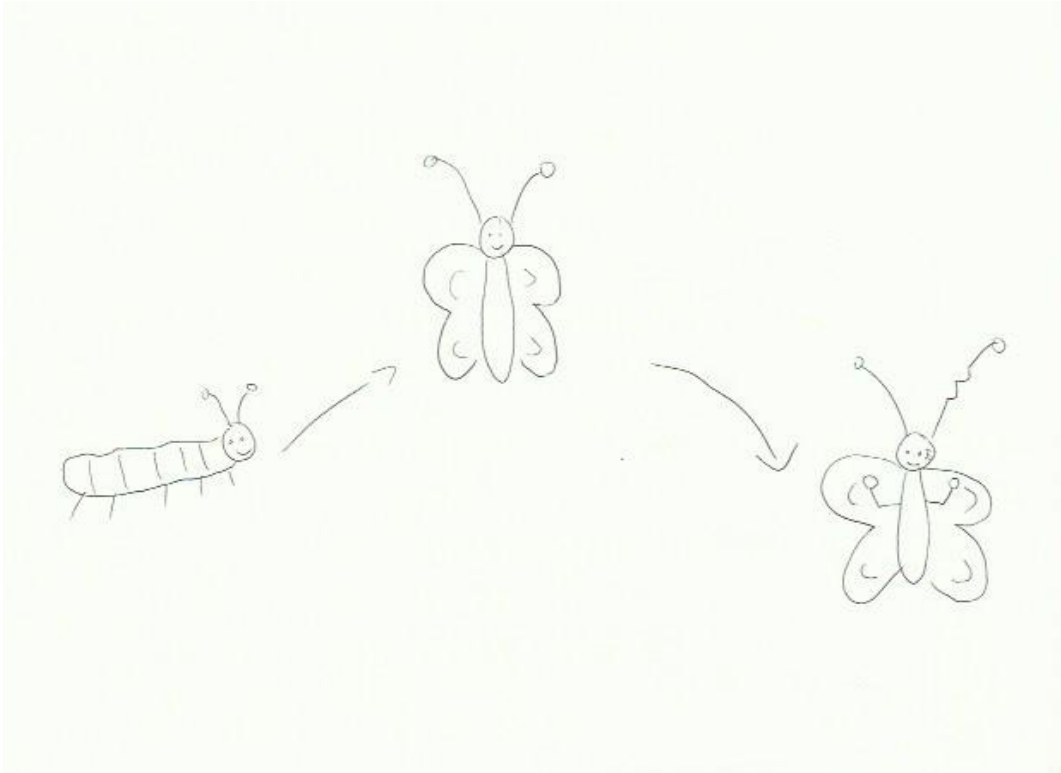
Figure 9. Amanda's Illustration.

Amanda explained her illustration by the following:

> When I started community college, I was a naive little caterpillar, I didn't
>
> really know what I was doing when I first started. I just didn't know what
>
> to expect... But then, as time progressed, I kind of came into my own, and
>
> that's the middle butterfly, after I got my bearings on things. I remember
>
> thinking about this at [community college], I really loved it for the most
>
> part. I really felt like I'd expanded since the beginning of college, going
>
> from a 24-year-old to now I'm 30, so I think age and experience made me
>
> grow. When I was there, I felt like I gained my footing and I knew what I
>
> was doing. This last one is kind of a beat-up butterfly, that's me now. The
>
> university is just hard, it really is. It's like I'm constantly being tested, or
>
> like, proving that I can do it, that I'm not going to give up. So that's me

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now, I've been knocked down or held up a few times, but I'm still

working at it. I'm still hanging in there.

In other words, Amanda felt like she blossomed during her time in community

college, and although she was still "hanging in there" at the university, she felt

beaten down from the various challenges she faced at SU. Amanda further

explained that many of the obstacles she faced at SU related to how others treated

her or viewed her. She noted that her difficulties at the university may have been

more manageable if she had "fit in" better. Although she felt like she was

managing her time at SU to the best of her ability, her "outsider status" and the

subsequent disconnect between her and her peers made her university experience

rockier than it might have otherwise been.

"I Don't Let it Stop Me"

It is also worth noting that even for the participants who felt stigmatized,

they refused to let these perceptions deter them from their goal of earning their

bachelor's degree. For example, Claudia explained that although she felt

marginalized at the university because she first attended a community college, she

did not let this "stand in [her] way." Claudia further explained:

I do see and hear people like, casting doubts on transfer students. It's in

their comments and their faces, and like, how they react to me, and that

does upset me. But I mean, it might hurt me, but it's not going to hurt my

goals.

Claudia was adamant that although perceptions of stigmatization hurt her feelings,

she was determined not to let it negatively influence her goal of becoming the first

in her family to earn a bachelor's degree. In this regard, perceptions of stigmatization did affect her university experience in that she noticed and was offended by it.

Additionally, although Andy did not feel like others stigmatized him for having attended a community college, he did observe, "I think other transfers might, and if you do, that could probably lead you to transfer again or even just quit." Rebecca also noted, "It was really, really tough to come back after I withdrew because I wanted so badly to just like, give up and throw in the towel and say, 'Well, I tried at least.'" For Rebecca, returning to the university and continuing with her education was something she had to "force" herself to do because, as she explained, her desire to complete her education outweighed her desire to "throw in the towel" when she felt overwhelmed and out of place. These statements and observations are important to note because the students who volunteered to participate in this study were already persevering and had completed at least one prior semester at the university. In other words, the students in this study are ones who were persisting and continuing in their time at the university, and the majority were doing so in spite of perceptions of stigmatization and marginalization. As Andy pointed out, such perceptions could lead to very different outcomes for other transfer students, such as attrition.

Overall, participants' university experiences were affected by perceptions of community college stigmatization. Some students in this study felt a desire to move more quickly through their time at SU in order to progress to the next stage of life, where they believed they would fit in and be better received. Others felt

like they were continuously being tested and viewed their transfer student status as an added challenge; these participants felt compelled to prove themselves during their time at the university. And finally, some participants noted that although they refused to let perceptions of stigmatization deter them from completing their university degree, such experiences might have a more devastating effect for other vertical transfer students.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the key findings related to my overarching research questions for this study. The chapter began with an overview of the study's participants. I then covered students' perceptions of community college stigmatization and the types of negative stereotypes they encountered related to their vertical transfer status. I also presented the sources of these perceptions and provided accounts of students' demonstrations of agency and how they reacted to negative interactions. Finally, this chapter ended with an overview of key themes relating to participants' overall university experience. In the following chapter, I will discuss how the findings of this study relate to prior research, and I will provide implications for future practice, policy, and research.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications

Approximately half of all bachelor's degree holders begin their higher education journey at a community college (Shapiro et al., 2012). However, attrition is higher for students who start at a community college than for those who begin their higher education journey at a university (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). This is a problem that must be addressed to improve graduation rates of this ever-growing transfer population and appropriately meet the nation's growing workforce needs (Carnevale & Rose, 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Although many prior studies have explored the topic of vertical transfer student attrition (e.g., Laanan, 1995; Kasworm, 2010; Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013), there is a void in the extant literature regarding the concept of community college stigmatization, as well as if and how it is perceived by this population.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to fill a gap in available research on vertical transfer students' impressions of community college stigmatization. By investigating this topic from the perspectives of transfer students, I gained a better understanding of their perspectives and experiences relating to stigmatization, as well as the sources of these feelings. I was also better able to discern transfer students' demonstration of agency and how they responded to these encounters, as well as how their overall university experience was influenced by their perceptions of stigmatization.

In this chapter, I present a brief overview of the study. Then, in response to the research questions that guided this study, I summarize the key findings and

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discuss how they relate to prior research. I then provide implications for future practice, research, and policy. Finally, I conclude with my reflections on this study as a whole.

Study Overview

In this qualitative case study, I investigated vertical transfer students' perceptions of community college stigmatization. Although the population of students who first attend community college before transferring to a university is growing (Marling, 2013), attrition of this population is a problem (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). Prior research has attributed transfer student attrition to issues such as unclear transfer articulation agreements (Laanan, 1995), course registration issues (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), and increased out-of-school responsibilities and obligations (Kasworm, 2010; Rodriguez-Kiino, 2013). Although transfer student stigma has been postulated as another potential reason for attrition (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), no previous research has been dedicated to exploring this topic. In an effort to fill this void in the literature, I employed the following research questions to help guide this study:

1. Do vertical transfer students perceive there is a stigma connected to community college attendance?

2. If so, how do vertical transfer students describe that stigma, and how do they respond?

3. How is the university experience of vertical transfer students shaped by their perceptions of how others regard community college attendance?

Site and Participant Selection

The site (SU) was purposefully selected (Creswell & Poth, 2017) because of its large transfer population and overall diverse student body. I also purposefully selected students who had completed at least one prior semester at the university. Additionally, all participants transferred to the university immediately after leaving community college and were enrolled full-time in face-to-face classes at SU at the time of data collection.

This case study included 10 vertical transfer students: four males and six females. Most of participants self-identified as White, with three identifying as Latina/o. Eight of the participants were single, while two were married and also had children. Additionally, four were first-generation students, and one was a military veteran. Participants worked an average of 25 hours a week, and students ranged in age from 21 to 37, with the average age being about 27. An array of different university majors was represented in this study, making findings meaningful and relevant across academic disciplines.

Data Collection and Analysis

To recruit participants, I sent email invitations to all students who fit the criteria of the study, to which they responded to set up an interview date and time of their choosing. All interviews took place in a quiet, on-campus conference room during the work week in the early part of the 2019 spring semester. My data collection methods included one round of semi-structured interviews, participant illustrations, and a demographic questionnaire. Interviews were audio recorded, and all documents were stored in a locked drawer or password-protected

computer. After I personally transcribed all interviews, I deleted the recordings, assigned pseudonyms for identifiable information, and worked with the transcripts for the remainder of my research time.

I used the Internalized Stigma Model (ISM) (Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, & Tucker, 2015) as a lens through which I considered my data. I adapted the ISM to the topic of my study and used it to help me explore the relationship between the concept of community college stigmatization and participants' university experiences. To ensure trustworthiness of data interpretation, I included four strategies: clarifying research bias (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Machi & McEvoy, 2016); providing rich, thick description (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2017); member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and peer debriefing (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Additionally, I incorporated a variety of strategies for data analysis, including various coding methods and writing memos (Charmaz, 2014) so that I could track my ideas for emerging themes and remind myself of details I wanted to remember about each interview. For my initial coding method, I employed line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2014) with my *a priori* codes (i.e., stigma, marginalization, and synonymous words and phrases of the two) in mind. From that point, I conducted axial coding (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to consider relationships among codes, and I then collapsed the data into emergent themes (Charmaz, 2014), which became the key findings for this study.

Key Findings

This study produced several main takeaways. Some of the findings support what has been found in prior research, while others constitute new

additions to the literature. In the following section, I provide a brief overview of the main discoveries and discuss how they relate to prior research.

Stigmatization

In response to the first two research questions of this study, I investigated whether vertical transfer students perceived a stigma connected to community college attendance, and, if so, how they described it. Although community college stigmatization has been discussed in non-empirical sources (e.g., Jaschik, 2019; McQuarters, 2015), there is no prior research that has been dedicated to examining this concept from the perspectives of vertical transfer students. Thus, many of the findings in this study represent new contributions to the extant literature.

Overall, the majority (nine) of the 10 participants felt stigmatized for their community college attendance. In particular, they had encounters which made them aware that others viewed them as being less intelligent for having attended a community college. Similarly, participants shared that university students and faculty perceived the curriculum at community colleges to be less academically rigorous than that at the university, which caused them to automatically discredit the academic preparation of vertical transfers.

Because of vertically transferring into SU, participants also felt negatively stereotyped or stigmatized by others as social outcasts. Participants described the difficulties of forming connections with other students who did not have a mutual need to make friends. Although the difficulty transfer students have in establishing friendships in their shortened time at the university level has been

described in prior literature (e.g., Dennis, Calvillo, & Gonzalez, 2008; Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Townsend, 2008; Townsend & Wilson, 2006), the connection this issue has to perceptions of stigmatization constitutes a new finding. For example, participants described times when blossoming friendships withered once their transfer student status was discovered, and others discussed feelings of isolation at SU, which was attributed to being viewed as outsiders by other students. This is important to note because social engagement has been linked to student persistence (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler, 2005; Kuh et al., 2008). Some participants were not bothered by their peers' disinterest in interacting with them and perceptions of stigmatization because they were not interested in forging friendships at the university anyway. This disinterest in connecting with their SU classmates is in line with previous research that has found vertical transfer students to be less likely to form friendships at the university than non-transfer students (e.g., Lester, Leonard, & Mathias, 2013). However, although a couple of the students were not bothered by their perceptions of stigmatization by university peers, their observations of the marginalization are still a noteworthy finding, and such perceptions were indeed worrisome for the rest of the participants who shared these impressions.

Further, eight of the 10 participants in this study were aged 25-years or older, which is in accordance with previous literature that has found community colleges to be popular entryways to higher education for older students (Marling, 2013; National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Many of the participants had difficulty establishing friends because of the visible age disparity, which they

perceived made their peers avoid them. This finding aligned with Townsend and Wilson's (2006) study in which they found that vertical transfer students often had difficulty establishing friendships with younger classmates. Some students explained that their older age made them outliers among their university classmates, and participants' interests were noticeably different from the activities in which their younger, more traditional-aged classmates were involved. As older, married mothers, for example, a couple of the female participants also felt a disconnect with their SU classmates. Specifically, different life stages, as well as their alternative educational pathways, made their university peers view them as out of place or motherly. On the other hand, feelings of marginalization were also perceived by participants who were under or even slightly above 25, as they felt ostracized by their non-transfer peers because of their community college attendance. However, they also did not feel like they meshed with the older students who comprised the transfer student groups and activities available on campus. This is worth noting because feelings of marginalization and stigmatization caused many of the participants to feel like they did not "fit in" or belong, and a sense of belonging has been marked as an important factor in contributing to retention (Strayhorn, 2012).

Prior research has found that community colleges are an important and popular entrance point to higher education for first-generation students (Redford & Hoyer, 2018) and those from low socioeconomic background (AACC, 2009; Miller, 2013). For this reason, it may be unsurprising that participants in this study also felt over-generalized and negatively viewed as being poor because of

their community college attendance. Many participants felt like low socioeconomic status was a label with which transfer students were automatically tagged. Although some students explained that this perception might be true in some cases, and they believed being poor should not be an inherently shameful concept, poverty was nonetheless something with which students did not wish to be automatically associated because of their community college attendance. This felt like an unfair and negative generalization to participants, regardless of whether or not this stereotype was accurate on a case by case basis.

Sources of Stigmatization

Because the concept of community college stigmatization is a new addition to the literature, unveiling the sources of these perceptions also serves as a new finding to add to existing research. Participants perceived community college stigmatization from a variety of different points, including university faculty, staff, and classmates. For several participants, the origins of the community college stigmatization were traced back to their high school teachers and classmates. Negative generalizations and disparaging comments from high school classmates are in accordance with previous research that has found high school juniors and seniors view community college as an undesirable avenue for higher education (Holland, 2015).

However, it was a new finding that such perceptions also came from participants' high school teachers. This was somewhat surprising, considering the national popularity of dual credit enrollment. The term *dual credit* is typically used to describe classes that high school students take to earn college credit in

tandem with their secondary school requirements (Malin et al., 2017). This credit is usually granted by community colleges, and the classes are taught by either community college faculty or qualified high school teachers on either high school and/or community college campuses (Malin et al., 2017). In the state of Texas, where this study took place, around 10% of students enrolled in a public higher education institution are dual credit students (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2016). Therefore, it is interesting to note that participants in this study perceived community college stigmatization from their high school teachers in spite of the common practice of dual credit being offered to high school students—and the connection between dual credit and community college curriculum.

Demonstrations of Agency

In light of my second research question, I explored how vertical transfer students responded to perceptions of stigmatization. Although I originally thought participants might be downtrodden and have lower self-esteem as a response to any stigmatization they perceived, what I found instead were inspiring displays of grit and resiliency in the face of adversity. Participants described the ways they combatted their feelings of anxiety early in their transitions to SU. One became skilled at "just mentally blocking out" his trepidations about his university adjustment, a strategy that is surely difficult and is probably not an available option to all people. Another overcompensated by working extra hard to do well academically to mitigate concerns that university faculty would grade her more harshly because she was a transfer student. This particular response aligns with

the concept of *transfer ecstasy* (Cejda, 1997), which is the term used to describe

when the academic performance of vertical transfer students improves after

transfer, typically in response to anticipated academic difficulty at the university.

Overall, transfer student tenacity was a theme that surfaced through many

interviews when participants discussed their reactions to perceptions of

stigmatization. Proving naysayers wrong, making their families proud,

capitalizing on their prior life experiences and maturity, and believing in their

abilities to adapt in due time were the most common ways participants rallied

against the negative assumptions of others.

Overall University Experience

In response to the third research question of this study, I examined how

vertical transfer students' overall university experience was influenced by

perceptions of community college stigmatization. Perceptions of stigmatization at

the university level made some feel out of place, which caused them to believe

they needed to rush to catch back up to their own age group, where they thought

they were supposed to be in life. Students explained that feelings of ostracization

made them long to finish their university time in a hurry and move on to the next

goal in life, where they would hopefully be better received. Other participants

explained that being stigmatized was like another test. Being doubted or outcast

by their university connections was essentially another obstacle for these students

to overcome. However, although perceptions of stigmatization were offensive to

the participants, they did not let this negativity deter them from continuing to

work towards their goal of earning their bachelor's degrees.

While it was inspiring and reassuring to hear such tales of determination and resilience from participants, perceptions of community college stigmatization could have a negative influence on other transfer students. The participants in this study successfully completed at least one prior semester at SU and were currently enrolled in classes at the time of data collection. In other words, these were students who were already persisting in spite of stigmatization and other obstacles. Additionally, the participants in this study all volunteered to be interviewed, which shows a willingness to engage and connect on campus to some degree. By their own accounts, the participants were persisting in spite of the stigmatization. It is possible that negative perceptions and encounters such as the ones described in this study could result in attrition for other transfer students.

Implications

This study serves as a significant contribution to research in that it fills what was previously a void in the literature. Better understanding vertical transfer students' perceptions of community college stigmatization is key to addressing ways to mitigate this issue and improve the transfer experience for future students. As such, this study sheds light on several recommendations that may be considered for future practice, research, theory, and policy.

Practice

There are several implications for practice at the high school, community college, and university levels that can help smooth the transition for future transfer students. Because many participants experienced their first taste of community college stigmatization from high school teachers and counselors, these

encounters must be addressed. Additionally, community colleges are in the complex position of receiving students who may have been influenced by perceptions of stigmatization and also preparing students for the transition to the university level, where they may also feel harshly judged or excluded for their vertical transfer status. Universities can also take practices into consideration to help alleviate the stigma at the university level and bolster student persistence for this growing student population. Implications for practice for each of these educational levels are discussed in the following section.

High school practices. Secondary school faculty, staff, and administrators are typically viewed as authority figures who hold the power to shape the futures of impressionable young students (Graca, Calheiros, & Barata, 2013; Pace, 2003). As such, they might consider that each student is unique, and a variety of educational avenues and vocational trajectories abound for pupils; university attendance is not the only respectable or necessary route. In fact, community college attendance is increasingly common (Shapiro et al., 2012), and for first-generation students and those of low socioeconomic status, two-year institutions may not be merely the best choice circumstantially; they may be the *only* option for those who cannot afford all four years (or more) at a university (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Hawthorne & Young, 2010; Marling, 2013). For these reasons, high school teachers and leaders may want to be careful to not stigmatize community colleges when discussing college choice options with students, as this may unnecessarily deter students from taking advantage of the higher education entry point that is accessible to them. Because prior research (e.g., National Association

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for College Admission Counseling, 2018) has found this negative practice to be most prevalent in private schools, this recommendation may be especially applicable there. Regardless of the type of secondary school (i.e., public or private), students from all backgrounds and walks of life often see advantages in first attending a community college (Marling, 2013). Therefore, secondary school employees may want to consider acknowledging and accepting this reality and then creating appropriate protocol on how to discuss college and career choice with students in a non-damaging or disparaging fashion.

To accomplish this goal, there are several specific actions that may be advisable for high schools based on the information participants shared in this study. First, whatever their personal views of two-year institutions may be, high school faculty, staff, and administrators may want to consider ways to inform and prepare students and their families for the wide array of educational and vocational options that exist for them so that each student has all of the information needed to consider the best option for his or her unique circumstances and future. This can be done through providing high school students with informational packets to take home and discuss with their families, informational assemblies or workshops for students and their families, or career and college fairs conducted in partnership with local community colleges, businesses, and universities. High school counselors and administrators might consider developing clear communication channels with the community colleges in their area so that they can in turn inform teachers, pupils, and students' families of options and expectations. High school administrators may want to host open

discussions with secondary employees about perceptions and attitudes regarding two-year institutions to ensure a message of negativity and shame is not being delivered to high school students who may prefer or be benefitted by community college attendance. Although the participants in this study who encountered community college stigmatization in high school still persevered with their choice, this may not be the case for other students who are more heavily influenced by the perceptions of high school teachers and counselors. For those, the message that is delivered to them in high school could mean the difference in utilizing community college as their access point, or not pursuing higher education at all.

Community college practices. Additionally, there are implications for practice that community colleges may consider. To appropriately address the emergence of stigmatization, one must first accept that it exists. Presidents and administrative boards of two-year institutions might consider facilitating candid internal conversations about their place and mission within their broader community, and they can investigate how they are perceived within their locale. Gaining and maintaining a clear picture of their public image may help community college administrators understand what their perceived attributes and weaknesses are, which can help them perpetually improve. Highlighting strengths and opportunities that are available to community college students is one way to counteract the stigma; improving any existing weaknesses and correcting misconceptions is another. Community college representatives should also be visible and involved within their broader communities and should work to

continuously provide local schools, students, and their families with facts and options regarding their institution (McCartan, 1983).

Further, it is worth noting that community colleges are in the exciting, though challenging, position of being in the middle of the K-16 educational pipeline (Karp, 2015). As such, it behooves two-year institutions to consider developing creative and thoughtful ways to bridge the transition with both sending institutions (i.e., mainly high schools), as well as with receiving entities (i.e., namely four-year universities) (Baldwin, Alfred, & Sydow, 2017). It may be advisable for community college administrators to form task forces of qualified employees to consider ways to improve the relationship and connection with K-12 schools, as well as with universities. Improving the communication across institutional levels may help streamline the transitional periods for students and provide more information to K-12 schools and universities to help alleviate the community college stigma.

University practices. There are also several implications for universities that can be considered. First, university faculty and advisors may want to refrain from voicing broad-sweeping doubts about transfer students' academic abilities and preparedness. This is not only an overgeneralization; it can also be a potentially damaging opinion that could tarnish the self-esteem and academic success of even the most academically equipped vertical transfer students. The participants in this study were students who had already been retained beyond at least their first university semester. In other words, even for students who were persevering, perceptions of stigmatization were clearly expressed, and encounters

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like those described could conceivably reap more detrimental effects, such as attrition, for other vertical transfers. Also, it is not necessary or helpful for a faculty or staff person to tell a student they are being given certain information or resources because they are a transfer student—they could simply provide the student with the information and leave stereotypes and generalizations unspoken. Instead of voicing doubts about a particular type of student or educational pathway, university staff and faculty could instead make *all* students aware of foreseeable obstacles and expectations.

Additionally, while it may be unadvisable for university professors and staff personnel to single out vertical transfer students in a negative way, they can also take care not to assume they are speaking to or teaching classes or groups comprised solely of non-transfer students. This lack of acknowledgment could cause feelings of marginalization that may negatively affect students' overall university experience. Therefore, it is suggested that university entities instead seek ways to acknowledge the diversity of students' academic backgrounds, while taking care not to stigmatize any particular population.

While the aforementioned university implications have noted ways to address community college stigmatization directly, there are other institutional practices that may also mitigate this negativity by creating a more transfer receptive culture (Herrera & Jain, 2013), or fostering an environment in which transfer students feel more welcomed, included, and valued. For example, in order to better serve and assist this ever-growing population of students, universities may want to have a physical location on campus for transfer support services. A

building or department such as this could house everything from transfer student admissions and orientation programming to transfer student organizations and first-year experience courses (Cuseo, 2012).

In addition to creating a physical space designated for transfer services, there is a myriad of additional steps universities can take to work towards building a culture of transfer receptivity. Universities can support or even establish a transfer student organization, which can afford transfer students the opportunity to meet others and subsequently encourage a sense of belonging and inclusivity that could boost retention and degree completion for transfer students (Marling, 2013). For older students who are juggling various responsibilities on top of academic work, it has been suggested that universities offer distance education and online or hybrid classes to make education more accessible for students with hectic schedules (Connell, 2011). To better assist transfer students of low socioeconomic status, universities could offer more need-based scholarships and work-study opportunities to make the dream of higher education a more realistic goal for those who do not have the financial means to pay for college (Miller, 2013). In regards to females and racial minority groups, some (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012; Townsend, 2009) have recommended that community colleges and universities have faculty, staff, and leadership personnel that are demographically reflective of the institution's student population in order to make students feel a greater sense of belonging and acceptance, which can lead to increased retention and degree attainment. Although these last recommendations do not directly address

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stigmatization, these actions could help cultivate an environment that is welcoming to transfer students and meets their needs, which may be helpful for students who feel marginalized at the university.

Research and Theory

As this is a new topic of exploration, future research may include similar studies with the purpose of discovering how transfer students across multiple academic majors and locations perceive and are affected by community college stigmatization. It is important to note that SU has a large population of transfer students and ample resources for them, and yet community college stigmatization was still perceived by participants. It is possible that at a university with a smaller transfer population or less abundant transfer resources, such perceptions could be even more severe or detrimental. Therefore, additional research can compare the transfer student climate and the idea of transfer student stigma across multiple university campuses, from the perspectives of multiple key stakeholders (i.e., faculty, staff, and administrators.) Future studies could also explore the perspectives of vertical transfer student alumni, or else those who are in their final semester at the university before graduating, to understand their perceptions of stigmatization and their sense of belonging on campus. Exploring this topic from an *antideficit perspective* (Harper, 2010) by investigating the points of view of academically successful vertical transfers could help shed more light on the strategies that helped them succeed. Additionally, vertical transfer students who have been lost to attrition could be interviewed regarding their perceptions of stigmatization and other factors that led to them stopping their education. It is

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important to understand all of the different factors that contribute to attrition to in turn determine what resources, initiatives, and policies universities can employ to better assist this population. It would also be useful to study how community college faculty, staff, and administrators view their reputation, perceptions of public image, and their ability to prepare students for transfer to the university. Community college representatives such as these likely have ideas to share related to this topic that could help ease the transfer student transition and increase the likelihood of student persistence at the university level. Additionally, quantitative research methods would be helpful in unveiling the effects perceptions of community college stigmatization have on academic outcomes.

Future research could also be conducted to better understand the Community College Stigmatization Model (CCSM) developed in this study. For this study, I used a revised version of the Internalized Stigma Model (ISM) (Lannin, Vogel, Brenner, & Tucker, 2015) to help me approach my topic and consider the data collected from participants (See Figure 10). This model was a way for me to organize my thoughts and consider the relationships among perceptions of public stigma, self-stigma, and how the two influenced students' overall university experience.
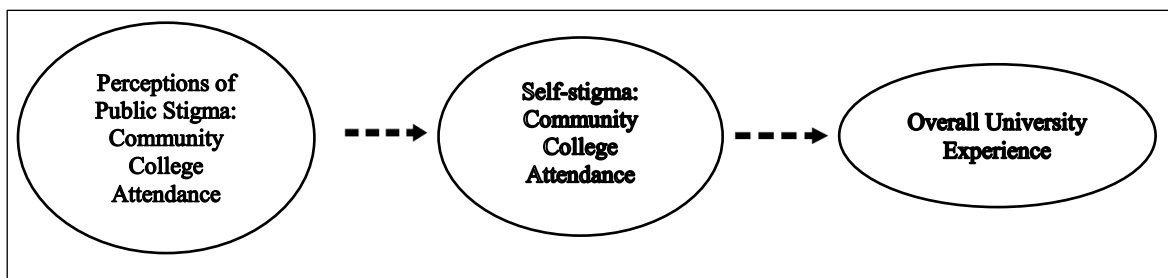
Figure10. Proposed community college stigmatization model.

After collecting and analyzing data from participants, I have developed a new, informed Community College Stigmatization Model (CCSM) (See Figure 11). Through this study, I found that participants did perceive there was a public stigma connected to their community college attendance, and the sources of this came in the form of high school teachers and classmates, as well as university faculty, staff, and classmates. However, rather than causing a self-stigma (as I originally anticipated), perceptions of public stigmatization seemed to instead stoke the fires of determination in participants and lead to resistance of this negative stereotyping. In other words, for the participants in this study, perceptions of public stigmatization of community college attendance led to a desire to prove naysayers wrong, and this made participants want to work harder and do their best at the university, which was evident through their tales of persistence and tenacity. Knowledge of this stigma did cause feelings of anxiety and trepidation, but again, this compelled students to demonstrate their agency.
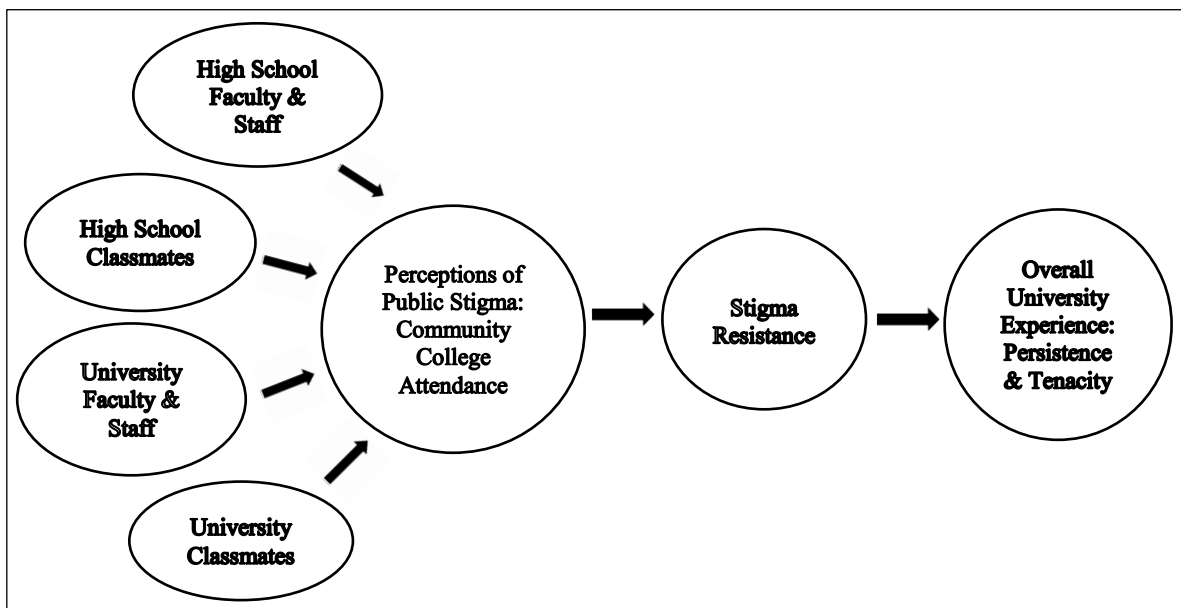

Figure 11. Community college stigmatization model.

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Although this study was focused on perceptions of stigmatization rather than on strategies students used to aid their persistence, the participants in this study were currently on the road to degree completion in spite of these negative perceptions. The picture may look vastly different for other vertical transfer students who were already lost to attrition and were therefore not invited to participate in this study, or for those who are disengaged from the university or considering withdrawing or dropping out and therefore did not opt to participate in this study—that much is unknown, though it is certainly conceivable. Therefore, future research employing the CCSM should be conducted to more fully explore the results of stigma on different categories of vertical transfer students (e.g., vertical transfer student alumni, persisting students, first-semester students, and dropouts) to more fully delineate paths in the CCSM. Future studies should also employ quantitative methods to explore factors or student characteristics that lead to one stigma response versus the other (i.e., stigma resistance versus self-stigma).

Policy

This study also provided some insight into a few policy considerations regarding vertical transfer students. First, it has been noted that many secondary educators may not be equipped with the up-to-date information to proffer students regarding college choice, especially the most veteran and respected teachers who have been away from the college scene for decades (R. E. Jones, personal communication, March 2, 2019). Although high school counselors have training

about college options, teachers generally do not, and students generally spend much more time with teachers (especially their favorite ones) than they do with counselors (R. E. Jones, personal communication, March 2, 2019). For this reason, it may be advisable for secondary education systems to consider establishing policies that mandate or incentivize employees to routinely brush up on their knowledge of post-secondary options for students. This may help high school teachers be better informed of current community college practices and policies.

At the postsecondary level, community colleges and universities may consider working together to ensure transfer articulation agreements are in place and are well understood by administrators and staff personnel (Miller, 2013). Both university and community college administrators might consider ensuring academic advisors, are well-versed in policies pertaining to vertical transfer students so that they can appropriately assist them. And finally, universities may want to consider polling or surveying vertical transfer students to determine the helpfulness of existing university policies affecting transfer students (e.g., orientation specifications, first-year experience course enrollment, transfer student financial aid and scholarships, housing, etc.) Determining what policies and practices are aiding this population and which are creating barriers or obstacles may provide valuable insight to help improve existing transfer student policies. Reevaluating and bettering established policies or creating new, beneficial ones may help cultivate a more transfer-receptive culture, which could signal that transfer students are welcomed and valued at the university level.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore whether vertical transfer students at one large research university perceived there was a stigma attached to their community college attendance, and, if so, how perceptions of stigmatization influenced their overall university experience. Although much research has been conducted on other topics relating to transfer students and attrition, no known empirical research exists covering this topic. Therefore, this study represents a valuable addition to the literature, in that it is filling a void in the research on transfer students. Additionally, through conducting this study, I was able to provide several key findings, as well as important implications for future practice, research, and theory that may be useful for a variety of constituents.

Several key findings came to light through this study. First, participants did perceive there was a stigma attached to their community college attendance. Specifically, students felt others viewed them as less intelligent because of their vertical transfer status, and their academic preparation in community college was seen as inferior or less rigorous. Participants also felt that others viewed them as social outcasts, often because they were visibly older. They also encountered preconceptions about their socioeconomic status because of their community college attendance.

Sources of stigmatization also constituted a new finding to add to the available literature. Although this study was focused more on how students' university experiences were influenced by perceptions of stigmatization, several

participants shared that their first encounters with negative outlooks on community college attendance occurred during their secondary education, with high school teachers and former classmates serving as sources of this stigma. University faculty, staff, and classmates were also conduits of these negative perceptions.

In spite of these impressions, participants responded with agency. Some students described the strategies and coping mechanisms they used to overcome feelings of anxiety caused by the stigma and fear of experiencing these negative views at the university. Tales of their tenacity in the face of adversity were common across interviews. Proving naysayers wrong, making their families proud, and capitalizing on their older age and life experiences (the very thing for which some felt stigmatized) were some of the most prevalent ways students reacted to the public stigma of community college attendance.

The overall university experience of participants was influenced by these impressions in a few key ways. First, participants felt compelled to move more quickly through their university time in order to rejoin their respective age group in the workforce. Students also felt like beating the stigma was another test they were being saddled with at the university. Refusal to let perceptions of stigmatization stop their progress or interfere with their goal of earning a bachelor's degree was a common proclamation across interviews, even for those who felt rushed to graduate or tested by the negativity. The students in this study explained that although the doubts and derogatory opinions of others might hurt their feelings, they did not let this deter them from their goals.

In this final chapter, I discussed how the findings relate to prior research. I also provided several implications for future practice, research, and theory that arose as a result of this study. There are many advisable practices that secondary schools, community colleges, and universities can take away from this research in order to improve the experience of this ever-growing student population. Future research should explore this topic to develop the Community College Stigmatization Model further and provide a clearer understanding of the different ways that public views on community college attendance can influence students. In summation, this serves as a significant contribution to research on transfer students in that it is filling what was previously a gap in the literature. Through this study, I aimed to provide greater insight into the experiences and perceptions of vertical transfer students at the university level and to contribute useful implications to help improve the future experiences of this ever-growing student population.

Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

Please fill out the following information.

Name: _____   Age: _____

Race: _____   Gender: _____

Marital Status: _____   Number of Children: _____

Where you are from (State, Country): _____

First in your family to attend college? Circle one: Yes   No

Student Veteran? Circle one: Yes   No

Financial Aid Recipient? Circle one: Yes   No

Please list any other scholarships you receive:

_____

Employed on or off campus? _____ Hrs. worked per week: _____

Community College Attended: _____

Degree/Certificate earned at Community College? Circle one: Yes   No

University Major: _____ Minor: _____

Expected graduation date (Semester, Year): _____

Intended career: _____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Section One: Illustration

1. Please use these colored pencils and paper to illustrate your experience as a transfer student at the university.

    a. Please describe your illustration.

    b. [If student is separate from others/on the periphery] It looks like you are separate from the action. Can you describe some encounters or events that made you feel this way?

    c. [If student is part of the action] It looks like you are part of the action! Can you describe some encounters or events that have made you feel this way?

Section Two: Community College & University Expectations

2. When did you decide to pursue college? What led you to want to go to college?
    a. Why led you to first attend a community college?

3. Describe your time at community college in regards to…
    a. Coursework (rigor, amount of work, time spent studying)
    b. Interactions with professors (in and out of class)
    c. Interactions with students (in and out of class)
    d. Involvement in clubs/activities

4. Why did you choose to transfer to this university?

5. What were your expectations of the university prior to coming here, in regards to…
    a. Coursework expectations (rigor, amount of work, time spent studying)
    b. Expectations of professors (in and out of class)
    c. Expectations of students (in and out of class)
    d. Expectations of involvement in clubs/activities

Section Three: University

6. Describe a typical day at UTA in regards to…
    a. Coursework (rigor, amount of work, time spent studying)
    b. Interactions with professors (in and out of class)

      i. Please provide examples

      ii. How do you perceive faculty view transfer students?

   c. Involvement in clubs/activities

      i. Is there anything in particular that has helped or hindered your sense of belonging at the university?

7. Was there anything you felt unprepared for once you got to the university?

8. As a whole, how would you characterize transfer students at the university?
   a. Why do you feel this way?

9. As a whole, how would you characterize non-transfer students at the university?
   a. Why do you feel this way?
   b. Do you feel transfer students are treated differently than non-transfers? If so, can you provide examples?

10. Are there any stereotypes (good or bad) that you perceive to be associated with being a transfer student?

11. How do you perceive transfer students as a whole are viewed by non-transfers at UTA?

12. Imagine you were asked to give recommendations to faculty and staff to help improve the university experience for future transfer students… What would your recommendations be?

13. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a transfer student?

Appendix C

E-mail to the Office of University Analytics

Hello,

My name is Melissa Thompson, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. I am conducting research on transfer student experiences at [this university]. Particularly, I am looking at transfer students who attended a community college before immediately transferring to the university.

This is a qualitative study (approved by [the university's] Institutional Review Board) in which I will be using interviews as my main data collection method. I will be interviewing participants once, and through this study, they will have the opportunity to share their experiences at [the university], which could improve the experiences of future transfer students. The interview will last approximately one hour, and it will be scheduled at an on-campus location at a date and time of students' choosing.

I am emailing you to ask for a list of email addresses of students who fit the criteria for my study. I will send students an invitation email (attached), and those who are willing to participate will respond to me via email to set up their interview.

The criteria for the participants are as follows:

- Attended no university other than [SWU]
- Attended a community college prior to [SWU]
- Transferred to [SWU] right after community college
- And completed at least one semester (or more) at [SWU]

I appreciate your timely assistance with this project, and I look forward to your response. Please do not hesitate to let me know if there is any additional information you need from me.

Kind regards,

Melissa L. Thompson

Appendix D

Recruitment E-mail to Students

Dear (Student's Name),

My name is Melissa Thompson, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. I received your contact information from the Office of University Analytics because I am conducting research on transfer student experiences at this university. Particularly, I am looking at transfer students who attended a community college before immediately transferring to the university. I am inviting you to participate in a study where I will interview you once.

During your interview, you will have the opportunity to share your experiences at this university, which could improve the experiences of future transfer students like you. The interview will last approximately one hour, and it will be scheduled at an on-campus location at a date and time of your choosing.

Your decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary. You may elect to discontinue your involvement at any time without any negative consequences from the university. If you participate, your identity will be kept confidential, and you will be given a pseudonym for the study.

If you are willing to participate, please email me at melissa.thompson2@mavs.uta.edu at your earliest convenience to set up a date and time to complete your interview. Your participation would mean a lot to me, and I appreciate your consideration. Thank you, and I hope to hear from you soon!

Kind regards,

Melissa L. Thompson

Appendix E

E-mail to Individual Departments

Dear (Name of Department Director),

My name is Melissa Thompson, and I am a doctoral student in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at [SWU]. I am conducting research on transfer student experiences. Particularly, I am looking at transfer students who attended a community college before immediately transferring to the university. I am emailing you because I believe you may have connections to transfer students who fit the criteria of my study.

If you are willing, would you please forward my email and flier to any transfer students you know? Thank you so much for your time and help with this important project.

Information for students:

- I am asking you to participate in one interview (approximately one hour long), during which you will have the opportunity to share your experiences at [SWU], which could improve the experiences of future transfer students like you.
- Your decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary, and you may elect to discontinue your involvement at any time, without any negative consequences from the university. If you participate, your identity will be kept confidential, and you will be given a pseudonym for the study.
- The interview will be scheduled at an on-campus location at a date and time of your choosing.
- Please view the attached flier to ensure you fit the criteria for the study.

  If you are willing to participate, please email me at melissa.thompson2@mavs.uta.edu at your earliest convenience to set up a date and time to complete your interview. Your participation would mean a lot to me, and I appreciate your consideration. Thank you, and I hope to hear from you soon!

Kind regards,

Melissa L. Thompson

Appendix F

Informed Consent Document

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Melissa Laird Thompson, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Educational
Leadership and Policy Studies, Trimble Hall, 109A,
melissa.thompson2@mavs.uta.edu

TITLE OF PROJECT

Community College Stigmatization: Perceptions of Vertical Transfer Students at
The University Level

INTRODUCTION

You are being asked to participate in a research study about your experiences as a
transfer student at the university. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to
participate or discontinuing your participation at any time will not result in any
penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Please ask
questions if there is anything you do not understand.

PURPOSE

The specific purpose of this research study is as follows: To find out if vertical
transfer students at one large research university perceive transfer student
stigmatization, and, if so, how those perceptions influence their university
experience, it at all.

DURATION

You will be asked to participate in one face-to-face individual interview. This
interview will last approximately one hour.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The number of anticipated participants in this research study is up to 100.

PROCEDURES

The procedures which will involve you as a research participant include:

1. Review the informed consent document and sign it if you agree to
   participate in

the study.

2. Participate in one individual interview. This interview will last approximately one hour.

The interview will be audio recorded. The audio records will be transcribed verbatim, which means they will be typed exactly as they were recorded, word-for-word, by the researcher. Once transcribed, the audio records will be permanently deleted after the study is completed. The interview transcriptions will be kept in a secure place for the required 3 years after the study closure.

POSSIBLE BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there will be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit community colleges and four-year universities by providing a better understanding of transfer students' experiences.

POSSIBLE RISKS/DISCOMFORTS

There are no perceived risks or discomforts for participating in this research study. Should you experience any discomfort please inform the researcher. You have the right to quit any study procedures at any time with no consequence.

COMPENSATION

There will be no compensation for this study.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES

There are no alternative procedures offered for this study. However, you can elect not to participate in the study or quit at any time with no consequence.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to decline participation in any or all study procedures or quit at any time with no consequence.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every attempt will be made to ensure that your documents and identity are kept confidential, and you will be assigned a pseudonym for the study. A copy of this signed consent form and all data collected from you will be stored in a password protected computer in a locked office for at least three (3) years after the end of this research. The results of this study may be published and/or presented at

meetings without naming you as a participant. Additional research studies could evolve from the information you have provided, but your information will not be linked to you in any way. Although your rights and privacy will be maintained, the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, the [university's] Institutional Review Board (IRB), and personnel particular to this research have access to the study records. Your records will be kept completely confidential according to current legal requirements. They will not be revealed unless required by law, or as noted above.

CONTACT FOR QUESTIONS

Questions about this research study may be directed to Melissa Laird Thompson at melissa.thompson2@mavs.uta.edu. Any questions you may have about your rights as a research participant or a research-related injury may be directed to the Office of Research Administration; Regulatory Services at 817-272-3723 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

As a representative of this study, I have explained the purpose, the procedures, the benefits, and the risks that are involved in this research study:

Signature and printed name of principal investigator or person obtaining consent and Date

CONSENT

By signing below, you confirm that you are 18 years of age or older and have read or had this document read to you. You have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time.

You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits, to which you are otherwise entitled.
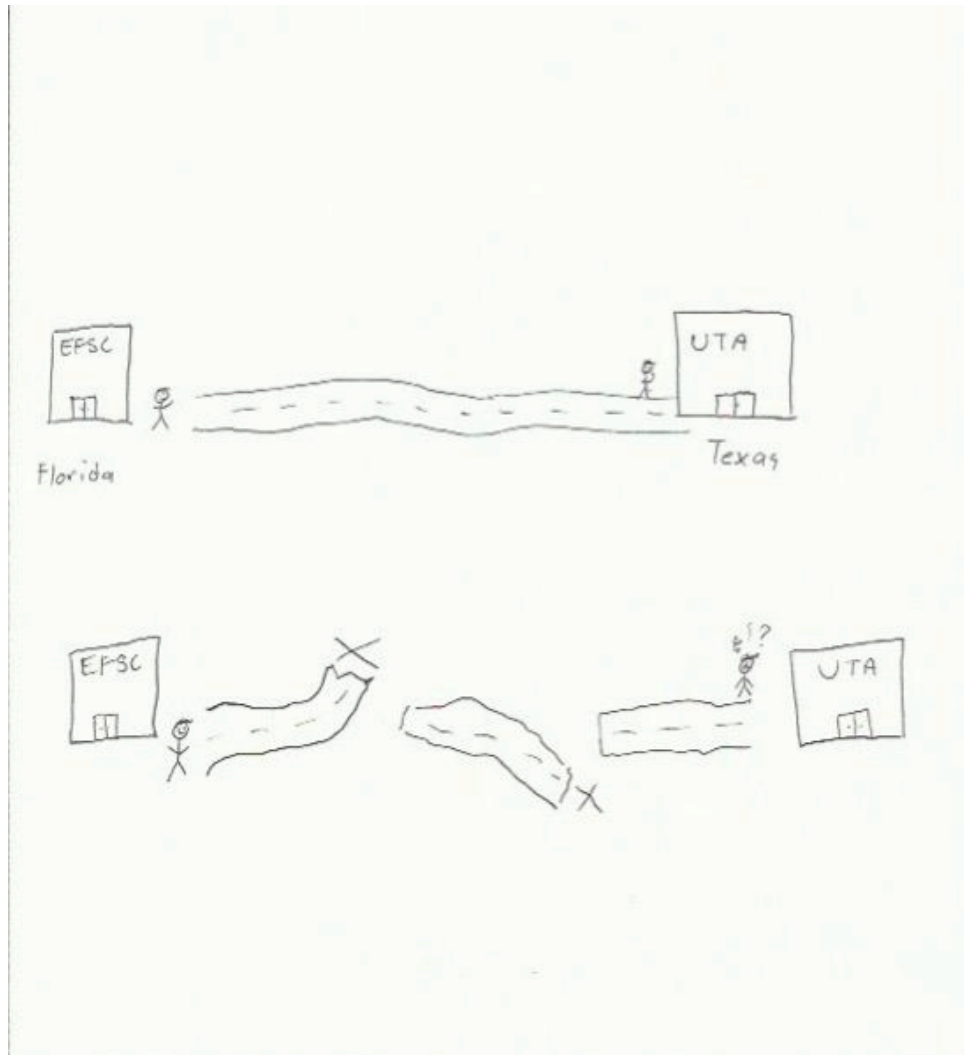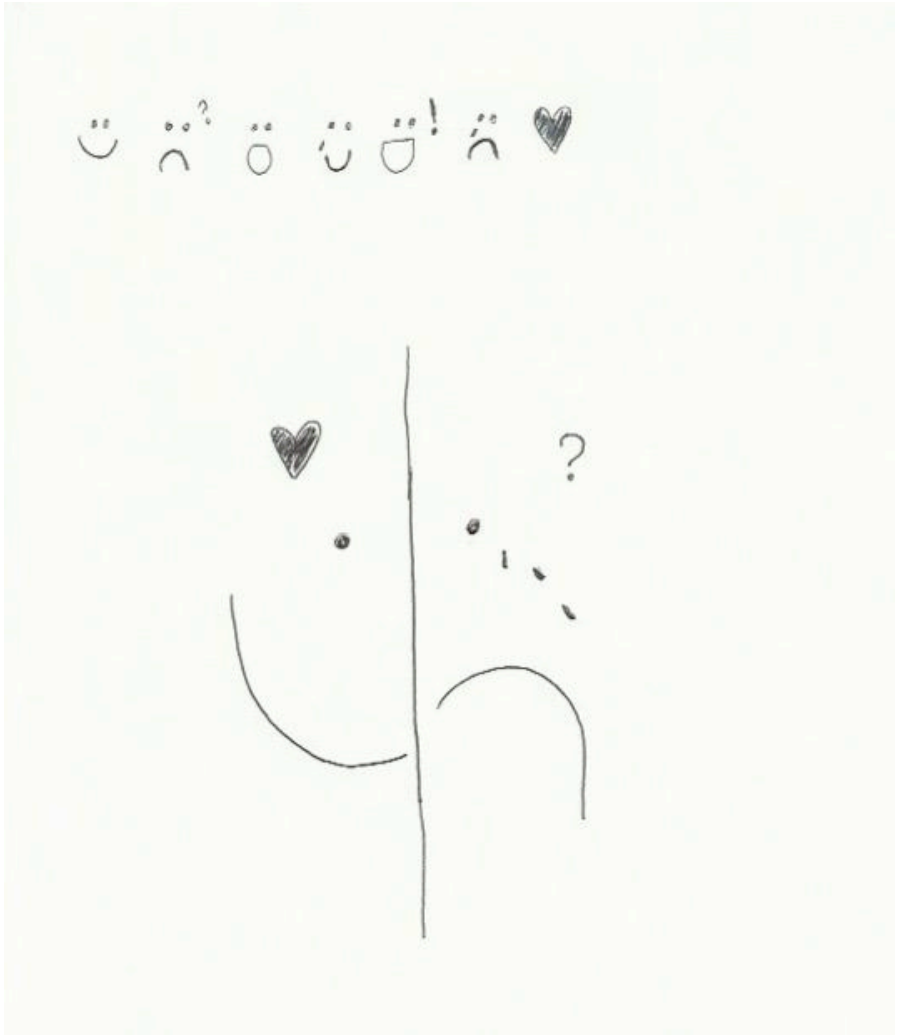

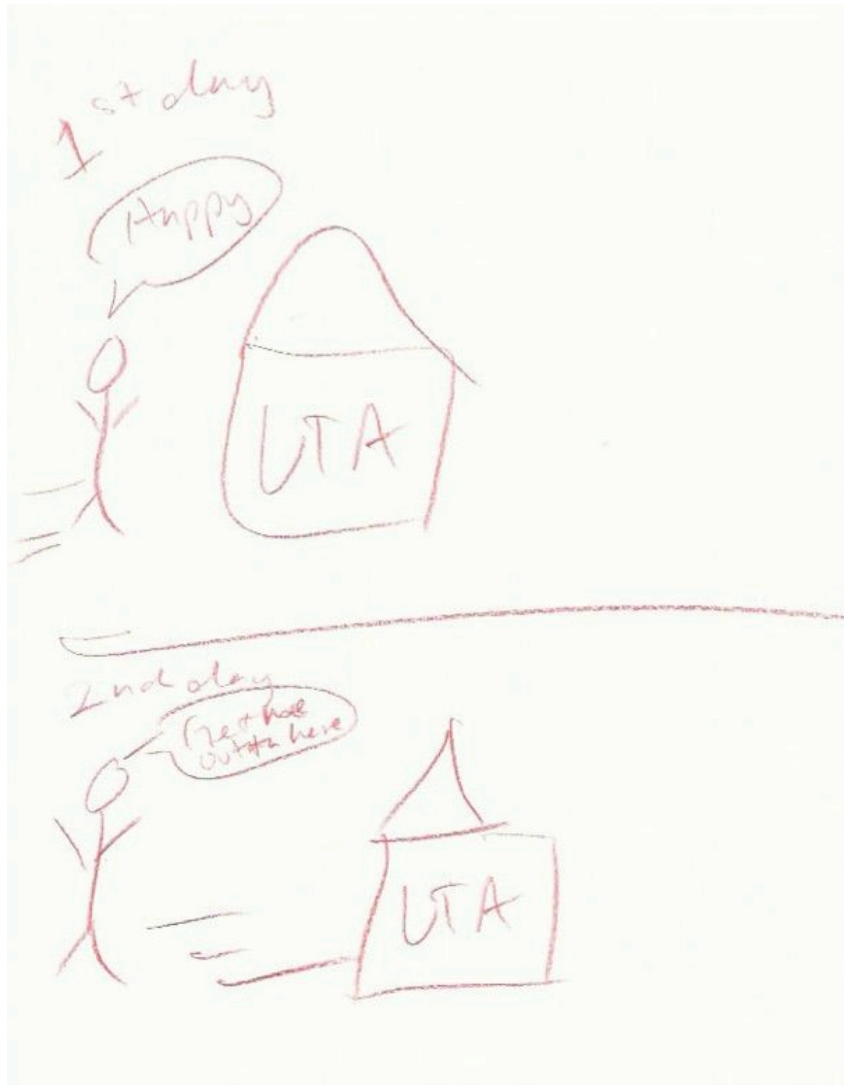**SIGNATURE OF VOLUNTEER**   **DATE**
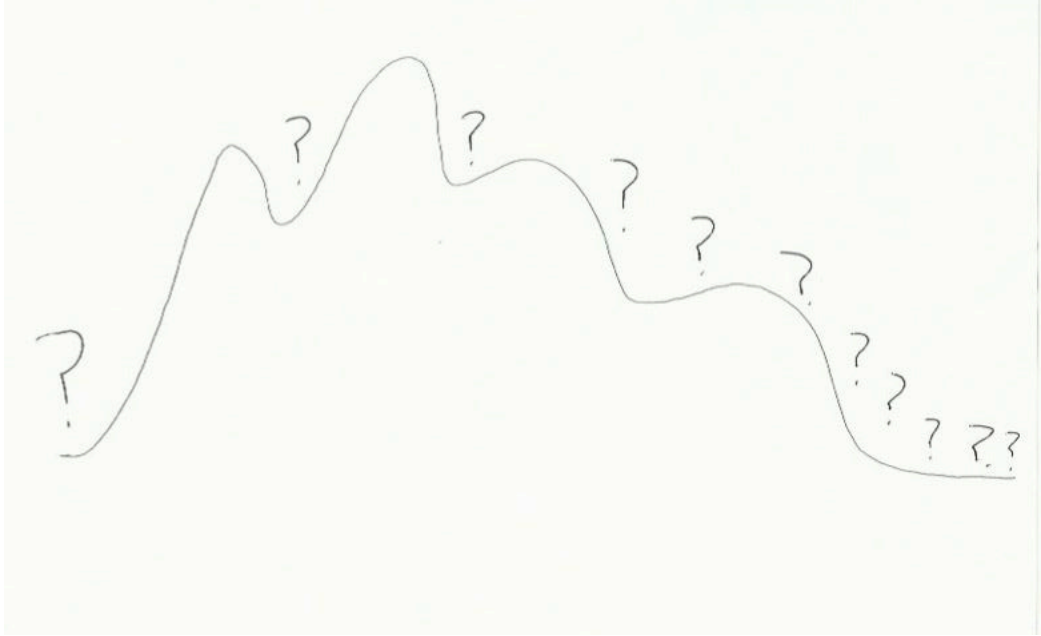
Participant Illustrations not Included in Manuscript

Andy's Illustration

Claudia's Illustration

Frankie's Illustration

Mike's Illustration

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Biographical Information

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In her spare time, Melissa enjoys reading, creative writing, watching movies, and playing her piano and flute. She currently lives in Denton County, Texas, with her beloved Australian shepherd, Genie.