

**EXPLORING STUDENTS' BARRIERS TO TRANSFER IN A COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP**

by

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A Scholarly Delivery Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Educational Leadership

West Texas A&M University

Canyon, Texas

December, 2022

## Signature Page

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*Qualified Signature	✓	Yes		No		Literature Review		Case Study	✓	Empirical Study
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\*The qualified signature of the methodologist indicates agreement only with the scholarly deliverable(s) checked. The lack of one or more checked scholarly deliverables is not indicative of disagreement, but instead reflects a lack or absence of the methodologist's involvement with the unchecked scholarly deliverable(s).

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### **Scholarly Delivery Framework**

The final composite explores distributive leadership and students' barriers to transfer in a 2- to 4- year transfer partnership through two artifacts. The first scholarly deliverable is a case study article that can be used for teaching doctoral or master's candidates in the field of higher education leadership. The title of this article is "Distributive Leadership in 2- to 4-Year Transfer Partnerships: Collaboration for Enrollment Management." This case recounts scenarios for higher education leaders from a community college system and both rural and urban universities engaged in collaborative efforts to improve transfer enrollment. This article offers teaching questions that can be utilized to further understand distributive leadership in higher education institutions. The final scholarly deliverable is an empirical article titled "Exploring Students' Barriers to Transfer in a Community College and University Partnership." This empirical article explores barriers to transfer in a qualitative case study, which provides a direct voice of students who participated in a community college transfer partnership but dropped enrollment and did not transfer to the 4-year university.

## IRB Approval



### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS Letter of Approval

Dr. Harper:

The West Texas A & M University Institutional Review Board is pleased to inform you that upon review, proposal #2022.04.018 for your study titled, “**Exploring Students’ Barriers to Transfer in a Community College and University Partnership,**” meets the requirements of the WTAMU Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) No. 15.99.05.W1.01AR Institutional Review Board (Use of Human Subjects in Research). Approval is granted for one calendar year. This approval expires on **May 3, 2023.**

Principal investigators assume the following responsibilities:

1. **Continuing Review:** The protocol must be renewed on or before the expiration date if the research project requires more than one year for completion. A Continuing Review form along with required documents must be submitted on or before the stated deadline. Failure to do so will result in study termination and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** At the conclusion of the research project (including data analysis and final written papers), a Close out form must be submitted to AR-EHS.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Pursuant to SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.13AR, unanticipated problems and serious adverse events must be reported to AR-EHS.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-Compliance:** Pursuant to SOP No. 15.99.05.W1.05AR, potential non-compliance, including deviations from the protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol must be requested by submitting an Amendment form to AR-EHS for review by the IRB. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented. Amendments do not extend time granted on the initial approval
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form, only the IRB approved form is allowed.
7. **Audit:** Any proposal may be subject to audit by the IRB Administrator during the life of the study. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete

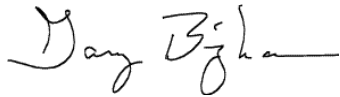
and accurate records for 5 years and making them available for inspection upon request.

8. **Recruitment:** All recruitment materials must be approved by the IRB. Recruitment materials distributed to potential participants must use the approved text and include the study's IRB number, approval date, and expiration dates in the following format: WTAMU IRB###-###-### Approved: ###/###/##### Expiration Date: ###/###/#####.
9. **FERPA and PPRA:** Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if applicable to the research being proposed. The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.

Sixty days prior to the expiration of this proposal, you will receive a notification of the approaching expiration date at which time you will need to submit an Amendment/Continuation/Close out form.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



Dr. Gary Bigham  
Chair, WTAMU IRB



Dr. Angela Spaulding  
Vice President of Research and  
Compliance

## Acknowledgments

Two months into the journey toward my doctorate, the COVID-19 global pandemic began. We were then on lockdown, and I began the world of virtual work. This was only the start of the trials and tribulations, which continued for the 3-year journey. During the pandemic, many were pushed toward a breaking point mentally and emotionally. I was also affected. I learned from this experience that we as humans need connection and belonging, and we need to help each other and build each other up. Now, through God's grace, I have made it through to the other side, even stronger. All praise be to God. I express my deepest gratitude to each one of you who played a role in carrying me through this journey to the doctorate.

In all this, you greatly rejoice, though now, for a little while, you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (New International Version, 1982, Peter, 1:6-7)

To my family, I love you all. Mom, I thank you for being so loving and being there for me no matter what. To the most amazing mother alive, I got my caring heart from you. You are an inspiration to keep going in life; no matter what happens, you make the best of it, and have fun. Walt thank you, too, for all your care, especially through the unexpected times. To my dad, although you are in heaven, I know you are looking down, smiling. I got my fierce determination from you, Dad. To my sister, Anna, my brothers, Russ, and John, God blessed us all on this journey called life. We have certainly been through a lot together. Thank you for always believing in me. To my nephews and nieces Alex, David, Jacob, Gavin, Kaden, Ron, Elsie, Archie, Averie, Saylor, and Kynlee, you

can do anything you set your mind to. If you find that you want to start over and change directions, you can do that, too.

To my children, Kameron and Ryan, thank you for reminding me every day how blessed I am to be chosen as your mother. I love you both with all my heart. Remember to embrace your uniqueness, dream big, be kind, and always believe in yourself and your value, the gift you share with the world just for being you. To my daughter Kameron Paige, you have experienced so much already and are becoming stronger through the lessons you are learning. I am so proud of your determination and your loyalty. Thank you for your compassion and understanding of my recovery from perfectionism. Now, I am trying to relax and take it easy. To my son Ryan Scott, you have been calm and steady in your genuine ability to adapt to the changes in the world, in school, and in your family life. Thank you for your patience and understanding of all that we have faced while I complete this degree. I am so proud of your steadfast commitment to taking care of yourself and being there for your friends and family. You are making those choices that support your future and well-being.

Connor, Landon, and Natalie Nickerson, I am so proud of the young adults you have become, and I appreciate your kindness, mercy, connection, forgiveness, and friendship during my doctoral studies. Dr. Cathan Coghlan and Dr. Rachael Capua, thank you for encouraging me to begin the doctoral program. Due to our previous work together, Dr. Harper was able to boost my confidence early on by saying, “You can do this. You are already a published author.” I had totally forgotten our article at TCU. Believing in myself that I could do this level of work was half the battle. Dr. Cap, thank you for your expertise at your graduate student virtual workshop. This helped me

significantly. Thank you, also, for your friendship and collaboration over the years. You are an inspiration! Sandra Garcia, chair, Hispanic Women's Network of Texas, thank you for the opportunity to speak and volunteer as a mentor with Latinas in Progress. The giant "You Can, and You Will" coffee mug you gave me has truly kept me going through some of the terrifying times during the pandemic. I hope I can now give back even more and inspire others who will come behind. Dr. Harper, I am also seeing more clear now that I have my reading glasses, which you recommended a couple of years ago. So, thank you. To my friends and colleagues at Tarleton State and the University of Texas at Arlington, who supported me while on this journey, I thank you. Carolyn Monk, thank you for being a positive inspiration of faith-filled perseverance and victory. Dr. Shanna Moody, thank you for being a personal inspiration and sharing the gift of recovery. I can see a vision of what life may have in store for me as I turn the corner beyond the doctorate.

The leaders at West Texas A&M University have been phenomenal, from President Walter Wendler to each of the faculty and staff I have worked with in the educational leadership program, the graduate school, the writing center, and the library. I am truly blessed to have chosen this great institution. Dr. Hooper, your gentleness, positivity, and open-mindedness were refreshing. I especially appreciated the relief I felt when you asked me, "Did you remember to smile?" Of course, I did remember to smile. Dr. Bigham, I appreciate your sharp skills in teaching and research and your service as the advisor and director of the program. Even more importantly, Dr. Bigham, I appreciate your empathy. I shared with you two very difficult personal hardships during this program. I remember you first said, "That really ticks me off." I knew at that point that you really cared, and that gave me strength at those critical moments to keep going and



not quit when my mind felt paralyzed. I was then able to think and do the work, even when I had to change directions midstream.

Dr. Harper, words cannot express how much I appreciate your kindness, patience, and understanding in leading me through this multi-layered journey. It was God's divine providence as you were the perfect person to serve as my chair. Thank you for gently reminding me to "not overthink it" and focus on one section at a time, line by line. I just love listening to your instructional videos. You are truly the embodiment of a great teacher, leader, and scholar. You have had more patience and been more supportive than I ever could have asked or expected. You are an angel. To my dissertation committee, Dr. Harper, Dr. Hooper, and Dr. Yang thank you for your guidance, corrections, thoughtful questions, and kindness. You have inspired me to share my research and believe in the impact my research may have for the administration to have the opportunity to listen to the students' own suggestions to improve transfer barriers.

Lastly, I am appreciative of every university and community college leader who assisted. To the students who participated, I salute you and appreciate your sharing your story. You help me to remember my "why." I am determined to help students like you, like I once was, a first-generation, community college student who was also supporting a young child. I will keep working to remove barriers, and I will do my part to continue to advocate for students' needs.

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**Distributed Leadership in 2- to 4-Year Transfer Partnerships: Collaboration for Enrollment Management**

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## **Abstract**

This case study is based on a distributed leadership model and the complexity within and between organizations with shared goals. The case study focuses on senior enrollment managers from 2-year community colleges and 4-year institutions collaborating to improve transfer student enrollment. The Advising Transfer and Admission Council brings together regional executive leaders to collaborate to reduce barriers for a seamless transfer. Improving transfer enrollment proves to be challenging due to differences in resources and economic, social, cultural, and political forces. This case study may be used in leadership preparation courses to illustrate complex issues in a competitive higher education marketplace.

*Keywords:* distributed leadership, enrollment management, transfer student partnerships, alliances

## **Distributed Leadership in 2- to 4-Year Transfer Partnerships: Collaboration for Enrollment Management**

Distributed leadership as a concept relates to the contextual analysis of leadership, as it is focused on the division of labor among many (Gronn 2000, 2003). Distributed leadership is primarily concerned with the activity of leadership and the mutual interdependencies that form leadership practice (Spillane, 2006). In fact, a central tenant of distributed leadership is *leadership as practice* versus as a role or responsibility (Harris, 2013). Spillane et al. (2004) described leadership as practice in distributed leadership as a combination of leaders, followers, and the situation. Characteristics of distributed leadership include emerging from a group or network of individuals rather than from an individual in a formal leadership position (Harris, 2004). This can also be seen as leadership that focuses on interactions and relationships (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). This requires an *openness of boundaries*, which necessitates collaboration across the institution, offering an avenue to build relationships and trust, which is essential (Beckmann, 2017; Harris, 2013; Woods et al., 2004).

Although distributed leadership has been popular in educational leadership, several strong criticisms exist. The first critique is the relatively few empirical studies showing specific positive outcomes, little empirical research exists on the outcomes of shared leadership in higher education there is slightly more work on the antecedents or conditions that promote its development (Holcomb & Kezar, 2017). Secondly, several theorists warn that there are challenges in the treatment of power in distributed leadership (Corrigan, 2013; Harris, 2013; Hartley, 2009). “Distributed leadership implies shifts in power, authority, and control” (Harris, 2013, p. 551). Leaders in distributed leadership

“have no formal authority their power is reduced” (Hartley, 2010, p. 280). Further, the reduced power creates a lack of accountability (Corrigan, 2013; Hartley, 2009). Lastly, theorists asserted that distributed leadership remains elusive or weak, and lacks a unifying concept (Corrigan, 2013; Hairon & Goh, 2015). Corrigan (2013) further asserted that detractors want educators to know that distributed leadership could be “a façade, designed to win commitment to objectives determined elsewhere” (p. 70). Depending on the context in which distributed leadership is applied in the social, cultural, and relational environment, there could be challenges and/or a potentially negative impact for distributed leadership (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016; Hartley, 2009).

This case study is based on a 4-year university that is experiencing a decline in its undergraduate transfer student enrollment. They seek help from the Advising Transfer and Admission Council (ATAC). The ATAC is a council that brings together regional executive leaders to collaborate to reduce barriers for a seamless transfer. The intent of the organization is good; however, the setting takes place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The quest for a successful distributive leadership endeavor is a challenge.

### **Freemont Northern University**

It had been several years since Freemont Northern University (FNU) met enrollment expectations. Due to this, FNU received lower state funding than other universities and already faced a low operating budget. Therefore, Dr. Adam Sotheby, Vice President of Enrollment Management, had been given more than the usual amount of pressure from the newly inaugurated FNU President, Frank Smith, and his cabinet.

President Smith was a young president, and this was his first position at a public university, with a total enrollment of 13,000. A lot was riding on this year’s enrollment

for both President Smith and Dr. Sotheby. Last year was a record-breaking freshman enrollment year. New staffing in the city, a new advising model, and increased services for first-generation college students also contributed to a 5% increase in student retention. However, in the past 5 years, Freemont struggled to grow enrollment for transfer students, including adult and online students. Dr. Sotheby's specific goal was to effectively grow undergraduate transfer enrollment by at least 6% (without an increased operating budget) within the next academic cycle 2020 recruitment for 2021 semester enrollment – or else! Dr. Sotheby, a former faculty member and department head, was afraid he might be released from his vice-presidential duties and asked to return to the teaching faculty, if he did not make these enrollment goals this year.

Freemont Northern University is a midsize, public university located in a rural town named Freemont with a population of 17,000. This was just outside of a typical driving distance (72 miles) southeast of the downtown area of Chicagoland, a metro area comprised of nearly 10 million people. Multiple community colleges and public and private university systems served the area. Chicagoland is a diverse metropolis, with the general population demographics consisting of about 33% white, 29% Hispanic, 31% Black, 6% Asian, and 1% other races. Freemont is a predominantly White town, and FNU was also a predominantly white institution with about 66% white, 22% Hispanic, 6% Black, 3% Asian, and 3% other races identified as the demographics of the student body. Freemont Northern University had only recently begun the diversity and inclusion committee on campus to address prospective and current minority students' needs in the enrollment process.

Due to the recent National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) ruling to eliminate the ethics law preventing universities from recruiting away students attending other universities, retention was also now a pressing threat for transfer students as competitor colleges, and universities can continue to recruit transfer students-- even after they have enrolled at another college or university. Due to the remote location, with limited retail and entertainment options, public transportation, and amenities, Dr. Sotheby thought FNU would be particularly vulnerable to this threat from the NACAC ruling. In fact, his daughter, Sophie, was now a college sophomore herself at FNU, and she was receiving flashy recruitment emails from Illinois State University (ISU) bragging about student apartments for juniors in the city with access to shopping and sports stadiums. Illinois State University even offered to reinstate the \$4,000 scholarship she had been awarded 2 years ago when she was originally admitted there as a freshman.

### **Metro City Community College**

Metro City Community College (MCCC) enrolled about 150,000 students per year at its seven physical locations and a fully online campus. Metro City Community College system had three goals: to increase the number of students earning degrees, increase the transfer rate to 4-year institutions, improve outcomes for students needing remediation to increase the number of adult education students progressing to college-level coursework. Metro City Community College was in an urban area of 2.7 million people within the greater suburban surrounding areas of 9.4 million. The results of the Fall 2019 COVID-19 situation, affected the community college's enrollment by a 7.5% decrease, which was an unprecedented drop.



## **A Call for Help**

Due to priorities mentioned for FNU, including freshman enrollment and retention initiatives, transfer enrollment was put on the back burner. In thinking about the next steps to launch a transfer enrollment increase campaign, Dr. Sotheby first set out to renew the partnership with MCCC. The transfer credit articulation was originally signed almost 6 years ago with MCCC. The articulation agreement was not followed up with much, other than an annual college update email sent out by Dr. Sotheby's assistant vice president, Ms. Nicole Fletcher. Travel and events by FNU's admission counselors or senior leadership were virtually non-existent, so it was doubtful many of the current students at MCCC would have heard of FNU or be familiar with its programs.

The first thing Dr. Sotheby did was give Dr. Moira Best a call. As a long-time builder of relationships, Moira was well-known in the greater Chicagoland area. She had deep connections and attended the best private schools in the region for secondary school, and the biggest public university in the area for her graduate school. Dr. Best was frequently cited in regional and even national news publications related to successful community college graduation and transfer rates. Moira had been credited with leading the first separate transfer office at MCCC, and was well respected in conference circles.

"This is Dr. Adam Sotheby, Vice President of Enrollment Management from Fremont State University. You may not remember me, but a few years ago we came to the event at MCCC and signed our articulation agreement." Dr. Best replied, "Awe, yes, how is it going for you during this difficult time of COVID-19?" Dr. Sotheby replied, "Well, it seems to be going as well as can be expected. Hope you are well." Dr. Sotheby continued,

The reason I am calling today is I would like to set up a Zoom meeting next week with you to see if we can get things rolling again for the transfer articulation agreement for FNU, and see about bringing our program information to the students at MCCC.

Dr. Sotheby would normally request to set up a personal meeting to discuss any new collaboration he wanted, but COVID-19 prohibited that. However, this also saved him the trouble of a 90-minute drive each way, the costs of car rental, and a day out of the office. He needed only a quick one-hour meeting. (He felt the new freedom of working remotely to be an advantage over the previous location-based limitations for faculty, staff, and hopefully, potential new transfer students.) “Well, let me check my calendar,” Dr. Best said, “Umm, it looks like I am completely full; however, we do have the monthly ATAC meeting next Friday afternoon. You’re welcome to join us.” Dr. Sotheby replied, “I’ll be glad to attend. Can you tell me a little more about this meeting?”

In the last 2 years, Dr. Moira Best started the ATAC, a council that brings together leaders from the top six largest feeder universities around the table to discuss the issues and reduce barriers to increasing transfer partnerships and collaborations for a seamless transfer. She had developed joint events and advising plans to give students more options for transfer. Moira said, “Sure, I’ll be glad to.” Just then, her assistant interrupted urgently to let her know she had an incoming call from MCCC’s Chancellor, Dr. Marie Alonso. “Well, I’ll need to call you back; I have an urgent call.” Dr. Sotheby replied, “Of course, take care.” As he hung up, Moira picked up her next call. “Hello, this is Dr. Best. May I help you?”

“Yes, Moira, this is Chancellor Alonso. Listen, I just want to make sure you have seen our enrollment totals this fall, and I want to ask a few questions. Are you available to chat?” Moira responded, “Oh, yes, certainly, Chancellor.” He continued:

Great, and you are doing fantastic, by the way! It is so wonderful to see your excellent work bringing national attention to MCCC. Listen, since we’ve gone fully online, our enrollment has dropped by almost eight percent. So, I really want you to focus on keeping our students enrolled here and earning their associate degrees. Okay?

“Oh, sure,” Moira quickly agreed. The chancellor continued, “Quick question for you Moira. Do you think the pandemic led to more competition for transfer students, and increased the chances the members of ATAC are poaching our students?” Moira paused and said,

Well, ‘poaching’ is not new, Chancellor, but we are in an increased climate where I think that is a concern for us, a heightened concern, but if you are a good partner, we will help promote you to students. If you poach us, then maybe we will not share as much information. We are definitely looking to raise the percentage of the transfer-outs who have earned their associate degree at the time of transfer, way above the current 38%.

The chancellor eagerly replied, “Wonderful sounds perfect. Have a great day!”

### **Advising Transfer and Admission Council, ATAC on the Scene**

For the school year, due to social-distancing, the members of ATAC agreed to meet bimonthly rather than monthly. During this meeting, each person was to go around the table to discuss program strengths, opportunities, and enrollment updates for advising

transfer and admissions requirements and topics to solve student transfer enrollment barriers. By the time Dr. Sotheby joined the call, he could see Dr. Clint Westwood, in the middle of a big laugh, telling jokes to all and bragging about how ISU recently boasted record-setting enrollment and graduation numbers. Dr. Sotheby had never met Dr. Westwood, but he recognized him from the photo on the email blast he had sent his daughter. Just then, Dr. Best called the meeting to order:

Welcome, everyone. I am so pleased that FNU was able to join us today. I really think ATAC can help them become current on issues for transfer admissions and advising here in the region—and hopefully, we can all help them with their transfer student population and add diversity. Diversity is the topic of the meeting today, and next meeting we'll have the agendas set for the next few meetings this fall by the end of today's meeting. Today, I asked Angela Faithton from Moore University, if she would share with us a few of the great things they are doing with transfer success.

Ms. Angela Faithton, the Director of Transfer Admissions at an urban, public institution with 20,000 students, Moore University. She quietly brought up her idea of a transfer coalition, how they came together for the first-time in college orientation events at the community colleges, and had staff attend the transfer university college fair. There they could collect student information with a data-sharing agreement. She said:

This way, we could plan for the long-term and build the advising (on a course-by-course) level and get to the relationship building where we can see education changes lives. We may build those deeper relationships where we can start to

inform the students with a good fit major and university where they will most likely be successful and build the confidence and self-efficacy they need to thrive. “Finally,” she continued, “We’re very culturally diverse and friendly, with bilingual support, parent and family programs, as well as financial aid and scholarship presentations to allow students to look at the full picture.” Ms. Faithton mentioned Moore University had internally been on a trajectory of transfer growth over the last 5 years. During this time, she implemented her relationship-based strategy with one-hour appointments with the admission counselors and their prospective student base. During this appointment, they were able to connect each student with campus resources, such as student support and diversity and inclusion offices, so they were best served. Appointments were set up automatically at the table visits, where the giveaway was a college-success “I Can and I Will” branded coffee tumbler. “Wow,” thought Dr. Sotheby to himself:

There is absolutely no way FNU can compete unless, of course, you look at our tuition being \$2,000 less. That’s more cash in their pocket. But we can’t even get to them if they’ve never heard of us. This is going to be tough. Even with the savings in tuition, we are going to need to develop stronger student success support across campus for diversity, inclusion, and belonging efforts, if we are going to compete for students in the greater market area, which I don’t think our administration has even considered at this point in the recruitment process.

“Thank you for your wonderful presentation, Angela,” said Dr. Best. She continued:

We certainly appreciate your guidance and leadership, Ms. Faithton. Before we conclude today’s meeting, I did want to briefly mention, I’m sure you all have

heard about the NACAC ruling, and while colleges overall do have to compete with each other for enrollments on some level, in recent times, we have seen a lot more growth in our partnerships and collaborations, particularly between the universities and colleges in this ATAC group. We are committed to achieving the best possible outcomes for our students with this alliance.

### **ATAC Meetings Continue**

The next few meetings started in the same manner. Dr. Best spent a few minutes welcoming the group after Dr. Westwood finished telling stories and jokes for at least 10 minutes, and of course, there were debates about the upcoming election. Later in the fall, the post-election emotional reckoning was full of opinions on the impact of funding for struggling higher education in the middle of an ongoing pandemic. Overall, less than half of the meeting time was spent going around the virtual table for updates from each of the six universities in attendance. Dr. Best shared the news on student attendance at the ATAC virtual transfer major information sessions for business, nursing, education, biology, engineering, psychology, and communications. Moira had recently also opened these ATAC transfer major fairs state-wide due to the virtual mode. So, there were now 15 colleges instead of the previous six who regularly attended the ATAC meeting. Due to this, the number of prospective students each college faculty saw in their private virtual breakout rooms was even further reduced. These majors were chosen as they comprised the ATAC joint faculty sub-group committees, which met quarterly with their counterparts on the community college faculty to share articulation coursework and other student preparation information among the ATAC university partners, Dr. Sotheby discovered. Dr. Sotheby thought to himself:

We have really missed out, we are going to have to come up with a way to stand out academically and competitively related to the academic theme, or maybe we could highlight our most student-friendly faculty member for attendance...

Hmmm...I bet I know some colleagues back from my faculty days which can lead me in the right direction...or maybe I could make a presentation to ask for volunteers to start attending these ATAC academic faculty sub-groups at the next faculty senate meeting.

Dr. Best sent out an email to the group members on December 6<sup>th</sup> stating,

As the winter holidays are right around the corner and the pandemic has yet to let up, we will cancel the next meeting of the ATAC. We will see you virtually on January 2021, so have a happy new year.

Dr. Sotheby reflected on this notification and became a bit perturbed. He felt he didn't really have the face time with the ATAC, nor his staff with the students of Metro City, to make a large enough impact on transfer enrollment for the spring semester. He was not asked before the cancellation was made. Furthermore, he was really disappointed because he had prepared for his roundtable update to talk about some of the faculty who had agreed to come on board for the subgroup committees. Dr. Sotheby was also hoping to share the news of the virtual programs FNU was conducting over the winter break called "Forward Together" to help transfers navigate the process of admission. He considered that he would have to take more of a long-term route to improve his transfer enrollment obstacles. Finally, he felt he needed to search for other solutions, as the ATAC was not as quick a fix as he had hoped. Dr. Sotheby was determined to continue communications

over the break to build more relationships with key leaders at MCCC to have more influence in the ATAC in the new year.

### **Teacher Notes**

Distributed leadership theory is derived from distributed cognition, a term for a division of cognitive science that focuses on “cognitive systems whose structures and processes are distributed between internal minds and external environment, across a group of individual minds, and across space and time” (Zhang & Patel, 2006, p. 340).

One of the foremost researchers and thought leaders on distributed leadership is James Spillane whose work defined a model of interactions among leaders, followers, and their situation vital for distributed leadership practice (Rah, 2013). Therefore, distributed leadership occurs within the group in a social context (Rah, 2013; Spillane 2006).

Although there is not a comprehensive definition of distributed leadership, Woods et al. (2004) noted it has three identifying characteristics: being an “emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals,” having undefined leadership boundaries, and having expertise and leadership opportunities widely distributed within the group. There are several different nuances to comprehending distributed leadership (also said to be collaborative, democratic, or shared leadership), according to Harris (2013), who shared a perspective from her research. “Distributed leadership implies a fundamental change in the way formal leaders understand their practice and the way they view their leadership role. Distributed leadership means actively brokering, facilitating, and supporting the leadership of others” (p. 546-547).

Along these same lines, Marchionini and Moran (2012) suggested that a strength of distributed leadership was its relevance in education today as it brings together



multiple points of leadership necessary for the future to safeguard the institution's ability to respond to volatile changes to innovate to a new educational model needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hartley (2010) claimed that distributed leadership was increasing in educational settings because of the practical application that had evolved within organizations in the new knowledge economy where there were fewer silos. Lumby (2013) agreed, stating that in the last decade, the theory of distributed leadership has moved from a means to better understand a form of situational leadership to a dominantly used practice.

Al-Ani et al.(2011) stated that “a prominent distinction between shared leadership and more traditional forms of leadership is that the influence processes involved may frequently include peer or lateral influence in addition to upward and downward hierarchical influence processes” (p. 229). Distributed leadership can be described as a hybrid model blending hierarchical and heterarchical components (Gronn, 2009). Al-Ani et al. (2011) noted the formal, senior leader has a critical role to play in the effectiveness of the distributed leadership model.

Townsend (2015) completed a case study for this hybrid model of leadership, which involved groups of six or more schools working together to address common concerns in a network of co-leaders, teachers, and senior leaders from member schools participating across the network. The qualitative study demonstrated the emphasis on shared values and aligned priorities through collaborative meetings. An extra outcome of the inter-organizational working groups was not only knowledge sharing, but also knowledge creation. Therefore, implementation brought about new forms of practice within the bottom-up distributed leadership groups (Townsend, 2015). This reframed

traditional senior leadership's role in sanctioning, facilitating, and “*championing*” the individuals participating (Townsend, 2015, p. 733).

Hartley (2010) noted “within political theory, distributed leadership sits well with the concept of governance, and with ‘joined-up’ government and ‘inter-agency’ working.” (p. 282). Burke (2010) agreed it naturally aligns with the shared governance found in post-secondary education. Burke further complimented the distributed leadership design to be used in post-secondary education as it can “encourage the collective action required to develop collegial institutional relationships” (p. 24) where the power becomes the collective influence of the group.

Alternatively, Zepke (2007) asserted that distributed leadership involves challenges for higher education in an accountability driven era. The division of labor includes forms of coordinated action from unprompted collaboration and role-sharing in formal relationships required to meet accountability standards. A similar viewpoint, Biesta (2004), suggested distributed leadership frameworks would be a problem in higher education that operates within a regulatory accountability administration where leadership is top-down, managerial and focused on performativity with pressure for economic outcomes to be met.

Finally, Lumby (2013) issued a harsh critique of distributed leadership in this respect for “avoidance of issues of power, distributed leadership is a profoundly political phenomenon, replete with the uses and abuses of power” (p. 581). By disregarding power imbalances related to the individual, such as race and gender, distributed leadership is detached from the individual, and offers false promises of equal voices and empowerment when focusing on the group influence. Lumby (2013) argued that

distributed leadership is actually a new way to maintain the power status quo. Zepke (2007) researched case studies in higher education and similarly found that “distributed leadership is never free from struggle or disappointment” (p. 312). For the struggle to be motivating and effect positive change, Zepke (2007) echoed the importance of relationships—people matter and personal relationships matter to the outcomes and mutual accountability. In agreement with Lumby (2013), Zepke (2007) acknowledged power within distributed leadership stating, “It is the flow of power that builds mutual trust and enables senior management to do its job, while also empowering the community to pursue its goals” (p. 312).

Overall, distributed leadership provides a framework for creating potential solutions to problems within complex organizational networks. More research is needed to review sustainable outcomes, and critical theory development is necessary to further define and understand distributed leadership (Burke, 2010).

### **Teaching Questions and Discussion**

Harris (2013) reported that there are varied understandings and definitions of distributed leadership. It is important to understand this is not just collaborative leadership. It contains both formal and informal leadership, and “inevitably, issues of power, authority, and inequality loom over distributed leadership as they do in any other form of leadership and its associated practice” (Harris, 2013, p. 546). In looking at our case study of FNU, reflect on the character’s behavior and the way these matters have affected the situation within the greater context of the scenario and how this affected the outcome. Several questions might help readers discuss the collaboration of 2- and 4-year

institutions, and leadership at various levels who have participated in the ATAC committee with the perspective of distributed leadership.

1. What advantages or disadvantages do you feel Dr. Sotheby has in the ATAC committee membership?
2. What do you think are the shared goals of the members ATAC committee in distributed leadership, and in what ways are those same goals conflicting for them as well?
3. When leaders from such diverse backgrounds are brought together, is it possible to have an equal partnership process? What are the challenges that each individual face within the collaborative processes of distributed leadership? Do power differences come into play?
4. In the context of this case study, economic, social, and political forces have combined to yield a climate in which administrators feel pressure to raise levels of enrollment to protect funding and therefore maintain job security. In what ways have these forces altered the effectiveness of the distributed leadership practices in the ATAC committee at MCCC? Have these forces affected some members of the committee more or less than others?
5. Who do you think Dr. Sotheby could enlist horizontally and vertically across FNU to enact a distributed leadership model internally to improve transfer students' enrollment and success? Explain why you chose these individuals and their roles in regard to a hybrid model of hierarchical and heterarchical leadership organization.

6. What role do trust building communications and activities within the virtual environment and geographic locations play in the distributed leadership model for the ATAC committee? Please frame your answers in relation to concepts within aspects of the theory of distributed leadership cognition mentioned by Zhang and Patel (2006) relating to the external environment, throughout a group of individual minds, and across space and time.

This case was developed as an instructional problem-based learning aid in developing students' critical thinking leadership skills in determining action steps within complex situations. The case focuses on the college/university atmosphere and would be best used in higher educational leadership coursework. Distributed leadership literature is imparted in this case study as a framework for understanding the larger context within which institutions' key stakeholders and executive leaders operate and interact to meet shared (and competing goals). Students should consider economic, cultural, social, and political themes when reading the case narrative. Ask students to reflect on the forces affecting the potential effectiveness of each individual leader within the distributed leadership system.

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**Exploring Students' Barriers to Transfer in a Community College and University  
Partnership**

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This qualitative single case study aimed to explore the barriers students indicated as contributing to their lack of transfer. In addition, this study acknowledged the suggestions that students who chose not to transfer had to improve the transfer process. **Research Method:** In this qualitative, single case study, interviews were conducted with 12 community college students who had indicated an interest in transferring and had opted into their community college and University partnership at an urban district in Texas. **Findings:** The theme of support encompassed both barriers to transfer and suggestions to improve the transfer process. With respect to barriers to transfer, the themes of financial issues, support, and change study focus area emerged. Suggestions from students to improve the transfer process included the two themes of support and content with the program. **Conclusion:** The main barriers for students in successfully transferring to a university from a community college are financial issues and the lack of support. The results also strengthen the conceptual framework of transfer student capital by supporting themes in transfer barriers, such as students who lacked the advising or capital to understand the transfer process.

*Keywords:* transfer, barriers, community college partnership, transfer student capital

## **Exploring Students' Barriers to Transfer in a Community College and University Partnership**

It is estimated that as many as 80% of first-time students entering community colleges intend to transfer to a 4-year institution to earn a bachelor's degree (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Handel, 2013). Nationally, less than one-third of degree-seeking community college students actually transfer to a 4-year institution (Hodara et al., 2016). Furthermore, according to the Community College Research Center, only 15% of students who start at a community college will earn a bachelor's degree in 6 years (Shapiro et al., 2017). Raising the number of students who achieve the community college pathway to the bachelor's degree has immense potential to improve upward social mobility and improve the labor force, and economic development as jobs requiring bachelor's degrees provide higher earning potential on average (The Aspen Institute, 2017). Improving the 2- to 4-year transfer rate also creates more equity in our society. Additionally, students who begin at a community college are statistically more likely to be a minority and from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Jain et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2017; Taylor & Jain, 2017).

Community college and university partnerships provide opportunities for achieving transfer goals that each institution cannot realize alone (Amey et al., 2010; Xu et al., 2018). The role of the 4-year institution is essential to the success of the transfer mission of the community college, and a significant way to improve the inter-institutional transfer process is through strong community college and university partnerships (Kisker, 2007; Stern, 2016; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Wyner et al., 2016; Yeh & Wetzstein, 2020). Therefore, the effectiveness of 2- and 4-year institutions working collaboratively for

transfer students' success is vital (Fink & Jenkins, 2017). Researchers agree transfer is one of the most important issues in higher education today and will continue to be in the future (Bragg, 2017; Fink & Jenkins, 2017).

The two institutions chosen for this study are both large, urban institutions in Texas engaged in a community college and university transfer partnership. These two institutions have a long history of a robust transfer partnership that was created to smooth the transfer student experience and increase the vertical transfer rate. This partnership included articulation agreements and a data sharing agreement, in which interested transfer students could opt-in on their community college application to participate in the transfer partnership events and student services, including an automatic application to transfer to the university when the student is ready. The community college partner was the largest feeder to the 4-year institution partner. However, after the beginning of the COVID-19 global pandemic, transfer student enrollment rates dropped considerably. Elias (2021) reported that community college showed the largest year-over-year decrease in Texas, with 45% fewer students entering Fall 2020 first-time, full-time first-year cohort. Furthermore, the enrollment decrease in the 2-year partner was predicted to continue to affect future cohorts of transfer enrollment at the 4-year partner, which had also experienced a 3-year downward enrollment trend. Therefore, this qualitative transfer student study is timely due to the significant disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has worsened the already poor vertical transfer rate (Saul, 2021).

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the barriers students indicated as contributing to their lack of transfer. In addition, this study

acknowledged the suggestions that students who chose not to transfer had to improve the transfer process. The research questions were:

**RQ1:** What barriers do students who have previously joined a 2-to 4-year transfer partnership indicate as the reason they have chosen not to transfer to a 4-year university?

**RQ2:** What suggestions do students who have decided not to transfer have for 2-to-4-year transfer partnerships to increase transfer completions?

### ***Definition of Terms***

**Articulation agreement.** An articulation is a formal document created when two or more academic institutions follow a process leading to a partnership to provide a formal pathway for transfer students (CollegeTransfer.net, 2020).

**Associate degree.** An associate degree is a degree granted by an institution after the satisfactory completion of a 2-year program of study (CollegeTransfer.Net, 2020).

**Bachelor's degree.** A bachelor's degree is a degree granted by an institution after the satisfactory completion of a 4-year program of study. The most common are the Bachelor of Arts and the Bachelor of Science (CollegeTransfer.net, 2020).

**Basic needs insecurity.** Basic needs insecurity is a “structural characteristic affecting students, not an individual characteristic. It means that there is not an ecosystem in place to ensure that students’ basic needs are met” (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021, p.6).

**Basic needs security.** Basic security means that “there is an ecosystem in place to ensure that students’ basic needs are met” (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021, p.6).

**Students' basic needs.** According to the Hope Center for College, Community and Justice (2021):

Student basic needs include access to nutritious and sufficient food; safe, secure, and adequate housing-to sleep, to study, to cook, and to shower; healthcare to promote sustained mental and physical well-being; affordable technology and transportation; resources for personal hygiene; and childcare and related needs.

(p.6)

**Transfer student capital.** Transfer student capital (TSC) is “the collective knowledge that students accumulate as they navigate the transfer process” (Maliszewski-Lukszo & Hayes, 2020, p. 36). Transfer student capital can also be defined as “how community college students accumulate knowledge to negotiate the transfer process” (Laanan et al., 2011, p. 177).

**Transfer partnership.** The leadership of community colleges and universities creates and engages in transfer partnerships, which can be defined as “collaboration between one or more community colleges and a bachelor’s degree–granting institution for the purpose of increasing transfer and baccalaureate attainment for all or for a particular subset of students” (Kisker, 2007, p. 284).

**Vertical transfer.** Townsend (2001) defined vertical transfers as students who first enroll at a 2-year institution and transfer to a 4-year institution with or without an associate degree (as cited in Taylor & Jain, 2017)

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of transfer student capital (TSC) served as the lens to examine the underpinnings of the research problem in this study. Transfer student capital

is understood as a model of “how community college students accumulate knowledge to negotiate the transfer process” (Laanan et al., 2011, p. 177). The concept of TSC and the process by which students participate to accumulate TSC provided a framework in this study for understanding barriers among community college students in the university partnership who failed to transfer.

Transfer student capital draws on the well-documented and multidimensional theory of social capital, which has multiple definitions. Bashin (2020) defined TSC as:

A concept where individuals and groups gain benefits and find solutions to issues through their social networks. It was described as an interconnected network of interpersonal relationships that gains and transfers benefits and resources by encouraging social ties and participation. (para. 19)

Common sources and influences on TSC can include academic counseling, faculty counseling, staff validation, faculty interaction, financial aid knowledge, mentor relationships, the student’s coping style (active and social), learning and study skills, and motivation and self-efficacy (Moser, 2012). However, Maliszewski-Lukszo and Hayes (2020) found that high schools, family members, and peers are important sources of TSC, in addition to previously well-recognized sources, such as community college faculty and transfer advisors. For example, Maliszewski-Lukszo and Hayes identified TSC in instances of social capital within students’ social networks, such as student organizations and learning communities, which were vital for transfer student success.

Students who begin at a community college are statistically more likely to be a minority, older, and from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Jain et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2017; Taylor & Jain, 2017). Researchers uncovered transfer rates have continued to



fall short for low income, first generation, racial minority, and lower academically prepared students (Bragg, 2020; Herrera & Jain, 2013; Umbach et al., 2019). Transfer students are remarkably diverse with an intersectionality of life experiences and therefore bring a unique set of needs for TSC support (Jain et al., 2016; Kisker, 2007; Young-Walker & Okpala, 2017). Following Yosso's (2005) argument, "these students bring aspects of community and cultural wealth to their college experience that are often not recognized by their institutions" (as cited in Laanan & Jain, 2016, p. 14).

Although students may not understand college processes, this does not suggest that students cannot develop or accumulate knowledge, expertise, and skills to understand the transfer process (Laanan & Jain, 2016). Students should have information and support structures in place to connect their community college experiences to the 4-year environment (Laanan et al., 2011; Rhine et al., 2000). Although many larger institutions (both community colleges and universities) offer transfer student organizations or adult learning communities to offer specific student capital opportunities for transfer and adult learners, many times, transfer student supports, receive a lower priority for institutional strategic goals within a limited operating budget having few dedicated transfer resources (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

### **Bachelor's Degree Attainment**

Higher education has been increasingly important in the US labor markets over the last nearly 40 years (Heller, 2011). Since the *Great Recession*, most jobs that have been produced require some form of higher education due to the global shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy (Lumina, 2019). Improving the vertical transfer path toward bachelor's degree attainment increases workforce development as

more open positions now require bachelor's degrees allowing for a family sustaining wage (Amey et al., 2010; Handel, 2013; The Aspen Institute, 2017). Carnevale et al. (2021) reported bachelor's degree holders earn over \$2.8 million on average over their lifetime, which is 40% more than those with an associate degree, and 75% more than those with only a high school diploma.

Improving the vertical transfer rate also creates more equity in our society and raises social mobility for students who begin at a community college and are statistically more likely to be a minority and from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Jain et al., 2016; Shapiro et al., 2017; Taylor & Jain, 2017). The community college route offers the cost savings and affordability needed for many students to maintain their living expenses, and an opportunity to access higher education and receive support to academically prepare for upper-level college work (Long & Kurlaender, 2009). Vertical transfer is also a social justice issue, as vertical transfer supports more equitable degree attainment (Valente et al., 2017).

Researchers uncovered transfer and bachelor's degree attainment rates have continued to fall short for low income, first generation, racial minority, and lower academically prepared students, and even after accounting for these factors, students who begin at a community college are still less likely to complete a bachelor's degree (Bragg, 2020; Herrera & Jain, 2013; Umbach et al., 2019). In fact, community college students with high income levels transfer at almost double the rate of lower-income students (The Aspen Institute, 2017). Raising the number of students who achieve the community college pathway to a bachelor's degree has immense potential to improve upward social mobility, the labor force, and economic development. Therefore, the effectiveness of 2-

and 4-year institutions working collaboratively for transfer students' success is vital (Fink & Jenkins, 2017). Researchers agree that transfer is one of the most important issues in higher education today and will continue to be in the future (Bragg, 2017).

### **Articulation Agreements and Statewide Transfer Policy**

Nearly half a century ago, the states attempted to solve the problem of the low vertical transfer rate problem by devising statewide transfer policies to address transfer-related issues (Anderson et al., 2006). One such issue that caused this attempt was the lack of a clear guide for community college students to know what courses will be accepted for their university degree, and therefore taking courses that do not transfer, ending up with a loss of transfer credits. This is a major inhibiting factor for transfer students pursuing a bachelor's degree (Bowen, 2019). Stern (2016) noted that due to this, articulation agreements were enacted amongst institutions designed to facilitate the transfer of credit.

An articulation agreement is defined as “a formal partnership between two or more institutions of higher education, and typically, this type of agreement is formed between a community college and a 4-year institution with the goal of creating a seamless transfer process for students” (Barrington, 2020, para. 7). In addition an articulation agreement is intended to certify which courses transfer from one institution and count toward a specific degree at the other institution in the formal partnership (Moody, 2020). The articulation agreement is often considered the first step to ease the transfer of credit from community college to the university and is the foundation of the vertical transfer for a bachelor's degree (Kisker, 2007). It is also important to note that over 30 years ago, states began to sanction statewide mandated articulation agreements through legislatures

and higher education coordinating boards as a method to improve the transfer rate (Anderson et al., 2006).

Ignash and Townsend (2000) evaluated the existing literature and completed a national review of the 34 statewide transfer policies, which included articulation agreements. Using the data collected in their study, they identified several important guiding principles, including a theme of the value of equality for the transfer process, and best practices for recommendations for statewide transfer policy. More specifically were the following guidelines: 2- and 4-year colleges should be viewed as equals in academic quality for lower-division academic coursework, and therefore, transfer students should be viewed as equal in status to native students post-transfer, faculty are the experts and should be primarily responsible for curriculum and articulation, and statewide articulation agreements should include both the general education core as well as major-specific lower-division requirements to the bachelor's degree (Ignash & Townsend, 2000).

### ***Texas Efforts***

Texas has a history of statewide transfer policy supporting the community college transfer route for bachelor's degree completion. The Texas Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (TACRAO) partnered with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) on a task force to create the Texas Common Course Numbering System (TCCNS; TCCNS, 2015). The TCCNS did not originally begin as a state government mandate, but rather as a voluntary, cooperative effort among community colleges and universities. TCCNS first began as an idea in the mid-1970s to a regional consortium in the late-1980s to a statewide organization in 1990. By 1993, TCCNS received statewide acceptance and independent status (TCCNS, 2015). Ignash

and Townsend (2000) determined Texas did not have a statewide articulation agreement, per se; however, Texas at that time had approved 36 out of the 42 semester credit hours (SCH) for subjects in the general education common core.

In fact, the THECB was required by Texas law to adopt the core curriculum to serve as a framework for a consistent statewide curriculum. The Texas Common Core (TCC) curriculum enables “the transfer of lower-division course credit among public colleges, universities, and health-related institutions throughout the state” (Texas General Education Core Curriculum Web Center, 2014, para. 1). An immense benefit to the transfer function in Texas was the development of the TCC. The TCC had a requirement that once a student completes the 42-SCH core curriculum at an institution, when a student transfer to another institution, the receiving public Texas higher education institution must transfer the entirety of the coursework and consider the student as core complete (THECB, 2018). The core complete designation was indicated on the transcript. The TCC courses were easy for students to identify between transfer institutions, due to the TCCNS, which used the same course numbers across the board, to ease the pathways toward bachelor’s degrees. Now, all 137 community colleges and all public universities in Texas participate in the TCCNS to allow for ease of transfer of general education in articulation agreements and transfer guides using the TCC (TCCNS, 2015.).

Increasing overall degree attainment became a statewide imperative for the economic future of Texas to be competitive globally. Due to this, in 2015 THECB launched a bold new vision with the 60x30TX strategic goal to have 60% of students between the ages of 18 and 34 receive a certificate or college degree by 2030 (THECB, 2019). In 2019, the most recent year of data available, the 60X30TX educated population

goal—an estimated 43.5% of the young adult population had a degree or certificate from a Texas or out-of-state higher education institution, up from only 40.3% in 2015 (THECB, 2019). These are moderate improvements, and stakeholders from across the state in higher education were required to develop and implement strategies to continue to meet these targets.

Students from community colleges transferring to universities to earn their bachelor's degrees are a key component of the 60x30TX goal. The 60X30TX strategic initiatives included a stipulation by the Texas legislature for community colleges and universities to work together in their marketing and developing pathways to increase bachelor's degree opportunities for transfer students from the community college (THECB, 2019). Now, according to state law, universities must provide transferable course guides to students showing which lower-division classes will count toward a specific major. The 86th legislative session passed Senate Bill 25, intending to improve transfer efficiency further and ease Texas's continuing problem with course pathways toward degrees. A specific initiative in the plan was the development of the fields of study curricula by the state (THECB, 2019).

### ***COVID-19 and Transfer***

The transfer enrollment initiative has become even more essential now, due to the impact that COVID-19 had on the recent declines. In Fall 2020, there was a decline of over 70,000 community college students, or nearly 10% of statewide, public 2-year institution enrollment (THECB, 2021). Due to COVID-19 decreases in enrollment and challenges in the economy, there will likely be potential backtracking to this progress, and lead to stakeholders having to face an even more challenging situation to meet these

targets. A letter from the Commissioner of Higher Education, Harrison Keller, in the Texas Public Higher Education Almanac (2020) stated:

As this almanac goes to publication, the state of Texas, our students, and our higher education institutions face unprecedented challenges. The global COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of our lives, caused tremendous hardship for students and families, and upended higher education in Texas as we have come to know it. (p. 2)

### ***Inconsistent and Ineffective Outcomes for Transfer Articulation Policy***

Taylor and Jain (2017) examined the literature on the transfer function in America, and they found ways vertical transfer policies and practices were inefficient and ineffective, such as credit loss, insufficient articulation, and “structural and institutional barriers” (p. 278). Even after significant gains in statewide transfer and articulation policy, the 2- to 4-year transfer process has remained complex, inconsistent, and ineffective (Handel, 2013). Anderson et al. (2006), conducted a quantitative study to test the effect of statewide transfer articulation policy existence on the vertical transfer rate. They found that after demographic and other influences, there was no statistical differences in the transfer rate between students in a state with or without a statewide articulation agreement. In a similar fashion, Roksa and Keith’s (2008) study did not show state transfer articulation policy to positively influence the vertical transfer rate, or the time to degree completion. Surprisingly, according to the data from Roksa and Keith’s study using the National Education Longitudinal Study data, students from states that have transfer articulation policies had more cumulative hours than those without articulation policies during their 6-year period to the bachelor’s degree.

This was the case in Texas, where even after all the work TACRAO and THECB had accomplished with the TCCNS and the TCC, the THECB reports the policy to have been ineffective, as there is a large problem of accumulation of excessive SCH attempted by students (THECB, 2020). Since the 60x30TX initiative began in 2015, the average excessive credit hours have been reduced by three SCH for all students earning a 2- or 4-year degree in Texas (THECB, 2020). However, this was still 16 credit hours more than was required for the degree, and these excessive credit hour issues wasted time and money for students (THECB, 2020). The Texas 60X30TX strategic goal was to reduce students' excessive SCH to an average of only three SCH by 2030, and improve transfer guides and articulations with major degree requirements were improved in the 2- to 4-institution transfer partnerships (THECB, 2020).

Critics described the transfer process as difficult and a *maze* rather than a clear pathway that for students can seem “opaque, convoluted, and confusing” (Morris & Cox, 2016, p. 75). However, LaSota and Zumeta (2016) analyzed a nationally representative dataset, the “Beginning Postsecondary Study: 2003 to 2009,” to determine statistically significant factors related to the vertical transfer rate of first time college students during that period. Using a layered hierarchical generalized linear model population average, their results showed, contrary to Roksa and Keith’s (2008) study, that some community college attributes and state transfer policy elements, such as state articulation policy and articulation agreements had a significant positive effect on the vertical transfer probability within 6 years of beginning at the community college level (LaSota & Zumeta, 2016).



Rifkin (1996) warned that as state mandates form and transfer progress is made ever so slowly, it is important to remember that “the actual realization of policy initiatives always occurs at the local community college level. Whatever happens at the institutional level is ultimately what ascertains the effectiveness of transfer and articulation practices” (p. 77). Along these same lines, while the state transfer policy was an important guiding factor for the 2- to 4-year institution transfer partnership policy initiatives, the review occurred in context with people and practices in identifying “local causality” or the “actual events and process that lead to specific outcomes” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 132; as cited by Maxwell, 2013, p. 88).

### **Community College and University Transfer Partnerships**

The leadership of community colleges and universities created and engaged in transfer partnerships, which were defined as, “collaboration between one or more community colleges and a bachelor’s degree–granting institution for the purpose of increasing transfer and baccalaureate attainment for all or for a particular subset of students” (Kisker, 2007, p. 284). These transfer partnerships are important, not only for enhancing the flow of students, but also for offering a pathway for under-represented ethnically diverse students and those with disabilities into Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math fields (Halpern et al., 2018). Transfer partnerships have become extremely common in higher education over the past 20 years, and several research studies have been conducted to identify the crucial policies and practices as well as key leadership elements of an effective community college and university partnership (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Kisker, 2007). Additionally, it became evident that there are several

challenges needed for leadership to overcome in order for their transfer partnerships to result in the needed improvement in transfer student outcomes.

The Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program and the Community College Research Center (2016) produced a 50-page comprehensive research report titled, "Transfer Playbook: Essential Practices for 2- and 4-year Transfer Partnerships." In this report, researchers selected six pairs of community college and university partnerships in six different states using National Student Clearinghouse data. The partnership pairs were selected due to their above-average transfer student bachelor's degree attainment rates based on the demographics of their student populations (Wyner et al., 2016). Results identified three overarching strategies and crucial practices for transfer partnerships, "prioritize transfer, create clear programmatic pathways with aligned, high-quality instruction, and provide tailored transfer student advising" (Wyner et al., 2016, p. 2).

Several findings arose as vital factors in the transfer partnerships in Kisker's (2007) qualitative case study utilizing purposeful participant selection, including the director and coordinator of transfer partnerships, faculty, senior and mid-level administrators, tutoring staff, academic advisors, and the presidents on the steering committee. Kisker (2007) interviewed leadership at a large public, research-university, and nine feeder community colleges. Kisker (2007) discovered four components were crucial to developing and maintaining an effective transfer partnership: previous relationships between institutions, presidential support, sufficient financing, and a strong physical university presence on the community college campuses.

Not only is the commitment by the presidential leadership at both 2- and 4-year institutions needed to improve partnerships, but also academic faculty and professional

staff, such as academic advisors, should participate in efforts designed to raise the transfer rate for students to earn their bachelor's degrees and serve society with more equitable outcomes (Herrera & Jain, 2013; Shapiro et al., 2017; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Wyner et al., 2016). It was evident that it takes all the stakeholders working together to develop and maintain a strong transfer partnership. However, several researchers mentioned that the faculty have the principle accountable, essential role, in not only teaching transfer students but also developing curriculum and the transferrable pathways to the degree, which is the core of vertical transfer (Ignash & Townsend, 2000; Kisker, 2007; Townsend, 2001).

Relationships are at the core of the university and transfer partnerships. Trust is a key theme found throughout the transfer partnership and distributed leadership conceptual framework literature as a critical component of these networks of leadership configurations (Amey et al., 2010; Beckmann, 2017; Bolden, 2011; Halpern et al., 2018; Hairon & Goh, 2015; Harris, 2013; Jones et al., 2012; Kisker, 2007; Taylor & Jain, 2017; Woods et al., 2004; Wyner et al., 2016). The importance of communication, along with a culture of trust, respect, recognition, and collaboration, in the context of the transfer partnership eased these structural differences and created partnership capital (Amey et al., 2010). Kisker (2007) noted that equal power and status should be maintained between the two institutions so that shared decisions, norms, beliefs, and goals will be supported. The Aspen Institute report on transfer partnerships had a consistent view on the necessity of building on-going relationships with the institutions in the partnership (Wyner et al., 2016). Their research indicated that senior leadership from both institutions should meet

regularly and agree to a leading vision for the partnership, taking into consideration the perspectives of the participants engaged in championing the transfer agenda.

Partnership capital, as noted in transfer partnership research, also contains several identical elements, such as the balance of power and the social processes of the leadership activity (Amey et al., 2010; Mokher & Jacobson, 2021). For example, when partnership capital existed, synergy grew over time as the group functioned as a team forming shared beliefs for the focus and processes of the partnership, and shared norms for an alignment of practices (Amey et al., 2010). An example of a successful transfer partnership that developed partnership capital, is seen in a study of the California community college and the university system in which the Center for Community College Partnerships (CCCP) at the University of California Los Angeles operationalized a “transfer-receptive culture which is a dramatically different way of viewing the transfer function as the receiving institution shares responsibility with sending community colleges for the success of transfer students” (Herrera & Jain, 2013, p. 52).

Yeh and Wetzstein (2020) referenced the continuum-based framework from which they defined a stronger transfer partnership in each of the cascading levels from cooperation, leading to coordination, followed by collaboration, and finalized by an alliance between the 2- and 4-year institutions. They asserted transfer partnerships “required intentional and sustained investments in multiple collaborative practices, including strategic planning, equal commitment to a balance of power, and shared goals” (p. 25). Likewise, Amey et al. (2010), noted that a requirement of a strong partnership is a sustained investment with clear roles and responsibilities of the partners for mutual benefit with a reliance on trust and flexibility as the partnership continues. Halpern et al.

(2018) presented data during the second decade of their mutually beneficial and dynamic transfer partnership between Howard University and Prince George's Community College. The partnership created undergraduate research opportunities for students from the local community college, with a 10-week "Research Experiences for Undergraduates" prior to their transfer. In addition, Howard University faculty guest lectured at the community college and worked together to create the science curriculum. Faculty and staff participants in Halpern et al.'s (2018) partnership study have found three important principles to sustain over time: continuity, preparation, and committed partners who work collectively as equals.

### ***Challenges for Community College and University Partnerships***

Significant challenges existed for those involved in transfer partnerships hoping to improve outcomes based on shared goals and equal partnership. Senie (2016) conducted a qualitative multi-site case study in the northeast, exploring the ways key stakeholders, faculty, administrators, and staff perceived the new statewide transfer policy from their unique perspectives. Results illuminated differences in campus and academic cultures, which create conflicts, as a political culture of a hierarchy of academic institutions exists with selective research universities at the top and community colleges at the bottom (Senie, 2016). These findings exposed a culture gap in the universities, including "underestimating a community college education, a "disconnect" among administrators, a love-hate relationship between university faculty and transfer students, and a failure to hear the transfer student voice" (Senie, 2016, p. 278). This lack of trust in the quality of the education the community college receives can prevent positive outcomes of transferability decisions on coursework. Unfortunately, these types of results sustained a

stigma on community colleges focused on the mistaken belief that led many to view community colleges as second-rate (Turk, 2019). In response to Turk's article, "Erasing the Community College Stigma", Bryan Reece, Ph. D., founder of the National Policy Agenda for Community Colleges stated:

This is an important issue to address because community colleges, more so than their colleague institutions, work with students from historically under-served communities; from cycles of low income and poverty; from recent immigrant histories; from families with no college-going tradition; and more. These students already have the academic odds stacked against them and to add a stigma to their efforts is a national problem we need to address. (Response #6)

Unconscious bias and racism pose an obstacle to a positive transfer receptive culture, and academic faculty should examine their own unconscious bias regarding the stigma of 2-year transfer students and their academic preparedness. These biases were reinforced by Jain et al.'s (2016) research from the CCCP, which originally defined the transfer receptive culture based on tenets of critical race theory. "It is crucial to confront the impact of race and racism on transfer students and how universities can support these students" (Casanova & Blanco, 2021, para.1).

Another important challenge to the community college and university partnership is the lack of time and resources dedicated to transfer effort. Oftentimes, the investment required for institutions in transfer partnerships to enact meaningful change, and produce impactful outcomes greater than the available resources and priority level. Most faculty and staff already have full-time positions on their own campuses and their transfer partnership activities add to their regular duties. In addition to this problem, most

undergraduate university campus resources are designated for the incoming first-year class (Young-Walker & Okpala, 2017). Tobolosky's (2012) study found institutional transfer support to be many times impeded by a lack of focus and resources designated for transfer students' unique needs. Further, his study asserted that this neglectful transfer support system could be invisible since many national rankings and accountability measures that provide valuable research funding do not track transfer students' success rates. Therefore, many times transfer student supports at all levels received a lower priority for institutional strategic goals within a limited operating budget having few dedicated transfer resources (Tobolosky, 2012).

### **Barriers for Transfer Students**

There are substantial obstacles to achieving improved vertical transfer and raising TSC in the face of significant challenges in the community college transfer mission. Addressing these obstacles to transfer required a stronger, more robust community college and university partnership. Herrera and Jain (2013) asserted that transfer students' unique support needs necessitated strong transfer partnerships, which required significant investments, including leadership and multiple faculty and staff initiatives between the institutions. The practices laid-out in the transfer partnership should address a comprehensive strategy through inter-institutional collaboration to provide services increasing TSC in this critical period prior to transfer to help students succeed (Herrera & Jain, 2013).

### ***Student Demographics and Characteristics***

It is important to take into consideration several studies have consistently found significant variables within transfer student demographics and characteristics to have a

large impact on the vertical transfer rate, both positively and negatively (Anderson et al., 2006; LaSota & Zumeta, 2016; Umbach et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018). Socioeconomic status, household income, racial or ethnic minority, parents' highest level of education, age of 22 or higher when first starting higher education, full-time versus part-time enrollment, enrollment in at least one developmental class, and of course, the stated intention of transfer plans, all strongly influence the vertical transfer rate (Anderson et al., 2006).

More recently, similar results were found in Xu et al.'s (2018) study. He used regression analysis showing transfer student demographics such as socioeconomic and first-generation status, as well as the distance from the community college, to have a strong mediating effect on the transfer success outcomes. Similarly, LaSota and Zumeta's (2016) research also found other transfer student behaviors and characteristics had a stronger influence on the vertical transfer rate than state articulation policy and articulation agreements, such as working no more than 19 hours per week and having a STEM major (LaSota & Zumeta, 2016). The nearest proximity of the public 4-year institution was also a significant factor for the vertical transfer rate (LaSota & Zumeta, 2016; Umbach et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2018).

It was important for leadership to consider these demographics and characteristics of students when implementing policy and assessing the effectiveness of the 2- to 4-year transfer partnership outcomes. These variables are found to have a larger effect than strong community college and university partnerships and coordination with statewide articulation agreements and effective transfer support services between the sending and receiving institutions (Anderson et al., 2006). These important elements should not be



ignored in the transfer partnership agenda and vision if expecting to considerably improve transfer student outcomes.

### ***Personal Barriers to Transfer***

Demographics and characteristics of community college students indicate a higher likelihood of being low-income which is a personal barrier to transfer. In the largest study of its kind, community college students from all regions of the country increasingly self-reported basic needs insecurity, and “food and housing insecurity among the nation’s community college students threaten their health and wellbeing, along with their academic achievements” (Goldrick-Rab, 2017, p. 1). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice conducted a similar survey in the Fall 2020 semester during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The survey revealed nearly 60% of students indicated basic needs insecurity; of those, 39% of students at a community college had food insecurity, 48% with housing insecurity, and 14% were experiencing homelessness (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, up to 35% of students reported exhibiting at least moderate anxiety (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021).

Various other personal barriers to transfer should be noted. Ecological theory points to environmental factors in the home as potential personal barriers to transfer as the home environment may not be as conducive for academic development with first-generation students, for example (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Transfer student capital (drawn from the social capital framework) showed potential personal barriers to transfer may be lack of family support, especially for first-generation students. Therefore, peer support, including the availability of emotional support from a trusted person to help develop a

plan of action, became more important (Moser, 2012). In addition, a student's own transfer student capital skills and self-efficacy, including the coping style involved in facing a difficult situation, and the student's motivation to put effort into solving problems can become a barrier to transfer (Moser, 2012).

### ***Institutional Barriers to Transfer***

There is a lack of support in the institutional structures for transfer students' needs in securing transfer student capital (Jabbar et al., 2021). Institutional structures, including formal policies and procedures within higher education institutions and social and cultural norms, affect transfer students' choices and can become barriers in the transfer process (Rosenbaum et al., 2016). Students' basic needs security is also described as an institutional barrier to transfer, and not solely a personal barrier, as there is not "an ecosystem in place to ensure that students' basic needs are met" (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021, p. 6).

Institutional barriers regarding lack of financial aid knowledge exist for community college students. It was discovered by a national study that a 30% gap between the number of students self-reporting basic needs insecurity and the number who applied for emergency aid, such as the Federal CARES Act funding (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021). Another empirical study found 31% higher associates degree graduation rates among community college female students receiving emergency aid and case management services in an "intervention that is designed specifically to help low-income students overcome the multitude of barriers to college completion, including emergency financial assistance" (Evans et al., 2017, para. 1). Academic advising was also noted as an institutional barrier to transfer. Jabbar et al.

(2021) interviewed community college transfer students to better understand institutional barriers identified within community college faculty, staff, and services in which several students perceived weak or no support in academic advising. Specific examples of institutional advising barriers to transfer, included advisors failing to plan far enough into the future to develop a transfer plan, academic advisors being inaccessible during hours that working transfer students needed, and transfer fairs scheduled during work hours or located physically too far away for transfer students to attend (Jabbar et al., 2021).

### **Strategies to Support Transfer Students**

It is well documented that transfer students are diverse with an intersectionality of life experiences and therefore bring a unique set of needs for student success support (Jain et al., 2016; Kisker, 2007; Young-Walker & Okpala, 2017). Herrera and Jain (2013) asserted that transfer students' unique support needs necessitate strong transfer partnerships, which involve significant investments, including leadership and multiple faculty and staff between the institutions. The practices laid-out in the transfer partnership should address a comprehensive strategy through inter-institutional collaboration to provide services in this critical period to help students succeed (Herrera & Jain, 2013). For example, it is recommended that a cross-functional team of experts across campus who serve transfer students, such as admission, financial aid, the registrar's office, academic advising, and various others that function to recruit, advise, evaluate credit, and retain transfer students (Schwienteck, 2018; Wyner et al., 2016).

Dowd et al.'s (2013) action research on institutional agents indicated the value of senior leadership, such as high-level administration and faculty members in positions of authority being personally involved in advising and empowering transfer students to

increase equity in the power structures that exist in higher education. Overall, due to transfer students arriving at the receiving institution with sets of unique needs, it is imperative that special support services are available that are both pre-transfer and post-transfer by both the sending and receiving institutions. Additionally, multiple strategies must be combined for special populations such as transfer students with dependents or non-traditional students aged 25 and over, or those working full time who may present a higher risk of attrition (Luo et al., 2007; Monroe, 2006; Schwienteck, 2018; Wyner et al., 2016).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This research study sought to explore and understand the barriers and suggestions for transfer from the students themselves. Qualitative research explores meanings and insights in rich data analysis and examines “local knowledge and understanding of a given program, people’s experiences, and meanings” (Mohajan, 2018, p. 23). Therefore, a qualitative, single-site case study approach was chosen as an effective method for the research problem at hand (Maxwell, 2013). A single-site case study, as noted by Maxwell (2013), “justifies the particular case in terms of the goals of the study and existing theory and research” (p. 78). The research questions served a particular intention that was well-suited for this single-site transfer partnership with the research goal of exploring and better understanding barriers to transfer and suggestions by students on how to improve upon the transfer partnership. This case study had multiple benefits, including flexibility and the ability to produce a deeper understanding when investigating a single group of

people to explore *local causality* of the research problem--a decreasing transfer enrollment rate in this transfer partnership (Gustafsson, 2017).

The setting of this single-site case study was a large, urban community college and a 4-year university in Texas that were engaged in a transfer partnership, experiencing documented decreases in transfer enrollment. The context of the research questions, problem, and goal in the study was an important factor in making this a feasible research design. The findings provide a deeper understanding of the answers to this particular research problem among a group of people who experienced this same situation (Creswell, 2014; Gustafsson, 2017).

### **Participant Population**

Purposeful selection was the strategy that was administered in this study to select the participants (up to 12 -15 students total). Maxwell (2013) defined purposeful selection as a strategy in which “particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 98).

The students that were eligible for the study, were students who were a part of a transfer partnership between a community college and a 4-year university. These students dropped out in the most recent semester (Spring 2022). There were over 2,000 students in this database. Due to this large size, I included an additional layer of strategy in the purposeful selection. I pulled a random sample of about 500 students. I sent an initial email asking for volunteers interested in participating in the interviews to self-select to opt-in. Once students submitted the form for the initial interest email, the automatic email response thanked them, and let them know that I would call them back and schedule with

them if they were selected for the interview. I did not receive enough responses, so I repeated this same purposeful selection strategy with another initial interest email to another 500 or smaller size random sample batch.

In this case, the researcher had an employment relationship in a professional role at the 4-year university in the transfer partnership. This particular transfer partnership included a formal transfer articulation agreement that contained a data-sharing file of students interested in transferring to the 4-year institution. The data file was shared each semester, and it contained the name and contact information of all enrolled 2-year college students who indicated an interest in transferring to the 4-year institution. If a student disenrolled from the community college, their directory information dropped off the next semester's shared-file. Therefore, the research population from which participants were selected was identified by comparing the unmatched names from the previous semester's data file to the current data file. These names represented a subset of students who had dropped out of the community college, which was the key population to sample for this study. (See Table 1 for specific participant information.)

**Table 1***Participant Information*

Participant Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Ethnicity	First Generation	Age	Community College Academic Major
Participant 1	Male	White	Yes	63	Management
Participant 2	Female	Hispanic	Yes	23	Nursing for RNs
Participant 3	Male	African American	Yes	24	Music
Participant 4	Male	Hispanic	No	20	Undeclared Liberal Arts
Participant 5	Female	Hispanic	Yes	21	Undeclared Liberal Arts
Participant 6	Male	African American	Yes	34	Art
Participant 7	Female	African American	No	36	Undeclared Liberal Arts
Participant 8	Female	African American	Yes	19	Unknown
Participant 9	Male	Asian	Yes	21	Computer Science
Participant 10	Female	African American	Yes	60	Undeclared Liberal Arts
Participant 11	Female	African American	Yes	47	Undeclared Liberal Arts
Participant 12	Male	White	No	28	Computer Science

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection started with sending an email to the target population of students who had indicated an intent to transfer but had since dropped out of the community college and were no longer on the transfer partnership's data-sharing file. The email asked students to participate in an interview for this study. Students who chose to participate were sent a second pre-screening email to *opt-in* for interest in participating in the semi-structured, open-ended interview. The pre-screening email form asked the potential participant for demographic data such as name, address, age, mobile phone, ethnicity, employment status, and time availability to participate in the interview. Once this form was returned, the participants were contacted regarding a good day and time for their interview. The interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews

were video recorded and transcribed (with the participant's permission) using Microsoft Teams software, and a transcript of the interview was saved for analysis.

In addition, data analysis sessions were planned to be held directly after the scheduled interviews, to aid in the recall and correct processing of any additional research memos and observations, which were jotted down in an organized fashion and kept by date and topic for easy retrieval (Maxwell, 2013).

### **Data Analysis**

“The Framework Method,” frequently called “thematic analysis or qualitative content analysis,” was best suited for analyzing and interpreting themes and patterns in interview data (Gale et al., 2013, p. 2). Using this framework method, the interview data were summarized and entered into a standard matrix spreadsheet with rows (cases), columns (codes) and cells, “providing a structure into which the researcher can systematically reduce the data, in order to analyze it by case and by code” (p.2). Gale et al. stated that “while in-depth (content) analyses of key themes can take place across the whole data set, the views of each research participant remain connected to other aspects of their account within the matrix so that the context of the individual's views is not lost” (p. 2).

### **Findings**

The overarching research questions for this study were “What barriers do students who have previously joined a 2- to-4-year transfer partnership indicate as the reason they have chosen not to transfer to a 4-year university?” and “What suggestions do students who have decided not to transfer have for 2- to-4-year transfer partnerships to increase transfer completions?”



Four distinct themes emerged through the research questions. The theme of support encompassed both Research Question 1 and Research Question 2. With respect to the first research question, the themes of financial issues, support, and change study focus area emerged from the analysis of the data. Regarding the second research question, the two themes of support and content with the program became apparent.

### **Theme #1: Financial Issues**

The theme of financial issues was more frequently indicated for Research Question 1 as a barrier to students' successful transfer than the other two themes for this research question. Comments were made regarding the lack of money to pay for classes and not enough financial aid offered for their academic needs. The students explained that these issues were related to the financial aid funding model and/or parental resources being too low to fund additional needs such a computer or transportation. In addition, three participants indicated they had to work full-time to pay for living expenses and/or to support their siblings or children, which they indicated as the reason they have chosen not to continue enrollment to transfer to a 4-year university. For example, Participant #8 said she had to help her family by helping her mama in getting her brother to school and is working a full-time job to help with expenses. Participant #5 said:

I sort of felt a little behind on everything, beginning with getting my books and stuff, because both of my parents did not, have the resources and were not able to go to college. I did not drive at the time, so it was hard for me to afford to go to school and then go back home and do my work. Buying a laptop was also a challenge because I didn't work.

Similarly, Participant #2 stated:

When I applied for my financial aid, they saw that it was under my father's taxes and all that, and they didn't give me a lot of financial support. The least amount they gave me was \$200. That's just only for two textbooks. And that's it. Yes. Last time I paid \$600 out of my pocket. So, in my situation, I just don't do financial aid; I just pay out of pocket.

Overall, financial issues were stated to be a contributing factor in the majority of the responses as a common barrier that prevented the students from continuing from their 2-year community college to transfer to the 4-year university. This is aligned with the literature on barriers to transfer student success.

### **Theme #2: Support**

The second theme, support, was discovered in Research Question 1 and Research Question 2. In Research Question 1, participants reported the following support as barriers to their transfer: financial aid process information, not knowing their eligibility to register, or who to contact at the community college for student services offices such as financial aid and academic advising. Participant #2 said, "I only have a part-time job, so I'm not sure what the financial aid process is. I haven't applied for FASFA yet, so I don't know what I would be receiving." In addition, Participant #9 stated:

I've been just trying to save up money to go back to college, as I didn't know what steps I would have to take since I dropped all my classes, so I didn't know if I was considered a student through college. I tried applying to classes, but they wouldn't let me apply to the classes. So that's what made me not wanna go. I wasn't sure if I was still eligible just to get back in and register.

Also, inside the theme of support in Research Question 1, three participants revealed feelings such as being intimidated, overwhelmed, and isolated in regard to support in their response to the barriers to transfer. For example, Participant #5 stated:

So, it presented a lot of challenges, and I felt a little isolated and a little behind when it came to all that stuff because I wasn't sure who to contact when it came to buying my books or choosing my classes and stuff like that.

Support as a theme carried over in Research Question 2, indicated by participants as a suggestion to help them in the 2- to 4-year transfer process. Most of the responses indicated that academic advising was an area that would help them the most in the transfer process. Two areas were listed specifically within academic advising for personalized advising and transparency in the advising process. Participant #4 stated:

Well, it would have helped if the academic advisors or support staff would contact you about it and help you stay on track. They can see what you want to do with the plan--if you want to finish your education at TCC or try to transfer. I wish they could do that, but they haven't done that.

Participant #7 said:

I believe that it would be great if more people like us [immigrants] had the opportunity to explore, especially when we came and didn't know what we wanted to do. We were confused that the advisory unit would help us pick the right program that would help equip us; it's better than going all round.

Along this same line, Participant #2 stated, "I believe we needed more transfer events where we could have a one-on-one talk with advisors, because the advisors at TCC are good. I just feel like maybe more contact with the advisors from the universities."

Further, support was indicated by Participant #2 in answer to Research Question 2 as indicated as a suggestion for more outreach overall,

Like I said, they should reach out to students about the whole transfer process, because it's kind of hard to know where to start. Like how to even start. I would say, just to get the word out.

### **Theme #3: Change Study Focus Area**

The third theme identified was a change of study focus area. The students changed their study focus area and this caused issues with their transfer plans. This theme emerged in Research Question 1 as another barrier to transferring to the 4-year institution. This theme displayed a variety of rich and layered answers that showed the complexity of the study focus area and the impact it had on a students' decision on whether to transfer. For example, for Participant #5, the study focus area was a bit unclear. In their answer to Research Question 1, they explained:

I'm still a little undecided on what I'm trying to do, but I'm leaning towards, you know, just finishing up all my basics and then going on to doing things that I enjoy, such as child development and stuff like that.

In another case, Participant #6, indicated a barrier to their transfer was a change of study focus area. She stated:

I needed to go outside of TCC, essentially. So that's what I thought, but it was a little intimidating at first because I don't come from a large school. But then I had a change of heart, and I just didn't actually wanna do graphic design altogether.

In a different way, Participant #11 revealed that there were contributing factors to her response regarding the change of study focus. She stated, "Well, I don't wanna do no

nursing. It was my first major, but I think with having to work full time and having small kids, that's just not the best option for me right now.”

#### **Theme #4: Content with the Program**

The fourth theme, content with the program, emerged in this study to help answer Research Question 2 regarding where participants had no suggestions for the institutions that would have helped them in the transfer process. A total of four participants indicated they had no suggestions for the institutions, as they were content with the program as it was. Majority of the participants indicated they were satisfied with the service of the institution in the transfer partnership program. The participants indicated positive explanations for their lack of not having suggestions for transfer partnership institutions. For example, Participant #1 indicated that he worked a full-time job with benefits owning a company and that he had learned what he needed from the courses he already completed. In addition, Participant #10 said:

I don't have any [suggestions for improvements]. I think that they went beyond when they found out that I had a disability. They helped me in every way that they could. They made me feel comfortable in doing it.

Likewise, Participant #7 stated, “I don't have much about that because it has been a great step for me. I will recommend it for anybody who wants to grow to come to TCC.”

Others content with the program themed responses by participants in Research Question 2 were neutral in tone. For example, Participant #12 claimed responsibility for the failure of his transfer completion, rather than blaming the institutions when he resolutely stated, “No, it was on me. I could have done better.” In addition, Participant #8, said, “Actually, I would say there's nothing they could help me with right now.”

Likewise, Participant #3 said, “I guess college just isn’t for me, I don’t end up thriving. But there isn’t a single thing I can think of to better the school system for anybody.”

## **Discussion**

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the barriers students indicate as contributing to their lack of transfer as well as the suggestions for transfer partnership programs. Herrera and Jain (2013) asserted that transfer students’ unique support needs necessitate strong transfer partnerships, which require significant investments, including leadership and multiple faculty and staff between the institutions. This study was guided by the conceptual framework of TSC. This was a foundation for the study because it investigated “how community college students accumulate knowledge to negotiate the transfer process” (Laanan et al., 2011, p. 177).

The results of the study indicated that the barriers to transfer consisted of financial issues and the lack of academic support from the institution. The participants suggested that there was a need for more academic and financial support. It was also discovered that the students had few complaints about their transfer program and credited their lack of transfer as a personal choice.

### **Conclusions**

The main barriers for students in successfully transferring to a university from a community college are financial issues and the lack of support. This was endorsed by Evans et al. (2017) when they explained that the significant barriers to transfer are related to financial issues and support issues from transfer partners (community college and university). This finding provides relevant and direct insight to inform community

college and university partnerships to expand advising and support opportunities. The results of the study also strengthen the conceptual framework of TSC by supporting similar themes in transfer barriers, such as students who did not have the advising or capital to understand the transfer process.

Additionally, there were two other themes that emerged from the study: change of focus area of study and contentment with the transfer program. Some of the participants indicated that they decided not to transfer to a university since their goals had changed, and they no longer wanted to go in the direction of their initial study focus area. They also felt that their decision not to transfer to a university was their own responsibility, not that of the program. These two themes help give relevance and an understanding to national data that reported that up to 80% of community college students plan to earn a bachelor's degree (Fink & Jenkins, 2017; Handel, 2013). Initially, the students had the intention of transferring: however, factors such as changing their focus area helped to encourage them not to transfer. Also, these themes could likely prove to be part of the phenomenon that is now being seen in an overall lower and reducing transfer and persistence rate in this particular transfer 2- to 4-year institutional partnership. The data exposed in these two themes may foretell a future where more students find and choose acceptable alternatives to the bachelor's degree, and never intend on actually transferring from the community college.

### ***Research Questions***

**What barriers do students who have previously joined a 2- to-4-year transfer partnership indicate as the reason they have chosen not to transfer to a 4-year university?** The first theme identified in this study found that common barriers were

financial issues. This response varied by each participant, such as lack of extra money for a laptop, lack of financial aid to cover the class tuition, having to work full-time to support siblings or children, and generally having to work full-time while in college. This finding is supported by a survey conducted by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (2021) that revealed nearly 60% of students indicated basic needs insecurity; of those, 39% of students at a community college had food insecurity, 48% with housing insecurity, and 14% were experiencing homelessness. The survey also found that there was a 30% gap between the number of students self-reporting the need for financial support and the number who actually applied for emergency aid. (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021).

The second theme, regarding the barriers to transfer, identified issues with support. The participants indicated that they needed more support in the form of advising that would help them with their lack of financial aid knowledge, academic advising support, knowledge of the registration process, and help with the overall transfer course selection process. This echoed the findings in Jabbar et al.'s (2021) research with community college transfer students in identifying and understanding the institutional barriers within community college faculty, staff, and services. They also found students perceived weak or no support in academic advising. In another study, researchers described the transfer process as difficult and a *maze* rather than a clear pathway that, for students, can seem “opaque, convoluted, and confusing” (Morris & Cox, 2016, p. 75).

The final theme relating to this research question was the changing of the student's major content area. This was a dilemma for the students because once they decided to change their content focus, they felt like they had wasted their time and their



money. They felt defeated due to the loss of credit and the addition of more credits needed. This is reflected in the research showing that students who eventually transfer have earned excessive credit hours in cases due to a change of major in their area of focus (THECB, 2020).

**What suggestions do students who have decided not to transfer have for 2-to-4-year transfer partnerships to increase transfer completions?** The participants noted that better support opportunities were needed. The common support issue suggested by these participants was to improve academic advising. The finding of academic advising presenting barriers to transfer was corroborated in the literature. This connection involved specific situations such as advisors failing to plan far enough into the future to develop transfer plans, academic advisors being inaccessible during hours that working transfer students needed, transfer fairs scheduled during work hours, or being located physically too far away for transfer students to attend (Jabbar et al., 2021).

The second theme related to this research question was contentment with the program. Students who indicated that they were content with the transfer program, experienced a variety of situations that led up to their response. For example, two participants acknowledged that the program was good, but they did not plan to transfer to the university, because the 2-year degree was meeting their needs both personally and professionally. Two other students indicated that they needed a more flexible schedule and that they preferred their classes to be scheduled in person (at a different time outside of their full-time job schedule). One student indicated they preferred online, which added to the complexity of their ability to continue, and due to their current employment success, this participant was content without continuing enrollment. These responses

indicated an issue they experienced that was not associated with the transfer program. The content with the program theme was reflective of two participants indicating they were taking responsibility for the failure to transfer due to their academic failures and maturity issues.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There were various strengths found in this study. The first strength is the qualitative design, which allowed for more complexity and perspective to the issue. More specifically, qualitative research examines “local knowledge and understanding of a given program, people’s experiences, and meanings” (Mohajan, 2018, p. 23). The research questions served a specific intention that was well-suited for this single-site transfer partnership. The research goal of exploring and better understanding barriers to transfer and suggestions by students on how to improve upon the transfer partnership was achieved by the in-depth interviews that were indicative of qualitative research. Utilizing semi-structured and open-ended questions in the interviews, the participants were able to describe in detail the reasons and motivations behind their responses.

Another strength of the study was found in the fact that the support theme was found in both research questions as a barrier and a suggestion to help improve the transfer rate. This showed the importance of support as a critical factor for institutions, transfer partnerships, and public policymakers to address to improve the research problem of a low and weakening transfer rate.

A major strength of the study was the participants. The participants were students who chose not to transfer to a 4-year university. This gave a unique effect on responses because they were able to reflect on their actual experiences. Hearing these “lived

experiences” added to the authentic results of the study, providing a direct voice of students who quit before transferring. These responses provide insight for further study and areas where community college and university partnerships to enhance a more successful transfer rate.

Limitations existed in this study. A core limitation of the qualitative research method selected, was the non-generalizability of the results. This is due to the context specific unique case in which the situations, events, conditions, and interactions cannot be replicated (Mohajan, 2018). This was a specific case study with participants chosen from a single 2- to 4-year transfer partnership in an urban setting. Also, the timeframe of the research was conducted during the latter part of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Many of the participants were affected, and all were forced to move to fully online courses and face other challenges which in some way may have permanently altered their trajectory to the 4-year university.

Another limitation of the study was understanding the initial intent of the participants to transfer. When the participants enrolled in the 2-year institute, did they truly intend to transfer to a 4-year institute? While conducting this study, this quandary was encountered. Some participants mentioned that they were content with the transfer process; they simply decided that they did not want to transfer. This decision could have possibly affected the way they responded to the challenges they experienced in the transfer process.

In addition, there was a limitation in the sample population. Participants in the study were selected at random from a complete file of students who had withdrawn from courses during the summer and spring but had been previously enrolled at the community

college the prior fall semester. Significant outreach was conducted via email, phone, and text message in order to schedule and conduct the interviews. The final participant sample included in the study were three Hispanic students, two white students, one Asian student, and six African American students. Therefore, the overall research sample did reflect the diversity of the population; however, the final sample had a larger representation of African American students and a smaller than average representation of white students than the general population of the transfer partnership. Other demographic data for the participants is found in Table 1.

### **Implications**

This study contributes to the limited body of research because it includes both barriers and suggestions from the students' perspectives for a transfer partnership between a community college and a university. The findings fill a gap in the literature by contributing to the work in transfer student capital. In addition, it added more depth to the understanding of the perspectives on barriers to transfer from those students who had already opted out of higher education.

The findings of the study provide relevant and direct insight for public higher education policymakers and government funding campaigns to improve the 2- to 4-year transfer rate. Institutions could benefit from the feedback and findings of identifying barriers and suggestions to improve applicable areas within the partnership for transfer students. Information, such as the need for financial support in the areas of personal needs such as laptops, tuition, and travel needs, as well as the need for part-time work due to family pressures, should be areas of concern and focus for the university/community college partnerships. In examining the need for support, the

partnerships should consider providing more support in the form of advising that would help students with their lack of financial aid knowledge. Initiatives that would increase academic advising support, the student's knowledge of the registration process, and provide more help with the overall transfer course selection process could be beneficial in increasing the transfer rate.

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