

## A Phenomenology of Transfer: Students' Experiences at a Receiving Institution\*

Anne-Marie Nuñez<sup>1</sup>  
Jeffrey Yoshimi<sup>2</sup>

*Abstract:* This study advances a conceptual framework to examine how students who had transferred into a four-year institution described their transition experiences. We used phenomenology as a source of theoretical constructs to interpret their experiences and as a research method. Key themes included the importance of online resources in facilitating the transfer process, the importance of supportive institutional agents, the importance of academic and career goals, and the comparative lack of emphasis on having a more social “college experience”. We discuss implications of these findings for future research, policy, and practice. This study contributes to a better understanding of (a) transfer students' experiences in an understudied institutional setting, (b) the factors distinguishing persisting and non-persisting transfer students, and (c) ways that receiving institutions can be more responsive to the needs of transfer students.

Keywords: Transfer, Phenomenology, Qualitative research, Identity

Nearly half (44%) of U.S. undergraduates begin their educations in community colleges (American Association of Community Colleges, 2012), and these students face two key hurdles to baccalaureate attainment: (1) transferring to a four-year institution and (2) completion of a 4-year degree. Transfer rates from community colleges to 4-year institutions are particularly low (Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonso, 2011), and one recent study found that only 15% of a sample of beginning community college students who intended to transfer actually did so within three years (Horn, 2009). Once transfer students continue their education at a 4-year institution, they complete their degrees at lower rates than do their counterparts who began their studies at the same institution (Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Melguizo et al., 2011).

---

\* Penultimate draft of <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10755-016-9374-7>

<sup>1</sup> Anne-Marie Nuñez is an Associate Professor in the department of Education at Ohio State University.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Yoshimi is an Associate Professor in the department of Cognitive and Information Sciences at the University of California, Merced.

Qualitative studies have addressed the subjective experiences of students who transfer to large public universities, and the findings suggest that these students face distinctive challenges in the receiving institution (Flaga, 2006; Townsend, 1995; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

Typically, research on transfer has not collected data on students who eventually leave the receiving institution (Bahr, Toth, Thirolf, & Masse, 2013, p. 10). Furthermore, research on transfer students' experiences at receiving 4-year institutions has focused on large urban university settings, largely excluding institutions of other sizes or in other types of settings. We believe that more understanding is needed about the factors that hinder or support successful transfer into different kinds of 4-year institutions (Townsend & Wilson, 2008-9) and that more research is needed on the experiences of students after they transfer into the receiving institutions (Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010). Also, some research suggests that college administrators at receiving 4-year institutions have a limited understanding of transfer students' experiences and needs, resulting in institutional neglect of these students (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

To address these limitations in the research and to inform institutional policies and practices so as to enhance the experiences of transfer students at receiving institutions, we examined the experiences of students who transitioned to a small, rural, 4-year university, after a time period when they would have been expected to graduate from the institution. Specifically, we addressed the following question. How do these students describe their experiences during and after their transitions to the receiving institution? Exploring this question enabled us to identify key supportive processes for such students in the transfer process.

In this article we first review existing literature on the transfer experience. We then discuss our conceptual framework, which is grounded in the philosophical perspective of phenomenology. After explaining our methods, we discuss the three key themes that emerged in

our interviews. These themes included the processes of using technical tools, interacting with supportive institutional agents, and actualizing academic purpose. Finally, we discuss the implications of these themes for enhancing research and institutional responsiveness toward transfer students in 4-year institutions.

### **Literature Review**

Transfer students face a number of challenges at the receiving institution, including insufficient academic preparation (Dowd, Cheslock, & Melguizo, 2008; Melguizo et al., 2011); limited access to information about how to navigate the new institution (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Townsend & Wilson, 2006); and difficulties making connections with other students and faculty members, which Townsend and Wilson (2006) described as leading to a feeling of “anonymity.” Some students experience “transfer shock,” an initial decline in GPA upon transferring (Glass & Harrington, 2002; Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010), which has been described as a more general “manifestation of the shock experienced in moving from one institutional culture to another” (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p. 454). Put more generally, transfer students may experience marginalization and a struggle to feel a sense of “validation” (Rendon, 1994) or of “mattering” to faculty and staff members at the receiving institution (Schlossberg, 1989). This is not surprising considering that faculty members, administrators, and other staff members sometimes lack awareness of the distinctive needs and experiences of transfer students (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012).

Quantitative research has identified increased rigor of high school academic preparation, higher socioeconomic status, higher degree expectations, higher internal motivation, being

employed for less time during college, and being placed in an academic (rather than vocational) curricular track as positively associated with the outcome of transfer (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Porchea et al., 2010; Wang, 2012). Porchea et al. (2010) found that larger enrollment size and higher in-state tuition rates were also positively related to transfer. Once in a receiving 4-year institution, transfer students from 2-year institutions have a lower rate of persistence than do their counterparts who first began their higher education in a 4-year institution (e.g., Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Melguizo & Dowd, 2009; Melguizo, Kienzl, & Alfonso, 2011; Wang, 2009), which may be related to challenges in transfer adjustment.

Qualitative research indicates that upon arrival at the 4-year institution, transfer students struggle with (a) finding access to institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) to help them navigate the new setting, (b) the increased academic demands and large classes of the new institution, and (c) difficulties making friends in a large population consisting mostly of students who began college at the same institution (Flaga, 2006; Owen, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2006, 2008-9). Students often rely on Internet sites for information about the application process itself and the extent to which coursework in the prior college will be credited (Adelman, 2006; Owen, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Hence, clear and readily available information about articulation policies is critical to facilitate transfer (Hagedorn, 2010; Van Middlesworth, Carpenter-Davis, & McCool, 2001). After transferring, many students experience isolation and marginalization in the new institution and look back on their community college experiences as offering smaller, more supportive environments. Transfer students also engage less in social activities, like informal socializing and attending parties on campus, and more in academic activities, like clubs related to their academic major or conducting research with a professor (Ishitani & McKitrick, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2008-9).

Qualitative studies have also suggested that social integration as initially conceptualized by Tinto (1993), which is often framed as university-sponsored, co-curricular activities or informal interactional social experiences, is less important to transfer students than it is to other college students. In a qualitative study of 19 transfer students at a large research university, Townsend and Wilson (2008-9) found that transfer students are not interested in having the same kinds of social experiences in college as their counterparts who began at the institution (the “native” students). Specifically, they found that transfer students describe themselves as more interested than native students in academic or social activities that are related to the goal of achieving the bachelor’s degree, such as working with faculty members on research projects or participating in pre-professional or specialized academic clubs related to their fields of study or desired careers. Furthermore, they found that academically-oriented activities contributed to their social engagement in the institution, challenging Tinto’s separation of academic and social integration.

However, as several scholars have noted (Ishitani & McKittrick, 2010; Townsend & Wilson 2008-9), there has not yet been enough study to understand the experiences and engagement of transfer students after they arrive in their new institutional environments, how these might be distinct from those of students at the same institution, and the associated implications for best serving these students. Our study extends existing research about transfer students in three ways. First, we address the experiences of transfer students after arriving at a small, rural 4-year institution. Thus, the study not only contributes to the limited understanding of transfer students’ experiences in the receiving institution, it extends findings on transfer students to the context of a new institutional setting which is very different from the large, established, urban institutions that have served as settings for most prior studies (e.g., Ishitani &

McKittrick, 2010; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012; Townsend & Wilson, 2008). Second, unlike other qualitative studies, we collected the data from the transfer students after a time period by which they would have been expected to graduate. Therefore, our findings allowed us to examine potential factors that distinguish persisting and non-persisting students at a receiving institution. Finally, unlike other studies, we apply new theoretical constructs from philosophy to identify and organize focal themes in these students' experiences and thereby advance theoretical understanding of transfer experiences. Our results in turn suggest implications for how institutional personnel, including faculty members and administrators, could be more responsive to the needs of transfer students.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In philosophy, phenomenology is both a generic methodological approach that emphasizes first-person experiences and an explicit research program that incorporates a complex set of tools and concepts for analyzing the structure of first-person experiences. It has primarily been applied as a methodology in qualitative research (Creswell 2007; Giorgi, 1997; 2006; Moustakas, 1994) and higher education (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this study, we make greater use of phenomenology as a source of theoretical constructs than most other qualitative researchers have done in that we use specific phenomenological concepts to interpret transfer students' lived experiences.

The philosopher Edmund Husserl originated phenomenology as an explicit research program, one of the aims of which was to describe the structure of conscious experience. Husserl focused on relatively simple forms of experience, for example, the perception of a house or table

(Husserl, 1913/1962; Smith, 2007). Husserl's student Martin Heidegger extended Husserl's project in a number of ways; for example, he developed a detailed "existential" analysis of the way meanings and life-purposes structure experience (Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1927/1962). We draw primarily on Heidegger's perspective and, more specifically, on a reading of Heidegger associated with the American philosopher Hubert Dreyfus (Blattner, 2007; Dreyfus, 1991). As we began to analyze our data, we found three Heideggerean concepts to be especially useful and subsequently organized our themes in relation to these concepts: (a) "transparent coping" and "breakdown", (b) "positive" versus "indifferent" modes of "solicitude," and (c) "for the sake of which's" (Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1927/1962).

"Transparent coping" corresponds to the way things are experienced when they function properly, as being largely "invisible in use" or, as Heidegger says, "ready-to-hand." (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 98). These things only become focally noticed in cases of "breakdown," when they stop functioning in their normal roles (Dreyfus, 1991) and become "un-ready-to-hand" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 103). The classic example is using a hammer to fix a fence. When using a hammer in this way, the hammer itself is largely transparent to us. However, if the hammer stops functioning properly, if the handle comes loose or is the wrong hammer for the job, then it stops serving its functional role—it is now un-ready to hand—and becomes noticed as a hammer. Thus, such tools are at their best when they function properly and are *not* focally noticed (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Our data suggest that institutional processes (or "institutional tools") are similar: websites, articulation agreements, and transfer guarantees are at their best when they are "invisible in use" and function as they are supposed to.

The second concept, "solicitude" (in German, *Fürsorge*, or literally "caring for"), is Heidegger's term for the way people experience encounters with one another in everyday life

(Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 157). He distinguishes “indifferent” modes of solicitude, in which a person is largely unconcerned with others (e.g. when passing people on the street or purchasing goods at a store), from “positive” modes of solicitude, in which a person takes an active interest in the goals and values of another person. Indifferent interactions can be problematic, as when someone is too busy to take the time to help you (Heidegger refers to “inconsiderateness” and “perfunctoriness”); but they also form a kind of default mode, an aspect of “everyday, average, being-with-one-another” (Heidegger 1927/62, p. 158). Positive modes of solicitude involve a more active form of interaction, where other persons “matter” to us. In higher education, more engaged forms of interaction with advisors, administrators, and other institutional agents can provide important academic support to students, especially when the institutional tools described above (e.g., articulation agreements) “break down” and stop functioning properly.

The third concept, “for the sake of which,” corresponds to one of a person’s broad life goals (e.g., being a doctor, an effective parent, an artist, and/or a social activist). It corresponds to those larger projects “for the sake of which” a person pursues her various activities. These goals frame our activities in a fundamental way and function as a kind of “organizing self-interpretation” (Dreyfus, 1991, p. 96). For example, whether attending a class, driving to school, chatting on campus, or surfing the web, college students are often engaged in activities that serve one of their ultimate life goals. A dominant goal for students is plausibly the completion of a degree as part of a career; and, as we shall see, this goal emerged as a central finding.

## **Method**

The purpose of this study was to address the following research question within the framework of phenomenology. How do transfer students describe their experiences during and after their transitions to the receiving institution? What is most innovative in our use of phenomenology is our application of some of its theoretical constructs. However, we also apply phenomenology as an approach to qualitative research design that focuses on what “participants have in common” in some domain (Creswell, 2007, p. 58) -- that is, what they tend to find meaningful about some aspect of their lived experience (e.g. being a nurse, a wrestler, or in this case, a transfer student).

### *Context*

The site for this study was Lake University (a pseudonym), a recently built 4-year public research university in the West. The University is part of a larger state system of universities with a mission focused on research. This condition is reflected in the fact that faculty members at Lake are hired to do research and that promotion standards and teaching loads reflect an expectation of a high level of research productivity. The University was launched with a large set of labs and several graduate programs prior to the initial admission of students. Thus, although the University was new, its mission was oriented toward research, and we use the term “research university” to describe Lake University in that sense.

Part of Lake University’s mission is to make a 4-year research university option available to a rural, geographically underserved region that had not previously had access to a higher education institution with a research mission. As part of this mission, Lake U. had several initiatives to recruit transfer students in place at the time of this study. The University had just

begun enrolling its first students in 2005-6. During the two academic years that study participants transferred into Lake (2005-6 and 2006-7), its enrollment increased from 838 to 1210 students. The proportion of transfer students at Lake was 15% the first year, followed by 8% the second year. Lake's total enrollment was more than 25% Hispanic, making it a Hispanic-Serving Institution (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). In contrast to most other public university settings, this institution had the following characteristics in its opening years: (a) the transfer students were a distinct sub-population of the student body with respect to their level (the junior and senior classes were composed almost exclusively of transfer students, while the freshmen and sophomore classes were composed almost exclusively of first-time college students); (b) the staff and faculty were all new hires; and (c) the campus was small, with fewer than 1,000 students. Furthermore, Lake had an initiative in place to develop an institutional culture responsive to transfer students.

### *Sample*

Because the phenomenon to be studied was the experience of transfer, a purposeful sample (Patton, 1990) of 11 students who had transferred into Lake in Fall 2005 was recruited for the study after human subjects approval from the institution had been obtained. In the Fall 2007 term, the first author obtained a list of 108 transfer students who had previously been enrolled in a state community college. The data included (a) their enrollment status for each of the four semesters between Fall 2005 and Spring 2007, (b) the community college they had most recently attended, and (c) whether they had graduated from Lake University. To capture a variety of perspectives, the researchers aimed to select a sample of students as diverse as possible in terms

of (a) graduation or dropout status from the university, (b) gender, (c) source community college, and (d) major. First, the team contacted 17 students who did graduate, and secured interviews with 7 of them. Then the team contacted all 15 students in the list of 108 who had dropped out of the institution (defined as those who had enrolled for two or fewer semesters of the four semesters for which we had data), and we were able to secure interviews with four of these 15 students, all of whom confirmed that they had indeed dropped out. To summarize, among the 11 study participants, seven of these students eventually completed their degrees at Lake University, while four dropped out of the institution.

Similar to the overall population of transfer students at the institution, in which 255 out of 260 students were state residents, all students in the sample were state residents. All but one of the students in the sample was from the local service area of the institution, compared with just under half of the entire transfer student population. Most came from low socioeconomic status backgrounds; seven out of the 11 (64%) were eligible to receive Pell grants during the first term they were enrolled, compared with just under half (45%) of all transfer students at Lake University. Similar to proportions for the overall student population at Lake University, five of the 11 students were female, five were first-generation students, and six were under 25 years of age. Most (8 out of 11) were White; two were of Asian descent and one of Hispanic descent. By comparison, the overall transfer student population was 33% White, 28% Asian American, 24% Hispanic, 3% African American, 8% international, fewer than 1% Pacific Islander, and 8% students from unknown racial/ethnic backgrounds. Five of the students had pursued majors in social sciences, three in engineering, two in the sciences, and one in humanities.

All students in the sample were enrolled full-time during their first semester, all commuted, and all but one were employed. Although data on working and commuting were not

available for the general student population, we speculate that, based on some of the other characteristics described above, these students were more likely to be commuters and working more hours than other transfer students at the institution. In short, then, in comparison with the overall transfer student body at the university, these 11 students were more likely to come from the local geographic area, lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and less racially/ethnic diverse backgrounds.

### *Data Collection*

The data collection team interviewed each of the 11 study participants during the spring and summer of 2008, within two years of either graduating from or dropping out of Lake University. Each of the participants in the study had previously attended a community college, but three mentioned having attended other institutions as well (two had most recently attended another 4-year institution; another mentioned having dropped out of college a decade earlier).

The data collection team consisted of two researchers, including the first author and a research assistant. Both had been transfer students from a community college to a 4-year university. As such, these individuals, one of whom is the first author, brought “theoretical sensitivity” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to learning about students’ transfer process both before and after enrolling at Lake. The first author and the research assistant developed a semi-structured protocol based on themes found to be important in the literature about transfer and designed the protocol to allow for openness and flexibility in answering questions (Merriam, 1998).

Using the protocol, the data collection team conducted semi-structured interviews of about one hour with each of the 11 participants, either in-person or by phone, depending on the

preference of the participants. The team asked participants about their demographic backgrounds, as well as why and how these students had transferred institutions. The team also asked students about their transfer experience and asked those who did not complete their degree at Lake why they did not do so. The team also inquired about the support students received or sought out from the community college relating to transfer, including the role of academic advising or online resources in the transfer process. In addition, we asked students about why they chose to transfer to Lake University specifically and about the ease of the transfer process. The team asked about students' academic and social acclimation to the environment at Lake University, including the role that faculty members played in their experiences. We also asked them to compare their own college experiences with their perceptions of the experiences of first-year students who had begun college at Lake University. In addition, we asked about barriers encountered in acclimating to Lake University as well as improvements that might ease those barriers.

### *Data Analysis*

The data collection team (including the first author and a research assistant) conducted a preliminary analysis of the data by coding interview transcripts to identify meaning units (Giorgi, 1997, 2006), which are patterns of commonalities across responses. After this, the first author contacted a higher education research expert to help enhance the trustworthiness of the data by examining the clarity and salience of the preliminary codes and themes with respect to other research in higher education (during this period, the research assistant left the team). The higher education expert then became the second author of this piece. Accordingly, following a pattern

matching technique (Yin, 1994), the first and second authors compared patterns in the data to existing research on college student experiences and the transfer process. Subsequently, the first and second authors synthesized the refined meaning units and patterns to create themes. The authors also considered “disconfirming cases” or alternative interpretations of the findings (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

### *Limitations*

Our site for the study was a newly established university that, in contrast with other universities examined in prior studies of this topic, was smaller and in a rural setting. Furthermore, this institution had an initiative to serve transfer students through activities such as hosting social events and providing transfer-specific resources; and therefore transfer students in this study may have received higher levels of personalized attention than in other institutional settings. These qualities should be taken into account when understanding the applicability of the findings to other institutional settings. The unique institutional setting, however, extends the range of institutional contexts within which transfer students have been studied and allowed us to explore certain ideas relating to transfer (e.g., a student’s appreciation of personalized attention) in a way that would have been more difficult at a larger, more traditional institution. Another potential limitation is that the data for this publication were collected in 2008. Qualitative research can take many years to complete, and each member of the research team took additional time studying the norms and concepts of the other’s disciplinary specialization in order to produce a more deeply interdisciplinary analysis. Following a phenomenological approach, we aimed to develop an account of transfer student experience that is relatively invariant in time,

identifying structures similar to what Husserl (1913/1962) calls the “essences” of a “region” of experience, in this case, the experience of being a transfer student. We believe the structures we identified characterize the experience of transfer students in a time window that extends beyond 2008 and encompasses present-day transfer student experience. As noted elsewhere in this article, other research before and after 2008 about transfer students aligns with our findings.

Another limitation is that the majority of the sample (8 out of 11) was White despite our efforts to recruit more racially/ethnically diverse participants, limiting the potential to discern the influence of race-related campus climate factors on transfer and persistence. The sample size for the study was small and not necessarily representative of the broader transfer population at Lake. However, there was a higher representation of Pell Grant recipients in the sample than in the overall student population, and Pell Grant recipients have also been a particular group of concern in wider policy circles.

### **Findings**

Three key themes emerged as significant in the Lake University students’ descriptions of their academic and social adjustment to the 4-year institution during transfer. These themes represent processes that the students identified as playing a central role in their experience at a new university. We used a phenomenological approach to understand their experiences from a student standpoint. This helped us to identify actions and behaviors that faculty members,

administrators, and other institutional personnel could undertake to better address the needs of these students, which is important in light of the “institutional neglect” (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012) these students sometimes encounter when they arrive at the receiving institution.

First, students focused on using technical tools when discussing the transfer process, reflecting Heidegger’s emphasis on readily available and functioning tools (Dreyfus, 1991). Second, supportive interactions with personnel who served as “institutional agents” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) helped them navigate the new environment of Lake University. This finding reflects the importance of what Heidegger called “positive solicitude” (Heidegger, 1927/1962), which is manifested here as direct, engaged interactions between students and personnel. Third, many described their academic projects and career goals as a priority. This finding reflects Heidegger’s emphasis on the importance of one’s overall goals and purposes in everyday experience (Dreyfus, 1991), which is manifested here as an emphasis on degree completion. We now discuss these three phenomenological processes in turn.

### *Using Technical Tools*

Six of the 11 students used web sites extensively to navigate the transfer process. Two of the students took web sites to be the default source of information. Karl said, “I would look at [the institutional website] all the time for kind of where I was going,” while Lloyd said, “The Internet is pretty much the first place that I go for any information; as a researcher now, professionally, that’s the first and usually last place that I go.”

Self-reliance, rather than reliance upon staff, was a common theme. Karl felt he could learn more from online resources than he could from counselors:

I did a lot of research on my own by going online, going to...[website]. I used to be on that all the time. I mean, it seemed like I was finding more stuff about transferring than people in the Transfer Center.

From this perspective, counselors functioned primarily as a way of validating information that had already been obtained via the Internet. Mike said, "I went just to ask questions, but I kind of knew all the answers to them. . . . So I just wanted to make sure I had all my bases covered." Karl pointed out that even the counselors used the websites: "Actually, the counselors usually always used [the state website], especially the transfer counselor." He continued, "[W]e can look... in the book of classes and then know exactly the classes we need to take, so why do we need to go spend our time going to a counselor?"

Five students reported problems relating to the clarity of articulation agreements and transfer of credits; but three said that these were minor problems that were easily resolved, further suggesting a degree of self-reliance. Articulation, accuracy, and currency of information were prominent problems with the web sites. Mike said, "The only thing I don't like about [the website] is that it really seems like sometimes it's not kept up to date... I mean, just one change is gonna really mess you up."

### *Interacting with Supportive Institutional Agents*

Seven students reported that experiences with faculty members were important in facilitating or supporting their transfer. Dan said,

I found that almost everybody that [sic] I dealt with was willing to take the time to make sure that you knew what you were doing and that you were getting whatever it was that you were needing at the time.

Denise enjoyed being able to encounter faculty members on campus and interact with them: “I mean, it was nice to, you know, go to the cafeteria and see them having lunch and join them.... Because it was such a small campus, you got to see them really often.” Thus, to use the language of phenomenology, students experienced positive solicitude with institutional agents on campus.

Several students noted that this contrasted with their prior expectations about faculty at 4-year institutions. As Greg put it, “The professors here... were very warm, which countered the stereotype of what I was told would happen if you go to a research university. I was actually approached to do research, as opposed to having to claw my way up and find it.”

By contrast, two students described having negative interactions with college personnel; these interactions were typically characterized as involving a lack of personal connection between the student and the faculty member or administrator. For example, Karl described a faculty member at the university who prioritized a video game over helping the students: “When I took that class... she’d be sitting there on her laptop playing *Warcraft*.... So you’re sitting there waiting for her to finish up what she’s doing so she can come help you understand what you’re stuck on.”

The contrast was especially stark for Gina, who had most recently attended another 4-year research institution and could thus contrast her experience at the two schools:

So, at [the other university], I can’t even remember my Professors’ names, because you hardly ever interacted with them. To get an appointment with them ... took forever; and

here, I mean, you could just go up to them after class and they'll say, "Do you want to meet?"

Though students were not asked specifically about their interactions with administrators at the receiving institution, several also mentioned the key role these personnel played in resolving difficulties and the close, personal attention the administrators offered them in solving problems. Mike described an associate dean who actually made a special trip from his home to the university, to respond to an issue with which he was dealing:

So, she set up a meeting with [the Associate Dean] .... He came from home just for that meeting specifically, and, you know, he talked to me and asked me...why I wanted to do this, and he said he would go ahead and do it if that's what I wanted him to do.

Theresa also had good experiences with a Dean (in another school) and felt that she could not have received that kind of attention at another university:

I never would have had the experience that I've had at any other university... just the one-on-one and friends that are professors and anything I need...The Dean of the department would write me a letter if I needed one and that, I find, is just the attitude towards the students, and making the students a priority really shows.

#### Actualizing Academic Purpose

The third theme was the importance of academics to the students, as compared with social events or functions. All participants perceived significant differences between the native students (in this case, freshmen, because the institution was new) and transfer students. Most (seven of 11) emphasized academic or career goals over social goals. Five described the freshmen as being more socially oriented, while they tended to describe themselves as more focused on academic

and career goals. As Roy said, “Most of the transfers were here trying to get it done and move on. A lot of the freshmen were still coming in trying to have an experience.” According to Gina, “I didn’t really make a lot of friends...I didn’t...want to [build a] social network... I was like, ‘I just want to finish so I can go to grad school’.”

The difficulties of actualizing academic purpose was a theme that emerged for the four students who did not graduate from Lake. Although all four mentioned external reasons for leaving the university, including finances, family, and a personal tragedy, for three, actualizing academic purpose played a critical role. One student had significant problems keeping up with the expectations and ended up on academic probation, eventually dropping out. In addition, two students faced challenges establishing an academic identity. Gina, who left Lake and eventually attended another university, described a lack of connection with her major: “When I was taking those upper division psych classes, I felt really lost.... I realized I didn’t like it.... So, I felt kind of like at a standstill, like, ‘Oh gosh, what do I do now?’” Drawing the contrast with her major at the new university, she continued, “Now, I just feel like I’ve found what I wanted to do. So, it just seems to flow easier. I’m just more focused now because I found something that ... I enjoy doing.”

Mike described similar experiences, associated with the fact that (at the time) Lake University did not offer the major he wanted: “I would have preferred a major in economics, but they didn’t have that at that time.... So basically, I mean, I kind of ended up in a major I really didn’t want.” Not having a core major he could identify with ended up de-motivating him: “I mean, being in a major that I didn’t want to be in... I kind of just stopped caring. . . .”

Reinforcing this problem, the major he did declare was one with a non-standard, provisional name because in the early years some majors at Lake University had unconventional names.

## Discussion

Our research revealed that three processes played a central role in students' transfer experiences: using technical tools, interacting with supportive institutional agents, and actualizing academic purpose. Each of these processes has been independently described in other studies of the transfer process with other kinds of samples (e.g., Van Middlesworth et al., 2001; Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Townsend & Wilson, 2008-2009), providing further support for their importance to transfer. We used three phenomenological concepts to make sense of these processes, so that we can provisionally refer to a "phenomenology of transfer." These concepts are (a) "transparent coping" (Dreyfus, 1991) with well-functioning technical tools that allow students to easily navigate processes on their own; (b) positive "solicitude" (Heidegger, 1927/62) of supportive institutional agents; and (c) an emphasis on what Heidegger calls that "for-the-sake-of-which" a person lives, that is, overarching life goals or "organizing self-interpretations," which in the case of transfer students is an emphasis on career goals over co-curricular "social experiences." Now, we consider these processes and their phenomenological interpretations.

First, students in our study relied heavily on computer resources, articulation agreements, and other institutional structures in facilitating the transfer process. Their use of technical tools can be understood using the phenomenological concept of transparent coping (Dreyfus, 1991). Students like to be able to negotiate the transfer process as easily and conveniently as possible. On the other hand, when institutional "tools," such as web-published articulation requirements, fail to work well or "break down" (Dreyfus, 1991), the students notice. In this sense, students want the transfer process to operate like a well-functioning machine, a set of available and

accurate institutional mechanisms that are “ready to hand” (Dreyfus, 1991). For them, this means having easy access to clearly communicated information about how to apply to the receiving institution and how to receive credit for their coursework once they arrive. This idea applies to other transfer students (and students generally). Existing research shows that web sites and Internet sources serve as critical sources of information in the transfer process (Adelman, 2006; Townsend & Wilson, 2006; Owen, 2010). It also affirms the importance of clear and comprehensible articulation policies (Van Middlesworth, Carpenter-Davis, & McCool, 2001).

Second, this study’s results indicate that interacting with supportive institutional agents facilitates the transfer process, reflecting the importance of meaningful human interactions or positive solicitude (Heidegger, 1927/62). When students can join faculty for lunch, encounter them in hallways, are known by name, or are taken care of in a close, personal way, they feel like they “matter” to faculty and staff (e.g., Rendon, 1994; Schlossberg, 1989). While the influence of administrators has typically been overlooked in the literature (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012) and while we did not anticipate finding that administrators could serve in this role, our study is among the first to suggest that, in addition to faculty, administrators can serve as institutional agents and foster a more supportive and responsive campus climate.

Our study based in a small institution supports other research conducted in a large institution (Townsend & Wilson, 2008-9), which shows that transfer students’ emphasis on academic success, academic goals, and career goals over social, co-curricular involvement is distinctive from that of students who begin and complete their studies at the same institution. Focusing on an academic area of interest – deciding on a major and building an academic identity around it – can offer students clear goal structures and reasons to persist in college.

Conversely, non-persisting students may lack the organizing structure of a set of clear academic goals so that these students become aimless or sidetracked in their pursuit of a degree.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

This study offers insights about how to develop more intentional institutional practices to support transfer students after they arrive at the receiving institution. Faculty members and administrators often assume that transfer students have the same needs as students who began at the institution (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2012), but our study and others (e.g, Townsend & Wilson, 2008-9) indicate that transfer students perceive their own needs as being quite different from those of native students, particularly with respect to the emphasis on academic engagement and goal orientation and a de-emphasis on purely social engagement.

Our research has several implications for how institutions can develop more informed responses to address these students' distinctive needs. First, providing students with well-functioning technical tools in the transfer process is essential. Such tools include accessible and updated web sites and clear articulation processes (Hagedorn, 2010). Second, to help students find a sense of belonging, offering access to supportive institutional agents is critical. Regardless of their official roles, these agents might be called "transfer agents" (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009) who can offer students various forms of social capital such as encouragement, access to resources, mentorship, and critical institutional information (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Third, addressing transfer students' emphasis on actualizing academic purpose is critical. Regular substantive interactions with faculty members or peers could be essential to helping them realize that purpose. Faculty members might connect students with research

opportunities or internships, or advisors might help students develop academic plans targeting personal and professional goals “for the sake of which” (Dreyfus, 1991) students live. This study contributes to emerging evidence that employing these strategies creates a more “transfer receptive” culture (Jain, Herrera, Bernal, & Solorzano, 2011) for incoming students.

**Acknowledgements:** This project was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The authors wish to thank Kathryn Yoshida, Benjamin Mook, Krushenka Salazar, and Harry Ramirez for their research assistance, and Gloria Crisp, Alicia Dowd, Kenji Hakuta, and Adrianna Kezar for their feedback and support.

### References

- Adelman, C. (2006, October 27). How to design a web site that welcomes prospective applicants. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B26.
- American Association of Community Colleges (2012). *American Association of Community Colleges 2012 Community College Fast Facts*. Retrieved from [www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/FactSheet2012.pdf](http://www.aacc.nche.edu/AboutCC/Documents/FactSheet2012.pdf)
- Bahr, P., Toth, C., Thirolf, K., & Masse, J. C. (2013). A review and critique of literature on community college students' transition processes and outcomes in four-year institutions. In M. B. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 28. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer. doi: 10.1007/978-94-007-5836-0-10
- Bensimon, E. M., & Dowd, A. (2009). Dimensions of the transfer choice gap: Experiences of Latina and Latino students who navigated transfer pathways. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79, 632-658.
- Blattner, W. D. (2006). *Heidegger's Being and Time: A reader's guide*. New York, NY: Continuum.

- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories (5<sup>th</sup> edition)*. New York, NY: Pearson.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among 5 approaches (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Crisp, G., & Nuñez, A.-M. (2014). Understanding the racial transfer gap: Modeling underrepresented minority and non-minority students' pathways from 2-year to 4-year institutions. *Review of Higher Education, 37*, 291-320.
- Dougherty, K., & Kienzl, G. (2006). It's not enough to get through the open door: Inequalities by social background in transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges. *Teachers College Record, 108*, 452-487.
- Dowd, A., Cheslock, J., & Melguizo, T. (2008). Transfer access from community colleges and the distribution of elite higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education, 79*, 1-31.
- Dreyfus, H. L. (1991). *Being-in-the-World*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Flaga, C. T. (2006). The process of transition for community college transfer students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 30*, 3-19.
- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2007). *Educational research: An introduction (8<sup>th</sup> ed.)*. New York, NY: Pearson.
- Giorgi, A. (1997). The theory, practice, and evaluation of the phenomenological method as a qualitative research procedure. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 28*, 235-260.
- Giorgi, A. (2006). Concerning variations in the application of the phenomenological method. *The Humanistic Psychologist, 34*, 305-319.
- Hagedorn, L. S. (2010). The pursuit of student success: The directions and challenges facing

- community colleges. *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 25, 181-218.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). New York, NY: Blackwell. (Original work published in 1927)
- Horn, L. (2009). *On track to complete? A taxonomy of beginning community college students and their outcomes 3 years after enrolling: 2003-04 through 2006*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.
- Hurtado, S., Alvarez, C. L., Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, M., & Arellano, L. (2012). A model for diverse learning environments: The scholarship on creating and assessing conditions for student success. *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 27, 41-122.
- Husserl, E. (1962). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (W. R. B. Gibson, Trans.) London, England: Collier. (Original work published in 1913)
- Ishitani, T., & McKittrick, S. A. (2010). After transfer: The engagement of community college students at a four-year collegiate institution. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 34, 576-594.
- Jain, D., Herrera, A., Bernal, S., & Solorzano, D. (2011). Critical Race Theory and the transfer function: Introducing a transfer receptive culture. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 35, 252-266.
- Melguizo, T., Kienzl, G., & Alfonso, M. (2011). Comparing the educational attainment of community college students and four-year college rising juniors using propensity score matching methods. *Journal of Higher Education*, 82, 265-291.
- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: SAGE.

- Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods (2nd ed.)*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Porchea, S. F., Allen, J., Robbins, S., & Phelps, R. P. (2010). Predictors of long-term enrollment and degree outcomes for community college students: Integrating academic, psychosocial, socio-demographic, and situational factors. *Journal of Higher Education, 81*, 750-778.
- Rendon, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education, 19*, 33-51.
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community. In D. C. Roberts (Ed.), *Designing campus activities to foster a sense of community*. *New Directions for Student Services, No. 28* (pp. 5-15). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Smith, D. W. (2007). *Husserl*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. (2001). *Manufacturing Despair*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.
- Tobolowsky, B. F., & Cox, B. E. (2012). Rationalizing neglect: An institutional response to transfer students. *Journal of Higher Education, 83*, 389-410.
- Townsend, B. K. (1995). Community college transfer students: A case study of survival. *Review of Higher Education, 18*, 175-93.
- Townsend, B. K., & Wilson, K. (2006). "A hand hold for a little bit": Factors facilitating the success of community college transfer students to a large research university. *Journal of College Student Development, 47*, 439-456.
- Townsend, B. K., & Wilson, K. B. (2008-9). The academic and social integration of persisting

- community college transfer students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 10, 405-423.
- U. S. Department of Education (2007). *Definition of Hispanic-Serving Institutions*. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/print/programs/iduehsi/definition.html>
- Van Middlesworth, C., Carpenter-Davis, C., & McCool, M. (2001). Examining the effectiveness of articulation agreements through community college transfer students: A pilot study of teacher education transfers. *Journal of Applied Research in the Community College*, 8(2), 117-124.
- Wang, X. (2009). Baccalaureate attainment and college persistence of community college transfer students at four-year institutions. *Research in Higher Education*, 50, 570-588.
- Wang, X. (2012). Factors contributing to the upward transfer of baccalaureate aspirants beginning at community colleges. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 83, 851-875.
- Yin, R. (1994). *Case study research design and methods*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE.