Community College Student Perceptions of University Transfer Barriers

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Community College Student Perceptions of University Transfer Barriers

A Dissertation by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

April 2017

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April 2017
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am so grateful for the opportunities for which I have been blessed. The blessing to teach full-time and the opportunities that led me here. The blessing of love and family that supported me along my path. The blessing of supportive colleagues and friends, with whom I have been honored to work with and collaborate.

I acknowledge my best friend and bride for standing by me through this journey and for the many challenges we faced before now. For seeing me through crazy ideas, supporting my pursuit of them, and being my partner in all we adopt.

I acknowledge my parents for always being supportive, always asking questions, but supporting my decisions in the end. My father’s example of hard work and my mother’s perfectionism. I acknowledge my sisters who cared for me over the years; even though I may have been too young to remember, your love has been imprinted on me. My in-laws, for your acceptance of me as son and brother.

I acknowledge my colleagues, my new family, at Irvine Valley College. It has been a pleasure and joy to start our many years together. My colleagues and friends at Brandman University who supported me in this program. My friends and fellow doctors in our amazing Ed.D. Irvine Beta One cohort!

I acknowledge my enthusiastic Irvine Beta One cohort mentor, Dr. Tod Burnett.

I acknowledge my amazing dissertation chair, Dr. Doug DeVore.

I acknowledge my friend and dissertation committee member, Dr. Jalin Johnson.

I acknowledge my respected colleague and committee member, Dr. Edward Bush.
ABSTRACT

Community College Student Perceptions of University Transfer Barriers

by Rick H. Boone

**Purpose:** It was the purpose of this study to identify and describe the perceived barriers that hindered California community college students from successful transfer to a four-year college or university and what services they perceived were needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year college or university.

**Methodology:** This qualitative, phenomenological study strove to understand the commonalities of the personal experiences of community college transfer students. In this study, the shared phenomena were the challenges experienced by these students when attempting to transfer to a four-year institution. Non-probability, purposeful snowball sampling was used to locate 12 participants in the southern California region. Semi-structured interviews were used to discover the perceptions of transfer students who were yet unable to transfer.

**Findings:** The findings from this research identified barriers experienced by transfer students, including not understanding the transfer process, bad advisement, the need to work while attending college, extended time from taking unnecessary classes, family commitments, and lack of confidence. Additional findings identified the services needed to help the transfer experience, as perceived by community college transfer students, which included better communications from the college to the student, early program and course advisement, more individualized advisement, and additional help for underrepresented students.
Conclusions: Based on these findings and the literature review, it was concluded that (1) community college transfer students need assistance along their path, (2) advisement on the community college campus was a vital instrument for transfer students, and (3) many transfer students were forced to manage competing priorities, which may affect their transfer experience.

Recommendations: It was recommended that community colleges implement and hold students accountable for a required, exhaustive new student orientation and purposeful advisement procedure. Through this orientation and advisement, the community college could provide better communications to all students with clear, accessible, and reliable information about the transfer process and requirements; provide greater access to counselors for required, enforced advisement by the first semester of enrollment; and provide better communications and support for working and underrepresented students.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Higher education was obtainable to varying degrees across the world and, in some countries, a college education was offered at no cost to the student (Business Insider, 2015; The Washington Post, 2014). In the United States, however, post-secondary education was usually available with admission standards and tuition costs, though grants and federal financial aid were available (California Student Aid Commission, 2015; Federal Student Aid, 2015). Students who graduated high school in the United States had the choice of entering the workforce, entering a public or private four-year institution, or attending a community college to begin their college education (Bahr, 2012; Handel, 2011; Mims, 2015). Though many private colleges and universities offered lower division units, it was the public community college system that contained the enrollment of almost half of the nation’s undergraduate population, equivalent to 7.7 million full- and part-time students (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2014a).

Community colleges started in the Americas over 100 years ago and endured many changes over that time (AACC, 2015). The initial instruction offered at these colleges was general studies in liberal arts, but job-training was added into the curriculum during the Great Depression to help with widespread unemployment (AACC, 2015). Each community college system in the country had its own mission; at the national level, community colleges were centers of educational opportunity. They were an American invention that put publicly funded higher education at close-to-home facilities, beginning with Joliet Junior College. Since then, community colleges have been inclusive institutions that welcomed all who desire to learn, regardless of income, background, or previous academic experience. (AACC, 2015).
For those students who sought job training, the community college workforce development programs were managed at the state level and offered students many areas of study. For example, Virginia’s Community Colleges (2015) offered hundreds of credit and non-credit credentials, including: veterinary assistant, HVAC tradesman, human resources professional, and Microsoft certification, to name a few. Oregon State had a Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development (2015) that offered many options for adults, including basic skills programs and credentials, and a National Career Readiness Certificate to support those looking to improve their employability.

The California Community College Economic and Workforce Development (CCCEWD, 2015) program, in collaboration with the California Community College Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) and California Department of Education, partnered with individual businesses, workforce investment boards, community colleges, career and technical education (CTE) groups, and K-12 school districts. The program targeted students whose goal could be attending college to learn general job skills or a specific trade, earning an associate’s degree, or obtaining a skill certificate or the knowledge of an individual course, but who had no desire to transfer to a university or pursue a bachelor’s or advanced degree.

Students pursuing a bachelor’s or advanced degree could choose to attend a university directly after graduating high school. This path typically was meant for students with a strong academic history to qualify for admission and the means to pay for tuition fees through federal or personal financing (AACC, 2009; Taylor, 2010). Universities established minimum grade point average (GPA) requirements and the public university systems often became competitive with their limited number of
admitted students (California State University [CSU], 2015; University of California [UC], 2015). The cost of attending a university ranged from tens of thousands of dollars at public universities to hundreds of thousands of dollars at some private four-year institutions (Biola University, 2015; CSU, 2015; Chapman University, 2015; UC, 2015; University of Southern California, 2015).

Approximately 80% of community college students in the United States stated their intention was to transfer to a four-year institution (Berger & Malaney, 2001; Cejda, 1997). Students who chose to attend community college first, with goals of continuing their education at a four-year institution, were referred to as transfer students (Berger & Malaney, 2001; Handel, 2011; Hermoso, 2013; Lewis, 2013). For these students, transfer pathways were of the utmost importance to assist with (1) credit transfer to a four-year college or university, (2) efficient and informed course selections and, (3) priority registration (California Community Colleges [CCC] & CSU, 2015; Evelyn, Greenlee, Brown, & Weiger, 2000). Unfortunately, less than half of these students were able to transfer within six years of starting at a community college (Berger & Malaney, 2001; Complete College America [CCA], 2012; Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, & Shepherd, 2010). In addition to the student’s desire to transfer and the low success rate at which it occurred, President Barrack Obama challenged community colleges that by the year 2020, the United States should increase completion by 50% and graduate an additional five million students (White House, 2015).
Background

The need for a college degree increased as access to a global economy grew. Yet, the United States lags behind other countries in terms of college graduation rates. Goldrick-Rab, Harris, Mazzeo, and Kienzl (2009) stated,

At least 10 developed nations have surpassed the United States in educational attainment, and our nation ranks even lower internationally on measures of cognitive skills. Part of the erosion of America’s longstanding educational attainment advantage can be explained by a heavy and growing reliance on community colleges. (p. 2)

With President Obama’s goal to educate an additional five million students by the year 2020 (White House, 2015) and the AACC’s 21st Century Initiative (2012), community colleges needed to target those institutions that helped their students succeed and transform the system into an agent of opportunity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009).

During the fall 2012 semester, 7,700,000 full- and part-time students chose to attend community colleges in the United States (AACC, 2014a), which equated to over 40% of all undergraduate students in the nation (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2015). In addition to those receiving academic credit for their coursework, an additional five million students were enrolled in non-credit courses (AACC, 2014a). Students enrolled in two-year community colleges for various reasons, including trade skill education, workplace skill and certificate achievement, degree attainment, and transfer to a four-year university (Berger & Malaney, 2001; Cejda, 1997; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Handel, 2011; Marcus, 2014). Though some students had a clear goal while attending community college, many took courses they did not need and
most of these students did not transfer to a four-year institution within six years of starting (Berger & Malaney, 2001; CCA, 2012; Marcus, 2014; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014; Radford et al., 2010).

**Why Attend Community College**

As described in *Transforming America’s Community Colleges* (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009), “Students today are likelier than ever before to choose to attend community college. Enrollment at community colleges is rising twice as fast as at four-year colleges, and campuses in many states…are bursting at the seams” (p. 3). With such growth, it was important to understand why so many people were choosing community colleges.

The literature identified finances as a primary reason for attending community college. Community college tuition and fees averaged about 36% of the typical public four-year institution (AACC, 2009; Handel, 2011). With comparatively low tuition rates and open enrollment policies, community colleges offered access to higher education to a distinct population compared to four-year institutions and brought educational opportunity at close-to-home facilities that were inclusive and welcomed all who desired to learn (AACC, 2014a, 2015; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009). This purpose also acted as a gateway to education for those students who were typically underrepresented, such as racial and ethnic minorities and low-income families, as well as those whom required remedial courses or were non-traditionally aged college students (Berger & Malaney, 2001; Laanan, 1996).

With so many students attending American community colleges, the education and support these institutions offered students was important, especially given the numerous obstacles in the way of student success in higher education (Sullivan, 2006).
One of these challenges was how to “successfully embrace and support students from culturally diverse backgrounds for retention and matriculation to four-year institutions” (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011, p. 45). Another challenge was supporting the future workforce that did not fit into the full-time student funding model of the community colleges.

**Community College as Workforce Development**

Many states, including California, offered workforce development programs through the community college systems (CCCEWD, 2015). In addition to non-credit programs offered at community colleges and credit programs that could be used to attain certificates, degrees, and transfer, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education was dedicated to improving the workforce skills of America (USDE, 2015). Furthermore, the U.S. focus on CTE programs was centralized with the Perkins Collaborative Resource Network (PCRN, 2015), which acted as a resource and portal for the workforce advancements through education.

One might think that attending a community college to learn a skill or trade would preclude a person from attaining a degree, but Bauman (2007) believed that career-training programs at community colleges should require students to take more liberal arts courses. Bauman (2007) also believed that liberal arts students should take more practical, career-focused courses. Many community college students who intended to earn CTE-focused, non-baccalaureate credentials often increased their educational goals after beginning their coursework (Handel, 2011). “Many high-demand, well-paying jobs require a college credential, though not necessarily a four-year degree…Associate degree
holders, in particular, earn 20 to 30 percent more than workers with a high school diploma only” (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009, p. 2).

**Community College as a Transfer Opportunity**

Eighty percent of community college students indicated their goal was transferring to a four-year institution (Berger & Malaney, 2001; Cejda, 1997). Looking back at history, “The community-college boom likewise occurred a generation after World War II, as immigrants from oppression and economic devastation, as well as returning veterans, tried to improve their lives” (Bauman, 2007); the same themes surfaced today. As previously mentioned, lower tuition costs, open enrollment, close geographical proximity, and the opportunity to transfer to a four-year institution was critical for underrepresented and low-income students (AACC, 2009; AACC, 2014a; AACC, 2015; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Handel, 2011; Laanan, 1996).

Community colleges needed to be deliberate and systematic when offering programs and support services to students, while managing limited resources, because community college transfer was such a critical step in attaining a baccalaureate degree (Bahr, 2012; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Melguizo & Dowd, 2009; Wang, 2009). The overriding suggestion was that the effectiveness of the two-year institution relied more on how it managed programs and student services and less on specific policies or practices (Jenkins, 2006). In *Assessing the Transition of Transfer Students from Community Colleges to a University*, Berger and Malaney (2001) discussed the importance the community college as a gateway to higher education, noting,

In particular, community colleges have provided an educational gateway for those students from groups (including racial/ethnic minorities, low
income, and non-traditionally aged students) that have been historically under-represented…This body of research is particularly significant given that community colleges, through the transfer function, should and do play a valuable role in providing a gateway for many individuals to pursue baccalaureate degrees. (p. 3)

Private four-year university transfer was a viable option for community college students, though institutional research typically related to the public higher education system. The CSU system collaborated with the CCC system to build more than 1,600 degree pathways that encouraged students to matriculate to the four-year institution (CCC & CSU, 2015). Community college transfer students were a priority for new student admission to the CSU Chancellor’s office; however, little data existed regarding this population and far fewer discussions and support programs were available at the four-year campuses (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011).

The Challenges Faced by Community College Students

Eighty-one percent of community college students indicated they wanted to attain a bachelor’s degree and attending the two-year institution helped them save money (Marcus, 2014). Unfortunately, less than half of those who wanted to graduate or transfer were not able to do so within six years of starting at the community college (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Radford et al., 2010). According to CCA (2012), less than 25% of bachelor’s degree candidates attending community college full-time actually graduated and only 10% were able complete their programs in two years.

Community college students faced challenges and barriers inside the two-year institution and from factors outside it. A high percentage of community college students
were not well-prepared to succeed at college-level work and were further challenged by the limited resources at the institution (Jenkins, 2006). When adding underrepresented students into the review, one paper identified individual factors affecting the transfer of Latino students to four-year institutions included lack of academic preparedness, career and educational goals, and personal drive (Suarez, 2003).

Community colleges were referred to as a handicap for students, as these institutions did not typically provide on-campus living facilities or adequate student involvement opportunities (Laanan, 1996). Other studies identified environmental and social factors as challenges for community college students, such as few support systems to assist with financial aid and the proximity of the four-year transfer institution (Hermoso 2012; Suarez, 2003). The responsibility of transfer support systems did not fall solely on the two-year institution, but also included the four-year colleges and universities that would receive and support these students in the future to positively affect the transfer student outcomes and retention (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Blaylock & Bresciai, 2011).

**Community College Student Barriers to Success**

Research on the challenges faced by transfer students dated back to 1967, where it was discovered that family income, employment levels, educational attainment levels, and population of the college’s district affected its transfer rates (Alkin & Hendrix, 1967; Banks, 1992). Over the past several decades, additional research evaluated the challenges of community college student transfer. These barriers were internal, at the post-secondary institution, or influenced by environmental conditions outside the institution (Banks, 1992). Identified barriers related to academic preparation, a lack of
clear pathways, four-year university admission standards, a lack of support systems, language and cultural concerns, work-school balance, and financial constraints.

**Academic preparation.** One of the goals urged in *Reclaiming the American Dream* (AACC, 2012) was to cut in half the number of students who entered college unprepared and double the number of students who completed developmental education programs. Several studies addressed the importance of meeting the needs of ethnic minorities and international students, including Hispanic students, whom tended toward poor academic performance and had low persistence and retention rates (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). The developmental programs offered at a college might not be as effective as intended with large expense and time commitments (Public Agenda, 2012).

**Lack of clear pathways.** The lack of clear pathways—drawing a connection and opportunity to transfer between the community college program and a four-year baccalaureate degree—was seen as a barrier to transfer. One of the six implementation strategies to increase college completion, advised by the AACC (2014b), was to “construct coherent, structured pathways to certificate and degree completion, and then ensure that students enter a pathway soon after beginning college” (p. 8). Transfer students were usually required to find their own viable pathway due to the inefficiencies and lack of support programs, so communication between the two- and four-year institutions was critical to offer solutions to students (Kadlec, Immerwahr, & Gupta, 2014). A college program with a clear goal and defined pathway to get there could improve completion and transfer rates (Public Agenda, 2012).

**Four-year university admission standards.** The high demand of many four-year institutions caused the admission standards to be raised (i.e., higher GPA
requirements), tuition costs to increase, and caps placed on the number of new students admitted (Long & Kurlaender, 2009). In California, the Associate Degree for Transfer (AD-T) guaranteed eligibility for admission to the CSU, but if the desired institution or program was impacted, the student was not guaranteed any specific campus (Taylor, Constantouros, & Heiman, 2015). These impacted institutions and programs had a negative effect on transfer rates in California (Banks, 1992).

**Inefficiency and lack of support programs.** The ineffectiveness or lack of support programs at two- and four-year institutions was a challenge for students, and further research was needed in the area of program development to assist transfer students (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Collaboration in support services was needed between institutions, both for transfer students overall and to specifically address the issues faced by minority and international students (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Kadlec et al., 2014). Additional research was also needed to identify why students did not utilize existing services; only 24% of students in developmental education programs used the support services (e.g., tutoring, counselors) available to them (AACC, 2012).

The AACC (2012) reported that less than one-third of entering students were assisted by a college advisor to set academic goals and create a plan to achieve them. Even when a student met with an advisor, the shifting admissions requirements of the four-year institutions and poor communication between both levels made it difficult for advisors to maintain accurate information (Kadlec et al., 2014; Public Agenda, 2012). Advisors and counselors who offered accurate and tailored guidance were in high demand and difficult to find, especially when an individual professional counselor was
responsible for serving as many as 1,100 students (Kadlec et al., 2014; Public Agenda, 2012).

**Diversity of student languages and cultures.** A growing population of racial and ethnic minorities attended community colleges as first-time freshman (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Transfer students were diverse in many other ways as well, including a variation of academic preparation, age, gender, employment status, and economic means (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). Some past studies looked at transfer rates in relation to a diverse student population; colleges with high transfer rates were in suburban areas and enrolled fewer full-time minority students (Banks, 1992). Beyond the low rate of 46% of students earning a degree or certificate or transferring, the rates were even lower for Hispanic, Black, Native American, and low-income students (AACC, 2012). The growing ethnic minority population required colleges to address the specific needs of these students, including language and cultural barriers (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001).

**Work-school balance.** The AACC (2014a) reported that among students attending college full-time, 22% also worked full-time and 40% worked part-time. For those students attending college part-time, 73% worked full- or part-time. The balance of work and school responsibilities was a challenge and barrier to completion. Work schedules kept students from taking needed classes and the balance of these responsibilities was a barrier to completion and transfer (Kadlec et al., 2014).

**Economic conditions and financial aid.** Median household income and unemployment were two economic conditions that affected student transfer. Banks (1992) found that “higher transfer rates came with high community income, high percentages of full-time faculty…and a high percentage of students with 12 or more
credits” (p. 5). Further, financial aid was seen as a barrier, especially to minority students and transfer students needing support at the four-year institutions (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001).

**The Research Gap**

For this study, research was focused on California community colleges, where 20% of the nation’s community college students attended school in fall 2012 (AACC, 2014a; CCCCO, n.d.-a). It was the primary mission of the CCCs to offer academic and vocational instruction to students of all ages, including the issuance of associate degrees and, through workforce development, advance the economic growth and global competitiveness of California (California Education Code, 1999). California had 112 community colleges that served 2.3 million students in the 2013-2014 academic year (CCCCO, n.d.-a). With transfer success under 50% and increased expectations for the colleges, changes must occur to limit student barriers and improve transfer rates.

In the available research, the focus was often on nationwide studies of colleges and universities with fewer focused on any one state or district (AACC, 2012; CCA, 2012; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Katsinas, Shedd, Koh, Malley, & Adair, 2015; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). Some studies focused on administrators’ perceptions of transfer barriers instead of the students’ perspective. Many studies—even when discussing transfer challenges—researched students who completed the transfer process, and most research compared their success to those who started at four-year institutions (Laanan, 1996). Little research was conducted on the shortcomings of the growing community college transfer population from the perspective of the student (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Jenkins, 2006).
Statement of the Research Problem

Community colleges in the United States were home to many undergraduate students, with reports noting 40% and higher of the nation’s undergraduate population (Aud et al., 2012; NCES, 2015). In fall 2012, almost half of the U.S. undergraduate population attended community colleges, with 7.7 million full and part-time students enrolled in credit programs (AACC, 2014a). However, less than half of those students who wanted to graduate or transfer to a four-year institution were able to do so within six years of starting at the community college (Radford et al., 2010). Less than 25% of full-time transfer students graduated from the community college within three years and a mere 10% completed a community college degree in two years (CCA, 2012).

Some reasons for low student completion and transfer rates at community colleges included: (1) unprepared students and few programs in place to help them; (2) unavailable, ineffective, or misinformed support staff; (3) few clear and attainable transfer pathways; (4) few programs available to support diverse language and cultural needs; (5) impacted four-year institutions with more competitive admissions standards; (6) difficulty balancing work and school responsibilities; and (7) economic and financial aid barriers (AACC, 2012, 2014; Banks, 1992; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Kadlec et al., 2014; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Public Agenda, 2012; Taylor et al., 2015). However, these explanations were derived from research at the national level and not necessarily from the students’ perspective.

After President Obama’s challenge to community colleges to educate five million more Americans by 2020, the AACC published its report Reclaiming the American Dream (2012), which gave a current state of colleges and student success, and defined the
changes needed to achieve the lofty goal of increasing completion rates by 50%. With a weak economy during the Great Recession and four-year institutions increasing competitive admissions process and tuition rates, incoming college students were more likely to attend a community college instead of direct admission to a four-year institution (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009). In a system already facing challenges with completion and transfer rates, the added goal of increased success further tested the community college system.

Recent studies examined community college students who successfully transferred to four-year institutions (Hermoso, 2013, Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). Other studies explored community college students who transferred from two-year institutions and compared them to those admitted directly into four-year institutions (Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). Additional studies researched student transfer issues as seen by the leaders of the institutions or through the lens of an administrator instead of the students’ experiences (Cohen & Brawer, 1994; Handel, 2011). To understand the challenges in the baccalaureate-transfer process, recent studies included research from two- and four-year institutions that commonly looked at nationwide trends and included students who were successful in transferring. Some themes emerged regarding these challenges, including issues within the college, external to the college, and personal to the student. Little research was conducted on transfer students from their own perspective regarding barriers of community college transfer and what support services were needed to successfully transfer.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the perceived barriers that hindered the successful transfer of California community college students to a four-year university and what services they perceived were needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year university.

Research Questions

The following two research questions served to guide the study:

1. What are the barriers to successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?
2. What types of services are needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?

Significance of the Problem

To meet President Obama’s charge, the AACC (2012) established a goal to increase community college success by 50% by the year 2020, adding five million more graduates to the U.S. population. With this needed increase in student success and the already challenged state of community colleges, understanding the perceived barriers of unsuccessful transfer students was imperative (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Radford et al., 2010). With 20% of the nation’s community college students enrolled in the CCC system, studies need to offer insights into this population whereas past studies were broad looking at nationwide data and students who already successfully transferred.

The results of this study could help the entire higher education industry –both public and private, two-year and four-year institutions– understand what students perceived as barriers to transferring from community college to four-year universities and
how these barriers affected their transfer experience. In addition, the student perceptions of services needed to support the transfer experience could also help institutions of higher education address their internal support programs.

**Definitions**

**Associate’s degree.** A degree usually earned at a two-year institution consisting of approximately 60 completed college units that can be used as a tool for transfer to a four-year college or university (CCCCO, 2015).

**Barriers to transfer.** Factors or challenges faced by community college transfer students that impeded them from attaining their educational goals and successfully transferring to a four-year institution (Hermoso, 2013; Townsend & Wilson, 2006).

**College completion.** The earning of certificates, associate degrees, or transfer from two-year to four-year colleges (Jaschik, 2013; Katsinas et al., 2015; O’Banion, 2011). However, a recent recommendation by the AACC (2012) included the completion of a CTE program.

**CTE/CCWD student.** A person who attended a two-year institution with no intention of transferring to a four-year institution, but to learn a skill or trade in CTE or community college workforce development programs aimed at preparing students for existing and future jobs (AACC, 2012).

**Four-year college.** A university or senior institution that awards baccalaureate and other degrees, which includes public and private as well as non-profit and for-profit institutions. Historically, students would spend four years as a full-time student to earn a bachelor’s degree (Smith, 2015).
**Four-year degree.** A diploma or certification used to describe a bachelor’s degree, typically attained at a four-year college or university (Smith, 2015).

**Full-time student.** A person who attends a minimum of 12 semester units of college-level coursework during any one session at a two or four-year institution (Academic Senate of California Community Colleges, 2016; CCCC, n.d.-b).

**Lateral student transfer.** A process in which a post-secondary student transferred from or was co-enrolled in the same level of institution (e.g., two-year to two-year institution, four-year to four-year institutions; Bahr, 2012; Simone, 2014).

**Private college or university.** An institution of higher education privately owned and operated, and although independent from state funding and obligation, often rely largely on tax exemptions for operations and endowment growth (Douglas, 2006). Private institutions could be for-profit, governed by private organizations and corporations and can also be considered as receiving institutions (National Conference of State Legislators, 2013; Lewis, 2013).

**Public college or university.** An institution of higher education owned and controlled by the state, primarily funded through public sources, and seen as advancing the interests of a state to sustain operations (CCCO, 2015; Douglas, 2006; Lewis, 2013).

**Transfer student.** A student who earned college credit after graduation from high school, typically from a community college, who intended to transfer to a four-year institution; this student could desire to complete an associate’s degree prior to that transfer (CCCO, 2015; CSU Mentor, 2015; Hermoso, 2013).
**Two-year college.** Sometimes called a community college or junior college, a localized institution where a student can earn an associate’s degree or other certificates and workforce development skills. It can be used by transfer students as an entry point into higher education and provides access to lifelong learning (CCCCO, 2015; Lewis, 2013).

**Underrepresented students.** The term underrepresented students was defined as racial and ethnic minorities, low-income students, first-generation college attendees, those who required remedial courses, international students, and/or non-traditionally aged college students (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Laanan, 1996; Nin, 2015; Soltani, 2013).

**Delimitations**

This study was delimited to California community college students enrolled in schools in the Southern California area who desired to transfer to a four-year institution, but were unsuccessful in doing so. Furthermore, the participants were limited to those who have completed 60 transferable units, enough to transfer, and attended community colleges full-time for at least five semesters.

**Organization of the Study**

The remainder of the study is organized into four additional chapters, a bibliography and appendices. Chapter II contains a literature review of community college history and functions, and the themes formed from the literature. Chapter III describes the phenomenological methodology and research design of the study, including a definition of the research population and sample. Chapter IV includes the qualitative findings and themes from the interviews with college transfer students. Lastly, Chapter
V contains a summary of key findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter II contains the literature review for this study. The researcher developed a synthesis matrix (Appendix A) to support the development of this literature review. The first section examines the existing research regarding the history and function of the community college system and why a student might enroll. The second section discusses two of the most common reasons a student attends community college, to prepare for the workforce or as a tool to transfer to a four-year university. This section also details the challenges transfer students experience. The third section introduces the known barriers experienced by students that impede their transfer from the community college. The fourth section presents the negative impact these barriers had on students and the processes intended to address the problem. Finally, the chapter concludes with a summary of the major trends.

Introduction

Eighty percent of college students in the United States chose to attend a community college first, with hopes of transferring to a four-year college or university (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Cejda, 1997; NCES, 2011). Unfortunately, fewer than 50% transferred within six years of starting at the community college and a mere 10% transferred within two years (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Complete College America, 2012; Radford et al., 2010). In 2009, U.S. President Barrack Obama challenged the community college system with a goal to educate an additional five million students by the year 2020 (Obama, 2009; White House, 2015). This spurred the AACC’s 21st Century Initiative to assist in meeting this goal (AACC, 2012). Many barriers to transfer existed for community college students, which affected these national goals (Alkin &
Hendrix, 1967; Banks, 1992; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Hermoso, 2012; Jenkins, 2006; Laanan, 1996; Suarez, 2003). The following literature review details why students attend community colleges, the differences between students attending for workforce training and for transfer, the barriers faced by transfer students, and where the existing research is lacking.

**Why Students Attend Community Colleges**

Dating to the late 1800s in Michigan, there was a separation of the first two years of college education from the university (Nin, 2015). The latter two years of university study was typically spent on a specialized or more advanced level of study (Witt, Wattenberger, Gollattscheck, & Suppiger, 1995). In 1900 at the University of Chicago, President Harper proposed to separate these levels of study into junior and senior and envisioned an associate degree for those completing a two-year course of study (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Extended high school education was also proposed as a solution to alleviate the universities of lower-division instruction, which lead to the creation of the nation’s first community college, Joliet Junior College (Handel, 2013; Joliet Junior College, 2017; Lucas, 2006). This dual level of higher education reached California in 1902, at the University of California, Berkeley, and was formalized by the Upward Extension Law in 1907 (Handel, 2013). By 1910, the upward extension of the high school at Fresno City College became the first community college in California (Fresno City College, 2014; Handel, 2013; McLane, 1913).

Prior to the Women’s and Civil Rights movements and the creation of the GI Bill, higher education in the United States was primarily reserved for young men of high socioeconomic status (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Nin, 2015; Thelin, 2011). These
impactful events of U.S. history expanded the access to higher education—and community colleges—to a much more diverse population (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). The Higher Education Act of 1965 further increased access to education with the improved availability of financial aid to help the less-privileged attend school (Nin, 2015; Vaughan, 2006).

Looking at more recent years, community colleges in the United States served more than 40% of the nation’s undergraduate population (Aud et al., 2012; NCES, 2015). Approximately 70% of high school students chose to extend their studies at two- and four-year institutions (Bragg & Durham, 2012). First-generation students made up 40% of community college enrollment (AACC, 2013). In the Fall of 2012, almost half of the U.S. undergraduate population attended community colleges, with 7.7 million full- and part-time students enrolled in credit programs (AACC, 2014a). As described in Transforming America’s Community Colleges (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009), students were much more likely to attend community colleges, with enrollment at community colleges growing at a greater rate than that of four-year universities.

“The community-college boom likewise occurred a generation after World War II, as immigrants from oppression and economic devastation, as well as returning veterans, tried to improve their lives” (Bauman, 2007, p. 2). In addition to improving their lives, other reasons for attending community colleges included lower tuition costs, open enrollment, close geographic proximity, and the ability to attend a community college first and transfer to a four-year institution (AACC, 2009, 2014a, 2015; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Handel, 2011; Laanan, 1996; Soltani, 2013).
The community college system served as a path and gateway to higher education for underrepresented students (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Soltani, 2013). The term underrepresented was defined as racial and ethnic minorities, low-income students, and first-generation attendees, as well as those who required remedial courses or were non-traditionally aged college students (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Laanan, 1996; Nin, 2015). With open door enrollment policies and comparatively low tuition rates, community colleges offered access to higher education to those not able to qualify for, or afford, a four-year institution (AACC, 2014a; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009). Community colleges also brought higher education closer to home for to any who desired to learn (AACC, 2015). Berger and Malaney (2003) addressed the importance the community college as a gateway to higher education,

In particular, community colleges have provided an educational gateway for those students from groups (including racial/ethnic minorities, low income, and non-traditionally aged students) that have been historically under-represented…this body of research is particularly significant given that community colleges, through the transfer function, should and do play a valuable role in providing a gateway for many individuals to pursue baccalaureate degrees. (p. 3)

**Workforce, Transfer, and Transfer Challenges**

Students attended community colleges with different goals and objectives. Some students looked to learn a skill or trade to more quickly enter the workforce or get promoted (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Tolbert, 2012). However, most students attended community colleges with the goal of transferring to a
four-year college or university (Bahr, 2012; CCCCO, 2014; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Melguizo & Dowd, 2009; Wang, 2009). The motivation to transfer instead of attending the four-year institution directly was driven by multiple factors, including saving money and gaining access to higher education from culturally diverse and underrepresented populations (AACC, 2009; Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Handel, 2011; Marcus, 2014; Suarez, 2003).

Community College as Workforce Development

Students attended community colleges to pursue workforce development for more immediate employment. Workforce development referred to programs that led to employment, instead of pursuing a degree, such as cosmetology, hospitality, manufacturing, and agriculture (CCCEWD, 2015). Workforce development programs were offered by community college systems throughout the United States (CCCEWD, 2015). The USDE managed non-credit programs offered at community colleges and credit programs that could be used to attain certificates, degrees, or transfer. It also oversaw the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, which was dedicated to improving the workforce skills of America (USDE, 2015). CTE programs were centralized with the Perkins Collaborative Resource Network (PCRN, 2015), which acts as a resource and portal for the workforce advancements through community college education.

Tolbert (2012) stated that students who earned certificates and degrees had more opportunities to gain employment and make a livable income. Another perspective was that higher education was becoming an increasingly necessary step to middle class jobs, as those with an associate’s degree made 20-30% more than high school graduates.
(Carnevale et al., 2010; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009). An increase in college completion rates equated to a more educated workforce and social mobility; higher education contributed to California’s workforce and assisted in the United States’ global competitiveness (Lucas, 2006; Nin, 2015; Sullivan, 2006).

In addition to the benefit of gainful employment, Bauman (2007) believed a community college student with the goal of learning a skill or trade should be required to take more liberal arts courses, and that liberal arts students should take more practical, career-focused courses. After beginning their coursework, many community college students who intended to earn CTE-focused, non-baccalaureate certificates often increased their educational goals (Handel, 2011).

**Community College as Transfer Opportunity**

Community college transfer was a critical step in attaining a baccalaureate degree (Bahr, 2012; Dowd & Melguizo, 2008; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Melguizo & Dowd, 2009; Wang, 2009). Students could attend a community college first to save money, with tuition and fees averaging about 36% of the typical public four-year institution and approximately 2-3% of some private universities (AACC, 2009; Biola, 2017; Chapman, 2017; Handel, 2011; Marcus, 2014; USC, 2017). Community college students also had the option to transfer to private, four-year universities, though research typically focused on public higher education systems. It was part of the mission of the CCC to transfer students, with a more recent focus on completion at the two-year institution (CCCCO, 2014a).
Jenkins suggested the effectiveness of the community college relied on how it managed programs and student services, and less on specific policies or practices (2006). Degree pathways was one way the two- and four-year institutions were trying to bridge this important gap. The CCCs collaborated with some CSUs to build more than 1,600 pathways to encourage students to matriculate to the four-year institution. (CCC & CSU, 2015).

**The Challenges Experienced by Transfer Students**

After the 2009 Obama challenge to educate five-million more Americans by 2020, the AACC published *Reclaiming the American Dream* (2012). This report detailed the changes needed to achieve the President’s goal of increasing completion rates by 50% (AACC, 2012). With the weak economy of the Great Recession and four-year colleges and universities increasing in tuition costs and competitive admissions processes, incoming college students were more likely to attend a community college instead of directly enrolling in a four-year institution (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009).

The majority of community college students—those who desired to transfer—had particular challenges to overcome (Alkin & Hendrix, 1967; Banks, 1992; Berger & Malaney, 2003; Cejda, 1997; NCES, 2011). Fewer than 50% of transfer students actually transferred within six years of starting at the community college, about 25% transferred within four years, and only 10% transferred within two years (Berger & Malaney, 2003; CCA, 2012; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Radford et al., 2010). Transfer students were diverse in many ways, including race and ethnicity, a variation of academic preparation, age, gender, employment status, and economic means (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). The
underrepresented students were more affected by the same transfer-related challenges (AACC, 2012; Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Nin, 2015; Suarez, 2003).

**Barriers that Impede Student Transfer**

Dating back to 1967, research discovered challenges in student transfer due to family income, employment levels, educational attainment levels, and population of the college’s district (Alkin & Hendrix, 1967; Banks, 1992). Research continued over the last 50 years to evaluate the challenges experienced by community college transfer students. These barriers were documented to exist institutionally, at the two- and four-year colleges and universities, and were influenced by environmental conditions extraneous to the educational institutions (Banks, 1992).

Community college completion and transfer rates were lacking and were studied mostly at the national level. Barriers that emerged as common in the literature included (1) unprepared students and few programs in place to help them; (2) unavailable, ineffective, or misinformed support staff; (3) few clear and attainable transfer pathways; (4) few programs available to support diverse language and cultural needs; (5) impacted four-year institutions with more competitive admissions standards; (6) difficulty balancing work and school responsibilities; and (7) economic and financial aid barriers (AACC, 2012, 2014; Banks, 1992; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Kadlec et al., 2014; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Public Agenda, 2012; Taylor et al., 2015).

**Academic preparation of students.** The report *Reclaiming the American Dream* (AACC, 2012) urged educators to double the number of students who completed developmental education programs and improve college readiness by reducing the students entering college unprepared by half. These developmental programs were
expensive with large time commitments, yet they were not as effective as intended (Public Agenda, 2012). A high percentage of students were not prepared to succeed at college-level work and were challenged by the limited resources at the institution (Jenkins, 2006).

**First year native students compared to transfer students.** Research looked at the success and efforts of community college transfer students at the four-year institution compared to students who started at the four-year institution. In the Hechinger Report, Marcus (2014) found that 63% of students who started at a four-year institution graduated, but only 40% of transfer students who started at a two-year institution were able to graduate.

By far, the most research found credit loss to be the largest factor affecting the transfer student. CCA (2012) found that students who transferred with an associate’s degree had earned close to 80 credits instead of the anticipated 60 in the degree. Those who earned certificates at the community college had earned more than 63 credits, instead of the 30 credits typically expected for certificates (CCA, 2012). In addition, excess transfer credit was found with U.S. undergraduate students earning almost 10% of their grades as “W” (withdrawal) or “R” (no-credit repeat) (CCA, 2012).

With the loss of credit for transfer students, less than half of them graduated after transferring to the four-year institution (Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). In addition to students being negatively affected by this, so was the nation’s financial stability. CCA (2012) reported that “excess credits are estimated to cost more than $19 billion each year... nearly $8 billion is paid by students - and more than $11 billion is the unnecessary burden of taxpayers who subsidize public higher education” (p. 2).
**Community college programs and staff.** The ineffectiveness or lack of support programs at two and four-year institutions was a challenge for students (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Gard, Paton & Gosselin, 2012; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015). Collaboration in support services was needed between institutions, both for transfer students overall and to address the particular issues faced by diverse minority and international students (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Kadlec et al., 2014). For students in developmental education programs, support services such as tutoring were used by only 24% of the students (AACC, 2012). A specific area of concern in support programs was the function and availability of counselors and advisors.

The AACC (2012) reported that less than one-third of entering students were assisted by a college advisor to set academic goals and create a plan for achieving them. Even when a student met an advisor, the shifting admissions requirements of the senior institutions and poor communication between staff and at both levels made it difficult for advisors to have accurate information (Ellis, 2013; Kadlec et al., 2014; Public Agenda, 2012). Advisors and counselors who could offer accurate and tailored guidance were in high demand and hard to find, with an individual professional counselor being responsible for serving as many as 1,100 students (Kadlec et al., 2014; Public Agenda, 2012).

**Pathways and communication between two- and four-year institutions.** In their report, *Empowering Community Colleges to Build the Nation’s Future*, the AACC (2014b) published six implementation strategies to increase college completion. One of these strategies was to “construct coherent, structured pathways to certificate and degree completion, and then ensure that students enter a pathway soon after beginning college”
(AACC, 2014, p. 8). Public Agenda (2012) agrees that a college program with a clear goal and defined pathway to get there can improve completion and transfer. One perspective is that the creation of community colleges was the original transfer “pathway,” though the path has not been effective (Handel & Williams, 2012).

Communication between the two- and four-year institutions is critical to offer solutions to students (Kadlec et al., 2014).

One such solution was the Associate Degree for Transfer (AD-T). In a report jointly issued by the CCCC and the CSU (2015), it stated,

The associate degree for transfer program, now in its third year, provides community college students with priority admission to a CSU campus. Once admitted, students complete an additional 60 units to earn a bachelor’s degree…The transfer program’s popularity soared in the 2013-2014 academic year, with nearly 12,000 associate transfer degrees conferred by community colleges, more than twice as many as the previous year. Of the 12,000 degrees conferred, about 7,000 [58%] students enrolled in CSU campuses to complete bachelor’s degrees. (para. 2-7)

With less than a 60% success rate, responsibility of these transfer support systems must also include the four-year college or university that would receive these students (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Blaylock & Brescia, 2011). The CSU Chancellor’s office made community college transfer students a priority; however, there were few support programs at the four-year campuses (Blaylock & Brescia, 2011).
In addition to degree pathways, establishing an education plan, including the required articulation of public two- and four-year institutions, was another form of assistance provided to the community college population (Evelyn et al., 2000). The CCC and CSU systems produced a website for the transfer degree where students could map their own degree pathway (CCC & CSU, 2015). With her paper on *Summer Bridge Programs*, Kezar (2000) detailed how these types of programs could be successful if they were connected to the institution’s mission, involved the community, were supported by both administration and faculty, engaged and collaborated with other support programs, and were individualized by using student assessment data. These education plans could be difficult to map, though, as there was a lack of consistency with the number of credits required with different degrees or at different institutions. Some institutions required more than the expected 120 credits for a bachelor’s degree, some required more than 60 credits for an associate’s degree, and some needed more than 30 credits to receive a certificate (CCA, 2012).

Several support programs were available at the community college campus to assist with student success and it appeared these services remained beneficial even after successfully transferring (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011). However, it was more typical for four-year institutions to lack these services, such as orientation programs and general knowledge of campus resources (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001). “Institutional factors included validation by staff and faculty, the active presence of role models, institutional flexibility, a view of transfer as shared responsibility, and active minority student support programs” (Suarez, 2003, p. 95).
Even with programs in place that could affect the transfer process, some four-year institutions preferred to not enroll transfer students for a variety of reasons (Berger & Malaney, 2003). “Without a long-term, strategic commitment, several leaders candidly argue that an institution’s commitment to transfer students is nothing more than a mercenary process designed to enroll students as backfill for an otherwise unsuccessful freshman recruitment season” (Handel, 2011, p.8).

**Diversity, culture and underrepresented students.** Underrepresented students were defined as racial and ethnic minorities, international students, those who required remedial courses, low-income students, first-generation attendees, and non-traditionally aged college students (Berger & Malaney, 2003; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Laanan, 1996; Nin, 2015; Soltani, 2013). Many first-generation students—those students whose parents did not graduate college—were ethnic minorities and low-income students, so research on first-generation students included research on student ethnicity (Chen, 2005; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; Nin, 2015).

Community colleges were the primary entry point for culturally diverse students and provide substantial opportunity for low-income and minority students to gain the social and economic benefits of attending college (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2009; Suarez, 2003). The supportive community college setting also offered underrepresented students a low-threat environment (Nin, 2015; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terezini, 2003). Given community colleges enrolled more underrepresented student groups than any other higher education system and the population of racial and ethnic minorities attending community colleges was growing, serving these diverse students was a necessity (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Handel, 2011).
Community colleges must address student needs and develop support programs for students with culturally diverse backgrounds, including language and cultural barriers (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Lucas, 2006; Wawrzynski & Sedlacek, 2003). In addition, colleges must “successfully embrace and support students from culturally diverse backgrounds for retention and matriculation to four-year institutions” (Blaylock & Bresciani, 2011, p. 45). With the 46% of students who completed or transferred from community college, the rates were even lower for Hispanic, Black, Native American, and low-income students (AACC, 2012). These low success rates were also consistent with first-generation students (Ishitani, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nin, 2015; Nomi, 2005; Pascarella et al, 2003).

Research on underrepresented populations identified factors affecting the transfer of Latino students to four-year institutions, including academic preparedness, career and educational goals, and personal drive (Suarez, 2003). A student’s belief, motivation, intention, attitude, and behavior led to the student persisting in college or dropping out (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nin, 2015; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Soltani, 2013). Other studies addressed the importance of meeting the needs of ethnic minorities and first-generation students, whom tended toward poor academic performance and had low persistence and retention rates (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Nin, 2015). Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) researched student background as an indicator of successful transfer, which found the socioeconomic status of a student was a strong predictor of community college transfer. Another study researched the transfer rates in colleges with diverse student populations; colleges with high transfer rates were in suburban areas and enrolled fewer full-time minority students (Banks, 1992).
Jenkins (2006) stated, “Minority community college students are more likely to succeed at colleges where they are made to feel welcome and where there are support services and programs specifically designed for them” (p. 40). For first-generation students, the more academically and socially integrated a student was, the more likely he or she would succeed academically (Nin, 2015; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007).

Multiple programs were implemented to help minority and first-generation students succeed. The Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOP&S) was established by California law to increase access and support underrepresented students (American River College, 2017; CCCCO, 2007; Soltani, 2013). One model used at Santa Fe Community College was the Comprehensive Minority SEM (science, engineering, and mathematics) Program that supported increasing minority involvement and retention, including faculty mentoring, skills development, tutorial labs, financial support for tuition and books, and work study placement (Kezar, 2006). A similarly intended ENLACE (Engaging Latino Communities for Education) program was also offered there (Santa Fe College, 2017). Leading and Energizing African American Students to Research and Knowledge (LEARN) offered specialized support with tutoring, mentoring, and services to help African American males gain exposure to career fields with the aim to build student success and personal achievement (LEARN, 2015). TRIO Student Support Services assisted student retention, graduation, and transfer for first-generation college students with low incomes (USDE TRIO, 2015); Upward Bound–part of the TRIO program–helped prepare low-income high school students who would be the first in their families to attend college (USDE Upward Bound, 2015).
Four-year institution admission standards and program impaction. With the vast number of community college transfer students, the admission standards at the four-year institution were another barrier to transfer. The admission standards at four-year colleges and universities required increased grade point average (GPA) requirements, tuition costs were raised, and limitations were placed on the number of students admitted (Long & Kurlaender, 2009). The AD-T guaranteed eligibility for admission to the CSU; however, if the desired institution or program was impacted, a specific campus was not guaranteed (Taylor et al., 2015). A student might apply to the nearest CSU campus, but get accepted into a campus at the other end of the state. These impacted institutions and programs had a negative effect on transfer rates in California (Banks, 1992).

Economic conditions and financial aid. Unemployment and household income were two economic conditions that affected student transfer. Banks (1992) saw that “higher transfer rates came with high community income, high percentages of full-time faculty… and a high percentage of students with 12 or more credits” (p. 5). In agreement, some studies indicated family income and occupational class were factors challenging student success, especially with first-generation students (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009; Ishitani, 2006; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Nin, 2015). Further, financial aid could become a barrier to transfer, especially for minority and transfer students who required support at the four-year institution (Eggleston & Laanan, 2001; Gard et al., 2012). With this barrier to transfer, many students chose to work while attending college, which became yet another barrier. Lacking support systems to help with financial aid and the proximity of the four-year college or university were additional environmental
and social factors identified as barriers for community college students (Hermoso, 2012; Suarez, 2003).

**Balance of work and school.** Students attending college full-time often also participated in the workforce. Balancing the responsibilities of these two commitments affected the student’s ability to physically be on campus and become involved with college activities (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Nin, 2015; Stewart, 2012). Students’ work schedules also kept them from taking critical classes and the balancing of these responsibilities was a barrier to completion and transfer (Kadlec et al., 2014; Mohammadi, 1994). To contradict this line of thinking, Dougherty and Kienzl (2006) found that students working fewer than 20 hours per week had a greater chance of transferring, even compared to those who were not working.

The AACC (2014a) reported that 22% of full-time college students also worked full-time and 40% are worked part-time. For those students attending college part-time, 73% worked full- or part-time (AACC, 2014a). First-generation students worked more hours per week in comparison to students whose parents both completed a bachelor’s degree or higher (Nin, 2015; Pascarella, 2003). Whatever the motivation was for working while attending college, the choice to attend community college part-time was detrimental to students whose goal was to transfer (Crosta, 2014).

**The Research Gap**

To understand the challenges in the baccalaureate transfer process, studies have included research from two- and four-year institutions at the national level, but few have researched transfer students directly; those whom have experienced the phenomenon (Dowd, Pak, & Bensimon, 2013; Gard et al., 2012; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Nin,
2015; Pascarella et al., 2003). Programs at the two- and four-year universities attempted to assist students in many areas, but transfer continued to be a struggle for community college students (Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Soltani, 2013). There is value in the students’ voice and little research has been done for those community college transfer students whom have not been able to transfer, on their own perceived barriers (Dowd et al., 2013; Moschetti & Hudley, 2015; Nin, 2015).

Community college transfer students researched were often those who already successfully transferred to four-year institutions (Hermoso, 2013; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). Some studies examined students who already transferred from the two-year institution and compared them to those admitted directly into the four-year institution (Ellis, 2013; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). Further, studies researched student transfer issues as experienced or perceived by the administrators or leaders of the institution (Cohen & Brawer, 1994; Handel, 2011). Research from the transfer students’ perspective while they were still enrolled in the community colleges was lacking.

Conclusions

Community colleges were created to assist students with the transition from high school to more advanced or specialized study, and the vast majority of students had the goal of transferring to a four-year university. The community college system was also used to support workforce training through CTE programs. Whatever the student’s goal, community colleges served as a gateway to education for the culturally diverse, underrepresented, and non-traditional students. Community college transfer students were impacted by many barriers, including their academic preparation, the programs and
staff at the college, a lack of clear pathways for completion, diversity and cultural issues, four-year admission requirements, and economic conditions.

Community college transfer barriers were researched primarily from the national perspective, using dense quantitative data. Some studies collected qualitative data, but included input from other perspectives such as the successful transfer student, the graduated transfer student, and the college or university administrator. The research questions in this study sought to further understand transfer barriers by asking the community college transfer student to explain his or her perceptions of the barriers experienced and what services could help the transfer process, as perceived by the student.

**Synthesis Matrix**

A synthesis matrix was developed to assist with the literature review. The matrix identified the alignment of the different sources to specific components of the study. The synthesis matrix is presented in Appendix A.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Overview

In the fall of 2012, almost half of the U.S. undergraduate population attended community colleges, with 7.7 million full- and part-time students enrolled in credit programs (AACC, 2014a). However, fewer than half of these students who wanted to graduate or transfer to a baccalaureate-issuing institution were able to do so within six years of starting at the community college (Radford et al., 2010). Less than 25% of full-time transfer students graduated from the community college within three years and a mere 10% completed a community college degree in two years (CCA, 2012).

Chapter III discusses the methodology used for this study. This phenomenological study sought to discover the self-perceptions of community college transfer students regarding the barriers to transfer and the services needed to increase successful transfers. This chapter begins with a reiteration of the purpose statement and the research questions. The chapter also describes the research design for this study, along with the population and study sample. Further, this chapter details the development of the instrumentation used to collect the interview data, the procedures used for the interviews, and how the data were analyzed. Lastly, the limitations of the study are presented.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the perceived barriers that hindered the successful transfer of California community college students to a four-year university and what services they perceived were needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year university.
Research Questions

The following two research questions served to guide the study:

1. What are the barriers to successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?

2. What types of services are needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?

Research Design

To investigate the perceptions of community college transfer students, this study followed a qualitative, phenomenological research design. As Creswell (2007) stated, the purpose of using qualitative research was to “inquire into the meaning individuals… ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 37). More specifically, this study strove to understand the commonalities of first-hand experiences of individuals who were unable to transfer to a four-year institution. Patton (2002) further explained that “what people say is a major source of qualitative data” (p. 21) and understanding themes from the collected data derived meaning for the researcher.

Creswell (2007) defined the phenomenological study as one that focused on the lived experiences regarding a phenomenon and the description of the universal essence of several individuals’ experiences. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) offered another perspective regarding phenomenology, noting it was “how individuals make sense out of a particular experience or situation” (p. 24). In this study, the shared phenomenon experienced was the difficulty experienced by community college students when attempting to transfer to a four-year institution.
This phenomenological study used semi-structured interviews to discover the perceptions of California community college students who wished to transfer, but were unable to do so. The focus was how these students made sense of their situations using their verbal responses to interview questions and probes. The researcher sought to discover what perceived barriers the students experienced and what services were needed to support the transfer process.

**Population**

McMillan and Schumacher (2010) defined population as “a group of elements or cases… that conform to specific criteria” to which the results of the research can be generalized (p. 129). For the sake of this study, the population was California community college transfer students. The target population was further defined by Creswell and Plano (2011) as “a group of individuals… with some common defining characteristic that the researcher can identify and study” (p. 142). The target population for this study included California community college students who were self-identified as transfer students and completed 60 transferable units, but were unable to transfer.

**Sample**

The sample of a study was the group of individuals from whom the data were gathered (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). For this study, non-probability, purposeful snowball sampling was used as students were selected based on a specific purpose—their inability to transfer—and not randomly chosen (Patton, 2002; Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Non-probability sampling was the selection of subjects who were accessible or who represented certain characteristics (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Creswell (2007) stated the use of purposeful sampling was to “purposefully inform an understanding of
the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). Snowball sampling referred to a method in which participants were informed of the study using personal relationships and networks, and they were asked to identify others with similar characteristics of interest; this process created a referral system from those who participated in the study to recruit additional participants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981).

The researcher used his personal network of community college counselors and faculty to inform participants of this study. The first request for participants was sent to counselors at 15 community colleges in the southern California area. Of those, four colleges were represented by the participants. After the interviews were completed, the researcher asked participants to recommend others who met the study criteria.

The sample of this study was community college transfer students who completed 60 transferable units in the Southern California area. Further, the term transfer student was used to describe students who desired to transfer to a four-year university, but were unable to do so within five semesters of attending two-year institution(s). The size of the sample was 12 students as the purpose of this study sought to gather in-depth qualitative data on the perceived barriers of students. Myers (2000) stated this meaningful information gathered was impossible to obtain with larger sample sizes and could be more valuable to researchers than a larger sample with only numerical values.

More than half of the sample were female participants. Of the 12 participants, 58% were ethnic minorities and nearly half were required to take remedial courses as incoming community college students. Additionally, 33% of the participants were non-traditionally aged and 17% utilized support from the disability services at their college (Table 1).
Table 1

*Sample Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Minority</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required Remedial Courses</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Traditionally Aged</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilized Disability Services</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* n = 12; participants could be counted multiple times

**Instrumentation**

To study the perceptions of participants in this qualitative study, the researcher acted as the instrument to collect data through personal, semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2004; Patton, 2002). The semi-structured interview followed premeditated questions, but also allowed the researcher to be spontaneous to seek clarification and explore additional themes that arose (Berg, 2009; Doody & Noonan, 2013). In-depth interviews were the backbone to a phenomenological study (Patton, 2002). As the instrument of the study, the researcher participated in asking probing and clarifying questions, in addition to collecting the content of the responses, to more fully understand the perceptions of the participants.

As recommended by Fowler (2014), an interview protocol (Appendix B) was created by the researcher as a guide for the interview and to help the participant feel comfortable and know what to expect during the process. The protocol was presented in writing to the interviewee prior to the interview and verbally at the beginning of the interview and consisted of the following items:
1. Revisit the rights of the participant;
2. A short background to and purpose of the study;
3. A review of the questions to be answered;
4. Opportunity for interviewee questions;
5. Asking of the interview questions;
6. Closing statements and opportunity for questions; and
7. Next Steps for the researcher and interviewee.

Validity

Validity referred to the ability of the instrument to measure what it intended to measure (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008; Patton, 2002). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explained validity as the “congruence between the explanation of the phenomena and the realities of the world” (p. 330). Two steps were taken to improve the validity of the study: an expert panel was used to review the instrument and interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure accurate data were captured.

Expert panel. Using an expert panel to review interview questions ensured content validity (Patten, 2012). For this study, four field experts were used. Three were experts in the content with knowledge of community college counseling; One who served as a Dean of Counseling Services and past Matriculation Officer, one was a faculty chair of counseling and the third was a counselor in the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) office who held a doctorate in education, focusing on these issues. The forth panel member was an expert in qualitative research who served as a Senior Project Director for an educational research institute. A draft of the interview questions was
provided to the expert panel for review in light of the research questions. The interview questions were revised based on suggestions given until a final version was agreed upon.

**Recording and transcriptions.** To ensure descriptive validity, interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed, reviewed for accuracy, and used by the researcher. This process helped ensure the interviews reflected what was said by the participants (Creswell, 2000). The review of transcriptions also offered interpretive and descriptive validity by helping ensure the researcher understood the participants’ perspectives, thoughts, and experiences communicated during the interviews (Johnson, 1997).

**Reliability**

Patten (2012) stated that a test was “reliable if it yields consistent results” (p. 73). With interviews, reliability focused on consistency over time (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008). By using semi-structured interviews, researchers did not intend to manipulate data, but interviewees could expand on their answers, which allowed for the data to be reliable (Leech, 2002). To increase reliability in this study, an interview protocol was used to give consistency to the data gathered, which included an agenda for the interview, a script for the interview questions, and potential probing questions. These questions and probes were written to be unbiased and clearly worded, which added to the reliability. The interview protocol improved consistency and assisted with the researcher’s credibility, rapport, and trustworthiness (Leech, 2002; Patton, 2002). In addition to reliability through the data collection process, further actions were taken to increase reliability through field testing and inter-coder reliability.

**Field testing.** As suggested by Patten (2012), a field test was conducted as the researcher was a novice in qualitative research. Pilot interviews were held with a student
who met the study criteria but was not part of the study, an industry professional familiar with the phenomena, and a research professional who was an expert in conducting qualitative research interviews. These practice interviews ensured the researcher could maintain a neutral perspective while asking valid questions (Patton, 2002). Upon the completion of the pilot interviews, the industry and research professionals provided feedback and coached the researcher to improve his ability in conducting interviews.

**Inter-coder reliability.** Inter-coder reliability referred to a process in which a second, uninvolved researcher reviewed and coded the same data and developed similar conclusions (Patton, 2002). Code agreement of 90% or greater was considered excellent and 80% or greater was considered adequate for meeting inter-coder reliability standards (Lombard, Synder-Duch, & Bracken, 2004). For this study, agreement on the data coded by both research was an excess of 88%, indicating the coding process was reliable.

**Data Collection**

Prior to any data collection, the data collection instrument and procedures were reviewed and approved by the Brandman University Institutional Review Board (BUIRB). After approval, participants were recruited and the interviews were conducted. These steps are detailed in the following sections.

**IRB Approval**

Prior to interviewing any participants for this study, the researcher submitted the proposal to the BUIRB and gained approval to proceed. Pursuant to the standards of the BUIRB, study participations engaged in non-intrusive, semi-structured interviews with the researcher that involved minimal risks and no tests, treatments, or research interventions.
Recruitment of Interviewees

Many community college counselors and teaching faculty were contacted to locate potential interviewees who met the criteria for this study. These counselors and faculty were in the personal network of the researcher and made referrals to other student service professionals for participation; this process was known as snowball or chain referral sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Participating counselors and teaching faculty introduced the study to potential interviewees using an informational letter and asked them to contact the researcher, if interested. The criteria for potential interviewees included:

- Completion of at least five semesters of full-time enrollment at the community college(s)
- Completion of at least 60 transferrable units
- Desired to transfer to a four-year college or university

Communication with Participants

The first communication from the researcher to potential participants was via telephone or email to gauge availability and interest in the study. If the participant was interested in contributing or was not reachable by phone, the researcher sent an introductory email that included a short background to the study, the questions to be asked during the interview, the Participant’s Bill of Rights and the informed consent form (Appendix D). All participants were assured protection of their confidentiality. If the student agreed to participate, an interview was scheduled at a time convenient for the participant.
Interviews

Participants were given the option of in-person interviews first, then by telephone if it was more convenient. Interviews were conducted based on participant availability, as suggested by Doody and Noonan (2013). At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked if they received the consent documents, had any questions about them, and agreed to participate. For in-person interviews, participants were given a choice of location and signed copies of the documents were collected. For telephone interviews, participants returned scanned copies of the signed documents by email. All interviews were audio recorded.

Prior to each interview, the participant was informed again of his/her right to confidentiality, to cease the interview at any time, and to ask clarifying questions if needed. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 60 minutes, with the variation depending on the interviewee’s length of responses. Initial interview questions were prescribed and additional probing from the researcher was given only when clarification was needed. Following the interview, the researcher sent a follow-up thank you message and $20 credit to Starbucks as a small token of appreciation.

Data Analysis

The goal of data analysis was to make manageable the large amounts of textual data, to code and find relevant themes within it, and to answer the research questions (Patton, 2002; Weber, 1990). Recorded interviews were professionally transcribed by a third party and reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. Patton (2002) stated the importance of “identifying patterns of experiences” (p. 250) from the participants and the patterns observed in them. With all interviews transcribed, words and phrases relating to
the research questions were coded and analyzed for themes. As the repeated notations (themes) arose, the interview data were summarized by the researcher using consistent language for presentation. Throughout the analysis, codes were evaluated and adjusted for inclusion in all the data.

To clearly explain the data analysis process used in this study, the following steps were taken:

1. The researcher audio recorded in-person and telephone interviews;
2. Identifying information was removed from file names;
3. The recorded interviews were sent to a third party for professional transcription;
4. Transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher for accuracy;
5. Transcriptions were analyzed and entered into Microsoft Excel;
6. Data were coded and grouped into common themes; and
7. Coding files were sent to a third-party researcher for a secondary analysis and verification of the results.

**Limitations**

As a qualitative study, this research alone was not generalizable to the larger population of community college transfer students (Myers, 2000). The negative affect of limitations existed in all studies and were typically outside the control of the researcher (Roberts, 2010). Specifically, the limitations of this study included:

- The study was geographically confined to southern California
- The study used non-probability, purposeful snowball sampling, and relied on a small sample size
• The purposeful sampling restricted the students to those who had a minimum of five completed semesters of full-time community college enrollment

• The snowball or convenience sampling limited the diversity of students to those with a degree of connection to the researcher

• The researcher needed to create a timeline for the collection of data due to the semester schedule of community colleges; a window of March 2017 to April 2017 was dedicated by the researcher for interviews

• Interviews could contain biases, as the study researched perceptions and used self-reported data from the interviewees; these data cannot always be independently verified

• Since the researcher was the instrument in this study, the researcher’s ability to be unbiased during data collection was a limitation

**Summary**

This Chapter III discussed the qualitative, phenomenological methodology used to research the perceived barriers of California community college transfer students. The chapter reiterated the purpose statement and research questions used by the researcher. The research design, population, and sample were described, as well as the instrumentation used in the study and how the data were collected and analyzed. Lastly, the Chapter listed the limitations of the study.
CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter discusses the research, data collection, and findings of this study. It begins with a reaffirmation of the purpose statement and research questions, and a discussion of the research methods and data collection procedures used for this study. Next, the chapter explains the alignment of how the interview questions answer the research questions and describes the population and sample used for the study. Last is a presentation and analysis of the data, organized by research question, and a summary of the chapter.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the perceived barriers that hindered the successful transfer of California community college students to a four-year university and what services they perceived were needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year university.

Research Questions

The following two research questions served to guide the study:

1. What are the barriers to successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?
2. What types of services are needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?

Research Methods and Data Collection Procedures

This qualitative, phenomenological research study used semi-structured interview questions and probes to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of community
college transfer students who desired to transfer to a four-year college or university, but were unable to do so. The interview questions were created to answer the research questions by exploring the perceived barriers these students experienced and by asking what services could have assisted them in reaching their goals of transfer. Though past studies were conducted with this goal, including several at a national level, they used quantitative measures (AACC, 2012, 2014; Public Agenda, 2012). Other studies used different populations, such as students who successfully completed the transfer process and were already attending the university or administrators (Cohen & Brawer, 1994; Handel, 2011; Hermoso, 2013; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Monaghan & Attewell, 2014). This study used a qualitative method with a geographically-limited sample of students who were unable to reach their goal of transfer.

The interviews in this study included six main questions and were developed with the assistance of an expert panel. This panel consisted of three subject matter experts, all working in the field of community college counseling, and a qualitative researcher who served as a Senior Project Director for an educational research institute. In addition to the interview questions, probes were developed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences spanning several categories of barriers. Interview questions one through three were intended to answer Research Question One in defining what efforts to transfer were made and the barriers experienced by the participants. Interview questions four through six were designed to answer Research Question Two by explaining the services that could have helped the transfer experience.

For this study, snowball sampling was used to locate participants. The researcher used his personal network of community college counselors and faculty to deliver
information letters (Appendix C) to potential interviewees, via classroom and email announcements, digital posting, and personal referral. The letter provided a brief overview of the study and criteria for potential participants. The request for participants was sent to community college counselors and faculty from 15 colleges in southern California. This request yielded 12 transfer students who were willing to participate, whom represented 4 community colleges (Table 2). Interested participants contacted the researcher via email or by phone.

Table 2

*Community Colleges Represented by Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community College</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cypress College</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fullerton College</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irvine Valley College</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saddleback College</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* n = 12

After confirming the participant criteria were met, the researcher scheduled the interview and emailed copies of the informed consent form and interview protocol, which included the interview questions and probes. Participants returned the signed informed consent form to the researcher in-person or via email when phone interviews were conducted. Interview times, locations, and modality were scheduled based on the availability and preference of the participants.

Interviews were recorded using a handheld digital voice recorder; the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber and each transcription was reviewed by the researchers for accuracy. Additionally, during the review the researcher began identifying initial themes and quotes. The coding document and transcriptions were reviewed by a research professional for additional analysis to ensure inter-coder
reliability. The coding and themes from both researchers were compared and the percentage of accuracy was 88.7%, exceeding the 80% threshold considered acceptable for inter-coder reliability.

**Population and Sample**

The population for this study was California community college students who desired to transfer to a four-year college or university. Participants for this research were California community college students who, at the time this study was conducted, were attending school in southern California, though some had attended in other areas previously. Students who volunteered represented four different schools in the area. Criteria for participating in the study included students who completed a minimum of five semesters of full-time enrollment, completed a minimum of 60 transferrable units, and had a desire to transfer. The researcher limited the sample to the first 12 participants who volunteered and met the study criteria.

Non-probability, purposeful snowball sampling was used. To answer the research questions in this study, purposeful sampling allowed for selection of participants based on a specific purpose, their inability to transfer; they were not chosen randomly. Creswell (2007) stated that using purposeful sampling was to “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). The use of snowball sampling created a referral system from those who participated, as they were likely to know others who had similar characteristics of interest to the study (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). An initial pool of participants was identified using personal relationships and networks of the researcher, and snowball sampling was used to gather additional participants.
Presentation and Analysis of Data

In this section, participant data are presented to answer this study’s two research questions. The researcher interviewed 12 participants to gather data regarding the barriers experienced by community college transfer students and the services they perceived would have helped them transfer earlier. Research Question One was separated into five categories of barriers, in which several themes emerged. Research Question Two related to services that could have expedited the transfer process had five primary themes emerge.

Findings for Research Question One

Barriers to Successful Transfer

Research Question One was What are the barriers to successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students? To answer this research question, the common themes were organized into five categories and were placed in ascending order of highest frequency. The frequency was calculated using (1) the number of codes identified in each theme, and (2) the number of times a theme was identified or referenced by participants. Table 3 details the five categories and the related themes in each category.
Table 3

**Barriers to Successful Transfer to a Four-Year University**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Theme</th>
<th>Number of Codes</th>
<th>Number of References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Issues Category</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took unnecessary classes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a low GPA</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placed in remedial courses</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took too many classes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Issues Category</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family commitments</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal perception</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family expectations</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Issues Category</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needed to work</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid issues</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer Process Category</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not understanding the transfer process</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult application forms</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Services Category</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect guidance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of orientation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of useful advisement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 12*

**Academic issues.** Based on the literature, this theme encompassed any barriers experienced by students which involved their academic placement, academic performance, grade point average (GPA), number of units completed, and selection of major. Specific transfer barrier themes identified by participants in this category included taking unnecessary classes (n = 6); having a low GPA (n = 5), testing low on the placement exam or being placed in remedial courses (n = 5), and feeling like they had to
take too many classes (n = 4). Responses mentioned by three or fewer respondents included having too few transfer credits, being undecided on a major, changing majors, and being unable to enroll in needed courses.

**Unnecessary classes.** Six participants reported that not all classes taken counted toward transfer. Enrollment in these unnecessary classes stemmed from needing to take required pre-requisites, failing to obtain proper advisement, misunderstanding the transfer course requirements, or retaking courses because of poor performance. The lack of advisement was a larger issue as noted by one respondent who stated,

> Especially the first semester, you have to register for classes in summer before the counseling. You don’t know what to take. They give you the IGETC [Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum]. You can follow IGETC, but the universities are not going to accept those classes sometimes.

Some respondents took responsibility for not seeking advisement, such as one who shared, “I just thought I knew the class I had to take in order to transfer, and half of those classes weren’t even transferable units. I had to take more classes apart from that. It was really frustrating.” And another, “I pushed myself to retake the course. It wasn’t transferable. I didn’t even have to take it, but I wanted to get that experience in, so I kept repeating some classes.”

**Low GPA.** Due to more demand than available seats, most universities were highly competitive for incoming transfer students. One of the primary qualifying criteria was a student’s GPA, which could be the first qualification met or not. Five respondents
mentioned GPA issues that created barriers and held them back. For example, one respondent commented,

I think my GPA was a little low in my first couple of years at the college. That brought me down. I wanted to do better so I repeated classes. For me, that was a barrier to get out quickly and transfer quickly.

*Low testing/remedial level classes.* Entering community college students must go through the matriculation process, which requires assessment and placement into math and English courses based on test results. Students who performed poorly on the assessments would be required to take remedial courses that did not count toward transfer prior to taking required, transferable courses. This was cited as a barrier by five of the respondents. One participant explained issues with math,

I had to take several classes before I got to the actual one I needed. I took a lot of the pre-requisites, the basic entry level classes that are the lowest levels. From that, I had to take a couple more than normal people would have to take.

One participant noted, “When I placed poorly in mathematics, it added two extra years onto my community college [tenure] because now I have to get through all those pre-requisites to get to the course that actually transfers to UC.” Another elaborated,

The only thing that set me back was I tested low into math. I had to take a pre-req, and then I didn’t pass one of my math classes so I had to retake that. Math has been one of my bigger issues.

*Had to take too many classes.* Some students believed community college should take only two years to complete, but did not consider the number of units needed to
transfer or the placement issues previously mentioned. The feeling that too many courses were needed was mentioned by four respondents. To succeed at the community college, one participant believed, “You’re supposed to be doing the two-year equivalent of what they’re doing, but if you do the normal units, you don’t have enough. You have to take extra classes or summer school in order to do it.” Another participant explained, “I calculated it and I realized that I had to stay three years no matter what because I’m not going to finish 60 units when the applications start.” Managing the two-year college timeline with university application deadlines was another limitation on the course load requirements.

**Personal issues.** Based on the literature review, this theme involved barriers experienced by students such as family responsibilities that competed with being a student, lack of confidence or anxiety about school or transfer, the pressure of familial expectations on attending school, and the feeling of belonging at a college campus. The common transfer barriers identified by participants in this theme included family commitments (n = 6), personal perceptions and confidence (n = 6), and family expectations and pressure (n = 4). Other responses noted by three or fewer respondents included poor time management, lack of support or belonging, and personal challenges such as mental illness.

**Family commitments.** Half of the respondents identified family commitments as a barrier to their transfer experience. Though many also discussed the importance of familial support, the added responsibility of family delayed the successful transfer of these students. One participant who was the oldest sibling reported having to “drop out of college and become the bread winner for the family so I can send my siblings to
college.” Another assisted with family responsibilities, saying “It was more like I had to revolve my classes around picking up my brother and my sister from school.” Yet another shared, “I work with my dad, and I work in the office, mainly. I’ve been trying to engage myself more in accounting books and the auditing. That’s what I’m doing most of my day right now.” In addition, the absence of family support in additional to commitments was found to be detrimental as one respondent explained, “I was married and got a divorce. That was really hard. That was really rough, to start school as a couple hoping to have a support system, and then having that support system taken away.”

**Personal perception and confidence.** Half of the respondents also found challenges in how they viewed themselves. An introspective look showed a lack of confidence that negatively affected these transfer students. This was highlighted by one respondent who shared,

I just knew I wasn’t ready. From all the stress, from everything going on, I was still working very hard, but those were the two worst semesters I’ve ever had grade-wise. I think that’s just anxiety and pushing yourself, and not having a support system. That definitely set me back a year.

Where some participants lacked confidence, others did not have a strong vision or drive to complete their program or transfer. This was the case for one participant who said, “I think I could’ve transferred a long time ago if I actually wanted to. I just didn’t feel the urgency to transfer.” Another stated,
I didn’t push myself to do the best. I pushed myself enough to pass a class, and pass exams. I didn’t really look forward. For me, I focused, whatever year I’m at, I was focusing on just passing that year and moving along.

**Family expectations and pressure.** While students attended college, familial support also crossed over into specific expectations and a general pressure to perform at a certain level. Some families prided themselves or set expectations on attending a specific university or standard of institution, which created added pressure and another barrier.

For example, one student explained,

> When I brought it up to my parents [attending community college], they were totally against it. I had to tell them, “If I’m willing to do this, it means I need to do this.” If you would have told me that in high school, I would’ve been mortified.

Participants also noted that some cultures placed additional pressures on success. As one respondent noted, “The reason for that family pressure is, for the Asian community or family, the family pressure is always there…You have to carry the parent dream of whatever they want for you.” Other students placed pressure on themselves based on wanting to make the family proud. The motivation described by one participant was to avoid disappointing his family, saying the biggest barrier to transfer was, “Family pressure, not that they were putting the pressure on me, but rather, I was putting the pressure on myself not to let them down.”

**Financial issues.** Based on the literature, this category involved participant experiences with the need to work while in school, the number of hours needed to work, issues with or lack of financial aid, and the inability to afford college. The specific
themes of barriers stated by participants in this category included the need to work while attending school (n = 9), affordability (n = 5), and financial aid issues (n = 4).

Must work while attending school. For most participants in this study, there was a need to work while attending community college. For some, they needed to work to afford the cost of tuition and fees. As one participant stated, “We have a family business. I’ve spent most of my time working to help that company grow and to fund my own education.” For others, it is the overarching need to meet financial obligations outside of the college requirements, such as one respondent who shared, “I have always worked on my own outside of school, but I think money is going to be tight for a while until I’m comfortably in a career.”

For some students, the need to work kept them from engaging fully at the college campus. This challenge affected participation in events like student clubs, extracurricular programs, and transfer events. This sentiment was noted by one participate who explained,

I work full-time at the same time, so I rarely have any time to do anything besides the homework and the maximum studying that I can do. Maybe that’s a bad thing, but I’ve always been used to it. I think that’s what it is. I’ve always been working and going to school. Maybe it’s part of my failures.

Another described how the issues related. The need to work to pay for school limited the time available to engage in school and transfer events, which was compounded by paying out-of-state tuition. This was described as,
I have a really busy schedule. I don’t have much time to [attend a transfer event]…I have to pay for all of my expenses, including my school fees. When I have to pay my out of state fees, I have to work 50 hours per week for a year and a half.

**Affordability.** Affordability overlapped with other comments in the financial category, but it became clear that this theme was a barrier for students in addition to working and financial aid concerns. Participants discussed this theme regarding the costs of community college for out-of-state residents and international students, added student fees and book costs on top of tuition, costs of housing while in school, and the cost of university applications while trying to transfer. One participant shared, “My expectation was that after one year, as a policy, I would become a resident and start paying in-state tuition. However, that was not the case. Until today, I’m still paying international student fees.”

**Financial aid issues.** Financing college education was an option for students, sometimes in addition to the income earned through employment. As one shared, “It’s a money issue…I was able to get financial aid for maybe a year, and then, after that, I had to just pay it out of my pocket.” For some, understanding how financial aid worked acted as a barrier. For example, one student noted, “I didn’t find out about financial until our second year in. I wasn’t independent back then. When I applied for financial aid, they wouldn’t let me even though I’m trying to file independently.” Another respondent shared, “The rest of it though, for FAFSA, I’m still trying to figure it out.”

**Transfer process.** Based on the literature, this category covered transfer barriers experienced related to the transfer process itself, including the requirements of the
individual community college, the requirements of the separate university systems (University of California [UC], California State University [CSU], private universities, and out-of-state universities), and the different applications involved with each. Two primary themes related to transfer emerged from participants, not understanding the transfer process from start to finish (n = 6) and application forms and requirements being difficult to understand (n = 6). Other topics cited by fewer respondents included communications difficulties between the two-year and four-year institutions and different academic requirements within the multiple university systems.

**Not understanding the transfer process.** The transfer process from community college to the four-year institution can be confusing. Academic requirements were different for each receiving college or university, and the process varied depending on the university. One respondent reflected, “I think one of the biggest things is not knowing the transfer process, what you’re supposed to do, how that all works.” Students reported confusion regarding the transfer process for the UC and CSU systems, as well as private schools that dictated their own application and academic requirements and out-of-state universities that could require a completely unique set of criteria and processes. One respondent noted a barrier was “the difference between a Cal State and a UC transfer. There were…different classes you had to take. Some more, some less. Just wrapping my head around that, it took me a while.” Another student shared, “I’m applying to three different systems, the UCs, the CSUs, and then some private schools. They all have different major requirements.”

**Difficult application forms.** Students who understood the transfer process were still challenged by the application forms for the different universities and systems.
Participants found difficulty filling out the paperwork for applications to the CSU system and noted the differences from the singular UC application used for all UC locations. Private universities created their own application process, which could require additional forms and documentation. One participant stated,

One thing I found about Cal State is you have to do it for every single school. You can’t just apply. UCs you can apply to all the UCs. That’s something I found really annoying. It certainly takes a lot of time to fill out all the information, especially if you have three different kinds of systems. You have to put the same information for all three of them. That takes time.

Another respondent noted a barrier with the process, paperwork, and timing, saying,

Especially with the common app, and just understanding how the deadline works. Finding the time to apply to all the schools that you want to, and having someone really direct you in how to do that, I was a little lost. I didn’t end up getting to apply to all the schools that I had hoped I had a chance for.

**College services.** Based on the literature, this category of transfer barriers comprised of issues experienced internally with the community college services. Themes of barriers recognized in this category included: incorrect guidance to students (n = 4); lack of orientation resulting in missed information early in the transfer process (n = 4), and lack of useful information during advisement (n = 4). Other responses provided by three or fewer participants included not seeking or using available advisement services,
counselors too busy to help or give enough information, and an inability to enroll in the classes that were needed.

**Incorrect guidance given to students.** Though some students sought guidance from an academic counselor, the advice given was not necessarily helpful and sometimes incorrect. One participant described a counselor who did not agree with his decision to seek a specific university and advised this student, “Are you sure you want to do this? Don’t take that, don’t take this.” The student did not feel supported or respected. It was also reported that different counselors would give contradictory advice, as one respondent shared, “You need to do it on your own. I personally feel the school doesn’t know what’s going on. I had one counselor say one thing, and others say something completely different, ‘Oh no, they’re wrong.’ Cohesiveness would be nice.”

When a student asked for more information and the counselor did not know the answer, she said she would research it further for the student. However, the student presumed the counselor would not have the time to perform that research, saying,

She told me, “Ok, I’m going to look into this and I’ll get back to you.”

They’re busy; they have so much work going. I already thought, okay, I’m going to do this on my own because what if the counselor doesn’t have time.

Unfortunately, the counselor never contacted the student with the answer, and worse yet, the student was not surprised by the lack of responsiveness.

**Lack of orientation/missed information early on.** For several participants, not receiving earlier general transfer information from the college was a barrier. Students felt that it took one or more semesters to get the knowledge they needed regarding transfer or
academic pathways. Participants also felt that clear expectations should have been set regarding the required college coursework to transfer and that transferring in two years should not be an expectation. It was also expressed that when first attending community college, having a major or deciding on a transfer university could help the overall experience. As one participant cited, “When I first enrolled in the college, I didn’t have a major in mind. Maybe that’s why my first two semesters were just, I had no drive.”

The participants thought a required orientation process could ensure they got a minimum level of support. Students recognized the responsibility was on their shoulders, but if there were consequences for not meeting the matriculation processes, like a required orientation, this barrier might be less of an issue. This participant shared,

I’ve never had orientation my whole time for community college. It’s something that you’re required to do, but I slipped through. I never got something that said ‘you have to do this before you register for classes,’ or something like that. That was a bad thing because I was really close to signing up to all the wrong classes. I didn’t know what I was supposed to be doing, exactly.

Lack of useful information during advisement. This theme arose as students met with college counselors and were not given purposeful advisement. Previously discussed was the counselor giving incorrect or conflicting information, but this theme represented no useful information given. One respondent explained, “When I initially got out of the military, I was like, ‘I want to go to UCLA. That’s my goal.’ I go into a counselor and they pretty much shoot that down almost immediately.” This participant was happy to also discuss his more recent acceptance to that university despite the counselor’s belief it
was not possible. Reflecting back as a new community college student, this participant stated this was problematic “In the first semester. You have to register for classes in summer before the counseling. You don’t know what to take.”

**Efforts Toward Transferring**

The participants were asked about the efforts they engaged in toward transferring to a university and what services they utilized at the community college they attended. All participants used more than one service or event offered at the college to assist in the transfer process. The vast majority also relied on their own research to seek out information on individual programs, universities or university systems, or the transfer process. Table 4 details the most common services that were used.

**Table 4**

**Efforts Toward Transferring**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Themes</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attended transfer events, on- or off-campus</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilized counselors</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducted research</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilized the transfer center</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilized the math lab</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relied on information from peers</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilized tutoring services</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoke with faculty</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used state transfer/university websites</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated in programs for priority registration</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visited a university campus</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilized the English language lab</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* n = 12

Other efforts toward transfer were used, but were noted by fewer participants. These included Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), Disability Services and Programs for Students (DSPS), conversations with peers, and two
participants who self-identified as military veterans reported utilizing the Veterans Resource Center.

**Greatest Barrier**

After discussing with each participant the various barriers to transfer experienced, the researcher asked which barrier they considered the greatest impediment to successfully transferring to a four-year university. Most participants chose one of the barriers already discussed, but some presented a new barrier not previously mentioned during the interview. The top two themes that surfaced from this interview question were not understanding the transfer process and lack of or poor advisement, both cited by three participants.

*Not understanding the transfer process.* Respondents discussed the various transfer processes needed to apply to and be accepted at the different university systems, and the challenges they experienced understanding the transfer process itself. For some, they learned in their first semester what was needed for a specific goal and course path to get there, but for others that realization took longer. One student noted, “I think one of the biggest things is not knowing the transfer process, what you’re supposed to do, how that all works. For me, it was the first three semesters.” This barrier appeared to be most closely connected with the targeted receiving institutions and the different admission requirements. As one participant shared, “I think the hardest part in transferring is just very simple, knowing how to. My biggest challenge was getting organized to where I wanted to go, and what it was I was eligible for. Then actually filling out applications.”

*Lack of or poor advisement.* The other greatest barrier, as perceived by this study’s participants, was not obtaining advisement or obtaining poor advisement. When
the student did not have a clearly defined path of courses, the classes chosen each semester were not always transferrable, not required by the four-year college or university, or not required for the community college degree or certificate. Advisement usually came during or after the first semester, when time was already lost. One participant stated, “I didn’t know what I was supposed to be taking. That was definitely one of the biggest things. I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing.” Another shared, “for the first year, you’re not going to think of transferring right away. You miss that first year of trying to find information to the correct classes.”

**Findings for Research Question Two**

Research Question Two was *What types of services are needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?* Participants were asked what could have helped them, what the community college could have done to help, and what universities could do to help the transfer experience. Responses to the questions were similar and grouped into five common themes, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

*Services Needed to Support the Successful Transfer to a Four-Year University*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Theme</th>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Better communication from college to students</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required purposeful orientation</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required early counselor meeting</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional help for underrepresented students</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More individualized advisement from the university</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 12*
Better Communication to Students

Study participants perceived that an increase in communications from the college could improve their transfer experience. This was highlighted by one student who shared,

I feel like the community is really passive on distributing the information. Most times you have to go to the counseling office, or the transferring center to understand what you need to take and then go online and search. I think that it should be, the Transfer Center or the Counseling Center, should do more events. To even go to classes or require students to take classes in order for them to know what class they need to take.

This participant also shared the vision of a more proactive approach from the student support services, noting

Every English 100 or every entry level English class, have somebody from each one of those departments [EOPS, DSS, Veteran Services, the Transfer Center] come in and give a spiel about what resources are available to them. I just don’t think a lot of students know that there is help if they’re struggling in class, or they don’t even know that they could be getting financial aid that’s meant for them.

Participants viewed the college as a leader that should focus on transfer and front loading information to students. This was echoed by another student who said, “I haven’t seen too big of an emphasis on how to transfer in two years. That’s why I haven’t really been too focused on transferring. I just applied recently.” Another participant stated,
Just recently, I had to apply for a transfer verification. I don’t think they made that obviously clear. I didn’t find out until 10 days after the deadline was due that I had to apply for it. It was out of the blue. At no point in my three years of being here have I heard that I needed to apply for a certificate to transfer.

Increased communications about financing college was also desired. For example one participant said, “The counselors, every time I ask them [about scholarships] they just say, ‘Yeah, you have to search for it yourself.’ There’s nothing around.”

**Required Purposeful Orientation**

Across colleges, new student orientation meant different things. As one participant experienced, an orientation was required, but not always enforced allowing this student to slip through. One participant perspective was, “A mandatory orientation. You have to go. A lot of times the students that need the help aren’t going. It was not required of me.” Another shared, “If they could make that, like when you first started at the college, here’s a list of everything you need to transfer. I didn’t get anything when I first started. They just left it to your own doing.” One participant saw required orientation as a starting prior to taking class, saying,

It takes a student to have enough courage to actually make an appointment. I know the counselors push a lot saying, “Oh, please make an appointment with us.” I feel like if we gave high school students more confidence saying, “This will actually help you,” maybe make it for them just because it makes it mandatory just to talk to them.
This requirement would help force the information into the hands of the student, which was viewed as an important and active way to education students about the transfer process. As one participated shared, “I think they could make a transfer one-unit class mandatory. There’s a lot of stuff that you don’t realize that you have to do that matter.”

**Required Early Counselor Meeting**

A sentiment shared across most of the participants was the earlier a student could receive quality advisement, the better. The need for early advisement was highlighted by one participate who described,

I think, definitely, they can help a lot by having more college reps at the high schools, especially for seniors. In my senior year, I applied to schools just to apply. I know that everyone was asking me, they were pressuring me, ‘What school did you apply to?’ If there were more college reps saying, ‘If you need a counselor, we can help you.’ Maybe enrolling in a four-year right away is not the best choice. Maybe inviting the students to come and see the counselor, and maybe set up a plan from their senior year. For them to enroll, it’s already with a plan, instead of waiting until you enroll and taking the first semester without a counselor.

Although some participants noted that colleges required an advisement meeting, they indicated the requirement needed to be enforced and completed with a knowledgeable advisor. In some instances, the advisement meeting was not useful or sufficient. One respondent described, “You have to go to a counselor to set you on a directive or path. I just wish they could’ve sent me to a source from them that would mentor you along on this path.” Another participant stated, “I feel very uncomfortable.
We need somebody who’s willing to sit down [with a student] and spend quite a bit of time, and guide them, and motivate them.” Yet another shared,

If someone was there to push me. ‘What do you want? You need to pick…That way you’re taking the right classes. You need to choose a smaller perspective of what you want to do, that way we can help you.’ I think if I had someone like that, that would’ve been better in the beginning.

**Additional help for underrepresented students.** Though EOPS and DSPS offices existed at most community college campuses in California, respondents saw a need for additional help for underrepresented students. For example, one participant expressed,

Some of them [students] come to tutoring centers, but a lot of them don’t even know this service exists. Homeless students spend more time than others to finish their classes so they can transfer. That is something that I feel like all the community colleges should allocate more resources on. This participant also indicated additional supports were needed for students expected to struggle, adding,

Let’s say you take the placement test, people who are placed on the very bottom. Those students should be grouped, or put in a bucket list or whatever. They should be divided amongst these coaches who should look after their classes each semester. We need somebody friendly. The thing about a counselor, you go there, they’re in a hurry. I feel like I’m a burden on them.
Participants noted that although some programs were available to help, additional outreach was needed for the most at-risk populations. This was highlighted by one participant who shared,

The people who are willing to do [honors] are already more likely to succeed, but the other people who aren’t willing to do that, I feel like they need more help. I feel like those people probably need more help and aren’t getting it. They’re the ones who need the resources that we have in the Honors program; the great counselors and the access to the counselors is way quicker.

More individualized advisement from the college and university. In addition to the required orientation and early advisement already mentioned, participants also perceived a benefit from more individualized help. This was demonstrated by one respondent who said,

Having an extra mentor program for that specific major that you’re in. I know you can go see professors after class, but I think just having a permanent faculty member there, who has eyes on, and can really take the time to speak to you about that. Academic counselors are great, but they’re not experts in that field. If they can send me to someone who is, who is literally there for that purpose to give direction beyond just a professor for that one class.

Individualized guidance from the receiving university was also desired. As one respondent expressed, “I think it just comes down to if you can have people on campus, and hold specific meetings on transferring. Have someone come in...who could directly
speak to the common app, and then directly speak to the UC app.” For the students at the community college, it was suggested university staff

Come to them on campus and visit with us. They do general information sessions in the quad, instead of doing the private counseling one-on-one. Everyone has 20 minutes to make an appointment ahead of time; that would be more helpful for the student. If they can, at CSU system or UC system, during the three months or four months leading up to the completion of transferring process, if they just set up one day a week.

Come on campus. Sit today from eight to five.

Another participant commented, “Honestly, my suggestion is to send those people out as little diplomats to help people understand what it is they need to do.” The need for university staff to visit and meet with the community college students was expressed by multiple respondents, including one who mentioned,

I think what would be very helpful is if they had academic counselor there who I could talk to, even at the college, where I could figure out exactly what are some of the requirements that I could be aware of so that I can really get out in two years and not be stuck for three years.

**Summary**

In this chapter, the purpose statement and research questions were restated, which focused on the perceived barriers of community college transfer students and the services they perceived would have helped them transfer earlier. The qualitative research methods were discussed and the data collection processes were explained. The research population and sample were detailed, where 12 participants responded to semi-structured
interview questions. Lastly, the data were analyzed and presented to answer this study’s research questions.

A total of 12 community college transfer students were interviewed from several colleges in southern California. They all met the study criteria, having completed at least five semesters of full-time enrollment, earned at least 60 transferrable units, and desired to transfer to a four-year college or university. Most the participants were interviewed in-person, with the remainder being interviewed via phone, all of which were audio recorded using a handheld digital voice recorder.

The analysis of data detailed five categories of transfer barriers: academic issues, personal issues, finance issues, the transfer process, and college services. Within these five categories, a total of 40 themes were identified, with the top 15 presented. Participants also described nine different activities that were used in their efforts to transfer. Lastly, five common themes were presented regarding the types of services that were perceived as being needed to improve the transfer experience.
CHAPTER V: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter V begins with a summary of this study, including a brief overview of the purpose statement, research questions, methodology, population and sample. It then discusses the major findings of the research, unexpected findings, and the conclusions drawn from the study. This chapter then details the implications for practice and the recommendations for further study. Finally, it concludes with closing remarks from the researcher.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to identify and describe the perceived barriers that hindered the successful transfer of California community college students to a four-year university and what services they perceived were needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year university.

Research Questions

The following two research questions served to guide the study:

1. What are the barriers to successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?

2. What types of services are needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?

Research Methods

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was used to examine the perceptions and experiences of community college transfer students. These students desired to transfer, but were unable to do so and were still attending a community college. A phenomenological design (Creswell, 2007) was used to focus on the lived
experiences regarding the difficulty experienced by community college students when attempting to transfer to a four-year college or university. To expand on the quantitative, national data that already existed, this study used a qualitative approach and sought to understand how students made sense of their situation.

The research was conducted through semi-structured interview questions designed to answer the research questions and to help participants discuss their experiences and perceptions of their community college transfer experience. The interview questions encouraged discussion of the barriers experienced by transfer students during community college enrollment and the services they needed to help the transfer experience. The interviews included six questions with additional probing questions, which were all developed using a panel of subject matter experts and a professional researcher.

**Population and Sample**

For this study, the population was California community college students who desired to transfer to a four-year college or university. Purposeful snowball sampling was used to locate participants through the personal network of the researcher, using community college counselors and faculty. Invitations to participate in the study were distributed to contacts at 15 community colleges in the southern California area via email, printed flyers, electronic bulletin boards, and classroom announcements.

The sample for this research was transfer students attending community college in the southern California area that met the following criteria:

- Completed at least five semesters of full-time enrollment at community college(s);
• Completed at least 60 transferrable units; and
• Desired to transfer to a four-year college or university.

While still attending the community college, the participants intended to transfer, but were yet unable to do so successfully. The researcher limited the sample to the first 12 participants who volunteered and scheduled interviews in-person and over the phone to meet their availability. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded to reveal themes in the responses.

**Major Findings**

Out of the 7.7 million students enrolled in the nation’s community colleges, approximately 80% want to transfer, but most cannot (AACC, 2014a; Berger & Malaney, 2001; Cejda, 1997). Fewer than half of community college transfer students were able to successfully transfer within six years of starting (Radford et al., 2010). Even more staggering was the percentage of students who transferred from the perceived two-year college within two years, only 10% (CCA, 2012). With these known nationwide issues, this study researched the community college students’ perceptions of barriers to transfer and the perceived services that would help the transfer experience. Using the common themes discovered in the data, the following major findings were organized for each research question.

**Research Question One**

Research Question One was: *What are the barriers to successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?*

**Major finding 1.** Based on the perception of this study’s sample, two main barriers were identified as challenges to successful transfer to a four-year college or
university: not understanding the transfer process and receiving bad advisement.

Understanding the transfer requirements and process itself posed a challenge for 50% of the participants in this study. The transfer requirements could be those specified by the community college to complete a degree or certificate, or those specified by the four-year institution, which might dictate specific academic, extracurricular, and programmatic expectations. Also, the varied enrollment application forms and deliverables added to this barrier as each university or university system had different requirements. These systems include University of California (UC), California State University (CSU), private universities, and out-of-state universities, all of which had unique requirements.

Half the participants in this study also found challenges with college counselors who provided incorrect information regarding transfer and/or course requirements. Not receiving foundational, early information about university course requirements was a barrier for participants. In some instances, a student received specific advice from one counselor, then later was told the advice was incorrect by a different counselor. In addition, several participants attended community college for a semester or more before receiving any advisement. One participant reported that after establishing the goal of a specific transfer institution, the counselor did not support his decision and would not advise him on coursework to meet his goal, creating frustration and disappointment.

**Major finding 2.** In addition to the greatest barriers identified by participants, the highest scoring common theme was the need for 75% of study participants to work while attending school. This commitment to work challenged the students’ ability to be present on campus, which affected their ability to seek advisement and participate in student clubs or other extracurricular activities. Involvement in these activities or added
peer involvement could assist a transfer student to complete in a more timely fashion. The requirement to work while attending school also challenged students by limiting their ability to take important classes for their programs. Students had to make the decision, at times, to work or take a required class. Sometimes the need to work kept the students from taking that required class, which also negatively affected their transfer timeline.

**Major finding 3.** Like one of the national concerns regarding community college transfer, 50% of the participants in this study found barriers by taking unnecessary classes. Classes were primarily seen as unnecessary because they did not fulfill the four-year institutions’ transfer requirements or did not transfer at all; the student took a community college class that potentially counted for nothing at the university. Participants attributed taking these unnecessary classes to needing pre-requisite requirements, having to retake a class because of poor academic performance, misunderstanding the transfer requirements and choosing the incorrect class, receiving poor advisement and being told to take the incorrect class, and receiving no advisement and choosing the incorrect class. The major finding in this study was the connection of this known issue to the participants’ reasoning. The participants named causes for this issue that coincided with not understanding the transfer process and not having early, appropriate advising, which could be at the root of this problem.

**Major finding 4.** Family commitments were noted by 50% of the participants as impacting completion of the transfer process in a timely manner. For some participants, this commitment overlapped with the need to work, as they financially contributed to or supported their families. Some participants worked for family businesses that involved financial contribution to the family, but also the commitment to supporting the family.
Another participant was responsible for the transportation of his younger siblings, which limited his ability to take classes at the community college. Though the support of family was instrumental for community college students’ persistence in school, the familial commitments attached to these relationships also hindered successful transfer.

**Major finding 5.** Half of the participants in this study indicated that a negative self-perception or lack of confidence was a barrier to transfer. Participants mentioned the presence of general anxiety and how that impeded their transfer experience and how having a lack of vision or drive to complete a program delayed their progress. One participant discussed the effects of a divorce on her confidence and the importance of having a support system in place to combat these mental challenges. Mental illness acted in the same way as participants shared the challenges they experienced because of anxiety and depression.

After understanding the barriers to successful transfer as perceived by participant transfer students, this study attempted to answer Research Question 2.

**Research Question Two**

Research Question Two was: *What types of services are needed to support the successful transfer to a four-year university, as perceived by California community college students?*

**Major finding 1.** Most participants in this study felt that better communication to students was needed from the college. Two-thirds of respondents desired more information from the college on student services, university information, academic advising, and transfer requirements and processes. Likewise, 66% of participants relied on peers for transfer help and direction and 83% conducted research on their own to find
information about four-year transfer institutions and requirements. As part of this increased college communication, participants requested a required, purposeful new student orientation at the beginning of enrollment that detailed information about available student services, transfer pathways, available advisement, and transfer expectations. Further, participants felt this requirement should be enforced with registration blocks to ensure new students received correct information in a timely fashion as they entered a new college.

**Major finding 2.** Early program and course advisement was desired by 58% of participants. Students felt that a required, early counselor meeting would set a student on a defined path promptly and create a class schedule from start to transfer to avoid taking unnecessary classes. One suggestion was to increase involvement at the high school level to encourage incoming community college students to participate in the transfer process and advisement before taking a class. Several other participants wished they had seen a counselor before the start of their first semester to limit the number of unnecessary classes taken. The first registration period for a new student typically occurred in the summer and most students did not see a counselor until after their classes started.

**Major finding 3.** To expand on early advisement, several participants desired more individualized advisement. These transfer students felt more specialized assistance could have prevented the confusion and delayed experienced. Without individualized advisement, there was a perception that counselors defaulted to a “follow the IGETC” approach. Participants felt this one model of course requirements did not work for the vastly different needs of community college students as it only addressed one university system.
**Major finding 4.** Additional help for underrepresented students could assist with added accountability and support needed with this population. Most of the participants that discussed these concerns found programs or supports that addressed their comments as solutions. For example, five participants relied on club or athletic involvement to gain priority registration. Most participants used student services, including tutoring, learning labs, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), Disability Services and Programs for Students (DSPS) and/or the college Veteran Resource Center. Concern was voiced for the students who could not find such a solution to their challenges.

**Unexpected Findings**

Through nationwide data from large research organizations, many barriers to community college transfer were identified. Adding to this body of knowledge, this study identified barriers from participants, including not understanding the transfer process, receiving bad advisement, the need to work while attending school, taking unnecessary classes, family commitments, and lack of confidence. Further, students perceived several services as being helpful, including increased communication, required orientation, required early advisement, individualized advisement, and increased services for underrepresented students. Though these major findings were substantial, the researcher also discovered some unexpected findings from the study.

**Unexpected Finding 1**

Several study participants specified the importance of priority registration for their progress to transfer. Some students made a strategic choice and sought out participation in athletic teams or academic programs (e.g., honors) to attain priority registration. Some students became involved in such programs and, only afterwards,
discovered this benefit of priority registration. A requirement discussed by one participant was a mandatory meeting with a counselor; for this student, a counselor meeting was avoided for the first several semesters, but was then seen as a critical step toward timely transfer. It was unexpected by the researcher that priority registration was a hidden tool that only certain students were aware of and able to use.

**Unexpected Finding 2**

Many participants in this study identified exterior challenges to transfer, but half of them also discussed their own confidence or personal perceptions as a barrier. It was an unexpected finding that half of the participants took responsibility for the delays in transfer instead of blaming exterior sources. Even though other sources created or added barriers to their transfer experience, these participants were willing to look introspectively to find potential solutions.

**Unexpected Finding 3**

With such a small percentage of transfer students successfully transferring within two years, it was not surprising that the participants experienced challenges. During the interviews, students discussed how seemingly impossible it felt to transfer in such a short period. It was an unexpected finding that students’ expectations were shifting; community college was not considered a two-year course of study, but one that took several years. In addition, it seemed participants who expressed this perception believed the longer transfer experience was still beneficial to their learning and maturity.

**Conclusions**

The findings from the research questions showed the importance of knowing the transfer process and receiving correct advisement. Many transfer students were also
accountable for work outside their college responsibilities and needed better communication from their two-year institutions. From these findings and the literature review, the researcher derived three main conclusions.

**Conclusion 1**

Community college transfer students need assistance along their path. It should not be assumed, nor should they assume, it can be done on their own. As an adult in college, it might be expected that transfer students could follow a process and a predetermined roadmap, like the UC IGETC general education pattern. However, the extent of the transfer plan, the number of classes that met multiple criteria, and the additional requirements based on major were all exceptions to the rule. In addition to this, the CSU system, the many private universities, and the out-of-state universities all had different requirements and expectations. To assist in the transfer process and avoid taking unnecessary classes, the transfer student relied on guidance given by the college and university.

**Conclusion 2**

Advisement on the community college campus is a vital instrument for transfer students. This guidance was usually provided through the counseling office, but could also come from the Transfer Center, Veterans Resource Center, EOPS or DSPS offices, faculty, peers, or from the university where the student wished to transfer. These services could also assist students with their confidence and stress management. When a student was unaware of these services, delayed seeking them, or received advisement that did not truly meet their needs, the transfer experience and student suffered. Thus, it was
concluded that all students need timely, appropriate, and accurate advisement to assist in the transfer process.

**Conclusion 3**

Many community college transfer students relied on additional income from employment, with varied levels of work hour requirements. Some students relied on this income to stay enrolled in college. Some needed income to pay for living expenses outside of college tuition, fees, and book costs. Depending on the number of required work hours, students were unable to participate in campus and transfer activities. In addition to work, some students needed to support their family financially or assist in other ways. However important school and the impending bachelor’s degree was, transfer students were forced to manage competing priorities.

**Implications for Action**

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following implications for action are suggested by the researcher:

1. Community colleges need to provide better communications to all students with clear, accessible, and reliable information about the transfer process and requirements. Community college students are unique in their personal and academic experiences and goals, and based on these factors, need to be informed of the transfer process and requirements. Receiving this information early, either in a required orientation format or required transfer course, will help students take fewer unnecessary classes and transfer more quickly.

2. Community colleges should provide greater access to counselors for required, enforced advisement by the first semester. Transfer students rely on proper
advisement to meet their goals and without this advisement, few students succeed. Though advisement could come from different places on the college campus, students should have a reliable plan in place as early as possible to assist them to reach their goals. In addition to accomplishing academic goals, there should also be a focus on the students’ mental wellbeing, as it also affects the transfer experience.

3. Community colleges need to provide better communications and support for working and underrepresented students. Students need clear communication, whether they are on-campus full-time or have outside responsibilities that contend for their time. These responsibilities may include employment, family or other commitments. Though matriculation, online and on-ground orientation, and advisement and education planning might already be available or even required, the accountability and extent of information provided is not meeting the needs of transfer students.

4. As one solution, community colleges can implement and hold students accountable for a required, exhaustive new student orientation and purposeful advisement procedure. Through these services, a community college can clarify the processes involved for the students’ academic and professional goals. Advisement can be scheduled and completed through this process, before the student begins classes. This orientation can also communicate to students how the college will disseminate information in the future and what resources are available for students to utilize, offering flexible times and modalities for students with additional responsibilities. If a student does not
meet the requirements of this new orientation, consequences from the college must be upheld, which may include blocked registration.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Based on the limitations and findings of the study, the following recommendations for future study were identified:

- Replicate this study on the military veteran population attending community college full-time and who wish to transfer to a four-year college or university
- Replicate this study on past foster youth who were dependents of the county/state, attend community college full-time, and wish to transfer to a four-year college or university
- Use the findings of this research to create a survey and conduct a quantitative study on the same population
- Study the effectiveness of required orientations at different community colleges, the content provided to new students, and how the requirement is enforced by community colleges
- Study the consistency of advisement between counselors at community college campuses
- Study a comparison of different colleges’ use of advising programs, training, and hiring standards, and their effectiveness with students
- Recreate this study at multiple colleges or districts to aggregate the data for geographical or statewide change to improve students’ transfer experiences
- Study the effectiveness of priority registration used with athletic teams and special academic programs (e.g., honors)
Concluding Remarks and Reflections

After teaching college courses part-time for several years, in 2011 I made the decision to pursue higher education as a full-time career. I saw an industry that valued experience, hard work and commitment, all to benefit the lives of students. This contradicted my previous business experience, which was largely focused on self-preservation and advancement. I looked forward to working in a more serving position, with emphasis put on access. One of these roles was to assist transfer students at community colleges.

After working several years in different capacities at a private university, I was hired to teach full-time at a community college. My experiences took me full circle as I too attended a community college as an undergraduate transfer student. I saw how the community college system could be the great equalizer, offering equal opportunities for all students. Both affluent and underrepresented students sit together in the same classroom with opportunities for a great education. Support systems are in place to help students in need, including first time transfer students like me.

Now teaching full-time, I experience my students’ frustrations and concerns and I want to do what I can to help them. Whatever their barriers, I feel responsible to guide and direct them to the best of my ability. This research put me in a more official position to make sense of student challenges, all for the potential of greater positive change and greater student support in the community college system. Though the participants in this study experienced challenges in their transfer experience, I also heard comments of gratitude for the experiences and opportunities the community college offered.
Implications were written in this study as examples of support, or expanded support, that would assist transfer students. These implications were based on the feedback of the participants in this study, not written to say that individual community colleges, or specific classifications of employees, were failing. That said, systematically, students are not getting what they need to transfer in a timely manner, which was thoroughly documented over the last several years and decades at a national level. I hope the findings from this study can continue to guide support services for students where they need it.
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## APPENDIX A – SYNTHESIS MATRIX

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<th>Access for Under-Represented Students</th>
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APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction and brief description of purpose/study

Good Morning/Afternoon/Evening,
Thank you very much for participating in this interview. As part of my dissertation research, I am interviewing community college students whose goal is to transfer to a four-year university. The purpose of the interview is to discover what barriers to transfer you have experienced. A secondary purpose is to discover your perceptions regarding the types of services needed to support the transfer experience. The interview will take about 30 to 45 minutes to complete and will include six questions. I may ask some follow-up questions in between, if I need further clarification.

Informed Consent (required for Dissertation Research)

As we begin this interview, I want to remind you that any information you give me regarding this study will remain confidential. All of the information will be reported without reference to you or your school, but will use a reference number instead, like “Interviewee #1”. After I record the data and have it transcribed, I will review it with my notes for accuracy.

You received the Informed Consent and Brandman Bill Of Rights I sent you via email. Do you have any questions or need clarification about either document, before we begin the questions?

These questions were designed to help you discuss your experiences and shouldn’t make you uncomfortable. At any point during the interview, you can skip any question or stop the interview altogether. With your permission, I would like to record this interview so that I ensure accurate recording of your responses. Do I have your permission?

Do you have any other questions before we begin?

Interview Questions

Barriers to Transfer

Interview question 1: Besides taking classes, what efforts have you engaged in toward transferring to a university?
  • Probe 1: Have you used any of the support services at the college, like counseling, tutoring, math/English labs, the Transfer Center, EOPS, DSPS, Veterans Services or instructor office hours?
  • Probe 2: Have you attended any transfer events held at the college or any universities? If not, why not? (check for awareness of events, timing, location)
Interview question 2: What have been some of the barriers that kept you from transferring to a 4-year university?

- Probe 1: Have you experienced challenges with understanding the transfer process? (Applying to a university, applying for financial aid?)
- Probe 2: Have you experienced any academic issues holding you back? (Lack of preparation, low GPA, too few transfer credits, undecided on major)
- Probe 3: Have you experienced any financial issues? (unable to afford, lack of financial aid, need to work, the number of hours worked per week)
- Probe 4: Have you experienced any personal issues? (time, family commitments, lack of confidence, fear of failure, family pressure, feel like you don’t belong)

Interview question 3: Of the issues you mentioned, which do you consider the biggest barrier and why?

Services Needed

Interview question 1: What would have helped you complete the transfer process?

Interview question 2: What could the community college do to help improve the transfer experience?

- Probe 1: How could the community college better prepare students to transfer to the university? (e.g., how could they get you the information or resources)

Interview question 3: What, if anything, could universities do to improve the transfer experience?

End of the Interview

This concludes our interview. Do you have any other information that you would like to share about your experiences as a community college transfer student?

Within the next week, I will send the Starbucks gift credit to you via e-mail. Thank you very much for your time and support in completing my research.
Informational Letter for Research Subjects

March 6, 2017

Dear Student:

My name is Rick Boone, a doctoral student in the School of Education at Brandman University. Most community college transfer students are not able to complete their program or transfer within six years of starting college. I am researching the transfer barriers of these students, as they have experienced them, and the support services they needed to help.

I am asking for your assistance to participate in an interview which will take 30 to 45 minutes, when it’s convenient for you. To thank you for your time, the first 12 qualifying students to volunteer will receive a $20 credit to Starbucks following the interview. Qualifying students must meet the following criteria:

1. Completion of five semesters (minimum) of full-time enrollment at community college(s);
2. Minimum of 60 transferable units completed;
3. Desire to transfer to a four-year college or university;

If you agree to this interview, it will be completely confidential. No names will be attached to any notes, transcriptions or records from the interview and any identifying information will remain in locked files, accessible only to me. You will be free to stop the interview and withdraw from the study at any time.

If you desire to participate or have any questions, please contact me at <email address> (quickest reply) or <phone number>. Your input is very important to this study.

Sincerely,

Rick H. Boone, MBA

Overview:
-Receive $20 credit to Starbucks for participating
-30-45 minute interview
-Meet the following minimum criteria:
  -Completion of 5 semesters full-time at community college
  -Completion of 60 transferable units
  -Desire to transfer to a university
-Email Rick Boone at <email address>
APPENDIX D – INFORMED CONSENT

Interview Informed Consent Form

STUDY TITLE: Community College Student Perceptions of University Transfer Barriers

RESPONSIBLE INVESTIGATOR: Rick H. Boone, MBA

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY: The purpose of this study is to identify and describe the perceived barriers of California community college transfer students and what support services were needed to assist them. The research is being conducted by Rick H. Boone, MBA, a doctoral student from the School of Education at Brandman University.

While participating in this study, I agree to be interviewed in person or virtually about my experiences as a student. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes.

I understand that:

a. In addition to a $20 credit to Starbucks, I and other community college stakeholders will benefit from this study with a realization of particular barriers affecting transfer students. The researcher will contribute to scholarly literature about the challenges faced by today's community college transfer students from a new, locally-focused, fully-qualitative perspective. The study will offer insight into the perceptions of the transfer student and what programs and services might assist them.

b. There are minimal foreseeable risks associated with this study. Exploring personal experiences may create anxiety or discomfort for research participants, therefore, the interview questions were sent prior to the interview.

c. If any questions or concerns arise regarding this study, please contact the Researcher, Rick Boone, at <email address> or <phone number>. You may also contact the Brandman University Advisor for this study, Dr. Douglas DeVore at <email address>.

d. I may refuse to participate in or I may withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. Also, the investigator may stop the study at any time. I also understand that no information that identifies me will be released without my separate consent and that all identifiable information will be protected to the limits allowed by law. If the study design or the use of the data is to be changed I will be so informed and my consent obtained. I understand that if I have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may write or call the Office of the Vice Chancellor Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA 92618,
Telephone <phone number>. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research participant’s Bill of Rights.”

e. Interviews will be audio recorded and will not be used beyond the scope of this research project. I understand that the Investigator will protect my confidentiality and retain no identifying information.

I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form and the Research Participant’s Bill of Rights. I have read the above and understand it and hereby consent to the procedure(s) set forth.

___________________________  _____________________________  ______
Printed Name of Participant  Signature of Participant  Date

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Printed Name of Investigator  Signature of Investigator  Date